NOTE TO USERS

Job Stress in the Pink Collar Ghetto: Clerical Workers in the Telecommunications Industry

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in the Joint Women's Studies Program

at

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Dedicated to **All Women Clerical Workers**

Job Stress in the Pink Collar Ghetto: Clerical Workers in the Telecommunications Industry

By Monnah Green

Abstract

This study examines, from a feminist perspective, workplace restructuring and the resulting changes to clerical work that affect women workers in the form of job stress. Five clerical workers were interviewed using a semi-structured interviewing method. All participants experienced job stress, and they cited heavy workloads in the context of intensified work in a telecommunications company as the most pressing workplace issue that contributed to their job stress.

Employers are currently introducing workplace changes such as downsizing, outsourcing and contracting out clerical functions. They are introducing new forms of office technology and changing the work processes in the office. Sources of job stress include work overload, increased pace of work, more complex and technical tasks, longer work hours, little opportunity for advancement, work intensification, heavy monitoring and supervision, lack of control over work and exclusion from decision-making. I conclude with strategies to reduce the workplace stress for clerical workers.

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Monnah Green

Introduction: Chapter 1

I am a single woman with no children or other dependents. I began working as a clerical worker in 1989 and remained in this capacity on and off for the next thirteen years. In addition, I have worked in many office workplaces and as a cashier and a waitress. I also took a course in office administration in 1993, thinking that it would help me to find a well-paying office job that would not be stressful and that would mean working from nine to five. At the time of my work experience in telecommunications I had an undergraduate degree with expectations of going back to university in the future. I worked for the telecommunications industry for a total of five years, both as a temporary clerical worker in a unionized environment and as a temporary full-time clerical worker in a non-unionized workplace. I have not worked in a clerical position since being dismissed due to taking time off for stress leave in 2001 by the telecommunications company at which I worked for two years.

While growing up in a small community in New Brunswick, during the late 1970s and the early 1980s, I knew one day that I would enter the paid workforce. I remember actually looking forward to working, imagining myself set up in an office, making oodles of money and buying things I had always wanted. It never occurred to me that this would be a difficult feat. I thought it would be as simple as moving into the city, applying for an office job, being hired by an established company such as the power or phone company, and living happily ever after. This was indeed a fairy tale that never became a reality.

After working at many jobs such as a cashier, sales clerk, waitress, cleaner, tree planter and short order cook, I decided to go to university and finish my undergraduate degree in Sociology. Then I moved to Toronto, Ontario where I finally managed to obtain my first office job in 1989. Here I worked as a general office clerk for the government, and was relatively well paid. However, I did not stay in this position for very long. I quickly became bored and frustrated with the office politics; once my contract position was up I did not try to renew it. I wanted out. Little did I know that all the office jobs I would hold after that time would instill in me the same feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration.

The last clerical job at which I worked was in a telecommunications company. I was hired as permanent full-time and was promised a promotion in the near future with an increase in salary. These promises were broken. Instead, I worked long and hard hours at the same low wage. Eventually, I was doing the work of three employees due to the tremendous increase of work as the company grew rapidly, and because another co-worker quit her job and was not replaced. Finally, I experienced extreme job stress resulting in illness and was fired by the company. I was fortunate enough to be able to come back to university to work towards a Masters degree in Women's Studies. Here I learned that the low wage clerical jobs at which I worked and the stress I experienced in them were not my own fault. Clerical work has been a feminized job ghetto for women for many years, but I did not recognize the forces influencing my job and work experience until I was in university for some time. This is the where and why of my thesis, a study of female clerical workers' experiencing job stress in

the telecommunications industry in Canada.

My area of research focuses on the negative impact clerical work can have on the health and well-being of female clerical workers in Halifax, Nova Scotia. More specifically, the purpose of my thesis is to examine from a feminist perspective how job stress affects women who work in female dominated clerical jobs. My objectives in doing this thesis were to determine what common factors cause job stress and to provide possible alternatives for a better future for clerical workers. A key component of my research is the personal stories of female clerical workers. I use a feminist qualitative methodology, and specifically the method of feminist interviewing, to explore the job stress experiences of these women to hear how they experienced job stress. I argue that job stress for clerical workers can be the result of dramatic workplace changes spurred by global economic restructuring. Thus, in addition to the women clerical workers' individual stories about their job stress experiences, in my thesis I also examine the nature and causes of workplace restructuring, in particular, its relationship to globalization and the introduction of new technology.

The term "new technology" that is used throughout this thesis refers to office technologies such as micro-electronic computers, information and communications technologies. Fax machines, electronic mail, network computers, voice mail, internet, cell phones and multifunction desktop computers are a few examples of this technology. Although globalization and technological change can be viewed as two different processes, I argue in this thesis that they are interconnected, since technological change is the vehicle that allows

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globalization to be successful. This discussion will be further explored in chapter two in my literature review.

This thesis allowed me to examine the workplace restructuring process in Canada, revealing in particular the nature of workplace restructuring in the telecommunications industry, clerical workers' experiences of workplace restructuring and its implications for their health and well-being in the form of job stress. In this thesis I will examine the changes to clerical work which have come about in recent years as a result of both organizational and technological changes in the workplace, changes which allow employers to successfully compete in the global economy. I incorporate the stories of five female clerical workers (in addition to my own experiences as a clerical worker) into this larger analysis of the structural changes that clerical work and clerical workers are experiencing. Here I will argue that most of the workplace changes and the negative impacts of those changes on female clerical workers are largely the result of globalization and the introduction of new technology.

As my focus is on the impact of workplace restructuring on clerical workers in particular, it is necessary to attempt to clarify what I mean by clerical workers for the purpose of this study. Here I will provide a brief overview of what clerical work is and who clerical workers are in general terms. As described by Alice de Wolff (1995:5), "[c]lerical work is a group of occupations, all of which are in the process of change. Job titles and classifications in these occupations are not standardized, and current changes in tasks and work processes makes the description and definition of current clerical work particularly difficult".

Furthermore, while there is a broad range of clerical workers in the office, it is difficult to fit the job into one occupation since many clerical workers are now responsible for a wide range of tasks (de Wolff 1998).

Most clerical workers generally perform a variety of tasks and duties to help keep offices running smoothly. More specifically, according to the Human Resources Skills and Development Canada website, general office clerks[1] may perform a variety of duties that include:

- Key in, edit, proofread and finalize correspondence, reports, statements, invoices, forms, presentations and other documents from notes or dictaphones using computers.

- Respond to telephone, in person or electronic inquiries.

- Provide general information to clients and the public.

- Photocopy and collate documents for distribution, mailing and filing.

- Maintain and prepare reports from manual or electronic files, inventories, mailing lists and databases.

- Process incoming and outgoing mail, manually or electronically send and receive messages and documents using fax machines or electronic mail.

- May perform bookkeeping tasks such as preparing invoices and bank deposits.

- May sort, process and verify applications, receipts, expenditures, forms and other documents.

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[1] General office clerks are also referred to as office assistants.

- May order office supplies, service office equipment and arrange for servicing in the case of major repairs.

As may be evident from the above description, clerical work, in general, includes several different types of job titles and types of office work, and incorporates the many changes to the structure and dynamics of clerical work itself. Traditional clerical workers could be easily identified as typists, stenographers, secretaries, and perhaps, as more advanced technology appeared in the office, as word processor operators. Today, many office workers are defined as general office clerks or administrative support staff, yet their work includes many sorts of tasks and responsibilities that were previously defined under different job titles.

Clerical workers are now doing technical support in addition to traditional clerical duties. Furthermore, each workplace is different, so that office clerk duties will differ depending on where one works. As will be discussed later in this thesis, the nature and conditions of clerical work have been and are continually changing in order to adapt to the constantly changing economy and new forms of technology. As a result, clerical workers often perform a mixture of several different jobs under the rubric of office clerk.

Although clerical workers have always been susceptible to changes in the workplace, there are recent distinctive changes in both the organization of the clerical workplace and new office technologies. These recent changes, such as downsizing, outsourcing, disappearance of some jobs and creation of others, more complex and technical tasks, intensification of work, increased pace of

work, longer work hours and heavier workloads, are dramatically changing the nature and conditions of clerical work almost beyond recognition of what clerical work was even ten years ago (Eyerman 2000). Moreover, these recent changes have the potential to adversely affect the health of clerical workers, due to increased workloads, the pressure of learning new work tools and uncertain job futures (de Wolff 1995). Attempting to endure heavy workloads over long periods of time without any relief in sight is apt to result in increased job stress for clerical workers. Therefore, these recent changes need to be explored to clearly illustrate the connection between clerical work and job stress.

Although clerical workers form one of the largest employment groups in any economy, they are one of the most ignored groups of workers in research (Eyerman 2000:22). Clerical workers have always been undervalued and essentially invisible in terms of the workplace hazards they are exposed to and the nature of the work they do. Their relationship to and experience of workplace restructuring, the emergence of new technologies and the new global economy are exacerbating their situation and increasing clerical workers' experiences of job stress. This thesis will make the clerical worker's experiences of job stress visible and their stories heard, allowing us to see how the larger decisions and policies of corporations and our government negatively affect their everyday personal lives.

This thesis is organized into five chapters, including this introduction. In chapter two, I provide a literature review that highlights the research that has been done on my topic of choice. I briefly examine job stress in general, provide

a historical overview of clerical work, a discussion of clerical work today, of the role that new technology (information and communication) and globalization play in workplace restructuring, particularly the changes to clerical work, and provide a brief discussion of restructuring in the telecommunications industry. The specific changes to clerical work in recent years in relation to job stress will be examined further in the chapter. Chapter three discusses the methodology and explains the research methods that I have used in my research. Here the emphasis is on feminist qualitative interviewing methods. I also draw attention to the challenges I faced during this research process. Chapter four presents my findings from my interviews with an analysis of the experiences of the female participants. Finally, chapter five is a conclusion to the thesis and my study. More specifically the final chapter includes a summary of my findings, limitations of the research and suggestions for future research. I then conclude my thesis with a few strategies to reduce job stress and promote a better future for clerical workers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

As I indicated in my introductory chapter, the focus of my thesis is on how workplace restructuring creates job stress which specifically affects female clerical workers. This literature review explores my research topic through a variety of disciplines, such as psychology, occupational health, economics, sociology and women's studies, in order to fully understand this complex issue. After the introduction, I begin with a brief overview of job stress, and then move on to discuss job stress and clerical work in particular. Since workplace bullying can also be a major factor for job stress, I end this section with a brief discussion about workplace bullying. Once job stress in relation to clerical workers is clearly specified, I proceed with a brief historical overview of clerical work that illustrates the changes that have taken place in clerical occupations since the 1870s through to the 1990s. The historical overview of clerical work is relevant to globalization and job stress today because it sets out an explanation of how clerical work has developed, and shows the advancement of technology and the growth in women's participation in clerical work (including the feminization of clerical work). The section following the historical overview, clerical work today, gives a synopsis of what clerical work is today. Here I briefly discuss how clerical work has changed from what it was two decades ago. The next section examines the relationship between clerical workers' job stress and globalization coupled with technology, particularly as globalization has affected and generated workplace and economic restructuring. Here, I briefly examine the literature on

the economic aspects of globalization, information and communication technology, workplace restructuring and the resulting workplace stress that affects female clerical workers in particular. Prior to the concluding section of this chapter, I have included a short section that provides an overview of the changes in the telecommunications industry, since this is the type of workplace I am focusing on for my research. The seventh and final section of this chapter is a brief conclusion of the findings of the literature review as well as an examination of existing documents that highlight women and workplace stress.

In order to address the issues set out above, the purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of how globalization and information and communication technology create job stress for female dominated clerical workers. For example, I will argue that the actions of large corporations and government can and do affect the local everyday lives of women clerical workers. The decisions and policies of those in power, such as governments and corporations, affect the health and well-being of women clerical workers. Consequently, the following literature review provides brief explanations of job stress, and the extent to which globalization, information and office technology, and workplace restructuring all contribute to job stress among female clerical workers.

The impact of job stress on female clerical workers does not originate from a single source, but is rather the result of a multifaceted crisis that requires a multi-faceted response. Many researchers who explore the issue of job stress tend not to consider the interlocking economic, political, cultural, and social

factors that are linked to job stress. Until recently, job stress appeared to be solely a health issue, with many researchers relying on medical or psychological approaches in order to understand and alleviate job stress. Unfortunately, many employers still tend to treat job stress as a personal medical problem, offering stress management programs such as relaxation techniques and the development of healthier lifestyles to help workers cope with the stress (HEU 2000). A closer look at job stress reveals that it is not just an individual problem. Job stress certainly is a health issue, but what is more important are the circumstances that contribute to and interact to cause this increasingly common health concern. For example, I will use the literature to argue that the clerical worker's lack of control over their work and the intensification of their work play a large role in the issue of job stress.

This literature review explores the dynamics of job stress not only from health perspectives, but also from a variety of approaches. This review contains literature from a variety of disciplines including Psychology (Haynes 1991; Waldron 1991; LaCroix and Haynes 1987; Murphy and Cooper 2000; Repetti et al.1989; Sauter et al. 1990); Occupational Health (Burke and Cooper 2000; Cartwright and Cooper 1997; Marshall et al.1997; Messing 1998; Sparks et al. 2001); Sociology (Armstrong and Armstrong 1983, 1984, 1990, 1994; Armstrong 2001; Connelly 1996; Duffy et al. 1997; Krahn and Lowe 1998; Lowe 1986, 1989, 2000); Economics (MacDonald 1996; Noble 1995; Phillips and Phillips 2000; Yalnizyan and Cordell 1994); Political Science (Bakker 1996; Fox and Sugiman 2003; Furman 2002; Wallace and Vosko 2003); and Women's Studies

(Christiansen-Ruffman 2002; de Wolff 1995, 1997,1998, 2000; Eyerman 1999, 2000). This review illustrates that job stress does not exist in a vacuum; rather, job stress is connected to the larger structures and infrastructures of our society.

The geographic focus of my thesis is Canada, particularly Halifax, Nova Scotia, since this is where I experienced job stress and where I interviewed female clerical workers about their job stress. Moreover, a few researchers have highlighted and explored some of the negative impacts that economic restructuring in Atlantic Canada and the resulting workplace changes have had on women here in Nova Scotia. This research has given me awareness that I am not alone in my own personal experience of job stress. For example, Connelly and MacDonald (1996:86) argue that "Nova Scotia has been hit particularly hard by restructuring and by federal-government cutbacks", while Christiansen-Ruffman (2002:59) suggests that economic restructuring in Atlantic Canada is comparable to the structural adjustment programs of the South, in that both exacerbate inequalities and harm women. While these scholars draw our attention to restructuring in Nova Scotia without specifically discussing job stress as one of the negative impacts of this process, Lowe and Northcott (1986:14) note that "[t]he first legal precedent establishing "job burnout" as a form of work-related injury was handed down by a Nova Scotia arbitrator in 1985 (The Globe and Mail, 4 June 1985)". The claimant in this case was a female teacher who suffered from burnout from her employment. Despite the fact that her claim was dismissed, an official with the Workers Compensation Board stated "there is nothing in the law that bars such a claim"(The Globe and Mail, 4 June 1985).

Thus, while my initial focus on this region for my thesis was due to my personal experience with job stress, that experience led me to examine research that explores the more widespread negative impacts of economic restructuring on job stress.

Job Stress

Definitions of job or workplace stress are as varied and diverse as the research disciplines from which they emerge. Furthermore, job stress is a many-sided and complex phenomenon that is difficult to define (Lowe 1989; Zeytinoglu et al. 2003), and has been a topic of continuous debate among experts (Di Martino 1992, 2000). However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will make use of two definitions of job stress. The first is a worker's negative reaction to a job or a work environment that results in mental and physical health issues for that worker' (Lowe 1989; Krahn and Lowe 1998; Messing 1998). More specifically, this thesis will supplement this with a second definition: "the harmful physical and emotional responses that can happen when there is conflict between job demands on the employee and the amount of control an employee has over meeting these demands" (CCOHS 2002; NIOSH 1999; Williams 2003). I have chosen to focus on the second definition of job stress because it works for my thesis, since it is specific to the kind of job stress I am examining.

Individual symptoms of job stress may include: exhaustion, insomnia, crying spells, upset stomach, headaches, lack of energy, burn out, yelling at people, difficulty concentrating, feelings of anger, helplessness, lack of control

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over one's own life, irritability and tension and dizziness (CUPE 2003; HEU 2000; MFL Occupational Health Centre 2000; Zeytinoglu et al. 2003). A few health problems that can occur with prolonged chronic stress are heart disease, diabetes, ulcers, colitis and irritable bowel syndrome, asthma, and neck and back pain (HEU 2000; MFL OHC 2000).

While most jobs are not free of challenges and pressures, psychological and physiological problems may result when the job pressures surpass the individual's ability to cope with the pressures and demands of work (Lowe and Northcott 1986; MFL Occupational Health Centre 2000). In fact, the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU 2000) notes that while normal stress may be a fact of life, prolonged stress at work is hazardous. The Australian Confederation of Trade Unions Occupational Health and Safety Committee (ACTU OHS 2000) argues that while it is often claimed that stress can be good for us in terms of motivation and job performance, "there is no such thing as 'good stress'. They suggest that referring to 'good' and 'bad' stress can actually "lead to blaming the victim for feeling stressed by causes beyond their control" (ACTU OHS 2000). This thesis will look at workplace stress as prolonged stress or "toxic stress" as defined by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (2003) and the Hospital Employees' Union (2000).

Some common causes of this kind of workplace stress include: difficult relations between workers and management; workplace bullying; work overload; job insecurity; constant change; not enough staff; excessive monitoring; poor work organization; lack of training; long work hours; and the overall intensification

of work (Bird and de Wolff 1997; CCOHS 2000; CUPE 2003; HEU 2000; Statham 1993; The Centre for Social Justice 2002; Williams 2003).

Even while working outside the home may also have benefits for some women, job stress is one of the leading health problems for women (Lowe 1989). Both Waldron (1991) and Armstrong (2001) suggest that paid employment can have both negative and beneficial effects on women's health. Studies show that on average, women employed outside the home appear to be healthier than non-employed women, possibly due to the benefits that paid employment offers, such as an increase in social support from co-workers, economic independence, increased income, a sense of accomplishment, and better access to and use of health care (Armstrong 2001; LaCroix and Haynes 1987; Repetti et al. 1989; Waldron 1991). However, while employment in general may not negatively impact women's health, there are certain characteristics of different jobs and home lives that cause women stress and affect their well-being, such as low pay, high demands and lack of control over work, and work overload (LaCroix and Haynes 1987; Repetti et al.1989). Furthermore, Armstrong (2001) draws our attention to the fact that not only can paid work be harmful to women, but many of the women who are not currently working in paid employment may be at home because they are in poor health due to their paid labour force jobs. Thus, while both paid work and unpaid work can positively and/or negatively affect women's health, we need to understand the characteristics of women's workplaces and how women experience their jobs in order to better understand women's experiences of job stress.

Researchers who tend to discuss and define job stress from an organizational psychological approach recommend changes in the workplace rather than direct treatment of the individual to alleviate job stress (Burke and Cooper 2000; Cartwright and Cooper 1997; Cox et al. 2000; Murphy and Cooper 2000; NIOSH 1999; Sauter et al. 1990). This organizational perspective is useful as it identifies the stressors in the work environment and "examines the links between social psychological characteristics of the workplace and harmful psychological or physical outcomes for the individual" (Beehr, 1995:5). However, as Grimshaw (1999:302) notes, since reducing work environment stress factors can be costly and difficult to implement, it is easier and less costly for employers to concentrate on individual-centred approaches that help the individual cope, rather than to find the root cause of stress in the work environment. Furthermore, Fox and Sugiman (2003) argue that management tends to blame the individual worker for job stress and to assume that the company is not responsible for the worker's problem. HEU (2000) acknowledge that employers often treat stress as a personal problem and may offer stress management programs for stressed staff. The Hospital Employees' Union (2000) also adds that there is evidence that programs that focus on the behavior of the worker make little difference in the workplace.

Researchers suggest that the most commonly used model of stress within an organizational psychological approach is the job demands-job control model developed by Karasek (1979) and his colleagues, a model that predicts that jobs characterized by high demands and low control have negative effects on

employee well-being (ACTU OHS 2000; Barnett and Marshall 1991; Bird and de Wolff 1997; CCOHS 2000; CUPE 2003; Grimshaw 1999; Haynes 1991; HEU 2000; Ibrahim et al. 2001; MFL OHC 2000; NIOSH 1990; Sparks et al. 2001; The Centre for Social Justice 2002; Wilkins and Beaudet 1998; Williams 2003). While Lowe (1989:9) suggests that Karasek's model is useful for studying stress among female employees because many women's jobs impose high demands yet provide little decision-making control, other researchers draw attention to the shortcomings of this model. For example, Grimshaw (1999:93) argues that the demands-control model may be too simple to grasp the complexity of interaction between people and their work environment, since job stress may be determined by a number of factors, such as work organization, physical and social environment and technology. Moreover, while Haynes (1991) and Barnett and Marshall (1991) agree that jobs that have high demands and low control are stressful, they also note that the studies for Karasek's job strain model were all done on males. Therefore, there is a need for comparable research that focuses on women and job stress.

