EMERGING PERSPECTIVES ON ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE

Chapter 6

Child Welfare: AOP's Nemesis?

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How can child protection workers address issues of child abuse and neglect with families in a way that is anti-oppressive? My struggles with this question, both as a practitioner and as an academic, have consistently led me to one conclusion—answers to working anti-oppressively do not lie in social work ideas but in the ideas of those receiving social work services. Acting on this conclusion, I have sought "client" ideas about how to work anti-oppressively. Before I present the results of this research, I will examine the challenge of working anti-oppressively within the context of child welfare. I begin by outlining the nature of anti-oppressive practice (AOP) and the ways it attempts to dismantle systemic inequalities that underlie social injustice. I then suggest that child welfare is a nemesis of such practice because modern child welfare's origins lie in the efforts of society's privileged to control those they perceived as a threat to their dominance. I will show that such control is not just historical—current child welfare practice continues to preserve systems of dominance. Child welfare, therefore, presents AOP with a poignant challenge: How can child welfare be transformed into an activity that challenges the dominant discourses that gave it birth while also protecting children? I contend that social work has no answer to this challenge because remedies formulated within social work simply perpetuate the discourses of domination in which child welfare is steeped. Instead, transformation lies in remedies formulated by service users—it lies in social work giving up speaking about what child welfare "clients" need and listening to what service users themselves say they need. I demonstrate the viability of listening to child
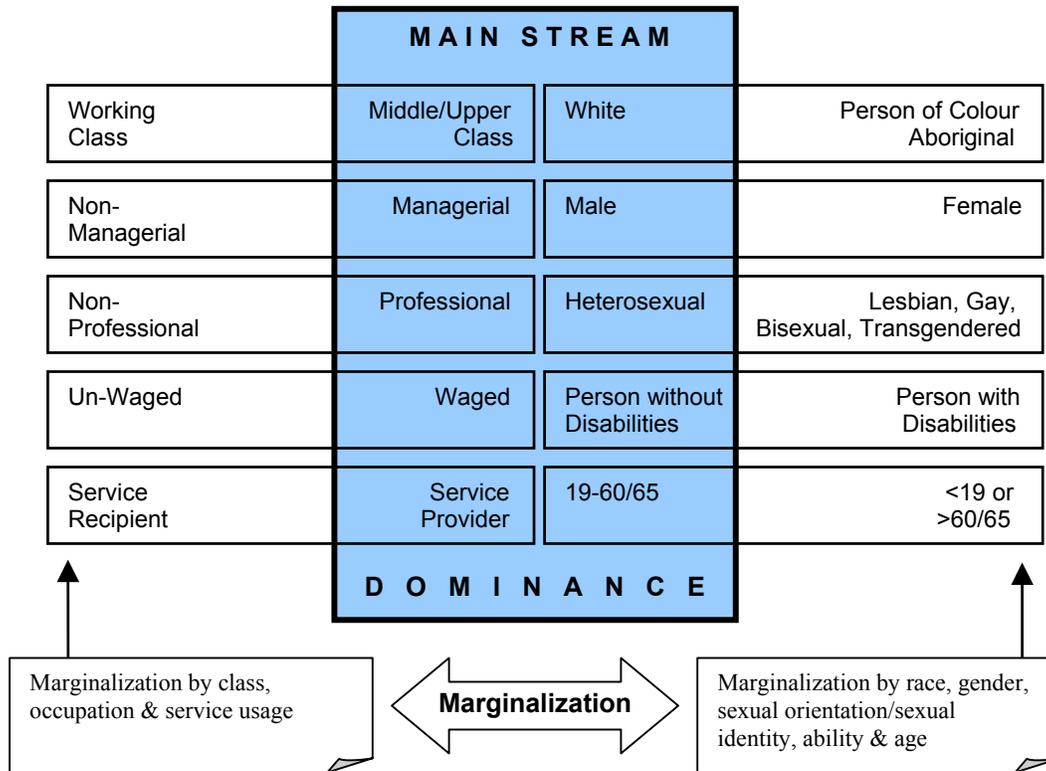
welfare service users by presenting the findings of my research that examined parents' views of child protection services.

