

Outing the Elephants: Exploring a New Paradigm for Child Protection Social Work

Abstract

This article sets out to deconstruct and challenge the psychologised and pathologising approach that has come to dominate child protection practice in Aotearoa-New Zealand and comparable societies in neoliberal times. Within a risk and protection focused paradigm circumstances and behaviours associated with material deprivation are construed as indicators of heightened danger and harm as opposed to a means of better understanding family life. In this way, although poverty may be classified as an issue that is worthy of attention in the realm of broader economic and social policy, structural inequality is rendered largely irrelevant to the practice of statutory child protection. This article sets out to trouble this construction. It will be argued that understandings of how the effects of material inequality are played out in the lives of children and their families are critical to the development of more effective child protection social work. This 'life-world' is generally populated by young women parenting in poverty. Poverty exacerbates the everyday struggle of parenting - it shames and dis-empowers; reducing confidence and perceptions of competence (Gupta, 2015). A paradigm shift is needed. Child protection policy and practice needs to re-engage with the every-day struggles that accompany the lives of socially marginalised families in increasingly stratified late capitalist society. The future of social work in child protection depends on it.

Key Words

child protection, poverty, inequality, neoliberalism, new paradigm

Authors

Dr Ian Hyslop
Faculty of Education and Social Work
Private Bag 92010
Auckland 1142
New Zealand
i.hyslop@auckland.ac.nz

Dr Emily Keddell
Department of Sociology, Gender and Social Work
University of Otago
PO Box 56
Dunedin
New Zealand

Engaging with complexity

A variety of factors conspire to generate the complex nature of child protection practice. The rationale for protective intervention in family life and the appropriate form of such engagement is politically contested (Fox-Harding, 1997; Gray & Webb, 2013). Regardless of the ascendant policy orientation, decision-making is a balancing exercise; an inexact practice that is influenced by competing principles (Berrick, 2018). Workplaces are pressured, and media-fuelled public expectations are simultaneously imperative and conflicted (Connolly & Doolan, 2007). At the sharp end of state social work, child protection practitioners balance family integrity with child safety concerns, making critical judgments that are guided by imperfect information.

The genesis of these frictions is perhaps best understood as a function of the interstitial location of child and family social work at the interface between the regulatory state and the semi-autonomous role assigned to family life in liberal society (Warner, 2015). This liminal position necessitates a double mediation between social workers and the state and between social workers and the children / families who are constructed as their clients. Habermas' concept of facilitating communication between the state system and the life-world of family is a useful way to conceptualise this location. However, following Garrett (2009), such a binary classification may also risk over-simplifying the subtle relations of power with which the social world is suffused. Much of the art of child protection social work involves an applied awareness of how power works in this context.

In keeping with the *elephant-outing* metaphor, the intent of the following discussion is to engage with the difficulties that plague this terrain, particularly the relationship between child welfare and socio-economic inequality. It will be argued that the impulse to over-simplify the social, moral and practical complexity of child protection is counter-productive to the development of a more humane form of child and family practice: the challenge is to acknowledge uncertainties and contradictions rather than to neutralise them (Munro, 2010; Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). The future development of social work in child protection has, it seems, arrived at a fork in the road. Practice identity is at stake and more importantly outcomes in the lives of citizen service users are on the line.

Our aim is to identify some of the elements necessary for the design of a new practice vision which takes adequate account of the socially and economically situated nature of child protection social work. Although the frame of reference is primarily related to the Aotearoa-New Zealand context, the analysis that is developed here draws on recent literature in the English setting and has wider relevance to Anglophone jurisdictions. Interrogation of the

dilemmas associated with child protection in societies divided by social class, ethnicity and gendered social relations, also has broader applicability given the global reach of the neoliberal social and economic model of development (Spolander, Engelbrecht & Pullen-Sansfacon, 2015).

In recent times, Anglophone child protection systems have adopted a more authoritarian approach; effectively focussing on a certain section of the population: families living on the margins in economically divided societies (Parton, 2014). Social class divisions have been magnified within a neoliberal policy rubric and there is increasing concern, at least among the academic social work community, that child protection practice may have become part of the problem rather than part of the solution to social exclusion (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris & Warner, 2016). The time is ripe to envisage a practice paradigm that links child well-being with wider issues of structural injustice and human equality.

Social work is no stranger to conflict and compromise and it has the capacity to rise to the task of re-humanising child protection practice. The flexibility and creativity of the social profession can be construed as both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, the tendency to theoretical plurality means that social work is not confined by a narrow or dogmatic frame of analysis, while on the other hand it can mean that the profession difficulty articulating a distinctive view of the world: finding a place to stand. It will be suggested here that social work affords a nuanced insight into the complex relationship between family life and socio-political context and that this understanding has the capacity to reinvigorate statutory child protection practices that have become soul-less; over-formalised and risk-saturated.