The mainstream literature on work stress, like that discussed above, though based on research on male employees, may lead to the suggestion that high strain jobs that are routine, tedious and repetitive, closely supervised, unskilled, and with little opportunity for decision-making, are characterized by low authority and autonomy, low pay, limited room for advancement, low status, high demands, underutilization of skills and abilities and that are machine-paced have a negative impact on the health of all workers, not only men's health (Doyal

1995; Haynes and LaCroix 1987; Lowe 1989; Messing 1998). Both Doyal (1995) and Haynes (1991) note that researchers have indicated that high strain jobs may have the same effect on women as they do men. However, as LaCroix and Haynes (1987) argue, although many women are employed in jobs that have high demands and low control, little is actually known about the health effects of job strain on these women. This latter observation is important to this thesis because, as Haynes (1991) notes, clerical work, the central focus of this thesis, is an occupation that employs predominantly women and is, as we will see, characterized by high demands and low job control. Both Messing (1998) and Armstrong (2001) suggest that much of the research produced on work and stress is male centred and assumes that women and men experience stress in the same way.

However, as this discussion suggests, until recently, women's experience of job stress has remained relatively unexplored, despite studies that show that women are faced with different and more work-related stressors than men. For example, Long and Cox (2000) examine how women cope with employment stress, noting that women have different types of jobs and different gender-specific stressors. In addition, de Ridder (2000) explores how women cope with stressful situations differently than men. Some researchers argue that men have higher levels of control over their work since they are employed in different jobs than women, who lack control over their work (Roxburgh 1996; Wilkins and Beaudet 1998). More specifically, studies show that women experience higher levels of job stress than men because their jobs, such as clerical work, saturate

them with high job demands, lack of control over their work, lack of decision-making, low pay and long work hours that conflict with their unpaid work (The Centre for Social Justice 2002; Williams 2003).

While Messing (1998) and Lowe (1989) also point out that research on occupational stress has tended to examine the relationship between men and work, and to assume that the same factors that affect men affect women, they suggest that alternatively, we should study how particular groups of women experience work stress. Further, although men and women may be in the same occupational category, they tend to hold different and unequal jobs and are assigned different tasks; therefore, their work conditions and environments are substantially different, and may contain different stress related factors (LaCroix and Haynes 1987; Messing 1998). What all this research suggests is that more research is required on occupational stress to identify the particular experiences and views of women, so as to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how specific job characteristics affect the health of female clerical workers (Marshall et al. 1997).

Since many women are clerical workers who work in offices, clerical work and the office workplace would be excellent places to begin research on how women experience job stress. Messing (1998) suggests that office work is assumed to be free of health risks, and therefore office workers are assumed to have very low levels of work-related health problems. Female dominated office environments are often perceived as being healthy and safe workplaces, with the exception of recent reports on repetitive strain injury (RSI), carpal tunnel

syndrome, and musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) (Messing 1998). Therefore, risk factors that lead to stress and burnout in these workplaces remain unidentified. Armstrong (1984) and Doyal (1995) suggest that the health hazards that female clerical workers face tend to be invisible, since they are not the same as the hazards present in many male dominated jobs. For example, Armstrong (2001) notes that the injuries and hazards in traditional male jobs such as immediate death or an obvious injury from a fall from a building are much more visible than issues of job stress.

Both Messing (1998) and Doyal (1995) argue that despite the assumptions that female dominated jobs are not stressful and that clerical workers are exposed to very few work-related hazards, recent research shows that offices do in fact present risks to health, exposing women clerical workers to physical and psychological stressors. For example, recent Canadian research by feminist scholars such as Armstrong (2001), Bird and de Wolff (1997), de Wolff (1995, 1998, 2000), Eyerman (1999, 2000), Fox and Sugiman (2003) and Furman (2002) found high levels of stress in occupations, such as clerical work, that are predominantly held by women.

Armstrong (2001) cites Messing (1991:45) who notes that "women's responses to the stress and fast-paced work have often been dismissed as hysteria, but research indicates that their symptoms are very much related to the conditions of work". These researchers are referring to the dull, repetitious and boring jobs that are performed at high speeds while being closely monitored. In addition to the constant demands placed on clerical workers, the lack of

supervisor support, little control over their work, isolation and immobility (resulting from few breaks away from being at the same desk all day without a chance to talk to other co-workers), as well as constant pressure from customers, co-workers and employers can cause stress in the workplace (Armstrong 2001; Messing 1998).

There are recent comparative studies on job stress which consider both women and men and the characteristics of their work, but these are usually limited to managerial occupations. Sparks et al. (2001) argue that much research on job stress has been done at managerial levels, but excludes subordinate employees at the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy, who are most affected by workplace restructuring. However, regardless of the assumption that managers or male bosses suffer from work-related stress, evidence suggests that the lower status jobs that women occupy appear to be more stressful than the higher status managerial jobs (Doyal 1995). As Armstrong (2001: 272) suggests, "although we often associate stress with high-level managers, the research indicates that high-speed work, especially when combined with low levels of control or close supervision, induces high levels of stress". In addition, as both Stellman (1977) and Armstrong (2001) argue, jobs that place the powerless clerical front line worker in positions to handle complaints and pressure from customers are difficult, since the worker is often blamed for decisions that are made by the powerful employer. These researchers also note that in addition to this type of customer harassment, women workers often have to deal with the additional stress of sexual harassment from employers and fellow

employees. Consequently, as Doyal (1995) and Sparks et al. (2001) argue, since many women are employed in lower status jobs that appear to be particularly stressful, more research is required on the impact of the changing workplace on the job stress of these subordinate employees.

Workplace bullying is a newly defined term that is similar to traditional stressors such as lack of control and work overload that is related to workplace stress and is frequently occurring in workplaces, affecting the daily lives of many workers (CCOHS 2002; Einarsen 1996; Hoel et el. 2003; OHS 2004). Workplace bullying is repeated, unreasonable behavior directed toward one or more employees, usually carried out by someone in the position of authority, such as a manager or supervisor (CCOHS 2002; Einarsen 1996; Hoel et al.2003; OHS 2004). Verbal abuse, intimidation, excluding or isolating employees, removing areas of responsibility without cause, undermining an employee's work, constantly changing work guidelines, establishing impossible deadlines, assigning unreasonable duties, creating overwork and underwork, constantly criticizing, assigning meaningless tasks unrelated to the job and deliberately withholding information that is important for effective work performance are all examples of workplace bullying (CCOHS 2002; Einarsen 1994; Hoel et al.2003; OHS 2004).

Historical Overview of Clerical Work

The following historical context shows that job stress has become more significant for clerical workers in the last two decades. The increased job stress

for clerical workers is associated with changes in clerical work such as downsizing, the transformation of permanent full-time jobs into temporary part-time jobs, more intensified work and faster paced work. These changes and their impact is clear in the recent works of feminists scholars such as Armstrong (2001), de Wolff (1995, 1998, 2000), Duxbury et al. (2003), Eyerman (1999, 2000), Fox and Sugiman (2003) and Furman (2002), who explore the relationship between the economic restructuring of the past 15 years and the resulting workplace changes for women clerical workers. These authors suggest through their research that these recent changes have increased job stress.

This section of the chapter is a chronological overview of the history of clerical work in a Canadian context, highlighting the changes in technology in the office, some of the organizational changes in the office workplace and the evolution of clerical work into work performed largely by women. I will begin with the 19th century and proceed to the recent period of change. The focus of my discussion will be on the time period between the 1980s and the 1990s, since this is the beginning of the most profound workplace changes affecting clerical workers today in the form of job stress. These changes will be discussed in detail further in this section.

In the early 19th century, offices were small counting houses that were staffed by men only who worked as bookkeepers and general clerks (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Strom 1992). The relationship between the employer and the employee was one that tended to be personal, with the clerk acting as an assistant to the owner; the clerical job was a training ground for management

and/or an apprenticeship which generally led to the clerical employee inheriting the business or becoming a partner. Therefore, employers were more apt to train their clerks in the overall operation of the business, with clerical workers handling a variety of different tasks.

In the latter part of the 19th century, small businesses grew into larger and more complex businesses, as a result of small firms consolidating into larger organizations. Beginning in the 1890s, the growth in business organization created an increase in paperwork, and more clerical workers were needed to process the huge volumes of paperwork (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Strom 1992). Although there were a few women working in clerical positions in the office in the 1870s, the number of women in the clerical domain began to grow after the 1900s most notably during WWI and in the 1930s (Lowe 1987; Strom 1992). In 1891, with 11.4 % of women in the paid labour force in Canada, only 2 % of them were occupying clerical positions; these numbers steadily increased until the period between 1911 and 1921, during which time the growth of clerical workers dramatically increased 109.3 % (Lowe 1987). White-collar clerical jobs were the fastest growing occupation in the 1930s; however, this growth in clerical positions was occurring at a faster rate than women's labour force participation was increasing (Lowe 1987:45).

In this period clerical positions were filled by women hired at a lower salary to do the jobs men did not want: minor tasks involving petty details such as paperwork, planning, scheduling, corresponding, billing, copying and filing, work that men felt was of no importance to them (Armstrong and Armstrong

1994; Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987). Women were also being hired because employers held the assumption that women were more reliable, educated and cheaper than men were. Clerical work also paid women better wages than most of the other jobs women had access to at this time, such as domestic work. Furthermore, the status of working as a clerk in an office was higher than that of working in a factory or as a domestic worker (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Strom 1992).

By 1916, due to the shortage of male clerks as a result of World War I, women were increasingly filling clerical positions (Armstrong and Armstrong 1994; Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Phillips and Phillips 2000). By the end of the 1920s, the organization of clerical work into large pools of routine clerical jobs performed by women in the expanding corporations created a "pink collar ghetto", in which female clerical workers were segregated into the most routine, low paying jobs with little opportunity to learn new skills or to use existing skills, and were seldom promoted into more challenging work (Cohen and White 1987). Krahn and Lowe (2002) suggest that this feminization of clerical work (mostly women occupying these jobs and being paid low wages) was well under way by the 1940s. Furthermore, the introduction of office technologies more complex than the manual typewriter began at approximately the same time as the feminization of clerical work was beginning to take shape. According to Lowe (1987), the feminization of clerical work was also occurring at the same time as this 'administrative revolution'.

While women were increasingly entering the labour market, clerical jobs

were being created for women, particularly between 1911 and 1951 (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Strom 1992). Moreover, women were filling what were emerging as unskilled clerical occupations because employers could hire women more cheaply than men, and it was expected by employers that women would eventually leave their jobs for family responsibilities (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Strom 1992). Earlier, the introduction of the typewriter to the office in the 1870s had shaped the feminization of clerical work and had a huge impact on women's new role in the expanding clerical sector (Cohen and White 1987; Goldberg 1983; Lowe 1987; Phillips and Phillips 2000; Strom 1992). The increasing use of office equipment such as the typewriter changed the organization of clerical work, creating new clerical jobs outside traditional male office work. Women did not replace men in traditional clerical positions; rather, new jobs utilizing office equipment were created for women at the bottom of the office hierarchy (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987). Men in the office performed the higher skilled work such as managerial occupations (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Strom 1992), while female clerical workers became the users of office technology: the beginning of a trend that continues today.

From the mid-1950s, office technologies began to change as the manual typewriter began to be replaced by the electronic typewriter. The manual typewriter had been the first office tool recognized as part of women's clerical work and was the beginning of the link between office technology and women's work in the office. This link continued to be evident in the next round of office technologies, such as the computer mainframe, introduced in the 1950s and the

1960s, used for data processing in offices, in accounts or for payroll functions (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Webster 1996). Furthermore, between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s, there was a dramatic increase in the number of women entering the labour market, many of whom found work in the increasing numbers of clerical positions, taking on jobs which involved the use of the developing office technology (Phillips and Phillips 2000:36). Clerical work was being transformed from a male-dominated occupation to a female-dominated domain at the same time the office was becoming more automated (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987). As clerical work became more automated, it also became more defined as women's work.

By the 1960s and the 1970s, the majority of clerical jobs were occupied by women, with clerical work being the leading occupation for women; clerical work had become defined as women's work - a new female 'job ghetto' (Cohen and White 1987; Krahn and Lowe 2002; Lowe 1987; Phillips and Phillips 2000). In 1891 women occupied only 2% of clerical positions, compared to 30.5 % by 1971; by 1981, 78% of all clerical workers were women (Lowe 1987). In addition to the increase of women occupying clerical positions, there was also an increase in the use of microcomputers. By the early 1970s, microprocessors ushered in the crux of the computer revolution into the office (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Menzies 1996). The relatively inexpensive microcomputer (computer terminal) could be used to perform a variety of functions, from word and data processing to graphics and spreadsheets, much more cheaply than the old computers that were big, expensive to operate, and could not perform many

functions (Cohen and White 1987:36). Consequently, by the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the office was completely electronic; computers evolved as word processing systems became widely used in offices (Cohen and White 1987; Webster 1993).

During the 1980s, advanced computer information and communication technologies such as electronic mail, modems, electronic photocopier, voice mail, word-processors, multi-functional computers and fax machines rapidly changed the office environment, profoundly affecting clerical workers and resulting in increased workloads, faster paced work and more tasks for them (Bird and de Wolff 1997; de Wolff 1995, Eyerman 2000; Probert and Wilson 1993; Webster 1996).

During this time, global competition between corporations also increased, which meant that corporations were using computers and microelectronic technology to cut costs and increase productivity (Furman 2002). Employers were able to replace many clerical staff with the new technology, leaving the remaining workers to do the work of those who were laid off (Bird and de Wolff 1997; de Wolff 1995; Eyerman 2000; Menzies 1996; Webster 1996). In addition to staff reduction, the clerical occupation itself, both the work processes and the organization of the work, was also changing (Bird and de Wolff 1997, de Wolff 1995; Eyerman 2000). For example, many clerical tasks were becoming less fragmented and routine, requiring a higher level of skill than was required of the clerical worker of the 1970s because of the multi-function capacity of the computers and the skills required to operate these new systems. This was also

the beginning of the polarization of clerical work, with routine unskilled jobs for some workers and more multitasked and higher skilled jobs for others.

Office technology in the late 1960s and 1970s advanced from main-frame computers used for basic text processing to personal computers with word processing, local databases and spreadsheets in the early 1980s. With technology being affordable, local networks of personal computers and client servers made it possible to redesign office jobs (Bird and de Wolff 1997). This also meant that professionals and managers could now perform their own text processing work, work that clerical workers had been doing prior to this period.

By the 1990s, technological innovations such as advanced computers, fax machines, the internet, cell phones, network systems, laptops, cables, microwave signals, and satellites coupled with the information highway's complex and powerful computer-communications networks have changed the office work environment (Bird and de Wolff 1997; Eyerman 2000; Menzies 1996; Webster 1996). However, this new technology changed clerical work processes and removed the direct role clerical workers had in the production of documents and the organizing of paperwork and files; clerical work was now looking and feeling more like factory work (Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002).

This historical overview of clerical work clearly illustrates that, although there has been a steady increase in women's participation in the labour force since the early 1950s, and particularly in the period from the mid-1960s until the 1990s, women have remained concentrated in many of the same kinds of occupations, such as clerical work (Armstrong and Armstrong 1984, 1983, 2001;

Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1989; Phillips and Phillips 2000). Researchers have described many of the more recent and past female-dominated clerical jobs as being characterized by poor pay, low status, lack of decision-making, little or no authority and autonomy, limited opportunity for advancement, underutilization of skills, high demands and little control over work. Clerical work is dull, repetitious, boring (routine and monotonous), and involves no creativity, as well as close monitoring, and high degrees of supervision; furthermore, this type of work is seen as a constant source of distress that is having a negative impact on women's health (Armstrong 1995, 2001; Armstrong and Armstrong 1983,1984,1994; Doyal 1995; Lowe 1989; Marshall et al. 1997; Phillips and Phillips 2000; Stellman 1977).

Not a lot has remained the same for clerical workers since the early 1980s. Some characteristics of clerical work have remained constant over the years. Clerical jobs are still predominantly filled by educated women, are low paying, some of the tasks are still relatively routine and monotonous, and under supervision. Prior to the technological revolution of the 1980s and 1990s, however, clerical work was less intensified, slower paced, less monitored, involved fewer hours of work, and more text processing tasks, and entailed opportunity for advancement; clerical workers had more job security, more control over their work, and required fewer skills and training (Bird and de Wolff 1997; de Wolff 1995). As the historical overview of clerical work has shown, significant changes in the clerical occupation have been occurring regularly over the past 20 years, particularly with respect to the role of technology in the

performance of clerical work.

Clerical Work Today

Clerical work today is different from what clerical work was 20 years ago. The increased use of office technology and the constantly changing software packages, accompanied by workplace restructuring, have changed both the structure of clerical work itself and the working conditions for clerical workers.

However, technology by itself does not determine the nature of jobs; rather, the way new technology is introduced and the way work is organized around technology is problematic. It is management that decides how technology will be implemented in the office; clerical workers tend to be left out of decisions about how computer systems are introduced to the office and decisions that affect their jobs (Benston 1989; Statham 1993). Management, not technology, is to blame for the negative impact of workplace restructuring on female clerical workers' working conditions (Fox and Sugiman 2003).

It is important to note that new office technologies are introduced for the benefit of the employer, not for the benefit of the clerical worker. Employers are looking for ways to increase profits and increase control over workers when organizing clerical work, rather than to benefit clerical workers (Cohen and White 1987). Furthermore, clerical workers are expected to continue learning how to use new computers in the office due to the constant upgrading and changing of software packages, which are often not accompanied by training (Benston 1989; de Wolff 1998; Eyerman 2000). Moreover, the workers are often required to learn

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how to operate these new computer programs on their own time and with their own finances. The dilemma posed by this constant technological development is the cost and time to the female clerical worker, who generally does not have the time to learn new skills (de Wolff 1998). In order to remain employable the clerical worker has to retain and upgrade new skills. However, while working she does not have the time to acquire these new skills; and if she is not working she has the time but does not have the finances; it is a vicious circle (Furman 2002).

While new computer technologies have tended to make clerical work easier in many ways, they have also dramatically changed the structure of clerical work (Armstrong and Armstrong 1983; Eyerman 2000:35). For example, desktop computers and other microelectronic technologies, while changing the type of work that clerical workers must do, have also rapidly replaced clerical workers, allowing companies to increase production while at the same time lowering their costs of human labour (Furman 2002).

As mentioned in my earlier discussions of the history of clerical work, the introduction of new forms of technology has meant that work conditions for female clerical workers have gone from bad to worse. These deteriorating conditions include: longer work hours; job insecurity; reclassification and polarization of work; heavy monitoring; increased pace of work; increased workloads; lack of benefits; decline in unionization; non-supportive management; increased flexibility of work, with a shift from permanent full-time jobs to part-time contingent jobs, and work intensification (Armstrong and Armstrong 1994; Bird and de Wolff 1997; de Wolff 1995, 1998; Eyerman 2000; Lowe 2000; Noble

1995; Menzies 1996).

The hours of work for clerical workers are also changing. This means that clerical workers are also expected to be flexible, not only in the work they do, but the hours they work. Standard eight-hour workdays are being replaced with unstable work hours, which may translate into too many hours, or not enough hours of work (Bird and de Wolff 1997; Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002).

Bird and de Wolff (1997:1) and de Wolff (1998) argue, in addition to changes in the clerical workers' working conditions and work processes, the divisions of labour within offices have also changed. Some researchers show that the latest round of technology has caused the disappearance of some jobs and the creation of new jobs for those in the telecommunications industry (Balka 1995). Some clerical workers are seeing their jobs become deskilled, downgraded, and then disappearing, while for others their work is more complex and skilled. For instance, some clerical workers perform more complex and skilled tasks as well as handle technical support. On the other hand, some clerical workers who do not lose their jobs due to technology are left with the more routine, basic and unskilled tasks such as data entry (Bird and de Wolff 1997). And for those still employed in permanent full-time positions, their work is greatly intensified (Menzies 1996). Katz (1997) refers to this polarization in the telecommunications industry, stating that numerous jobs now require computer programming skills while some jobs have become so routine that they can now be performed by clerical workers. There are now two different levels of clerical workers determined on the basis of their access to technology; more highly

skilled multifunctional level clerical workers who now handle some technological support and some computerized entry-level professional work, work that has tended to be performed by males, and very routine data entry function workers such as text or data entry operators (Cohen and White 1987). A more divided workplace is created by the employer, by classifying certain workers as the more skilled clerical workers who are generally more highly educated and segregated from the lower level clerical workers, limiting the latter's chances to move into the higher level positions. Those workers at the bottom of the clerical hierarchy do not have access to the training required to enter into the higher level positions; therefore they are at a real disadvantage compared to the higher level clerical workers (de Wolff 1998). The vertical gap between workers in the clerical hierarchy is widening as office automation evolves.