What is Anti-Oppressive Practice?

Anti-oppressive practice is concerned with eradicating social injustice perpetuated by societal structural inequalities, particularly along the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation and identity, ability, age, class, occupation and social service usage. Young (1990) explains how such inequality is maintained, in part, by five forms of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. "Exploitation" results from fixed social relations between social classes and groups causing "a transfer of energies from one group to another that produce unequal distributions" (Young, 1990 p. 53). "Marginalization" pushes classes and groups of people to the edges of society where they are "expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation" (Ibid.). "Powerlessness" leaves categories of people experiencing "inhibition in the development of [their] capacities, lack of decision making power in [their] life, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the status [they occupy]" (Young, 1990, p. 58). "Cultural imperialism" causes groups of people to find that "the dominant meanings of society render the particular perspective of [their] own group invisible at the same time as they stereo-type[*sic*] [that] group and mark it as the Other" (Young, 1990, pp. 58-59). "Violence" is systemically "directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group" (Young, 1990, p. 62).

These five forms of oppression, and the social injustice they support, result from the domination and privilege held by select societal groups and classes. Figure 6.1 presents a spatial representation of the relationship between domination and oppression and shows how "mainstream" societal space is occupied by locations of privilege and "minority" locations are pushed to the social margins. The oppression shown in Figure 6.1 is accumulative with the more marginalized sites pushed further from the centre. For instance, a lesbian woman of colour living with a disability is likely to experience more marginality and other forms of oppression than a heterosexual White male with a disability. Just as sites of oppression interlock, so do sites of dominance and privilege with prime societal space monopolised by the dominant male, heterosexual, White, able, middle-class, professional/ managerial locations that situate themselves as epitomising the Canadian social fabric (Yee & Dumbrill, 2003).

Figure 6.1: A Spatial Analysis of Domination & Oppression

	MAIN STREAM		
Working Class	Middle/Upper Class	White	Person of Colour Aboriginal
Non-Managerial	Managerial	Male	Female
Non-Professional	Professional	Heterosexual	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered
Un-Waged	Waged	Person without Disabilities	Person with Disabilities
Service Recipient	Service Provider	19-60/65	<19 or >60/65
	DOMINANCE		

Marginalization by class, occupation & service usage ← **Marginalization** → Marginalization by race, gender, sexual orientation/sexual identity, ability & age

Although Figure 6.1 aids social analysis, it does not empirically represent society—it is abstracted from select characteristics of society. Figure 6.1 must not be taken literally because to do so would oversimplify and reduce the dynamics of oppression into a clash of binary opposites. Such reduction is problematic because although power is held within the locations shown in the centre of Figure 6.1, this is not universally so and the ways oppression operates are much more fluid and complex. Figure 6.1 is further complicated by its categories being social constructions. "Race," for instance, is a category that gains meaning only because of the oppression experienced as a result of racialization. Consequently, the significance of the locations shown in Figure 6.1 do not lie in an "essential" difference within the categories listed, but in the power held by the dominant groups to define specific locations as "different" and marginalize those so defined. Figure 6.1, therefore, does not provide a map of society that can be used to identify individuals who oppress and others who are oppressed, but it provides a broad topography of Canada's social landscape that reveals the socially constructed contours that shape oppression.

Social work was combating social injustice and dominance along the dimensions shown in Figure 6.1 long before the term "AOP" was coined;

