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Parental experience of child protection intervention: A qualitative study[☆]

Gary C. Dumbrill*

*School of Social Work, McMaster University, Kenneth Taylor Hall Room 319,
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ont., Canada L8S 4M4*

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Abstract

Objective: To explore the ways in which parents experience and negotiate child protection intervention.

Method: A qualitative grounded theory approach was used. In-depth qualitative interviews explored the experiences of 18 parents who had received child protection services. Grounded theory methods were used to build a model representing the ways these parents perceived and reacted to intervention.

Results: The ways parents perceive workers using power was shown to be the primary influence shaping parents' views of intervention and their reactions to it. Two perceptions of power emerged: parents perceived power being used over them as a form of control or power with them as a form of support. Three ways of responding to intervention emerged: parents fought workers by openly opposing them, "played the game" by feigning co-operation, or worked with them in collaborative relationships. Parents experiencing power being used over them tended to fight or play the game while parents experiencing power being used with them tended to work with intervention. No evidence was found linking case type (non-voluntary or voluntary cases) to whether parents perceived power being used by workers over them or with them.

Conclusions: Findings highlight the importance of practitioners and policy makers being aware of the impact power has on worker-parent interaction. Doubts are raised about the viability of policies separating policing and helping in child protection through differential response systems.

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* Corresponding author.

Introduction

Child protection workers must understand how parents experience and negotiate intervention if they are to help them engage with service plans. Policy makers also need this understanding if they are to design services that parents experience as valuable. Yet research paints a blurry picture of what it is like to be on the receiving end of child protection intervention. Some studies, particularly those focusing on reports of service satisfaction, show parents viewing intervention in a predominantly positive manner (Fryer, Bross, & Krugman, 1990; Kapp & Vella, 2000; Kapp & Propp, 2002; Magura, 1982; Magura & Moses, 1984; Platt, 2001; Poertner, Harris, & Joe, 1998; Shulman, 1978) with between 74% (Fryer et al., 1990) and 95% (Thoburn, 1980) of parents reporting satisfaction with the services they received. A less positive picture emerges from in-depth qualitative studies of parental experience. These studies reveal parents viewing services as “inhumane” (Diorio, 1992; Drake, 1994, 1996), parents being afraid of worker power (Anderson, 1998; Cleaver & Freeman, 1995; Corby, Millar, & Young, 1996; Diorio, 1992; Howe, 1989; McCullum, 1995), and parents claiming to be misunderstood by workers and unable to correct these misunderstandings (Corby et al., 1996; Fisher, Marsh, & Phillips, 1986). In Ontario, Canada, the experience parents have of child protection intervention is particularly unclear. Research in Ontario reports a mix of positive and negative parental experience of intervention (Anderson, 1995; McCullum, 1995), but these studies were undertaken before the province reformed its child protection system in the late 1990s. Reform in Ontario has involved child protection agencies adopting a standardized risk assessment instrument, an increased emphasis on risk reduction, and a decrease in preventative intervention and family support. The impact of reform on the Ontario system in the period 1998 to 2003 has been a 47% increase in abuse investigations, a 23% increase in open protection cases, and a 56% increase in children in care (Ontario Association of Children Aid Societies, 2003). Although the impact of reform on child protection agencies has been catalogued, the impact on parents has not. Consequently, the way Ontario parents currently experience intervention is almost entirely unknown.

Although the study focuses on the way parents in Ontario experience and negotiate child protection intervention, it fills a larger gap in the literature. Existing research of this nature does not consolidate findings into a model or schema that child protection workers can use to understand the process of how parents perceive and negotiate intervention. This study explores this process and uses a grounded theory method to map the way parents understand and negotiate services. This research, therefore, consolidates findings into a model explaining parental experience that has the potential to be generalized to other jurisdictions.

Method

A qualitative grounded theory approach was utilized. In-depth qualitative interviews focused on understanding intervention from the perspective of parents, while grounded theory allowed patterns emerging within these perspectives to be mapped and formed into a model explaining the process parents go through when negotiating intervention. Model building took place by inductively deriving theory from concepts and categories emerging in data and deductively testing these notions through questioning participants and also by theoretically sampling new cases in attempts to both verify and falsify emergent theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998). This iterative inductive-deductive cycle was repeated, and sampling continued, until theoretical redundancy was achieved; such redundancy occurred when no new information

about these patterns and categories were emerging in interviews, and until the model developed from data remained robust and consistent in the face of new information.