This change is due to the fact that new office technology generally has the capability of allowing one operator to perform many functions, in addition to word processing. For example, a typical desktop computer for a clerical worker in an office has a variety of software packages installed, with one worker being able to use all the packages simultaneously. Work that was traditionally done by a financial department can now be done by a single clerical worker, once she knows how to use the new software. Having the ability and knowledge to operate as many new software packages as are available is what makes a worker more employable. Consequently, clerical workers are now performing tasks that are not part of their original job descriptions.

Not only are those clerical workers who remain doing more work that

requires additional skills, they are also not getting paid for that work. As mentioned earlier, clerical workers are expected to perform a wide range of routine functions. In some workplaces, clerical workers are taking on sales and marketing duties that were once defined as managerial functions. Their job title may change from that of clerical worker to senior clerical worker, but their wage does not increase accordingly. There is a hollowing out of the middle clerical jobs (supervisory type jobs), making it next to impossible for female clerical workers to climb the job ladder to a better position (Lowe 2000; Phillips and Phillips 2000). Rather than creating new jobs that pay more and have a higher status level, employers tend to redefine clerical jobs, incorporating many more tasks and responsibilities under a job title, without corresponding and much-deserved increases in pay and status.

While the introduction of new technology in the office may initially appear to reduce the workloads of clerical workers, these new computers have actually increased the pace of work and the workload because of management's presumption that clerical workers can perform more tasks on a daily basis with computers. Now information is received on a much faster rate than ever before and clerical workers are expected to keep up with the pace. Since the computer can now record the actual speed of the worker, management can set strict production quotas for clerical workers and monitor those quotas (Cohen and White 1987). However, it has been argued that computerized monitoring of the pace of work can increase rather than decrease a clerical workers' error rate, leading to lower productivity (Cohen and White 1987). The more monitoring a

clerical worker is subject to, the greater the number of her errors, the lower her morale and the higher the worker absenteeism. Consequently, clerical workers often experience increased workloads because of the increased pace of work and are blamed for errors when their lack of training and unrealistically high expectations from employers are really to blame.

In addition to changing the pace of work, new technology has also changed the amount of control clerical workers had over the work process. Prior to office computerization, clerical workers had some sense of control over their work. They used to rely on their own skills and knowledge to organize and run an office, they managed their own time and could complete their tasks at their own pace, within reason (Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002). In other words, clerical workers had some control over their work and the decision-making in the office up until the 1980s and 1990s. Now clerical workers no longer make decisions or control the pace of their work; clerical workers just input information into the computers without using decision making or personal judgement about what they are entering (Menzies 1996:61).

Furthermore, office machines such as the electric typewriter used to be an extension of the clerical worker; today the clerical worker is an extension of the office machine. Clerical workers used to operate and control office machinery by manipulating it to do what they wanted the machines to do. Now the computer is used to control the clerical workers' pace of work and to monitor how much work she does. The clerical worker, ironically, no longer sees the work she has accomplished; a document is normally sent or faxed without ever having to be

printed. Computers are now used to control the clerical worker and her work.

In addition to being able to perform a multitude of clerical and computer functions at a fast pace, while being closely monitored, clerical workers are now expected to be flexible as well. Flexibility is one of the most important factors in the restructuring of the new and changing workforce (Barndt 1999; Eyerman 2000; Fox and Sugiman 2003:18). Clerical workers are now required to be flexible with when, where, and how they work. For example, both Eyerman (1999) and Barndt (1999) cleverly compare clerical jobs to McDonald's work, that consists of part-time, cheap, and flexible labour, where workers are expected to be able to perform a variety of tasks in an efficient manner, and be available to work when the employer needs them. The flexibility characteristic of clerical work and clerical workers is a strategy used by employers for their own benefit. Like technology, flexibility is introduced not to benefit the worker but to benefit the employer.

Connelly and MacDonald (1996) are critical of the literature that focuses on the increased need for flexibility in the global market and in the use of labour, because that literature fails to recognize the gendered nature of restructuring. They argue that flexibility strategies are not gender-neutral and create marginalization for the majority of women. Furthermore, many scholars argue that flexibility in the new workforce may offer greater flexibility to the employer in terms of cutting costs, but actually decreases flexibility for workers and exacerbates work conditions for women (Barndt 1999; Connelly and MacDonald 1996; de Wolff 2000, 1998; Eyerman 1999).

Although flexibility may imply choice, the choice generally remains in the hands of the employer and causes great stress for the clerical worker. The flexible female worker is increasingly a and/or temporary part-time worker. Part-time and temporary full-time employment is a form of flexibility, ostensibly a way of accommodating women's increased labour market participation in the context of the widespread assumption that family responsibilities are predominantly a private responsibility to be performed by women (Duffy and Pupo 1992; Fudge and Vosko 2003; Vosko 2000). However, part-time and contract work have many benefits for the employer, but very few, if any, for the employee. Furthermore, as with part-time, temporary or contingent clerical workers, employers depend on permanent full-time clerical workers to be flexible as well, in that they are able to perform many skills and work at any time, which allows for their overtime or work intensification.

At first glance, it may appear that flexibility is an opportunity for women to gain some control over their lives in terms of balancing their paid work life with family and/or other non-paid work activities. A closer look reveals that flexibility may indeed provide the chance for women to enter the workforce on a part-time basis while pursuing an education or tending to family responsibilities. On the other hand, Barndt (1999) discusses the notion that flexibility implies choice, but she warns us that this so-called choice does not have the same meaning for the employee as it does for the employer. Flexibility can be applied to both the workforce and the nature of work itself and can work in favour of the employee or the employer; most often, however, flexibility meets the needs of the employer.

Many employers assume that contingent or temporary work is beneficial for women since it allows them the flexibility to handle family responsibilities (de Wolff, 1998:108). Employee choice over flexible work hours is important, because studies indicate that employees who have a choice over flexible work schedules have less stress, greater well-being, and are better able to balance both work and family life (Sparks et al. 2001). For some women part-time or temporary work may work in their favour, allowing them to juggle their work and non-work activities. In this context, flexible hours appear to have a positive impact on employees (Barndt 1999; Eyerman 1999). However, on the other hand, flexibility may mean that in addition to unstable employment and unrealistic work schedules, many women need to work at two or more jobs to survive (de Wolff, 1998:108). This has resulted in an intensification of work for many clerical workers.

As a result of increased female labour force participation coupled with large-scale clerical job loss due to the replacement of clerical workers with new technology and by part-time or contingent workers, clerical work has become more competitive and intensive for clerical workers. There is now a surplus of clerical workers out of work or underemployed in the workforce; as a result, those who do permanent full-time clerical work may acquiesce to the overabundance of work and less than desirable work conditions in order to keep their jobs.

Scholars point out the contradiction in the new restructured workforce that has fewer people at work doing more work, and working longer hours, and yet who are feeling less secure in their jobs as unemployment and underemployment

continue to grow (Sparks et al. 2001; Yalnizyan et al. 1994). Therefore, while the amount of work being done remains the same or increases, the numbers of workers doing this work decreases, thereby increasing the workload of individual workers (Armstrong and Armstrong 1994; de Wolff 1998; Krahn and Lowe 1998; Lowe 2000; Marshall et al. 1997; Phillips and Phillips 2000).

Economic and workplace restructuring as well as the introduction of new technologies has left fewer clerical workers in most offices to deal with an increased workload (de Wolff 1998). Employers are focused on making a profit and cutting costs, and one way they are able to do this is through lean staff restructuring, which means hiring fewer employees to do more work, and making use of new computer technologies (Cooper and Jackson 1997; Hoel et al. 2003). As a result, there is more pressure on those remaining employees with increased workloads and work pace; more work is done with fewer employees who work longer hours. "The absence of 'excess' labour under the 'lean and mean' model means that employees must absorb the cost of production problems by extending their workday into mandatory overtime - becoming accordion workers" (Fox and Sugiman 2003:191). In addition to working overtime, clerical workers are expected to be flexible in yet another way, moving from job to job whenever their own work is done in order to maximize the work done for the employer. This means that cross-training has become a tool used by employers to enhance productivity.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, employers are able to replace workers with new computer software programs that are assumed to have the

capacity to do more work at a faster pace. What is not generally recognized is the fact that it is female clerical workers who are required to perform the work done on the computer, with the ultimate result that they are often doing the work of more than one worker. Consequently, clerical work is both intensified and more flexible, with fewer permanent full-time clerical staff handling an increased and increasingly diversified workload. This intensification suggests that those clerical workers who are fortunate enough to remain employed in permanent full-time positions are often overworked, with much overtime and multiple responsibilities, and they do not feel secure enough in their jobs to refuse the extra workloads. The very real fear of unemployment creates anxiety and stress for workers, and those still employed are pressured to work harder, work longer hours, increase their workloads, and even put up with harassment so as to hang onto their jobs (de Wolff 1998).

In addition to the intense workloads, the constant fear of losing one's job is another strain for the clerical worker. Clerical workers are under the constant threat of job loss. Clerical workers are afraid of losing their jobs and tend to do what it takes to keep their jobs - this means putting up with an abundance of overtime and heavy workloads (Fox and Sugiman 2003). Job insecurity has become a common stress factor for clerical workers, as companies have restructured their operations by drastically cutting staff for a 'lean and mean' workplace; employees cannot assume that their jobs are long term (Grimshaw 1999). Both Armstrong (1994) and Colman (2000) argue that the disappearance of permanent full-time jobs resulting from workplace restructuring has created

high levels of insecurity in jobs that are dominated by women. Therefore, job insecurity, the growth of contingent work, intensified work, and the increased pace of work are all concerns for the clerical worker in terms of job stress.

Fox and Sugiman's (2003) study on clerical workers found that clerical workers consistently believed that the new technology, specifically the rate system and the goal of same-day processing, was harmful to their health and well-being. These authors also found that health problems increased for clerical workers as a result of computerization. Technology alone is not to blame for the ill-health among clerical workers; however, the way that technology has been implemented in the office contributes to job stress. Office automation has resulted in an increased pace of work which has been exacerbated by many employers who believe that clerical workers can work at the same pace as the computerized system. In addition, the worker is expected to simultaneously answer phone calls, respond to constantly incoming emails and enter data into the computer, all as efficiently as possible. Not surprisingly, research indicates that such intense workloads and long work hours can induce high levels of stress, leading inexorably to illness (Armstrong 2001; Cartwright and Cooper 1997; Marshall et al. 1997; Noble 1995; Sparks et al. 2001).

Armstrong (2001) also notes that job stress is exacerbated by precarious work and sporadic work hours. Armstrong (2001) and Statham (1993) point out that many clerical workers spend much of their time doing fast-paced computer work that often leads to depression, anxiety, and a lack of concentration. Fox and Sugiman (2003) also note that the use of technology enforces productivity quotas

and monitors workers, resulting in stress for the workers due to their fear of not meeting quota and therefore being fired from their jobs. As these authors suggest, clerical workers are experiencing job insecurity and an increased work pace; advances in technology and the restructuring of workplaces are clearly associated with job stress.

Cohen and White (1987:47) cite Heather Menzies (1982) who suggests that clerical workers are suffering from monotony, isolation, productivity pressure as well as lack of autonomy, variety and growth opportunity in their work. Close supervision, tight production quotas, poor working conditions and low pay cause psychological problems and worker dissatisfaction. Furthermore, a number of studies show that the job characteristics referred to above, in combination with conflicts between job and family roles, can cause high levels of work stress for women in the office and can lead to mental and physical illness (Colman 2000; Doyal 1995; Haynes 1991; Lowe 1989, 2000; Messing 1998; Sparks et al. 2001).

Feminist researchers argue that the loss of clerical jobs, restructured office systems, new divisions of labour and a leaner workforce are a result of the existence of reliable and affordable office technologies and the accompanying restructuring that many employers are doing in response to the recession of the early 1990s (Bird and de Wolff 1997; Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002). These researchers add that it is important to understand that technology alone is not responsible for reshaping clerical occupations and job losses. More importantly it is how the new technologies are implemented and introduced into the office (Menzies 1996). The organizational restructuring and redesign of work processes

are impacted by corporations competing with other corporations which introduce new technologies, then reduce staff, and then redesign work processes (de Wolff 1995:vii).

Recently research is emerging that clearly reveals how and why clerical workers are experiencing more stress in their jobs than they did prior to the 1980s. For example, Duxbury et al. (2003) argue that workplace stress levels have increased as the work environment has changed in the last decade in response to downsizing, globalization, competitive pressures and technological change. Although these researchers do not explicitly refer to clerical workers' stress levels, many women who are employed in the paid workforce are working in the clerical occupation.

To summarize, with the 1980s and 1990s came the increasing polarization of clerical jobs, the widening range of clerical tasks, the intensification of clerical work, increasing unsustainable heavy workloads, longer hours of work, heavier supervision and monitoring of workers, more complex work, more information processing and technical support, and increased pace of work thus resulting in increased stress for clerical workers (Bird and de Wolff 1997; de Wolff 1995; Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002). The combination of new technology and economic restructuring are at the heart of these restructured offices, new work processes and divisions of labour and a leaner, more competitive workforce (Bird and de Wolff 1997; Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002; Menzies 1996). In addition, there is a lack of job security, lack of opportunity for advancement, less control over work and less decision-making involvement by clerical workers in the

context of the new technological innovations that affect their jobs (Bird and de Wolff 1997, Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002).

Aside from changes in the nature of clerical work there have been notable changes in the clerical labour market. There is little room for clerical workers to advance to better positions due to the creation of flat classification systems and lack of middle management positions such as supervisory jobs. There are also fewer entry level clerical positions that require no experience since many employers now expect their clerical workers to be trained and have the skills for the clerical job. Workers are expected to be work-ready with minimal training and workers are expected to update their training on their own time. Many employers now outsource clerical functions which means they are not hiring permanent full-time clerical workers, rather, they are hiring both temporary full-time and part-time workers. The existing unionized workplaces are now downsizing; employers/companies are decreasing their permanent full-time unionized workers but replacing them with temporary full-time and temporary part-time non-unionized workers (Bird and de Wolff 1997; de Wolff 1998; Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002).

Canadian industries and occupations experienced massive restructuring by employers, corporations, and governments in the 1990s as a response to globalization (Bakker 1996). The ongoing restructuring of the labour market and employment relationships has been occurring over the 1980s and the 1990s in order to promote corporate productivity and competitiveness (Lowe 2000). Therefore, as Eyerman (2000:17) suggests, "[i]t is impossible to ignore the role

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that globalization has had on all of these changes in our workplaces".

The Impact of Global Economic Restructuring on Clerical Work

Corporations are now competing in a global market; new technology has provided the tools for corporations to expand their markets and production globally, allowing them to restructure their organizations and workplaces in order to cut costs and maximize profits. Globalization has spawned international competition, forcing corporations and companies to be more flexible and competitive. In response to this global economic restructuring, employers are reorganizing their workplaces and implementing strategies to reduce costs in order to survive in the competitive market (Zeytinoglu et al. 2003).

Corporations are now able to move their companies to anywhere in the world since the "revolving doors" of free trade agreements have been established that allow corporations to move and operate their businesses globally in search of new markets and cheap labour (Bakker 1996; Eyerman 2000; Menzies 1996; Mitter 1986; Phillips and Phillips 2000). Studies and literature on globalization and technological changes also reveal increasing unemployment rates, because employers are able to lay off workers and move around the world in search of a cheap and flexible labour force (Eyerman 2001; Lowe 2000; Menzies 1996; Mitter 1986; Noble 1995; Phillips and Phillips 2000; Wichterich 2000). Corporations are cutting costs and making a profit by downsizing and using technology to replace workers as well as by relying on cheap female labour to successfully compete in the global market; companies are also merging to form

transnational corporations, expanding their operations worldwide. (Bakker 1996; Cohen 1994; Eyerman 2000; Menzies 1996; Phillips and Phillips 2000). Free trade agreements allow corporations to move their operations around the world with very little restraint. The emphasis is on free trade - policies that enhance capital mobility and ensure the rights of corporations (Cohen 1994) - while human rights, especially for women and marginalized workers, are ignored (Bakker 1996:3; Furman 2002).

Governments now place the corporate sector above the economic and social well-being of people; profit comes before humanity and social justice (Furman 2002; Eyerman 2000). As a result, the power of governments to regulate the economy or set laws in the public interest is weakened, and corporate competition and productivity becomes more important than workplace standards and economic justice (de Wolff 1998; Eyerman 2000; Lowe 2000; Menzies 1996; Noble 1995; Phillips and Phillips 2000).

The neo-liberal agenda aimed at maximizing corporate profits through free trade, deregulation of the labour market and a continued reliance by employers on technology, has had a profound impact on the Canadian labour market (Bakker 1996; Christiansen-Ruffman 2002; Connelly and MacDonald 1996; Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002; Krahn and Lowe 1998; Lowe 2000; Noble 1995; Naples and Desia 2002; Phillips and Phillips 2000). More specifically, the transformation of the labour market from permanent full-time secure jobs to insecure precarious and temporary part-time jobs, and a movement towards a polarization of the labour force into good jobs and bad jobs (overemployed/

underemployed, core permanent full-time /peripheral temporary part-time workers, skilled/unskilled jobs), a decline in unionized workers, and declining wages (Bird and de Wolff 1997; Eyerman 2000; Phillips and Phillips 2000; The Centre for Social Justice 2002; Williams 2003). The labour force has now become divided into permanent full-time employees and part-time, casual, on call, temporary and subcontracted workers. In some workplaces, many of the jobs being lost are unionized while the jobs being created tend to be non-unionized.

The use of new computer technology and workplace restructuring makes possible corporate reliance on a contingent and flexible workforce, as workplaces are downsized and temporary part-time and full-time employees replace permanent full-time employees. Employers do this by outsourcing, contracting-out work and hiring temporary full-time and part-time workers rather than permanent full-time workers, while paying them low wages and no benefits (Bird and de Wolff 1997; de Wolff 2000; Duffy and Pupo 1992; Duffy et al. 1997; Eyerman 2000; Furman 2000; Menzies 1996; Vosko 2000). Much of the significant growth in the Canadian labour market in the past decade has been in the part-time sector, as full-time jobs that have good wages, benefits, job security, and opportunity for advancement are being replaced with non-standard, part-time or temporary employment that offers low wages, increased skill requirements, less autonomy, more isolation, decreased job security, few or no benefits and lack of opportunity for advancement (Armstrong and Armstrong 1994; de Wolff 1998, 2000; Eyerman 1999, 2000; Lowe 1998, 2000; Menzies

1996; Noble 1995; Phillips and Phillips 2000; Vosko 2000).

This transformation is occurring at a rapid pace and is visible in office workplaces, where the majority of office clerks are women. The shift in economic focus to a market-based model and the rise of the neo-liberal state has negatively and forcefully influenced the working conditions of clerical workers (Furman 2002:1). While studies show that during the 1990's, workplaces have undergone profound changes as a result of restructuring in our economy and the introduction of new technologies, de Wolff (1998:107) points out that clerical workers are rarely included on the list of workers who have been affected by these changes. However, both the neo-liberal economic policies adopted by government coupled with corporate demands for restructuring and downsizing in the 1990s has resulted in a deterioration of working conditions for clerical workers. Moreover, as this discussion suggests, the introduction of new technology plays a large role in the process of restructuring the economy and workplaces and, in particular, clerical workplaces (Cohen and White 1987; Lowe 1987; Menzies 1996).

As discussed above, economic restructuring and the introduction of new technologies are resulting in recent workplace changes that are profoundly affecting the nature of female dominated clerical work. Therefore, in addition to displacing many clerical workers and their skills, computers and networking technology are changing several aspects of clerical work in the following ways: increased pace of work and monitoring; less control over work and lack of opportunity for advancement; work intensification (heavier workloads, longer

work hours, fewer staff); increased flexibility, and the shift from permanent full-time jobs to temporary part-time contingent jobs (Armstrong and Armstrong 1994; Armstrong 2001; Bird and de Wolff 1997; de Wolff 1995,1998; Eyerman 2000; Furman 2002; Lowe 2000; Menzies 1996; MFL 2002; Noble 1995).

Telecommunications and Restructuring

Telecommunications is an important industry to examine when researching the implications and impacts of restructuring and globalization on clerical workers. According to Katz (1997:2), the telecommunications industry is important because it "...provides the basic infrastructure for the information highway and thereby lies at the centre of the economic changes that are occurring across the globe". In addition, telecommunications industries provide the advanced communications and information technological services to other companies that require these tools in order to remain competitive globally; thus these industries play an important role in relation to globalization and corporate competition by providing services that allows corporations to trade goods and services globally (Katz 1997; TWU 2004). Many companies are currently relying on telecommunication services in order to compete and survive in the new global economy, allowing them to trade goods and services both locally and globally (TWU 2004).

