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New times or same old story? Risk, reflexivity and social control in child protection

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Summary

The paper addresses some recent attempts to reassess the child protection system as potentially liberating. These are, firstly, discussions of child protection in the context of theories of reflexive modernisation and the risk society, and secondly, post-modernist feminist writings. After initial theoretical debate about some of these perspectives, the authors go on to present ethnographic research evidence showing that social control is alive and well in child protection work. The paper concludes that whilst these recent optimistic accounts of the child protection system are welcome contributions, they have overstated the liberating potentials of the current system.

Child protection procedures and interventions must not only be seen as constraining, but viewed also in a positive light as enabling, creating new opportunities for protection from violences that were traditionally repressed and for reflexively organised life-planning (Ferguson, 1997: 230).

My warning to people now is that if you need help the last people you should go to is to social services. We warn anybody we can.

They are not there to help (one of the 'bad mothers' interviewed by Croghan and Miell, 1998: 454).

The judgements expressed in these two extracts illustrate the range of possible conclusions in the evaluation of current child protection practice. The former extract comes from an academic commentator and the latter from a former client. We do not intend to set the opinions of clients against those of researchers, but only to show the scope for opposing views. A similar range of opinion can of course found between academics and between clients.

This paper revisits the question of whether contemporary child protection is constraining or liberating. It does so in response to some recent optimistic accounts, and in the light of ethnographic research conducted by one of the authors. We begin by addressing the issue of reflexivity in child protection. The term is doubly relevant, firstly in terms of reflexivity in the research process and secondly in relation to Ferguson's (1997, 2001) claim that child protection in conditions of reflexive modernity can be liberating. We question Ferguson's reading of the reflexive modernisation thesis through a consideration of debates from the sociology of the environment that have clarified issues of lay / expert relations and the model of transformation advanced. We then proceed to present some judgements of our own about contemporary child protection work, drawing on ethnographic evidence.

Reflexivity in child protection research

It may seem obvious in the context of the rise of reflexive qualitative research in social policy to remind ourselves that what we find in child protection research depends on what we are looking for. It is crucial that as researchers we acknowledge the theoretical origins of our writings and our orientations towards our data. This argument has of course been made before, notably by Corby (1987), but we believe it needs to be restated. Too many of those who comment on child protection do so without acknowledging their ideological baggage.

The conclusion a researcher reaches about the extent of coercion in family welfare services is principally determined by his or her position in relation to the respective rights of parents, children and the state (Fox Harding, 1997). So, for example, Dingwall *et al* (1995) in commenting on the second edition of their book *The Protection of Children*, an influential piece of research conducted in the late 1970s, conclude that the organisational orientation in statutory child welfare work remains one of optimism about parenting. White (1997), within a couple of years of Dingwall *et al*'s comments, found the accomplishment of the social work role to require a display of scepticism about parental accounts. These almost opposite findings can perhaps be explained less by differences in research methodology or regional and temporal variations in workplace culture than by the different stances of the researchers on what constitutes optimism or scepticism in relation to standards of parenting (Corby, 1987). These stances will depend

on the researchers' baseline for good enough parenting, and also on whether they incline to a parents' rights, children's rights or other perspective.

Any serious attempt at reflexivity requires us to declare our perspective at the outset. According to the family welfare paradigms outlined by Fox Harding (1997), it has to be acknowledged that the researcher (*N*) set out with a parents' rights perspective. The research set out to shed light on the problem of gender bias in child protection work. Making that statement necessarily involves asserting that there is bias and that this is a problem. It was, to an extent, taken as read (based on existing research and commentary) that child protection social workers spend more time working with women. The concern about gender bias assumes that women, who are the object of services, are having a rough deal, rather than men, who are not the object of social work intervention. This in turn is based on the assumption that being in contact with child protection services is a negative experience, at least for adults.

