"Reimagining Child Protection"
Fifth Giving Poverty a Voice Social Worker Training Programme Study Group
Tuesday 12 May 2015

Setting the Scene – Brid Featherstone and Kate Morris, *Reimagining Child Protection*

Our guests, Featherstone and Morris, outlined the main themes in their recently published book and some of their motivations for writing it. They challenged the development in the UK over the last five years of a **risk-averse** and punitive child protection system. This system, they argued, circumvents the principles in the Children Act 1989 by **individualising children** (rather than acknowledging their family networks as the key source of protection and context for resolution) and thereby **demonising and ostracising parents**. They also pointed to the **redefinition of the role of the social worker**, from a supportive-assistance-based role, to one that investigates and surveils families and enforces top-down approaches. They cited this **replacement of a model based on support with one based on policing** as unfair in the current context of **austerity and rising inequality**. Accordingly, they called for more **family-based work** and stronger **community approaches**, and challenged the social work profession to do more to call-out the negative changes we have seen in recent years. (See Appendix 1 for a more detailed summary of Featherstone and Morris' presentation.)

What is a Parent's Role?

Write one sentence about what you believe a parent's role to be. What barriers exist to realising this role fully?

Role of the parent	Barriers to realising this role fully
Protect, love and care for	**Y**our own experience of being parented
Protect, love unconditionally	**P**overty
Look after another	**B**eing criticised by others, including professionals, for not meeting their notion of what parenting should look like
To be there	
Love and provide – not just in the sense of putting dinner on the table but providing an example and providing principles	**E**xpectations
Love, nurture, respect and support	**A**ddiction
The most altruistic thing I've ever done	**V**alues
Keep children safe and clean	**T**he difference between what you imagined having a child would be like, and the reality
Love and food	
Love, protect and nurture children and teach and guide them and enjoy as family members	
Nurture	**F**amily member perspective: *"…everyone's different on how they parent a child but if you're not parenting them the way that they want you to parent them, then you're doing it wrong and they're doing it right. … a lot of it, with any of the professionals, is the way they look at it – you're not doing it the way they like so as far as they're concerned you're a bad parent. I've been told for years I'm a bad parent but I let it go because I know I'm not."*
Support and guide (and to learn – more for the parent than the child)	
Support and love children to grow up happy and safe	
Love	
Nurture them to grow to be independent	

What Happens to Parents in the Child Protection System?

Family members discussed how the child protection system and social services intervention can obstruct parental aspirations. Below are some of the reasons they cited.

Parents' priorities for their children undermined: Once inside the system, parents' aspirations and priorities regarding their children's needs are frequently not taken seriously or are superseded by institutional priorities. Family members noted that if parents fail to perform parenthood in the manner social services expect or deem acceptable, they are considered bad parents, which further delegitimises priorities they hold for their families in the eyes of social workers. One parent described how she loves, cares for and

Family member perspective: *"It always puzzles me that a family who really fight social services to keep their children are seen as resistant and not complying to the rules, rather than they passionately love their child and don't want anyone to take it away. To me it's a shame that that isn't seen as a positive – 'that this family is prepared to fight us tooth and nail to the bitter end means that they really want to keep their kids, how do we help them to do that?' Rather than 'they're not complying with rules, therefore how do we take the kids away?'"*

protects her children, but she finds this frequently brings her into conflict with the authorities, who may not share her perspective on her children's needs: *"At the end of the day when you know that your child needs professional help and he's not getting that because there's no funding. You don't give up on them, you don't give up fighting."*

Parents stripped of their role as parents: Aspects of the system's approach can usurp from parents certain responsibilities that are crucial to parenthood, derailing not only their parental aspirations, but also their status as parents. A frequently cited example was parents' exclusion from decisions and meetings that greatly impact on their families' lives and futures. This action demeans individuals in their capacity as parents and robs them of the key parental responsibility of family decision-making.

Family member perspective: *"I'm the parent and I'm the one that was in court and I'm the one that had all the allegations put against me and stood there and didn't actually know half of what was in that paperwork, I only got a certain amount. So you're ring-fenced to a certain degree..."*

Keeping parents in the dark like this is also a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of professional judgments about their parental capacity, as it makes them less able to participate in their own cases and to connect with issues that professionals deem crucial to their family's life. Accordingly, they appear out of touch, detached or disinterested.