Context of practice development

Although the intrinsic ambiguities alluded to above are seldom fore-grounded in the official narrative of statutory social work, efforts to manage the tensions that go with the territory have underpinned the development of child protection practice in recent decades. Attempts to extinguish uncertainty and simplify complexity, particularly technocratic approaches to managing risk and harm, tend to reproduce the expectation that child maltreatment can be predicted with a sufficient degree of accuracy to ensure that safe decisions are always made. This demand is both comprehensible and inevitably unrealistic in the emotive and conflicted world of statutory social work (Ferguson, 2004).

The persuasive lure of science as an antidote to uncertainty is explicable in this setting. In tandem with managerialism, the attraction of science-centric approaches to understanding

and addressing social problems has profoundly influenced the theory and practice of child protection and of contemporary social work more generally (Butler & Drakeford, 2005). However, there are inherent difficulties with the application of objective scientific knowledge to the social world. Social causation is ideologically contested: complex economically configured issues do not necessarily lend themselves to definitive analysis and instrumental resolution (Morrison, 2010). Lorenz (2017) argues that the nascent risk and efficiency focus, which also reaches into the realm of social work education, is the product "... of a new 'coalition' between positivism in scientific explanations and political interests, which demand of academic experts the delivery of unambiguous 'facts' that obviate political debate" (p.318). Such ostensibly apolitical 'facts' serve to engender discursive blindness.

It is important to understand that the development of child protection social work is never simply a matter of linear scientific progress. The morality which informs practice is not fixed or divine: it is politically constructed and historically patterned (Ferguson, 2004). Social work, particularly state social work, is embedded in a socio-economic-political context (Wallace & Pease, 2011). In relation to the design of new statutory practice processes, the introduction of fresh tools, or the elevation of practice principles such as the contemporary mantra of child-centred practice, it is critically important to pose the question 'why now?' (Garrett, 2009, p.880). It is no coincidence that the child-centric practice emphasis that colours recent changes to the law and related practice frameworks for state social work in Aotearoa-New Zealand has been accompanied by a renewed focus on parental responsibility for child well-being in a society riven by systemic social inequality (Author's own, 2017).

The current emphasis on psychologically situated understandings of trauma or attachment may usefully inform practice, but these models are inadequate tools for grappling with the socio-political context of child maltreatment. It is within this context that the inevitably messy work of social work in child protection is undertaken. At best, a cognitive or behavioural science lens obscures the symbiotic connection between poverty and wealth in capitalist societies. It minimises the structural relationship between material deprivation and life-outcomes and, at worst, it can serve to biologise social inequality by blaming a recalcitrant underclass for reproducing poverty through the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Cummins, 2018; Gillies, Edwards & Horsley, 2017).

Arguably the profession of social work is distinguished by efforts to synthesise, in theory and practice, an analysis of both individuated need and the structural determinants of disadvantage: the big and small picture of social life. This orientation is complex and potentially conflicted, leading Epstein (1999, p.8) to characterise social work as a "Janus-faced" endeavour:

For example, it is common to state the intentions of social work as helping people to accommodate to the status quo and as challenging the status quo by trying to bring about social change. This dissonance is intrinsic to social work, to its essence. (p. 9)

However, despite and perhaps *because of* these constitutive tensions, social work is potentially a humanising, integrative and empowering enterprise (Dominelli, 2004).

Statutory child protection practice may be inherently conflicted, but it does not have to be associated with a draconian policing of the risk-sodden poor and it can be reconstructed as an anti-oppressive activity. Understandings of socially configured causation, insight about how capitalist societies 'work' and how inequality is manifested in the lives of children and families, particularly in their relationship to the state, can and should be applied in every-day practice. A new sociologically-informed practice paradigm needs to be developed if child protection social work is to be rehabilitated in this way. In our view, the first step in this process necessitates a critical deconstruction of the contemporary relationship between social work, child protection and the neoliberal political project (Author's own).

The state, poverty and child protection

There are significant generative frictions in the current accommodation between social work and the state in Aotearoa New Zealand and in comparable societies. As child and family social work has moved away from the universal aspirations associated with the post-war welfare state it has become, in the words of Bywaters et., al. (2017, p.2), "saturated by a focus on child protection". The following discussion focusses on the increasingly problematic nature of the relationship between child protection practice and the political state. First, it is important to recognise that social work within the liberal state has always juggled elements of empowerment along with regulatory functions: care with control (Brodie, Nottingham & Plunkett, 2008). The balance between these elements is contested in policy and practice and it has shifted over time (Lewis, 1995). This conflict is particularly apparent in present-day practice. Secondly, most of the knowledge required for child protection decision making is not purely objective; it is mediated through interpersonal communicative engagement (Author's own; Warner, 2015). The following commentary explores the implications of these two propositions, and of the connections between them, for the future development of child protection social work.