feminists, anti-racists, and structuralists have addressed these forms of oppression for decades. Even interlocking oppression and the socially constructed nature of "difference" has been recognized for some time. In my own and others' anti-racist work in Britain in the 1980s, interlocking oppression was recognized and the term "Black" was used by those from oppressed groups as a term of resistance not only referring to race but also to others forced to society's margins (Gilroy, 1987; Hiro, 1971). More recently, the term "Whiteness" has been used to refer to the groups that dominate (Kincheloe, 1999; McIntosh, 1998; Yee & Dumbrill, 2003). AOP, therefore, does not bring a radically new perspective to social work; it brings a synthesis and refinement of earlier social justice perspectives. With the spatial analysis shown in Figure 6.1, AOP also brings attention to the social location of those who speak and are heard in social discourses. It is no longer sufficient for social work to speak of social justice without considering the location it speaks from, which is usually the dominant location at the centre of Figure 6.1. Indeed, laws governing social work, most Canadian social work institutions, and the theories that underpin social work intervention tend to be steeped in White European thought and ways of being. By speaking from a location of dominance, social work not only removes the opportunity for those on the margins to speak for themselves, it also perpetuates mainstream discourses that underpin injustice. Consequently, high on AOP's agenda is examining and dismantling the role social work plays in maintaining oppression. This self-examination is not only required by the discipline as a whole, but by each of us within the discipline. For me, therefore, a White British male who appears to be located in the centre of Figure 6.1, I must not only ask how social work oppresses and how it might become anti-oppressive, I must also ask how I oppress and how I might become anti-oppressive? The question posed at the beginning of this chapter, therefore, is very personal for me: How can I address issues of child abuse and neglect with families while also being anti-oppressive? To understand the challenge of answering this question, one must first be aware of how child welfare systems protect dominance.

Child Welfare: A System of Dominance

Child welfare masks its propensity to oppress by presenting its efforts to protect children as the product of "civilised" society and contrasting its compassionate treatment of children with the barbaric treatment of children in past societies (Fraser, 1976; Radbill, 1974, 1980; Rycus, Hughes & Garrison, 1995). Indeed, the protection of children from abuse is said to have begun in

1874 when the New York Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals discovered six-year-old Mary Ellen being beaten by her caregivers and "rescued" her after recognising that children deserved at least the same rights as animals (Costin, Karger, & Stoesz, 1996; Lazoritz & Shelman, 1996; Litzelfelner & Petr, 1997; Mohr, Gelles, & Schwartz, 1999). Further advances occurred in 1962 when the medical team of Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegmueller and Silver (1962) refocused society's attention on child abuse by discovering the "battered child syndrome." More progress was made in the 1970s when the extent of sexual abuse became evident (Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youth, 1984; Finkelhor, 1984; Kempe & Kempe, 1978; Russell, 1983). Now, children in the modern developed world are protected by social workers who police parenting with an array of risk-assessment instruments.

The above accounts misrepresent both the past and present. Life in ancient societies was often brutish for adults and children alike, yet efforts to protect children from physical abuse, sexual abuse and also neglect can be traced back to the beginnings of recorded history (Corby, 2000; Dumbrill & Trocmé, 1999; Pollock, 1983). Historical accounts, therefore, contrasting ancient barbarism toward children with modern caring for children do not provide a basis for understanding the past but an oversimplified binary opposite against which modern child welfare characterises itself as "advanced." Indeed, once the ancients are considered "barbaric," the moderns are more easily considered "civilised" and acts of modern child welfare that might be regarded as oppressive are more easily overlooked. For instance, portraying modern child welfare as "civilised" overlooks the fact that when Mary Ellen inspired the 1874 "advances" in child welfare, First Nations children were being removed from their families in a deliberate attempt to eradicate Aboriginal language and culture. Also overlooked is the fact that when Kempe and colleagues' 1962 "advances" occurred, the "sixties scoop" was underway in which, supported by a Federal stipend for every Aboriginal child apprehended, provincial child welfare agencies "scooped" thousands of First Nations children from their parents and placed them with White families. Although the treatment of Aboriginal peoples is the clearest form of oppression by child welfare organisations, other marginalized groups have also been oppressed (Gordon, 1988; Pfhol, 1977; Swift, 1995a, 1995b). This oppression results from child welfare organisations not only being founded to protect children like Mary Ellen from harm, but also being designed to protect social order. Swift explains the motivation of those founding modern child welfare organizations:

They believed that in "saving" neglected children, they also
could save themselves and their positions of privilege. They
most certainly hoped to help neglected children, but they
wanted to reduce threats to the existing social order that they
believed these children might come to pose. Their scheme
was ingenious, providing themselves and their representatives
with the authority of the state to intervene in and alter
the private lives of those they saw as dangerous to their own
interests…. This basic approach, with continual refinements,
remains in place today. (Swift, 1995b, p. 74)

