

How the Common Language of ‘Child Abuse’ Makes Enemies of Parents

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In his book “The Social Construction of What? Hacking (1999) points to a growing list of things which are said to be socially constructed. Included among the list is “child abuse.” Noting its ‘discovery’ as an object of medical science by authoritative child paediatricians in Denver, Colorado in the 1960’s, Hacking speculates as to how and why “child abuse” has become a ubiquitous feature of social and personal realities even though the numbers of avoidable child deaths and seriously harmed children have remained stable across the developed world over many years. In this paper we are specifically concerned with the ways in which the language of “Child Abuse” has been unproblematically deployed to define the aims of public policy in the field of child welfare programmes and as well, to organize the activities of individuals engaged in transdisciplinary children’s services activity. Drawing selectively on research data on the organization and outcomes of Child Protection programmes undertaken by these authors in eighteen local authorities in the UK and in West Australia, we first describe briefly how the discourse of Child Protection came into being. Secondly we consider the state of relationships between parents and social workers arguing that inherent in the dominant discourse of Child Protection are perceptions of parents as potentially dangerous ‘others.’ These oppositional positioning results in actions which simultaneously fail to recognize the complexity of situations in which intervention occurs and any possibility for improvement.

Introduction

The discourse of Child Protection has dominated the childcare social work field for well over twenty years. Its negative effect on professional and transdisciplinary practice and learning in the field of children’s services has been considerable. Prior to the institution of Child Protection the activities of social workers in particular were based on the collectivist principles enshrined in the welfare state legislation of the post-war period. The role for social workers in assisting people who were deemed to be at a social disadvantage in a capitalist economy due to poverty, disability or some other form of ill-health or adversity was more straightforward during this period.

Programmes designed only and specifically to “protect” children from avoidable harm had their genesis in the 1970s. At this time a series of scandals involving the avoidable deaths of children who were known to local authorities prompted far-reaching enquiries and recommendations for changes in practice to avoid such events re-occurring (Thorpe, 1994). As a result of the first public enquiry into the death of a child called Maria Colwell in 1974, a direct connection was made

for the first time between the failures of health and welfare staff and a fatal outcome. The conclusion was that “a better functioning system would have prevented Maria’s death (Gibbons 1997:79). The imperative for government to take action to prevent such tragedies was further fuelled by subsequent enquiries into more child deaths (Jasmine Beckford 1985; Tyra Henry 1987; Kimberly Carlisle 1987; Ricki Neve 1996 and most recently Victoria Climbié 2001). These deaths came to signify all that was thought to be wrong in the child welfare system.

Before the term “child abuse” was coined the Denver child paediatricians labelled the healing fractures they observed in X-rays of young children as illustrative of the “battered baby syndrome” but later this reference was rapidly extended and new connotations were acquired. Hacking notes that:

“The idea [of child abuse] became embedded in legislation, incorporated in practices and changed a wide range of professional activities involving social workers, police, school teachers, parents, busybodies. It acquired new moral weight: child abuse became the worst possible vice” (Hacking, 1999:126).

The effect of the repeated media scandals in the UK also led to similar developments in state-funded services for children. Notwithstanding the extensive measures put in place to protect children, research into the outcomes of the Child Protection programme commissioned by the Department of Health in the UK (Department of Health, 1995) revealed that Child Protection procedures and protocols failed not only to prevent avoidable child deaths but also served to alienate families and others wrongly accused of ‘child abuse.’ Most worryingly, the research found that following an intrusive investigation, usually carried out in conjunction with police officers, many families needing help often refused assistance from Social Services departments. (Department of Health, 1995; Thorpe, 1994). The government report noted:

“Many investigations are undertaken, many families are visited and case conferences called but [...] in the end, little support is offered to the family. In such situations, it is unsurprising that participants become angry, alienated and bewildered. Furthermore, the children are not helped and a chunk of valuable child care resource has been consumed with little apparent benefit” (DoH, 1995: 54-55).

Despite an official catalogue of failure and repeated attempts to curb the negative effect of overzealous investigations, programmes of Child Protection persist and continue to cultivate powerful backing from various quarters (King, 1997). Children’s rights groups, media, medical practitioners, government officials, academics and children’s charities such as the NSPCC uncritically deploy the discourse of “child abuse” to explain various kinds of adversities confronting children and their generally impoverished carers.