The telecommunications industry is also going through its own restructuring for the same reasons as most other corporations - new technological changes and market competition - which has resulted in

downsizing and cost cutting efforts in the industry (Balka 1995; Katz 1997; Rideout 1997; TWU 2004). Katz (1997) suggests that the pace and intensity of work in the telecommunications industry is a result of cost cutting pressures. Moreover, technology for these firms is changing rapidly and having an impact on the organization of the industry (Balka 1995; Katz 1997; TWU 2004).

Balka (1995) has examined the effects of technological change as it relates to occupational stress, particularly for women operators who work for a telecommunications industry in Newfoundland. She found that technological changes contributed to increases in job demands and decreases in job control; a discovery relevant to Karasek's (1979) model of occupational stress based on high demands and low control as a source of job strain. Balka (1995) uses Feldberg and Glenn's (1983) framework for analyzing the effects of technological change on these workers. This framework emphasizes the way social relations affect the development and use of technology, particularly technological changes in relation to change in occupational and organizational structures and work processes (Feldberg and Glenn 1983). Fox and Sugiman (2003) also conducted a study on clerical workers who work for a telecommunications firm in Toronto. These researchers found that job stress was high for women clerical workers who worked in a payment centre and were dealing with technological changes in their jobs.

As part and parcel of globalization, many services, programs and regulations are being dismantled by governments and corporations. The once heavily regulated telecommunications industry is no exception. According to Katz

(1997:3), "[t]he corporate restructuring being driven by regulatory restructuring is in turn leading to significant changes in the employment systems of the telecommunications services industry". More specifically, this means that these once large monopoly industries are now being forced into a more competitive environment with many telecommunications service providers (Katz 1997). Former monopoly carriers are cutting costs in order to survive in this new environment, resulting in enormous downsizing - a dramatic change for the large number of employees who worked for these large industries and who had once enjoyed and expected employment security for life (Katz 1997). Rideout (1997:8) states that between 1991 and 1995 '[t]he net [employment] loss in the Canadian telecommunications service sector has amounted to 32,000".

By the late 1980s, large scale staff reductions were taking place in the telecommunications industry in the form of early retirement packages, voluntary severance programs, surplussing of some positions and involuntary layoffs (de Wolff 1995; Katz 1997). In addition to downsizing, these firms are also resorting to subcontracting and outsourcing as well as more flexible work schedules (Katz 1997). Another important impact of deregulation and downsizing of the former monopolies is the growth of non-union entrant firms (new companies in the same industry that are not non-union) to the telecommunications services industry that have different work practices than the traditional union firms (Katz 1997).

The telecommunications industry continues to restructure (Katz 1997). As I have suggested throughout the above review, increased job stress stems from major workplace changes spurred by deregulation, the introduction of new

technology, restructuring and downsizing that have been occurring since the 1980s. The telecommunications service sector is clearly one of the many industries whose workplaces have undergone profound changes, resulting in increased job stress, as researchers Balka (1995) and Fox and Sugiman (2003) have illustrated.

In summary, much of the existing literature I reviewed suggests that the increasing pace and pressure of office work, manifestly leading to increased job stress, are caused by profound alterations in the workplace that are the result of deregulation, restructuring and downsizing. Permanent full-time workers are working longer hours with higher workloads because of inadequate staff and resources. At the same time there is an increase in permanent and temporary part-time jobs in offices, resulting in increased staff turnover and making it next to impossible for clerical workers to form a union, since part-time or contingent clerical workers often do not have the ability or opportunity to organize effectively. The unavailability of unionized jobs means that fewer women have protection from undesirable working conditions, and that they lack the power to change their workplaces (de Wolff, 1998). These circumstances clearly suggest that female clerical workers are workers who experience to a great degree the impact of workplace changes.

Conclusion

While it may initially appear that new and advanced technologies in the workplace create more challenging and better jobs for women in the clerical field,

a closer examination of the literature reveals that office technology is in fact chaining women to the "pink ghetto". While the introduction of new office technology has the capability to improve clerical work and provide better opportunities for women, clerical work has become an undesirable occupation for many. In short, clerical work has changed from being a permanent full-time job that allowed the worker some control over her work and provided her with a sense of job security, to being an occupation that consists of many temporary as well as full-time workers. Both the contingent worker and the full-time worker are dealt a bad hand, since they both experience an intensification of their fast-paced work, require more qualifications and skills, are not likely to be unionized and are closely monitored. These stressful changes in the workplace are due to the latest round of technological innovations and workplace restructuring, that are in turn a result of globalization and economic restructuring.

The feminist political economy literature addressed by authors such as Isabella Bakker, Martha MacDonald, Patricia Connelly, Leah Vosko and Marjorie Cohen gives me a better understanding of the nature of globalization, labour market restructuring, and the restructuring of the economy in general. This information clearly illustrates that work for women is being transformed into the type of work that can contribute to job stress.

There are already existing documents that do highlight women and workplace stress and that provide fact sheets on stress and work. For example, the MFL Occupational Centre in Winnipeg, the Workplace Anti-Centre Guide by the Hospital Employees Union, CUPE Health and Safety Branch (2003),

Australian ACTU OHS Unit (2000), Canadian centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2000), and The Solid Facts - The Social Determinants of Health (1998, 2002), all clearly show the factors that can contribute to workplace stress and conclude with recommendations and policy implications as well as suggestions for future research.

Workplace stress is also increasingly negatively affecting more people across the globe (Cox et al. 2000), and policy makers, employers and governments must realize that the changes they are making are having an impact on the health of workers (MFL 2000). It is my hope to be able to contribute to such research in my thesis, by listening to and analyzing the voices of female clerical workers.

Therefore, I used a feminist methodological approach to analyze the cause of job stress from the perspectives of women clerical workers for my study. More specifically, I used qualitative feminist interviewing as a research method for collecting my data. The challenges and controversies that arise from this research method of interviewing are fully discussed in the following methodology chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology Chapter

Doing Feminist Research

The dominant methods that have been used to explore the topic of women and job stress have largely been drawn from mainstream positivist perspectives that rely heavily on objective measures, medical records, classification data, statistics, traditional medical models, survey questionnaires, and textual information. Thus, while there is literature on women and clerical work issues as well as on job stress, the feminist qualitative research that examines how women clerical workers experience job stress can still be supplemented. Some of the feminist research that does exist includes works by Duxbury et al. (2003), Eyerman (2000), Fox and Sugiman (2003), Bird and de Wolff (1997) and Balka (1995).

Recent studies on job stress that have used qualitative approaches have tended to neglect women who work in lower status and subordinate positions such as clerical work; therefore these women's voices are not being heard and their experiences are not visible (Zeytinoglu et al. 2003). One of the goals of my thesis is to overcome this neglect of female clerical workers' experiences of job stress.

Feminist researchers often examine women's lives from the point of view of those who are on the margins, rather than from the perspective of the privileged. Feminist researchers often explore these issues using qualitative interviewing; semi-structured or unstructured in-depth interviewing is a qualitative data gathering approach that feminists use to involve participants in discussion and data collection. Careful listening allows the researcher to introduce new questions as the interview proceeds. The interviewer asks questions that challenge her own assumptions,

while being careful not to substitute her own experiences for those of the interviewee (Reinharz 1992). Unstructured interviews often employ open-ended questions, allowing researchers to give more depth to statistical information as well as to maximize findings and description (Acker et al. 1996:63). Open-ended interviews also seek to involve interviewees in the accurate recording of their experiences (Reinharz 1992).

Feminist Interviewing

Interviewing as a research method is not new, but how the method is used can depend on the research approach being taken by the researcher, an approach which may not be feminist. Traditionally, interviewing has generally been a one-way process in which the interviewer forms and asks questions but does not answer them. Oakley (1981:35-37) describes this hierarchical interviewer-interviewee relationship as one in which the interviewee plays a passive and subordinate role and is treated as a mere data-provider or object of study, who is there to answer questions for the interviewer and to provide information, but not to ask questions back. The interviewer is to focus on the researched, to learn and get the researched's opinions, to evade questions and to avoid the temptation to provide any information regarding the interviewer's views, values, or beliefs even if the interviewee asks, because doing so may bias the interview (Oakley 1981:34-37).

Oakley (1981:27) advocates a new feminist model of interviewing that strives for intimacy and self-disclosure, involving an ethic of commitment and an egalitarian

relationship between researcher and participant that differs greatly from the traditional ethic of detachment and role differentiation between researcher and the researched. Oakley (1981) and Reinharz (1992) argue that a feminist interview differs from the traditional interview approach because it is inclusive, allows for clarification, open discussion and interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees, and includes the possibility of developing potentially long lasting relationships. Oakley (1981) finds the detached, objective, and hierarchical traditional approach to conducting interviews problematic because that approach does not validate women's subjective experiences as women and as people - a key element of feminist research.

Oakley (1981) argues that a non-hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees, where the interviewer does not pose as a superior person and invests her own subjectivity in the relationship and the research, is the best way to find out about people. Similarly, Acker et al. (1996) and Reinharz (1992) both argue that the subjectivity of both the researcher and the researched need to be included in the interview process, thereby reducing the unequal power relationship and creating a true dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewees.

Reinharz (1992:30) cites Judy Wajcman, who argues that this non-hierarchical relationship in an interview helps the researcher to gain trust that often leads to the discussion of additional topics above and beyond those prepared for the interview. Mies (1983:123) also argues that a hierarchical relationship creates

distrust in those being researched and makes them feel that they are being interrogated, which may lead to distorted data. Christine Webb, also cited by Reinharz (1992:31-33), suggests that viewing the interview as an exchange of information creates a dialogue and promotes good rapport that can result in learning about the interviewee's feelings and experiences in great depth, and allows the interviewees to become co-researchers. Acker et al. (1996) suggest that allowing the interviewer to reciprocate and answer both personal and research related questions as the opportunity arises is a way of thanking the interviewees for their help with the study as well as dealing with the subject/ object issue: that is, not exploiting the interviewee or treating them like an object of scientific study.

Several issues and controversies have arisen when feminists have attempted to conduct non-hierarchal interviews as described above. One controversy that emerges in feminist interviewing is the friend or stranger dilemma. Both Oakley (1981) and Acker et al. (1996) formed relationships with many of the women involved in their studies. Reinharz (1992:26) also cites researchers who found that forming close relations prior to an interview gave them access to the interviewees and enabled them to have shorter and more focused interviews. On the other hand, Reinharz (1992:26) also draws attention to the fact that some people often agree to be interviewed because of a lack of relationship with the researcher. She suggests that not seeing the interviewer again is appealing for the interviewee, enabling them to divulge more private information. On the other hand, having more than one interview with the interviewee is a common approach for the same reason

– obtaining more information.

Feminist researchers often choose repeat interviews that are relatively intimate, non-hierarchical and more involved with the interviewees' reactions to and experience of the interview (Acker et al. 1996; Oakley 1981). Repeat interviews help form a strong interviewer-interviewee bond that is typical of feminist research; such interviews also provide the potential for developing trust between the interviewer and the interviewee and the opportunity to share interview transcripts with the interviewee so as to invite the interviewee's analysis (Acker at al. 1996; Oakley 1981). Repeat interviews tend to be more accurate than single interviews because of the opportunity to ask additional questions and to get ample feedback on previously obtained information, allowing the researcher to constantly correct the interview process (Acker et al. 1996; Reinharz 1992). Repeat interviews can increase the comfort of the interviewee in that the interviewer is seen as a friend.

Some researchers also argue that self-disclosure by a researcher about one's own life during interviews is good feminist methodology that helps to establish some reciprocity and develops intimacy with the interviewee, while also putting her at ease (Acker et al. 1996; Oakley 1981; Reinharz 1992). However, Reinharz (1992) also adds that some feminists stress that the timing of self-disclosure in an interview is important, and suggests that researchers should look for cues from the interviewee as to when to self-disclose. Reinharz (1992:33) notes that some feminists argue that interviewer self-disclosure could influence the interviewee to say what she thinks the interviewer wants to hear; therefore self-disclosure should

begin only after the interviewee states her own needs and concerns.

As the above discussion illustrates, conducting an actual interview within a feminist framework involves several challenges and possible dilemmas for the researcher. In addition, once the interviews have been transcribed, the researcher is faced with another set of complex issues: the interpretation and analysis of the interviews.

Acker et al. (1996:71) argue that to give an analysis that goes beyond the interviewees' interpretation of their experiences to an understanding of the causes of their oppression and exploitation, while granting the interviewees' full subjectivity, is a difficult task. The process of analysis is the point where the research process creates objectification, where the interviewee becomes merely a data provider from whom the researcher can extract information at will without considering the impact on the interviewee. Consequently, this objectification reinforces power differences between the researcher and the researched. This objectification can be minimized when both the researcher and the researched participate in the process of analysis; however, Acker et al. (1996:71) argue that objectification cannot be totally eliminated in analysis, and question how the lives of others can be explained without violating their reality.

The question of how to grant the researcher full subjectivity while producing an analysis that goes beyond the interviewees' experience is a concern for feminist researchers. In other words, how does the researcher incorporate her own ideas and her own analysis of the interviewee's experiences, and write these experiences

up as an academic document, without removing or diminishing the interviewee's own ideas and analysis of her own experiences? Ultimately, the process of analysis means moving beyond purely descriptive data and engaging the interpretive authority of the researcher with the realities of interviewees' lives.

Feminist Interviewing in My Research

As a feminist researcher, I attempt to incorporate the feminist interviewing methods as discussed by the feminist scholars mentioned in the above discussion (see Acker et al. 1996; Oakley 1981; Reinharz 1992). For example, I have attempted to minimize power imbalances between myself (the interviewer) and the interviewees. I treated my participants in a friendly manner, and in striving for reciprocity, I answered any questions they had for me. I also shared my own experiences of being a clerical worker and of job stress. I did not act in a detached manner throughout the interviews. I allowed the interviewees to lead the interview discussions in directions they thought were important and actually encouraged them to do so.

Oakley (1981) suggests the possibility of maintaining friendships with the women she interviewed. The friendship dilemma is somewhat problematic and contradictory for me in a number of ways. I have worked with four of the participants who I interviewed; therefore, we were not strangers prior to the interviews. The fifth was an acquaintance, but we did not work together. There have been times when a participant has contacted me after our interview to have a friendly talk. However,

the fact that my schedule was hectic and I did not have time to engage in friendships made a continuous relationship with my research participants impossible.

Although I do empathize with the women I interviewed and hope to change work conditions for clerical workers in general, when I began my research I did not intend to maintain close personal relationships with these women after the interviews. I did not go into the interviews with this possibility on my mind because I did not anticipate that any of these women would even consider a relationship beyond the interview. However, when I rejected a participant after our interview (not returning phone calls or accepting offers to go out for coffee and/or other social activities - refusing to carry on a friendship), particularly given my pre-existing relationships with my research participants, I felt as though I had treated my participants as objects. I feel that I elicited information from the women I interviewed and then continued on my academic path. On the one hand, I am not sure why, but I feel that I should have remained in contact with these women after I interviewed them. Perhaps this is a result of having already known these women and having worked closely with most of them as co-workers in the same workplace. In addition, I feel guilt from being able to walk away from the job and the job stress while they remain working in these occupations.

On the other hand, even if I had the time to maintain contact with the women, I am unsure if I would want to continue a relationship with them. My life has moved into another chapter and those women are a part of my history, not my present life.

Was I indeed exploiting these women for my own research? Was I in fact doing feminist research? I have since come to the realization that there are many different ways of doing feminist research, and not maintaining a friendship with an interviewee does not define my research as non-feminist.

Aside from my internal conflict with my decision not to maintain relationships with my research participants after the interviews have been conducted, I am also aware that doing repeat interviews would have allowed me to gain more relevant information from for my thesis. Oakley (1981) also discusses doing repeat interviews with her interviewees in order to generate rapport and trust to gain more information. This type of interviewing is very time consuming. I am certainly not opposed to repeat or multiple interviews as I can clearly see how useful they would be in collecting more data; but for most students doing research, time constraints are a huge issue that may make repeat interviews difficult or impossible.

Once knowledge is produced that illustrates the health risks of female dominated clerical work from the perspectives of the women workers, then perhaps researchers themselves will be more compelled to do whatever additional research is necessary to promote the development of policies and programs to protect these workers. The goal of feminist research is to uncover the different realities that exist for women and to hear their voices; as my literature review revealed, women clerical workers in more subordinate employment positions are not being adequately heard.

<u>Interviewing Clerical Workers</u>

Adhering to Sandra Harding's (1987) suggestion that feminist research is of and for women, my research is about and for women clerical workers, an attempt to hear and write their voices, and hopefully to make their lives visible. I attempt to hear female clerical workers' experiences, as expressed by the women themselves, in order to gain knowledge that can be utilized to advocate for changing women's marginal position in the paid labour force. Sherry Gorelick (1996) argues that it is important to document women's voices faithfully and with respect for their experience; I have attempted to do this in my research by using open-ended interviews. Furthermore, my decision to conduct research in the area of female clerical work and job stress was based on my own experience; therefore I explicitly include my own voice and experience in the study.

By choosing to conduct semi-structured/in-depth interviews, I hoped to avoid objectifying female clerical workers and to add depth to my literature review, hoping to make the lives of women clerical workers visible. The process enabled me to gain rich and detailed knowledge that comes from letting women speak for themselves on the nature of clerical work and job stress. This method allowed me to understand more about the nature and conditions of female dominated clerical work. While methods such as the survey questionnaire provide the broad outline of who works where and for what pay, surveys cannot give us a detailed account of a female clerical worker's average day of work or about her work history (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1983:222).

I hoped that my research would address the following questions: How do these women make sense of their rapidly changing work environments? How does the restructuring of workplaces negatively affect women clerical workers' health in the form of job stress? How do female clerical workers cope with the rapid workplace changes that can contribute to job stress? What are the key factors that cause work stress among clerical workers? Do female clerical workers experiences work stress and how do they cope with it? What understandings do they have of women in clerical work and of job stress?

In order to deal with these questions, I initially planned to interview five to ten female clerical workers who are employed or were previously employed in permanent full-time clerical positions for at least five years since the early 1990's. Another reason I chose to interview full-time clerical workers is that being employed full-time for at least five years in this field allows for a worker to have had sufficient time to experience and assess workplace changes that have been taking place over the last few years. Such clerical workers are also in a position to compare the workplace changes with the workplace they had experienced prior to the early 1990s. However, one of the five women in my research had not worked for five years in a clerical position; nevertheless, both her clerical experience in the telecommunications industry and her experience with job stress provided useful data for my research. Ultimately, I interviewed only five female clerical workers who are currently or were previously employed in clerical positions since the early 1990's.

An additional reason that I decided to focus on full-time clerical workers for my research is the fact that as my literature review indicates, permanent full-time clerical jobs are being transformed into temporary, part-time and contract positions. Most of the research reveals the dramatic changes in the workplace and how the changes affect part-time workers, but not how workplace changes affect permanent full-time clerical workers who are still employed. In addition, the notion that contingent workers are desperately seeking permanent full-time work as an answer to their work crisis is an issue that needs to be examined. Further, while permanent full-time clerical work may appear to be better than temporary work, permanent full-time work is not without its share of issues. Based on the interviews I conducted, it became evident that both permanent full-time and temporary full-time clerical work have both advantages and disadvantages.

Among the five women who participated in my thesis research, two were clerical workers who worked full-time hours but were temporary employees. While these interviews did not meet my initial criteria for participants, they did provide me with useful data with which to compare permanent full-time work with temporary full-time work. This comparison is important because my literature review reveals that permanent full-time workers are being replaced by temporary and contingent workers, who experience degrading and stressful working conditions. I gained the sense from two of the women who had been temporary employees that contingent work was worse than permanent full-time work for clerical workers. At the same time, interviewing both temporary and permanent full-time clerical workers who are

struggling with work conditions allowed me to show the differences as well as the similarities between the two forms of work.

I also chose to interview women clerical workers who have worked in the telecommunications industry, primarily because of my own experience in this area, and also because this industry is one of the growing service industries which is undergoing explosive changes in work and employment relations. To reiterate the words of Katz (1997:2), used earlier in this thesis, "[t]he telecommunications service industry is important because this industry provides the basic infrastructure for the information highway and thereby lies at the center of the economic changes that are occurring across the globe".

I limited my sample in these ways in order to fill a gap in existing research. Most research on women and work focuses on contingent work and the restructuring of workplaces, rather than on job stress among clerical workers. While I may not agree with Ann Eyerman's (2000) argument that organizational and technological changes have impacted office work and office workers more than any other workplace and workforce, I do agree that there have been profound changes in the office work environment that deserve much needed attention. I am interested in gaining insight into the experiences of women who were and still are clerical workers in this changed and changing environment. However, recruiting female clerical workers who have experienced job stress was not an easy task. I encountered a few limitations in my recruitment process that I will now briefly discuss.