The trustworthiness of findings was established primarily by “member checking” and through “peer debriefing.” Member checking took place by presenting the model that had emerged from the study to four parents who had participated in the research to ascertain whether the model reflected their experience. The concepts and categories emerging from the study and the final model were also presented to a team of five child protection workers. This process with workers was not traditional member checking because the story told by the research was that of parents not workers. Yet, if the story told by the research were credible, workers should recognize it as such because although told from the perspective of parents, it was also a story in which workers played a part. Peer debriefing took place by discussing the interpretation of data and model development with a four-member research committee, each of whom had expertise in child welfare research and qualitative methods.

Sample

Following approval by the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board, recruitment took place. Sampling was “theoretical” allowing participants to be selected in ways that allowed notions emerging in data to be examined (Miller & Fredericks, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998). Recruitment took place between November 2000 and August 2001 and began with two Ontario child protection agencies inviting former clients to take part in the study. Because agency staff contacted parents they believed would be open to involvement, only two of the 15 parents approached refused to take part. Snowball sampling also occurred with four parents volunteering to take part after hearing about the project by word of mouth. Because there were similar patterns of child welfare reform in British Columbia, an attempt was also made to recruit parents in that province. Three of the four parents recruited by child protection agency in that province decided to withdraw. This high refusal rate was likely the result of a less selective recruitment process by workers in British Columbia. Logistical issues prevented further recruitment in that region.

The final sample of 18 parents was comprised of 17 from a mix of urban and suburban areas in Ontario, and one from an urban area in British Columbia. Data from the single British Columbia participant was retained in the study because the data gathered in this interview fit with data gathered in Ontario.

All participants signed informed consent forms before taking part in the study. Questions were open-ended, probes were used and in keeping with the grounded theory method, questions were modified as the research progressed to explore concepts and categories emerging from data. Participants were interviewed in their own homes or in a similar private location of their choice. All interviews took place individually, with the exception of one member-checking interview (a second interview to review the researcher’s interpretation of findings) in which a participant asked to have her partner present. Interviews lasted 40–90 minutes and were audio-taped and transcribed. Analysis was assisted by NVivo qualitative analysis software, a program that facilitates the management and analysis of qualitative transcript data.

The study only sampled parents whose cases were closed. To ensure parents had relatively recent experiences of service, all cases had been closed no longer than 18 months before the study took place. Fourteen cases involved alleged or verified physical abuse and neglect, and four cases involved children’s special emotional or mental health needs. Cases involving sexual abuse were not sampled because the potential parental tensions within such families (Trepper, Niedner, Mika, & Barrett, 1996) would introduce a range of concepts and categories that would be beyond the scope of this study to isolate and examine.

Results

Parents ranged in age from 19 to 60 (mean of 34); 11 parents were men. Most, seven fathers and three mothers, were single parents. Parents were primarily from lower socio-economic groups, the only exceptions being a mother who was a homeowner working as an accounting professional and a father who was a successful businessperson and prominent political figure in his community. Fifteen parents were White, two were women of Color, and one father was Aboriginal. One participant was a grandparent who had primary parenting responsibilities and consequently she was considered a “parent” in this study.

Parents making sense of intervention

When child protection intervention was initiated, parents’ first response was to ascertain the nature of services so they could formulate a response. All parents drew similar conclusions about the nature of intervention. They all regarded child protection services as far more powerful than themselves, a power they believed could be used over them in a coercive and penalizing manner or with them as a form of support.

Power over

Sixteen parents spoke of child protection services using power “over” them in ways they considered negative. Seven of them considered this power to be “absolute,” “tyrannical,” or “frightening.” A mother whose alcohol consumption brought her to the attention of child protection services described being afraid each time the child protection worker came to her home:

Participant H: Holy, man I was scared! I didn’t know where to go or what to do. I kept saying to her “oh here we go again.” She said, “I’m not here to scare you.” “Well you are because you are scaring me right now you’re in my house!”

Parents were afraid even when abuse or neglect allegations were unfounded. A burly 6’3” father who presented a tough macho image throughout his interview became visibly upset when he recounted being investigated for abuse:

Participant N: I broke down and cried. I thought I did a good job with these kids right. I phoned my mom and dad and I said, “I feel real bad here right, like this guy [the worker] really did a number on me.”

Fear was evoked primarily by parents being skeptical about the child protection system acting in the interests of their children, and by perceiving workers holding narrow pre-conceived ideas about the problems that existed in their family. Parents felt they were given little opportunity to challenge or even dialogue with workers regarding the interpretation given to events or to discuss the plans workers formulated for their families. A mother recalled a child protection worker informing her by telephone that her 6- and 7-year-old sons were being interviewed for suspected abuse and neglect, and the mother was instructed to attend the child protection office immediately. When she arrived at the office the worker informed her that her children had been taken into care. The mother stated, “If they were not going to listen to anything I said why did they haul me down to the office? Because they had already made the decision that was kind of academic” (Participant B).

