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The University of San Francisco

JOB SATISFACTION AND STRESSORS: THE DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL'S
EXPERIENCE

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education of the
University of San Francisco

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
Organization and Leadership

By

Saralynn Emery

Spring, 2021

This thesis, written by
Saralynn Emery
University of San Francisco
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under the guidance of the project committee,
and approved by all its members,
has been accepted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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this is for you.

ABSTRACT

The current service system for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities is provided in the form of community-based support. This support is carried out by Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who provide one-on-one services to individuals in their homes, workplaces, and communities. The current system is undergoing a turnover crisis and there is an enormous need for a quality and reliable workforce of DSPs to continue to carry out services. Previous research has explored factors that contribute to DSP burnout and ultimately turnover. By researching the DSP role from the DSP experience directly, this study examines other factors that contribute to DSP burnout, as well as factors that contribute to job satisfaction. This study additionally examines how DSPs maintain a balance between both the stressful and fulfilling aspects of their job, in an attempt to determine how organizational leaders can positively affect retention in a manner that situates DSPs' direct needs at the forefront. The study was conducted by surveying and interviewing DSPs who work for agencies in four Northern California Counties. The study found that the greatest contributor to DSP job satisfaction is in their investment in and commitment to the job as well as relationships, particularly with clients. The greatest source of stress was found to be in other relationships, and a lack of recognition and professional regard for the DSP role. DSPs were found to reconcile these contrasting factors by continually returning their focus to the positive and tangible impact that they have on the lives of clients served. Through the theoretical framework of Social Capital, the study concludes that while DSPs may lack social capital societally, they gain interpersonal and relational social capital in the rich and meaningful relationships that they develop with their clients.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

California paved the way for community integration for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) by way of an entitlement service system. California remains as the only state in which – upon diagnosis of a developmental disability – individuals are immediately entitled to receipt of services from community-based agencies, as opposed to being placed on waiting lists, such as is the case in other states (Zuraw et al., 2019). This shift in California first began with the deinstitutionalization of individuals with I/DD by way of the swift closure of numerous State Hospitals that housed people with disabilities. The focus then turned to support via community-based care. This support is carried out by Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). DSPs provided one-on-one support to clients with I/DD in their homes, workplaces, and the wider community to provide highly individualized assistance that supports clients to live as independently as possible. The current system faces a DSP turnover crisis, heavily affected by low wages for support staff. Crucial to solving the problem of turnover is an investigation of other factors contributing to burnout. With new diagnoses and longer life expectancies among persons with I/DD, there is an increased need for a quality and dependable workforce to provide community-based care and support. With an examination of quality of life among individuals with disabilities (Friedman, 2018) and job satisfaction among direct support professionals through the lens of social capital (Kowalski et al., 2010), this thesis aims to inform policies and practices that may serve to improve the experiences of staff on both the state and community agency level.

Statement of the Problem

California's service system for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) remains one of the most innovative and first-of-its-kind systems in the United States with its establishment as an entitlement service that guarantees services to all members of the I/DD community. Previous to the current system, individuals with I/DD were either sent away to live in State Hospitals or, if they stayed living in their homes, the entirety of their care fell to their families. There did not exist an infrastructure for support to individuals and families that was based in their own communities. For those individuals with I/DD, whose needs and disparities are often invisible and nuanced, the fight for inclusion culminated in the Lanterman Act of 1977 (Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center, 2015) which mandated a support network of 21 Regional Centers throughout the state. Central to California's service system is community-based support that goes beyond the notion of inclusion and emphasizes *integration*. Integration, in this context, means that by providing community-based care, the goal is not simply to invite persons with I/DD to be present in their communities but further, to have "access to the full range of opportunities available to his/her non-disabled peers" (Zuraw et al., 2019, p.14).

This service system is comprised of a variety of state and federal funding to the Department of Developmental Services (DDS). DDS provides oversight and distribution of funds to the Regional Centers throughout the state. Regional Centers then act as the Case Management service and funding stream for community-based agencies who provide direct services to individuals in their homes, workplaces and communities. The workforce that carries out this community-based care and support are known as Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). There are a variety of DSP roles that exist to support individuals. A few such examples are Independent Living Instructors who support individuals in their homes, Job Coaches who support individuals

to be successful in their workplaces, and Community Living Assistants who support with wheelchair transfers, personal hygiene, food prep, etc. While California's entitlement service system and network of Regional Centers is innovative, community-based support and care is not unique to the state. Since the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, similar efforts toward community integration for individuals with I/DD have been prevalent throughout the country (Scotch, 1989). In the United States, the care and support of persons with I/DD prior to the establishment of community-based programs was primarily provided by families in the home or by Occupational Therapists and Nurses in State Hospitals (Lerner & Pollack, 2015). With the deinstitutionalization of care and the move towards community-based support came the creation of the DSP workforce (Mary, 1998). These DSPs perform high-stress and emotionally involved job duties. As Zabin (2006) points out,

...direct-support workers assist consumers in navigating relationships with family, neighbors, co-workers, and others, advocating for their rights and interacting in a broad array of work and social environments. Support work in this environment is both a service and a quality of relationship. (p. 3)

The work of a DSP is therefore centered around not only the quality of care provided, but also the quality of the relationship they build with their clients. DSP jobs require a nuanced understanding of the individual needs of each client served, patience, compassion, the ability to navigate a multitude of interpersonal interactions in a way that is empowering to their client and, lastly, the wide range of state-required paperwork that details all aspects of support provided.

Despite the complexity of the job, DSPs are paid at incredibly low wages. These low wages are due in part to the current system of rate reimbursement to agencies, which has

undergone numerous rate freezes by the state due to budget cuts, and has also been criticized for having a severe lack of transparency (Gans et al., 2011).

The combination of high-stress positions and low wages leads to burnout and ultimately, high rates of turnover among DSPs. While the inception of California's service system for individuals with developmental disabilities was the first of its kind, these struggles are faced by DSPs nationally as well, as there are high rates of turnover among DSPs throughout the country (Houseworth et al., 2020). Both in California and in the nation as a whole, we see numerous impacts that high DSP turnover rates have on the service system. For example, turnover has been shown to place financial strain on agencies due to the high overhead costs of recruitment and retention efforts (Hewitt & Larson, 2007) as well as to have negative effects on the overall quality of life among clients served (Friedman, 2018).

The service system in California is predicated on the notion of *entitlement* to services ,and the nation as a whole has emphasized the civic duty to supporting the needs of all its disabled citizens. However, these high rates of turnover among DSPs lead to this entitlement service being left ineffectively provided and this civic duty unfulfilled.

Background and Need for the Study

In order to affect positive change in the quality of care provided to individuals as well as the financial viability of agencies available to provide services, these high rates of turnover among DSPs must be addressed. With high rates of turnover left unaddressed, many agencies have not been able to keep their heads above water and have been forced to close down (Ho, 2019). Additionally, as individuals with I/DD have longer life expectancies (Gans et al., 2011) and diagnoses of autism grow (Williams et al., 2017), there is an increased need for the support services provided by DSPs. If these high rates of turnover among DSPs are not addressed and

improved, we leave fewer and fewer options for community-based supports available to individuals with I/DD.

In order to address DSP turnover, it is essential that we better understand the factors contributing to turnover, without being quick to assume simply increasing pay is the only solution. We must work to understand the other factors affecting job satisfaction and contributing to burnout and turnover. If we can do this, we can inform better practices among agencies employing DSPs in hopes of improving retention. Furthermore, by investigating contributing factors to burnout in the workforce, needs for improvement in other aspects of the larger system structure may become illuminated, which would have a positive effect on the service system as a whole. To make improvements to this system is a public good in that we would be improving the lives of the clients served by the system and also cultivating and nurturing an entire workforce, which is good for the larger community collectively.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to closely examine the various factors contributing to DSP job satisfaction, burnout and turnover and to gain deeper understanding of the DSP experience among professionals working for community-based agencies. There has been ample previous discussion about how low wages so often drive many DSPs to leave their jobs (Hewitt & Larson, 2007) and additional research which has pointed to role ambiguity and heavy workloads as factors contributing to burnout (Hatton et al., 1999). What is lacking, however, is an investigation of factors that contribute to DSP job satisfaction, and what makes DSPs desire to stay in their roles. With a growing and deepening need for quality community-based care for aging populations of those with I/DD (Gans et al., 2011) and an increase in those eligible for services due to growing diagnoses of Autism Spectrum Disorder (Williams et al., 2017), there is

a necessity for a strong and dependable workforce available to provide those essential supports. This study aims to identify key factors contributing to DSP job satisfaction as well as those factors, beyond hourly wages, that contribute to burnout.

Research Questions

The questions guiding this study are:

- What are the fulfilling aspects of the job that contribute to DSP job satisfaction?
- What are the stressful aspects of the job that contribute to DSP burnout?
- How do DSPs maintain a balance and reconcile both the fulfilling and stressful aspects of their job?

Theoretical Rationale

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital is used to examine the relationships between community integration for individuals with I/DD as well as its effects on the DSP workforce. Social capital is defined as the level of access to resources in a society by way of the relational connections made among individuals in a community (Bourdieu, 1986). Membership within a given group provides a network of connections and potentially an elevated status within a community. Social capital has been used to study quality of life among persons with I/DD (Gotto et al., 2010) as well as to research emotional exhaustion among employees working with and supporting individuals with I/DD (Kowalski et al., 2010). Additionally, the concept of social capital has been elaborated upon in an exploration of employment-based social capital, which aids in further understanding of workplace relationships and its effects on burnout (Boyas & Wind, 2010). In this study, I utilize this theoretical framework to account for the experiences and

contributing factors in job satisfaction and burnout among DSPs. Social capital is used in this context in particular to examine the variety of relationships that DSPs build in their position, as well as their place in society as professionals.

Limitations of the Study

There are numerous limitations to this study, beginning with the geography. Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, and Sacramento Counties provide a unique set of demographics and socioeconomics that are not necessarily representative of the state, nation or even Northern California as a whole. Additionally, the sample set of participants accounts for a limited number of agencies providing services to individuals with I/DD. There are other agencies existing between the four counties that are not represented in the sample set. Further, among the participants, the sample set is small and does not include the experience of every DSP within each organization.

The sample set cannot account for the highly individualized experiences and backgrounds outside of the workplace that may have also accounted for particular responses. In addition, because the sample set exclusively includes DSPs presently working in the industry, I have reason to believe that participants have a higher level of investment and are likely to respond more positively than would those no longer working in the field. Were this survey to include those who have chosen to leave the industry, we might expect to see a far more variant set of results.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to fill a gap in the research and literature by detailing the experiences of individuals working as DSPs in Northern California counties and illuminating the wide array of factors that contribute to the job satisfaction and burnout of currently employed DSPs. In doing so, I hope to glean a deeper understanding of how to make positive changes to the high rates of turnover that cause a serious detriment to the service system currently. While increased wages for DSPs is of crucial importance, information on other contributing factors is essential for looking holistically at the experiences of DSPs and the service system structure at large. The research may be of interest to policymakers in their determinations of protocols for rate reimbursements and distribution of funds throughout the service system in California. These findings may also be of interest to agencies nationally who are employing DSPs. This study can be used to inform best practices in meeting the needs of staff so that they may effectively complete their job duties in a way that is meaningful and impactful to not only the clients they serve, but in their overall job satisfaction as well.

Definition of Terms

DDS: Department of Developmental Services; entity which oversees all 21 Regional Centers in California.

DSP: Direct Support Professional; entry-level support staff who provide direct, one-on-one support to clients in the community. Example: support on the job, support with finances, nutrition and housekeeping, and support in community day programs.

I/DD: Intellectual and/or developmental disability; in California, defined as being an “intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and autism... the onset of these conditions had to have been

prior to age 18; [and] continues, or can be expected to continue indefinitely” (Regional Center of the East Bay, n.d.).

IPP: Individualized Program Plan; document drafted by the Regional Center Case Manager, client, and their family to establish long and short-term life goals in order to determine individualized support needs.

RCEB: Regional Center of the East Bay; “RCEB provides intake, assessment, diagnosis, and coordinates community-based services” (Regional Center of the East Bay, n.d.).

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

California's service system for its developmentally disabled community has long set the bar for person-centered and community-based care and support across the country. In California and beyond, what we see however, are strikingly high rates of turnover among the entry level staff in the industry. The Direct Support Professionals working in homes and communities to provide this care fulfill complex and ever-changing job duties that require acute adeptness for sensitive interpersonal and professional relationships. Staff perform their duties largely independently (Zabin, 2006), without direct supervisory oversight and furthermore, without a larger professional community to attach oneself to. Despite the challenges of the job, staff are paid considerably low wages, one of the main factors contributing to turnover (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). The consequences of turnover are dire, both for the clients in receipt of services as well as for agencies in constant pursuit of improving their recruitment and retention efforts (Friedman, 2018). Through the lens of the theory of Social Capital, we are able to better understand the importance both of the services being provided to clients as well as how relationships built in the workplace affect job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover among staff.

History of Developmental Disability Services

For Americans with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), the last 50 years have shown a dramatic change in the structure of support and care, in a shift towards deinstitutionalization (Lerner & Pollack, 2015). Prior to the 1960's, the vast majority of individuals with I/DD were either being supported by their families or living in government-run

institutions (Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center, 2015). Beginning in the 1960s, this process of deinstitutionalization began based on both philosophies around human rights, and also in efforts to save costs incurred by the state to run these institutions (Lerner & Pollack, 2015). Sigelman et al. (1981) points out in a study across the United States, that the trend towards deinstitutionalization is most commonly found “in relatively affluent states... where there is a strong emphasis on political reform” (p. 513).

In California specifically, this resulted in the enactment of the Lanterman Act, which designated the creation of 21 Regional Centers throughout the state (Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center, 2015). These Regional Centers provide oversight and funding to local agencies (also known as vendors) that provide community-based care and support to clients with I/DD. Agencies receive their funding directly from their Regional Center, by way of an hourly rate of reimbursement (Gans et al., 2011). These rates of reimbursement are determined through a variety of cost-analyses, negotiations between vendors and Regional Centers, and adherence to “statute-defined rate[s]” (Gans et al., 2011, p.4). The funding Regional Centers receive to then distribute among vendors is determined by the oversight of the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), a state agency charged with ensuring the Lanterman Act is being upheld and whose budget is determined at the state level (Zuraw et al., 2019).

In California, DDS has faced continual cuts to funding of services in the years since the inception of the Lanterman Act (Association of Regional Center Agencies [ARCA], 2015), leading to increased stringency on the availability of funds. In other states throughout the country, a number of similar funding streams are utilized under Medicaid to provide community-based care and support to those with I/DD (Hemp et al., 2016). Since the Reagan Administration in the 1980s, strains to adequate funding of these programs have been faced throughout the

country (Scotch, 1989). Despite the cuts to funding, vendors remain reliant on this funding to employ Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who carry out the work of supporting individuals with I/DD in their communities. Some of the types of community-based support services available are Independent Living Services (ILS), Supported Employment Services (SES) and Day Programs. The primary focus of this review of the literature will be on the experiences of the Direct Support Professionals working in this field in California, throughout the United States, and abroad.