<u>Limitations of the Research</u>

I encountered several limitations during the course of my research process that had an effect on the work I did as well as on the final product. The number of women I was able to recruit for my project was much smaller than I had anticipated. I intended on interviewing at least ten or more women. I soon learned that ten participants would be sufficient for a Master's thesis because of restrictions on the time available for this project. Therefore, although I began this thesis with high expectations of interviewing approximately twenty women, I ultimately ended up with only five participants. However, it should be noted that even though my sample was small, my data were rich. Nevertheless, I realize that a greater number of participants might have resulted in different findings.

I was only able to conduct five interviews because finding participants who met the required criteria was more difficult than I had anticipated. One of the dilemmas of finding permanent full-time clerical workers to participate in interviews is that they are very busy, tired, and stressed and do not have the time for an interview. Several women had agreed to do the interviews and seemed happy to do so, but failed to get in touch with me about a time and place to meet. I phoned and/or emailed these women on several occasions, but gave up after three or four attempts. There is a fine line between recruiting participants and harassing them, so I decided to proceed with the five women I was able to interview.

Another limitation of my research was that I was unable to conduct repeat interviews. I realized in the process of analyzing and documenting my data that

there were several areas on which I could have expanded in the interviews. However, I was also aware that even if I had more time for further interviews, my research participants did not have the time. They were already overworked and stressed from their jobs, so asking for another interview with them might have been too much to ask of them.

While I did gather a substantial amount of data from my research participants, it is important to note the reluctance of the participants to be interviewed. All of the women I interviewed were concerned that they would not have anything important to say, and one of the participants did not want to be tape-recorded. In addition to the five women I did interview, there were four other female clerical workers I had intended to interview, but unfortunately they were either too busy and/or stressed to take part in my study. Some of the potential participants outright said to me that they did not want to say anything negative about their jobs for fear of getting fired.

In addition to the sample size, another limitation of the sample was its composition. Although I attempted to recruit women of different races, classes and ages, as a result of the criteria I was looking for, all of my participants were white working class women who were in the same age cohort (between the ages of 34-38), with the exception of one woman who had only recently retired. Furthermore, most of my contacts with participants were made through word of mouth as well as snowball sampling. After I had recruited a few participants I asked them if they knew of other women clerical workers who worked in the telecommunications industry and

who were experiencing job stress. Unfortunately, while many hopefuls were mentioned and I contacted them, only a small number actually followed through with an interview. Perhaps if I had the opportunity to interview a more diverse group of women, the data may have produced different results. I may have found more diversity among the women I recruited if I had not relied on interviewing women I knew and women they knew who would be interested in participating in the study.

An Insider/Outsider Position

Overall in my thesis research, I explore the issue of job stress based on my own experience and observations, open-ended interviews with female clerical workers, scholarly books, and academic journals. In order to make women's experiences of workplace stress more visible, I conducted open-ended interviews with the five women I discuss above. I prepared interview questions that were used as guidelines for the interviews and introduced them into the interviews in such a way as to make the interviewees comfortable and to allow room for the women to shape the dialogue. (See Appendix A for the interview questions.) I began each interview by asking the participant to provide me with some personal information such as her age, education, and family status, as I believed this information could be related to job stress. I then proceeded to ask general questions concerning participants' experiences with job stress and work, in order to gain a better understanding of how these women perceive job stress.

I attempted to hear how clerical workers understand and experience job

stress and how they make sense of the changes in their workplaces, such as flexible work schedules, increased workloads, insecurity, lack of benefits, low wages, and long or insufficient work hours. I asked specific questions about how the participants attempt to cope with work-related stress, what aspects of work they see as stressful, and what thoughts they have on the restructuring of workplaces and stress. I was also interested in discovering whether women's family status or being part of a union affects their coping with job stress. I concluded by asking the participants how they would like me to use the information that they shared and what they see as possible solutions to the problem of job stress. Overall, I asked interview questions that used everyday language rather than academic jargon in order to obtain the everyday life experiences of the women rather than impersonal reports, as well as to ensure they knew what I was asking them (Chase 1995:2-3).

I also planned to tape record the interviews that I conducted, but I was only able to tape record three and had to take notes for the other two. The inability to record two of the interviews was partly due to the location the women selected for the interview and partly because they were uncomfortable with being tape-recorded. One interview was conducted in a cafeteria at lunchtime, so the background noise would have made the recording inaudible. In addition, this particular participant was not comfortable with me using the tape recorder; I am unsure if this was due to the public place of the interview or whether the location of the interview made a difference. The other unrecorded interview was also conducted in a busy eating establishment. Although this interviewee gave me

permission to tape record our discussion, we could not see any place to plug in the tape recorder. Although I could have bought batteries for the recorder, the interview still would have been inaudible due to the noisy environment.

I also interviewed two women at the same time as per their request. These two participants had worked together at the same workplace. In this interview, more elaborate information was gathered through a memory-jogging dialogue between the two participants, each reminding the other of incidents and situations as the interview progressed. However, this interview was more difficult to keep focused, as both women also talked about issues that were not related to my research.

I also include myself as a participant in this research. I worked from 1989 to 2001 in the clerical occupation, was employed for five years in the telecommunications industry in particular and experienced job stress in my work environment. Moreover, I was dismissed from my job at the telecommunications company for which I was working in 2001 because I took time off work due to job stress. Unfortunately, the company did not regard job stress as an illness and dismissed me from my job. My clerical work and my job stress experience allowed me to occupy the position of both subject and researcher, giving me both an insider and outsider view.

This insider/outsider stance meant that I had to move between being a clerical worker and an academic researcher throughout my research. This situation created a great deal of discomfort for me when interviewing clerical workers and analyzing their interviews. While I was engaged in analyzing the interviews I felt I

was doing a disservice to the women clerical workers I interviewed by taking what they said and transforming it into more academic prose. I was not only using their words, but I was also taking their words and stories and writing an academic piece of work, using my academic knowledge, ideas and analysis to make sense of their stories. However, throughout the process of doing this thesis I came to understand that my own authoritative subjectivity is not only legitimate, it is indeed essential to the process of analysis, to make women's experiences visible and their voices heard (Chase 1995).

My ultimate goal in conducting these interviews was to explore personal experiences of job stress in female clerical workers who have worked in the clerical capacity for several years and to give these women a voice. I developed questions that helped me to achieve this goal of exploring the personal experiences of job stress in female clerical workers. I also incorporated some of the arguments and ideas from my literature review into my dialogues with the participants, to see how these women reacted to such ideas and arguments around job stress for women clerical workers. Although I ensured that the main points of my interview questions were addressed, I also allowed participants the freedom to ask their own questions and to become involved in discussions beyond the prepared interview questions.

Ethical Considerations

Deciding to interview participants for my thesis gave me a clearer understanding of some of the ethical considerations that are involved in making use

of this research method. Since job stress is a sensitive and personal issue, and because interview participants may fear losing their jobs if they discuss job stress, it was extremely important for me to ensure that ethical considerations were addressed in my research. Many clerical workers already live with the anxiety of not knowing how long they will be employed in their position due to downsizing and the contracting out of work. They work harder, doing more work and working longer hours to make themselves more of an asset to their employer, thus hopefully better securing their job. Therefore, to admit that they are experiencing job stress could make them appear weak and unable to do their work, which might result in their dismissal from their place of employment. In addition to not wanting to appear weak, clerical workers do not want to speak negatively about their boss or workplace, because if this information reached their employer, they could lose their job. For these reasons, I knew it could be difficult recruiting participants for my study and that I would need to inform the women I intended to interview that the information they gave me would be completely anonymous.

As is evident from the above, I had to carefully consider ethical standards when I conducted my research. Therefore, before conducting the interviews, I obtained informed consent from the participants, maintained their anonymity, and ensured their well-being throughout the interview process. I conducted the interviews at a time and place that was convenient to the participants. Prior to conducting each interview, participants were fully informed as to the purpose of my research to ensure that they were able to make informed decisions as to whether

or not they wished to participate in the study. Consent forms (See Appendix B) were provided to participants that stated that participants could withdraw from the study at any point during the interview process if they felt the need to do so. Moreover, all questions were voluntary and participants could refrain from answering any or all interview questions. Participants signed the consent forms, and each of us kept one copy of the form.

I maintained the anonymity of my research participants throughout the study in several ways. I locked copies of the consent form and the unlabeled tape recordings of interviews in a filing cabinet in my home. I used fictitious names in my study, ensuring that the real names of the interviewees and their places of employment remained anonymous, while recognizing that there was a lack of anonymity between the two women I interviewed together. Once I transcribed the interviews I invited participants to read over the transcripts to ensure that I had not unintentionally revealed their identities or misinterpreted any statements. The participants, however, did not take me up on this offer.

I used an open and forthright approach about my research in discussing the study with the participants involved, while maintaining the confidentiality of the other participants. I also integrated my own personal experiences with job stress into my discussions with the participants. I believed that the interviewees would be more at ease if they knew that I have experienced job stress and was open to discussing my own personal experiences with them.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I have gained a better perspective on and understanding about feminist interviewing. I am now fully aware that exposing the problems inherent in traditional interviewing methods does not mean that feminist interviewing is without its own ethical dilemmas and challenges. What feminist interviewing has done for me, however, is to show where there is room for improvement in feminist research; it has also made visible to me the many limitations and challenges feminist researchers face. Rather than back away from these difficulties I stand strong in pursuing my research from a feminist perspective because I feel it is important to struggle through the difficulties for the sake of liberating women.

I began this process suggesting that giving women a voice is an important step in achieving my goals of empowering women and attaining social and economic justice for women clerical workers. However, I now realize and fully agree with Pat Baker (1998:48) when she argues that "simply "giving voice" to women is not enough; indeed, it is impossible and undesirable. Hearing and writing women's voices involves acknowledging and analyzing the contributions of the relationships among all those involved in the research". For me, this was not an easy task, as I realized once I began analyzing the interviews I conducted.

When I began transcribing my interviews I became aware of how difficult it is to give the women I interviewed a voice. In my attempt to write what the women said and translate their stories into written academic text I was constantly

questioning if what I was doing was feminist research. How could I take the words of the clerical workers and analyze their experiences if my goal was to have their voices heard and make their experiences visible? Although I asked interview questions that used everyday language rather than academic jargon, my own interpretations of these stories the women told would have to meet the criteria for writing a Master's thesis. I found writing my own interpretations a difficult task because I felt I was doing a disservice to the women I interviewed by translating what they said and writing their words up as a piece of academic research. However, I have come to understand that my position as a graduate student has already given me a privileged and authoritative voice. I had to and eventually did learn how I could incorporate my feminist researcher voice with my clerical worker voice.

To conclude, I agree with both Pat Baker (1998) and Shulamit Reinharz (1992) that we must push forward in our pursuit of hearing and writing women's voices in our interview process and analysis. In my opinion, dealing with the many dilemmas and challenges feminist research poses is better than not attempting to hear women at all. In the following chapter, I have interpreted the stories of the women I interviewed, using my interpretive authority as a researcher. I attempt to make sense of the women's experiences of job stress, incorporated with my own experiences of clerical work and job stress.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Interviews

"Clerical work for women is one of the most demeaning, degrading, and humiliating occupations that women work at".
- Louise (Clerical Worker)

Introduction

As my thesis focuses on female clerical workers who experienced job stress while working in the telecommunications industry, I will begin this chapter with a brief discussion about this industry. The telecommunications industry provides an interesting workplace through which to examine the issue of job stress, especially in terms of economic restructuring and corporate competition spurred by globalization and information technology. As discussed earlier in Chapter 2, the telecommunications industry and its technology are the vehicle that allows for globalization to change the labour market as we know it. As Katz (1997:184) points out, "[t]he Canadian telecommunications industry provides an excellent laboratory for examining an industrial relation system undergoing change in response to changes in technology, regulation, and the increasing globalization of markets in general".

As a result of deregulation of the telecommunications industry, there has been the disappearance of the heavily regulated telecommunications monopoly and the emergence of new private firms entering the industry (Katz 1997). In Nova Scotia, for example, MTT was a huge monopoly in the telecommunications industry for many years. A new firm that I will call Uphone (a fictitious name to ensure anonymity of participants) is now providing local telephone service as well as internet and cable services in Nova Scotia. I began working with this new

company when they started, and one reason I was hired was due to my experience with MTT. Many of the employees working at Uphone were employees who had taken the early retirement package offered by or were laid off from MTT; there were also a few workers who were recent temporary contract workers for MTT but who were unable to find permanent jobs due to MTT's cutbacks, layoffs and hiring freezes. It seems that Uphone was hiring those who used to work for MTT and who had enjoyed decent wages in that unionized workplace. Now at Uphone, they are working for a non-unionized company that pays them much lower wages than they were once earning.

This pattern of hiring used by Uphone can be more clearly understood by recognizing that one of the recent changes in the Canadian labour market in the past 15-20 years has been development of industry specific experience or skills. This means that an employer expects (usually) his employees to know the systems and software packages specific to the industry. The hiring of new employees by Uphone is a prime example of the expectations of employers for employees to have the skills required specific to their industry. Uphone was looking for workers who had experience and skills in the telecommunications industry, and therefore hired many workers who used to work for its competitor, MTT.

Like many other clerical workers, I began working in this industry at a time when workplace changes were beginning to affect clerical workers; thus, I experienced the impact of these changes first hand. When I first entered the paid labour force in the early 1980s, getting a job in a well-known industry such as the

telephone company was a common goal for most job seekers I knew. The reason for this was that large companies paid well, offered full time positions with good benefits and, once one was hired, it was commonly assumed that one would be working for that employer for one's entire work life. Unfortunately, as a result of workplace downsizing and restructuring in many workplaces, including the telecommunications industry, the optimistic outlook held by current employees and hopeful employees has now been replaced with a sense of job insecurity. Those clerical workers who generally felt secure in their jobs are now facing the possibility of losing what they thought would be their life-long employment.

Based on my own observations, it appears that the telecommunications industry in Nova Scotia is restructuring and replacing its full-time permanent staff with temporary contract contingent workers, while offering older employees an attractive early retirement plan. This once largely "untouchable" telecommunications industry, a pillar in providing well-paying and secure jobs, is currently downsizing and restructuring, while other smaller telecommunication companies such as Uphone are hiring the same workers at a lower wage and keeping the workplace non-unionized, in order to remain competitive and survive in the new global economy. All of the research participants in my study have worked for one of these telecommunications companies and discussed with me the negative impact the restructuring has had on their work lives.

Introduction of Participants

The five participants in this study are all female clerical workers who have been working in the clerical occupation in telecommunications since the early 1990s. Three of my research participants have limited experience in the telecommunications industry and this has affected my research by not allowing me to explore the telecommunications industry as closely as I had intended. However, their experiences in the clerical occupation in general, coupled with their telecommunications experiences, provide an analysis of clerical work in general and for industry specific clerical workers.

This time frame, since the early 1990s, is important as it allows enough time for the workers to have experienced the changes as they were happening. In other words, the women I have interviewed have experienced working in the office workplace before, during and after certain types of workplace changes have taken place. Permanent full-time employees have been replaced with temporary employees, and workers have experienced heavier workloads and longer work hours. All have worked in the telecommunications industry and they all have experienced job stress in the workplace.

The clerical workers I interviewed are office clerks with job titles such as Network Clerks, Service Provisoner Clerks, and Service Operations Clerks and all experienced job stress. Their jobs involve information-processing work that contains a variety of technical components as well as several general office tasks such as data entry, filing, photocopying, responding to telephone inquiries, corresponding with telephone technicians and call centre employees, quality

control and troubleshooting. Most of the clerks' time is spent on the phone while at the same time they enter and manipulate information and/or perform inquiries on the computer terminal. Due to the large number of phone calls, emails and faxes (that other office workers happily drop off at their desk) that these workers handle, these clerical workers rarely get a chance to leave their desk. The intense workload, lack of control over their work, and the fast pace of work and daily deadlines for work orders, places these clerical workers under high pressure.

Three out of the five women I interviewed have 'significant others' in their lives, three of them have small children, and all but one of the women was in her thirties when they worked for the telecommunications industry. All of the women were working because they needed to work for financial reasons. Only one of the women I interviewed still remains with the telecommunications industry. One woman has retired, another has returned to university, and the other two are working in other workplaces as clerical workers. As I mentioned earlier, I also include in this research my experience of having worked from 1989 to 2001 in the clerical occupation, with five of those years in the telecommunications industry where I experienced job stress that resulted in illness.

All the names of the research participants are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Kate is a married mother of one; she also lives in her own home with her mother who has a disability. Prior to working in an office in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kate worked as an office building cleaner, a cashier and a waitress; she then took a clerical course that allowed her access into what she

thought would be a better paying occupation. She has worked in both unionized and non-unionized offices; however, her experience with job stress was most prevalent in the non-unionized workplace. In addition, Kate has worked as a permanent full-time clerical worker and a temporary clerical worker. The different workplace sites, unionized and non-unionized, and the different types of employment, permanent full-time and temporary, have provided Kate with a variety of perspectives on clerical work and job stress. Kate is still employed with the telecommunications industry as a full-time permanent clerical worker.

Sally is now a mother of one, but at the time of her three-year work experience in a telecommunications company she did not have any children. She also has a 'significant other' in her life. Like Kate, Sally also took a course in office preparation in order to escape the cashier and fast-food industry. While most of her work experience has not been in the telecommunications industry, she has worked in a variety of office environments as a contingent worker since the late 1980s, as well as working as a permanent full-time clerical worker since 1999. While Sally has work experience in both full-time and temporary work, she has not worked in a unionized work environment. Sally is currently working for a small office outside the telecommunications industry in a clerical capacity, where she is not experiencing job stress.

Sylvia has recently retired but worked for the same telecommunications industry for all of her paid work life. However, she changed positions within the company during her twenty-five years employed there. This company is and has always been unionized since she worked there. She has two children. Her

husband and father died while she was working. As a permanent full-time senior clerk, Sylvia has worked with many temporary workers during the last decade. Sylvia is now enjoying her retirement.

Anita was also a single parent of two pre-school children when she worked for a telecommunications company. Anita has worked for the telecommunications industry for two years, but most of her work experience is from other office environments. Her work experience in the telecommunications industry was in a temporary position in a unionized workplace. She is currently working in a permanent full-time administrative position for a large company that is unionized. She is not experiencing job stress with her current position.

Although Louise does not fit my original criteria for research participants, I decided to interview her because she has experience as a clerical worker in the telecommunications industry as well as having been a temporary employee. Louise does not have any children, but has a significant other and takes care of her elderly sick mother in their home. She worked as a temporary worker in a telecommunications company that was unionized. Louise worked in a clerical capacity for only a year in telecommunications, but unfortunately, we did not discuss if or how long she worked in a clerical occupation prior to this. She is now a full-time student and working odd jobs while attending university. She is not currently working as a clerical worker.

<u>Interview Themes</u>

All of my research participants reported that they experienced job stress in their telecommunication workplaces. Any discussion they did have regarding past jobs were about how they were not stressed in those jobs and enjoyed the positions much more. The only concerns of their past jobs appeared to be job security and the possibility for better wages – job stress was not an issue prior to their telecommunications jobs.

The nature of the job stress experienced by the participants in the telecommunication workplace was both physical and emotional/mental. One of the most obvious manifestations of this stress was daily crying spells, particularly in the non-unionized workplaces. In addition, the clerical workers with whom I worked had many angry outbursts, including insults and offensive language. These are all symptoms of workplace stress. This behavior in turn created further stress in the office. In one office, for example, there were constant discussions among the clerical workers about quitting and finding new jobs. On occasion there were upsetting conversations about suicide due to the work stress.

The phrase "do you have any Tylenol?" was echoed throughout a non-unionized telecommunications office on a daily basis. Some of the physical aspects of the stress were evident in headaches, migraines, ulcers, bladder infections, neck and back problems and upset stomachs. All my participants experienced at least one of the above symptoms on a daily basis. Kate would often be sick to her stomach upon arriving at work each morning, and experience severe headaches. One woman, known by three of us participants in this

research, had a heart attack and was informed by her doctor to stay away from work for several weeks. When she went back to work she had another heart attack. What these examples suggest is that workplace issues in the office environment can quickly manifest as physical and psychological illness in clerical workers.

Most of the workplace concerns of the research participants are related to organizational changes in their workplaces that were the result of downsizing, which in turn decreased the workers' job security, increased their workloads, decreased staff numbers and increased the pace of their work. The most common themes described by my research participants included: difficult relations with management; lack of control and decision-making over their jobs; heavy supervision and monitoring; conflict between co-workers; lack of trust; flexibility issues such as multi-tasking; and work intensification (heavy workloads, overtime, too few staff). In addition, there were discussions about temporary workers, new technology and change, wage issues, family/work responsibilities and union issues. However, difficult relations with management was one of the most pressing concerns. What also becomes apparent is that the stressed out participants do not explicitly direct the cause of their job stress to the organization or the restructuring due to global competition.

Difficult Relations with Management

As the Hospital Employees' Union has pointed out, it is important to note that "[p]eople often think their job is stressful because they have too much work,

or they're fighting with co-workers, or their manager is unreasonable, or some individuals have poor coping skills. The truth is, job stress is not caused by individuals or by personal qualities. It is rooted in the organization of the workplace" (HEU 2000:23).