This approach remaining in place today is evidenced by the continued
overrepresentation in care of children from groups that the founders of
modern child welfare saw as a potential threat to their privilege. First Nations
children are still removed from their parents in disproportionate numbers
(Fournier & Crey, 1997a, 1997b) as are children of single parents (Callahan &
Lumb, 1995). Child protection agencies' focus on marginalized groups is not
just a Canadian phenomena; in the United States child removal is linked to
poverty (Lindsey, 1994); gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered parents
consistently come "under fire" (Polikoff, 1999); and children of colour are
over represented in care (Chand, 2000). Examining the impact of interlocking
sites of oppression on involvement with child welfare services makes the
scope of this problem apparent. Working with British statistics, Jones (1994)
calculates the compound risk of child removal for a child aged five to nine
from a single-parent family of mixed ethnic origin receiving social assistance
with four or more children living in rented accommodation with one or more
persons per room to be one in ten. In contrast, a similar child from a two-
parent White family not receiving social assistance with three or fewer
children living in a home they own with one or more persons per room faces
a one in 7,000 chance of entering care. This 700:1 ratio does not result from
the parenting of White middle class families being 700 times better than single
parent mixed ethnicity families dependent on benefits; it results from
prejudices and structural inequalities deeply embedded within child welfare
and other social systems. Child welfare and AOP, therefore, are diametrically
opposed: child welfare protects privilege by removing the children of those
marginalized within society rather than examining the structural inequalities
that disadvantage these families, while AOP demands that these structural
factors are examined and dismantled—child welfare is AOP's nemesis.

Tackling the Nemesis

To break its own cycle of abuse, child welfare must challenge and change the dominant discourses that gave it birth. Such challenge is not possible from within the child welfare system because remedies conceived from a site of dominance will simply reproduce the privilege preserving activities initiated by those who founded the modern child welfare system. Indeed, the founders of modern child welfare did not meet and consciously plot ways to preserve their privilege, but attempting to prevent child abuse and neglect from their position of privilege caused their remedies to be steeped within the world view they operated within. Consequently, their ideal of a White, two parent, heterosexual, able-bodied, hard working Christian family became the solution they set for the children and families they helped—a solution that institutionalized the marginalization of families who did not match this ideal. Current child welfare remedies conceived from a location of dominance will do the same—although well intended, they will perpetuate a discourse in which the privileged conceptualise and determine what the marginalized need. Transforming child welfare, therefore, requires "privileging" voices from "the margins" and drawing solutions from outside dominant space.

AOP is already drawing on knowledge from the margins—a growing number of child welfare professionals speaking from personal experience of marginalization are challenging child welfare's dominance from the inside out. Literature from the margins is also being drawn into the centre of AOP social work education. Such work is crucial, yet efforts must go further—those outside social work who are directly impacted by child welfare intervention must gain a voice in shaping the services they receive. Social work needs to listen to remedies rather than generate them—it needs to de-centre its own dominant knowledge and make space for service users' knowledge. Beresford explains that, "there has always been service users' knowledge—from the earliest days of the secular religious charity and the beginnings of state intervention and the poor law" (Beresford, 2000, p. 492). Such knowledge is based in the real lives, struggles, ways of being, and locations of those whom services are directed. If the founders of modern child welfare services had drawn on knowledge from those in these locations rather than from their own positions or privilege, perhaps the systems they designed might have transformed the existence of those who received intervention rather than preserved the dominance of those who delivered it. If social work focused more on facilitating service users defining their own problems and remedies rather than establishing its right as a profession to speak for them, social work might have had more success in remedying rather than reinforcing

social injustice. AOP, therefore, must facilitate and tap the development of service users' knowledge. Indeed, because "service users knowledge grows out of their personal and *direct* collective experience of policy and provision from the *receiving end*" (Beresford, 2000, p. 493), such knowledge is crucial if AOP is to overcome the nemesis of child welfare.