In the following excerpt from an interview conducted by these authors as part of their research (Regan 1997-2006; Thorpe 1988-2006), social workers describe how their practices changed as a result of the introduction of child protection procedures:

"If it [a referral] was about a child you pinked it ...the two teams [north and south] were pinking them [child protection referrals] differently. Everything was logged as a CP [Child Protection]. The scene was set for CP... One time a teacher reported a child with a red mark on it's face. The teachers would not ask any questions they were told not to We went out to find that it was raspberry jam... Social workers started to act like policemen. You couldn't ask the child any questions that the police should ask. We knew it was stupid but that's what we had to do... I remember in one joint investigation we had to put the child up to the window to see the bruise... I was horrified ...it was going to court... When I first arrived [in this authority] it made me rethink my views on Child Protection. We'd always had a strong Family Support base... I started to think that I wasn't any good as a social worker because of this... You were just investigating and didn't have time to do social work ... I didn't want to practice this way ... working long hours and the chaos!"

The account paints a disturbing picture of an ideology which has more in common with the pre-enlightened, medieval world of witch-hunts and inquisitions than it does with post-war welfare reform. Listening to these and other stories told by social workers on post-qualifying training programmes one could be led to believe that childcare social work is engaged in a contemporary form of social engineering designed to enforce aspects of middle-class norms of child rearing. When encouraged to describe childcare social work in their organisations, conversations invariably focused on either the assessing or investigating of parents and accumulating developing evidence against them using court procedures or finding or fixing foster placements, wrangling with managers over funds to pay for an out-of-county placement or the long distances travelled to carry out mandatory placement reviews. Very few childcare social workers even those working in so-called 'family support' teams ever mentioned their role as 'resourceful friends' for families in need of assistance (Holman, 2000).

Somewhere along the line the idea of providing the sort of interventions which would enable more parents to better care for their own children no longer existed as a viable reality in the minds of many social workers nor indeed in the minds of those government policy makers responsible for raising the standards of practice. The steadily rising numbers of children being accommodated by the state, the setting of targets for adoption and policies for the 'twin-tracking' of children for adoption suggest that policies which privilege a conception of the 'child's world' (Howarth, 2001) as being the object of practice interventions, parents have become the enemy

The failure of childcare social work to genuinely believe in change as a possible outcome of intervention cannot be seen in isolation from the restructuring of organizational arrangements and changes to practice interventions (Regan, 2006). The fragmentation of childcare social work into short term/initial assessment and long term family support/permanency work has engendered a moral vacuum where accountability for the consequences of decisions made about the future of a child and its family has resulted is strangely absent. Many social workers claim that the material resources and the requisite skills they need to assist families in situations where poverty, unemployment, poor housing, substance misuse and other forms of ill-health strongly feature are no longer available to them.

In addition to this the quasi market model of commissioning make resources more difficult for social workers and other professionals to access. In some local authorities contracts for service provision are established with voluntary or private sector agencies in situations where workers and volunteers often lack the necessary training to intervene in families facing multiple long-term problems. (In our research we find these families being re-referred to social services). More to the point the government's policy of 'fast-tracking' children for adoption pointedly enacts a negative view of parents who often love their children but who do not have the emotional or material resources to fight the courts for their care(1). At the same time they can be denied regular assistance to enable them to demonstrate their capacity to care. Often these financial and practical resources are subsequently offered to more 'worthy' foster and adoptive parents.

Removing children from their parents and local communities in the hope of producing a better outcome is an intervention fraught with risk. Forty-three percent of placements break-down in the first year and the chances of children who remain in care after six weeks of returning home are dramatically reduced by two-thirds (Thorpe 1988). Many children lose contact with their natural families and siblings (Bilson 1995). The statistics produced by the DfES on movements in the 'looked-after system,' the educational attainment of children in care and performance on targets for adoption fail to convey the human cost of interventions in terms of fractured lives, distorted realities, disrupted attachments and the loss of a child's capacity over time to constitute an identity which is connected in meaningful ways with their wider birth family and place of origin. Social workers discover that children even temporarily removed from their homes often return with a new set of problems caused by the anxiety of separation from their familiar surroundings and exposure to unforeseen events (such as the breakdown of the placement which was supposed to produce stability in the child's life). The outcomes for many children who are looked after are notoriously bleak, as noted recently in the Society pages of the UK Guardian newspaper (4/10/06):