All of the women clerical workers I interviewed experienced difficult relations with management. Rather than talking about their job stress in terms of structural problems, such as workplace restructuring and the new global economy, the participants placed the onus for their job stress on management. As the HEU (2000) points out, stress makes it difficult to see the real sources of anger and tension in the workplace. Based on my own experience, I also found that management does indeed have the ability to make one's work environment unbearable. Unlike my earlier work experience, the last few years of my paid work involved managers who were not so supportive and did not treat their workers equally; there was explicit favoritism by management of particular clerical staff. Managerial behavior can be viewed as workplace bullying since workplace bullying is generally performed by someone in position of authority who has the power to create undesirable work conditions for their employees (CCOHS 2002; Einarsen 1996; Hoel et al. 2003; OHS 204). The following comments and quotes from my research participants draw attention to the issue of workplace bullying that can cause a great deal of stress in the workplace. What is interesting is that none of my participants refer to their conflicts with the manager as workplace bullying. Perhaps this is because workplace bullying has only been recognized recently as a legitimate phenomenon for study.

The job stress described by my research participants came from the lack of respect they received from managers and the failure by management to recognize their hard work or act on their complaints. This lack of respect is also manifested when the manager does not value the workers' skills and knowledge or act upon the needs and concerns of the workers. One clerical worker, Kate, was fully aware that she was blaming her boss for most of her problems, but she also recognized that the company human resources and senior management were at fault as well. Therefore, in a sense, Kate realizes that her stress expands beyond her boss and includes the company as a whole.

> *And that's what I feel like sometimes like I'm standing my whole problems just basically around her and I do blame her [boss] for most of it but then I do have to look at the company for not doing nothing about her. Because the company's been made aware of her numerous times, not only from myself, but other people.*

I have witnessed other clerical workers who have gone to the human resources department to complain about their manager, only to find out that the human resources department supported the manager, not the clerical worker. This action suggests that the company does not care about its clerical workers. It seems as though managers know that clerical workers can be easily and quickly replaced due to the high unemployment rate and the large pool of female clerical workers waiting for full-time jobs. For example, when a clerical worker in my former place of work complained about any aspect of the workplace, she was told by management that if she was unhappy about her workplace, she could leave. They told her she would be easily replaced by another clerical worker. This is not just a threat, but the reality of the competitiveness of clerical work.

With an increase in contingent work and a decrease in core permanent full-time work with benefits, those who are unemployed or underemployed are looking for permanent full-time work in this very competitive labour market. Therefore, permanent full-time workers often tolerate work conditions and treatment that they would not have tolerated 30 years ago. Both employers and employees are aware of this situation. This is one way in which clerical workers have lost control over their work and their work conditions.

This lack of respect on the part of a manager is also evident when Kate tells us of the numerous complaints made about the management of her workplace. Furthermore, in Kate's workplace, the manager then made workers' jobs intolerable when human resources reported complaints back to managers. This clearly appears to be workplace bullying and is causing Kate a great deal of stress.

Another common complaint shared by my participants was the attitude that managers appear to have toward clerical workers. For example, Kate talked about her feelings towards her manager:

> *Everybody has a boss for a reason, to help your department but sometimes you feel like your boss is against you.*

Again, Kate is referring to her manager's behavior that shows signs of what the literature review describes as workplace bullying.

Today female clerical workers are generally distant from the owner of the business and are forced to deal with middle-level management who in turn control and closely monitor the clerical workers. The resulting lack of a positive personal relationship between management and clerical workers is echoed

throughout my interviews. For example, most of the clerical workers I interviewed felt they were treated as less than subordinates by their managers. Although the clerical workers are in a subordinate relationship with their managers due to the hierarchical structure of the workplace, the clerical workers felt that the treatment they received from their managers went beyond the manager/clerical worker relationship and was negatively personal. The manager made the work lives of clerical workers worse than they needed to be and contributed to their job stress. Although I would argue that there is always an impersonal structural dominance - subordination relationship in workplaces where an inherent hierarchical structure exists, many workplace managers have personalized this relationship in negative ways.

There are times when clerical workers appear to take on more of a managerial role than the managers themselves. In some cases, such as Kate's, managers see themselves as separate from their clerical workers and segregate themselves from the work area. Consequently, they are unaware of what is going on with the workers and what work they may or may not be doing. In this situation, Kate actually advised her boss to get out on the office floor.

> They [company] used to take our concerns and everything but since [...] she's [new boss] come...because I used to sit in her room and say well you need to come out on the floor and learn what your employees are doing because she used to say to me "what can I do to make this better Kate?" Well you know, and I used to say to her be a boss. Go out there and check it out, get involved, ask everybody what they are doing.

This separation of management from workers could also be evidence of a strategy that is often used by management to control and supervise workers without having middle level management actually do the work of supervision of

the clerical workers. When clerical workers themselves complain and voice their concerns about what is going on or complain about other clerical workers who are not doing their share of work, management can abdicate supervisory responsibility. This strategy is stressful for clerical workers for several reasons.

Clerical workers are too busy to have to take on the responsibility of supervising other workers who are not doing their share of the work or are making numerous errors in their job. In addition, even when a clerical worker does complain about another clerical worker, the problem usually does not get solved. To make the matter worse, the whole department knows who and when someone goes to the manager and complains. The "trouble maker" is then seen as untrustworthy by most of the other clerical workers. As a result, clerical workers no longer identify themselves as working together; they now see themselves as pitted against one another. This isolation and conflict appears to be a divide and conquer strategy used by employers to keep employees from pulling together and trying to change things. In addition to the presence of a "trouble maker", the use of computer technology also allows workers to be monitored without the presence of the manager. The network systems allow higher level workers to see what work the clerical workers are doing with production counts, and monitor when a person is not entering data into the system.

Given the distant relationship between the manager and the clerical worker coupled with the autocratic actions of the manager, the difficult relations between clerical workers and management are understandable. The clerical

workers' interests in the workplace are different from the manager's interests. Moreover, it appears that managers are no longer concerned with managing people, but instead, due to pressure from their employer, they are more concerned with maximizing production and profit and lowering costs.

Further evidence of the pessimistic attitudes that clerical workers felt towards their managers can be found in the participants' responses to the questions: What would a good day look like for them at their workplace? What would a bad day look like for them at their workplace? When asked what a good and/or bad day at work would look like, the responses were very similar for all the participants. More importantly, the responses reveal the lack of control the workers have when the boss is present. When the workers have more control over their work they feel less stressed. Louise quickly responded to this question by saying:

> A good day is when the boss doesn't show up...it was more pleasant and less stressful.

When describing what a bad day looked like the participants made reference to management. For instance, Sylvia referred to the manager's lack of knowledge about the work that the clerks actually do on the computer system. She noted that:

> Something else that would make a bad day would be that the managers would create them [bad days] for me. They would make these commitments not knowing what the system could do and then I would be expected to come forward and meet that deadline. Or they wouldn't know how that system worked. Like Olga was the administrator but she didn't even have a log on to the system and if she needed information she would often come over and ask me for all kinds of information and want it now. And you're doing other stuff. But what they want is priority because she is the manager.

As illustrated in the above comment, it is clear that participants in the study experienced difficult relations with their management. I would argue that this is more of an issue of workplace bullying than of non-supportive management. One of the elements of workplace bullying is the constant picking of information from others to use for one's own gain as well as impeding a person's work. Lack of control is also connected to difficult relations with management because as we have seen from the quotes mentioned above, even when the workers take a problem to someone with more authority than their boss, they still did not receive any satisfaction or relief from the problem. Although workplace bullying and/or non-supportive management was a major source of stress for the participants, lack of control over their job and decisions that affected their job was another.

Lack of Control and Decision-Making

According to CUPE (2003:3), "stress is closely related to less control of direct work and over the job tasks". The lack of control over one's work is another significant factor that appeared to cause job stress for the clerical workers I interviewed. They discussed how being excluded from decisions and meetings that concerned their own jobs was particularly stressful for them. Kate explicitly stated her feelings towards this issue when we discussed meetings.

> *How come I'm not in none of those meetings? You guys are coming back telling me what I'm doing, what I'm suppose to do, but I'm the one who knows the job and I'm telling you that's not the way it goes but you want me to go that way? I have to go that way because you're the boss. So I have to do it that way even though I know it's wrong, you know and that that bothers you because you know that but you have to do it.*

Kate may not be aware of the strategy that the company has in keeping clerical workers out of meetings, but she is definitely aware that it is not working for her. She knows that she and her co-workers generally know the computer systems and the details of their work better than their managers and the technicians who are present at the meetings. This exclusion from decision-making meetings causes much conflict and resentment between managers and clerical workers. The clerical workers see and understand ways that could make their tasks easier and more rewarding, but not having a say or not being taken seriously about the knowledge and ideas they may have feels very degrading.

Sylvia also discussed her experience of managers who would ask her questions to which they needed to know the answers for the meetings they were about to attend. It is important to note that the individuals (managers) who obtained information from Sylvia did not give Sylvia the credit for the information at the meeting.

> *And that's something else that used to drive me crazy, they [management] would pick my brain, they'd pick it and pick it and then they'd go to a meeting and present it.*

Based on Sylvia's response, it is evident that management also knows that clerical workers have knowledge and information that managers themselves lack. It seems clear that lack of control over their work by being excluded from the decision-making process is indeed a source of stress for the women.

These participants experienced what is one stress factor for workers – lack of control over their work and being left out of the decision-making process. Prior to the introduction of advanced office technology which is changing rapidly

and constantly, workers knew what their job consisted of and knew how to operate the office machinery such as word processors. One of the changes in clerical work today is that while women still occupy the lower level jobs, they are required to use the new technology that is designed and implemented by professional technicians and programmers. Clerical workers know the problems with the system and what would make their work more productive and easier, yet they are not involved in the decision making process of the design of the new office technology. Furthermore, as the quote above suggests, even when we do know the system and how it works, we are not given credit for that knowledge.

Heavy Supervision and Monitoring

New office technology is not only put in place for productivity and profit reasons, but is a highly effective way of monitoring clerical workers. In addition to having no control over or input into decisions that affect their jobs, my research participants also experienced heavy supervision and close monitoring in their workplace, increasing the sense of powerlessness and anxiety they already experienced in their jobs.

Louise was very clear about stress in her job when she mentioned the competitiveness, fast-paced work, heavy supervision and job insecurity she has experienced. She explained:

> *Competitive atmosphere and fast paced, monitored and if not fast enough you were let go. [You must] meet their expectations.*

Louise continued our conversation with respect to stressful aspects of her job and listed off a number of factors that caused her job stress.

*Crunch, production up, unorganized, deadlines, and heavy supervision or
close supervision. No freedom, no independence, always scrutinized. and
behind schedule.*

Anita also talked about expectations and high pressure in her job. Her reply to

my question of what was one of the most stressful aspects of her job was:

*[The most stressful aspect of my job is] when I am under a lot of pressure,
ratings and having job performance reviews, and always under scrutiny.*

The comments on close supervision illustrate yet another of the changing

aspects of clerical work that is increasing job stress. Employers seem to believe

that if a worker is not closely monitored she will slacken off and productivity will

decrease.

Monitoring clerical workers' time spent on phone calls with clients is one

aspect of the close monitoring made possible with computer technology. The

following quote came from Kate, when she compared her job to those in the call

centre department. She stated:

*The way the department runs now is there's timing people on their calls
and everything else now right? The department is really like the call centre
now.*

Kate is aware that there are good jobs and bad jobs in the clerical

occupation. For example, although my participants were not call centre workers,

as Kate suggests, they knew that their own jobs could be worse – that is, like

those of call centre workers. This comment is interesting because it clearly

illustrates that clerical workers are aware of the polarization of clerical jobs –

higher end and more skilled clerical positions versus low end unskilled call centre

positions.

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On the basis of my own experience and conversations with other clerical workers when I worked in a clerical job, I would suggest that some call centres are very much like sweat shops and are seen to be at the bottom of the clerical heap – a place most clerical workers try to avoid or use only as a spring board to a better job. The literature on clerical jobs does state that the clerical jobs that are more routinized and monotonous, such as some call centre jobs, are the jobs that are the most heavily supervised and monitored. It should be noted that there are a variety of different kinds of call centres; some much better than others for working conditions. However, as Kate suggests, her own job is becoming like a call centre job, with its constant monitoring.

Conflict Between Co-Workers

All the women in this study reported that their job stress was due not only to difficulties with management but also to difficult relations with co-workers. As with management difficulties, worker conflict masks the real issue of job stress. Workplace stress may lead to workers turning on other workers; getting angry at co-workers because their work now consists of tasks that were once performed by another worker and accusing a co-worker of not doing their share of work are symptoms of workplace stress (HEU 2000). These symptoms will be illustrated in the following quotes from my participants when they comment that conflict arose when some workers did very little work, while others did their own work in addition to the carrying the workload of others. In other cases, clerical workers did not have to carry the load of slacking workers, but spent the day putting out

fires, trying to fix problems that were created by other workers. Two of the workers I interviewed stated that other workers in the office spent much of the day on the internet doing whatever they wanted, such as reading the paper on-line or looking at porn sites, when they should have been working. As Sylvia pointed out:

I was stressed when I didn't feel the people were carrying their share.

It appears that the competitiveness of the employers themselves has rubbed off on the workers. Although they all work for the same company and get paid relatively the same amount, they manage to be in conflict with each other. Rather than seeing the issue as being the employer not hiring enough workers or giving clerical workers too much work, (a feature of restructuring), workers blame other workers for the heavy workloads rather than resisting the workloads or acknowledging where the intensified work is coming from. Part of the workplace restructuring that is creating stress for/between clerical workers is the intensified work – too much work and not enough workers.

From my experience as well as that of two other women I interviewed, Kate and Sally, it was the younger male workers who tended not to do their share of the work. Perhaps they viewed clerical work as 'women's work' and did not see themselves in this type of occupation for a very long period of time.

Kate expressed her anger at work because of the constant occurrence of such events; when she did so, her boss took her into the office to talk to her about this situation. Here is a brief part of that discussion, according to Kate.

She [the manager] said "Kate, there are times when you do outburst, for all the good you do, that one or two times is making that all gone. Making all

the good gone". That's what she says to me all the time. So she said to me the other day "you know you gotta control your outbursts". Control my outbursts? You're pulling me in the office talking to me about attitude but yet you send me an email telling me about porn sites when you know exactly who's looking at the porn sites, take him in the office and give him a warning. Don't send it out as an all points bulletin. You know we know we're not allowed on these sites, I was never on those sites.

Kate is getting scolded for becoming angry due to stress and all the hard work she has been doing that is going unrecognized. This illustrates that one of the changes experienced by clerical workers is that they are not respected or valued as workers. Basically they are treated like the new technology and expected to keep working hard without breaking down. In addition, Kate is being blamed for the situation she is in rather than the boss asking what can be done to alleviate her stress. It seems it is expected that the worker, not the employer, has to cope with the added work and stress.

Sylvia experienced a similar situation:

We had eccentric people in the group...and you were constantly dealing with that. I found that really wore me down because I just wanted to do the job. While you were doing the job you had to maintain all this peripheral garbage.

Working alongside other clerical workers who do not do their share of work is indeed frustrating and stressful. However, if the clerical worker who does the majority of work was paid more for her effort, I wonder if her level of frustration and stress would decrease. Since I did not ask this question during my interviews I do not have an answer, but this could be an interesting issue for further research.

Lack of Trust

Conflict with co-workers is also expressed by the participants in a lack of trust toward their co-workers. Similar to anger and hostility, lack of trust is also a symptom of workplace stress. As my participants reveal, when they are overworked and/or under poor management, they begin to feel isolated, resentful and powerless. Rather than talk with one another about their concerns they talk about one another. Lack of trust between workers, or between workers and bosses, was an explicitly stated issue that created stress for the clerical workers I interviewed. The participants discussed how they and other workers always had to 'watch their back' with both bosses and co-workers. Upon closer examination of why they did not trust one another, it becomes clear that the issue is job insecurity. Not only are corporations in competition with one another, clerical workers are also in competition with one another in order to keep their jobs.

According to the research participants, some clerical workers seemed to diminish fellow clerical workers by informing on them or in some cases making up stories so as to make themselves look better so they will be on the receiving end of favoritism. Since a manager cannot always see and/or know everything that goes on amongst their employees, they can rely on other clerical workers to provide them information about what someone is or is not doing. Based on my own observations and experience, the boss generally gathers this information from a clerical worker who they favor. Kate, Sally and I saw evidence of favoritism in our workplace. Those clerical workers who were favored did not face the same heavy workloads and long hours of work that we endured. Since

there was evidence of much favoritism in the workplace, it was in the interest of a clerical worker to be on a manager's 'good side' in order to avoid managerial mistreatment or workplace bullying. Both favoritism and rumours about other co-workers were a concern in both unionized and non-unionized workplaces. For instance, Sylvia, who was a unionized worker, stated:

> You have to be very careful who you speak to. You can't speak to everyone around you. And [if you do] it gets distorted and repeated.

Sally, who was not unionized, also brought up the issue of lack of trust. She said:

> Now that you think about it right. At the time you think you can trust these people. And I'll tell you that probably the only person that in that office that you can trust now is [Rachel].

Kate also discussed trust when she talked about confiding to senior management about some issues she was experiencing with her job. She said:

> Me. I said "you know what I'll never come talk to you again. I said I'm sitting in here confiding in you. You asked me these questions; I'm telling you what I think".

These comments suggest that the office workplace is organized in such a way as to keep clerical workers from getting together to improve their workplace, a strategy that keeps workers in isolation and pitted against one another. It appears that the ideology and values that are instilled in the employers are trickling down to the clerical workers. The way the workplace is organized may also be a strategy used by employers to keep workers from forming a collective group – keeping workers isolated may keep them from seeing what is really going on in the workplace as a whole.

Favoritism by managers, and the lack of trust it generates, is a form of control; workers will be quick to report another worker who is doing something wrong or are not doing their share of the work if such reporting improves their standing with their manager. Favoritism is also a form of workplace bullying. Working in a workplace for at least eight hours a day with many other workers, without a sense of trust, can be extremely stressful.

Research participants discussed lack of trust as a major issue causing job stress. At the same time, they also spoke about cross-training. Ironically, while clerical workers lack trust in one another, they are expected to learn each other's jobs and perform another worker's duties and tasks. Each worker feels that they are good at their job and they know their job; this helps give them a sense of security. When they are forced to teach each other one another's job this is bound to create conflict. What if another worker ruined someone else's job and created a huge error that cost the employer money? Who would be blamed for the error? Who would be at risk of losing their job for such a costly mistake? Thus, while cross-training and learning as many jobs as one can may be positive in terms of being more flexible and thus more employable, it can also lead to a sense of insecurity for a clerical worker.

Flexibility

Flexibility is one of the key factors in the new and changing global economy in relation to both the workforce as well as the workplace. Workers are expected to perform a variety of tasks at any given moment. It also means that

the worker be available for work any day at any time. Interestingly, Sylvia mentioned that her bosses complimented her on her flexibility.

> *Yeah because you wanted to be flexible and that's one thing ... not to blow my own horn but [Gladys] who was my second level and [Nicky] the other supervisor, everyone of them have always said that I was the most flexible one in the group. And I was the oldest one in the group. They did not accept change in the group most of them.*

Sylvia's reaction to her being characterized as a flexible worker by her employer was a positive one. Her notion of flexibility meant being 'adaptable to change'. This is indeed part of the strategy employers now use to get the most work out of their employees. Flexibility is being categorized as a good quality to have and it is a necessity for employers if they are to survive in the new global economy. It seems that whatever is good for the company is good for the employee, at least in terms of flexibility and competitiveness.

While not using the word flexibility, other research participants also made reference to the strategies characteristic of 'workplace flexibility'. Flexibility for the women workers interviewed was not about choice in the workplace, but rather about being able to adapt to the new and rapidly changing workplace environment. Although some researchers imply that the newest workers are the most flexible, Sylvia, who had been a clerical worker for the same workplace for many years, was described as being flexible by her manager. However, while adaptability is important for being flexible in the workplace, multi-tasking is also an important characteristic of flexibility, whereby the worker is expected to perform a number of tasks, including jobs that are not in her job description. The

following paragraphs examine this aspect of flexibility, known as multi-tasking, in more detail.

Multi-tasking or cross training is part of the new management flexibility strategies that are causing workers stress. Having a flexible workforce in this sense is part of the change in workplaces and the global economy that allows companies to be more competitive by keeping production high and costs low. For the low-paid clerical worker, it means that there is no downtime; if one's own department is not busy, then one goes to another department and helps out. The clerical workers I interviewed recognized the chaos this caused. Kate explained her frustrations with multitasking at her non-unionized workplace.

> They [the managers] keep making everybody do everybody else's job. And nothing can get straight. You can have two or three people doing do one job. Everybody has a hand in it [a job] then you don't know, nobody knows what's going on.