All those who comment on the child protection system surely have to be open about their family ideology. It simply begs too many questions to claim to be child-centred. Not all children express a clear view on the question of with whom they want to live. Even when they do, we know from existing research (e.g. Butler and Williamson, 1994) that social workers do not necessarily follow children's stated wishes, taking the view that children do not always know what is best for their welfare. We therefore have to decide whether we are inclined towards the view that children are basically better off with birth parents or whether we think families of origin are so often damaging to children that they will be better off, at least in the long term, with trained

carers who have a commitment to child-rearing and experience of vulnerable children.

In what follows, we (the authors) are therefore making several assumptions, but our point is precisely that assumptions about the family, and assumptions about gender, are inherent in the framing of research questions about child protection. Questions of audience are also crucial. In writing this piece, we are challenging a particular emphasis in some recent papers on child protection – more of this below – just as, for example, Ferguson (1997, 2001) is challenging authors such as Parton (1991) and Thorpe (1994) who have emphasised the constraining aspects of child protection, and Featherstone and Trinder (1997) are taking on standpoint feminism.

Later in the paper we will further explore some of *N*'s original assumptions in the light of the ethnographic data. Before that, we outline the recent work we take issue with, and engage in discussion of some of the theoretical basis for this work.

Risk, reflexivity and the experience of child protection

The overall message of the Department of Health research studies that were summarised in *Child Protection: Messages from* Research (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995) has been characterised by Parton (1996) as follows

What the research seems to demonstrate is that while there is little

evidence that children are being missed and suffer harm

unnecessarily at the hands of their parents, as implied by most child abuse inquiries, and (intervention) is thus 'successful' according to a narrow definition of child protection, this is at a cost. Many children and parents feel alienated and angry, and there is an over-emphasis on forensic concerns, with far too much time spent on investigations, and a failure to develop longer-term co-ordinated treatment, counselling and preventative strategies (Parton, 1996: 5)

This characterisation belies Parton's own orientation to the child protection system, but it is, in our view, a fair summary. These research studies represented the high point of pessimism about the system. That is not to say that the pessimists' case has not been made more strongly – it has, especially by Marxist critics of social control in social work. Rather, it was the high point of general acceptance, including from government, that the system was too much based on investigation of alleged abuse and not enough on helping families.

Several commentators have argued that a preoccupation with risk lies at the heart of child protection practice. Kemshall *et al* (1997) argue that a categorisation process of risk has emerged as a central organising principle across the personal social services. Parton *et al* (1997) draw on the work of Mary Douglas (1986; 1992) to demonstrate that the concept of risk has become increasingly associated with negative outcomes: hazard, danger, exposure, harm and loss. Douglas points out that the term 'risk' has overtaken 'danger', because danger does not have risk's aura of science and does not conjure the possibility of accurate prediction. She also comments that the

major significance of the current emphasis on risk is its forensic functions, which are particularly important in the development of blaming systems. In the light of this risk-blame connection, Parton (1998) argues that audit becomes a key element in responding to the inherent uncertainty of risk. Social workers have to make themselves auditable. In this climate it is not the right decision that is important, but the defensible one.

Harry Ferguson's ideas on social work and child protection in the risk society disagree with this emphasis on constraint and control (Ferguson, 1997; 2001). He argues that such writings are one-dimensional, and ignore how people actively make themselves the subjects and not just the objects of social processes. He draws heavily on various writings of Giddens (1990, 1991) and Beck (1992) on risk and reflexive modernisation, and sees subjects of social regulation as increasingly critical and reflexive with reference to these systems. He sees lay people as knowledgeable about expert information: 'most people most of the time know a great deal of what social workers, other professionals, administrators and politicians know' (Ferguson, 1997: 229). He is also optimistic about gender relations, and social workers interactions with women. Whilst acknowledging that not all abused women and children get what they want from the system, he argues that child protection should be seen as potentially enabling for women, in 'drawing social workers into a process of engagement around who they are and how they want to live, as mothers and women' (Ferguson, 2001: 51).