Parents find their family life gets distorted: Social services' involvement can distort family relationships and dynamics, which inevitably undermines parents' abilities to achieve the kind of parenthood they strive for. Participants described how parents with children in the system can become overly protective, worrying that if a child falls over, gets hurt or is seen alone, social workers may incorrectly suspect abuse or neglect. In previous study groups, parents discussed how social workers undermine parental authority when they enter family homes and infantilise parents in front of their children.

Family member perspective: *"… it really destroys the relationships inside the family. The bonding, the psychological relationships… when my son was taken, you grieve the death for a kid that's still alive and you can't accept them back as alive when they've gone. They break that bond, and they can't relate with other siblings."*

Practitioner perspective: *"…this will have consequences you know, taking children away in this way, without giving their parents a chance to look after them properly; those consequences would go down through the generations… we are taking children away from their families, from their networks, from their communities…. we are creating a stolen generation really…"*

ATD activist **Moraene Roberts** used personal experiences and critical reflections to discuss how the shift in social services **from support to policing** has impacted on parents. She highlighted how the policing approach effectively robs families of what should be "an automatic resource for families who are struggling" because they become too scared to approach social services, for fear of punitive responses. Too often this fear is confirmed by draconian intervention when families finally do turn to social services as a last resort. It is unjust that needy families feel dissuaded from seeking help early, and could be avoided if services were collaborative rather than hierarchical: *"When families and social workers can work collaboratively in the best interests of the children, it builds a better knowledge base for both parties and the outcomes are likely to be better for the children. As you work together, you learn from each other."*

All participants cited removal of children as severing the family connections that parents see as their role to protect and foster. These connections include a parent's relationship with their removed child, but also that child's relationship with siblings and extended family members, and the maintenance of a complete family structure for any children remaining in the household. Parents expressed a sense of helplessness over mitigating the impact separation has on all these individuals, and guilt for the pain caused by their child's removal. Many also described feeling torn over treating their various children unequally because the system allows them to maintain contact with some and not others. Guilt permeates the individual's view of themselves, as a person and as a parent.

Parents also discussed experiencing an identity crisis post-removal in terms of what their 'new' parenthood meant for children still in their care, for those in foster care and for those adopted. They aired grave anxiety about what will

Family member perspective: *"I don't know who I am anymore. I am a mum to three of my children that I have in my house. I have full responsibility for them... But I have other children who I equally feel I have the responsibility, the same as these three. But I'm told, no, it's not… my identity has been completely stripped and I now feel like I'm very lost and confused… it's hard work because I have to put a different hat on for each person I'm speaking to without my emotions clouding how, at the end of the day, I am their mum. I am their mum. And I refuse to let them strip me of that, but they do try very hard to make you believe."*

happen when removed children return as adults and how they should fulfil their parental role in that scenario. As several family members stated, they can expect no support from social services at that point.

Parents forced to be deceptive because of a lack of trust. The lack of trust between families and social services creates an 'us' and 'them' divide. This suspicion often makes parents unwilling to communicate information explaining circumstances social workers might otherwise perceive as neglectful. Mistrust about the intentions of social workers may also lead parents to behave in ways they would rather not resort to, or which seem irresponsible. For example, parents may mislead social workers in an attempt to protect themselves from a feared intervention.

Family member perspective: *"To me the biggest obstacle is trust. If the social workers don't trust the family and the families don't trust the social worker that prevents them from believing that we really do love our children. I've heard so many times 'oh well you know, there's inadequate food because there's inadequate money, but the mother smokes… if she loved her children of course she'd give up smoking and she'd feed them better.' But also, there may be other things going on in that mother's life that she doesn't want to tell the social worker – how stressed out she is by her ex-partner or her mother or her grandmother or the neighbours… she doesn't want to tell them… 'I am a smoker and the stress makes me want to smoke…' because then that will go against her as well… [H]ow can we begin to come together, how can we trust the professionals enough to say 'it's not just this, it's this, this and this as well' and not have that turned immediately against us, rather than them thinking 'well how can we help her with that?'"*

Child Protection: From Support to Policing

What does 'child protection' mean?