In further explaining the problems of multi-tasking, Kate also commented on another clerical worker with whom she worked, who received a bad review on her production level. Here is how Kate talked about the situation:

> [Lisa] is trained to be [Gary's] back-up because [Gary] does the voice port things. But then [the manager] will come to [Lisa] and say "well your average is down". Well I wonder why? [Lisa] is helping out with [Gary's] job and [Lisa] is helping out with [Angela's] job. She's not able to do her own job.

Kate also discussed the training or lack of training with which workers must deal while they are expected to engage in multi-tasking. Having worked for the same company as Kate did, I know that there is little time and effort put into training for one's own job, let alone for someone else's job.

What bothers me is now they got [Lisa] as [Angela's] back-up when she's on vacation or sick. [Lisa] is trying to train but [Lisa] told [the manager], "before [Angela] goes off I want to be totally trained. I'm not doing that job until I understand that job".

Attempting to learn and do another one's job as well as learn and do one's own job is a very stressful situation. There is constant conflict between workers because with everybody doing everyone else's job, it is difficult to track who is making errors and who is doing the work correctly. In another part of our interview, Kate described having to work for many different departments even when her own work was not done.

There's too many departments in our office. We should all be separated. Kate was fully aware of what was going on in her workplace and had also worked in a unionized workplace where this sort of multi-tasking does not occur. Based on my own experience with multi-tasking, I found that generally workers who are forced to do another worker's job do not give it their best and tend not to care if they make errors. Part of this behavior is resistance to being coerced into doing many jobs aside from the job for which one was hired. Part of this response is a response to being overloaded with work.

One aspect that I find interesting about multi-tasking is that it seems to occur at the clerical worker level, among women. I noticed during my time working at Kate's workplace that men who were occupied in other jobs did not have to deal with this chaos. Based on my own observation of the men's jobs, all the male workers knew how to do all the tasks involved in their work, however, the men were hired to perform all the functions of their jobs. In contrast, female clerical workers were hired to carry out a certain job description, yet they were

told after being hired that they would need to learn other clerical workers' jobs. These jobs were completely different from the job tasks for which they were hired. Learning and performing a multitude of clerical tasks is quite useful for the employer, because when one of his employees is sick someone else can do her job. This allows the worker to be easily replaced if required, and ensures that the clerical worker never has a moment without anything to do. This strategy also allows employers to downsize and squeeze as much work as possible out of the fewer employees who remain with the company. Consequently, generally speaking, the employees' overall workload has increased.

Work Intensification

Not only are clerical workers now expected to perform many tasks, they are also dealing with an intensification of their work. Employer demands for higher productivity and cutting costs often result in understaffing, high workloads, and long work hours. Heavy workloads and long work hours were significant issues for the women in this study. Kate discussed her heavy workload situation this way:

> *If you can't meet that criteria because there's just too much, because the size of the customer base now is so large. You know, I used to be able to take care of [this] and [that]...and the day that I couldn't do it, I'm a bad person.*

When asked by a friend, who was also a co-worker, why Kate didn't look for another job, since this one was causing her so much stress; Kate replied:

> *I don't have enough time in my 8 hours to do my job... so how am I gonna look for another job?*

Kate also expressed her anger and stress about the favoritism going on in her workplace with regards to overtime. Some workers were getting paid for hours of work that they did not actually work. Perhaps if the clerical workers who claimed to work overtime did work the extra hours they claimed, then clerical workers such as Kate would not be left with such a heavy workload. As Kate explained:

> When I go into human resources [and informed them] that they [managers] were illegally paying people overtime, they didn't take me seriously. I'm the person that was working over 40 hours overtime every two weeks. That means that I'm working my regular 40 hours plus 40 hours overtime. I'm always in that office! I know whose working overtime and who isn't. And someone comes to me and says" I am getting paid over time. I was told to put 20 hours in over every two weeks cause they can't give me a raise". And I'm working that overtime! Of course I'm gonna speak about it.

As Kate suggested, it is a very stressful experience to put in many hours of involuntary overtime. However, if one does not do this in order to get caught up on their work, the workload gets even more out of control. In Kate's workplace, there appeared to be no workers available to help get the extra work done, yet there were workers getting paid for overtime they did not do.

Temporary Workers

Employers in the telecommunications industry in which we worked, do not hire enough permanent full-time staff to handle the large amount of work that is generated by Uphone. One way employers avoid hiring permanent full-time staff, in addition to intensifying the work of those who are permanent full-time, is to hire part-time and temporary workers only as they need them. All my research participants, with the exception of Sylvia, have been temporary workers in the clerical capacity, and have provided many interesting comments on this issue.

More specifically, the academic debates around the topic of temporary and contingent workers and the nature of clerical work itself were different from the views of the clerical workers I interviewed.

Most of the workers in my research worked in temporary positions prior to becoming permanent full-time in their current place of employment. Contrary to the literature I reviewed, the women found that temporary work was better than their permanent full-time positions with the telecommunications industry. What is interesting is that they left their temporary and contract positions because they were offered permanent full-time positions in another company. Sally and Kate discussed their leap from contingent to permanent full-time work:

> As Sally said: *Full-time, full-time is everything!* Kate responded: *But is it always? Now I'm looking back and saying maybe it wasn't worth it. I was more nappy working 6 months as a temporary employee. You know with that freedom, it's almost like a freedom.*

Sally agreed: *Looking back on it, it [temporary] was a better experience.*

Kate added: *And not only that, because when I was off [not working] for those six months I was on unemployment which is more [money] than I'm making now.*

Another participant, Sylvia, did not have the experience of being a temporary employee, but she did work with many clerical workers who were. Here are Sylvia's comments about temporary employees:

> *We had temps doing more work than the full time.*

While working in a non-unionized workplace, I had heard that temporary employees did not work hard at all. Having worked as a temporary clerical worker myself, I know first hand that temporary workers often work harder than those who are permanent full-time. They do this trying to impress their employer,

in the hope of obtaining a permanent full-time position with the company. However, rather than employing many temporary staff, the workplace I worked for as a permanent full-time clerical worker took on many students for temporary and part-time work throughout the year. Students knew they were employed at the company for a short time, and once they were out of university would not need to continue on in these jobs. Therefore, the students did not put much effort into their work and did not work much overtime. They also tended to make errors that the permanent full-time employees had to fix. These are my own perceptions that I shared with many other permanent full-time employees.

I also had experience as a temporary clerical worker, and although I was treated fairly well by the telecommunications company for which I worked, I was still referred to as "the temp" by many of the staff. I was not regarded as a "real worker", although I worked as hard as, if not harder, than the permanent full-time clerical workers who worked there. The permanent full-time workers' and the employer's view of a temporary employee as not being a "real worker" suggests a lack of appreciation and low status of temporary workers.

Notwithstanding these varying perceptions of temporary workers, like Kate and Sally, I still preferred working as a temporary clerical worker at this workplace than working as a permanent full-time clerical worker at my last place of employment. As a temporary clerical worker, if one is discontented with the job one is doing, once one's contract is up one can leave and draw employment insurance benefits if one has earned enough weeks to do so. This gives a clerical worker a break from the stress of the workplace, since she is not locked

into the drudgery of the intense workload and office politics of a permanent full-time position. Further, if one quits one's permanent full-time job it is unlikely that one can receive employment insurance, since one's leaving was voluntary in the eyes of the government.

Technology and Change

The introduction of computer technology in office workplaces has allowed many employers to replace permanent full-time clerical workers with part-time and temporary workers because many new computer software packages are easy and quick to learn. Computers and software packages have allowed work to be fragmented and quickly learned by new, part-time and temporary employees. In addition to simplifying work tasks, technological advances have been integral to a number of other changes in the office workplace.

While the introduction of new technology was a significant issue in my literature review, the clerical workers in my study did not initially discuss new technology in the office as being relevant to their job stress. Rather, new office technology was initially viewed as something new that would, hopefully, make their work easier. However, because of the lack of training on the new and constantly changing software and databases as described by my participants, clerical workers who are attempting to learn new software on their own while dealing with a heavy workload experience a tremendous amount of work related stress. The computer systems were constantly changing and clerical workers

were continually learning the systems, working out the bugs while attempting to complete their heavy workloads.

While the issue of heavy workload was a constant theme, my research participants did not identify the connection between the pace of their work and constant monitoring with technology. However, they did talk about the computer systems in their workplaces as being a source of stress in different ways. For example, here is how Sylvia discussed technology in relation to the database she used every day at her job:

> *Technology has changed. [We] still [use] the same database but they are in process of changing it over. My job itself changed with the different processes that were put in place and things like that. It was always changing.*

As Sylvia has suggested, technology has been part of her workplace for many years. She recognized that her work has changed but she did not indicate that it had changed because of the technology used in her workplace. With respect to computer technology being introduced into her workplace, Sylvia said:

> *I think it would be vital to consult the workers [because] they're the users of the system. I mean the managers were going to the meetings discussing this [the computer system] and didn't even know how to get on the system. I think it is the same everywhere. You [the clerical worker] are invisible.*

Kate's response was:

> *I wear my emotions on my sleeve but I get I think it's because I have so much passion for my job too right? And I know all the shit. And that's what I said to her [the manager], I said "[Margaret], maybe the reason I get so frustrated is that I'm adapting to change because that's all that [Y company] has been doing is changing since the day I've been here". But that's the problem; I've been here since day one. I've seen everything. I know everything that is wrong. I know. I see that.*

Kate's response illustrates how her lack of control and lack of decision-making over her job, particularly its technological aspect, negatively affects her job.

Most clerical workers in the telecommunications industry deal with many technical and computer related tasks; therefore technological and system changes are a significant component of their workplace changes. Notwithstanding their original optimism, these changes can be very disruptive and stressful for them. Clerical workers now require more technological and computer skills in order to obtain the better clerical positions, yet it costs money to take computer courses. Not only are many clerical workers overworked with little time left to learn new skills, many clerical workers earn low wages that will not support their taking of computer courses.

Wage Issues

Low pay is one of the degrading characteristics of clerical work. The participants in my study pointed out that when new employees were hired to do the same job as my participants were doing, they received the same wage as the more senior permanent full-time staff beside whom they were working. Kate explained:

> *It [wages] is good in one way but it's not really good for the job I do and the amount of work I do. And then when you have somebody come in with no experience, and you already have three years experience, and they're paid the exact same! The exact same!*

The women I interviewed were fully aware that they were doing much more work than they were getting paid for; in other words, they knew they were being

exploited. However, they also knew that they needed to work in order to survive. Kate explained:

> They [management] expect you to do more, way much more than what they pay you for. And then the job that you are doing they [management] are not paying you what you're worth.

These two quotes from Kate clearly show the stress she feels from not being acknowledged and valued for her work and skills.

I did not ask why Kate continued to do overtime, knowing she was not being paid what she was worth. However, I assumed that Kate and other clerical workers took on additional overtime not only because of their heavy workload, but also because they have to earn a living even though they know they are not getting paid what their time is worth. There are not many options in the paid workforce for women without connections or an education; therefore doing the best job we can at what and where we are working is our only option.

Based on my own experience of working a tremendous amount of overtime, I know that because of income taxes, one ends up being paid less than the wage one is paid working regular hours. Not only is the lack of monetary rewards for the extra work a problem for clerical workers; also, the extra time a clerical worker gives to her job could be going to her family or to social time of her own. On one occasion, management actually questioned Kate about all the overtime she had been doing. Kate had been working seven days a week in an attempt to get caught up on her work. She gave up her own personal and family time to do this. Kate clearly illustrated her thoughts on the overtime she did and the money she made doing it.

> *Management kept asking me, "do you need the overtime to make money"? And I'd say, "you know what? I grew up poor. Money is not my motivation. Money is not my motivator. You know money is nice I like to have enough to pay for bills and whatever but money is not my motivator. My motivator is getting the job done and then getting respected for what I am doing".*

Kate angrily discussed this issue:

> *I gave up my time. I spent a whole weekend in there [workplace]. I did a lot of work for them [managers]. It might not have been the most important work, but I know how much I'm worth now. You know what I mean? The motivation for your job everyday is slowly going away. It's slowly going away, and slowly going away. I used to give 120%. Now I might give 50% of myself to this job. What for? I have no ambition to do anything. Why? I'm not getting any respect.*

Kate knew that she did not get paid what she was worth. She worked very hard but did not get an increase in pay that corresponded to her hard work.

As this discussion suggests, wages are not simply about money, but are also about the value of the clerical workers' work and one's self-worth. The workers are aware that they are not being adequately compensated for their work and the time they give to the company.

Many single women in the workforce need to work as they have no other financial support. For example, Anita, a single mother, is aware that if she does not make the best of her clerical job, her only other option is welfare. Many single mothers who are clerical workers are confronted with this impossible choice.

Family/Work Conflict

I did not include family and work conflict in my literature review because this was not the focus of my thesis and I was attempting to move away from research that tends to emphasize workplace stress and family responsibilities.

Although initially the theme of family responsibilities did not seem to fit well with this thesis, I felt it was important for four reasons: 1) the participants thought it was important enough to discuss, 2) most of the research that discusses job stress mentions external factors that contribute to job stress such as family responsibilities, 3) in today's economy both parents usually have to be in the paid workforce in order to make ends meet and 4) due to the social and healthcare cuts introduced by our governments, family members are required to look after the sick, the elderly and their children (and generally women do this care giving). Perhaps if a clerical worker did not have to worry about her family responsibilities she could work the long hours, work overtime and not need to take time off because her family is sick. There is a real fear among clerical workers that if one takes time off for one's family, one will lose one's job. Personal relationships and family circumstances can and do influence stressful situations, and vice versa (Hoel et al. 2003:10).

An employee's outlook on family responsibilities varies depending on the workplace. While most of my participants discussed workloads, overtime, and heavy supervision and monitoring as contributing to their stress on the job, Anita, who is a single parent, also mentioned her struggle to balance domestic and paid work responsibilities. In response to what were the most stressful aspects of her job, Anita noted: *Lack of parking, repetitious data entry, no independence and boring work.*

It is interesting to note that my other participants did not seem to see these issues as important. It is also interesting to note that reserved parking is

generally meant for management and professional workers, not for clerical workers. Lack of parking may have been stressful to Anita since she required a vehicle in order to drop off her two young children at daycare before going to work. While other workers may have had cars to park as well, they could come to work a bit earlier to ensure they found a parking spot. Anita by contrast had to arrive at work after she dropped off her children, who could not arrive at the daycare before a certain time. She was, thus, restricted to a tight schedule even before she arrived at her workplace. The time she spent on trying to find a parking space often resulted in her tardiness at work. Consequently, Anita was scolded by her boss for being late, adding to her stress at work. I suspect that being late to work because of dropping children off at a daycare may be a common occurrence for many single parents.

Many workers felt they had to lie to their managers about the reason they took time off, instead of being honest about their difficulty in juggling their family responsibilities with their paid job. The following comment is from Kate, who is not unionized. She explained:

> They [management] always say "don't talk about your kids. Don't talk about your kids". But your kids are your life. That's why you're there working. That's why you're doing what you're doing.

Although my participants did not indicate that they took time off because of job stress, they did respond when I asked them if they ever took stress leave for other reasons, such as family illness or other needs. For example, Sylvia, who is unionized, commented on how her boss reacted towards the stress leave she took for family reasons. She said:

I did take some stress leave when my husband was sick. I took the last month that he was alive, not even the whole month. I hardly missed any time during his illness. But I had a very good boss. The one [manager] I had the fight with, but anyway he [manager] liked me at that time. I had a very good department head and the department head is very much up there. He doesn't associate with clerks and but this one we had when [husband] was sick came right down to my desk. He said "I hear your husband is not well". I said "no". He said "I want you to know that if at any time you want to leave you do it. You want to go out for the day you do it".

Sylvia explained how her co-workers reacted to her time off:

I never had any problem with my co-workers. I wasn't terribly friendly. I wasn't a very open person. I was a very private person. I missed a couple or three days cause I didn't have anyone to stay with him [father]. But you know what the ironic part was, is that I was actually sick those three days. I had the flu. I really bad cold. I would have gone to work [with cold] but with him [father] sick I stayed home. The night he [father] died I had brought home papers from work to take a leave of absence. They [management] had this thing where you could take a leave of absence (pause) and you would draw a small salary. I forget how it [leave of absence] worked but they [management] didn't give you the money, you earned it. Say I had took 6 months leave of absence and came back to work, well during that 6 months I would draw half my salary. Then the next 6 months when I was working I still just draw half my salary. So at the end of the year I had a years salary but I only [...] I didn't explain it very well there.

The contrast between the non-unionized clerical workers' responses and the unionized clerical worker's response to the issue of taking stress leave is striking. The managers in the unionized workplace appeared to be more relaxed about employees taking time off than were those in the non-unionized workplace. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the employer was more relaxed about the time off. However, the employer does not have a choice about this time off where a union exists and where the workplace collective agreement includes provisions for such leave. This is one area in which a union is of special help to a clerical worker who has family responsibilities.

Sylvia noted that one of her bosses responded in a typical corporate manner to her request for stress leave for family reasons by drawing attention to the money she would lose while on leave. Sympathy for her was not expressed.

Well, when I told [manager] that I was going to apply for it [stress leave], she [manager] said "well you'll lose money". I said "well that's not relevant right now". She said "I'm sorry I know it's not". She said that was her first reaction.

This response clearly illustrates that Sylvia's manager did not regard family responsibilities as important as money issues.

Union Issues

Working in a unionized workplace can help alleviate job stress experienced by clerical workers through job security, better wages, and the elimination of unfair treatment by management, intolerable working conditions and intense workloads. My research participants briefly discussed some of the pros and cons of having a union in their workplace, with job security being an important factor.

Rather than seeing the managers as totally at fault for difficult relations at work, Sylvia, a unionized worker, understood that the managers were under an enormous amount of pressure and stress. They were not protected by a union and could lose their jobs at any given moment. She said:

I think that the way things are at the company right now it's harder for the managers. The clerks have drawn a lot of the work and doing it but the managers are getting a lot of the stress. Everyone is breathing down their [managers] neck and they [managers] don't know when they are going to be tapped on the shoulder. They [managers] didn't have any protection. The company could come tap them on the shoulder and say "you are leaving".

Sylvia also recognized that a non-unionized manager was on salary and not on a regular work schedule, as were the unionized clerical workers with whom she worked. She said:

> There is so much demanded of the managers. As a clerical person, I could walk out of [workplace] at 4:00. I've often stayed if an emergency came up but that was my choice. They [management] couldn't make me do that. I would stay if something came up. Most of the managers don't work 8-5. They work 8 to whenever.

Notwithstanding Sylvia's apparently sympathetic comments about managers, Sylvia did support her co-workers and expressed her negative feelings towards her manager as well. This apparent contradiction leaves me wondering if her apparent support for management was not because she is a senior clerk, but because she is a member of a union. It appears that Sylvia views being involved in the union as positive. She recognizes that a union can be helpful for clerical workers. Union involvement is obviously an important issue that is open to more inquiry and has raised questions for me.

In my own experience, many non-unionized clerical workers often stayed after regular working hours while the manager went home to have supper with his or her family. If we did not stay to do the work, we would have an impossible workload for the next day. We felt that it was in our best interest to stay and do the work. Once the managers knew that there were workers willing to stay and keep working long past quitting time, the managers could leave and know the work was getting done.

Not all telecommunication companies are unionized; therefore the experience and perspective of a unionized clerical worker will likely be different

from the perspectives of non-unionized clerical workers, at least in some respects. Based on my working experience, as well as the experiences of three of the five clerical workers I interviewed who have worked in non-unionized workplaces, it is evident that many non-unionized clerical workers are now afraid to refuse overtime and heavy workloads for fear of being let go. Although my participants did not explicitly state this fear of being let go, I assume there is an underlying fear; why else would we push ourselves to the limits to get the extra work completed? Perhaps this is another area that future research could pursue – why do female clerical workers not resist the heavy workloads and overtime if they are not afraid of being fired?

My own experience of working in a unionized work environment was considerably different than my experience working in a non-unionized workplace. In the unionized office, we were not allowed to do the work of another worker in another department, and if the workload was too heavy, the employer would bring in extra help to get the work done. We did not work in fear; the workplace tended to be more relaxed, and I actually looked forward to going to work at my unionized workplace. The organization of the work was different; management also could not mistreat their workers, since they knew that they had to treat workers in accordance with the rules set out in the collective agreement negotiated between the union and management.

A unionized workplace can help alleviate factors that contribute to job stress by improving wages, financial stability, and working conditions (long hours, overtime), while reducing job insecurity and unfair treatment by management.

Workers in a unionized workplace may be less likely to experience these problems, so that job stress could be less of an issue for unionized clerical workers. I recognize that my data on the issue of non-union versus union workplaces and the effect of unionization on clerical workers and job stress are limited. However, this topic could be an area of investigation for further research.