Some post-modern feminist accounts of social work support Ferguson's optimism. Brid Featherstone (e.g. 1999, 2000), for example, seeks to challenge the more rigid prescriptions of standpoint feminism. In relation to

the relationship between women clients and child protection officials, she questions the assumption that mothers necessarily experience officials and investigations as oppressive and over-bearing. Her stance is in keeping with a more general desire to move away from monolithic approaches to questions of gender, and to emphasise complexity and fluidity. We welcome this quest for more complex understanding of gender relations. Post-modernist feminism has been liberating in many ways, for example by loosening the ties of biology and gender identity, and by undermining binary thinking based on heterosexual assumptions. As many critics have observed, however, post-modernist feminism is less effective in explaining the enduring social regulation of women. As Ann Oakley observes, post-modernist feminism does not adequately explain

> the situation of women out there in a world that definitely does exist, and that remains obdurately structured by a dualistic, power-driven gender system (Oakley, 1998: 143).

On one level, we welcome the debate engendered by authors such as Ferguson and Featherstone. It is important to avoid the unrelenting negativity about social work from some authors, that Pithouse and Williamson describe thus:

> the unrelieved gloom that sometimes characterises academic accounts of practice, particularly social work, whereby oppression, neglect, and incompetence are unerringly found by those whose

intellectual fascination with welfare is to ensure they find little that is

positive or liberating about it (Pithouse and Williamson, 1997: xiii).

Whilst welcoming the interventions of these more optimistic commentators on child protection, we reject their conclusions. We do so largely in relation to questions of evidence. We are not convinced of the evidence for the kind of reflexive modernity described by Beck and Giddens and we are not convinced of the evidence for reflexivity in the relationship between child protection workers and clients.

Problems with the reflexive modernity thesis

Culpitt argues that, following twenty years of neo-liberal ascendancy, the 'new rhetoric of governance' has placed the 'lessening of risk, not the meeting of need' at the heart of social policy (Culpitt 1999:35). Such work reflects the widespread ascendancy of managing 'risk categories', defined via a range of technical and professional knowledges, in an increasingly diverse range of policy spheres (Kemshall *et al*, 1997; Kemshall and Maguire, 2001). In the process of risk definition professional knowledges assume an axial position in defining which risks are to be managed, how they are to be identified and the relevant practices necessary to manage risk.

This immediately raises questions about the degree of fit between these abstract risk categories and the range of actual needs existing within existing lived relations. The increasing prominence of risk owes much Beck's

postulated 'reflexive modernity' (Beck 1992) and the subsequent contributions of Giddens and Lash (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994). The prospect of 'reflexive modernisation' leading to a 'new modernity' represents one of the key theoretical moves in postulating more positive scientific and social domains through the practice of reflexivity. Before proceeding it is important to be clear about the nuanced differences in the way this term is used particularly by Beck and Giddens.

The most fundamental point here is that Giddens inherits the term reflexivity from an Anglo-American tradition where, following Goffman, the term is applied to critical subjects reflecting on practice to produce change. This understanding of the term is almost the antithesis of Beck's use. Beck (1996) categorically asserts that reflexivity means 'more of the same' whilst the term 'reflection' denotes critical appraisal and change. Understood in this manner reflexivity and reflexive modernization represent the deepening and perfection of the modernization deficits associated with wealth production. Reflection for Beck is generated within particular occupational locations when workers (usually professionals and managers) are confronted by situations that conflict with professional knowledge challenging workplace norms and culture. For our present purposes it is sufficient to acknowledge that such cases are a central form of agency within Beck's model of 'sub-politics' (1997; 1999).

In terms of the empirical material presented below it would be important to analyse the accounts of social work professionals in terms of their 'reflections' upon the limits or otherwise of a risk management approach in childcare provision. Such reflection would be some evidence of the limits of

risk management as a primary focus of professional practice being subject to 'reflexive modernisation'. The relevance of such an approach lies in the role given to knowledge in both Beck's and Giddens' approaches to reflexive modernization.