Historic and current child protection practice is inextricably tied to social inequality (Ferguson, 2004). Poorer people are more likely to have contact with child protection systems for a variety

of reasons. Relative poverty involves social insecurity and a range of social risks associated with deprived neighbourhoods, including crowded or inadequate housing, which increase the likelihood of poorer health, education and well-being outcomes for the children of the poor. As suggested, child abuse is a complex phenomenon influenced by personal, family, demographic and social factors. Stressors associated with parenting in poverty, including a lack of access to appropriate support services, are likely to impact upon the quality of parenting and increases, but does not accurately predict, the probability of maltreatment. Families from lower socio-economic groupings are also more likely to be subject to oversight from the public or quasi-public-sector workers who report child abuse concerns.

There is some contention in the academic literature regarding the relative impact of systemic bias in relation to class, ethnicity and gender in the reporting of abuse and the treatment of families once they enter state child protection systems (Bradt, Roets, Roose, Rosseel, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2014). It seems clear that families subject to a greater number of social risks may also be more likely to be subject to reporting and intervention bias (Bywaters et. al., 2016). In a sense this becomes a chicken and egg debate, but it does point to the need for a policy and practice framework that takes account of each of these factors. Significantly for the purposes of this article, the liberal state has been reluctant to recognise the correlation between poverty and child maltreatment, preferring to focus on individual pathology rather than the causative function of social inequality. Gupta (2015) has described this inconvenient truth as the elephant in the room.

Davidson, Bunting, Bywaters, Featherstone & McCartan (2017) frame the resulting challenge for policy and practice design in the following terms:

Despite this clear evidence that poverty is a contributory causal factor in children's health and welfare - arguably the most important single factor - social work policy and practice have not effectively addressed this issue at any level. This is not to suggest that poverty is the only factor in the abuse, neglect and health problems that children experience, or that it is even necessary or sufficient, but that the graduated impact deprivation has on the likelihood of these difficulties should make it of more central importance to child and family social work in the twenty-first century. (p.1642)

Although the empirical evidence is both significant and disturbing, in an important sense this revelation is unsurprising. As Warner (2015) observes, social work and poverty are deeply enmeshed:

Since its earliest incarnations, social work has been inextricably bound up with poverty and with the complex and contradictory attitudes towards people living in poverty that have characterised social policy since the late 19th century. (p. 46)

Our understandings of the nature of this relationship and how we might best address the implications in contemporary policy and practice are ideologically disputed. Liberal capitalist societies are constitutionally uncomfortable with acknowledging the endemic reproduction of class-based inequality. Child protection policy and practice can function to sanitise this inconvenient truth (Ferguson, 2004) or, alternately, it can align its practice with social justice.

From Care to Control

There is an indistinct and ambiguous line between the concept of state social work as the 'fifth arm' of the integrative welfare state (Parton, 2014a) and social work as a mechanism of control in a class society. As neoliberal hegemony has intensified over the past three decades, this dichotomy has been brought into increasingly sharp relief. Moral condemnation of the dependant poor has enjoyed a political re-birth as the visible relative poverty which characterises unregulated capitalism has re-emerged as an outcome of the contemporary economic order (Crossley, 2015; Jensen & Tyler, 2015). Social work has been recast as a mechanism of surveillance and intervention directed at problem populations (Spolander, Engelbrecht & Pullen-Sansfacon, 2015). Arguably the associated policy drive for investment in individuated social capital amounts to a sophisticated repackaging of the late Victorian preoccupation with the social, moral and economic threat posed by the degenerate poor (Sugarman, 2015).

Gillies, Edwards & Horsley (2017) build a comprehensive case for something of a perfect storm in contemporary 'early intervention' policy development for example. They argue that the confluence of a social investment policy framework, brain science and corporate interest has justified a proliferation of parenting programmes targeted at impoverished mothers:

Left aside in the seemingly common sense and straightforward scenario of early intervention to save young brains is the unequal gendered, classed and raced environment in which parents and children live out their lives. (pp. 131-2)

A culture of poverty discourse masks the reality that structural disadvantage is an abiding and embedded outcome of exploitative capitalist economic relations (Krumer-Nevo, 2017).

Lorenz (2017) identifies the erosion of social solidarity which currently characterises political economy across the western world, drawing parallels between contemporary social conditions and the unregulated capitalism of the late nineteenth century. In the European context, Lorenz argues that care functions have been increasingly privatised while the social control mandate of the state has been strengthened (see also Schram & Silverman, 2012). However, he also highlights the inclusive social humanist history of social work as a mechanism designed to promote universal citizenship and social participation. As a historical response to economically generated social suffering, social work is classed as one of the mechanisms that saved modernity from itself (Lorenz, p. 315). Following Lorenz, it will be argued here that social work can be reconfigured as part of a new democratic social contract to address the current crisis of modernity.