The Direct Support Professional's Job

Previous research has highlighted three aspects of the DSP job that demonstrate its distinct characteristics, both in how it is situated as an industry and those particulars of the job that make it especially challenging. Firstly, multiple studies examine the many complexities of the DSP position. Secondly, previous research notes that unlike other social and human services, the DSP profession lacks an established educational program and wider professional community for DSPs to participate in. Lastly, a great many studies conducted on DSP experiences cite the impact of the low wages DSPs earn.

The DSP position is a dynamic and complex role where DSPs are responsible for the care and support of individuals in a number of capacities. These services are provided on the job, in homes to support and develop skills to live independently, in the attendance of day programs, and many more community settings. DSPs support individuals to meet the goals that they have laid out in their Individualized Program Plan (IPP) with their Regional Center Case Manager. To accomplish this, DSPs provide highly individualized and person-centered support to each of their clients, in which each client dictates their vision for their own future (Mary, 1998). For example,

in Supported Employment Services, a DSP's duty is to provide support to their client in their place of work. This is done through observation, suggestion, offering of reminders and feedback, and support to communicate effectively with management and coworkers in order to build strong professional relationships. DSPs also act as a liaison for communication between the client, their families, and their employer, with responsibilities to upholding the desires of both their own supervisors, as well as those of clients' families, all while ensuring the empowerment and individual choice of the client they serve (Zabin, 2006). DSPs are additionally typically required to complete daily and monthly paperwork to detail the support provided to each of their clients in order to comply with state-mandated documentation of services. DSPs perform highly complex job duties that require both strong administration and organizational skills, as well as strong interpersonal and communication skills with a multitude of persons involved in their client's circle of support. Furthermore, DSPs must engage in strong relationship-building in supporting their clients (Hewitt & Larson, 2007) by working to establish trust and supporting their client to navigate a plethora of relationships in their community. Much of the support provided in a client's workplace, for example, is in helping to facilitate positive and professional relationships between clients and their supervisors and coworkers. This kind of support requires effective communication and interpersonal skills (Zabin, 2006). DSPs must be able to carry out these duties largely independently. Because DSPs perform their duties in a number of locations throughout the community, they do so without the constant and direct supervision of their own supervisors (Zabin, 2006). To that end, DSPs must not only be adept at effectively handling a number of complex situations, but they must also be able to do so with a great deal of autonomy and independence. Additionally, because so few wide-ranging training programs exist, DSPs typically receive on-the-job training in the first few weeks of their employment, and that is

specific to each individual agency they are employed by and therefore non-transferable (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). This makes camaraderie among DSPs across service agencies largely nonexistent.

We see here that the DSP is responsible for the care and support of their clients from a number of different angles. They must be highly organized in how they plan out their day, and must have the clerical skills to complete timely and precise paperwork. They must also display exceptional interpersonal skills, not only in their work with their clients individually, but also with client families, supervisors, and other community members involved in their clients' lives. The DSP must therefore embody multiple – and varied – skillsets simultaneously. What remains absent from this discussion of the complexity of DSP work is what DSPs have to say themselves about this dynamic work environment. To what degree do DSPs find satisfaction from the many hats they wear, and to what degree does it aid in their stress? My study aims to find answers to these questions.

A second body of research has sought to speak to the educational and professional spheres that DSPs occupy. The present training model for DSPs is determined by each individual service agency, and their own mission, values and philosophies. The common threads that run through agencies are funding streams and the requirements around documentation of services, not a standardization of training. When DSP jobs were first created, they were in direct contrast to the more medically-inclined jobs previously held by those caring for the disabled in institutions: nurses, physicians, and practitioners (Mary, 1998). In the movement towards deinstitutionalization, the model of care and support shifted from a model of addressing problems and deficits and instead towards a model of counseling support, “skill development and behavior change” (Mary, 1998, p. 251). This has resulted in dramatic shifts in how professionals

working with individuals with I/DD approach their supports. Test et al. (2004) conducted a study using surveys and focus groups among DSPs, clients, and administrators in a number of agencies in a southeastern state, in which each were questioned about the necessity for training as well as the prevalence of comprehensive existing training programs. It was found that due in part to the highly individualized nature of the work, training has fallen on the backs of individual agencies, and typically only spans one full time week of on-the-job training (Test et al., 2004). Though there are indeed agency-specific training needs, little attention has been given to the fundamental skills and knowledge base required for effectiveness in the DSP profession that are consistent throughout the industry, between each agency (Test et al., 2004). Furthermore, in a study conducted by Finkelstein et al. (2018), in which DSPs were surveyed to measure the prevalence of burnout, it was found that those professionals who had in the year prior attended a conference, the effects of burnout were notably lower than that of their peers. Finkelstein et al. (2018) also commented that the presence of continued growth and education in the field may lead to DSPs feeling a sense of rejuvenation and recommitment to their work. It therefore seems evident that the institution of a larger professional network would be in the best interest of professionals in this field. It has also been noted that the I/DD service system as an industry has also been largely ignored and left undervalued by society. As Hewitt and Larson (2007) point out, “labor economists, policy makers, and educators consider direct support work to be a secondary labor market that requires little skill” (p. 180). With little knowledge of the profession existing in society, it is also left widely unknown by those studying to enter into counseling and social work. Without direct knowledge of the service system, perhaps from a loved one in receipt of services, many in society might remain completely unaware of its existence and therefore, of the professionals carrying out the work. Additionally, there do not really exist larger professional

communities – beyond their individual employer – for DSPs to involve themselves with (Zabin, 2006). Mary (1998) has suggested the advent of a professional certification or credentialing program, not unlike what is currently found in nursing, teaching, and social work as both a means to standardize training and education, but also as a way to strengthen the profession's perception of credibility in society. Zabin (2006) has similarly called for the creation of “a training, education, and career-advancement infrastructure” (p. 27) to support DSPs in establishing stable careers in the industry with opportunity for professional growth. Due to the current structure of the profession, there also lack clear career paths. Beyond promotion to supervisory positions, there lack many opportunities for growth or expansion. Often, DSPs who do not receive promotions to supervisory roles leave and instead take jobs in other human service positions which can offer higher compensation (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). This leaves the industry constantly competing for new recruits with other human services positions.

Previous research has proposed the significance of limited, and disjointed, training programs and professional communities in its relation to DSP burnout and turnover. What each of these studies demonstrates is a profound need for structured educational programs for DSPs and a professional community for them to align themselves with to provide a space for camaraderie. In my study, I seek to determine reproducibility among DSPs in Northern California counties and to see if the DSPs of my study have a similar need for training and professional community. And if so, to what extent it affects their overall experience.

Finally, it has been noted in numerous previous studies that low wages are one of the primary contributors to turnover among DSPs (Zabin, 2006). Much of the recommendations for improvement of the service system therefore have involved a push to increase rates of reimbursement in order to compensate DSPs at a higher rate commensurate with the work and

services they are providing. Hourly wages for DSPs are determined by the rates of reimbursement that vendors receive from the Regional Center (Gans et al., 2011). The hourly rates reimbursed to the vendor must then be distributed between staff wages, administrative costs and miscellaneous overhead costs of doing business. The result is hourly wages for DSPs that fall, oftentimes, below a living wage and a mismatch in fair compensation for the work they are doing. Furthermore, wages paid to DSPs in community-based settings are vastly different from the rates paid to staff working in institutions and state hospitals. Sjoberg (1999) as cited in Zabin (2006), states that “workers in state developmental centers earned almost twice (197%) as much as those in community settings” (p. 14). Despite providing care and support that is comparable in complexity, we see an enormous inequity in wages. In 2016, the average hourly wage for entry level DSPs nationally was \$10.79 (Houseworth et al., 2020). The wages paid to DSPs often teeter on minimum wage and “have failed to keep pace with inflation” (ARCA, 2015, p. 7), resulting in workers whose living costs continue to increase while wages remain stagnant. Furthermore, as the costs for healthcare have risen, many employers have had to increase premiums and copays for their staff (Hewitt & Larson, 2007) which whittle away at the already low wages staff are earning. Related to the state budget and allocation of funds to DDS, a primary reason for the low wages earned by DSPs are freezes on rates of reimbursement imposed by DDS. As Gans et al. (2011) explains, “Since 2003, rates for many services have been frozen or restricted by the state” (p. 5). For vendors to raise the hourly wages for their staff, there must first be an increase in the hourly rate of reimbursement received. The inextricable link between the two leaves providers’ hands tied and DSPs working many years without increases to their wages. The inability to increase wages due to rate freezes leaves vendors without the ability to provide any merit-based or annual pay raises for staff, despite the growing complexity and

skillsets that come with long term employment. This leaves a growing number of DSPs working an increased number of overtime hours to receive time and a half, taking on second and third jobs, and sometimes relying on public assistance themselves (Houseworth et al., 2020). To provide context for the present situation, the current (as of January 1, 2021) living wage for a household of one adult and zero children in Alameda County is \$21.88 (*Living Wage Calculator - Living Wage Calculation for Alameda County, California*, n.d.). The current hourly wage for a Supported Employment DSP at an Alameda County-based agency surveyed in this study is \$17.60. The living wage of course only increases when accounting for children and/or other adults in the home. Simply put, to live in Alameda County, working as a DSP does not provide a living wage. In fact, for those without the financial support of another household member making a higher wage, DSPs are often left nearer to poverty level.

There is an extensive amount of research and documentation that solidifies the impact that low wages have on DSPs with regard to turnover. What remains absent is discussion of the impact of low wages directly from the DSP perspective. In my study, I seek to examine how DSPs experience the low wages they earn and how those who choose to continue working in the field grapple with the substandard compensation.

The current body of research on what the DSP job entails – enormous job complexity, lack of a professional community, and work for low wages – all serve to provide insight into the specifics of this profession, in hopes of better understanding causes leading to turnover. What these studies help us to understand is why there is such frustration with the low wages DSPs earn: because their jobs are so complex, and responsibilities varied. Additionally, by looking closely at the training received by DSPs and the lacking professional community surrounding the industry, we can better understand how and why DSPs might come to see their role as having

little opportunity for growth. What this entire body of research on DSP jobs fails to point out, are how each of these points intersect with one another in the daily lived experiences of DSPs working in the field and how DSPs who continue to work in the industry contend with each of these factors.

Direct Support Professional Burnout and Turnover

As demonstrated in the previous body of research, the culmination of low wages, complex job duties, and the lack of a larger professional community to be engaged with have all been shown to contribute to feelings of low job satisfaction and burnout among DSPs. Burnout is characterized as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 397). The Maslach Burnout Index (MBI) has been the most robust measurement tool for the study of burnout among those in human services (Hastings et al., 2004). Hastings et al. (2004), using the MBI, noted that the study of burnout among professionals working with individuals with disabilities is of grave importance due to the predicted effects it may have on the well-being of clients served, stating that “one would predict that those experiencing emotional exhaustion would tend to avoid contact with clients” (p. 269). While only a prediction, it demonstrates the importance of studying burnout as its potential consequences are great. In addition to the effect of DSP burnout on clients, studies have been conducted from a series of perspectives: what leads to DSP burnout and ultimately turnover, the impact turnover has economically on service provider agencies, and lastly, how turnover affects clients served.

In a study conducted among professionals working with individuals with I/DD in Israel, Finkelstein et al. (2018) found that levels of burnout existed across professions within the I/DD

service industry, seeming to suggest that levels of burnout correlate not necessarily with each specific job duty, but with the experience of working with the I/DD community in general.

Finkelstein et al. (2018) also found that among workers who most greatly experienced feelings of “work overload and role ambiguity” (p. 871), the highest rates of burnout were found. That is to say that whatever duties one is responsible for, becoming overwhelmed by an increased number of tasks and duties combined with the lack of clear direction from supervisors results in greater instances of burnout. This was confirmed in a study conducted by Kowalski et al. (2010) which concluded that the greatest determiner of emotional exhaustion among employees surveyed was a heavy workload. Because DSPs work the majority of the time in isolation from their supervisors (Hewitt & Larson, 2007), there is much room for ambiguity and uncertainty in the tasks they are performing regularly. Hatton et al. (1999) found that role ambiguity was directly correlated with staff of younger ages as well as those receiving less training upon hire and that the prevalence of role ambiguity had a direct effect of feelings of “general distress” (p. 261) among staff. In another study conducted to research factors contributing to DSP burnout, it was found that DSPs experience a great deal of secondhand trauma due to the emotionally laborious nature of their job and little has been done to examine the quality of their experiences holistically (Keesler & Fukui, 2020). There are demonstrated rates of burnout among staff across agencies supporting individuals with I/DD. In a study conducted by Hatton et al. (1999), there was a high prevalence of stressors on the job related to staff members’ perceptions of “low job status” (p. 263), which was greatly associated with conflict, lack of autonomy and little reward for staff. Further, it was found that collaboration with both superiors and colleagues as well as regular feedback on work performance were linked to higher job satisfaction (Hatton et al., 1999). This demonstrates how the structure of an organization can directly impact the experiences of its staff

members, and therefore has the power to affect positive or negative change. High rates of staff stress have been found to lead to low morale, burnout, and ultimately turnover (Hatton et al., 1999). Low wages and a lack of health insurance options made available to DSPs has resulted in increasingly high rates of turnover among DSPs throughout the country in recent decades (Houseworth et al., 2020). These high rates of staff stress, burnout and turnover then have numerous effects on personal, organizational, and system-wide levels.

The previous research on DSP burnout paints a picture of the many interrelated factors that influence burnout among DSPs. The research demonstrates how the combination of emotional labor, low wages, and isolation from team members all contribute to burnout. The studies also point to evidence that working with the I/DD community in general leads to higher levels of burnout. What is missing is the direct commentary from DSPs on how each of these factors plays out, and what factors are most impactful over others. The goal of this study is to investigate whether there are other factors that account for DSP stress and burnout. Additionally, this study aims to identify how those DSPs currently working are able to manage the stressors that they face to assuage burnout.

Stress, burnout, and turnover among DSPs is additionally felt on the agency-level. One of the hallmarks of the community-based service model – particularly in California – is the ability for individuals with I/DD and their families to have a variety of choices among available agencies and service providers in their community (May & Hughe, 1987). However, due to the aforementioned budget cuts and inadequate funding, the ability to choose from a wealth of options has been severely limited. Long underfunded, strains to the service system in California reached new heights at the onset of the recession of the early 2000s (ARCA, 2015), and many have had trouble recovering since. In addition, with a greater increase in diagnoses of autism,

there is an increased need for support agencies among individuals seeking services (Williams et al., 2017). All of these factors greatly affect agencies' ability to keep their doors open, and high turnover only exacerbates the financial struggles they face.

High rates of turnover have resulted in enormous economic strain on agencies employing DSPs. The overhead costs to hire and keep on staff have proved to be detrimental to the ability of agencies to remain open, resulting in many being left with no choice but to shut down (Ho, 2019). The increased need to hire and retain staff leads to numerous administrative efforts made towards recruitment and retention. These measures are both costly and time-consuming. With each DSP that resigns from their position, attention must be turned to the replacement of that DSP. It costs an estimated \$2,413 (Hewitt & Larson, 2007) to replace each DSP. With high turnover rates, this number adds up. The costs incurred by high rates of turnover serve to greatly increase the already steep overhead administrative costs that agencies deal with. Agencies must continue to keep up with increased costs of "rent,... healthcare insurance, and worker's compensation healthcare rates" (Hancock, 2012, p. 81) all while rates for services remain frozen or reduced (Gans et al., 2011). Many agencies have been unable to stay afloat, leading to closures. This leaves individuals with I/DD with fewer and fewer options available and those agencies that remain grow more impacted and stretched thin to provide services.