Within Giddens' model of reflexive modernization Giddens uses a 'double hermeneutic' model of knowledge (Giddens 1991). In this, professional (abstract) knowledge 'spirals in and out of' concrete sites and is recast in the process, thus accommodating inputs from a range of social sites. This is a crucial mechanism through which the everyday experience of citizens is disembedded – lifted out of day to day context by experts – before being re-embedded within lived relations that reintroduce a degree of local redefinition.

Bauman (1993) amongst others (see Wynne 1996, Welsh 2000) has pointed out that this model of the transformation of knowledge and professional practice ultimately leaves 'expert' discourses in a position of primacy. To paraphrase Bauman, that which is re-embedded is always qualitatively different from that which was disembedded, as the primary filter of risk makes anything other than a technical / expert resolution unthinkable. In the context of this paper this means that the categories of a range of professionals will assume primacy in the formulation of professional practice despite the emphasis placed on reflexivity by Giddens. In effect, the model of reflexive modernization advanced by Giddens and Beck silences more social space than it gives voice to because of the primacy afforded to a variety of knowledges based in substantive forms of rationality (see McKechnie and Welsh 2001).

Qualitative data from a range of sites suggest that 'lay' protagonists exposed to 'expert systems' have highly sophisticated understandings of the prime categories of response that will trigger 'the system' to act – to address their needs as distinct from their abstract risk position. In order to achieve this, lay respondents translate need into risk categories recognised by the expert system. Such acts of translation are based in an appreciation of the power relations embedded within all knowledge and the recognition that there is more chance of being heard by speaking in the voice of the system. The data presented below do not engage directly with clients perceptions, concentrating as it does on the view so social work practitioners. Within their discourse, however, the issue of power relations between worker and client is clearly present.

The primacy given to substantive forms of knowledge by Beck and Giddens arises from their assertion of a radical disjuncture between traditional society and modernity on the one hand and modernity and reflexive modernization / risk society on the other. This simply assumes that, within modernity, knowledge based on substantive forms of rationality becomes the common currency of debate, banishing other ways of knowing associated with traditional society. Further, it is assumed that the crisis of expert knowledge typifying reflexive modernization and the risk society is a new phenomenon associated inter alia with the challenge of post-modernism, the collapse of faith in meta narratives, and an inescapable politicisation of expertise. Though neither author puts a date on this second transition it parallels the ascendancy of neo-liberal thought originating in the late 1970s. Whilst the notion of disjuncture permits a series of category shifts such as Beck's assertion that

risk production replaces wealth production, risk position replaces class position and Giddens' transition from tradition to modernity to high modernity it arguably conceals important elements of continuity. Wynne (1996) cites Welsh (1993) in support of the argument that lay scepticism about expert views predates this period, suggesting that public doubt is historically persistent rather than a novel feature of reflexive modernity.

A second consequence of the radical disjuncture adopted by Beck and Giddens can be seen in the way that risk becomes, in Culpitt's terms ubiquitous, ignoring all social distinctions (Beck 1992) arising from the previous era of wealth production. Beck's argument that risks are democratic is derived from the paradigm case of radiation and the assumption that the universal spread of radiation has universally democratic consequences. Even in this strong case it has been pointed out that the consequences of radiation exposure vary according to age and gender and that the consequence of exposure vary.

Lupton's incisive review of the risk literature (1999) lends support to this view pointing out that gender is a major determinant of childrens' approaches to risk and risk taking (1999: 157-160). Parton *et al*'s research (1997) is one of many studies that show mothers being targeted for risk management in child protection. This underlines the point that once the risks being considered are social in character then reflexive modernization's heavy reliance on 'democratic' environmental and science based risks diverts attention from the continued importance of social categories such as 'race', gender and class. The risks being assessed and regulated are societal risks and are thus inescapably framed through social categories and perceptions – they are

clearly social constructions just like the early radiation dose models that masqueraded as science (Welsh 2000).