A father shared a similar experience and described his worker presenting him with a typed intervention plan during their first meeting. The father concluded that nothing he said could have changed these plans because they had been developed and put in writing before the meeting began. He reflected that, “They already had a program, they knew very well what they were going to do. They wanted me to sign the papers and they wanted me to go along with them” (Participant A).

Parents thought that their opinions had little impact even when workers did dialogue with them because workers were quickly categorizing their cases to fit pre-established intervention plans.

Parents believed the courts offered a means to challenge workers but most could not finance court action. More importantly, most lacked the emotional energy to launch and maintain an action against child protection services. Parents explained that they were already struggling to deal with the problems and issues that brought them to the attention of child protection services and did not have the emotional resources needed to fight workers. In contrast to their own fragility, parents perceived workers as being reinforced by an efficient team of lawyers and supervisors who had ample resources to sustain litigation. To overwhelmed parents, child protection services appeared indomitable. Parents believed workers had the power to impose their opinions and plans for their family even if those plans were illogical and not in the best interests of their children. A mother described the process she went through of recognizing the power imbalance between her and the worker as entering a “twilight zone” in which regardless of facts or logic, the worker has the power to impose their version of reality and their intervention plans upon families.

Power with

Nine parents spoke of child protection services using power with them in ways that helped remedy their problems. Most of these parents also spoke of workers using power over them, indicating that parents could perceive power being used in differing ways at different times. Parents indicated that there were few nuances between these categories—from the parents’ perspective these two forms of power were dichotomous.

Some parents experienced workers’ ability to define “reality” as operating in their interests. A mother recalled giving birth to her first child when she was 16 years old and feeling completely overwhelmed by the prospect of parenting:

Participant C: I didn’t know what to do! How do I know when to change her, how do I know when to feed her? And the worker said to me, “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.

This mother attributed her eventual parenting success to the encouragement given by her worker. For parents who experience themselves as powerless and their workers as powerful, small words of encouragement by workers took on enormous proportions. Trivial comments can enable as they did with this mother or disable as they did with the burly father who broke down and cried when his parenting was questioned.

Parents also experienced workers using power with them through advocacy. Parents spoke with delight regarding incidents where workers called or confronted landlords, hospital workers, schoolteachers and others who were unresponsive to their needs. For parents who were aware of their own lack of societal power, child protection workers using power with them were seen as allies who brought balance to the scales of social justice.

Workers offering practical assistance were also considered by parents to be using power with them. A parent receiving welfare assistance recalled, “The worker would help me a lot. Like I didn’t have diapers, I was having a rough month, she went out and brought me a package of diapers” (Participant C).

A parent whose child was experiencing mental health problems reflected how child protection services used their resources to help:

Participant K: The worker was very very helpful. . . . She took us everywhere we needed to go and she was there for us, different ideas about different things and so we had a really good rapport with child protection services.

Although 50% of participants described instances of power being used with them descriptions of power being used over parents was far more evident in data.

Shifts in power

Eight parents described experiencing shifts in the type of power child protection services used as a result of workers being changed. A mother described a change from power being used over her to power being used with her when she was assigned a new worker:

Participant B: Once the permanent worker was assigned and he and I had time to talk, that’s when it stopped being about a power struggle and it started being about, this is the path we need to take to navigate the maze out of this issue. All of a sudden we were on the same page.

Other parents experienced a negative shift with a change in worker. A custodial grandmother described her experience:

Participant K: At the beginning it was great, the worker we had was very helpful. The new worker we got, our feelings were that he was trying to take our grandson away from us. Needless to say things went right down hill.

The grandmother told how this shift in power caused her to begin feeling that *she* was the problem with whom the worker was dealing, and in response the grandmother began to perceive *her worker* as the problem with whom she was dealing. From the grandparent’s perspective the case had shifted from one where she and the worker focused their joint energies on meeting her grandson’s mental health needs to one where she and the worker expended energy dealing with each other.

Parents believed that the ways workers used power resulted from the worker’s style or personality. This hypothesis held by parents was not supported by data because during interviews it became evident that some parents shared workers and that there were instances where the same worker was experienced by one parent as using power over them and another as using power with them. Different parental experiences of power cannot, therefore, be explained entirely by worker personality or style alone. Neither can the difference in power be explained by the nature of cases: no link emerged between the ways parents perceived power being used and whether their cases were opened without their consent as a result of abuse or neglect or as a result of their request for support with parenting. Consequently, a more complex mix of variables than case type and worker style must explain these shifting parental perceptions of power usage.