The research clearly demonstrates the very real threat that DSP turnover poses to the viability of service agencies in communities. With more agencies closing, individuals and their families miss opportunities for choice among providers in order to find the most well-suited and individualized care. This study aims to investigate what leads DSPs to leave their jobs, and what makes them want to stay. If agencies can have an understanding of what their employees need in order to stay, practices can be implemented to affect positive change in retention.

As high rates of turnover plague the community-based service model throughout the country, the strain is felt not only by the agencies struggling to hire and retain DSPs to carry out support services. Many studies have illuminated the negative consequences of high rates of turnover on the overall quality of care that is ultimately provided to clients (Zabin, 2006). When DSP staff turnover is high, this means frequent changes in support staff for the clients receiving services. High levels of staff change are shown to result in lower quality of life among clients (Friedman, 2018). As Friedman (2018) goes on to explain, “people with [I/DD] who experience DSP change are less likely to have intimate relationships, have friends, have natural supports, perform social roles, and decide when to share personal information than people who do not experience change” (p. 246). This is because so much of DSP involvement in client support is centered around relationship-building and engagement in the community. Additionally, often the majority of an individual with I/DD’s personal relationships – aside from family members – is made up of the DSPs with whom they work (Scott & Havercamp, 2018). With each change in staff, so again begins the process of building trust and establishing connection with an integral part of one’s social circle. Because many individuals with I/DD in receipt of services develop deep connections with the DSPs they work with, it is all the more important to look closely at the ways that staff’s job satisfaction is affecting them. Hastings (2010) points out that while the conversation about staff burnout and turnover is most often centered around how client behaviors can be the cause of stressors for DSPs, it is crucial that we also examine the ways in which “the psychological and behavioural adjustment of [clients] will be influenced by the current well-being of their support staff” (p. 208). Given the deep levels of trust that go into the DSP/client relationship, it is essential to have an understanding of the duality between how clients affect the well-being of staff and in turn, how staff well-being (and staff leaving) affect the well-being of

clients served. Furthermore, as policy continues to evolve in the field of developmental disability services, there are a growing number of programs designed to encourage the continued empowerment and community integration of individuals with I/DD (McLaughlin et al., 2015). The successful implementation of these programs is reliant upon the support services that DSPs provide to clients accessing these programs. One such example is the growing number of individuals opting for supported decision making, which is a decision-making process designed as a potential alternative to conservatorships and guardianships (Gooding, 2013). This is conceptualized as a mechanism for aiding in the support of an individual to make important decisions, while maintaining their autonomy in the process (Gooding, 2013). DSPs play a critical role in supporting their clients to participate, and they must have the knowledge base and know-how to effectively support them in doing so (McLaughlin et al., 2015). In some cases, DSPs serve as facilitators, guiding clients and their appointed supports through the decision-making process and occasionally are appointed within the individual's circle of support from the beginning (Bigby et al., 2017). Without experienced and consistent DSPs to carry out this important work, the ability for clients to reach their full potential for community engagement and integration is severely limited. The detriment to quality of life among clients when DSP turnover is high, and support is inconsistent ultimately puts at risk the entire efficacy of the community-based support model's philosophy and mission.

As demonstrated in the research, clients feel the effects of DSP turnover on many levels. The aforementioned studies show how client behaviors and support needs can play a significant role in DSP burnout but furthermore, how the well-being of DSPs can directly impact the well-being of the clients they are working with. We also see from this research how deeply attached many clients feel to the DSPs with whom they work, but what is missing is an understanding of

the DSP/client relationship from the perspective of the DSP. What my study aims to investigate further is how DSPs feel about their clients, what kinds of bonds they build and how those relationships ultimately either contribute to or assuage burnout.

The current body of research provides insight into many of the factors associated with DSP burnout that ultimately lead to turnover and further demonstrates the grave detrimental effects that both burnout and turnover have on agencies and clients served. What the research does not provide is a close examination of what aspects of the DSP position offset burnout, contribute to job satisfaction, and make many DSPs desire to stay in their positions long term. Furthermore, the existing body of research – while clear in its demonstration of the bonds clients build with DSPs – does not provide information on what DSPs have to say of the relationships that they build with their clients, directly from their perspective.

Theoretical Framework: Social Capital

Pierre Bourdieu introduced the theory of *capital* as being “what makes the games of society... something other than simple games of chance” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 15). The possession of varying forms of capital serve to build the stratification of society. Among the forms of capital presented by Pierre Bourdieu is that of social capital, which “is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked... to membership in a group” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). In other words, in Pierre Bourdieu’s view, social capital accounts for the ways in which social connection grants individuals greater access to a variety of privileges and advantages in society. Beyond these broader concepts of social capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu are evolved discussions of social capital operating not only on the larger societal level, but also in smaller individualized and personal levels (Gotto et al., 2010). From this view, social capital is

applicable both in an examination of the experiences of DSPs and also of the clients they serve. Social capital is useful in examining DSPs' positionality within professional spheres on the societal level, how they support their clients with integrating into the community, and in the many different relationships that DSPs build with their clients, coworkers, and supervisors.

Because the DSP position involves fostering a multitude of individual relationships, DSPs build many different kinds of social capital, depending on where and with whom they are working. Crucial to this individual social capital among DSPs and the many relationships they build in their work is what Gotto et al. (2010) describes as being at the crux of social capital: "trust; that is, the trusting of others within one's social network and trusting of those whom your friends trust" (p.2). In addition, Gotto et al. (2010) go on to describe the importance of relationship-building in increasing social capital, which aids in the confidence-building among members in a group. Additionally, relational social capital provides an added confidence that individual members will work together in the best interest of the whole.

We see these conceptions of social capital useful in examination of the many bonds and relationships that DSPs build in their role, and what their effects may or may not be on how DSPs view and come to understand their positionality among their clients, their coworkers, and their supervisors.

We also see social capital used to account for job satisfaction and stress in general. Boyas and Wind (2010) point out how one's workplace serves as an important space in the development of one's esteem, self-worth, and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, Helliwell and Huang (2010) point out the great number of hours that an individual spends in their workplace, versus at home, which speaks to the way that social capital in one's profession has such enormous impact on overall life satisfaction. We can surmise then that – beyond the number of

hours in a day one spends at the workplace – an individual is affected by how the hours are spent and to what degree an employee is committed to the goals of their employer. Each of these aspects can affect social capital and a sense of belonging attributed to employment. In another use of social capital to frame this study, Gotto et al. (2010) assert that building the social capital of individuals with disabilities can afford them greater access to numerous aspects of the community and thus improves their quality of life. As was discussed in the previous section, the relationships between clients and DSPs are enormously impactful in client well-being and, it could be argued, aid in the formulation of each client's social capital as well. Social capital therefore serves as a framework suitable for interpreting the experiences of DSPs and those factors contributing to their burnout and turnover, as well as the effects that such turnover has on the I/DD population in receipt of services from said DSPs.

The theoretical framework of social capital has been used to account for workplace satisfaction in a broad sense, and DSP relationships with individuals with disabilities in a more narrow sense. It has not as of yet been used to understand how social capital operates in various other relationships in this field, from the perspective of the DSP. This study aims to utilize these conceptions of social capital to gain deeper understanding of the many relationships that DSPs form in their work and how, from the perspective and viewpoint of the DSP, these relationships and the social capital they build contribute to DSP job satisfaction and/or burnout.

Summary

The damaging effects of DSP turnover in the disability services industry are far reaching, with long lasting effects on the clients served as well as the viability of agencies available to provide services in communities. The Lanterman Act made a promise to the developmentally

disabled citizens of California that they would have immediate access to support services upon diagnosis; in order for this promise to be fulfilled, it is imperative that there be qualified and reliable staff available to do the job. With low wages, a complex job description, lack of professional support communities, and other factors contributing to low job satisfaction, DSPs find themselves unable to continue working in the field. With a growing population of individuals eligible for services and growing needs among that community of people, deeper understanding of causes associated with DSP turnover is greatly needed in order to affect positive change that will keep the service system in California – and beyond – thriving.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of those individuals working as Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) throughout various counties in Northern California, specifically with regard to factors contributing to job satisfaction and burnout. In an attempt to inform practices to positively affect change in current high rates of turnover, this study seeks to identify and more clearly understand the unique experiences, triumphs, and challenges that DSPs face. Previous conversations around DSP job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover have highlighted the negative effects that low wages have on workers (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). The aim of this study is to come to understand other factors that additionally contribute to job satisfaction and stressors, as well as to gain insight into what makes DSPs want to stay in their roles. This study seeks to examine the everyday experiences of DSPs actively working in the field in a variety of settings in hopes of informing future practices by leadership that will be more closely aligned with the actual needs of DSPs.

Research Design

The research design for this study is a combination of survey and interview data via a phenomenological approach. The purpose being to uncover the common phenomenon experienced by numerous DSPs in a variety of service agencies and departments. Creswell and Poth (2016) describe the intention behind a phenomenological study as being “to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 75). That is to say that in approaching this research from a phenomenological standpoint, I can glean

universal information about the experiences of working DSPs that transcends particular employers or workplace specifics and instead speaks to the lived experiences of those working as DSPs more broadly. The survey was able to capture demographic data as well as concrete percentile data on responses to a series of questions related to feelings towards job duties and relationships to clients, coworkers, and supervisors. Interview data allowed for elaboration on concepts and themes as well as deeper insight into the wide breadth of each interview participant's experience.

The online survey was designed to be accessed via link embedded in introductory email and to take approximately 10 minutes to complete. According to Survey Monkey, the average completion time was 15 minutes. Survey questions were divided into seven sections (to be discussed further in the Instrumentation section) focusing on demographic data, feelings about the job, and relationships with colleagues and clients. Particular focus was given to the scale and quality of relationships with clients, coworkers, and supervisors in order to comment on the impact of social capital among DSPs. The interview protocol was broken into similar sections, omitting demographic data already included in the survey to avoid redundancy. Interviews took place via Zoom and lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. Audio and video recordings were saved to the Cloud via password protection and will be deleted upon conclusion of the study. Transcripts, notes and other data analysis tools will be saved for no more than 3 years for potential future research and then will be destroyed.

Population and Sample

Both survey and interview participants for this study include DSPs working for service agencies in the following Northern California counties: Alameda (43%), Contra Costa (24%),

Marin (21%), and Sacramento (9%) as well as 3% from unspecified counties. The participants are DSPs who have worked for their respective agencies for a varying number of years. Some of the participants have worked in supervisory or managerial positions to some capacity but all participants currently work in DSP roles for at least half of their time.

A total of 73 participants initially responded to the survey. A total of 66 participants responded to the opening four demographic questions, a total of 58 participants responded to the seven general employment information questions, and a total of 57 participants completed the survey in its entirety, not including optional fill-in questions. Responses from all 66 participants who completed the opening demographic questions were included in the analysis of total demographic data (below) and responses from all 58 participants who answered the general employment information were also utilized in the analysis of the question “*What made you interested in applying for the Direct Support Professional position?*” The remainder of the analysis is comprised of responses from the 57 participants who completed the survey in its entirety. It is worth noting that the total number of survey responses and interview volunteers far exceeded expectations. This seems to be indicative of a desire among DSPs for a space to voice their perspectives, concerns, and feelings about their work. Responses in both the survey and one-on-one interviews confirm this suspicion. There were no limitations nor attempts to recruit on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, or level of education with the intention being to take a wide sampling in order to account for overall experiential data among DSPs, as opposed to being indicative of any one particular subgroup. Such demographic data was collected, however, in order to observe any trends that may appear along those lines.

Demographic data of the survey respondents is as follows: Age: 18-24 (9%), 25-34 (23%), 35-44 (20%), 45-54 (15%), 55-64 (19%), and 65+ (14%); Gender: Female (73%), Male

(18%), Transgender (1.5%), Non-binary (4.5%), Prefer not to say (1.5%), Other (1.5%); Race/Ethnicity: Native American or Alaska Native (1.5%), Asian (17%), Black or African American (8%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1.5%), White (56%), Hispanic or Latino (18%), Prefer not to say (5%), Other (8%); Level of Education: High School diploma or equivalent (26%), Associate's Degree (18%), Bachelor's Degree (39%), Master's Degree (12%), Other (5%).

Interview participants also completed the online survey. Interviews were conducted on a volunteer basis in which survey respondents had the option at the conclusion of the survey to volunteer their name and email to be contacted for an interview. A total of four one-on-one interviews were conducted. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of interview participants: Kirk, Danielle, Shirley, and Sierra. Three of the interview participants – Danielle, Shirley, and Sierra – work for the same agency but each in unique departments and locations with responsibilities wholly independent of each other. Kirk works for an agency in a county separate from the other three interviewees and in a department separate from the others as well. Despite the commonality of agency among three participants, the sample set of interviewees provides varied examples of DSP roles and responsibilities.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation utilized for data collection consisted of both an online survey and interview data. The online survey was created using Survey Monkey and interviews took place via Zoom. The online survey consisted of 48 total questions. Questions included multiple choice, linear scale, check all that apply, and optional short answer fill-in questions. Questions were broken into 7 sections: Personal Background Information (demographic data), General

Employment Information (department, hours per week, length of time employed, etc.), Feelings About the Job, Relationships with Clients, Relationships with Coworkers, Relationships with Supervisors, and Short Answer Fill-in questions. A complete list of survey questions can be found in Appendix A. Survey questions were designed to examine how DSPs began their careers in this field; the relationships they experience with clients, coworkers, and supervisors; and to gather information about their level of enjoyment with their job and their emotional relationship to the work that they do.

The researcher utilized one-on-one interviews with those who, at the end of the survey, volunteered themselves for participation in a confidential interview. Questions in the interview served to gain further elaboration on survey responses and to gain deeper insight into the DSP experience and what contributes to DSPs wanting to continue in their jobs. A full list of questions on the interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. The interview questions are designed to be open-ended and referential to survey responses. Due to the variance in survey responses, some interview questions that were no longer relevant were omitted. The interview protocol is intentionally semi-structured in order to allow for flexibility in the responses.

Researcher's Background

I began working in this field in 2013 as a Direct Support Professional in Alameda County. I was hired on as a Job Coach in the Supported Employment Services department. I have subsequently been promoted twice, first to Coordinator and later to Assistant Director. From this experience, I understand job satisfaction and burnout from the perspective of the DSP as well as how the effects of turnover affect supervisors managing large caseloads and attempting to support their DSP staff. The work conducted by service agencies in the Bay Area is of great

importance to me and furthermore, so too are the experiences of DSPs who are, in my opinion, the backbone of the system. DSPs work tirelessly to provide impeccable support and services to clients daily, despite their low wages and sparse resources.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I witnessed enormous inequities in how DSPs are regarded as a workforce. They worked in people's homes and in essential workplaces without being afforded many of the benefits – such as additional “hero” or “hazard” pay – that were awarded to other essential workers, many of whom being DSPs' own clients. I witnessed DSPs who would have received more money having been laid off and receiving unemployment benefits – with the additional \$600 per week in the early days of the pandemic – continue to provide essential supports to their clients on a daily basis, placing themselves and their own loved ones at higher risk, continually ensuring high degrees of care and support to their clients. Supervising and attempting to support DSPs through this has inspired me to do more to better understand the challenges experienced by DSPs and what their unmet needs are in order to improve the service system as a whole. This experience furthermore made me interested in what, despite the odds, inspires DSPs to continue to do this important work. I desire to amplify the voices and stories of DSPs to highlight the joy and fulfillment that these jobs bring in hopes of shining a light on the value and significance of this work, in how it positively affects not only clients served, but also DSPs themselves, and society as a whole.