The influence of reflexive modernization has been so pervasive that social risks are treated as if they are technical risks open to resolution through the refinement of knowledge categories. In a neo-liberal climate it is not only needs that are sidelined but the very notion of collective provision within social policy. Increasingly individuals are delegated responsibility for 'risk management'. In this sense risk has become an overarching discourse when it is far from clear that it provides an effective base for either environmental or social risk management. One of the authors has long argued that social justice provides a better means through which to address both these domains (*self-citation*). The pursuit of environmental and social justice has in fact become the main organizing frame for the emergent global coalition of people against capitalism.

Given this, we would argue that the liberatory potential of reflexive modernization is limited as the model of reflexivity at the heart of these theories contains too much room for more of the same. In a widely cited work, Power argues that the need to process risk has given rise to the 'audit society' but warns against this becoming nothing more than 'shallow rituals of verification' (1997:123). We would emphasise that we do not want to completely dismiss optimistic accounts of child protection work, nor question the dedication of social workers attempting to advance such agendas. Our objective is to question the assumption that risk and reflexivity represent a panacea offering a gateway to a new era of professional practice.

Evidence for Optimism?

Our other observation about the limitations of optimistic accounts of child protection work relates to the relative lack of empirical support for this stance, in comparison with the body of research which suggests an over-emphasis on control and forensic concerns (see Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). Ferguson (2001) refers to his data from Ireland which show mothers to be the most important source of referral to child care and child protection social work teams. This does provide some support for his earlier assertions based on social theory (Ferguson, 1997). Pithouse and Tasiran's (2000) data from Wales show that local authority social workers believe themselves to have an orientation towards family support, rather than control. This finding does, however, raise the question of whether or not social workers are aware of, or would admit to, more controlling aspects of their orientation towards families. Spratt (2000) reports a study from Northern Ireland of the views of senior social workers. This shows potential for child protection cases to be reconstructed as 'child care problems', but Spratt notes the continuing tendency for child care problems to receive quasi-child protection responses in a climate of preoccupation with risk. Gordon's (1988) historical research, which shows women often choosing to initiate contact with social workers for protection, is cited by Featherstone to support a more optimistic account of women's experience of child protection. The practice Gordon studied could of course be considered of marginal relevance to contemporary child protection practice because it pre-dates the contemporary preoccupation with risk. We

would not disagree, however, that some women do seek help from protective agencies. It is also worth noting, though, that many who need help do not ask for it from social services, and our argument is that those who do ask for help enter a system whose basis is social control. This seems the appropriate point for us to turn to our ethnographic data to support our case.

Social control in child protection practice

N spent three months attached to a child care social work team in the UK, 'The Uplands'. He collected data from participant observation in the social work office, interviews with social workers, and reading of case files. As this was a study of social workers' occupational culture, nearly all data were from the office, and there was no concerted strategy of contacting clients. Data were analysed according to the principles of grounded theory, and coding was facilitated by the software NUD*IST 4. There were two in-depth interviews conducted in another authority, 'Docktown', and these are also used as ethnographic evidence in the material that follows. It is important to note that the fieldwork was conducted in 1997. More recent child welfare policy is beginning to reflect the 'refocusing' agenda, emphasising the importance of seeing all child clients as 'in need' (Department of Health, 2000). This guidance is too new for any up-to-date evidence to have emerged of the effect on front-line practice. Anecdotal evidence from social workers in South Wales during 2000 suggests, however, that their time is more than ever targeted on the most urgent of child protection cases. Pseudonyms are used in the data

excerpts below. All these relate to social work practitioners, except for one manager ('Margaret').

Fieldwork in the Uplands team suggests there is in fact overt control in much routine practice. That is not to argue that there is no support or help for clients. It may well be that many clients regard their social worker very positively, but clients' accounts of their experiences are beyond the scope of the research design. In the section that follows, we simply intend to draw out some of the important aspects of social control in the child protection role, because these fundamentally affect how clients are constructed.