Participants considered various societal figures holding protective roles - lifeguards, parents, police officers, teachers, doctors and social workers - and discussed which they thought were involved in supporting and which in policing. They concluded that all roles generally require a bit of both. Thus **protection carries *both* a supporting aspect and a policing aspect.**

Following this, considerable discussion took place about what 'child protection' really means. Like other notions of protection, child protection is not just about support; at times policing may be required. However, participants questioned whether unanimity exists amongst practitioners, let alone society at large, about where the concept's boundaries lie. Lack of clarity permits professionals greater leniency to presume the worst-case scenario, a tendency

Domestic violence was a key example some participants raised to illustrate the compromised position parents can find themselves in when they do not trust social workers. Practitioners discussed how social services may seem unapproachable to victims because the pressure it puts on them to get rid of perpetrators can be re-victimising and controlling. Some victims can feel implicitly or explicitly blamed by social workers for staying with perpetrators or maintaining contact with them because it is seen as putting their children at risk. As a result they may be reticent to seek help to address the reasons for these choices, such as continued dependence on perpetrators for finances or to provide childcare while they work.

"…trust is a big thing for me with them. Like what I'm saying about my [ex-partner]… procedure would be, if he come to my door, to phone the police and have him removed. I don't want to do that because then that's going to get recorded and put to social workers. Then they're going to come and ask me a question about it."

Lack of trust to approach social services can leave individuals navigating alone difficult situations that compromise their 'good parenthood' ideal. One mother told us that when her ex-partner tried to visit her and the children, she did not seek help from social services or notify them - even though she wanted support for her family's safety - for fear it might entangle her and her children in a child protection case. She refused to let her partner see the children, for their wellbeing and also over concern that if social services found out, her children would be removed instantly. But in doing so, she felt she was obstructing the children's ability to maintain a relationship with their father.

that the risk-averse climate implicitly promotes. Thus, social workers are potentially framing more cases as 'child protection' than initially intended. During discussion, three important factors arose for how the application of the child protection label might be controlled, while also ensuring that 'true' child protection - a social good - is fulfilled most effectively where truly needed.

1. BALANCE

- Support and policing must be balanced. While policing has its place in the child protection system, the balance has tipped too far in this direction. One practitioner argued that we have constructed a society where everyone is expected to stand on their own two feet, where problems are considered an individual's own making and where asking for help is not OK. This logic has infiltrated our model of welfare and propelled a shift away from support-based social work.

- Where provision of support is neglected, families often receive no attention until they are in crisis, at which point levels of perceived risk may be higher. In a risk averse climate, this is likely to activate immediate policing. Consequently, for some families, the only service they may ever receive from social services is an investigation. This is unfortunate, as appropriate and well-timed support can often pre-empt and negate the necessity for policing at all.

Practitioner-academic perspective: *"I don't think policing and support should be counter-posed. I think some of the best things I did as a social worker were policing-type things, you know where somebody was really vulnerable. But it has to be done in a context of respect and trust and that's the trouble, it's not and it's not explained properly to people either... So I think policing and support are part of the same thing, it's just the policing has become too dominant…"*

Family member perspective: *"I've noticed a change in social work in the last recent years from being able to note risk and resilience and now it's only risk. Before social workers going into case conference would say, "yes, the mother is very stressed, but on the other hand she's asked for help". Or "yes, this has happened, but it's as a result of… and the mother coped with it, or the father coped with it, really well". So there'd be a kind of balance of the resilience of the family."*

- An overzealous policing approach can side-line genuine opportunities to recognise and build upon a family's strengths, reinforcing deficit-based understandings of parents' capacities.

- A policing approach can put great pressure on social workers, which detracts from their ability to undertake a balanced approach in their work: *"there's a lot of pressure on civil servants to act as a second parent to the state: "you have a responsibility, you have a duty of care to be reporting, reporting, reporting anything you see". And the civil servants are so scared that if they don't report anything and they got found out, that their job will be on the line…"*

2. CHECKING POWER

Family member perspective: *"I have a brilliant relationship with my foster carer who's got my children long term… we could go out and have a cup of tea and sit with the kids and it'd be a wonderful day. The elephant in the room is the contact worker sat there, writing the notes, or the social worker. The foster carer doesn't appreciate her being there, I don't appreciate her being there. But the system requires it, for what reason? Because I've never run off with these children. There's never been a reason why these contacts can't take place between me and the foster carer. But we've got a policing unity around us that says it must be done in this way."*

"…it's like nobody's checking the power that they're using or thinking about what the use of that power does to people, what what they do does to people. And that's the difficulty." – Academic perspective

- While there are contexts where policing in child protection is appropriate, policing always involves the use of power, which must be exerted mindfully to avoid abuse.