I am aware of my positionality and biases, particularly with regard to my current standing as a supervisor. I recognize that being in a managerial position has afforded me more flexibility in my position, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which my responsibilities allow me the opportunity to work from home while many DSPs continue to work in the field. I also recognize the opportunities I've been afforded that precede my work in this industry, including

but not limited to having grown up in an upper middle-class household with highly educated parents and extended family. I recognize that I did not and do not feel the strains of the low wages for this industry in the same manner that many DSPs do, given my own previous financial resources which afforded me the opportunity to continue working in this field that I've so enjoyed while earning lower wages when starting out as a DSP.

Human Subjects Approval

The University of San Francisco (USF) Institutional Review Board has approved this study for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) under IRB Protocol #1438. Prior to the completion of the survey, each participant consented to an acknowledgement of the use of survey responses and confirmation of confidentiality; a copy of the survey consent page can be found in Appendix C. Prior to participating in an interview, each participant signed a consent form which detailed the purpose of the study and confirmation of confidentiality; a copy of the interviewee consent form can be found in Appendix D.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited by sending general information and online survey link to Executive Directors of service agencies in Northern California. Agencies were identified by my own organization's Executive Director based on his perceptions of likelihood of interest and response. Participating Executive Directors were informed that following the conclusion of the Thesis project, a summary of results and findings would be shared in a presentation to all who were interested. Emails including survey link were then sent directly to DSP pools by service agency leaders. Interview participants were recruited on a volunteer basis at the conclusion of the

online survey, where participants were given the option to volunteer for a confidential interview. Those who responded with interest in being interviewed were provided the consent form and instructions for scheduling time to meet via Zoom.

Data Analysis

For the data collected via survey, responses to multiple-choice questions were filtered separately according to responses to the following two questions: “*I enjoy the work that I do*”, and “*I see myself working long term in this industry*”. These two questions were chosen in order to emphasize two primary focuses of the study’s purpose: 1) an examination of the level of job satisfaction among DSPs and 2) an examination of the prevalence of respondents’ desire to stay in the industry, in light of the conversation in the literature around turnover. The result of filtering these two questions was four main filters by which to analyze multiple-choice data. Filter One was comprised of those that answered either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* to the question, “*I enjoy the work that I do*”, and are referred to in Chapter IV as “those who enjoy their job.” Filter Two was comprised of those that answered the same question with either *Not Sure*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* and are referred to as “those who do not enjoy their job.” Filter Three was comprised of those that answered *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* to the question, “*I see myself working long term in this industry*” and are referred to as “those who see themselves working long term.” Lastly, Filter Four was comprised of those that answered either *Not Sure*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* to the same question and are referred to as “those who do not see themselves working long term.” The purpose of Filters One and Two were to analyze the prevalence of respondents who enjoy their work, in an effort to understand the levels of job satisfaction among participants. The purpose of Filters Three and Four were to analyze the

prevalence of respondents who see themselves working long term in the industry, in order to glean insight into the likely levels of future turnover, as well as to examine any correlates between job satisfaction and likelihood to stay in the industry long term.

Eleven multiple-choice responses were selected for analysis within the four filters. I have grouped the answers according to two categories *Feelings* and *Relationships*. The purpose of grouping according to these categories was to more closely examine the trends among responses to answers throughout the *Feelings About the Job* section of the survey, in order to uncover information regarding level of respondent job satisfaction. In addition, to examine the trends among responses to each relationship section of the survey to analyze DSP relationships through the lens of social capital. The *Feelings* category includes responses to questions from the *Feelings About the Job* section of the survey. The *Relationships* category includes responses from the *Relationships With Clients*, *Relationships with Coworkers*, and *Relationships with Supervisors* sections of the survey. In the *Feelings* category, responses were analyzed according to linear scale responses to the following questions: *I have adequate time and resources to complete all my work*; *At the end of the workday, I feel emotionally drained*; *At the end of the workday, I feel happy*; *At the end of the workday, I feel accomplished*; and *At the end of the workday, I feel frustrated*. In the *Relationships* category, responses were analyzed according to linear scale responses to the following questions: *I have a well-established relationship with one or more clients on my caseload*; *I feel appreciated for the work that I do by my clients*; *I am in communication with my coworkers*; *I feel part of a team with my department as a whole*; *I am in communication with my supervisor(s)*; and *I receive recognition and appreciation for the work that I do from my supervisors*. These multiple-choice questions were chosen specifically to examine the emotional spectrum of DSP experiences on a regular basis as well as to examine the

role of various relationships built within the position. Responses to the aforementioned eleven multiple-choice questions were analyzed overall as well as within each of the four filters in order to illuminate trends and differences between responses in each filter.

Responses to short answer fill-in questions that were provided optionally throughout the survey and at its conclusion were catalogued. Fill-in questions chosen for analysis were: *“What made you interested in applying for the Direct Support Professional Position?”*, included in the General Employment Information section, as well as *“Is there anything you would like to add pertaining to these questions?”* which appeared at the conclusion of each subsequent section of the survey.

At the conclusion of the survey, participants had the option to respond to the following four short answer fill-in questions: *“What is your favorite part of your job?”*, *“What is your least favorite part of your job?”*, *“What advice would you give to someone newly beginning their career as a Direct Support Professional?”*, and *“Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?”*

A grand total of 251 responses to the aforementioned optional fill-in questions throughout the survey were catalogued. A total of 202 responses to such questions were analyzed. The 49 responses that were omitted were comprised of responses that stated some variation of “No” or responses that reflect highly individualized experiences detached from the DSP experience such as “I hate mornings” or “I needed a job.” Responses to the fill-in questions were grouped according to categories that mirror those of analyzed multiple-choice responses: *Background*, *Feelings*, and *Relationships*.

Upon review of fill-in responses both among those questions in each section of the survey as well as those at the conclusion of the survey, responses were organized according to broader

themes and subthemes. The themes identified are: 1) *Investment in the Job*; 2) *Recognition, Understanding, and Support*; and 3) *Wages*. Within each theme, multiple subthemes were identified. The subthemes of *Investment in the Job* are: a) *Sense of Purpose and Accomplishment/Meaningful Work*; b) *Client Connection and Relationships*; and c) *Other Relationships*. The subthemes of *Recognition, Understanding, and Support* are: a) *Concern for the View of Clients in Society*; b) *Concern for the View and Understanding of the DSP Role: Among Organizational Leaders and Society*; and c) *Needed Support/Resources from the Organization*. The subthemes of *Wages* are: a) *Difficulty Working for Low Wages*; and b) *Competition With the Job Market/Organizational Issues*.

Interviews were transcribed via Zoom transcription, indexed, and coded according to themes. Survey and interview questions were compared to determine if there was similarity in overall trends. Interview responses were reviewed in conjunction with fill-in survey responses and categorized according to the same themes and subthemes. Survey and interview questions were matched with specific research questions and quotations from interviews and fill-in questions have been included to illuminate particular points.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

As explained in the Data Analysis in Chapter III, responses to multiple-choice questions, optional fill-in questions and interview responses were reviewed and analyzed individually as well as collectively. The sections that follow will detail the results of each theme and subtheme, beginning with multiple-choice response data, followed by fill-in question data, and concluding with interview data. The data has been organized into three overarching themes that each contain two or three subthemes. The first theme, *Investment in the Job*, speaks to the level of commitment to the work experienced by DSPs and is where a majority of the data lies. The subthemes contained in this theme are: *Sense of Purpose and Accomplishment/Meaningful Work*, *Client Connection and Relationships*, and *Other Relationships*. The second theme, *Recognition, Understanding, and Support* describes the desires among respondents for better understanding of both the clients they work with in society, as well as that of their own roles as DSPs among society and organizational leaders. The subthemes of this theme are: *Concern for the View of Clients in Society*, *Concern for the View and Understanding of the DSP Role: Among Organizational Leaders and Society*, and *Needed Support/Resources*. The final theme is *Wages* which details the DSP experience of earning low wages in their position. The theme is broken into two subthemes: *Difficulty Working for Low Wages* and *Competition With the Job Market/Organizational Issues*.

Findings

Investment in the Job

In examining responses to the question, “*What is your favorite part of your job?*” and noting the variety of responses that speak to client relationships, affecting positive change in the lives of clients served, and enjoyment of the relationships built within the position, it is clear that DSPs do more than just like their jobs. Much more than that, DSPs place great value in what they do; they find their jobs meaningful, they’re invested in the outcomes, and they’re committed to successes. The way respondents speak about aspects of their job that they most enjoy or feel most aligned with demonstrates how emotionally invested they are in the work from a number of different perspectives. Firstly, in the sense of purpose and meaning attained through their work as a DSP, secondly in the substantial relationships built with clients, and lastly in the significant impact of other relationships within the organization.

Sense of Purpose and Accomplishment/Meaningful Work

The vast majority of survey respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction with the work that they do. Similarly, the majority of interview participants spoke to the satisfaction they derive from their role as a DSP. Beyond baseline enjoyment, the data also signals that DSPs are deeply committed to the work and its outcomes. The highest number of responses collectively to all data collection methods are centered around the deep sense of fulfillment and purpose that DSPs derive from the work that they do, which provides us an answer to Research Question 1: “*What are the fulfilling aspects of the job that contribute to DSP job satisfaction?*”. DSPs express that the work they do daily directly affects positive change in the lives of their clients

and furthermore, DSPs have an understanding of their own particular skillsets and what they have to personally offer to clients. As is demonstrated in the following data, DSPs find purpose and meaning in their work, leave the majority of their days feeling accomplished, and derive deep satisfaction from being able to affect positive change in clients' lives.

93% of respondents answered *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* to the question, "*I enjoy the work that I do*" while 7% of respondents answered either *Not Sure*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* to the same question. Despite the overwhelming number of respondents who reported that they enjoy their job, only 67% of respondents answered either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* to the question, "*I see myself working long term in this industry.*" 33% of respondents answered either *Not Sure*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* to the same question.

81% of total respondents answered either *Every day* or *More than once a week* to the question, "*At the end of the workday, I feel accomplished.*" The same answers were given among 85% of those who enjoy their job, 25% among those who do not enjoy their job, 100% among those who see themselves working long term, and 42% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

81% of total respondents answered either *Every day* or *More than once a week* to the question, "*At the end of the workday, I feel happy.*" The same answers were given among 85% of those who enjoy their job, 25% among those who do not enjoy their job, 92% among those who see themselves working long term, and 58% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

32% of total respondents answered either *Every day* or *More than once a week* to the question, "*At the end of the workday, I feel emotionally drained.*" The same answers were given among 28% of those who enjoy their job, 75% among those who do not enjoy their job, 26%

among those who see themselves working long term, and 42% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

21% of total respondents answered either *Every day* or *More than once a week* to the question, “*At the end of the workday, I feel frustrated.*” The same answers were given among 17% of those who enjoy their job, 75% among those who do not enjoy their job, 16% among those who see themselves working long term, and 32% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

A total of 59 responses to fill-in questions in various categories referenced a sense of accomplishment, meaning, and purpose in the work that DSPs do. Responses included being of service and contribution, teaching, and supporting clients in the attainments of goals. Other responses spoke to making clients happy, witnessing clients learning new things, and assisting in removing a barrier for a client. Of those 59 responses, 22 in response to the question, “*What is your favorite part of your job?*”, said it was the work that they do that aids in helping a client accomplish a new task, goal or activity, by being in direct responsibility for an accomplishment, or client attainment of goals. One respondent noted, “I like seeing my clients take joy in some of the things I help them with that utilize my strengths.” Six other responses to the same question commented that their favorite part of their job was bearing witness to their clients reaching goals, growing, or trying something new. Thirteen responses to the question, “*What advice would you give to someone newly starting out their career as a Direct Support Professional?*” referenced the impact that the DSP has on clients, the difference it makes in client lives, and how fun and rewarding the job is, encapsulated in this remark by one respondent: “There WILL be times that are difficult but remember that what you are doing CHANGES lives.” Fourteen responses to the question, “*What made you interested in applying for the Direct Support Professional position?*”

commented that it was due to a desire to be of assistance, to be an advocate, to contribute to society, to help people, and to do a job that would be rewarding. Two responses to the question, “*Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?*” cited the satisfaction gained from changing client lives and the learning experiences as a DSP. One response at the end of the *Feelings About the Job* section commented that if their day began poorly, it is always improved by helping clients. Lastly, one response to the question, “*What is your least favorite part of your job?*” explained that it is when their client is having a difficult day and there are barriers to finding solutions to their problems.

Interview data confirmed these same findings and demonstrated again the view among the majority of DSPs in this study that their work is meaningful and impactful, and they derive a sense of purpose from carrying out the work. Three out of the four interviewees talked about their jobs as DSPs providing a sense of purpose in their lives. One interviewee, Sierra, explained, “I finally feel like I'm giving back to society and I'm doing a meaningful thing all day.” Two of four interviewees commented that this job was the most meaningful and rewarding job that they'd ever had. In particular, Kirk compared his current role to a corporate position he held in the past, explaining that corporate work does not amount to anything that matters, whereas working in his position as a DSP, he feels that the work he does makes a “real” difference. Sierra expressed how happy it made her to see the smiles on clients' faces after she helped to teach them something new, and Danielle described the joy she gains from seeing her clients learn and succeed.

Client Connection and Relationships

In addition to DSPs having their own understanding of the value of the work that they do, DSPs appear to receive clear confirmation of their impact as well, as will be seen in the data, a great majority of respondents noted that they feel appreciated for their work from their clients. A large portion of the data collected in the survey revealed the depth and importance of the relationships that DSPs establish with their clients. Interview participants only built upon that data, with added insights into what the clients mean to interviewees and how impacted they are by their relationships with them.

95% of total respondents answered, “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” to the question, “*I have a well-established relationship with one or more clients on my caseload.*” The same answers were given among 98% of those who enjoy their job, 50% among those who do not enjoy their job, 100% among those who see themselves working long term, and 84% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

79% of total respondents answered either *Every day* or *More than once a week* to the questions, “*I feel appreciated for the work that I do by my clients.*” The same answers were given among 83% of those who enjoy their job, 25% among those who do not enjoy their job, 89% among those who see themselves working long term, and 58% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

A total of 42 responses to fill-in questions in various categories referenced the relationships and connections that are built between DSPs and their clients. Some responses were highly positive, commenting on the enjoyment in being in the company of clients, communicating with them, and participating in activities with them. Other responses described the more negative aspects of client relationships, such as the emotional toll of being a client’s

primary confidant, struggling with behavioral issues, and when clients leave the program or pass away. As one respondent noted, “The job is all about the clients.” Of those 42, fourteen responses to the question, “*What is your favorite part of your job?*”, referenced building connections with clients, spending time with them, doing activities together, communicating and having heart to heart conversations with clients, and overall interaction with clients. Thirteen responses to the question, “*What advice would you give to someone newly starting out their career as a Direct Support Professional?*” referenced the importance of getting to know your clients well, having patience with clients, and that the primary focus of the job is the clients. Two responses to the question, “*Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?*” referenced that clients become like family and how the DSP experience is dictated by what clients are willing and able to hear from their DSPs. Two responses at the end of the *Feelings About the Job* section referenced how bonding with a client makes their day better and how the emotional needs of a client affect their day. Two responses at the end of the Relationships sections referenced clients feeling like family and the importance of working to establish professional boundaries with clients. Nine responses to the question, “*What is your least favorite part of your job?*” referenced a variety of stressors including: only being able to support clients via Zoom due to the pandemic, being one of very few personal connections in a client’s life, instances of difficulty in communicating with and effectively supporting a client, and when clients pass away.

