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# “Bad Things Happened There:” Family Reflections on Working at the Manitoba Developmental Centre

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## Abstract

*Bad things happened at the Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC), an institution with a 130-year history of institutionalizing people labelled with intellectual disabilities.*

*Survivors of the Centre have begun to come forward to share stories of mistreatment, neglect and abuse. It is essential that survivors’ stories are heard to understand the historical systems of oppression and violence in the lives of people labelled with an intellectual disability in Canada. Yet narratives from others who were involved, including those who worked in institutions, can contribute to a more fulsome understanding. Using the experiences of the first author’s parents who were employed at the MDC in the 1980s, this paper explores the conditions that contributed to some people’s decision to work at the MDC and considers how phenomena such as poverty, labour, exploitation, coercion, choice, resistance, and compliance feature in the lives of institutional labourers. In addition, the authors reflect on how oppressive foundations of institutionalization remain to the detriment of those needing support and care and those who provide it. These reflections illustrate the need to disrupt the “logics” of institutional care on which the system currently depends.*

## Introduction

Bad things happened within the walls of the Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC). This was recently expressed by David Weremy, lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the Manitoba Government which administered the MDC for over a century.[1] I (Jenna) first became aware of

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[1] “Bad things happened there” was said by David Weremy in the film *These Four Walls* (2024), dir. B. DeFoort.

this reality at a young age when my father drove me past the fence and into the large fortress that was the institution. Sitting in the back of the car, I gazed up at the brick buildings towering above us. My father pointed at an abandoned structure I now know as Northgrove. “That’s where I used to work,” he explained, “If any place is haunted, it’s there”. He did not elaborate, not then, but I could infer the worst: tortured memories clinging to those walls. What I could not understand was why my father had been there. My father was good; this place was not.

In an adjacent building’s window, I saw a woman’s smiling face. She saw me too. We waved to each other as my father drove us away from this place and back to my comfortable, safe, and stable life, one that my father and mother and their fathers and mothers before them never got to have. The comfort and security I enjoyed would not have been possible without the institution that we left behind.

When we are children, things are often explained to us as good or bad, black or white. In reality, this is seldom accurate. As accounts from the recent class action settlement between survivors of the MDC and the Manitoba government have confirmed, horrible things happened there. Yet not everyone by whose labour the institution functioned was there to do harm. Some held deep purpose and love in their hearts for the people they served and the work they did. For others, it was a matter of survival.

The MDC, previously called the Manitoba School for Mental Defectives [sic], closed its doors for good in December 2024 after a 130-year history of institutionalizing people labelled with intellectual disabilities. Similar to survivors’ actions in other provinces where institutions have closed, MDC survivors launched a successful lawsuit against the provincial government for harms caused while residing there (Weremy vs. Government of Manitoba, 2023), and have begun to share stories of mistreatment, neglect and abuse. Survivors’ stories are essential to understanding the implications of historical systems of oppression and violence in the lives of people labelled with an intellectual disability in Canada (Burghardt, 2018; Hutton et al., 2017; Rossiter & Rinaldi, 2018; Scott & Rinaldi, 2017). In addition to accounts from survivors, narratives from others who were involved, including those who worked in institutions, can also contribute to a more fulsome understanding of how institutions came to play such a central role in Canada’s history of (mis)treatment of people labelled with intellectual disabilities. Their accounts can reveal the motives for people’s decisions to become part of that system and what led them to believe that working in an institution was a reasonable and even good thing to do. It is important to understand the role the workforce played in sustaining the MDC for over a century, and how harms continued despite the presence of some compassionate staff.

In this paper, we explore the conditions that contributed to some people’s decision to work at the MDC and consider how phenomena such as poverty, labour, exploitation, coercion, choice, resistance, and compliance feature in the lives of institutional labourers and their relationship to their place of work. To do this, we reflect on accounts from the first author’s (Jenna) parents, both of whom worked at the MDC in the 1980s. The stories are important to me (Jenna), as they are woven into the fabric of who I am. But they also illuminate more broadly the historical position of institutions as intentional sites of exploitation which incite unjust relationships and abuses of power at different levels and with different groups of people, notwithstanding the most grievous harms being committed against the people who were forced to live there.