- Policing powers are abused when resorted to unnecessarily, disproportionately or too readily. In the present risk-averse climate, situations are too quickly named as 'child protection', without proper attempts to ascertain all surrounding facts and circumstances. Furthermore, practitioners described "a filter" that social workers seem to put up when assessing parenting in child protection cases. The filter is risk-averse and characterised by parents being held to high or unreasonable standards, intolerance for mistakes or oversights that any parent might make, elevated degrees of scrutiny, and an investigative, evidence-gathering approach. Rather than giving parents the chance to prove themselves, the filter

effectively criminalises parents by assuming they will violate rules, and implements pre-emptive procedures to avoid this.

- Checking policing power also involves ensuring its use is limited to achieving the ends for which it was initially justified. In the child protection sphere, some policing of families is justified where necessary to protect a child from harm. However, power is misused if parents are policed for behaviour that does not harm their child. If practitioners do not critically reflect on their thought-processes, a danger exists that decisions in any given case about whether policing powers are justified, will rely on subconscious prejudices, biases, or morals. Accordingly, in child protection cases social workers, judges and other professionals must constantly check their critiques of parents to avoid moralisation skewing judgments. This view was advanced by Munby J in a recent decision of the High Court Family Division, where he emphasised that the primary question to be asked at every point when assessing parental behaviour is 'what is the harm to the child?'

3. MAINTAINING TRUST

Practitioner perspective: *"The thing is that in a democratic society we have to have trust in the people we give powers to… we have to trust that the police will exercise their powers responsibly, that if they enter our house or they do things, that they will do it in a legal way. And we've lost that trust in social work; we don't believe that they will exercise their powers in a trustworthy way, generally, we don't."*

- If social workers police more than they support, and resort to such policing powers rashly and unjustly, they are unlikely to maintain family members' trust. Without trust, mutual suspicion will grow, which may exacerbate tendencies amongst professionals to police families further.

- One family member posited that a good test for whether a protection service has maintained trust is to ask, 'would you go there willingly', even if you knew that the service may police you as well as support you? For example, if your house was burgled, would you contact the police? If you were going swimming, would you warn a lifeguard to watch out for you because you have poor eyesight? Regarding social services, family-member participants stressed that many families would not go there willingly.

- Family members acknowledge the pressures that social workers face, but note that greater understanding amongst families regarding why social workers behave a certain way is not the same as family members' fear of bad practice being placated. In fact, it may make them more suspicious: *"Unfortunately I probably wouldn't trust half of them **because of what their job requires them to do**. And it shouldn't be like that; they're meant to be a support system, but it's just become something very different."* [emphasis added]

What One Change Do You Want to See to the Child Protection System?
The study group concluded with each participant positing one change they would like to see to the child protection system. The answers have been grouped here under overarching themes.

Greater transparency and support for navigating the system, including more use of peer support and advocacy and greater professional respect for these. Some models to learn from are ATD's approach of working alongside families, the Lewisham local authority's Parent Advocacy project, and the community approach adopted in New York, as described in David Tobis' book *From Pariahs to Partners*.

Reform of the current UK approach to adoption. Potential areas for reform are closed adoption and removal through non-consensual forced adoption. Both are far from universal practices internationally or in Europe, indicating nothing immutable about the UK approach that could not be revised. Alternative models to consider include Scandinavian models.

Greater support for parents who have had their children taken into care, to try and break the cycle of multiple removals and/or facilitate the children's future return.

A guarantee of early supportive intervention when parents first approach social services seeking help.

Greater use of Family Group Conferencing, run by independent agencies, to truly investigate every alternative to separating a family.

An increase in resourcing for the system as a whole.

Mainstreaming of positive family strengthening policies that recognise a family's resilience and boost their self-esteem, rather than operating a deficit model.

APPENDIX 1: Summary of Brid Featherstone and Kate Morris Presentation

A changing climate: In the last five years social work practice and policy in the UK has changed dramatically. In child protection the dominant conversation moved from discussing 'need' to 'risk'. This represents a shift from a child welfare and safeguarding approach, to a conception of children needing to be rescued from purportedly incompetent, neglectful or dangerous parents. Most painfully, this paradigm shift occurred in tandem with widespread cuts in existing support services, a climate of austerity and an ever-increasing rate of inequality. In essence, "we were seeing it being proposed that it was alright to rescue children but you left their parents behind and that that was somehow an ethically OK position." Featherstone went on to say:

> There are really ethical problems with a project that cut the supports to families, that was profoundly unequal in terms of the life chances available to people, and that then went in, and in very, very simplistic (often) encounters between social workers and children, talked only in the language of risk - didn't talk in terms of language of health and need… it's ethically unsustainable.

Focus on the child rather than the family: The Children Act 1989 considers the child's welfare as paramount, but presumes that the starting point should always be to keep the child within their family. Section 17 of the Act allows for provision of family support to achieve this goal. At its core, the policy behind the Act took the ethical and pragmatic stance that professionals would work in partnership with parents given that they represented the child's existing protective sphere. While "[t]he family is often the context for the difficulties… [it is also] the context for the resolution." However, Featherstone and Morris described a steady watering-down of this approach, evidenced by an increasing disregard or demonisation of parents in the child protection system and an attendant tendency to individualise the child. Rather than viewing children and their needs in the context of their wider family network, children's needs have been increasingly viewed in opposition to that of their parents. For example, social workers may enter houses and interview only the mother about what is going on with the child, or simply talk to the child while ignoring the parents completely. Thus, Featherstone stated that:

> …what we wanted to say in the book was… [parents] are people …people with dreams, hopes, fears, loves, attachments. Stop treating them as some sort of cipher for children's welfare. Treat them as people who have the right to engage in conversations about what they want for themselves in order to care well.

Family-based and Community Work: Morris and Featherstone see a return to genuine family-based work as the logical response to the individualisation of the child. But they also called for an increase in community-based work generally. They noted that, today, social workers rarely live in the communities in which they work, they have little direct insight about what it means to shop for vegetables in those areas, what it means to raise children there, what unique challenges the location might present, or what local supports or one-off events a family could benefit from.

Too little for too long and then too much too late: As support has successively diminished, families often do not receive any intervention until they reach crisis point, at which point, such intervention will probably be draconian in the current risk-averse climate. Morris and Featherstone illustrated this by highlighting that in the last five years, child protection investigations that have resulted in no need for protection of the child have increased by 120%. This demonstrates that social services are too quick to assume the worst. But it also shows that for too many families, the primary service they receive is an investigation, as opposed to actual support. Morris and Feathersone also noted that invasive interventions tend to interact with inequality. Thus, recent research showed that a child in Blackpool is 12 times more likely to be taken away from their family than a child in Kingston-upon-Thames. In this regard, they argued that the UK's child removal policy is dangerously close to creating a stolen generation of children dislocated from their networks, communities and families due to deprivation and poverty rather than poor parenting.

Redefinition of the social worker: Featherstone and Morris also highlighted the redefinition of the role of the social worker, stating:

> …we stop being social workers, we stop being involved in the social – you know, family support, negotiated help… we stop talking about worries, help and need… our role has been shrunk to that of child protection. So child protection defines social work, instead of social work defining child protection. When you've got that happening, you've got almost a perfect storm: …increased investigations, reduced help and a social work profession that's having itself shrunk by the government

because it's going to assess it and accredit it on its ability to deliver on child protection, not its ability to deliver on family support. It's a really troublesome and worrisome time, both for families to be on the receiving end on all of this, but for practitioners that don't want to work in this way.

Apathy of the Profession: Morris and Featherstone argued that the social work profession is not doing enough to challenge these changes in attitude and approach, and they noted that social work is "an industry that profits from inequality". They also identified apparent taboos around debating certain things, including approaches to adoption, or even recourse to adoption at all, and cited examples of foster carers being ostracised by social services for expressing their views on the suitability of prospective adopters. Featherstone and Morris did concede that social workers' ability to speak out is often restricted by the risk-averse culture imposed by frameworks outside of their control. In this regard they critiqued OFSTED stating:

> …it is *absolutely* making the culture in organisations so toxic because people are afraid to make a mistake. So they can't have the kind of humane conversations that we need them to have… we want a better organisational culture so that social workers are able to have humane conversations with their supervisors, as well as with families. And we want managers and top managers to see their reference group as families, rather than OFSTED or the Minister. We want them to feel accountable to families and communities, not accountable and frightened of OFSTED and of politicians.

APPENDIX 2: Word cloud – What is the role of a parent?