The relationship between worker and client in child protection social work is inherently problematic, and the difficulties in the relationship form the context of the construction of clients in the office culture. Local authority children's services in the 1990s have been increasingly preoccupied with responding to allegations of child abuse (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). Not all abuse investigated is familial. Allegations are made against other parties, including family friends, neighbours, strangers, and people with professional contact with children, such as teachers. The Uplands team cases that *N* read about in files or discussed with social workers were, however, all cases of alleged familial abuse, using that term in its broadest sense to include, for example, the boyfriend of a child's mother who does not live in the home full-time. Investigating familial abuse and neglect cannot be done in the context of a straightforwardly warm and trusting relationship between social worker and all family members. Some parties may well have asked for social services intervention: perhaps a child directly asking for help, or confiding in someone who then contacts the social services department, or one parent

making an allegation against another. Also some parties may already have an established bond with a social worker. But conflict, on one level or another, is inevitable. There is an atmosphere of coercion surrounding the child protection role. Social control is very explicit. Lorraine, a social worker, acknowledges the trend by labelling child protection as authoritarian:

> Lorraine: You know there is less of this sort of welfare work I suppose.
>
> Interviewer : Right, right.
>
> Lorraine: And it is more sort of child protection and authoritarian if you like (interview with Lorraine).

The authority role does not mean that all adult clients are seen as equally difficult. The picture was more complex than that, with clients constructed within multiple, and sometimes conflicting, discourses of masculinity and femininity (*self-citations*). But the possibility of coercion is inherent in a relationship with such a power differential. Client self-determination has been an important element of traditional social work values, although more recent statements of the ethical base of the profession have incorporated an acknowledgement that the use of authority to override client's wishes can be necessary (see, for example, British Association of Social Workers, 1996). The Uplands team staff manage the challenge that overt social control poses to their social work identity by deciding that in order to be fair to their clients they must be overt about the power differential. They speak of the importance

of being clear with clients, that this is good social work and thoroughly compatible with their occupational identity.

I spell it out…if we don't do ABC we'll be going back to court. If things don't change there'll be consequences…. spelling it out - this is the situation (interview with Claire).

I think that from what Graham was saying, it was very much presented to her as 'this is your last chance, you know, if we find the kid's are still not going to the school and that you're still leading the same sort of lifestyle as before we're going to start looking at care'. (Mike's supervision with Margaret)

This is very concerning as I thought you were doing much better than before. I am worried that this may mean that your standards have slipped and that you are returning to the way things used to be when living in Woodlands. As you know I do not like making threats or giving people ultimatums but I have to consider the children's needs. The children are still subject to care orders (except Leanne of course) and as such we still have shared parental responsibility and the right to remove them to a safe place if necessary (letter from Pete to the Brown family, in their case file).

Making power overt seems to acquire the status of a social work intervention. As Howe (1992, 1996) amongst others has observed, traditional therapeutic

social work intervention does not form a very significant part of the contemporary social work role. Child care social workers have become care managers. The traditional idea of helping clients to learn strategies that will lead to change in their lives has faded. It has not disappeared. There are referrals made to specialist agencies for this traditional social work help, and some workers try some strategies with some clients. There is a great deal of support in the form of day care for children, to ease stress on parents. But many of the 'redeemable' clients are, in the last analysis, expected to change solely in response to the threat of losing the care of their children. In practice, for the Uplands team social workers, 'working with' clients usually means monitoring the quality of their parenting and telling them what they have to change. As Howe puts it,

Clients are expected to comply and conform; they are not diagnosed, treated or cured. If they know the rules, it's up to them to decide whether or not to abide by them (Howe, 1996: 88).

The extent to which 'being clear about concerns' has achieved the status of a social work intervention is illustrated by the two pilot interviews in Docktown. The respondents were asked 'what do you think helps people change? what kinds of things that social workers do are more likely to help?' The responses are reproduced below.