Moreover, the accounts of former staff are important during this era of ‘deinstitutionalization’. It is important to understand how the creation of a vulnerable workforce that is largely voiceless and choiceless are not phenomena fixed in time and space. They are part of the institutional model's oppressive foundational frame that will remain in sites meant to support people with intellectual disabilities if not fully understood and prevented (LeBlanc Haley & Temple Jones, 2020).

## Before

In my parents' memory, there was not much separation between MDC residents and the rest of Portage, whether you were on its payroll or not. According to my mother, the building north of town and the presence of people who looked and acted in un-typical ways were "just Portage". She grew up across the street from the institution and swam with residents in the facility pool. These people were "like friends" to her yet were always regarded with suspicion and sometimes fear. Though disability was present in town, no one acknowledged or spoke openly about the intellectual and physical differences that were widely seen. Despite the appearance of integration, my father also speaks about the mistreatment that MDC residents received on the street, where individuals were chastised and often taken advantage of.

My parents were both children when they began working at what was then the Manitoba School. My mother was 17 and homeless, sleeping on a friend's laundry floor. My father was living with his mother, her boyfriend, and three younger siblings. He had had a rough go but was starting to think about the future, finally considering that he might have one instead of ending up in prison or worse. Both my parents wanted to stay in Portage, and they both had bills to pay. The institution paid well, and jobs were provided, with few questions asked. You could even buy a full, hearty meal from the cafeteria on your shift for far less than anywhere else in town.

When I was 10, I found a pin in my mother's jewelry box that bore my grandmother's name. It was her ID pin from the Manitoba School, a reminder that my mother and father were not the first from their families to work there. Both my mother's mother and my father's mother had worked at the institution. They had both struggled with mental health and addiction issues and needed work, and the Manitoba School delivered. Indeed, my father explained that "half the town worked there". Ask anyone who grew up in Portage where their family worked, and their answer will be either the Campbell's Soup factory or the Manitoba School. It was one or the other. The town was inextricably linked to the institution.

My mother had been to the institution many times in the back of her father's car as he drove her mother to work. She recalls looking up at the buildings, as I did decades later, with a mix of fear and curiosity. Her mother had been assaulted by a resident, something that my mother knew long before she accepted a similar role. Fear and familiarity rested together uneasily in my mother: although she felt some fear of the complex and the people it held, economic need and its convenient location kept her from turning away. Farm labour was always an option in Portage la Prairie's rural location, but farm wages did not compare to what was offered at the institution. When she walked through the front doors of the MDC, she did not feel this was a calling. She felt it was a way to survive and was the only option she had. For my father, it was a lucky break when he needed it most.

## During

My parents arrived at the institution for their first shifts and were told to get to work. They were immediately responsible for the care of highly vulnerable people. My mother was a permanent Resident Assistant (RA) by age 17; my father by age 19. Neither recall safety training or policies and procedures that informed best practice. They would watch other staff as they went about their day and were expected to fall in line. What best practice looked like depended on who had the most power and how they said it should be done. Even as their experience grew, my mother reports that it was never a matter of *what* you knew. It was about *who* you knew and if you weren't connected to the right people, you were never going to be taken seriously. You were expected to conform, to keep your mouth shut and not rock the boat.

Both my mother and father speak of having control over only their own responses in the moment. They could choose kindness in an interaction, but its impact was limited by the harsh reality of institutional life, which they felt powerless to change. When asked if they felt like they made a difference to the people they supported, they voiced hope that small actions-- like turning on a hockey game or providing an extra treat--made a difference. Yet my father acknowledges a deep undercurrent of hopelessness that followed the residents, who seemed to exist to survive rather than to live.