Although social work in child protection is potentially complicit with neoliberal social engineering, it can also be a well-spring of dissent. Paradoxically (dialectically) the tension within this practice context means that social work is always potentially subversive of neoliberal orthodoxy (Author's own). Practical engagement with families struggling with the consequences of structural disadvantage facilitates a questioning of the dogma of self-responsibility and/or the intra-familial reproduction of poverty, abuse and crime (Jones, 1983).

Speaking truth to power

While international social work organizations have embraced an aspirational commitment to the pursuit of social justice (Global Agenda, 2014), child protection practice is increasingly focused on protecting the children of the poor rather than addressing the social conditions which foster unsafe environments in increasingly unequal societies (Parton, 2014). In late 2015, the hypocrisy of this position was openly articulated by a social worker (reported in *The Guardian* newspaper) in response to an address by the U.K. Chief social worker for children and families which aligned social work with social justice:

The role of the child protection social worker in today's world is not to strive to redress the imbalance of our society. And if the reality of what social workers do differs so radically from the ideology, then surely, it's time to look again at what we mean by social work and what the government and society expects of social workers? (Nicholas, *The Guardian*, October 20, 2015)

We suspect that this instance of speaking truth to power captures the conflicted experience of many, if not most, statutory social workers. However, we also believe that naming and

confronting this glaring disjunction can be the first step in re-introducing a social-work-informed understanding of *the social* into the practice of child protection social work specifically, and in the formation of public policy more generally. As suggested, a resurgent commitment to this humanist agenda is reflected in recent social work research and scholarship which has highlighted the incontrovertible correlation between poverty and child maltreatment (Bywaters, Brady, Sparks, & Bos, 2016; Pelton, 2015; Slack, Berger, & Noyes, 2017). According to Gillies, Edwards & Horsley (2017):

Supporting families to survive and thrive in this period of extended austerity should be a more central children's services priority, as a contribution to preventing fractured and damaging relationships in families and protecting children from their consequences. This objective has to be underpinned by wider economic and social policies. It has to inform staff education and training and be embedded in processes such as assessment and case review. (p.8)

From reflection on our own experiences as statutory practitioners and in relation to qualitative research undertaken with practitioners in Auckland, New Zealand (Authors own), it seems clear that social workers recognise that they engage disproportionately with people living in relative poverty. Practice-centred relationships also potentially produce a depth of understanding that transcends stereotyped and morally saturated accounts of self-responsibility for social failure; insight which lays bare the 'old libel' of behavioural poverty reproduction (Gordon, 2011, p.5, cited in Gillies, p.163). According to Warner (2015, p.160), the "in-between" positioning of social work affords the opportunity to communicate the "politics of social suffering" to others. Dominelli (2004) describes the nature of the advocacy that can be informed and motivated by such insight as follows:

Social workers engage clients in exchanging knowledge about their life experiences so that their voices can be heard and their stories can expose the inadequacy of official constructions of their lives. By supporting the creation of counter discourses social workers assist those outside their circles to understand the world from client perspectives. (p. 38)

This critical voice and the 'public role' which social work potentially generates appears to have been significantly diminished in recent times (Cree, 2013; Rogowski, 2012). It has certainly been largely silenced in mainstream child protection practice and it is instructive to consider why this has come to pass. Child protection social work appears to have lost the capacity to articulate and apply the insights which are derived from engaging with families struggling with

the burden of deprivation. It is time for child protection to open its eyes to what its practice reveals and to have the confidence to develop a more ethical model of practice.

Risk and responsibility

Apart from the fact that state social workers are often contractually muzzled by their terms of employment, the discourse of risk and abuse and the associated need to protect vulnerable children, carries immense self-evident authority (Warner, 2015). Although this imperative can effectively disable critique of current practice and policy prescriptions, there are signs that a new critical scrutiny of the relationship between poverty, social justice and child protection is re-emerging. Featherstone, Gupta, Morris & Warner (2016), for example, have characterised the dominant child protection paradigm as a voracious *risk monster* which entraps us in a logic bubble, inducing a form of analytical paralysis. The child protection mandate is disguised as apolitical, or rather as supra-political, in the sense that the need to protect children from harm over-rides concerns about the social circumstances of their parents or the socio-economic determinants of poverty and child maltreatment.

In the Aotearoa New Zealand setting this narrow framing has structured a process of *child-centred* practice reform that has played out over the last several years (Author's own x2). This orientation is graphically illustrated in the following statement by the Hon. Paula Bennet, the then Minister for Social Development, in the foreword to the 2013 New Zealand Government White Paper for Vulnerable Children:

Though I acknowledge the pressure that financial hardship puts on families, that is never an excuse to neglect, beat, or abuse children. Most people in such circumstances do not abuse their children, and I cannot tolerate it being used as a justification to do so. (Bennett, Vol. 1, p.2)

This analysis furnishes the 'strong on child safety' political stance with a powerful red herring. Featherstone, Gupta, Morris & Warner (2016) expose the realities that this reductive argument obscures:

For example, it is often asserted that the majority of people living in poverty do not neglect their children. This assertion not only supports notions of intentionality but also misunderstands the complexity of how parental identities are formed and maintained over time in the context of constraint and challenge.