I think it very much depends on the family themselves and how they see the problem. The family, as I was saying earlier, the family

need to recognise that there has been a difficulty or a problem and that that difficulty needs to be overcome, and that they want to change to move forward. And unless the family recognise that, then change will not happen and obviously then that is where we start going down the road of care proceedings or whatever. I mean that is the last resort. You usually try sort of all sorts of family support systems first to try and get change going as soon as possible, but we can only allow so long for that to happen. If there isn't any movement towards making improvements, I think as long as you are open and honest with the family all the way through, that makes life easier for the social worker to say 'right this is the cut off point, you haven't done this that and the other as expected and which you agreed to do, therefore we go along the lines of care proceedings and will work against your wishes if necessary, to sort of gain what we think is best for this child'. (interview with Sarah, Docktown)

I think that the best policy is to be open with them and not to have a hidden agenda. If you put your cards on the table and not hold things back and say look these are the concerns, these are the choices we have got, this is what we would like to do, this is how we think we can achieve that and involving them in that process, they may think that it is a totally different problem, you know. I have always worked in a way that, I have never hidden issues. I have always been completely honest with the clients and I think they

respond to that. I don't what else to say really (interview with Lynne, Docktown)

These two social workers are in effect choosing this approach as their favoured social work intervention: the thing we do which most helps people to change is telling them they have to. Lynne's 'I don't know what else to say really' may effectively be an admission that this is all that is on offer; that traditional social work helping strategies are just not part of the job. There are many accounts of cases that suggest most, if not all clients are aware of the social worker's ultimate authority.

I did a visit to a family up in Meadow Vale, but having kind of established that I wasn't going to take their daughter into care they said they didn't actually require any other service (Mike's supervision with Margaret)

He is like, you can't get hold of him because he thinks that we are to do with the police, you see (Lisa's supervision with Margaret).

Mike mentioned a visit he had just done to an 11 year old boy with learning difficulties. Mike said, 'I'm no expert but I think he was functioning as a 5 year old'. On a previous visit, the boy had hidden under the table because he thought Mike had come to take him away. Mike said that because he is in local authority care he

associated social workers arriving with him having to move to another placement (from fieldnotes, 8 July)

It could be argued, of course, that clients are well aware of the power differential anyway, even where their social worker is not self-consciously 'open'. It should be stressed that making power overt does not necessarily lead to a uniformly conflictual situation. Many worker-client relationships continue to be very warm and, arguably, a generally positive experience. An example of where power is potentially subverted through humour is that of the Brown family. The Browns received an overtly threatening letter from Pete, their social worker (see above) but continued to have a relationship with him that seemed genuinely warm. During a formal meeting in their home that the team manager also attended, the story was told (not for the first time, it seemed) of how Dean Brown had previously joked that Tracey, his wife, needed a diary for meetings like this since all the social workers had one. He had gone the next day to buy her one for 35p in Poundstretcher, a local budget shop. The price and the chosen shop contrasted sharply with the origins of the social workers' thick institutional diaries, serving to illustrate the difference of class and income, as well as poking fun at the trappings of authority.

Discussion and conclusions

Clearly there are methodological limits to what can be claimed from this one ethnography about the current state of child protection work. *N* did not

research the views of either parent of child clients on their involvement with social services, and theirs are surely the most important opinions on whether that involvement has been a good or bad experience. He also only studied one team of social workers, but we can take from this study some ideas on what the culture of the Uplands team reveals about the current preoccupations of child protection practice. Waddington (1999), writing on police canteen culture, criticises researchers' claims that what the police say about their work amongst peers reveals how they perform their duties in public. We believe *N*'s research in the Uplands team avoids this pitfall. Firstly, as Pithouse and Atkinson (1988) assert, social workers' accounts of practice *are* work, since good work is only known through good accounts. Secondly, the analysis of documents shows something of frontline practice. Whilst case records are, of course, particular retrospective versions of worker-client interaction, documents such as case conference reports constitute actual social work intervention. Reports are a written summary of a social worker's judgement of a case that strongly influences the conference decision. So whilst there are limitations to what can be claimed from our data, we maintain there is a basis for some initial comment on what can be learned about the current state of the child protection system.