Interview data confirmed survey data on the bonds and relationships that DSPs build with their clients and the importance thereof. Information provided by interview participants provided deeper insight into how well DSPs know their clients, and the care that they have for them. All four interviewees commented on the bonds and relationships they’ve built with their clients.

When asked, “*Can you tell me about the clients that you work with?*”, two out of four interviewees gave detailed information about each individual client on their caseload, demonstrating a deep level of investment in and knowledge of each individual that they support. Two out of four interviewees commented on their clients feeling like family to them. All four interviewees commented that the time spent with clients is their favorite part of the job.

Kirk talked about how his best days are those spent doing fun and recreational activities with his clients, while also commenting on the draining nature of sometimes being a client’s only confidant. Shirley described her clients as “pleasant, hilarious, and considerate” while also describing the stressors of supporting her clients during the pandemic, in a more “cooped up” environment. Shirley additionally discussed the closeness that clients feel to their DSPs, explaining that, “the DSPs are the most important people to the residents... They don’t care who the director is.” Danielle explained how “wonderfully different” each of her clients were and how they teach her far more than she could “impart” on them. Sierra commented on the impact of DSP relationships with clients, explaining that she’s learned,

...it's really not good to like get as close to some of the clients, as I have gotten because they have to deal with so much loss in their lives, and so many people that come and go and you know, eventually I'll go, and it'll be another loss.

Sierra’s comment highlights her self-reflection on the fact that despite how much she enjoys building a deep bond with her clients, it might not be in their best interest, and so she must curtail those instincts. Sierra’s concern for her clients exemplifies how DSPs maintain awareness of client needs and center their focus on strategies that are in line with what best supports clients’ well-being.

Other Relationships

The second largest chunk of all data is centered around the relationships that DSPs have with others in their work, namely coworkers and supervisors. Many survey respondents and interview participants spoke to a desire for more team-building aspects of the job in general and a longing for more connection and camaraderie among other DSPs, demonstrating the strong impact of these other relationships (or lack thereof). The data shows that most DSPs are in regular communication with their coworkers and supervisors, but the experiences they have with them vary greatly. For some respondents and interview participants, working together with their coworkers as a team is a source for great satisfaction in their positions, where coworkers work in tandem supporting clients as well as each other. For others, however, coworker relationships are a primary source of stress and frustration. This appears in a few different ways: frustration with a lower quality of work produced by other coworkers, gaps in communication, the stresses of understaffing, and a need for support networks among DSPs, particularly when they are first beginning their jobs. The data shows a similar positive/negative split in responses regarding supervisor relationships. A handful of respondents commented on the positive and hugely supportive roles their supervisors play, while others stressed the frustration born of lack of communication between levels of the organization, or feelings of being ignored by their supervisors.

86% of total respondents answered either *Every day* or *More than once a week* to the question, *"I am in communication with my coworkers"*. The same answers were given among 85% of those who enjoy their job, 100% among those who do not enjoy their job, 95% among those who see themselves working long term, and 68% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

86% of total respondents answered either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* to the question, “*I feel part of a team with my department as a whole*”. The same answers were given among 91% of those who enjoy their job, 25% among those who do not enjoy their job, 97% among those who see themselves working long term, and 63% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

75% of total respondents answered either *Every day* or *More than once a week* to the question, “*I am in communication with my Supervisor*”. The same answers were given among 75% of those who enjoy their job, 75% among those who do not enjoy their job, 82% among those who see themselves working long term, and 66% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

53 total responses to fill-in questions in various categories referenced respondents’ relationships with their coworkers, supervisors, or the larger organization as a whole. Of those 53 responses, five responses to the question, “*What is your favorite part of your job?*”, referenced interaction with their coworkers and team, spending time with people, making friendships, and building connections with coworkers. Thirteen responses to the question, “*What advice would you give to someone newly starting out their career as a Direct Support Professional?*” referenced working as a team, reaching out for questions, developing a support network among coworkers, and to speak up to supervisors when in need. Four responses to the question, “*What made you interested in applying for the Direct Support Professional position?*” referenced enjoying working with people and having had previous experience with a family member with a disability. Two responses to the question, “*Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?*” referenced the need for DSPs to develop support teams in order to evade burn out and how many different

supervisors one can have in the course of the career and the differences in experience between positive and negative experiences with supervisors. As one respondent noted, “The quality of the job can change so drastically depending on the supervisor, coworkers, and clients you have.”

Responses to the above set of questions demonstrate the positive experiences derived from coworker and supervisor relationships in the DSP role, as well as the benefits to DSPs developing support networks around them. The remainder of responses, however, speak to the flip side of coworker and supervisor relationships and how negative or ineffective relationships can be to the detriment of a DSP’s overall experience.

Three responses at the end of the *Feelings About the Job* section referenced the need to perform socially for supervisors as well as clients, and that frustrations are mainly with coworkers and staff shortages. Eight responses at the end of the *Relationships* sections referenced having different quality standards than some coworkers, difficulty building relationships when having little time physically working together with coworkers, lack of communication, and good relationships with supervisors that have good communication. Eleven responses to the question, “*What is your least favorite part of your job?*” referenced difficulties working and communicating with coworkers, having to work remotely, short-staffing, and having concerns addressed with supervisors being ignored. Seven responses to the question, “*What is your least favorite part of your job?*” referenced the large amount of paperwork required, seeming to suggest that such duties spent away from being in community with others are among the least desirable in this position. The dichotomy of these two kinds of responses relating to coworker and supervisor relationships demonstrate how differently each other kind of relationship is experienced by DSPs and to what degree each kind of relationship has affected participants.

While survey responses provided more commentary on coworker dynamics and the need for camaraderie and teamwork, interview data placed greater emphasis on relationships with supervisors and upper management. All four interviewees commented on the role of relationships with their coworkers and supervisors as being impactful aspects of their jobs. Two out of four interviewees commented on having highly positive relationships with their supervisors whereas one interviewee expressed a neutral feeling towards their supervisor. One interviewee commented on having a nearly nonexistent relationship with their supervisor but expressed frustration with the larger administrative team. Kirk explained that days with the department as a whole essentially do not exist and that even in the pre-pandemic world, staff meetings consist largely of supervisors talking *at* the DSP team. He expressed a yearning for team-building activities, explaining that the only daily interactions being with clients and their families can sometimes be rather challenging. At one point in the interview, when asked if he had any desires to be promoted into a supervisory position, Kirk commented that he did not feel there was a need for more supervisors and that instead the greater need was for “more boots on the ground”, explaining that it is more DSP staff with clients that is needed, rather than more supervisors. Kirk additionally addressed paperwork, explaining that the need to complete copious amounts of paperwork takes valuable time away from the client, and interrupts the flow of support.

Shirley explained that she did not have a close relationship with her coworkers, but that they were all cordial with one another, describing a fairly neutral regard for her coworker relationships. Shirley went on to describe what she sees as a lack of communication from direct supervisors to upper management, as well as a lack of client information that makes its way from upper management to DSPs. Shirley shared that she perceives this lack of information as a

mistrust of DSPs on the part of management. Additionally, Shirley sees a lack of effective communication between weekday and weekend staff, which can cause confusion and frustration. Shirley expressed seeing the issue being that there is a cohesive team on paper, but management is inconsistent, so it is not a team in practice. Shirley went on to explain that she feels that DSPs “carry the program” and oftentimes end up being the ones training supervisors, because DSPs stay on the job longer than management, who come and go far more frequently.

In contrast, Danielle commented on how well she and her team worked together, particularly in group outings with clients. Similarly, Sierra spoke very highly of her supervisor, explaining that she felt comfortable approaching her supervisor with anything that came up. Sierra expressed most of her frustration being with some coworkers who do not seem to contribute as much as others, or do not adhere to proper safety protocols.

Both Kirk and Shirley provide responses that show their views of the supervisor role as being ineffective and disconnected, while Kirk speaks to a desire that is echoed in survey responses: that DSPs long for more connection and teambuilding with their fellow DSP. What Danielle and Sierra’s responses potentially showcase is how little there is to say about supervisory and coworker relationships when they are largely positive, as they seem then to just allow DSPs the space needed to do their jobs.

Recognition, Understanding, and Support

Second only to the role of investment and commitment to the work, is the role that recognition, understanding and support plays in the responses to both survey and interview data. In addition to enjoying their work, being committed to outcomes and successes, and building important relationships with clients, coworkers, and supervisors alike, the data demonstrates how

DSPs are motivated by concerns for how they and their clients are viewed. Firstly, DSPs make multiple mention of their concern for how individuals with I/DD are viewed within the larger societal context. Similarly, DSPs are concerned with how they themselves are viewed as professionals in society. What's more, DSPs share this same concern for how they are viewed among their own organizational leaders and how that leads to a need for additional recognition and support.

Concern for the View of Clients in Society

Multiple survey respondents and interview participants commented on how their clients are seen in society. This looms separately from the importance that DSPs place on their own individual relationships with clients – where they are attuned to the inherent value of each client they support – and demonstrates a concern among DSPs for not only their own clients within the realm of the support they provide them in one-on-one settings, and takes their concern far beyond, to the totality of the I/DD community.

There were not any corresponding multiple-choice questions for this subtheme. Nine total responses to fill-in questions from various categories referenced DSPs' concern for and understanding of how clients are viewed in society. Of the nine total, two responses to the question, *“What is your favorite part of your job?”*, referenced how work as a DSP helps clients gain much-deserved independence in the world and also how their work “[helps] clients to be positively viewed in society.” Four responses to the question, *“What advice would you give to someone newly starting out their career as a Direct Support Professional?”* referenced the importance of getting to know a client beyond the diagnoses listed in a file, the importance of treating all clients with dignity, being sure not to feel sorry for clients but rather to listen to each

of their needs, and how the work DSPs do serves to support a misunderstood group of individuals. As one respondent so aptly noted, “this may not be a highly seriously regarded profession by our money hungry society, yet we serve a very select group of human beings that not everybody understands.” One response to the question, *“Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?”* described the way that society has imposed on people with disabilities a necessity to “bend to its rules” but that society as a whole benefits from the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. One response to the question, *“What is your least favorite part of your job?”* referenced instances witnessing their clients being treated unfairly in society.

Two out of four interviewees expressed sentiments that their jobs positively affect the views of clients in society. Danielle expressed a strong desire to show people that the clients that she works with are “limitless”. Sierra shared that she herself had misconceptions about people with disabilities before working in this industry, but in her job as a DSP she has come to get to know the disability community and how “wonderful” it is. She also explained how she loves seeing new movies being made highlighting individuals with disabilities, because it “helps them shine” which is also what she seeks to do in her work as a DSP.

Concern for the View and Understanding of the DSP Role: Among Organizational Leaders and Society

DSPs express concern for how they are viewed in two different spheres: among society at large, and among their own organizational leaders. Fill-in and interview data demonstrate how feelings of lack of appreciation and recognition from the societal and organizational viewpoint are intertwined for DSPs. What is illuminated clearly in the multiple-choice data – and which

confirms fill-in and interview data – is the stark contrast between how often DSPs receive recognition and appreciation from their clients versus from their supervisors. The frequency of recognition is much, much higher among those who enjoy their job and who see themselves working long term, versus those who do not enjoy their jobs nor see themselves working long term.

39% of total respondents answered *Every day* or *More than once a week* to the question, “*I receive recognition and appreciation for the work that I do from my supervisors*”. The same answers were given among 42% of those who enjoy their job, 0% among those who do not enjoy their job, 45% among those who see themselves working long term, and 26% among those who do not see themselves working long term.

Fourteen total responses to fill-in questions referenced either how they experience society’s view of the DSP role or how understanding (or lack thereof) of the DSP role from the view of organizational leaders affects their experiences. Two responses to the question, “*What advice would you give to someone newly starting out their career as a Direct Support Professional?*” commented that a supervisor should make the work easier, not to stay working under a supervisor who makes the work harder, and that the work often goes completely without being recognized by anyone at all. Three responses to the question, “*Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?*” referenced a desire for DSPs “to be recognized as a profession with better pay”, being treated unfairly by a system that doesn’t value all the work that they do, and the importance of having patience and remembering that clients rely on you, when confronted with moments of feeling underappreciated. Two responses at the end of the *Feelings About the Job* section referenced feeling unnoticed, and of understaffing and a lack of understanding of the

value of DSP work in society at large. Three responses at the end of the *Relationships* sections referenced instances of concerns addressed to management being dismissed, direct supervisors expressing appreciation but no one else at the organization, and, conversely, one respondent feeling enormously supported by their organization from all levels. Four responses to the question, “*What is your least favorite part of your job?*” referenced supervisors not listening to feedback, administration putting pressure on DSPs to maintain hours during the pandemic, the need to advocate strongly yet remain invisible, and feeling disrespected on multiple ends.

Comments on the view of DSPs in society and from the organization were more prevalent in interview data than in survey responses. Interview data provides deeper insight and further detail on how these perceived views affect DSPs and their experiences. Two out of four interviewees commented on how the DSP role is viewed by society and by their own organizational leaders. Both also commented on the fact that it was difficult to find any other work at their age (middle-aged), seeming to suggest that roles in other more highly respected professions were unlikely to hire them, but because the DSP role is less highly regarded, they were hired on despite their age. Shirley spoke at length about her frustration with management and the administration’s lack of understanding about her role. Shirley expressed that the DSP role might look much easier to an outsider than it really is. She explained that it is exhausting in a unique way, describing what it takes for a DSP to successfully be aware of multiple things going on at once with clients. Shirley explained how from the outside it might not look like a DSP is doing a lot, but there is a lot going on that an outsider can’t see. She went on to express feeling that her administration did not appreciate or fully understand the work that DSPs do, explaining that “we are the heart and soul of the organization.” Shirley explains that she feels that management sees DSPs as only being capable of doing one thing, and that she does not

believe they see all the skill and patience that it takes to do what they do. Shirley then stated that in her view, her administration works hard to portray a happy and creative environment in the activities that the organization provides to clients, but without acknowledging that those outcomes are only possible because of the support provided to clients by DSPs behind the scenes. She added that something she would like organizational leaders to know is everything that it takes to be a good DSP, adding that she would love to see management “break away from management positions and consider what [DSPs] do every day to make the program what it is.”