"You only have to look at the shocking figures. Only 1% of care leavers go to University, while half of all prisoners under 25, and 80% of Big Issue sellers have been in care"

Of the eighteen local authorities where these authors have carried out research only two local authorities were found to support practices which result in social workers maintaining their involvement with families over a period of time. The first, Cheshire Social Services had also retained family support workers as integral members of their generic childcare social work teams, while the second and most notable exception, North Lincolnshire Children Services, supported a range of specialist resources which remained within the firm control of that local authorities child care managers (Regan, 2003). Of course there are circumstances where substitute care is the only alternative but nonetheless if some local authorities like Cheshire and North Lincolnshire can organize to keep their entries to care to a minimum then why are these outcomes considered as exceptions rather than the rule?

The answer to this puzzle seems to reside in the connecting together of a clearly stated management philosophy of enabling parents to provide for their chil-

dren rather than a philosophy of child rescue, the translation of this philosophy into a practical reality in terms of flexible, accessible and locally available resources (both for childcare workers and those they assist) and the belief of workers that they can make a difference even in the most distressing of circumstances.

In our view the national programme of Child Protection and its language of “risk” and “abuse” has steadily eroded the moral necessity for social workers to see parents as ‘others’ worthy of professional engagement. In the discourse of Child Protection expressions such as ‘perpetrator’ ‘abuse’ ‘risk’ ‘safety’ ‘protective factors’ ‘threshold’ ‘domestic violence’ and ‘danger’ form a common language amongst childcare professionals which in a philosophical sense casts the ‘others’ of intervention as either perpetrators or potential victims of some form of ‘abuse’ or ‘risk’ (Regan and Thorpe, 2005). Rescuing child victims from parents who pose ‘risks’ of various kinds has conferred an unassailable moral legitimacy on social work action which can simultaneously fail to recognize the complexity of situations in which intervention occurs nor any possibility of improvement. As a result social policy more generally is bereft of ideas as the knowledge which informs practice derives from a world view which no longer values the advancement of humanity and the relief of poverty and adversity through programmes of social justice and welfare reform.

Note

[1] Social services departments in the UK run a “Twin Tracking” system when children are taken into care. This means that when a child gets taken into care, plans for adoption are run alongside (twin tracked) against any other plans, such as the child coming home or being placed with another family member. The apparent logic behind this is that if for any reason it is judged that the child cannot be returned to the birth family, then they have adoptive parents ready and waiting for them and do not have to “languish” in the care system. The government are also encouraging Local Authorities to drastically reduce the time it takes from a child coming into care, to being adopted. This is giving the parents hardly any chance to get a case together and fight for their child (see http://www.fassit.co.uk/fassit_uk_reforms)

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Suzanne Regan has a background in child welfare work and began her career as a district officer for the NSW Department of Youth and Community Services in the mid 1970s. After arriving in the UK from Australia in 1984 she studied for her MA and PhD in Organizational Behaviour and Analysis from Lancaster University. As an organizational research and development analyst specializing in health and welfare organization, Suzanne has researched practice in over twenty UK local authorities. Her research interests involve the development of new methods of researching practice which involve the use of edited video-recorded data to improve practices in local work settings.

After leaving Lancaster University in 2006, **David Thorpe** has taken up a post as a Professor of Applied Social Science at Trondheim University Norway. Much David's work also entailed the development of new methodological approaches to evaluating child welfare programmes which took him in the early 1980s to the United States (Harvard Law School and the Universities of Southern California and Ann Arbor, Michigan) and Australia where he has developed a continuing relationship with child welfare agencies and academic institutions. In 1987-90 he directed the Australian study into the outcomes of child protection services on secondment from Lancaster University and then in the late 1990s, was responsible for the UK component of a nine-nation European Union research programme on child protection under the BIOMED II programme which was based on the methodology originally developed for eight Australian states. His other international activities have include those of visiting Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia a continuing research collaboration programme with the Norwegian Child Research Centre at the University of Trondheim, L'Office Nationale de la Naissance et de L'Enfance in Brussels.