My parents were also ambivalent. Although things were bad in the institution, what else was there? Where else would people with high needs be provided with the care they needed? As my father acknowledged, the community was not always a kind place. My mother, who often worked with residents with fewer behavioural needs, told me that she felt that some people "thrived" with the routine that could be provided within the institution. They knew people, they had regular meals and participated in recreation. Although it was not ideal, their basic needs were met. The conditions in Northgrove, my father acknowledged, were rough: nothing more than two rows of beds in a small room with an entrance at one end, a small television area and bathroom at the other. Residents rarely, if ever, left these rooms. Violence was commonplace and extreme, a phenomenon that Rossiter & Rinaldi (2018) have described as generated through institutions' inherently violent structure (p. 3). Yet somehow, my parents felt it could be worse, that if the staff were not there or if they dropped their guard, it *would* be worse. My father did his best day after day to prevent harm from coming to these men. Thus, perhaps some people were drawn back to work each day by the sense that although only the bare minimum was provided and would never really lead to a good life, staff could contribute something to the wellbeing of these people who had no other choice but to exist within those walls.

As with the initial attraction of the MDC, my parents' financial concerns continued to influence their decision to stay. Regardless of how they felt about it, moral commitments do not pay the bills. My parents needed a paycheque, and the Manitoba School was still the best one around. After working as Resident Assistants, my parents entered the nursing program run out of the facility. Here they were offered room and board, a meal allowance and a hundred dollars per month. The education was good. They were learning and building a future. They had a place to live, friends, and a steady life. They started dating one another. Despite all its drawbacks, this way forward offered more than they could have hoped for otherwise.

## After

For my father, the choice to leave MDC was made for him. It was summer in the 1980s. Northgrove was a sweaty, crowded oven. One can only imagine the smell, the discomfort, the tension when there are dozens of men packed into a small space with the temperature over 30 degrees. Most of these people could not speak for themselves, never mind leave for some fresh air. So my father did. He stepped into the administration building and the director's office. Standing in the air-conditioned space, he saw a fan. He asked to bring it back to the ward, and his request was met with disgust. *You will never work here as a nurse*, the director said. And it was true: upon graduating from nursing school, the entire class was offered employment except for my father. After hearing about the heaviness and horrors of Northgrove and the abuse that went unaddressed, I asked my father what he would now tell his younger self. He stated unequivocally he would tell this young man to get out of the situation. Yet he acknowledges that the young man would probably not have listened. He couldn't leave, not by choice. He needed the money.

My mother did not last long at MDC either. For her, the final straw occurred when she witnessed a resident being assaulted by a staff member. She reported it, and the complaint went unaddressed. Having completed her nurses' training and with other jobs now possible, she left. Both my parents went on to work long careers in nursing outside of the Manitoba Developmental Centre. Yet this meant leaving home and travelling to Winnipeg, away from family and friends, an option that was not available for everyone.

In retrospect, my parents' move away from the MDC emerges as a persistent thread in the care of people living with intellectual disabilities. Roles which provide direct care (such as resident assistants, support workers, and respite staff) are often steppingstones for those who begin with few options and a desire to move on as soon as they can. Decision-makers know that these roles will always be filled because there will always be people who have little choice but to take them. Even higher-level jobs within the disability sector are consistently underpaid when compared to other jobs that do not involve serving people with disability-related needs. The injustice embedded in this system goes beyond inequitable pay: it also reveals a great deal about the view society holds about the people being cared for. Why is the work of caring for people with disabilities placed at the bottom of the pile of limited opportunities?

## Aftermath

Like my father, my mother has said that even if she could step back in time and re-enter the institution with all the experience and teachings she now has, it would have been hard to do things differently. The culture and power dynamics were so strong, making change was not a matter of knowing what was right or wrong, or even speaking up against it. Now working within the system, I (Jenna) do not feel we have moved far enough away from these obstacles.