Sierra similarly expressed lack of appreciation from her administration, commenting that she got the impression that her administration was more concerned with maintaining the status quo rather than attempting to think creatively and innovatively to support and enhance the lives of clients served. Sierra additionally commented on multiple occasions in which upper management did not make any kind of effort to say hello to her, ask her name, or acknowledge her presence at all. She elaborated, stating that she felt she was being treated as invisible because she is “just” a DSP. Sierra explained that she felt that upper management should spend more time out with DSPs and clients to observe what those days actually looked like, explaining that they make “big decisions”, and those decisions could be better aligned with DSP and client needs if they saw what DSPs experienced firsthand.

Needed Support/Resources from the Organization

Hand in hand with their experience of being undervalued and recognized for their work by organizational leaders comes DSPs’ need for added support from their organizations. The previous data builds on itself, beginning with the DSP’s recognition of their own value demonstrated in their investment to their job, continuing with their desire for greater recognition

from society and their organizational leaders, and culminating in a need for that recognition to be acted upon by their organizations and supervisors tangibly investing back into them. Many DSPs discussed areas where they could use additional resources to more effectively do their jobs, with feedback being centered around supervisors' responsiveness to challenging situations and a desire among many for more trainings.

There were not any corresponding multiple-choice questions for this subtheme. Eleven total responses to fill-in questions referenced the need for additional resources or support from their organization. One response to the question, *"What advice would you give to someone newly starting out their career as a Direct Support Professional?"* commented on the need for DSPs to be provided more training and follow up when starting out, explaining that not doing so is "disrespectful to staff and clients". One response to the question, *"Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?"* referenced limited training resources for staff. Five responses at the end of the *Feelings About the Job* section referenced frustration due to inconsistency in expectations among supervisors, increased workloads in light of staff shortages, worry around a return to more in-person support post-pandemic and general lack of support from supervisors when concerns are addressed. One response at the end of the *Relationships* sections described experiences of being faced with a client's behavioral challenge and other uncomfortable situations that did not result in needed support from the organization. Three responses to the question, *"What is your least favorite part of your job?"* referenced not having adequate time to complete paperwork and restrictions on time allotted to do admin work, and the need for more physical support on the job.

Interview data confirms data found in the survey which speaks to the desire for more training materials. One interviewee commented on tangible resources that she would benefit

from if provided by her organization. Sierra described a desire for more training being available to DSPs, particularly when they are first beginning their careers. Sierra suggested having more training modules before going out to work with clients. She also expressed a suggestion for ongoing training opportunities for staff, explaining that while she understands why a higher wage can't be paid to DSPs, she felt it would be good to at least offer retreats or other training opportunities to support staff's ongoing development.

Wages

Unsurprisingly, a decent number of both survey and interview responses referenced the low wages that DSPs earn. This is a key contributing factor to stress and burnout across the literature and across agencies internationally. While not the most prevalent piece of data throughout the study, the significance cannot be understated as compensation can, for some DSPs, supersede all previously stated aspects of the DSP experience and can become the ultimate factor in how DSPs determine their ability to continue working in the industry. The data presented speaks to this sentiment.

Difficulty Working for Low Wages

Survey and interview data alike demonstrate that DSPs experience the low wages they receive in a multitude of ways. Firstly, is the simple fact of making ends meet under the current wages. Many survey and interview respondents reported that if not for the income of another household member, they could not feasibly continue to work in a DSP position and support themselves. This is a source of tension for many DSPs, as one survey respondent summed it up so poignantly: "I love what I do, and wish to stay in it for as long as I could but the pay just isn't

that much compared to living expenses.” Secondly, DSPs find a mismatch between the intensity of their job and the monetary compensation that they receive for the work that they do. This appears both in survey data, as well as in comments made by interview participants.

Lastly, DSPs feel the strain of low wages in how they are confronted with short staffing. DSPs feel the stress of having to pick up extra duties and take on increasingly fuller caseloads due to staff leaving. Many survey respondents spoke to the difficulty of having to keep up with the same level of work, with only a fraction of the staff. At the same time, DSPs empathize with their peers who leave, understanding that for many, it is due to the low wages. DSPs also see how some of the highest quality DSPs who provide phenomenal support are unable to continue in the work due to the wages, a fact which is both straining and disappointing to DSPs.

There were not any corresponding multiple-choice questions for this subtheme. Thirteen total responses to fill-in questions referenced the low wages earned by DSPs. Four responses to the question, *“What advice would you give to someone newly starting out their career as a Direct Support Professional?”* referenced the necessity to budget well due to the low pay, and the mismatch between job expectations and compensation. As one respondent so aptly noted, *“You pursue a career in this field because it speaks to you, not to your bank account.”* Three responses to the question, *“Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?”* commented on the pay being far below a living wage, that no one gets into this field for the money, and one commented on how the *“lesson on humanity”* makes up for the low wages earned. One response at the end of the *Feelings About the Job* section commented on how the work from home workload has increased, but the wages are a fraction of what other work from home jobs pay. Five responses to the question, *“What is your least favorite part of your job?”* referenced the low pay as being their

least favorite aspect of the job, the difficulty in working so hard for such little pay, and the desire to continue in this field for a long time but the inability to keep up with living expenses.

Three out of four interviewees commented on the low wages that DSPs earn. Danielle commented that there is so much more to be gained in this job than “financial rewards” but still, the low pay seems to be the main factor that leads to staff shortages. Danielle cited the “revolving door” of staff as being the most stressful aspect of the job. Shirley discussed how many DSPs have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, leaving them exhausted and unable to do as effective a job as they would otherwise. Sierra talked about the pay not being a living wage, and that she does not know how others who do not have other income streams are able to stay afloat. Sierra went on to explain how many fantastic staff she has seen leave due to the wages.

Competition with the Job Market/Organizational Issues

Discussions of how the rate of pay for DSPs compare to the job market and how wages are dispersed among organizations appear in both survey and interview data collected. There were not any corresponding multiple-choice questions for this subtheme. One response at the end of the *Feelings About the Job* section commented on the strain of working with so few staff, and how difficult it is to bring in new staff “because Taco Bell has a higher starting wage than we do with 1/16th the responsibility.”

While only commented on once among survey respondents, one interviewee did also discuss the competition with other industries in the area. Sierra commented on how with the small raise she received, she now only makes the same wage as a position at In n Out Burger.

And while only discussed by one interviewee, it seemed to be of great concern to Shirley how the organization managed their funds. Shirley described concern and frustration with the minimal increase in wages received by DSPs in her organization, while there seem to be new positions in upper management that are being hired for, and she does not understand how there is money at the top, but none available for DSP wage increases.

Summary

The vast majority of the data collected falls under the first theme: *Investment in the Job* and appears to be the most prevalent result of the survey and interviews. That being said, a significant amount of the remaining data fell into the subsequent two categories: *Recognition, Understanding, and Support* and *Wages*. The second and third themes echo some previous research while the first theme demonstrates an important aspect of the DSP experience that has until now remained largely absent from the literature as far as I can tell.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Chapter IV

The vast majority of responses to multiple-choice and fill-in survey questions as well as interviewee talking points spoke to a deep level of investment to the job among DSPs. What's more, DSPs derive a sense of purpose from the work that they do and find their work to be incredibly meaningful. DSPs also develop strong connections with their clients and likewise are affected – both positively and negatively – by other relationships with coworkers and supervisors. Each of these components comprise the first identified theme in the findings: *Investment in the Job*.

Secondly, it was found that DSPs have a yearning for recognition and understanding in society, both for that of their clients, and for themselves. DSPs want their profession to be seen in higher regard societally as well as from their own organizations. In part of that recognition, DSPs have some need for additional support from their organizational leaders. This accounts for the second theme identified: *Recognition, Understanding, and Support*.

The final theme identified is *Wages*. DSPs are unhappy with the wages that they earn in this position. They feel it in dealing with understaffing and making ends meet on their own, and they also see how difficult it is to be working a position with such enormous responsibility that pays wages comparable to the fast-food industry, which requires a fraction of the responsibility.

The research shows that the DSP experience spans multiple spheres, with the social and relational connections being at the forefront.

Discussion

Investment in the Job

Far and away, the vast majority of responses to all forms of data collection speak to DSPs' level of investment in the work that they do. Through their responses about the relationships they have with their clients, client achievements, and enjoyment in their work, DSPs display how much they care about outcomes and successes. Unlike other positions, where perks such as bonuses, per diems, flex schedules and location might make the job positive, DSPs are far more concerned with the real and tangible outcomes of the work that they do. DSPs recognize and deeply value the fruits of their labor, they take seriously and put great care and attention into their support of clients, and they do it because it means something to them. DSPs experience more than just enjoyment in their job, they are truly invested in and committed to the achievements of the clients that they directly support. It is DSP investment in the job and connection to the work that is most absent from previous literature on the prevalence and causes of DSP burnout and turnover. I have found no previous research in the literature that speaks to the level of enjoyment and satisfaction experienced by DSPs. Furthermore, no previous research appears to have explored the reasons why DSPs desire to stay in their jobs or what they gain from their positions. This research provides valuable insight into what DSPs love most about their positions and where most meaning is derived from.

Sense of Purpose and Accomplishment/ Meaningful Work

It is clear from the data surrounding DSPs' deep sense of accomplishment and purpose in their work that there is a demonstrable return on investment in the form of tangible outcomes in

client success and goal attainment, which continues to contribute to DSP job satisfaction.

Additionally, many DSPs responded to the enjoyment they get from simply bearing witness to an accomplishment or triumph among their clients. Many respondents absolutely gushed about their clients' successes, whether or not they could attribute personal responsibility for said success.

This speaks to not only the satisfaction derived from being directly involved in clients' outcomes, but also from being in the mere presence of their joy and being in the company of client successes. This demonstrates how DSP investment in the job goes beyond their own personal involvement and spans to a sincere care for clients and their well-being.

My findings suggest that the sense of purpose and accomplishment that DSPs derive from their positions is a key contributing factor in the overall job satisfaction that DSPs experience in their role. While previous research has spoken to the importance of the DSP role and the negative impacts on clients when they leave (Zabin, 2006), none so far as I have found speak to the DSP experience of playing a vital role in client success. Because the developmental disability service model takes special care to focus attention on clients being served in a highly individualized and person-centered manner, it seems that the focus of DSP turnover has placed emphasis on its ultimate impacts on client well-being. In doing so, it has pulled attention away from all the steps leading up to DSPs leaving their positions. By focusing wholly on the DSP experience in my study, we are offered insight into not only what is gained by clients when DSPs stay onboard longer-term, but also what is gained by the DSPs themselves. My study offers less of a deficit model – like literature of the past that focuses on the negative effects of departure – and instead offers an abundance model that places primary focus on what *does* work for DSPs. In doing so, we are able to better understand the DSP experience while they currently reside in the position, as opposed to singularly reacting to what happens to clients after they leave.

In this study, we see how providing a needed service to individuals with I/DD benefits not only the clients in receipt of services, but also has a direct and positive effect on the experiences of the DSP working in the position. What this signals to me is that by being of service to this community of clients served indeed builds the social capital of DSPs in that they establish themselves as an integral member of the community, whose work results in tangible and positive outcomes for the greater good of society.

Client Connection and Relationships

In conjunction with a sense of accomplishment in one's own impact on the I/DD community, an enormous contributor to job satisfaction among DSPs resides in the bonds that they build with their clients. A great number of respondents spoke to the time spent with clients as being their favorite aspect of their job. As mentioned in Chapter IV, both Sierra and Shirley in their interviews spent a great deal of time giving detailed accounts of each client that they work with, providing detailed descriptions of characteristics and their individual experiences with each client. Beyond just the words alone used to describe each of these clients, the demeanor in both Sierra and Shirley shifted as they spoke about them. Both their verbal and nonverbal communication confirms how deeply they care for each client they support, and how invested they are in how each client progresses, grows, and succeeds. Survey respondents too commented on how much enjoyment they derive from spending time with their clients, and how close they feel to them, many noting that clients feel like family.

This understanding of DSPs' relationships with their clients helps to answer Research Question 3, "*How do DSPs maintain a balance and reconcile both the fulfilling and stressful aspects of their job?*". When stressors of the job come up – low wages or difficult supervisors,

perhaps – DSPs seem to find comfort and reconciliation in their relationships with clients. It is these connections that make up for other less desirable aspects of the job. DSPs maintain their commitment to and investment in their work because they are acutely aware that at the end of the day, it is all about the clients they work with. The individual moments they spend with the people they are supporting is what matters most and they appear to find continual meaning and purpose in their work because of the strong bonds that they have built with clients. Throughout the study I find confirmation that client relationships are the most rewarding aspect of the job for DSPs.

Previous research has discussed the social and emotional ties that clients make with their DSPs, due to typically having much smaller social circles in general (Scott & Havercamp, 2018) and the severe detriment to clients' quality of life when they experience high rates of DSP turnover (Friedman, 2018), but both leave out the perspective of the DSP on the relationships they form with clients. By not including the DSP's direct perspective on client relationships, DSPs become viewed as merely a tool for client success rather than active participants in the relationship dynamic and, not only that, whole persons themselves. This gap in understanding of how DSPs are also affected by the relationships that are built between them and their clients leads to a lack of full comprehension of the full scope of how DSPs view their jobs and what they might be in need of in order to stay in their positions longer. While client perspective is important in justifying the significance of DSP longevity and retention, we cannot positively make the necessary changes to turnover rates without a complete understanding of the entire view of the relationship, which necessarily includes both sides: the client's *and* the DSP's.

The findings of this research help to fill this gap by pointing out the significant impact that client relationships have on the DSP personally. Through the lens of social capital, we can

see through previous research how DSP involvement builds the social capital of clients, and now, through this research, we see how client relationships indeed build DSP social capital as well. DSPs build rich interpersonal social capital through the deep and meaningful relationships that they foster with the clients that they support. In fact, it appears that the social capital built through client connection can often supersede the lack of social capital gained among peers and supervisors within the organization.

Other Relationships

The other relationships developed while in the DSP role – those of coworkers, supervisors, and other administrative members of the organization – are met with mixed reviews. For some, these relationships are largely positive, and for others it is quite the opposite. In this sense, relationships answer both Research Question 1, “*What are the fulfilling aspects of the job that contribute to DSP job satisfaction?*” and Research Question 2, “*What are the stressful aspects of the job that contribute to DSP burnout?*” It is important to note that the volume of comments made about coworker and supervisor relationships was much smaller than that of client relationships, which I see as an indication that the relationships that DSPs hold with their coworkers and supervisors do not carry the same weight that their relationships with clients do. It is also worth noting that comments made about coworkers and supervisors were certainly far less positive on the whole than that of clients. Interestingly, there were far fewer comments made about relationships with supervisors than relationships in any other category. My suspicion is because in the DSP field, there is so little in-person interaction with supervisors, their impact is much smaller. Interactions with coworkers, however, pose a much greater impact on job satisfaction and stressors among DSPs.

The findings of my study suggest that having others to turn to with concerns, frustrations, and shared experience is not always easily accessible but would be enormously impactful in DSP experiences. This appears to demonstrate that while at the heart of DSP work is being in relationship with clients and the client's community, there is still an element of isolation among DSPs and a longing to connect with other DSPs who might be able to share similar experiences. In addition, a number of respondents in both survey and interview described the paperwork as being their least favorite part of their job. I take this to be an indicator of how highly favored all of the relational aspects of the job are. In comparing the DSP profession to other industries, where there are perhaps better pay or other perks of the job, such material benefits might compensate for lack of social interaction. In the DSP position, however, because the material benefits are so sparse, the relationships that are built hold greater significance. All this to say that relationships in general are certainly on the minds of DSPs when they detail their experiences, and they have a significant impact thereof. Relationships with coworkers and supervisors can be cause for either satisfaction or stressors, and sometimes both.