Even when it is accepted that the social and economic strains impacting on parents who are living with crushing material hardship may impact upon the care and safety of specific children, this does not reduce the potential risk of harm that children suffering abuse or neglect are exposed to. If anything, poverty may be construed as a danger in and of itself, essentially blaming caregivers for social circumstances which are beyond their control.

To return to the November 2016 Guardian article highlighting the absence of any tangible relationship between contemporary child protection and distributive justice, the social worker concerned makes a further telling comment in the following excerpt:

I became a social worker because of a strong feeling that the world is very unfair; some children are born with huge advantages and others huge disadvantages. Throughout my 23 years in child protection I have seen and done work to ensure children are protected and allowed to thrive, whoever they live with. The founding principle for children's social workers is "the welfare of the child is paramount". *Perhaps social justice for the child, but certainly not for the family.* (Italic emphasis added)

The clear implication is that there is a place for social justice in statutory child protection. It is, however, a narrow conception which is compatible with a specific political and economic lens. A risk-averse child rescue practice focus is legitimated if responsible parenting rather than economic redistribution is construed as the engine of socially just outcomes. Within this frame the notion of individuated children's rights to a life free of abuse and neglect becomes something of a Trojan horse for a neoliberal social agenda. In the neoliberal political universe social justice is conflated with the concept of meritocracy and social mobility - the right of individual children to maximise their allocation of human capital (Warner, 2015). If an idealised global capitalist market-place is the organising principle of the social order, a socially just society is one which reproduces the idealised market subject: 'the self-determining, networked individual liberated from gendered and classed expectations and ties' (Gillies, Edwards & Horsley, 2017, p. 34). A return to a nineteenth century child rescue practice discourse is legitimised in this construction.

Reclaiming social justice in child protection

Given that social workers operate in a social world that is shot through with relations of power, our theories and practices are always politically situated. In our view child protection social work needs to apply a far deeper understanding of how social injustice is manifested in capitalist societies that are premised on the unequal allocation of wealth and opportunity.

Davidson, Bunting, Bywaters, Featherstone & McCartan (2017) argue that distributive justice is, or should be, the “organising value of social work” but that this zeitgeist has been hijacked by an “individual focus on risk and harm”. To mobilise against this narrow construction, social workers and policy makers need to reconstruct a practice of respect and open-ness: to effectively “change where they are sitting” (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2014, p.112).

Gillies, Edwards & Horsley (2017, p. 38) argue that a resurgence of child-rescue-driven practice in what might be described as late-neoliberal times amounts to the state being mobilised on behalf of the market to ‘secure the production of clear thinking, flexible, self-directed brains able to withstand the pressures of a global competitive system’. Child protection social work must reject this ideologically assembled fallacy which runs so counter to the social insights that our profession produces. Children are not individual products that need to be made market ready - they are enmeshed in the variably adequate shelter of their material circumstances, family constellations, cultural histories and community relationships. This insight is fundamental to social work.

Complicity with a focus on re-moralising the urban poor and / or saving their babies is not consistent with a commitment to reduce “rather than reflect or reinforce social inequality” (Bywaters. et.al. 2018, p.60). Allied with this is the invisibility of everyday parenting within capitalist societies: the labour of parenting is neither seen nor valued, it is simply expected to be well-executed by someone – usually a woman – without the support of the state. Within a neoliberalism frame the ability of parents is measured by their capacity for independence from the state and their ability to raise conforming economically productive citizens. Failures to do either become conflated with the risk of abuse to children. Appreciation of the everyday demands and processes associated with parenting is absent from the current narrative. Although these pressures may be recognised by practitioners who have parented or cared for children, social workers are increasingly taught a more distant set of preferred practice knowledges. Instead of learning about everyday parenting and how it may be shaped by deprived circumstances, social workers learn about trauma and its effects.

Human identity and well-being is essentially collective; constituted in relationship to others. Sometimes family relationships are fragmented and impoverished, and sometimes they are dangerous. Even the most forthright critics of contemporary child protection systems are at pains to point out that they recognise that authoritative intervention is necessary in some situations to protect children from serious harm (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). However, this kind of crisis-related practice is exceptional and the child abuse detection and rescue paradigm that is derived from this imperative is no basis for a socially just child protection system. In the Aotearoa-New Zealand setting, the children who come to the

attention of the statutory child protection system are drawn disproportionately from the *brown proletariat* - often young families, disproportionately young Maori and / or Pacific families, often women parenting alone - who are actively engaged in resisting their circumstances; struggling to live adequately. This is a socio-historical-economic reality rather than an imprudent choice (Authors own, 2017).