When I was nineteen, I found myself in a situation much like my parents: standing in front of a large brick facility where people with disabilities lived, needing work. I started working at St.Amant in Winnipeg in an administrative role as my first job out of college. I didn't have a lot of options, and this was a world familiar to me through my parents. Society had moved ahead in the twenty years that had passed since my parents worked at MDC, but not as far as I had hoped. Today, people in our province are not forced to be incarcerated within brick buildings. But the language of 'choice', even in community-based living arrangements, obfuscates what little autonomy people have. Choice becomes degraded to a series of ultimately inconsequential decisions that do not allow one to have control over one's life. Does it matter if you can choose the colour of your room if your relational and vocational dreams are not honoured? This ensures the ongoing subjugation of people with disabilities and their families.

Today, I (Jenna) am employed as a social worker in the disability field. I admit I have been in situations with young people with disabilities, or supporting their struggling families, where part of me wished an institution of sorts was available. This is not because I think it is the right thing to do, nor because I think they should not have a life in community, and certainly not because I do not respect their humanity. Rather, it is because I know the systems in place will not always be able to keep them safe or support them to live a good and meaningful life. Just as my father acknowledged that he did not think the people he supported should have been in the institution but did not know where else they could go, I, too, sometimes feel at a loss.

Yet this is how the framework of institutionalization carries on. So long as supports remain underfunded and unresponsive, the line between total institutions and the current situation of people living with disabilities in the community remains thin. So long as exploitation remains embedded in the system, affecting those needing support and care and those who are ostensibly there to take care of them, then the threads of large, total institutions carry on (Chapman, 2014).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the tendency to understand family stories as individual and unique, when Jenna's parents' account is placed alongside scholarly work about institutions, the labour they demand, and their replication in community-based living, the reiterative nature of institutional exploitation and practices is revealed. Goffman (1961), writing over sixty years ago about the structure and running of total institutions, describes the process through which new admissions to the institution are "worked on smoothly by routine operations" (p. 16) in order to enter the institutional world. Goffman points out that this process cannot happen without the agreement and acquiescence of the staff, whose role includes participating in the "repair" of the "disruptive agent" who has come under his or her care (p. 331). He notes that the "establishment of the body as a serviceable possession…[is] a triumph of the secular-scientific spirit." In other words, the successful management of the bodies and minds of those entering the asylum are evidence of the success of the entire enterprise.

Decades later, Liat Ben-Moshe (2011) noted the mirror-like mapping of institutional practices onto community-based living arrangements: "the shift from custodial care and institutionalization to deinstitutionalization and community living should not be seen as the rise and fall of one epoch to be replaced by the other. This is because the effects of the former still linger on in the latter" (p. 243). Ben-Moshe's point is that regardless of presentation, institutional and community-based models are governed by similar logics (ibid), such as permitting the survival of people with intellectual disabilities but not their thriving; the administrative logic of disallowing the life-enriching risks inherent to living in community; and the belief that there will always be a need for total institutions in some shape or form.

Jenna's parents were not unaware of the role that staff played in the running of the "machinery of the establishment" (Goffman, 1961, p. 16), nor of the current overlaps between what they encountered at the MDC and some of the harsher realities of current community-based living. Their reflections illustrate the need to disrupt the "logics" of institutional care, including eliminating the exploitation of people living with disabilities and those who care for them, on which the system currently depends.

## Acknowledgements

Jenna would like to thank her parents for their bravery in sharing what they witnessed. She would also like to honour her great uncle, Albert Decloedt, who never experienced life outside the institution. May he know we are trying to do better. Madeline would like to thank Jenna and her family for so generously sharing their stories of their time at the Manitoba Developmental Centre.

## Key messages

***People with disabilities***: Institutions were a bad way to treat people labelled with intellectual disabilities. Stories from the people who worked there can help us to get a better understanding of the whole system and why it was hurtful.

***Professionals:*** Hearing from people who worked at institutions helps to show the full history of institutionalization in Canada and how working there was sometimes from a feeling of having few life choices. Care must be taken to learn from the mistakes of institutions and to not repeat them in community-based living arrangements.

***Policy makers:*** Policy must ensure that living arrangements for people labelled with intellectual disabilities are safe and allow people to thrive. Workers must be supported and encouraged to create good conditions for people with intellectual disabilities.

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