I am also fully aware that clerical workers may indeed want to unionize, but the fear of losing their job stands in the way. While I was employed at a non-unionized company, for example, the clerical workers had been cautiously discussing the need for a union at our workplace. At that time, I was told that at one point a certain department had threatened to form a union, and the owner of the company said he would shut down before he would allow unionization. The clerical workers were frightened by this threat and decided against forming a union. The clerical workers resisted forming a union based on the recognition that their employer strongly opposed unionization and was willing to go to extreme measures to prevent the company from unionizing.

Although the company Kate worked for at the time I interviewed her was not unionized, she recognized that one of the benefits of being unionized is better pay. Based on my own experience of working for both a unionized company and a non-unionized company, I know that the wages are better in a unionized environment. Kate, who has worked for both a unionized and non-unionized workplace, was very aware of the difference a union can make in a clerical worker's wages. When I asked Kate about her wages, this is how she responded:

About the better wages, right now if a union was at [Company X- the non-unionized company where she currently works], I'd probably be at almost double what I make.

Although being unionized has its advantages, it is also noteworthy to mention the disadvantages of a unionized workplace, such as not always being able to be hired as a full-time worker no matter how good a worker you are. Kate knows the difference a union can make in a workplace, but she also knows how difficult, if not impossible, it is to get a job in a unionized workplace. She had been working for a unionized workplace prior to becoming employed in a non-unionized workplace. Unfortunately, Kate could only get temporary work with the unionized workplace.

Having worked at a unionized workplace myself, I am familiar with the frustrations of working there as a temporary clerical worker, hoping to obtain permanent full-time work by working hard. I think it is difficult to obtain permanent full-time positions within a unionized workplace because the employers appear to be replacing permanent full-time staff with temporary full-time and part-time staff. In addition, those who have been laid off from their unionized workplace are often in job pools waiting in turn for the next available unionized position (waiting for call backs for rehiring).

Coping with Stress or Adding to Stress?

By the end of each interview, it was apparent that the clerical workers I interviewed were indeed experiencing job stress. Therefore, it seemed natural to

inquire about how they dealt with this stress. I asked the participants how they coped with job stress. Sylvia replied:

> I think I have a positive attitude? And I think that I can usually see past the person's actions. That's where most of my stress came from, relationships. If I could understand where that person was coming from I could understand my how they were acting. I think the most freeing thing I discovered was that I couldn't change that person, but I could change how I reacted towards that person. I realized that I had no control over them [co-workers]. I can only control my own feelings towards them [co-workers]. I prayed a lot too. Something else I did and it was when it was in the first day of the job when it was really really stressful, I did creative visualization. Every morning I would lay in bed and I'd visualize my morning going in [to workplace] and everything's fine.

Sylvia talked about and realized her loss of control in the workplace, but she referred to gaining control over her reactions to the person with whom she was having difficulty, rather than gaining control over aspects of her job. I find it interesting that Sylvia coped with job stress through a strategy that involves gaining control over herself, yet not control over her work. Rather than focusing on changing the conditions of work that caused workplace stress, she focused on changing how she reacted to stress. This is an individualized way of dealing with her situation and does not change the workplace. Since Sylvia had been with the same employer for many years, she may have learned this response from her employer and/or management stress programs offered by her employer.

Louise responded to the question of coping with job stress by saying:

I ate, smoked, and drank.

At first glance Louise's response appears simple. In reality, these behaviors can only add to one's ill-health. Overeating, smoking and drinking are

all common behaviors for dealing with stress in general for many women I know. While these factors may not appear as direct symptoms of job stress, they certainly have the potential to cause health problems.

Not only do these coping behaviors not decrease the job stress, they can actually perpetuate stress, since as a result of these behaviors, the worker becomes less healthy, thereby giving the employer a concrete reason to blame the worker. He can say that if the employee took better care of herself she would be able to cope with the stress and handle the job better. Furthermore, the negative impacts these coping mechanisms can and do have on workers are manifested in heart attacks and/or cardiac related illnesses.

Louise, like Sylvia, focused her control issues away from the job. Rather than trying to change aspects of their job that cause them stress, they chose to cope by engaging in behaviors that may appear to relieve their job stress, but in reality do nothing to address the problem. Unlike Sylvia, Louise's coping strategies do not even mention the workplace, but are meant to cope with the effects of the stress the workplace has generated for her. However, both Louise and Sylvia relied on individual tactics to deal with an organizational issue. This is interesting because most employers also place the emphasis on the individual worker for their stress on the job. Rather than recognize that the issue is not with the individual worker but with the workplace itself, both the participant and the employer see it as an individual problem.

Anita, on the other hand, appeared to deal with work-stress in stride. When I asked her how she coped with stress she replied:

I never take my stress home as I have two kids to look after.

A closer look at her response reveals a more complex issue. Anita is a single parent and has stresses outside of the workplace that are inherent in being a single parent. Therefore, although she said she did not take job stress home, perhaps her job stress was overshadowed by the stresses of looking after two young children on a tight financial budget. Not only does Anita have a double burden of work, paid and unpaid, she has double the stress.

While my research participants discussed a variety of mechanisms for dealing with job stress, it is important to note that they are all individualized coping strategies that did not address the actual problems that are causing the stress. Therefore, although they may appear to be coping, the features of the workplace and the work itself that are inducing job stress are unchanged. I will discuss anti-stress strategies in my concluding chapter.

Conclusion

Most of the data collected in this research supported the findings from the literature review. Difficult relations with management (workplace bullying), lack of control and decision-making in their jobs, heavy supervision and monitoring, co-worker conflicts, lack of trust between co-workers and management, flexibility strategies such as cross-training and multi-tasking, work intensification from having to deal with more work with fewer employees, temporary workers, technology and change in the office, wage issues, and family responsibilities were themes that were found throughout my findings and supported my literature review. There were, however, a few surprises. For example, while the literature I

reviewed repeatedly stated that one of the characteristics of clerical work is that the work is boring (routine and monotonous), only one of my participants who worked in a unionized workplace, as a temporary clerical worker, cited boredom. Perhaps one of the reasons for this difference is that some clerical work such as data entry is boring, meaning that there is no variety, and it is unskilled and monotonous. The non-unionized workplace at which my research participants and I worked did have a variety of different and complex tasks for clerical workers to perform. The workplace was not unionized and we had to perform many different jobs that were not in our department. In the unionized workplace, however, one could only do the job for which one was hired, such as strictly data entry functions. The participant who worked for a unionized workplace may have felt bored because of the simple tasks she was hired to perform.

I was also surprised that one of my participants, a single parent of two young children, spoke about the lack of parking as one feature that caused her stress at work. At first glance this may seem like a small concern; however, for single mothers who have to drop their children off at a daycare before going to work, parking at work can be a major source of stress.

Another unexpected revelation was that the clerical workers I interviewed who had the experience of working both as temporary employees and as permanent full-time employees stated that they thought the temporary position was the better job because of its better wages and less stress. Being a temporary worker provides the worker with a way out of a job she does not like. If a worker quits her permanent full-time job because she does not like it, she will

not receive employment insurance. In addition to having an escape, temporary work provides a clerical worker with a variety of jobs and, in some cases, if the employer is impressed with one's work they may ask her to become permanent full-time. If one likes the job and the workplace one can stay, but if one does not, then one has the option of refusing.

Temporary employment represents a sort of freedom and choice, unlike the chains of a permanent full-time position that places one in an intensified work environment with no way out. However, there are significant drawbacks to this freedom, such as lack of financial stability, lack of benefits, and constant movement from workplace to workplace. All of these features are also stressful – having no income stability, no benefits, meeting new employers and co-workers on a constant basis, and learning new jobs and new workplace cultures. At least for permanent full-time employees there is a better chance of pulling together as group and taking action towards change. This could be in the form of a union or as a community support group for stressed out clerical workers.

It is also interesting that while the literature review mentions sexual harassment and customer harassment as a source of job stress for many women, my participants did not discuss either of these in the interviews. Part of the reason for the lack of mention of sexual harassment could be that they had female bosses (for the most part) and worked in a predominantly female workplace. However, all my participants spoke about situations and events that appear to be workplace bullying, which is definitely a form of harassment in the workplace.

All of the participants in this study, like many others, complained of difficult relations with management, particularly the lack of respect and support they received from their managers. Although my research participants did not name these issues as workplace bullying, their descriptions of their experience of job stress implied that bullying was a problem in the workplace. The women also spoke about difficult relations and conflicts with co-workers, primarily with those who did not do their share of work. These are also symptoms of bullying and stress. Lack of control over their jobs and access to decision-making was also a major source of job stress for my research participants. They frequently discussed their discontent at not being included in meetings where decisions that affected their jobs were taking place. Other common sources of job stress the women spoke about were heavy supervision and close monitoring by their managers.

These women also identified the intensification of work (fewer employees, more work and fast-paced work) as another factor contributing to job stress for them; in particular, they spoke about working much overtime because they had too much work to do. Wages were also a concern for some of my research participants; they knew they were not being paid for what they were worth. As the literature notes, heavier workloads with more complex and technical tasks are features of changes to clerical work that workers are not compensated for, both in terms of wages and respect. The constant workplace changes, especially technological changes, were also a source of job stress for the women I interviewed. In addition to the heavier workloads, the clerical workers were

bombarded with the continual learning of new computer programs and working out the bugs in these systems, adding stress for my participants.

In contrast to my literature review, my findings from the interviews showed that two of the women I interviewed did not view permanent full-time work as necessarily better than temporary work. In fact, they suggested that temporary work was the better option, providing them with a sense of freedom. The heavy workloads coupled with the long hours of permanent full-time work without a sign of relief in sight can be very stressful, as my participants have shown. In contrast, working in temporary contract positions provided an escape from the never-ending workloads. In the event that the workers had enough hours of work to be eligible for Employment Insurance, they could have some time off once their contract was finished before entering into another temporary position. If one is employed permanent full-time, one is generally unable to take time off away from the stressful job, especially if the workers are non-unionized. If the workers decide they cannot cope with the stress of the intensified work and quit the job, they are not eligible for Employment Insurance and they tarnish their employment record. Therefore, while much of the research on temporary employment states that temporary work is part of the job stress phenomenon, my findings suggest that temporary work may also provide a bit of relief for the worker. I am not arguing that temporary employment is the answer to workplace stress, but I am suggesting that more research that highlights the negative impact of permanent full-time clerical work in contrast with temporary work could be beneficial.

Temporary and contingent work, however, can be stressful for the worker. The goal of workers appears to be to obtain permanent full-time work as opposed to temporary part-time work; however permanent full-time clerical positions are also problematic in terms of job stress, as my research has shown. Permanent full-time workers are overworked – working long hours with a heavy workload. Therefore, both temporary and permanent full-time clerical workers are stressed; either a worker is under-worked or overworked.

Interestingly enough, all of the participants chose clerical work as an escape from other types of employment we found ourselves doing, such as cashier and waitress jobs and cleaners. We all assumed clerical work would provide us with job satisfaction, better wages and possibly a promotion in the future. Ironically, the clerical jobs we chose are becoming more like the jobs we thought we escaped.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

For my thesis I interviewed five women clerical workers in the telecommunications industry who experienced job stress. I focused on the negative impact that restructuring of workplaces and the introduction of new technologies in the workplace has had on their health and well-being in the form of job stress.

As my literature review and research findings indicated, several factors contribute to female clerical workers' experience of job stress, including: difficult relations between workers and management (workplace bullying); too few staff and work overload (intensification of work); job insecurity; excessive monitoring; increased pace of work; more complex and technical tasks; poor work organization; insufficient training; long work hours; and lack of decision-making and control over work.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could add to the existing research about female clerical workers and job stress. One area I found interesting and deserving of more attention is the topic of unionization. While I did manage to interview female clerical workers from both unionized and non-unionized workplaces, it would be interesting to explore further the differences, if any, between how women clerical workers employed in unionized and non-unionized workplaces experience job stress.

Another area for future research would be a comparison of clerical

workers who have worked in both permanent full-time positions and temporary positions. This may show that permanent full-time clerical work, with all its recent changes, may not be the best alternative or escape from temporary clerical work. Perhaps by illustrating the negative characteristics of both permanent full-time and temporary clerical work, it will be clearer that a better future for clerical workers is not necessarily to be found in permanent full-time work. Perhaps future research could also examine a greater diversity of clerical workers, by age, race, and class.

Strategies for Change Toward a Stress-Free Workplace

My research has provided me with a clearer understanding of clerical work and job stress and their association with aspects of globalization, information and communication technology, restructuring of the workplace and the economy. Furthermore, this study has expanded my awareness of the clerical occupation and women's experiences of clerical work. I learned that attempting to do research as a researcher and as one of the researched, as an insider and an outsider, is a difficult task. Yet, despite the difficulties I experienced in doing this research, I now have a clearer understanding of the dilemmas faced by female clerical workers and how female clerical workers experience job stress. I now know that my own experience was not unique.

Perhaps if policy makers had more exposure to research that clearly demonstrates that workplace restructuring is causing job stress among clerical workers nationwide, they would be forced to develop policies that would be in the

best interest of clerical workers and society as a whole. In addition, a support group for clerical workers, with community leaders, employers and union representatives as well as policy makers who could listen to clerical workers and be able to provide possible alternatives could be helpful. Most of all, I believe that if clerical workers came together as a collective group, they could form a movement for social action and improve their current work situation. This collective could best take the form of a union. Most importantly, by escaping the isolation and the self-blame of one's job stress, individual workers could come to the realization that job stress is not an individual problem but an organizational one with individual consequences. Recognizing the symptoms of job stress and the common sources of job stress could prompt workers to take control and organize for change.

As I suggested in the beginning of this thesis, clerical workers would benefit if they joined together as a group and struggled for change and resistance, rather than use individualistic ways of adapting and coping with workplace issues that are causing job stress. Prior to doing this research, one of the questions I kept asking my self was, how do we make this happen? How do we organize for change? Although I still do not have the answers to these questions, this could be a future research project for researchers interested in studying groups organizing for change.

However, throughout my research process I discovered a number of organizations that have created educational fact sheets for workers who are experiencing job stress. Some of the information in these fact sheets highlights

specific ways that stressed workers can organize for change to reduce workplace stress. The movements and groups that I have discovered throughout my research are in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Toronto, Ontario and in the United States. Not only do these organizations create a safe and supportive environment for clerical workers, they also provide a space for gathering important research that will hopefully add to the current research and fill the existing gaps in the research on women clerical workers and job stress.

In Toronto, the organizations that exist to support women clerical workers are Office Workers Career Centre (OWCC), formed in late 1997 thanks to the research of Bird and de Wolff (1998) presented in "Occupational Analysis: Clerical Work in Metropolitan Toronto" as well as an earlier study in 1995, "Job Loss and Entry Level Clerical Work" conducted by de Wolff. OWCC provides career and employment counseling as well as up to date labour information for clerical workers. Times Change Women's Employment Service is also a Toronto based organization formed in 1974 that celebrated its 30th anniversary in September 2004. This organization also specializes in career and employment counseling and provides workshops to women looking for employment. Similar to these Canadian centres, the United States has a well-known grassroots organization called 9to5, National Association of Working Women. This organization is "dedicated to putting working women's issues on the public agenda" and their mission is "to strengthen women's ability to win economic justice" (www.9to5.org). In Halifax, Nova Scotia, Women's Employment Outreach is an organization that supports all women looking for work, including many

clerical workers.

These existing organizations have made me realize that support groups for clerical workers are possible. The profound changes that have occurred and are still taking place in clerical occupations are affecting clerical workers; thus having a safe place to discuss their experiences is extremely important for clerical workers. These groups could also provide a starting point for more qualitative research about clerical workers.

In addition to the current support groups for clerical workers, I also suggest other related strategies for a move toward a stress-free workplace for clerical workers. The findings from my interviews clearly reveal both the negative behaviors exhibited by stressed clerical workers as well as how they attempt to cope and deal with stress. Most evident is the anger and blaming that occurs in the stressful workplace. Placing blame on others and ourselves results in co-worker conflicts, and does not expose the root cause of workplace stress. Feelings of guilt, anger, powerlessness and isolation only serve to exacerbate the problems and do not solve them. Rather than pulling together as a group, stressed clerical workers tend to work against one another. What I am proposing is that clerical workers work together in order to reduce workplace stress.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, it is common practice for employers to rely on stress management courses to teach employees to handle their jobs better. More specifically, management tends to blame the worker for their job stress and to argue that the employee is entirely responsible for their stress. Unfortunately, the employers' attitude of "blaming the victim" is all too often

expressed in society (HEU 200). This individualistic attitude is very much a part of the neo-liberal agenda that emphasizes self-determination; we are responsible for our own success or failure. Yet as research has shown, stress management programs and coping skills do not remove the workplace stressors. Stress is an organizational issue, not an individual one; therefore, the solution lies in the improvement of workplace conditions. As HEU (2000) argues, blaming other co-workers for stressful conditions is a form of self-blame, focusing on individuals rather than structural issues such as restructuring as the cause of job stress.

HEU (2000) proposes that workers should begin to work with one another rather than against one another. They propose that workers need to show respect and encouragement to co-workers, communicate with others rather than turning to anger, and support co-workers when they are taking care of themselves by, for example, taking time off from work. In addition to self-care, HEU (2000) suggest that mutual support is an important factor in reducing the impact of a stressful job. This support could come from co-workers, supervisors, activists and union shop stewards. As discussed in the interviews from my study, co-workers only have one another to rely on, since their issues stemmed from non-supportive management. Mutual support can be a challenge for many workplaces today, with the trend away from unionized workplaces. However, as HEU (2000:39) note, "[t]he only way to really reduce toxic stress is to change the work and change the workplace".

Both the HEU (2000) and CUPE (2003) suggest a healthy job design and a democratic workplace as practical approaches to reduce job stress and benefit

both workers and employers. Rather than employers operating in a typical hierarchical manner, a more participatory management practice in which workers have more decision-making involvement would result in a less stressful and more productive workplace. Since lack of control over one's job is a major source of stress for workers, this approach makes sense.

According to these organizations, strategies to reduce workplace stress involve improving specific working conditions such as: clearer job description and duties; more control in carrying out tasks; more decision-making; decreased workload; the right to refuse overtime; fair pace of work; redesigned physical work features such as noise reduction, proper ventilation, more natural lighting and ergonomically designed work areas; a variety of tasks to eliminate monotonous work; the introduction of job-sharing, flextime, and other options to help with family obligations; mutual support from supervisors and co-workers; a reduction in sudden changes in the workplace; the provision of training and opportunity for advancement; and respect and acknowledgement of work and skills.

HEU (2000) suggests that making stress prevention a central issue among workers, employers, and Health Authorities, and fighting for changes to collective agreements, Worker's Compensation Board regulations and legislation are all ways that could also reduce workplace stress. They add that stress prevention policies are one way to deal with workplace stress; however, workers need to participate in developing these policies and not allow management or the employer to draw up such policies without worker input.

In conclusion, clerical workers are experiencing a number of changes at their workplaces and in the nature of their work itself. As a result of these changes, women clerical workers are experiencing job stress. My study focused on only a small group of women clerical workers in the telecommunications industry, but as I have suggested, more research could be done in all sorts of industries where women clerical workers work. Furthermore, while support groups for clerical workers do exist, a more practical approach to reducing job stress for these women, such as changing the workplace and the nature of clerical work, would be highly beneficial for both the workers and the employer. In order to move towards these changes, more attention and exploration of what women clerical workers actually do and experience is necessary.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Describe your work history since 1990.

2. How long did you work for the telecommunications company?

3. What was your job title?

4. How long did you hold that position?

5. Did you have more than one job at that company? If so, why did you change jobs?

6. What were your duties and responsibilities?

7. Have you worked for any other company in the last 13 years? If so, why did you leave?

8. Why are you working in a clerical position?

9. Did you receive benefits? If so, what were they?

10. Did you have vacation and/or sick days? If so, how many?

11. Was the company you worked for unionized?

12. What was your wage or salary?

13. Did you find the nature of your job changed over the past few years? If so, in what ways?

14. If your employer introduced changes into the workplace were you consulted or informed? If so, how? If not, do you think you should have been consulted?

15. What level of education did you have while working in a clerical capacity?

16. Describe what a good day in your job would have looked like? What features make it good?

17. Describe what a bad day in your job would look like? What features make it bad?

18. Were there any specific features of your job that you disliked? Is so, what are they?

19. What features of your job did you enjoy the most? Why?

20. Did you have a family? Children? A supportive partner when you worked in a clerical position? Were you married?

21. Did you ever feel overwhelmed or stressed at work? If so, when and why? Describe your experience, how it feels to you?

22. What were the most stressful features of your job?

23. How did you cope with job stress?

24. Did you feel you could talk with your boss about your job stress? If not, who would you talk to about it?

25. Do you think other clerical workers in your workplace experienced job stress? If so, did you talk with them about whether or not they feel stressed due to their job?

26. Did your employer offer stress management programs? If so, what are they like?

27. If you needed to take time off to tend to your family, how did your boss react? How, if at all, did your co-workers react?

28. If you could have changed anything about your job, what would you have changed?

29. Do you have any questions, concerns or comments?