As the cracks in the wider neoliberal project begin to widen, social work needs to re-examine its role in child protection. Social workers and their managers are afforded the opportunity to develop not only awareness of structural inequality at the societal level, but also particular insight into the ways in which the micro-physics of power are manifested at the level of family life. Arguably the capacity to appreciate the relationship between social structure and the lives of families and individuals is what distinguishes social work as an applied social profession (Authors own, 2013; Krumer-Nevo, 2017). It is a sensibility which needs to be reclaimed and realised in the practice of child protection social work: making the links between socio-political analysis and practice method (Gupta, Blumhardt & ATDFW, 2017).

It is time for social work to exercise some of its subversive potential, even if the message is unpalatable to our political and managerial masters. Child protection social work may not be a revolutionary activity, but it does not have to be alienating and innately oppressive. We need to consider how we might shift the balance of our practice towards a socially aware paradigm that involves more social care and less social control. The capacity to operationalise an awareness of the relationship between structural inequality and private pain is the unrealised promise of child and family practice. (Authors own, Gupta, Blumhardt & ATDFW, 2017).

How might this be achieved?

Child protection is a demanding and inexact craft, but we do this work a dis-service if we do not engage with the wider socio-political reality: take account of the way in which capitalist societies are divided by exploitative social relations. In part the sea-change that is needed simply involves adopting a fresh perspective which challenges the ideological constructions that have come to dominate child protection theory and practice in neoliberal times (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2016). With reference to the socio-economic determinants of neglect, Featherstone, Gupta, Morris and Warner (2016, p. 6-7) embellish this point as follows:

A number of interconnected issues need addressing: the relationship between poverty and neglect and how child protection systems translate 'public issues' into 'private

troubles' and, in doing so, convert them into evidence of intentionally troublesome / risky behaviour by parents. Great quote

In Aotearoa New Zealand, a discourse of personal and family responsibility for the reproduction of trauma has become associated with both poverty reproduction and child maltreatment (Expert Panel, 2015). Psychologically grounded and trauma informed practice frameworks risk the demonising and *othering* of service-users; discounting their wisdom.

Socially just practice and child protection social work are uncomfortable bed-fellows historically, but they are not irreconcilable. In terms of systemic bias, social workers need to understand that poverty can contribute to poor parenting while also recognising that poor parenting and parenting in poverty are not synonymous. We need to develop meaningful understandings of the stresses associated with social deprivation and the way in which these pressures impact upon security, trust, communication, choices, relationships, and the possibilities for change. As Featherstone, Gupta, Morris & Warner (2016) argue, such an approach needs to be nested in a wider social model of policy and practice: a humanising orientation that recognises people as essentially social subjects rather than rational, context free, neoliberal units.

Gillies, Edwards & Horsley (2017) propose that a socially justice child protection lens would require the following:

It would mean greater recognition of the harm, distress and disadvantage poverty inflicts on children and families in the here and now. Rather than constructing policy and practice around individualised models that personalise and normalise inequality, initiatives would start from a framework of civil rights to housing, income thresholds, education, and health care services. More specifically, poverty and all its cumulative impacts would need to be acknowledged and addressed in terms of financial deprivation, as opposed to cultural or psychological deficits. (p.161)

Such a change of perspective inevitably involves re-thinking the validity of risk-obsessed child protection systems; recognising that we have become over-organised and paralysed by risk, or more accurately by fear of the consequences of not assessing risk accurately (Stanley, 2005).

Relationships of open-ness and trust are difficult to develop and sustain in statutory practice, and they impact significantly on decision-making (Smith, 2001). Gupta, Blumhardt & A-D FW (2017) discuss the impact of 'corrosive assumptions'. Messages of disrespect or coercion are conveyed insidiously across boundaries of class and ethnicity. Veltkamp & Brown's (2017)

qualitative study of the 'every day risk work' of Dutch child healthcare professionals found that similarities, or 'proximal' relationships', in terms of class and gender supported the development of 'we relationships' - where "common lived experiences and correspondingly shared stocks of knowledge facilitate familiarity and shared understanding" (p.1300). In other words, it is easier for middle class professionals to form trusting relationships with middle class clients. In child protection practice obstacles relating to class difference are often also further exacerbated by culture and ethnicity.