Undoing dominance: What child welfare service users say

Children have been gaining an increasing voice in Canadian child welfare (Strega, 2000) and this voice is crucial because ultimately it is children the system attempts to serve. My work, however, has focused on the voice of parents for two reasons. First, parents receiving child protection services are rarely heard in Canada. Second, my child protection practice usually placed me face-to-face with parents in attempting to bring change. It has been primarily in this face-to-face encounter with parents that I have struggled with the question of working anti-oppressively—what does AOP look like in this context? Answering this question requires me to hear what parents have to say. In previous work, reported elsewhere, I have explored parents designing and evaluating the services they received at mezzo levels (Dumbrill & Maiter, 1997; Dumbrill, Maiter, & Mason, 1995). My current work explores parental views at the micro level in an attempt to answer the question outlined at the beginning of this paper—how do I address issues of child abuse and neglect with families in a way that is anti-oppressive?

Previous Research
The few studies that examine the ways Canadian parents experience child protection intervention reveal that parents have a predominantly negative view of services. Anderson (1998) examined the views of six Native parents in Toronto who had been involved with child protection agencies and elicited themes of, "anger, hate, fear, despair, isolation, frustration, pain, guilt, distrust, betrayal, and worry." Given the history of the residential school system and the "sixties scoop," such themes are not surprising. Yet not only First Nations parents held these views; McCullum (1995) examined the experiences of ten non-Aboriginal parents receiving child protection from an Ontario Children's Aid Society (CAS) and found that "parents were conscious, and frightened, of the extent of worker and agency power. Parents knew their children could be removed and feared they would never be returned" (McCullum, 1995, p.55).

McCullum found that fear caused parents to feel angry, resentful and frustrated with the agency. Parents in British Columbia felt similarly; Callahan,

Field, Hubberstey and Wharf (1998) examined the views of thirty parents, twenty-one child protection workers, and five voluntary agency workers in an attempt to distil the elements of "best practice" within child protection. Parents not only feared workers, but saw one of their main parenting tasks as protecting their children from child welfare intervention. Also in British Columbia, Grams (1989) examined the views of thirty-five parents who were afraid of workers and felt that they had little control over the process or outcome of child protection intervention. Not all the findings of these studies were negative; variables mitigating against fear included workers and parents being open about their fears (Callahan et al., 1998); workers showing compassion, commitment, concern for the family's problems and listening to what parents had to say (McCullum, 1995). When fears were not addressed, parents were unwilling to be honest with workers and began to "play the game," which involved "learning what workers expect and providing workers with the answers workers wanted to hear, even if this means lying," (McCullum, 1995, p. 119-120). One parent who took some time to learn the rules of this game reported that if she had know these rules earlier, "I would have been humbled a long time ago. … I would have kissed their arses, bowed, whatever," (McCullum, 1995, p. 98). There is also evidence of parents fearing child protection workers in Britain and the United States (Cleaver & Freeman, 1995; Corby, Millar, & Young, 1996; Diorio, 1992) as well as evidence of parents "playing the game" (Corby et al., 1996; Howe, 1989). Whether the findings of these international studies can be transferred to Canada is unclear because of differences between British, American and Canadian child protection systems. Even the transferability of Canadian study findings within Canada is problematic due to methodological limitations. More problematic is building anti-oppressive practice on these findings. Anderson, for instance, describes the feelings of First Nations parents toward child protection workers and contrasts these with qualities parents appreciated in workers through services they had received from outside the child protection system, but Anderson (1998) does not develop a viable means to utilize these qualities while delivering child protection intervention. McCullum (1995) attempted to develop a model of child protection intervention by using a grounded theory and recommended child protection workers intervene by building on parental strengths, but these recommendations are limited because her study examines only cases of sexual abuse. Grams (1989) also attempted to develop a model by using grounded theory, but his findings are limited by containing few recommendations for practice. Callahan and colleagues' (1998) study contains several implications for intervention and they provide workers with guidelines for "best practice." Central in their

recommendations is that parents discuss with workers their fears of children being removed and that workers dialogue with parents about their fears of children being harmed. Callahan and colleagues, however, do not formulate "service users' knowledge" into theory that explains the process of intervention from a parental perspective. In fact, none of the above studies provide a theoretical model that explains the process of how parents experience and make sense of intervention. Such knowledge is crucial because if child welfare is to be transformed so that it does not oppress, it is essential to understand how those it oppresses consider it to oppress, and to understand the changes *they* believe are necessary for it to become anti-oppressive. Thus, to transform the child welfare intervention process into an anti-oppressive activity requires that the theories and ways of understanding of parents be used to develop appropriate interventions.

Research Design
I set out to discover how parents experienced and made sense of child protection intervention. A grounded theory design was used so that the research would map parental experience and also allow a model to be developed explaining intervention from a parental perspective. In-depth interviews lasting between forty to ninety minutes were undertaken with seventeen parents. Member checking interviews took place with four parents. A focus group of five child protection workers explored emerging themes and considered implications for their practice.

Sample Characteristics
Sampling took place primarily in Ontario with only one parent from outside Ontario (in British Columbia) being interviewed. Theoretical sampling was used, a process where as themes begin to emerge from data, cases are selected into the sample to allow the perimeters and characteristics of these themes to be tested and mapped. Although mapping of themes was possible, some limitations occurred as a result of workload pressures at the participating agencies, thus preventing them providing an extensive sampling pool. Participants ranged in age from nineteen to over sixty with a mean age in the mid-thirties. Ten parents were men and seven were women. Most—seven fathers and three mothers—were single parents. Parents were primarily from lower socio-economic groups. Three of the fathers were employed in unskilled or semi-skilled work, one was a homemaker, one unemployed and one on long-term disability. Three fathers did not specify their occupations, but lived in lower income, working-class neighbourhoods. One father was a successful businessperson and politician. Four mothers were homemakers

living in working-class neighbourhoods and two—one student and the other unemployed—were living in a woman's shelter at the time of the interviews. One mother was a professional or semi-professional working in accounts for a large company and also owned her own home. Parents were predominantly White; two were women of colour and one father was Aboriginal.

Findings

Parents described the encounter with child protection services as being confronted with "absolute" power. Some parents connected this power with history and oppression on a political level. Mr. E., a First Nations parent, packed his bags and left home when child protection workers came to talk about concerns regarding his children—he had been taken from his mother in the "sixties scoop" and had no faith in talking with child protection workers. Mr. A. spoke of the physical and sexual abuse suffered by his family members two generations previously as orphans in state care, and was indignant that child welfare agents had now come back to criticize his parenting. Ms. O., a Black mother who had five children removed by White workers and placed with White foster mothers, found her baby developing an increasing inability to look into her "Black face" during access visits. Apologising for talking about "discrimination," Ms. O. said she wonders "why they are having Black babies bonding with White women?" Mrs. B., a French Canadian parent, was not only refused a French-speaking worker but was also prohibited from speaking French to her children in supervised access visits. Mrs. B. resisted:

> I refused to speak to them in English, I have only spoken to
> my children in French since the day they were born... I was
> not about to give them, by an action of mine, the impression
> that authority means English. … It is difficult enough to try
> and raise children in French in such an overwhelmingly English
> environment, without giving them the message that any time
> that there is anything serious going on we speak English.

Most parents did not connect child protection intervention to broader social or political issues, and with the exception of one parent, no difference existed in the ways parents experienced or dealt with intervention between those who recognized a political dimension to their experience and those who did not. All parents simply described child protection intervention as a force far more powerful than themselves and spoke of quickly learning that given the power differential between workers and themselves, they had to

"play the game." This game was similar to that identified by earlier research where parents feigned co-operation to get child protection services out of their lives. Mr. J. was the exception to this rule: Mr. J., a single parent and full-time homemaker, learnt legal skills in jail and devoted his full energies to challenging child protection and other social service departments. Mr. J. reported that his efforts gained him financial settlements and caused workers to be "fired," but said he was unable to change the system from exerting power over parents.

The ways power is wielded over parents by child protection services conforms to the three dimensions Lukes (1974) claims social power is exercised through: coercion, controlling agendas and controlling consciousness. In Luke's first dimension, overt coercion is used to force a person to do something. The experience of Ms. F. typifies how such power was used. Ms. F. wanted her partner, Mr. E., to return home, but child protection services had concerns about his parenting abilities, Ms. F. describes the impact of intervention: "Every time she came here she made me cry, every single time she came here. Every time I said to her, 'you know what, you are scaring me.' She says, 'if we find Mr. E. here your kids are gone!'"

