Jo Warner – Opening Presentation

Building and maintaining human relationships is fundamental to social work. Trust is a core component of good relationships and is also vital to effective communication and cooperation. Without trust, no real social work can be done. However, the nature of social work-family relationships is shaped by governmental and organisational policy, which is not made in a vacuum. In the child protection context, policy tends to be emotionally charged because the topic is highly sensitive.

Politicians both feed and feed on public emotion because they want to be seen to connect with the public and to convince voters that they see the world how they do. In almost any context, when crisis strikes and public emotions are high, politicians replicate (and thereby legitimise) such emotions to garner support.

So, when a high profile child protection case occurs, politicians repeat public and media rhetoric about bad parents and incompetent social workers who failed to do more to protect the child. This phenomenon, particularly following the Baby P case, has caused social workers to prioritise risk-aversion and risk-minimisation in child protection cases.

But who is at risk and who is defined as risky? Increasingly, parents with children in the child protection system are defined as a risk to their own children. A "poisonous" blame culture has crept into policy-making, associating parents with emotionally-laden notions of evil, and encouraging stricter social work and faster adoption. Take, for example, the title of an IDS document produced shortly after the Baby P case – "Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens" – an aspiration which implies that bad parents exist out there, raising recalcitrant children who will go on to become the underclass of tomorrow. Defining risk also reveals social biases. For example, the parenting gold-standard is insidiously white and middle-class. We could say that social work focused on risk not only attempts to eliminate possible cases of physical harm, but also certain perceived 'lifestyles'.

Risk-aversion erodes the trust between families and social workers because it requires social workers to be suspicious of families involved in the child protection system and to presume that they cannot automatically be trusted to raise their own children without policing, or at all. Risk averse practice also deprioritises families' needs. As a result, families struggle to trust the child protection system, which not only fails to provide what they actually seek or need, but which may also yield devastating consequences (such as the removal of children).

Figure 1: Emotional politics of child protection
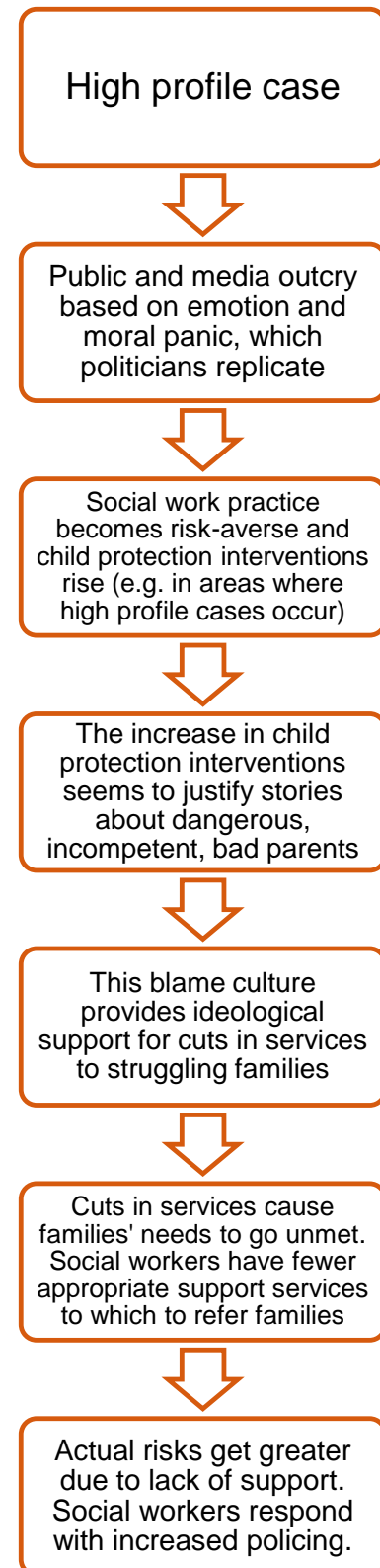
Trust in a risk-averse context – the views of family members

Risk aversion is not conducive to trusting relationships because:

… THE PRESUMPTION IS THAT YOU CANNOT BE TRUSTED WITH YOUR OWN CHILDREN. Risk-averse practice does not place faith in parents from the outset, but operates from a starting point of suspicion. The practice seems to prioritise identifying and neutralising failings, rather than recognising and building on strengths.

… YOU ARE LIKELY TO GO AROUND TREADING ON EGGSHELLS, trying not to make things worse (without knowing what the standards are). You do not feel comfortable being open or being yourself.

… ASKING FOR HELP MAKES YOU SEEM LIKE A GREATER RISK because it's like you can't cope – so you are unlikely to be honest about the needs your family has.

… IT BREEDS FEAR AND A FEELING OF IMMENSE PRESSURE, which can bring up emotions that make you seem aggressive, defensive, or not calm – all of which could be interpreted as dangerous.

… WHEN SUSPICIONS ABOUT YOU ARE MADE ON FACE VALUE, WITHOUT COMMUNICATION, this seems prejudiced and unfair: "The system can judge you on one thing straight away. And they wonder why we don't trust the system."

> ### FAMILY MEMBER PERSPECTIVE
>
> *Knowing that I am viewed as a risk to my own kids…*
>
> *… is a nightmare*
>
> *… makes me disillusioned and insecure as a parent – is what I do not good enough for my son?*
>
> *… makes me feel like my concerns are not being listened to because I am being blamed for the risk*
>
> *… makes me wonder what the standards are, where they come from, and who is judging the judgers*
>
> *… makes me feel under huge pressure to jump through hoops to try and show the system how much I love the children and all the things I do… but it's never enough. It's exhausting.*
>
> *… makes me feel blamed for things that are out of my control, such as my child's unaddressed health or behavioural problems.*

… YOUR ENERGY IS PUT INTO PROVING YOU ARE NOT A RISK, rather than trying to get you the support needed or simply getting on with all the things that need to happen in real life (which doesn't stop just because social services have walked through the door).

… THE ATMOSPHERE OF SUSPICION leads us as parents to believe that we don't get the full story from social workers, that they are hiding something, and that you aren't being listened to. For example, you do something good and it's twisted to become a negative.

How to build trusting social worker-family relationships in a climate of risk and fear – Views of academics, practitioners and family members

1) *WHAT IS THERE TO WORRY ABOUT?*: DEFINE THE RISK YOU ARE WORKING WITH

RECOMMENDATION 1: **In each case, social workers should pinpoint and articulate the precise risk(s) they perceive.** Undefined risks are vulnerable to becoming amorphous fears that are exaggerated or mixed-up with unconscious prejudice. Furthermore, where risks are not expressed and delineated, a social worker may respond with an overly draconian intervention when, in fact, precisely defining the risk could have revealed a solution that was simpler and easier for everybody.

RECOMMENDATION 2: **Social workers should be critically reflective when identifying the risk.** Whose risk is really triggering the most aversion? Is it really about risk to the family or is it about risk to the social worker and the organisation? How might the answer to this question affect the necessary response?

RECOMMENDATION 3: **When defining the risk, social workers should distinguish between risk emanating from dangerous contexts and risk emanating from dangerous people.** Too often, risks are presumed to stem from the latter, so social workers aim to spot bad parents and remove their children. However, fostering and adoption only removes risk if parents are the source of the risk. What if those parents are perfectly good parents but their parenting potential is restricted by material circumstance? In that case, investment and support would be a better approach to removing the risk.

OBSERVATION 1: **Where people are presumed to be the source of risk**, new initiatives like 'Signs of Safety' – that aim to encourage social workers to identify good behaviour or resilience – will never fulfil their potential because they present the right idea in the wrong political environment.

2) *HOW AM I GETTING ALONG? HOW CAN YOU HELP ME?*: BE READY TO SUPPORT FAMILIES THROUGH CHANGE AND BE EQUIPPED TO MEANINGFULLY MEASURE IMPROVEMENT

RECOMMENDATION 1: **Before social workers require a person to make changes in their life, the social worker should have a framework in place with which improvement can be recognised/assessed/measured.** It is disingenuous if this cannot be done and is likely to result in shifting goalposts, which will undermine mutual trust and cooperation.

RECOMMENDATION 2: **Social workers cannot expect people to address 'risky' behaviour in the absence of support.** Social workers must fulfil their side of the bargain and provide families and parents with support, or signpost them to such support.

3) *WORK TOGETHER, SHOW YOU CARE*: BUILD GOOD RELATIONSHIPS AND RAPPORT

Practitioner perspective

… one great big fear is about the emotional content of the work and there is a real paradox operating here. In the midst of it all are people at their most vulnerable, suffering intense psychological emotional pain, and then we as social workers are allowing systems around us to be created which precisely block any emotional engagement whatsoever with the human suffering ... Everyone is buying into a system which stops you from having a proper conversation where you might detect how much pain people are in.

OBSERVATION 1: **Risk cannot be accurately assessed or effectively managed without a trusting relationship** within which information can flow freely between the social worker and the family. At present, families are not themselves around social workers because the trust is not there. This blocks the efficacy of social work and can lead to the wrong decisions being made for the family.

OBSERVATION 2: **Building good relationships requires empathy.** Social workers need to understand the normal human reactions to some of the activities they undertake with families (such as

home visits and the mere fact of having a social worker in one's life at all). True empathy may require a recalibration of the current systemic detachment that stops social workers from truly engaging with families and their feelings. Systemic detachment is partially perpetuated by the dehumanisation of parents in a risk-averse climate and partially by social workers' need to protect themselves.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Social worker training could do more to equip students with a strong relationship-building skill-base. Students may learn the principles of good communication, but what about the bare bones of empathy and rapport? Even when these are incorporated into the curriculum, students do not have enough opportunity to build their emotional strength or confidence to put them into practice in real situations where they may face nervousness, potentially worrying situations, the messiness of reality, and suffering.

4) *BE POSITIVE*: AFFIRM WHAT IS GOOD AND FRAME NECESSARY IMPROVEMENTS CONSTRUCTIVELY

RECOMMENDATION 1: Social workers need to give affirmation for positive things they observe families doing, alongside constructive feedback on where improvements could be made. Recognising and acknowledging a family's positives can change the relationship; affirmation makes families less likely to feel undermined by social workers and more open to considering changes in other areas.

5) *BE HONEST*: BE UPFRONT ABOUT PROBLEMS, EXPECTATIONS, AND PROCESSES

RECOMMENDATION 1: Trust is inseparable from honesty. Social workers must be honest with families about the risks that they perceive, explain those risks and why they are risky. They should be transparent with families about how they intend to manage these risks and should broach conversations about a family's needs. They should be upfront about what is negotiable and what is not. Social workers also need to make clear that not all circumstances are immediately apparent and may take time to find out, at which point, expectations may change (although nothing should change without prior communication).

RECOMMENDATION 2: Social workers must take time to ensure families and parents understand core issues and concerns and update them on what is going on in their child protection case. Honesty, transparency and ongoing conversation are necessary to avoid mixed messages, which can upset parents and corrode trust. Often when parents fail to make the changes that social workers want to see, it is because they have not fully understood that that is what the social workers are looking for.

6) *KEEP IT LOCAL*: ENCOURAGE MORE COMMUNITY-BASED PRACTICE

OBSERVATION 1: Risk could be managed differently if social workers were located in the community. Social workers would be able to construct networks of support within neighbourhoods and build upon protective factors that already exist in the community.

7) *LOOK BEYOND RISK*: RISK IS IMPORTANT, BUT OTHER THINGS ARE TOO!

OBSERVATION 1: The myopic focus on risk has shifted social workers' gaze away from need and any practical recognition of the broader social responsibility towards families. Successive governments have failed to adequately incorporate the reality of poverty into social work policies. The dominance of the risk-averse mentality over a sensitivity towards need is demonstrated by the anecdote of one social worker who described working with a family of ten children and a single mum. He recounted how he had assessed the family as requiring extra financial assistance for child care, as the older siblings were having to spend time looking after their younger siblings. However, this assessment was interpreted as the mother being unable to cope. Rather than additional funding being provided, four of the children were removed.