Both Krumer-Nevo (2017) and Gupta (2017) advocate for a poverty-informed social work that recognises and learns from the struggles, strengths, wisdom and rationality of those living with debilitating economic scarcity. This recognition includes taking account of the symbolic dimensions of poverty: the ways in which socially constructed shame and stigma can shape communication and influence relationships. It is also important to stress that these engaged understandings are not a matter of seeing the children of the poor as a "category apart"; of viewing families in poverty as a separate and dysfunctional class to be understood differently (Gillies, Edwards & Horsley, 2007, p. 24). Rather it involves bringing social understandings back in to the social work profession: recognising the reality that divergent structuring circumstances impact upon options and capacities in complex ways, including practices of struggle and resistance. To adapt Bourdieu's theorisation of the way in which social conditions become subtly embedded within individual subjectivities, social workers in child protection bureaucracies need to develop a feel for those who don't have a feel for the game (Garrett, 2009).

A more progressive child protection paradigm requires political advocacy, policy shifts and practice reforms. Material support and practical help is often more useful than clinical assessment. This kind of political reorientation involves a commitment to a meaningful politics of redistribution and the re-building of family centred social services. Parenting is difficult. Middle class families are often able to purchase their way out of this pressure in a market model. Struggling families have an equal social right to meet their children's needs. Policies that provide for adequate basic income, housing and affordable quality child-care facilities are required. A lack of integrated social policy and accessible community support services means that poorer families are funnelled into the child protection system; effectively as a social service of last resort.

The more that child protection social workers are distanced from the families they engage with, the more de-skilled and de-sensitised they become. Social workers need to get closer to people. We have been seduced by fear of getting too close, too complicit with the experience of the dangerous classes. The neoliberal social order is reinforced, effectively policed, by this

kind of bureaucratised clinical practice at a distance. We need to have the audacity to reinvent the relational basis of social work in child protection; to destigmatise the intimidating risk monster that our professional practice has become. This is not an injunction to naïve or unduly idealistic practice but rather a call to engage meaningfully and get closer to the truth (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris & Warner, 2017). We need to rethink child protection for the sake of children, families and for the heart and soul of the social profession.

References

Author's own (x5)

- Bennett, P. (2012). *The white paper for vulnerable children*. Retrieved from Ministry of Social Development website: <https://www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz/the-white-paper>.
- Berrick, J. (2018). *the impossible imperative*. Navigating the Competing Principles of Child Protection.
- Bradt, L., Roets, G., Roose, R., Rosseel, Y., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2014). Poverty and decision making in child welfare and protection: Deepening the bias–need debate. *British Journal of Social Work*. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcu086
- Brodie, I., Nottingham, C., & Plunkett, S. (2008). A tale of two reports: Social work in Scotland from social work in the community (1996) to changing lives (2000). *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(4), 697-715.
- Butler, I. & Drakeford, M. (2005). Trusting in Social Work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 35 (5), 639-653.
- Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Bunting, L., Daniel, B., Featherstone, B., Jones, C., Morris, K., Scourfield, J., Sparks, T., & Webb, C. (2018). Inequalities in English child protection practice under austerity: A universal challenge? *Child & Family Social Work*, 23 (1), 53-61.
- Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Sparks, T., & Bos, E. (2016). Child welfare inequalities: New evidence, further questions. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(3), 369 - 380. doi: 10.1111/cfs.12154

- Bywaters, P., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., Hanratty, J., Mason, W., McCartan, C., & Steils, N. (2016). *The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: An evidence review*. Coventry: Joseph Rountree Foundation.
- Chambon, A. (1999). Foucault's approach: Making the familiar visible. In A. Chambon, A. Irving, & L. Epstein (Eds.), *Reading Foucault for social work* (pp. 51–83). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Cree, V. (2013). New Practices of Empowerment. In M. Gray & S.A. Webb (Eds.). *The New Politics of Social Work*. (pp. 145-158). Basingstoke, U.K: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Crossley, S. (2015). 'Realising the (troubled) family', 'crafting the neoliberal state'. *Families, Relationships and Societies*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/204674315X14326465757666>
- Connolly, M., & Doolan, M. (2007). Responding to the deaths of children known to child protection agencies. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 30 (March), 1–11.
- Cummins, I. (2018). *Poverty, Inequality and Social Work. The impact of neoliberalism and austerity politics on welfare provision*. Bristol, U.K: Policy Press.
- Davidson, G., Bunting, L., Bywaters, P., Featherstone B., & McCartan, C. (2017). Child Welfare as Justice: Why Are We Not Effectively Addressing Inequalities? *British Journal of Social Work*, 47, 1641-1651. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcx094
- Dominelli, L. (2004). *Social work: Theory and practice for a changing profession*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Epstein, L. (1999). The culture of social work. In A. Chambon, A. Irving, & L. Epstein (Eds.), *Reading Foucault for social work* (pp. 3–26). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Expert Panel - Modernising Child Youth and Family (2015) Final Report: Investing in New Zealand's Children and Their Families, Wellington, New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, available online at www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/investing-in-children-report.pdf.
- Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K. & Warner, J. (2016). Let's stop feeding the risk monster: Towards a social model of child protection. *Families Relationships and Societies*. ISSN 20467443

- Featherstone, B., White, S., & Morris, K. (2014). *Re-Imagining Child Protection – Towards humane social work with families*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Ferguson, H. (2004). *Protecting children in time: Child abuse, child protection and the consequences of modernity*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fox-Harding, L. (1997). *Perspectives in Child Care Policy (2nd ed)*. Longman: London and New York.
- Garrett, P. (2009). Questioning Habermasian Social Work: A Note on Some Alternative Theoretical Resources. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39, 867-883.
- Garrett, P. (2013). *Social work and social theory: Making connections*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Gillies, V., Edwards, R., & Horsley, N. (2017). *Challenging the politics of early intervention – Who's 'saving' children and why*. Bristol, U.K: Policy Press.
- Global Agenda. (n.a.) (2014). Global agenda for social work and social development, First Report, Promoting social and economic equalities. *International Journal of Social Work*, 57 (54), 3-16. 1011770020872814534139.
- Gordon, D. (2011). Consultation response. Social Mobility & Child Poverty review, Policy Response Series No.2, www.poverty.ac.uk
- Gray, M., & Webb, S. (Eds.) (2013). *The new politics of social work*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gupta, A. (2015). Poverty and shame- messages or social work. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 3 (1), 131-139.
- Gupta, A. (2017). Poverty and child neglect – The Elephant in the Room? Families, Relationships and Societies. Doi:10.1332/204674315X14207948135699.
- Gupta, A., Blumhardt, H., & ADT Fourth World (2017). Poverty, exclusion and child protection practice: the contribution of the politics of recognition and respect. *European Journal of Social Work*, 1-3. Doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1287669
- Jensen, T., & Tyler, I. (2015). 'Benefits broods': The cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare common sense. *Critical Social Policy*, 35(4), 1-22.

- Jones, C. (1983) *State Social Work and the Working Class*. London and Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Press.
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2017). Poverty and the political: wrestling the political out of and in to social work theory, practice and research. *European Journal of Social WORK*, 20 (6), 811-822. DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2017.1318264
- Lewis, J. (1995). *The Voluntary Sector, The State and Social Work in Britain – The Charity Organisation Society / Family Welfare Association since 1869*. Aldershot, U.K: Edward Elgar.
- Lorenz, W. (2017). Social Work education in Europe: towards 2025. *European Journal of Social Work*, 20(3), 331-321.
- Morrison, T. (2010). *The role of the scholar-facilitator in generating practice knowledge to inform and enhance the quality of relationship-based social work practice with children and families* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. UK.
- Munro, E. (2010). *Review of child protection in England: Part One: A systems analysis*. Retrieved from Department of Education website: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175407/TheMunroReview-Part_one.pdf.
- Nicolas, J. (2015). Why pretend social work is about social justice? It's not. *The Guardian* (on line). October 20, 2015. Accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2015/oct/20/why-pretend-social-work-is-about-social-justice-its-not>
- Parton, N. (2014). *The politics of child protection: contemporary developments and future directions*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. Parton (2014)
- Parton, N. (2014a). Social work, child protection and politics; some critical and constructive reflections. *British Journal of social Work*, 44 (7), 2024 – 56.
- Pelton, L. H. (2015). The continuing role of material factors in child maltreatment and placement. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 41(0), 30-39.
- Procacci, G. (1991). Social economy and the government of poverty. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 151–168). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Stanley, T.W. (2005) *Making Decisions: Social Work Processes and the Construction of Risk(s) in Child Protection Work*, Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Rogowski, S. (2012). Social work with children and families: Challenges and possibilities in the neoliberal world. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(5), 921–940.
- Schram, S., & Silverman, J. (2012). The end of social work: neoliberalizing social policy implementation. *Critical Policy Studies*, 6 (2), 182-145.
- Slack, K. S., Berger, L. M., & Noyes, J. L. (2017). Introduction to the special issue on the economic causes and consequences of child maltreatment. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72.1-4.
- Smith, C. (2001). Trust and confidence: Possibilities for social work in 'high modernity'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 31(2), 287–305.
- Spolander, G., Engelbrecht, L., & Pullen-Sansfacon, A. (2015). Social work and macro-economic neoliberalism: beyond the social justice rhetoric. *European Journal of Social Work*. doi:10.1080/13691457.2015.1066761
- Sugarman, J. (2015). Neoliberalism and psychological ethics. *Journal of theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 35 (2), 103-116.
- Veltkamp, G., Brown, P. (2017). The everyday risk work of Dutch child-healthcare professionals inferring 'safe' and 'good' parenting through trust, as mediated by a lens of gender and class. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 39 (8), 1297-1313.
- Wallace, J. and Pease, B. (2011). Neoliberalism and Australian social work: Accommodation or resistance? *Journal of Social Work*, 11(2), 132–142.
- Warner, J. (2015). *The Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection*. Bristol, U.K: Policy Press.