Responses to intervention

Parents reported responding to intervention in three ways: (1) “fighting” through openly challenging and opposing workers in court; (2) “playing the game” by feigning co-operation; and (3) working with services in what appeared to be genuine and collaborative relationships. Responses tended to hinge on the ways parents perceived power being used by workers. Those perceiving power being used over them tended to fight or play the game, while parents perceiving power being used with them appeared co-operate with workers but also still spoke of playing the game.

Few parents openly fought because the predominant view among parents was that one rarely won a fight with child protection services. Consequently, most parents played the game, a process identified by earlier research (Cleaver & Freeman, 1995; Howe, 1989; McCullum, 1995) in which parents feigned co-operation to placate workers. Some parents learnt to play the game by their own accord, but others were advised to do so by friends and, in two cases, by lawyers. A single father accused of child neglect recounted his lawyer’s advice:

Participant L: You don’t want to cross the line with the Children’s Aid Society because they can become your worst enemy. . . . Be very co-operative, invite them into your home, if you can make appointments with them, show up for the appointments, be very attentive, accept any information they want to give you.

A mother received similar advice from her lawyer and reflected:

Participant B: When lawyers basically advise me well “don’t piss them off,” that “it could get worse” and that’s your own lawyer saying this to you, you realise that you don’t have a lot of avenues to fight . . . [so] you play nice.

Some parents, however, spoke of open and co-operative relationships with workers that did not seem to be based on game-playing tactics. A mother described how she attempted to engage workers in such open co-operative relationships:

Participant C: Every worker I have met I have told them, “If you are open and honest with me, I’ll be open and honest with you, if you beat around the bush, I’ll play games.”

Yet the boundary between co-operation and “playing the game” was somewhat blurred because regardless of how open the relationship with workers appeared, parents spoke of being cautious and knowing that shifts from “power with” to “power over” could easily occur. For parents, interacting with an organization they believed held absolute power required considerable caution.

A grounded theory

Grounded theory hinges on the identification of a “core category” that ties together all other concepts and categories to emerge in a study (Miller & Fredericks, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This category must be robust, which means it must resist attempts to falsify its central role in the social process under examination. In this study, the ways parents perceived workers using power emerged as the core category. Figure 1 shows the relationship between these concepts and provides a grounded theory model for the ways parents’ experience, make sense of, and negotiate child protection intervention.

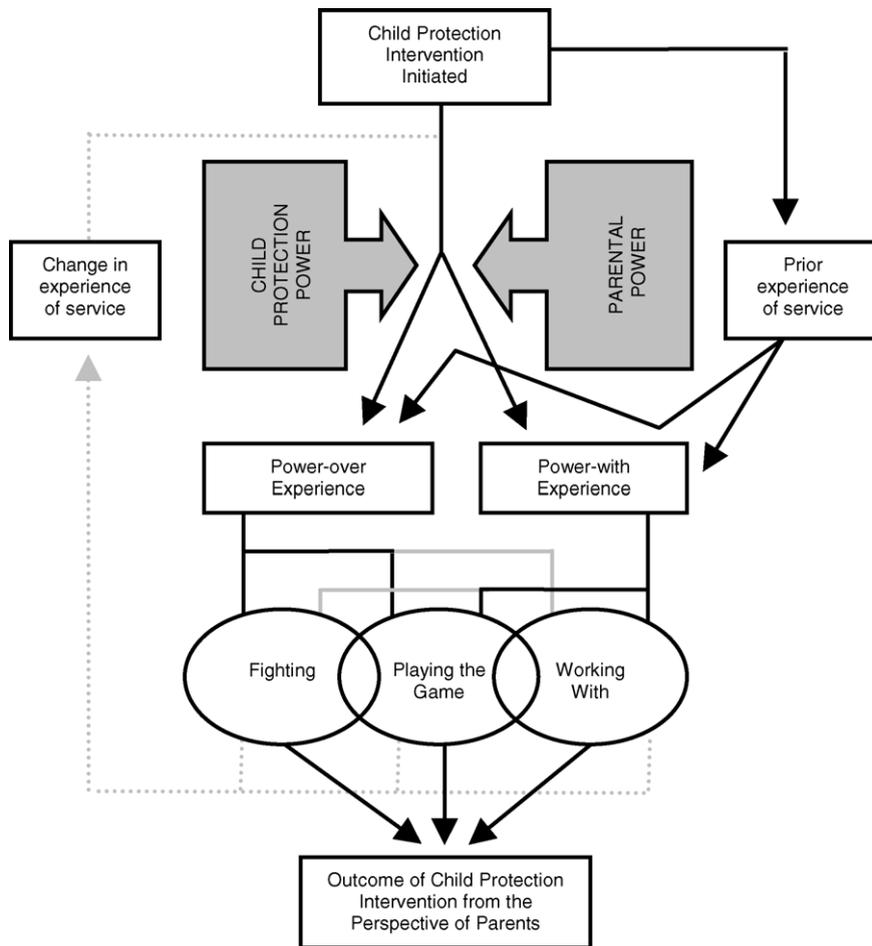


Figure 1. Parental experience of child protection intervention.