This echoes the findings of previous research in the literature (Boyas & Wind, 2010) which speaks to the effect that building community and social capital within a team of coworkers can have. In contrast, other research found no significant correlate between social capital in organizations and emotional exhaustion among professionals working in the I/DD support industry (Kowalski et al., 2010), which tells another part of the story. The research of Kowalski (2010) appears to be in line with the additional findings of my study: that while teamwork and coworker and supervisor relationships are important to DSPs – and could certainly lead to an increase in job satisfaction – they do not have quite the same effect as does the social capital that is gained through the DSP/client relationship. My research illuminates the level of impact that

these other relationships have on job satisfaction and stress in comparison to the relationships formed with clients. My findings help to differentiate between each of the relationships that DSPs build and to identify where the most change is needed to be affected.

My findings suggest that when coworker and/or supervisor relationships are either good or neutral, they have a much smaller impact on DSP job satisfaction because it simply allows DSPs the space to keep their attention on the aspect of the job that they derive the most satisfaction from: their clients. In contrast, negative relationships with coworkers or supervisors have a greater impact on DSP stress and would be much more likely to aid in burnout and potentially turnover. In this sense, coworker and/or supervisor relationships act as a gatekeeper to the most impactful and fulfilling aspect of the job: client support. Still, while the study shows that coworker and supervisor relationships have an impact on DSP job satisfaction, these relationships, whether positive or negative, do not have the same level of impact as does the client relationship. By this I mean that the sense of accomplishment and purpose as well as client relationships yield far more dramatic implications for the overall experiences of DSPs. The depth and richness of the client relationship makes up for what is lacking elsewhere. This is not to say that DSPs are not impacted by their relationships with coworkers and supervisors, it is just that it is simply not as profound an impact as with the direct work and relationships with clients. Perhaps for those with positive and smooth relationships with coworkers and supervisors, because there is less to be concerned about in that area, it allows opportunity to not focus on those relationships and to instead have more energy focused on client care and support. For those with neutral or negative relationships with coworkers and supervisors, the relationships they hold with clients are deeper and hold more weight, as it makes up for what lacks elsewhere. This stands to demonstrate that the social capital that DSPs gain from the relationships they build with

their clients is the predominant driver in building social capital. Whereas being in community with the larger department, organization or DSP community is secondary.

Recognition, Understanding, and Support

A number of responses within the survey spoke to DSPs' concerns and desires for understanding and recognition. Firstly, with how clients and the disability community at large are viewed in society. DSPs seem to attribute some of the value of their work as being not only in the support towards the individual successes of their clients, but also as a vehicle to facilitate greater acceptance of people with disabilities within society.

Secondly, DSPs expressed a yearning for more recognition and understanding from their own organizational leaders. DSPs expressed concerns around management's true understanding of the work that DSPs put into the job and the skillset required to provide effective support. It appears that for DSPs, with greater understanding of their role among their organizational leaders, comes more support when it is needed and trust that DSPs know their jobs well.

Lastly, DSPs long to be reviewed more respectably in society at large. Many DSPs discussed their disappointment and frustration with the DSP not being granted acceptance into more highly regarded professional spheres.

Concern for the Views of Clients in Society

Many respondents commented both in response to the survey and in interviews on their hope that society will begin to view individuals with disabilities in an evolved and more positive light. As discussed in previous sections, DSPs are aware of the direct impact that they have on the lives of the clients they support, and it appears that they also understand that increased

awareness of disability in society has very real consequences for the clients they support. Sierra spoke in her interview about how happy it makes her to see an increase in film and television featuring individuals with developmental disabilities and that she views her role as a DSP – inspiring and supporting clients in creative projects – as fulfilling a similar role in the advancement of societal acceptance of persons with I/DD. Furthermore, a majority of the work that DSPs are providing in community-based support services are in assistance of achieving greater community integration for their clients. As we have already established, relationships are valued highly among DSPs; they take great care in the interpersonal social capital that they gain through client connections and demonstrate here that they are also concerned with the social capital of their clients. This echoes the literature in which Gotto et al. (2010) discusses the crucially important role that social capital plays in the well-being of persons with I/DD.

The findings of my study demonstrate how that important role plays out in real time. As DSPs work to support their clients in achieving their expressed goals, they are also acutely aware of the societal views that continue to evolve around their clients. Some respondents shared that this job provided them with a new understanding of disability and they now have a desire to share that newfound understanding with the broader community. DSPs see their own work as playing a part in the advancement of social capital among clients and in a shift in perception of the I/DD community societally.

Concern for the Views and Understanding of the DSP Role: Among Organizational Leaders and Society

DSPs see the enormous value in their work, both in how they make a difference in supporting clients to reach individual goals, and also in how their work can support shifts in

societal views of disability. Because they see how valuable their work is, there is a desire for the value and worth of their own work to be recognized by their organizations and by society at large. This appears to provide an answer to Research Question 2, “*What are the stressful aspects of the job that contribute to DSP burnout?*”: that lack of recognition and acknowledgement proves to be a source of frustration among many DSPs.

This demonstrates a gap in the social capital that DSPs acquire in this position. Despite the interpersonal social capital that they gain, there simultaneously exists a lack of acceptance from their organization. DSPs who are not experiencing a sense of being valued by their organization do not gain the esteem and social capital that comes with being a respected contributor to an organization, and this proves enormously frustrating for DSPs, especially because they are so aware of the level of skill their work requires.

While 79% of respondents received recognition and appreciation from their clients either every day or more than once a week, only 39% said to have received the same from their supervisors. Feelings of devaluing and lack of recognition on the part of supervisors and the organization came out most strongly in interviews, where Shirley commented on the unrecognized skill required to maintain the level of awareness that DSPs need to do an effective job and Sierra commented on her administration’s lack of effort to get to know her and her fellow DSPs.

As discussed in the previous section on *Other Relationships*, DSPs are most notably affected by the relationships they have with their clients, while relationships with coworkers and supervisors leave them less affected ultimately. It is curious, then, that so much of the data still would point to a strong desire among DSPs to be seen in a different light by their own organizational leaders. These points seem in contradiction to one another, however, what I see

operating here is a tension in the kind of trust associated with the social capital built between clients and DSPs and then between DSPs and supervisors. As mentioned in Chapter II, Gotto et al. (2010) offers insight into the critical role of trust in interpersonal social capital. For DSPs, it appears that positive supervisor and coworker relationships are built on mutual trust and reciprocity: DSPs being able to rely on their coworkers and vice versa; and being trusted by supervisors to have the know-how to carry out their duties. The frustration that DSPs express around recognition at the organizational level seems to point to instances where DSPs feel their capabilities and degree of skill are diminished by supervisors and/or upper management. DSPs on the other hand have full confidence in their abilities to support clients, evidenced by the numerous successes they witness and take part in regularly. When DSPs don't feel that their supervisors and upper management value their work – despite knowing full well its value – trust is lost. When DSPs see how separated management is from those tangible client successes and yet they receive minimal credit for the impact and significance of their work, there is little social capital to be gained for the DSP within their organization.

Compounded by the perceived lack of understanding from organizational leaders, DSPs feel the lack of recognition and value in their work from the society at large. The combination of their profession being largely ignored and undervalued (Hewitt & Larson, 2007) as well as compensated poorly reinforces the low status and minimal social capital gained in professional society by working in this industry. We see in the findings of this study how aware DSPs are that affiliation with this profession in and of itself does not grant DSPs greater social capital in society despite how much social capital they gain on an interpersonal level and despite how important and valuable they understand their work to be. The findings of this study demonstrate how DSPs long to be regarded professionally in a sphere that accurately matches their own

experience of both the importance of the work and of the responsibility and rigor of the work. It seems that DSPs recognize the respectability and social capital gained among other professions that provide care, such as teachers and health professionals, and desire to be regarded within society in a similar light.

Furthermore, the devaluing of work to support persons with I/DD appears to be indicative of society's greater devaluing of individuals with disabilities in general. Perhaps the lack of social capital in society among DSPs is partially as a result of their association with the I/DD community, who hold so little social capital in our current society.

What we see happening for DSPs then is a duality of diminished social capital on two levels. Firstly, DSPs often experience a depletion of interpersonal and relational social capital within their own organizations due to the lack of recognition and regard that would otherwise afford them kinship, camaraderie, and mutual aid within the larger group. Secondly, DSPs are not afforded the resources and privileges that are made available to those who hold professions that are deemed more worthy and esteemed in our society.

The DSP experience of gaining rich interpersonal social capital versus lack of social capital in the broader context of society is cause for tension in the experiences of DSPs. Several DSPs commented in their survey responses about the necessity of maintaining a positive attitude despite much of their work going completely unnoticed. It seems that the nature of the job – being spread throughout the counties that DSPs work in and providing services in small, one-on-one environments with clients – lends itself to this lack of understanding. By this I mean, when DSPs are providing care and support to clients, it is often known only to the two of them, taking place in small moments in client homes and workplaces. The true essence of the work and the victorious moments of achievement that clients and DSPs celebrate often occur in isolation,

where interpersonal social capital is built but there is no opportunity to build societal social capital. DSPs appear to reconcile this tension by cherishing the moments where they offer this kind of one-on-one support in small, intimate settings with their clients. Despite DSPs' understanding of how meaningful and impactful they are for their clients and despite how highly valued their client relationships are, there remains a strong desire for others – both within the organization, and in the broader society – to also attribute that same value and recognition to the work that DSPs are doing.

Needed Support/Resources from the Organization

In response to their frustrations, DSPs provide a number of examples of their needs in response to survey questions and in interviews, both Sierra and Shirley offered tangible solutions for meeting DSP needs. In survey responses, much of the needs expressed were in regard to more follow through from supervisors and quickening response times, particularly in regard to client struggles and behaviors. DSPs maintain a deep level of commitment to the support of their clients, and it seems apparent that when the scope of support goes beyond their capacity, there are some who want to see that supervisors have the same level of investment in finding solutions for clients.

The findings of this study also confirm points made elsewhere in the literature: that there is strong desire among DSPs for more training opportunities (Zabin, 2006) both when they are first starting out on the job, and throughout the course of their employment. This was addressed in some survey responses, but most notably in interviews. Kirk expressed that building a community around DSPs would be enormously helpful both in the quality of client care and support, and in the camaraderie between DSPs. Kirk suggested a “buddy system” when DSPs

first begin on the job, so that new DSPs have time to shadow and acclimate, while also establishing a connection with a coworker that they can go to for questions in the future. Unfortunately, with so many staff shortages, new hires are often not given a lengthy training process (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). As previously discussed, DSPs are invested in and care about their jobs, and they see the value in having adequate training and resources before getting started, as well as along the way to continually develop and refine skills. Furthermore, DSPs see the benefit in building a peer-based relationship for support. Sierra also brought up the issue of training. She suggested retreats or conferences that DSPs could attend to develop their skills. Sierra described this as a way to invest back in DSPs, even if organizations' hands are tied around the ability to increase wages.

The topic of training seems to point to two aspects of the DSP experience: one is training on the front end which again seems indicative of DSP investment in their job and concern for the job being done well by all who enter into the industry. A second aspect – ongoing trainings with other DSPs – seems to point to building community with other DSPs and investing in the profession in a way that other professions are invested in. I believe that DSPs would like to have opportunities to involve themselves in a larger network of DSPs as a way to build social capital among peers within a larger professional community in hopes of gaining greater recognition within society. The work of a DSP is so highly individualized and yet there are niche experiences that can only truly be understood by those who work in a similar profession, which makes connections with other DSPs with similar first-hand experiences so meaningful. It seems that if DSPs are offered opportunities like this by their organizations, it would also signal to them that their organizations appreciate the work that they do and see the value in investing back in their continued development as professionals.

Wages

The topic of low wages in conversation about the DSP community is not new by any means. It came as absolutely no surprise that a fair number of responses to survey and interview questions alike resulted in commentary on the incredibly low wages that DSPs receive. This aspect of the study provides perhaps the most confirmation of previous research on the topic of DSP experiences, burnout, and turnover (Houseworth et al., 2020). Wages indeed provide a clear answer to Research Question 2: “*What are the stressful aspects of the job that contribute to DSP burnout?*”, as confirmed by previous research as well. The discussions of previous research, however, have primarily focused on the economic implications of low wages, including medical benefits and PTO, and how those affect turnover among DSPs (Gans et al., 2011) as well as the economic impact on agencies (Ho, 2019).

Difficulty Working for Low Wages

This study situates the difficulties that DSPs face with regard to low wages in the context of *their* direct experiences. The data demonstrates how difficult DSPs find it to continue to work for low wages, many struggling to provide for themselves and their families. Further, DSPs find frustration in the mismatch between the enormity of the work that they carry out and the compensation that they receive for it. This again returns to the view of the DSP role in society, as the compensation appears to match the respectability that it receives, not the rigor or effort put into it. This again is a stressor for DSPs, having a high level of care and investment in their work, but without the financial reward to show for it. Still, for those who are able to continue working in this field despite the low wages, their commitment to their clients seems to continually

outweigh the difficulty of working for so little pay, with the payoff being fulfillment and purpose making up for low wages.

Competition with the Job Market and Organizational Issues

A final point made with regard to DSP wages is its relation to the current job market. One survey respondent and one interviewee commented on how DSP wages are comparable to wages earned by those working in the fast-food industry. This is not to say that employees in that industry are not deserving of fair wages, but rather, that the rigor of the two positions simply do not match, despite earning similar wages. Again, DSPs see the value in the work that they do and also understand the skill necessary to perform their duties effectively. They understand their role as being one of great importance and deserving of respectability. When their wages continue to match those industries that require fewer skills and responsibility, it is disheartening and frustrating for DSPs because it further drives the point that their work is neither valued nor understood in terms of what it brings to society as a whole and the rigor it takes to do an effective job.

Lastly, one interviewee, Shirley, commented on what she sees as a mismanagement of funds at the organizational level. She described seeing a number of new higher level management positions posted and yet, no wage increases for DSPs. She sees this as a mismanagement of funds because, in her view, there would likely be a far lesser need for higher level management positions if DSPs were invested in more. This appears to provide the perception of further confirmation that the DSP role is undervalued or at least misunderstood by management. What's more, it seems to demonstrate lack of transparency and communication between the two sections of the organization: management, and DSPs. DSPs seem to recognize

there is communication lacking that would help them to understand the necessity for these higher-level management roles. Furthermore, DSPs see that there is information and understanding lacking among administrators of how DSPs could potentially fill roles in the work that wouldn't necessitate these higher-level positions.

Recommendations

The implications of this study on future practice are primarily centered around the suggestion for agencies to take a closer look at the relational connections that DSPs make in their position, and the framework of social capital helps us to do this. We can see that the relationships, and most predominantly the client relationships, are the foremost important part of the job to DSPs. Furthermore, the level of investment and commitment to client success is the most predominant driving force for DSPs according to the findings of this study. By coming to a deeper understanding of the gratification that DSPs get from positively impacting the lives of their clients, we can narrow our focus on where the highest value is placed among DSPs. Other attempts to boost DSP morale or incentivize retention are futile if they do not engage the aspects of the DSP role that are most meaningful to DSPs at large.