This paper is largely about social control in child protection work. All state welfare work can be understood as social control in some way or another. As Abbott and Sapsford (1990:120) boldly state, 'it is now widely accepted that social workers are "soft policemen"'. Marxists would emphasise the pacifying of the working class to diffuse opposition to capitalism (Leonard, 1978). The work of Foucault (1977) and Donzelot (1980) has shown that

helping professions have a crucial role in disciplining populations. Moreover it was the premise of the research that gender relations, whilst not the only social relations relevant to the topic (class, in particular, is crucial), do inevitably impact on every aspect of the job of child protection. So of course child protection is about social control and of course it is gendered.

There is something of a consensus in the research on child and family social work that across the Western world the emphasis has shifted from child welfare to child protection, with a great deal of time being absorbed by investigation of alleged abuse (see, for example, Lindsay, 1994 on the United States; Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995 on the UK and Parton *et al,* 1997 on Australia). As Parton and Parton (1989) have observed, it is inevitable in such a climate that women will feel the heat of the investigation because they are far more likely to be the primary carers of children (Parton and Parton, 1989). A narrow interpretation of the welfare of the child only serves to intensify this process.

Social workers tend to be very clear that their responsibilities are to children *rather than* adults. It is a clear and open organisational ethic that helping parents for its own sake is not part of the job, and in child protection cases children's interests are quite often thought to clash with those of parents. In the ethnographic research, we did not encounter any instances of children going home to parents against their will. There were, however, several cases discussed around the office where children had been taken away from home against their stated wishes. Where a family home is considered by social workers to be unsafe, children's opposing views will not affect the action taken. Certainly there is a belief that parents should be

supported for the sake of improving children's quality of life, but we know from existing research that support services are often lacking (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). Women do most of the caring, so are more likely to be the parents needing and asking for some kind of support service. They are also more likely to be victims of abuse from violent male partners and, arguably, less likely to cause serious harm to children. But if support services are few, and primarily for children, or at least for the sake of children, then women will inevitably experience investigation more than help, and experience this more than men.

Rose (1987) sees society as regulating parental conduct not through obedience to the threat of sanction, but through the activation of guilt and anxiety. Rather than power operating on the family, it suffuses the family. This is Donzelot's (1980) notion of government *through* the family, rather than government *of* the family. Whilst this is no doubt a fair judgement on the regulation of parenting across social classes, and we are generally happy to accept this Foucauldian understanding of power, we would argue that the practice of child protection needs to be viewed rather differently. Power is not simply uni-directional in the child protection process, but clients do not tend to have much of it in relation to crucial decisions about children (rightly, some would argue). The control of parents in this arena is overt and relies on the existence of threats, which are often quite explicit. Since the child protection system affects poor working class families more than any others, the nature of the regulation of parenting can be seen to be class-specific. Certainly parenting is regulated through anxiety about children (see Scott *et al*, 1998), but the parenting of those under scrutiny of the child protection system is

regulated by threat of sanction. Our concluding evaluation of the child protection system, then, is that social control of parents and children is fairly overt and that this inevitably impacts more on women as mothers.

The impact on social workers themselves must not be forgotten. One Uplands social worker, Mary, found the child protection role very difficult and said that 'most of the time it doesn't really feel like you're helping people'. She left the job soon after. McMahon (1998) has appropriately entitled his ethnography of a child care social work team *Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't*. He vividly describes how the stress created by an investigative culture premised on rooting out failing parents takes its toll on the social workers. He documents negative physical reactions that include nausea, sickness, depression, nightmares and ulcers. One man in the social work team 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'.

We intended this paper to be written in a spirit of frankness – to be frank about the limitations of our research, and frank about some of our assumptions, as well as those of others. Debate is healthy, of course. The authors we have taken issue with have helpfully drawn our attention to some previously neglected aspects of the client-worker relationship in child protection. Our aim in this paper has simply been to challenge these a little in turn and contribute to an ongoing debate.

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