In the second dimension, power is exercised through the control of agendas and by determining what is debated and what is not. The case of Mr. A. typifies how this power is used. Mr. A. became increasingly frustrated by decisions about his family being made by child protection services in closed meetings he had no access to; he described how this left him feeling powerless: "I cannot do anything because I am put against a wall, I am facing an enemy that is not a visible enemy—who do I fight? What do I do?"

In the third dimension, control is exerted through the power to shape or limit consciousness. When this type of power is wielded, there is an absence of observable conflict because power operates through establishing "taken-for-granted" practices. This power operates by parents accepting and not challenging the ways service is delivered. Mr. J. explains: "Most parent are so caught up in the struggle that they have with their children who are in need of services that they cannot perceive ways and means by which this service can be provided."

Although Luke's framework reveals how parents are controlled by differing forms of power, the study's focus was on identifying how the theory of service users, rather than theory developed within the academy, explains parental experience. It is important to analyze power as defined by parents themselves because their definitions give access to the world of those receiving service rather than the world of those delivering it.

Parents articulated how workers had access to five specific power mechanisms: coercion, resources, knowledge, defining and procedure. Parents not only articulated how workers gain "power over" them through these five mechanisms, they also described how these same mechanisms can be used in a constructive manner—as "power with" them. The concepts of "power over" and "power with" are well developed in social work literature (Miller, 1991). Simply stated, "power over" is a worker directing power at a client to cause him or her to conform, while "power with" is a worker joining his or her power with that of the client to achieve a jointly agreed objective.

How parents experienced "coercion" being used as "power over" them was described above—Ms. F. being reduced to tears in fear of her children being removed. Such fear has enormous coercive power over parents. At the same time, however, parents recognized that coercive power could be used by workers on their behalf. Ms. P. explained: "If I ever had a problem, I would consult the CAS because I like to have some kind of power advice, advice from people who are very powerful." Ms. P. went on to describe how child protection services had sided with her and forced other agencies and landlords to co-operate with her. Similarly, Ms. C. recalled how her child protection worker came to her defence and demanded that she be released from a psychiatric ward when nurses were badgering her to remain.

The "resources" child protection services have access to were also viewed by parents as providing workers with power. Ms. B. explained that because "they [child protection services] have this absolute power that corrupts absolutely, that it was best to … consent to a Supervision Order for six months and get the children home instead of fighting them. Well I thought that really goes against the grain, but I did not have a couple of hundred thousand dollars to really argue about it." Unable to match the legal resources of child protection services, Ms. B. consented to a supervision order and proceeded to "play the game."

Child protection resources are not just financial; they include the ability to endure and maintain a long drawn-out struggle. Mr. J. explained that to contest child protection power, he needed to also learn to endure. As a result of his endurance and successful battles with child protection services, other parents now ask him for help with child protection services. Inevitably the parents who come to Mr. J. are overwhelmed; he describes the advice he gives them: "'You gotta stop crying and you gotta start acting.' But once I start telling them the process, then they can't because, uh, they're too caught up in the emotional issues that they cannot see the process behind it and they cannot detach themselves." According to Mr. J., therefore, parents are so involved in the struggle to manage their day-to-day affairs that they have

difficulty finding the emotional resources to "fight" child protection services. Child protection workers can, however, use their resources to assist overwhelmed parents. Ms. K. describes her experience: "The CAS was very, very helpful. … She [the worker] took us everywhere we needed to go and she was there for us, [had] different ideas about different things [regarding parenting] and so we had a really good rapport with the CAS."

Ms. K.'s experience of being supported by child protection resources changed when she was assigned a new worker and it quickly became evident to her that her "power with" experience was changing to a "power over" process. Ms. K. first became aware that the new worker was exercising power over her by the way he controlled "knowledge." She said "the biggest problem was the secretive part where he'd [the second worker] make decisions and then tell us and we had to go along with them whether we liked it or not, while she [first worker] never made a decision without our input."

The ability to "define" also afforded workers power. Ms. B. recalls a conversation with her worker: "When I herd her [worker] say to me that taking the TV away was 'too harsh a discipline,' I knew I had stepped into the twilight zone." Ms. B elaborated that the "twilight zone" experience resulted not from the child protection worker defining an event in a way she disagreed with, but from the worker's "absolute" power to impose her definitions of an event upon her. No matter how absurd Ms. B. considered the worker's opinion, she felt unable to challenge it.

The combination of "absolute power" and worker opinion also provided a means to support parents. Ms. C., a teenage mother, describes how a worker used defining power to help her overcome the fears she experienced when first taking care of her newborn child:

> I didn't know what to do! I looked at this baby and was like,
> 'yeah okay what do I do? How do I know when to change
> her, how do I know when to feed her?' And she's [the worker]
> like, "You'll know don't worry." She told me, "You can do
> it." …Knowing somebody, especially a professional, believed in me
> helped me believe in myself.

Taken outside a power context, the above comment "You can do it" seem benign and almost insignificant. For this mother, however, who experienced her worker as having "absolute power," this comment defined the reality she existed within—the mother began to believe she really could be a good parent.

Child protection "procedure" is also experienced by parents as a form of worker power that can be used over them or with them. Ms. B. describes

how procedure gave workers power over her: "I call it a song and dance. You know that in the mean time the period in which the children are away from home is going from one day, two days, to a month, while they [child protection services] are exercising their god-given right to do whatever they want." Ms. B. believed that the longer her children were in foster care while she was waiting for a court date, the weaker her case for having them return home became. Ms. K. on the other hand, experienced procedure as enabling: "For the first two years it took us that long to find out what was wrong with him [grandson], to get him on the right medication, to try and get the proper help for him. … Our worker did a fantastic job, you know she was right there to help us." For Ms. K., therefore, the careful methodical steps child protection services took to uncover the causes of her child management problems provided her with exactly the support she needed.

Parents' responses to intervention hinged on the way they experienced workers' use of power and they described three ways of responding: fighting child protection services, playing the game by feigning co-operation, and co-operatively working with services. Parents describing experiences of power being used over them tended to fight or "play the game." Parents describing power being used with them tended to speak of having co-operative relationships with their workers. There was, however, some overlap between "playing the game," "fighting" and "co-operative" working. Ms. K. explained that she co-operated with her first worker, who used "power with" her and fought her second worker, who used "power over" her, but in both situations she also "played the game" because, in her opinion, it was impossible to always fight or always co-operate.

Although parental experience and reaction hinged on their perception of a worker's use of power, the varying parental perceptions cannot be explained by worker style. It became evident in interviews that some parents shared the same workers and that the same worker could be experienced by one parent as exercising "power over" them and another as "power with" them. These differing perceptions cannot hinge on worker style unless workers change their styles with different parents. Similarly, perceptions cannot be explained solely by parental characteristics because some parents' experience of child protection power switched from "power with" to "power over" and visa versa with a change of worker. Neither do differences between "power over" and "power with" experiences hinge on workers and parents agreeing on issues—parents described disagreeing with workers in "power with" scenarios. More assistance from parents is needed, therefore, to identify the ways in which intervention can be shifted from "power over" to "power with" processes. Such identification is crucial because unless "power over" experiences can be transformed into "power with" experiences, parents resort

to "playing the game" and child welfare workers will evoke no more than the appearance of co-operation from parents.

Conclusions

Parents in this study spoke of feeling afraid, powerless, intimidated and silenced in the face of child protection intervention. Clearly, different ways of delivering child protection intervention must be identified and to be anti-oppressive, parents must be involved in identifying these different ways of delivering service. Such forms of practice are possible and parents can help identify such practice—parents described workers using the same powers that had been used to control them, being used to help them with their problems. Parents described in detail the sources of power used by workers and gave coherent and detailed descriptions of the ways workers use that power either "over" them or "with" them. It should be possible, with the further assistance of parents, to gain more information about the ways to minimise the use of "power over" and maximise the use of "power with" in micro child protection casework. If additional research projects provide parents and families with further opportunities to evaluate and contribute to the redevelopment of child welfare practice on micro, mezzo and macro levels, there is every reason to believe that new ways of working can be developed and that child welfare need not be AOP's nemesis.

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