Beginning at the top of the figure, when child protection intervention is initiated parents ascertain the ways services operate and come to the conclusion that power is being used either “over” or “with” them. Parents with prior experience of service may immediately assume that power will be used in the manner they previously experienced.

Parents respond to intervention by fighting, playing the game or co-operatively working with child protection services. Perceiving power being used over them tends to lead parents to fight or play the game, while experiencing power being used with them is likely to lead to co-operating and perhaps playing the game at times. Although these patterns emerged in data, the possibility that any of the three responses to power can arise from either of the ways parents perceive power exists and this is reflected in the model.

Changes, such as a worker being replaced, can shift a parent’s perception of the ways power is being used. In some instances, such shifts cause parents to re-enter the stage of ascertaining “how they work” and can change their evaluation of how power is being used. In such cases, parents’ responses to intervention also change.

The model shows that parents view the outcome as a product of the interaction between worker and parental power. When parents believe power-over is being used they perceive the intervention trajectory as following the path of least resistance between the worker's power and their resistance. When parents perceive power-with is being used, the intervention trajectory is seen as shaped by a combination of worker and parental power that is focused on achieving a jointly agreed objective rather than on opposing each other's plans. In both instances, however, outcomes are produced by power.

Discussion

Key findings

This study reveals worker power to be a central variable that shapes parents' perceptions and reactions to child protection intervention. The study confirms earlier work that identifies worker power as a factor influencing parental perceptions of intervention (Callahan, Field, Hubberstey, & Wharf, 1998; Corby et al., 1996; Diorio, 1992; Fryer et al., 1990). This study also shows the ways parents can perceive workers using "power over" them or "power with" them and the study links these perceptions to the ways parents negotiate the intervention process.

Limitations

The model developed by this research can be said with some certainty to apply to the sample of parents who participated in this study. Qualitative findings should be transferred to broader populations cautiously. The study does, however, bring the picture of what it can be like for parents to receive child protection intervention into sharper focus and it highlights a number of issues that have implications for practitioners and policy makers that require further research attention.

Implications

The study has implications for practice. Workers should lessen their emphasis on starting intervention by understanding the ways parents view the problems that causes the need for intervention, and increase their emphasis on understanding how parents perceive them using power in the process of addressing these problems. Intervention must begin by addressing the power imbalance that exists between worker and client, and by acknowledging the fear parents may be feeling. Workers can gauge, through parental reactions, the perceptions they generate about their power. Workers finding parents fighting, or playing the game by being overly compliant, may wish to question whether parents perceive them to be wielding power over them. Workers, of course, may choose not to change their use of power based on these reactions because sometimes workers must use power in a coercive manner to protect children.

The study also has implications for policy. Recent changes to child welfare systems have allowed a "differential response" where cases are separated into those requiring a coercive police response and those requiring supportive casework (Waldfoegel, 2000). This strategy rests on the premise that coercion and casework can be separated in child protection intervention, a notion that findings from this study do not support. Separation into policing and helping cases may be possible from the perspective of those delivering service, but not from the perspective of parents on the receiving end of service. Indeed, many

of the parents in this study who described power being wielded over them were voluntary clients. From a parental perspective, a differential response may not separate intervention that uses power over them from one that employs power with them.

Conclusion

Child protection casework ideally involves workers and parents formulating goals in a partnership process (Campbell, 1997; Hall & Slembrook, 2001; Healy, 1998; Waller, 1995). This study suggests that given the power imbalance parents perceive between themselves and workers, an equitable partnership may not be possible in child protection casework. Even when parents perceive workers using this power with them as a form of support, they remained mindful and cautious of the potential for this power to be used over them. Workers, therefore, must approach the case planning process aware of the considerable power parents perceive them to wield. Working with parents in cases of child abuse and neglect involves workers not only understanding the ways parents view the problems that brought intervention to their door, but also the ways parents perceive and react to the power they perceive workers holding.

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Résumé

French-language abstract not available at time of publication.

Resumen

Spanish-language abstract not available at time of publication.