To that end, it is important to examine concerns around wages from the perspective and experience of the DSP. It is important to do so because when agencies attempt to exclusively provide additional material or financial resources (hiring bonuses, referral bonuses, extra PTO, incremental raises) they have the potential to fall flat because they are missing the mark in terms of what DSPs place highest value on. That is not to say that a swift increase in wages would not have dramatic positive effects for DSPs and recruitment efforts. But rather that to assume that lack of retention can be affected solely by an increase in wages – or to assume that retention

would immediately be resolved if wages were increased – would be a naïve assumption. To do so would be to continue to ignore the necessary feedback from the DSPs who are most affected. Looking at most of the reasons why staff applied, and what their favorite part of their job is, this study shows that having a connection with the disability community, desiring to be of service, and finding purposeful work land highest on DSPs’ list. Simply increasing material or financial gain does not fulfill all of their needs. These are people who value connection and the social capital gained as highest priority. Meeting their needs means recognizing where their focus lies and affecting organizational change in those realms.

What DSPs appear to lack most in their position is recognition for the work that they do, and because not everyone in society can come to understand the DSP role immediately, that has to begin with organizational leaders. Developing practices that demonstrate genuine positive regard for staff and acknowledgement of their efforts have the potential to greatly impact the social capital that DSPs long to gain from their organizations and society. As Sierra so aptly explained in her interview, and which perhaps best encapsulates the results of this finding as a whole, “I mean, we’re totally invested, so why wouldn’t they invest back.”

Recommendations for further research would be to include in the study participants who are no longer working as DSPs. It would be particularly interesting for the sample set to have an array of former DSPs in terms of the length of time they spent working as a DSP. I imagine that the information to be gleaned from individuals who worked in the DSP position for less than a year before leaving – a number that I understand to be rather large – would elicit information quite different from those who worked in the profession for a number of years before leaving. While this study helps illuminate the experiences of individuals currently working as DSPs, we

might be able to even better understand the needs of DSPs by surveying those who did finally make the choice to leave.

Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that DSPs understand their role to be complex, dynamic, and hugely rewarding. The fulfilling aspects of the DSP role that most contribute to job satisfaction are the relationships they build with their clients and the deep sense of purpose and accomplishment that they feel when supporting clients to achieve their goals. The stressful aspects of the job that most contribute to DSP burnout are the lack of recognition that they receive from both their own organizational leaders and society as a whole, as well as the low wages they earn. DSPs reconcile these fulfilling and stressful aspects by continually refocusing their efforts on the clients they support and the direct impact they personally have on the lives of their clients. This study contributes to the existing body of research on DSP burnout and turnover by examining the DSP experience firstly from their perspective directly and through the lens of social capital. Social capital helps to illuminate the integral role that relationships play – on interpersonal and societal levels – in the DSP’s experience.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

1. PERSONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- A) What is your age?
- 18 – 25
 - 26 – 35
 - 36 – 45
 - 46 – 55
 - 55 – 64
 - 65 +
- B) Gender
- Female
 - Male
 - Other (please specify)
 - Prefer not to say
- C) Race / Ethnicity (check all that apply)
- Native American or Alaska Native
 - Asian
 - Black or African American
 - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Hispanic or Latino
 - Other
- D) What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- Some high school
 - High school diploma or equivalent (eg GED, certificate of completion)
 - Associate Degree (eg AA, AS, AAA)
 - Bachelor's Degree (eg BA or BS)
 - Master's Degree (eg MA, MS, MEd)
 - Doctorate (eg PhD, EdD)
 - Other – Please Specify (eg trade school, certification programs, etc)
- E) Is there anything you would like to add pertaining to these questions? (Optional)
-

2. GENERAL EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION

- A) What is the name of the organization you work for as a Direct Support Professional?
-
- B) What department(s) do you work in? Check all that apply:
- Supported Employment Services
 - Supported Living Services
 - Independent Living Services
 - Project SEARCH

- Community Day Services
 - Day Program
 - More than one department
 - Other (please specify)
- C) In your position as a Direct Support Professional, please indicate your average weekly hours:
- ~ 40hrs per week (Full-Time)
 - 25 – 30hrs per week (Part-Time)
 - 16 – 24hrs per week (Part-Time)
 - 8 – 15hrs per week (Part-Time)
 - Less than 8hrs per week (Part-Time)
- D) If you answered in a Part-Time category above, what led to your decision to work Part-Time in your position as a Direct Support Professional?
-
- E) Is your employment as a Direct Support Professional your primary source of income?
- Yes
 - No, I also receive additional financial support (eg Social Security, Food Stamps, etc)
 - No, I also work an additional job(s)
 - Other (please specify)
- F) How long have you been working in your current Direct Support Professional position?
- Less than 1 year
 - 1 to 2 years
 - 2 to 3 years
 - 3 to 5 years
 - 5 to 8 years
 - 8 to 10 years
 - More than 10 years
- G) Before your current position in your organization, did you previously work for another agency as a Direct Support Professional?
- Yes, I have worked for one previous agency
 - Yes, I have worked for more than one previous agency
 - No, this is the first agency I have worked for as a Direct Support Professional
- H) How did you first learn about Direct Support Professional positions?
- Through my job search (Craigslist, Indeed, ZipRecruiter, etc)
 - Through a friend already working for an agency who referred me
 - Because I know/knew a person with a disability who has received services

- In school/a class I was taking
- Other (please specify)

I) What made you interested in applying for the Direct Support Professional position?

-

J) Is there anything you would like to add pertaining to these questions? (Optional)

-

3. THE JOB IN GENERAL

A) I enjoy the work that I do

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Comments:

B) I have adequate time and resources to complete all my work

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Comments:

C) I have developed professionally while in this position

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Comments:

D) I see myself working long term in this industry

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Comments:

E) I would like to move into a supervisory position in the organization

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree

- Strongly Disagree
 - Comments:
- F) If I wanted to move into a supervisory position, I know who to talk to and how to prepare
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Not Sure
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Comments:
- G) I feel that the work that I do is important to the community
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Not Sure
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Comments:
- H) I feel that I am doing a good job
- Never
 - A few times a year
 - Once a month
 - A few times a month
 - Once a week
 - More than once a week
 - Every day
 - Comments:
- I) At the end of the workday, I feel emotionally drained
- Never
 - A few times a year
 - Once a month
 - A few times a month
 - Once a week
 - More than once a week
 - Every day
 - Comments:
- J) At the end of the workday, I feel happy
- Never
 - A few times a year
 - Once a month
 - A few times a month
 - Once a week
 - More than once a week
 - Every day
 - Comments:

K) At the end of the workday, I feel accomplished

- Never
- A few times a year
- Once a month
- A few times a month
- Once a week
- More than once a week
- Every day
- Comments:

L) At the end of the workday, I feel frustrated

- Never
- A few times a year
- Once a month
- A few times a month
- Once a week
- More than once a week
- Every day
- Comments:

M) Is there anything you would like to add pertaining to these questions? (Optional)

-

4. **RELATIONSHIPS WITH CLIENTS**

A) I have a well-established relationship with one or more clients on my caseload

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not Sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Comments:

B) I spend time outside of work worrying or thinking about what happens to one or more clients on my caseload

- Never
- A few times a year
- Once a month
- A few times a month
- Once a week
- More than once a week
- Every day
- Comments:

C) I feel appreciated for the work that I do by my clients

- Never
- A few times a year
- Once a month

- A few times a month
 - Once a week
 - More than once a week
 - Every day
 - Comments:
- D) Please check all that apply:
- I communicate regularly with the clients on my caseload
 - I feel that I have positively affected the lives of one or more clients on my caseload
 - I have exclusively professional relationships with one or more clients on my caseload
 - I have friendly relationships with one or more of the clients on my caseload
 - Comments:
- E) Is there anything you would like to add pertaining to these questions? (Optional)
-

5. RELATIONSHIPS WITH COWORKERS

- A) I am in communication with my coworkers
- Never
 - A few times a year
 - Once a month
 - A few times a month
 - Once a week
 - More than once a week
 - Every day
 - Comments:
- B) I feel part of a team with my department as a whole
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Not Sure
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Comments:
- C) I have well-established relationships with:
- No coworkers
 - 1 coworker
 - 1 to 3 coworkers
 - More than 3 coworkers
 - Comments:
- D) The following most accurately describe my relationship with coworkers (please check all that apply):
- My coworkers and I work collaboratively as a team on supporting clients we share

- I talk with coworkers about logistics and to coordinate support schedules, but nothing beyond that
- I have at least one coworker that I can talk with about work-related frustrations or issues
- I have at least one coworker that I have a friendship with outside of work
- Comments:

E) Is there anything you would like to add pertaining to these questions? (Optional)

•

6. RELATIONSHIPS WITH SUPERVISOR(S)

A) I am in communication with my supervisor(s)

- Never
- A few times a year
- Once a month
- A few times a month
- Once a week
- More than once a week
- Every day
- Comments:

B) Please check all that apply:

- When I have questions, my supervisor is available to me and I receive answers back quickly
- I can talk to my supervisor about my professional growth and career goals
- I feel comfortable talking with my supervisor about issues/concerns about client support
- I feel comfortable talking with my supervisor about issues/concerns about my work tasks and responsibilities
- I feel that my supervisor takes my input into account when making decisions
- My supervisor allows me the freedom to organize my workday as I see fit
- I have a friendly relationship with my supervisor
- Comments:

C) I receive recognition and appreciation for the work that I do from my supervisors

- Never
- A few times a year
- Once a month
- A few times a month
- Once a week
- More than once a week
- Every day
- Comments:

D) Is there anything you would like to add pertaining to these questions? (Optional)

•

7. FILL-IN QUESTIONS

A) What is your favorite part of your job?

•

B) What is your least favorite part of your job?

•

C) What advice would you give to someone newly beginning their career as a Direct Support Professional?

•

D) Anything you would like to add that was not covered in the survey that you feel is important to know about the DSP experience?

•

APPENDIX B

1. I'd like to hear about your background, and how you got into working in this position?
 - a. What first drew you to applying for the position?
 - b. Have you always worked for the same department?
2. What does a day in the life as a DSP look like?
 - a. What does an average day of client support, without issues look like?
 - b. Can you tell me a little bit about days that are not average?
 - c. Can you tell me about days that involve meeting with your team?
3. Can you tell me a bit about the clients that you work with?
 - a. What are some of the things that you do with them?
4. What is your favorite part of your job?
 - a. Are there particular tasks or responsibilities that stand out?
 - b. You mentioned that [____] is your favorite part, can you tell me a little more about why that is?
5. Can you tell me about your relationships with your clients?
 - a. What about with your coworkers?
 - b. Supervisors?
6. Can you give me an example of a really good day in supporting a client?
 - a. What about a really good day with your team (coworkers and/or supervisors)?
7. What is your least favorite part of your job?
 - a. Are there particular tasks or responsibilities that stand out?
 - b. You mentioned that [____] is your least favorite part, can you tell me a little more about why that is?
 - c. If it were up to you, what would you change to make this easier?
8. Can you tell me about a really frustrating day you've had supporting a client?
 - a. What about a really tough day with your team (coworkers/supervisors)?
9. Can you tell me about what, if anything, makes you feel the most stressed when supporting clients?
 - a. What about in your relationships with coworkers?
 - b. With supervisors?
10. How long do you see yourself in your role as DSP?
 - a. What would you need to see change in order for you to stay longer?
11. Do you have professional goals within this organization or other positions you're interested in?
 - a. Do you have a sense of how you'd be able to achieve that goal?
 - b. What kinds of additional resources or support would be helpful to you in achieving these goals?
12. What's your dream job?
 - a. What are your long term career goals?
13. What advice would you give to someone starting their career as a DSP?
14. Is there anything about your role that you wish your supervisors or organizational leaders had a better understanding of?
15. Is there anything else about being a DSP that is important to know that we haven't discussed yet?

APPENDIX C



Job Satisfaction and Stressors: The Direct Support Professional's Experience

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey!

As someone who has been working in this field for 7 ½ years, and who was previously a DSP myself (working as a Job Coach), I am passionate about the incredible work that each DSP does in the community on a daily basis. This work is complex and can be unnoticed or misunderstood, sometimes even by our own colleagues. That is why for my Master's Thesis at the University of San Francisco, I want to research the DSP experience by hearing from currently working DSPs like yourself.

I would also love to talk one-on-one with individuals to learn more about DSP experiences in depth. If you are interested in participating in a confidential interview with me, please include your name and email address on the final page of the survey.

If you prefer to only fill out this survey, that is fine too! The answers you provide are helpful and valuable to me.

Thank you,
Saralynn Emery

Please Note:

By completing this online survey, you are consenting to participation in the following research study: "Job Satisfaction and Stressors: The Direct Support Professional's Experience". You can stop the survey at any point in the process without retribution or punishment. Your responses are anonymous, unless you choose to enter your name. Summaries of responses may be shared with organizational leaders to enhance their awareness of DSP experiences. All responses are confidential and no identifying information is shared with anyone in the organization.

* 1. By clicking "Yes", I agree to the above terms

Yes

APPENDIX D



Consent Form for Adults

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study entitled Job Satisfaction and Stressors: The Direct Support Professional's Experience conducted by Saralynn Emery, a Masters student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Professor Seenae Chong, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this research study is to understand the common experiences of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) working with the developmentally disabled. Specifically, around those aspects of the job that are most fulfilling, and those that are most stressful.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen: With your permission, I will audio-visually record and take notes during the interview, using Zoom. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be recorded, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being recorded but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, we can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time. You will be asked questions about your background in this industry and your experiences working as a Direct Support Professional.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve one interview session lasting up to one hour. The study will take place via Zoom.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

The risks and benefits associated with this study are a loss of your time and the risks associated with regular activities. The benefit of the study is that it may add to the research on the field of education and international/multicultural issues. This information, once collected, might be read by policymakers, educational experts, educators and scholars and could affect the educational practice. If you do not want to participate in the study, you will not be mentioned in any documents of the study, and your decision to not participate will not be told to anyone. You may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. If you are upset by any of the questions asked, the researcher will refer you to counseling services available publicly or at the university if you are a member of the academic community (student, staff or professor).

BENEFITS:

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include a deepened knowledge of the DSP experience that may serve to better inform agency leaders about the needs and experiences of their staff. In this study, I hope to learn more about what the greatest triumphs and challenges are to DSPs in hopes of bettering the service system as a whole.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, real names will be replaced by pseudonyms on all interview and observation transcripts, and all audio files, observation notes, or other documents that contain personal identifiers will be stored in a password-protected computer or hard-drive that we will keep in a locked file cabinet until the research has been completed. Original audio-files will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Specifically, all information will be stored on a password-protected computer and any printouts in a locked file cabinet. Consent forms and any other identifiable data will be destroyed in 3 years from the date of data collection.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: ([Saralynn Emery](mailto:Saralynn.Emery)) at (760-310-1050) or (sjemery@usfca.edu) or the faculty supervisor, Seenae Chong at (408) 421-2085 or srchong@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE