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Abstract

The paper begins by introducing Isaiah Berlin's concepts of positive and negative liberty and the application of these concepts to child protection. There is discussion of some recent debates on the social and political context of state social work and child protection in particular. The authors then consider, in turn, the experience of children, parents and social workers in the child protection system. There is also a consideration of partnership and rights. The conclusion is that opportunities for statutory child protection to be liberating are limited, but that there is more potential than the most pessimistic accounts might allow. Rather than libertarian child protection, social workers can aim for child protection practice that is respectful. The paper concludes with some principles for respectful practice, based on the ideas of Richard Sennett. Most importantly, Sennett's ideas recognise the importance of relationships in social welfare and acknowledge the context of inequality within which social work takes place.

Introduction

In the context of child protection, the notion of libertarian social work is fraught with difficulty. At first sight it can be difficult to conceive of any aspect of what is essentially a policing role that might be seen as liberating. Child protection, when it works well, might be seen as an intervention that curtails the liberty of adults to act in ways towards children that society has deemed unacceptable, and that aims to liberate children by enabling them to live abuse-free lives. At a basic level, that of child rescue, we might see that the child is being liberated from an oppressive, abusive family environment. But this is a crude depiction of child protection work. Only a small minority of abused children are removed from home and unfortunately there are many aspects of the looked after system that could not be described as liberating. Such a conceptualisation also regards the child as the sole object of our concern, and indeed much child protection literature assumes this to be the case. But it is an unbalanced view of society that regards all those under 16, or perhaps 18, as worthy of our care and all those above that arbitrary line only of interest in terms of their responsibilities towards a child.

In this paper we retain an awareness that libertarianism is associated with the political Right, with resistance to regulation, government and welfare, and with the survival of the fittest. Since we do not regard such a perspective as relevant to contemporary social work we do not choose to discuss libertarianism in this sense. Instead we wish to begin by outlining Isaiah Berlin's (1969) concepts of positive and negative liberty and consider how these may apply to child protection social work. Berlin describes 'negative liberty' as being a form of liberty where outside interference in a person's life is minimal, and they are free to pursue and achieve the goals that they choose. John Stuart Mill was an advocate of this type of freedom, as he was concerned about the uniformity and lack of individual creativity and

genius that may ensue from state interference into personal lives. In contrast, ‘positive liberty’ is not freedom *from*, but freedom *to*. Thus:

I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them.

(Berlin 1969: 131)

Berlin notes that negative freedom is an impossible goal. All societies will place some restrictions on the personal lives of individuals, at the very least to prevent the liberty of others being infringed. Equally, it is generally agreed that some level of personal freedom is necessary – a practical compromise must be reached and the debate over the centuries has been the level at which to set this. It has often been noted that child protection is a perfect exemplar of the difficulty governments face in setting boundaries between public and private life (see, for example, Parton, 1998). Few would argue that full negative liberty, in Berlin’s sense, should apply to the protection of children. A parent’s right to bring up their children in a manner judged by society to be mistreatment infringes the liberty of those children. What is of particular concern to us in this paper is not where the boundaries between personal freedom and state interference should be determined – that is beyond our scope. Instead we wish to explore whether there is room in the UK child protection system for any sense of promoting ‘positive freedom’ in the lives of those affected by state intervention – particularly children and their caregivers. We therefore are interested in whether child protection provides the opportunity for family members to be self-directed, make decisions and form goals and policies, and to what extent that might be an unrealistic or unwelcome aim. Although there are echoes across the English-speaking West of the trends we discuss, and some of the issues raised are of very general relevance, this paper is primarily about the UK. We are aware that approaches to child welfare are very different, for example, in some European countries (Pringle, 1998). Before considering the extent to which children, parents and social workers experience the child protection system as liberating, the paper begins with a discussion of some recent debates on the current state of child protection and its social and political context.

Debates on the current state of child protection

What we conclude about how liberating the child protection system is will depend on our ideological orientation towards the family and the role of the state (see Fox Harding, 1997). Varied conclusions can be seen in child protection research. For example, Dingwall *et al.* (1995), in the second edition of their ethnography *The Protection of Children*, conclude that the organisational orientation in the 1990s remained one of optimism about parenting whereas White (1997), writing at around the same time, concluded almost the opposite from her research, namely that the accomplishment of the social work role requires a display of scepticism about parental accounts. In child protection practice, there are considerable tensions between an ideology of family strength, for example by encouraging families to take responsibility for child safety, as in the family group conferencing model, and a more individualistic approach, where each family member is considered to have separate and possibly opposing needs and rights. [This latter approach may involve a prioritising of social

divisions such as gender, generation, class, ethnicity and disability]. An individualistic stance tends to dominate UK child protection work, with a 'child-centred' approach dominating the rhetoric, although not necessarily the practice.

There are debates about liberty and child protection in the social work literature that make reference to social and political theory. Parton (1998) writes of risk and regulation in advanced liberalism and reaches a basically pessimistic conclusion about child welfare. Ferguson (1997; 2003) is much more upbeat about the potential for child protection to be liberating in conditions of reflexive modernity. Ferguson has been challenged as downplaying questions of power and inequality (Garrett, 2003; Scourfield and Welsh, 2003) but his intervention is a welcome one insofar as he questions an interpretation of child protection as unremittingly controlling and oppressive, and argues that we should avoid the culture of blame that follows child death inquiries (Ferguson, 2002). Although the debates in these academic papers refer heavily to social theory, they are in a certain sense empirically based, insofar as they rely on assertions about how much society is changing and how people on all sides experience child protection work.

The *Messages from Research* studies (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995) showed a generally negative picture, especially of the concentration on investigation at the expense of family support (see Gibbons *et al.*, 1995 in particular). However, these studies were conducted in the early 1990s, so this evidence is now a decade or so old and predates recent policy developments that have attempted to 'refocus' child welfare services. Spratt's more recent research (2000, 2001) has provided some interesting evidence on these developments in Northern Ireland, and his findings are of general relevance. He shows some potential for child protection cases to be reconstructed as child welfare cases, but notes the tendency for considerations of risk to dominate professional formulations and the potential for child care problems to receive quasi-child protection responses. Parton and Mathews (2001) report on a refocusing experiment in Western Australia. Their evidence suggests that the energies of practitioners are still focused on high-risk cases, but that the numbers of substantiated cases of child maltreatment have reduced without any observable increased risk to children or loss of services. For families who are considered low risk, there still seems to be a deficit in services, however, and for these families there is a high rate of re-referral. It seems that these initiatives show potential for some refocusing towards family support, but within the framework of a continuing preoccupation with risk.

Any consideration of the liberating potential of child protection needs to consider more general commentary on the political context of contemporary social work. There is a general pessimism about the state of British social work under New Labour (see, for example, Jordan, 2000; Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Jones, 2001). Some aspects of policy that govern social work are devolved to the separate nations, of course, and need not therefore be straightforwardly formed in the New Labour mould, but others are maintained by Westminster. The contributions by Jordan, Butler and Drakeford, and Jones emphasise New Labour's continuity with Conservative social policies, and its increasing social authoritarianism. These authors are critical of the paternalism towards parents and punitive approaches to crime. Parton (2002), in considering child welfare under New Labour, is more circumspect. Whilst acknowledging valid criticisms of the Blair government, he also observes that considerable resources have been invested in the prevention of family problems, such as Sure Start and the reduction of child poverty. He observes that the work of local authority social services has become increasingly residual, however.

Another more general debate that effects any consideration of child protection as liberating is the methodological argument about qualitative and quantitative approaches to

social work. Very different traditions are represented by the journals *Research on Social Work Practice* and *Qualitative Social Work*, for example. These debates affect the practice of child protection insofar as practitioners are aware of both discourses and approaches to assessment in particular can differ enormously according to whether the goal is measurement of risk or analysing a range of accounts (Holland, forthcoming). Advocates of both approaches would claim the moral high ground and, to varying extents, would make reference to considerations of liberty. For example, advocates of qualitative social work might claim that their prioritising of the narratives of service users is more liberating for those users, and those who argue for (quantitative) evidence-based practice might claim that the proven accuracy of risk assessment tools is more likely to lead to the liberation of children from abusive situations.

Having set out some of the more general context to the topic, the next three sections of the paper consider fairly briefly the experience of child protection social work as liberating from the points of view of three interested parties: children, parents and social workers.

How is it for children?

It is somewhat ironic that, in an era of generally increased emphasis on listening to children's views and children's participation, their voices are often absent in the child protection arena. We are increasingly learning from looked after children about their needs and experiences, both in practice through their involvement in reviews and planning meetings, increasingly facilitated by independent advocacy services, and in many research studies (for example, Thomas, 2002). Their involvement has also been sought recently in central government policy-making in the *Choice Protects* programme. Whilst many looked after children are also involved in the child protection system, we know much less about the experiences of those living at home but involved in child protection-orientated interventions with social workers. Research that specifically explores these children's perspectives is rare and children are still unlikely to be present in child protection case conferences and courts (Thoburn et al. 1995, Lyon and Parton, 1995, O'Quigley 2000). One of the starkest findings from the Laming Inquiry was the failure of any adult professional to find out directly from Victoria Climbié how she was. Participation and advocacy services are increasingly offered to children looked after (DoH 2002a). There is little routine provision of advocacy for children living at home but thought to be at risk of harm. The National Standards on children's advocacy frame these services as being primarily for children living away from home (DoH 2002b) Even the Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH 2000), despite its welcome emphasis on a holistic view of the child, only suggests the recording of the views of children who are aged ten and over.

In general we can only guess whether children find child protection interventions liberating, from statistics in which children appear as numbers. We do not know how many children suffer harm, only the numbers under categories of decisions made. Fewer children are being placed on the Child Protection Register. In England between 31 March 2000 and 31 March 2001, the numbers on the register fell from 30,300 to 26,800 (DoH 2002a). There are also fewer children remaining on the register for a long period of time. This appears to be due to more accurate reporting, changes to rules governing registrations, more efficiency, more reviewing of cases and a desire to meet targets. Some of this may add up to a more

positive experience for children involved in the system, but brings us no closer to knowing whether interventions are in any sense liberating. In terms of the most basic form of liberation, 'child rescue' it has been claimed that UK child homicide rates are falling, and compare favorably to other Western nations (Pritchard, 2002). Such claims are vigorously denied by the NSPCC who claim that child homicide rates have remained consistent for the last 20 years, with about 79 children being killed each year, mostly by their care-givers (NSPCC, 2003).

Therefore we would suggest that, whilst in general the UK child protection system works fairly well in protecting children (with occasional tragic lapses), there is still a clear gap in terms of listening to children's experiences of this system and beginning to find out if there are ways of promoting positive freedoms for children within that system. As Beresford writes:

If children who are bereaved, being considered for adoption, or facing life-threatening conditions, can express their views, communicate their preferences, as is happening, then it is equally possible in child protection. (Beresford, 2003)

How is it for parents?

Is it desirable or possible to talk about liberating social work with parents in the child protection system? The investigation of child protection concerns inevitably involves the infringement of parents' liberty. Occasionally it necessarily involves the taking away of almost all of their autonomy as parents – when children are removed, their access to their children is managed and all aspects of their lives are assessed. Cleaver and Freeman's (1995) study of parents' perspectives in the system exposed the bewilderment and loss of control experienced by many parents. Since then, partnership principles have become more commonplace and parents are routinely invited to case conferences and core groups and provided with written information and minutes. Their views are routinely recorded in assessments (DoH, 2000). Such processes do not, however, prevent the system being dominated by professional decision-making. Meetings to which parents are invited risk becoming the rubber-stamping of decisions made elsewhere and a means to engage parents' co-operation (Corby and Millar, 1997; Lupton and Nixon 1999).

It is not really possible to consider 'parents' experience of the child protection system, since practice is heavily gendered and the scrutiny of parenting by the state falls disproportionately on mothers. Whilst there is historical continuity here (see Tice, 1998 for some history) a lot has changed since Maynard (1985) recorded social workers advising mothers to stay with violent men for the sake of the children. The dominant response to domestic violence has become one of counselling women to leave violent men and criticising them for 'failure to protect' when they do not (Scourfield, 2003). There is now some evidence that the relative domestic labour of fathers and mothers is beginning to shift (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003) and that for many women domestic gender relations are no longer simply about 'taking care of men', as McMahan (1999) described it. Our understanding of gender identities has also been shifting since earlier radical feminist writings, and post-modern feminist ideas on social work are increasingly influential (see Fawcett *et al.*, 2000). However, Gender on Planet Earth, to borrow the title of Ann Oakley's latest book (2003), is still largely characterised by social arrangements that leave women substantially disadvantaged at the expense of men, and stark gender inequalities can often be

seen in the families that social workers encounter and the practices of social workers in relation to those families.

There are, of course, strong arguments for retaining a strongly professionalised and authoritarian approach to child protection interventions, and particularly encounters with parents. However much we may aim to take a respectful approach to practice, listening carefully to family members' accounts, there will be some whose behaviour is simply unacceptable and must be stopped. However, the constant separation of children's and adult family members needs fails to recognise their interaction in family life, as Lupton and Nixon (1999:21) argue,

Those who argue that it is the child themselves whose empowerment needs must prevail may underestimate the interconnectedness of these needs with the empowerment of others, such as parents/carers or, indeed, in the context of inter-agency decision making, the power of particular professional groups.

In taking a strengths perspective, now fully endorsed by government policy (DoH 2000), we can see that in most family networks there are those who are in a better position than outsiders to decide on alternative ways to provide for a child's safety. The Family Group Conference is an increasingly popular way to do this. The method has a good record of success in safeguarding children and enhancing the power of the family network (Marsh and Crow, 1997). This method is, of course, not a panacea, and is susceptible, like any other, to manipulation by those with power to the disadvantage of the less powerful (Lupton and Nixon 1999). In a recent qualitative study of family group conferences in Wales (Holland *et al.* 2003), we found that, in general, this intervention was a liberating experience (in the sense of being listened to and self-determining) for families as a unit as well as individual family members, including children. We also noted that meetings and plans were often 'professionalised' to some extent and that some families resented what they saw as imposed empowerment. There are no quick fixes within an entrenched system, but we would suggest that family group conferences and other approaches that attempt to mobilise family and community networks share aims with our definition of positive freedom.

How is it for social workers?

We believe that it is also legitimate to ask if child protection social work can be in any sense a liberating experience for social workers. In a recent series of seminars with child protection staff in New South Wales, one of us (Holland) asked each group whether they ever gained a sense of personal freedom or liberation in their work. After a stunned silence, several were able to summon up examples. This included helping women escape from abusive relationships by being the 'bad guy' and threatening coercive intervention. Some also gained satisfaction from seeing children thrive with alternative carers and feeling confirmed in their decision-making. Several gave examples of parents stating that although they resented the intervention at the time, it had in the long-term been to the benefit of the family. Such glimmers of achievement must be what keep social workers going, for it is well documented that the role is generally stressful and difficult. McMahon (1998), whose research vividly describes the experience of this stress in a specific Australian setting, conveys the double bind of child protection work with his book title *Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't*. Social workers are criticised if they intervene in families to protect children, and criticised if they leave a situation alone. He describes negative physical reactions that include nausea,

sickness, depression, nightmares and ulcers. One man in the social work team he observed periodically vomited into a rubbish bin in his office. McMahon (1998:89) writes that 'their bodies were wearing out because of the way they had to do their work'. Jones' (2001) recent study of state social work in the UK also notes widespread sickness and exhaustion. He describes the child protection office as 'a grim place' (p. 551). It is unsurprising therefore that there are particular problems in recruiting and retaining social workers in statutory child and family teams (SSI, 2002).

It was noted earlier in the paper that a preoccupation with risk continues to dominate child welfare work, even where initiatives are developed that are intended to move away from this. Despite major efforts to refocus children's services away from a narrow focus on risk in England and Wales there is little evidence to suggest that practitioners have been enabled to broaden their work focus.

Compared with the 2000 census, in the 2001 census there were 8% *more* children served whilst looked after and a 6% *reduction* in the numbers of children supported in their families. This represents a significant real shift. It implies that councils are having to focus on children with the greatest need at the expense of the volume of family support services.

(DoH 2002a: 23)

The same document argues that the concentration on children with more complex needs may be due to programmes such as Surestart and On-Track starting to take effect. The more positive focus on prevention and support in such programmes is an attractive proposition for social workers, and social services managers report that they are losing many experienced and skilled staff to new and exciting schemes (SSIW, 2002). Statutory child and family teams thus risk becoming a second-class option for newly qualified and agency staff, undermining efforts to provide a quality and supportive service for families.

The answer to retaining staff may not just be remuneration and reducing case-loads, although these would be welcome. Instead, a change of culture more akin to the approach of the new community-based services and the longer-established voluntary agency projects might provide a more attractive work culture. Empowering families within the child protection system does not necessarily mean a loss of power for social workers (Lupton and Nixon, 1999). Power is not a finite entity. Embattled practitioners may themselves feel strengthened, and perhaps to some extent liberated, if enabled to work in more collaborative ways with family networks and communities. Collaboration is sometimes associated with working in partnership and we therefore examine this approach next, as an extension to the discussion of whether children, parents and social workers experience the child protection system as liberating.

Partnership and rights

Any liberating stance in child protection, when considered at all, is most often discussed under the discourse of 'partnership'. But we would argue that partnership is as much associated with legalism than with liberation. It has often been noted that child and family social work has become increasingly legalistic and regulated (see, for example, Howe, 1992, Parton, 1998). A legalistic approach tends to be associated with a clear delineation between various parties' rights and duties. In research carried out by one of the authors (Holland, forthcoming) it could be seen that, within the narratives of in-depth child protection

assessments, children have rights (but no responsibilities or power), parents have rights and responsibilities (but no power) and social workers have responsibilities and power (but no rights). The following excerpt from the introduction to an assessment report illustrates this:

“All adults, not only parents, have a *responsibility* to assert and protect the *rights* of children” [source not noted in original]. Where there is a conflict of interests between the parents and the child, the child’s *interest* must be given first consideration. Parents have a *right* to expect careful assessment prior to long term decisions being taken. *Opportunity to challenge* information held on them should be given to parents and decisions taken that affect them should be taken in a framework within which the parent is always involved. Parents have a *right* to an *open and honest approach* from social workers and a *right to clear explanations* of the power, actions and reasons for concern of the agencies involved. Their views should be sought and taken into account, although engaging them in assessment and planning does not mean a total sharing of the agency’s *responsibility* for decision-making. (Extract from Family Court Assessment report written by a social worker. Emphasis added).

In this context, and from the practitioner’s perspective, partnership is enacted through a transparent and contractual approach. Therefore written agreements are drawn up outlining the expectations placed upon parents and the type of behaviour they should expect from the social work agency. Such an approach aims for fairness by reducing the power differences inherent in an opaque and complex system, whilst remaining honest about the authority retained in statutory interventions. It can also be understood as setting out the sanctions and rewards available to the service user, overtly teaching them the role of ‘client’ (Lipsky 1980). What can be missing from such a conceptualisation of partnership is the notion of relationship.

Carole Smith has argued that ‘rights-talk’ provides an element of certainty in late modern risk society, and that such talk eclipses value-based talk in contemporary social work discourse:

A rights discourse is based on a contractual exchange between persons with entitlements and duties. It does not require any semblance of a relationship, any belief in the innate worth of particular individuals, any engagement, any caring. There is no ambiguity or uncertainty other than that which is introduced by practical or resource issues
(Smith, 1999, p. 21).

As the Rev. Dr. Morris Young puts it, in Stephen L. Carter’s novel *The Emperor of Ocean Park* (Carter, 2002: 349¹), ‘when you give a man a right it is too easy to forget to love him’. Loving your clients is not of course the most respectful basis for a social work relationship (Sennett, 2003) but this phrase does nonetheless capture something important about rights. We would not wish to suggest, of course, that rights are not important. However, they do not form the whole solution to ensuring baselines of fairness and decency in what is essentially a negative but necessary form of social intervention.

Partnership practice was conceived of by social workers in the child protection assessment study (Holland, forthcoming) as one based on honesty. They did not pretend to be the equals of those they were assessing. Instead, they aimed to be clear and fair and this was expressed through formal contracts and statements of intent. This reflects the hierarchic and managerial approach dominant in contemporary statutory social work (Ife, 1997). Partnership is likely to remain little more than a set of policies, that appeal to our sense of fairness and justice but that often mean little to the recipients of our services, unless they are accompanied by other, much less easy to define, qualities. Many studies of the perspectives

¹ Page reference is to the QPD edition.

of adult and child service users have found that the quality of the relationship with the social worker is valued more highly than formal structures and procedures (Butler and Williamson, 1994, Thoburn *et al.*, 1995). Whilst fairness, in the form of keeping within procedures and the law, and honesty, in the form of transparency, are vital aims in child protection work, what is of interest here is whether there is also room in child protection work for other, perhaps more human, values.

Respectful child protection

There will always be limits on how liberating the child protection process can be for family members. In terms of defining liberty as freedom from outside interference – Berlin's negative liberty – child protection investigations must impede on this human freedom. However, to apply aspects of Berlin's definition of positive liberty - goal setting, self-determining and being treated as a subject not an object, there is certainly scope for these in child protection practice. A stance of careful listening to each family member's lived experiences, and helping them to set goals in terms of changes that need to be made in their family lives, might potentially become a liberating experience for participants who find that there is the possibility of escape from negative spirals of family interactions. Client participation in service planning and policy making is always difficult where clients are involuntary, but insights brought to us by service user-led organizations such as the Family Rights Group and Voices from Care have been invaluable. Even if the term 'liberation' appears unrealistic or glib in this field, there are, perhaps, other goals we can aim for, such as practice that reduces shame and stigma, practice that is respectful. To conclude the paper we outline the potential for respectful social work in this field.

Many discussions of 'respect for persons' in social work have come to seem rather tired. They tend to be rather 'liberal' in the glib pejorative sense that socialist activists sometimes use that term, that is, not taking very seriously the persistence of social inequality and specifically class inequality, and also being overly vague and non-specific. Richard Sennett (2003) goes beyond platitudes about social work 'values' and roots his discussion of respect in the realities of inner city life and the jobs of social workers. He is concerned with how to cross the boundaries of inequality with respect and he does not only tackle the relatively comfortable issues (for left-wing social scientists) of poverty and social exclusion, but also the much more tricky and controversial issue of inequality in abilities. Child protection is unavoidably caught up in inequality: clients' often extreme poverty, educational disadvantage and often poor parenting skills in comparison with social workers' (let's face it) relatively comfortable wages, 'expert' status, and, we would hope, skills in engaging children. Sennett provides some interesting ideas for social policy and the welfare state in general, but applying his ideas to an arena such as child protection where social control is so overt is more of a challenge. We attempt to do that in what follows. We outline Sennett's ideas on dependency, autonomy and reciprocity.

Sennett argues that there is nothing inherently shameful about dependency. He challenges the discourse that regards dependency as infantilisation. What does need to be avoided, however, is passivity. People who encounter the intervention of the welfare state need 'to control the conditions under which they see and are seen' (p118). Reluctant clients of child protection teams may not be able to control the fact of being 'seen' (made visible) by the authorities, but they should indeed be able to control the *conditions* of their visibility. They need not be objectified and demeaned by inhumane bureaucratic responses. Passivity

can be avoided if people are allowed to participate actively in the conditions of their own care.

Autonomy is another crucial aspect of respect for Sennett. This means accepting that you cannot fully understand another person. This acceptance leads to an 'opaque equality' as you are 'treating the fact of their autonomy as equal to your own' (p122). This autonomy requires a relationship. The lack of understanding of the other needs to be mutually acknowledged. Autonomy 'supposes at once connection and strangeness, closeness and impersonality' (p177). Social workers should be able to accept that there are large areas of the experience of the often extremely poor, stigmatised and damaged adults and children that are the clients of the child protection system that they (social workers) cannot begin to understand, even if they have themselves lived in poverty or had troubled childhoods or relationships.

Sennett insists that autonomy has to be mutually granted and there has to be some reciprocity across social inequality. Reciprocity, he observes, is 'the foundation of mutual respect' (p219). Where does reciprocity apply in child protection work? Social welfare is apparently one-sided: it is *provided for* people in need, and working in a conflictual child protection system does not necessarily have any tangible payback for the workers. But some mutuality can be achieved if social workers can learn from the resilience of children and parents in challenging situations. The grant of autonomy by a social worker dignifies the marginalised or stigmatised client and in turn 'strengthens one's own character' (p262). Sennett insists that there has to be a respectful *relationship*. Respectful interactions do not just happen, but have to be worked at and negotiated. Appropriate words and gestures are needed to convince each other of the respect, and this negotiation 'engages the complexities of personal character as much as social structure' (p260).

He further identifies part of the process of respectful relations as 'turning outwards': taking in and testing new values, a new relation to other people. Turning outward means that 'the prisoner reforms rather than is reformed; he cannot simply be prescribed another, better set of social practices' (p240). This is the process of *individual* change that has to be part of successful social work, no matter how social that work is. To summarise in Sennett's own words, he is attempting to construct

a necessarily complicated relationship between society and character which might, just might, lead people to treat each other with mutual respect. For this to occur, people would have to practice exchanges of a peculiar kind; they would have to break down in certain ways their own tacit assumptions and shared pictures of the world.

(Sennett, 2003: 245-6)

We describe these ideas at some length as we see the respect that Sennett describes as perhaps a more useful basis for child protection social workers to proceed than a partnership that is rights-based but devoid of a relationship. His version of respect recognises the inequality in society and in the state welfare system and recognises the importance of a human relationship.

To conclude

The UK child protection system is reeling from another tragic child death and subsequent thorough inquiry. Laming (2003) recommends more structures, safeguards and procedures. The government has responded swiftly, with an audit of local authorities'

structures and procedures. Children's Trusts, bringing separate services more closely together to provide a more streamlined and hopefully person-centred service, are likely to be gradually introduced. Governments and practitioners have a duty to ensure baselines of care and safeguards, but, as Beresford (2003) notes, it is difficult to regulate the kind of involvement that service users, children and adults particularly value. These are attitudinal and reflect a genuine desire to engage with and listen to service users and to risk allowing some decision-making to rest with family networks and communities. We have gained some headway, we believe, in listening to children who are looked after, but child protection investigation and assessment is still often an adult-to-adult affair. Parents and children have many more formal rights to participate and be informed, and while we welcome this development, we feel that not only do such rights often turn out to be conditional in practice, but they also represent a partial view of liberty.

We intended in this paper to present a measured assessment. We mean this to be a principled balance rather than just fence-sitting. There is genuine evidence of problems in the system but also indications that child protection practice can have a positive impact on families and that it is becoming a little more liberating in some limited ways. We have further argued that perhaps liberation is not the most appropriate goal within the limitations of state intervention but that the notion of respectful practice is more relevant and useful for social workers.

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