**‘Cultivating our humanity’ in child and family social work in England**

“Anytime now we will cough up our last breath. For now, while we breathe and are among our fellow humans, let us cherish the qualities that make us human” (Seneca the Younger, 2012, p. 96)

**Abstract**

The goal of the Social Work reform process was to provide a generic framework and single professional body within a broad conception of generic social work. However, debates about the role and nature of social work continue to exist. This paper explores whether contemporary child and family social work is inclined at times to make use of a less humane social work practice with families and children. The policy context and the culture of child and family social work are considered. Implications for social work education are identified.

The key message of this paper is two-fold. There is a tendency in contemporary child and family social work to become synonymous with a particular version of child protection. The type of child protection adopted tends to be authoritarian with at times a limited consideration of the humanity of parents and adult carers in particular

Key words: child and family social work, social work education, humanity

**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to identify whether child and family social work tends to be identified with a less humane approach to child protection and, if so, to contribute to ways to make child and family social work more humane. The focus is restricted to child and family social work for two reasons. First, the limitations of an article make it difficult to consider adults and child and family in a single paper. Second, there is some evidence that adult social work may be moving in a different direction to child and family social work. For example, the Department of Health’s Croisdale-Appleby report (2014) proffers a broader approach than the Department for Education’s Narey report (2014).

Like other professions social work in England has gone through many changes in its relatively short history. It has been suggested even that social work is in a continuous state of fluctuation (Parton, 1994) or always at the point of a major transformation (Preston-Shoot, 2000; Lymbery, 2001). The most recent major social work reform arose from the death of a young child, Peter Connelly (Haringey Local Safeguarding Board, 2009). The resulting public outcry led to a report recommending major reforms mainly in social work education (Social Work Task Force, 2009) and the Social Work Reform Board was established to implement these reforms (Social Work Reform Board, 2011). Two of these innovations were the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and the College of Social Work (TCSW).

The PCF and TCSW apply to social workers in child and family and adults. Both TCSW and PCF adopt a broad approach to social work education and practice. Broad in this sense means that the International Federation of Social Workers’ (IFSW) definition is accepted as part and parcel of what social work in England represents. The IFSW (2014, no page number) states:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.”

In spite of the reform board’s changes and the generic and broad framework of the PCF and TCSW there continues to be debates about what social work in England is about (Author et al, 2014). The Narey Report (2014) explicitly states that there are multiple models of social work and child and family social in England is child protection. Narey dismisses the IFSW as irrelevant to social work in England and calls for radical reform of the PCF.

The introduction of the Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS) for child and family (Department for Education, 2014) provides further confirmation of a move away from a generic notion of social work towards a narrow child protection approach. The KSS is about child protection with no reference to a broader and universal social work practice. The KSS is explored in more detail later in this paper.

As a contrast to the limited child protection model evidenced in Narey and the KSS Munro’s (2011) review of child protection provides a wider conception of safeguarding children. Munro argues that contemporary child protection is focused on safety and tends to ignore the complexity of this type of work. This results in a process-driven approach (Wilson, 2013) rather than emphasising quality and effectiveness.

The announcement that TCSW was to close in September 2015 was met with concern in the social work profession (Community Care, 2015). The rationale for the governmental decision was that the college had not successfully become self-funding by recruiting sufficient membership numbers. The relevance of the college’s closure to this paper is that it may be argued that its demise can be seen to reflect ambivalence both from the government and the profession of a professional body which owns the PCF. Perhaps the idea of a single generic profession with a broad mandate is not central either to the state or social workers in practice.

Finally, it is important to contextualise this paper within the wider setting of the other nations in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. Since devolution in the UK social services in each of the four nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) have developed within the systems of their own nations. However, there is evidence to indicate that the equation of child and family social work with a narrow model of child protection tends to be dominant in the other nations. Stafford et al (2012) undertook a comparative study of child protection systems in the four nations. They found that despite some differences social work across the UK was broadly in line with a limited child protection model of contemporary child and family social work. In their studies on the child protection systems of ten countries (eight of which were European) Gilbert et al (2011) found a more nuanced picture of child protection models. There were approaches similar to the child protection model in England. However, there was also a ‘family-oriented’ approach which was more focussed on prevention and support. Although the latter model was not linked to a public health model of child protection, its focus on early interventions gives it similar features to a public health approach. Gilbert et al (2011) and Fox Harding (1996) make the point that states have a history of oscillating between these two models of family and child protection orientations. Arguably, it can be suggested that a narrow child protection model is not unique to English social work. What perhaps may be distinctive to child and family social work in England is that child and family social work has become synonymous with a model of child protection within which broader perspectives are excluded (Parton, 2014a). For example, in Germany it is suggested that there is a debate between broad and narrow approaches to social work (Wolff et al, 2011). The debate in England seems to be increasingly dominated by a child protection approach to social work with other voices struggling to be heard.

**The policy context of child and family social work in England**

Exploring policy documents and actual practice is important because the implementation of policy is not a simple translation from abstraction to reality (Stafford et al, 2012). The introduction reviewed various approaches to social work in England. There seems to exist two main types: generic and specialist. The former generic model approaches social work as a single profession. The PCF is an example or product of a generic and single profession. Some of its leading architects describe the PCF as:

“[A] single set of integrated standards for the professional development for social workers from initial education, through to strategic level.” (Burgess et al., 2014, p. 2)

The PCF provides a framework for a single social work profession and offers a generic set of capabilities across the range of social work activities.

The latter specialist model focuses on a bifurcation between adults and child and family. Evidence to support this separation between adults and child and family can be seen in the Narey report (2014) and the separate knowledge and skills statements for adults (Department of Health, 2015) and child and family (Department for Education, 2014). As this paper considers only child and family social work, it will draw out the implications of the relevant specialist documents (Narey report and Knowledge and skills statement for child and family).

Narey is clear that child and family social work is child protection, and there is no single social work profession. For example, Narey rejects out of hand the International Federation of Social Workers’ definition (2014). On page 10 Narey provides a “list of the things” a newly qualified social worker needs to know. The phrase ‘list of things’ may contribute to an understanding of what Narey’s model of child and family is. First, the use of lists can be problematic because a list may appear to provide a “shared logic” but without demonstrating an overarching framework to connect the items on the list (Fairclough, 2000, p. 162). Second, Narey’s list indicates that child and family social work is child protection and the type of child protection is procedural or process-driven (author’s own, 2015). The items appear to be more about what tasks social workers must undertake than what they need to understand. For example, the last ‘thing’ on the list is (Narey, 2014, p.10):

“assessment: how to collate and critically analyse information to arrive at the right decision (particularly vital when defending decisions at court)”.

Making a connection between assessments and public protection proceedings highlights the child protection focus of Narey’s vision of child and family social work. The function of this assessment seems partly procedural (‘collate’ and ‘information’). Even the use of the phrase ‘critically analyse’ may be seen to be weakened by the term ‘right decision’. The inherent complexity of social work has been replaced by a list of ‘things’, which will provide the right answer. The procedural approach in social work has been criticised in the literature (e.g. Wilson, 2013) and Munro (2011, p. 14) expressly criticises this procedural and approach in child protection:

“The problems faced by children are complicated and the cost of failure high. Abuse and neglect can present in ambiguous ways and concerns about a child’s safety or development can arise from myriad signs and symptoms.”

The use of the word ‘thing’ to label the areas Narey considers essential for social work knowledge on qualification may also reinforce this limited and procedural model. Knowledge appears to be reduced to an object. Narey’s approach may be described as a ‘commodification’ of knowledge (Brancaleone and O’Brien, 2011; Author’s own, 2013). Commodification transforms knowledge into a standardised model within which knowledge acquisition becomes akin to shopping in a supermarket for the ‘right’ thing. The complexity of social work knowledge and judgment (Munro, 2011) has been replaced by a straightforward process of what Beck (1994) calls ‘linear’ learning. Linear learning understands learning as an objective process of facts (Author’s own, 2013). Facts and ‘right decisions’ reflect an uncontested and unambiguous approach to knowledge and learning.

The knowledge and skills statement for child and family social work (Department for Education, 2014) is a response to Narey’s criticism of broader single generic standards such as the International Federation of Social Workers’ (2014) and the PCF. Narey recommended that the Chief Social Worker for Child and Family should devise a definition of children’s social work based on state intervention to protect children. The KSS shares the core characteristics enunciated in the Narey report:

* There is no single social work profession
* Social work education for child and family social workers should be specialist
* Child and family social work is child protection

The KSS makes a number of broad comments about knowledge and skills. However, in the main, the statement tends to focus on narrow prescriptive activities. The type of work described appears to be a limited ‘referral and assessment’ team model of local authority state coercive intervention (Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee and the Association of Professors of Social Work, 2014, no page number).

An example of this type of narrow child protection can be seen in the section in the statement on analysis. The title of this topic is: “analysis, decision-making, planning and review” (Department for Education, 2015, p. 17). The title may be seen as a linear approach to learning, which was discussed in the previous section on the Narey report (2014). It adopts a fixed and formulaic notion of assessment. Each step follows automatically from the previous action. The paragraphs are also structured in this linear way. Each paragraph starts with a command or imperative verb. This approach to knowledge and learning may be compared to the checklist formula seen in medicine and aeronautics (Hales and Pronovost, 2006).

**The culture of contemporary child and family social work**

The importance of the culture within which social work is undertaken is a common theme in the wider social work literature in UK (Nixon and Murr, 2006; Brown et al., 2008; Green, 2009; Preston-Shoot, 2012; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2012; Rixon and Ward, 2012; Wilson, 2013) and other states (Lonne et al. 2004; Musil et al., 2004; Papadaki and Papadaki, 2008; Mansbach and Bachner, 2009). The point has also been made more generally about professional practice (Eraut, 1994).

Munro’s (2011) review of child protection may be seen to be focussed on the culture of child protection social work (Author et al, 2015). She argues that there was a concentration on process to the detriment of appreciating the purpose of child protection: to make children safe and promote their welfare. As Munro puts it:

“Helping children is a human process. When the bureaucratic aspects of work become too dominant, the heart of the work is lost” (Munro, 2011, p. 10).

Munro’s review was warmly welcomed by the then Conservative-led coalition government. However, there appears to be limited evidence that the culture of social work agencies has changed (Featherstone et al., 2013). Social workers report that Munro has not transformed practice and her recommendations are largely ignored (Cooper, 2013). The narrow and process-driven model of child protection social work seems still dominant in the culture of contemporary social work.

The publication in January 2016 of a ‘vision’ for child and family social work reinforces this child protection model of social work. The report makes use of language which may at first suggest that the Department for Education adopts a wide notion of the role of social work in England. For example, words such as “transform” and phrases such as “creating the conditions that enable children to thrive and achieve” (Department for Education, 2016, p. 3). However, a closer reading quickly establishes that the vision is about child protection and making sure children are safe. Also, there is no reference to the PCF. Instead, the KSS is seen as the “incontrovertibly clear statements of the necessary knowledge and skills for children’s social work” (Department for Education, 2016, p. 5). The use of the words ‘incontrovertibly’, ‘clear’ and ‘necessary’ reinforce the focus on a process model which has unambiguous and self-evident ways of undertaking social work.

The three areas of the ‘vision’ are: people and leadership, practice and systems, governance and accountability. These topics tend to reflect the focus on regulation and rules rather than wider notions of social work. Even the ‘people and leadership’ focus can be understood to be less about professionals as human beings and more about keeping children safe and “making the right decisions about their futures” (Department for Education, 2016, p. 4). This sort of language echoes that of the Narey report (2014) when Narey emphasises the importance of making the right decisions (see above). The danger of this sort of language is that it eliminates the inevitable tensions and difficulties of humane practice with fallible human beings.

The problem with reviewing the effects of this culture on social workers’ direct interventions with service users is that there is relatively little research on what social workers actually do when they meet with service users (Forrester et al, 2008; Ferguson, 2014). The existing research tends to be retrospective responses from social workers and parents (Forrester et al, 2008). There appears to be some limited evidence that the ‘Narey’ child protection model of social work agencies is mirrored in a rigid and antagonistic approach to service users. One study looked at social workers’ responses to a selection of vignettes. The findings from this simulation indicated that social workers tended to express little empathy with service users and, instead, evidenced a considerable degree of confrontation combined with a low level of listening (Forrester et al, 2008). Another study involved observing and interviewing social workers in a variety of settings, including their meetings with children and families, for the most on home visits (Ferguson, 2014). The findings indicated that the amount of time spent with children on their own was inadequate. This may be the result of the tight timetable imposed for governmental targets. The lack of time for direct work has been explored elsewhere (Broadhurst et al, 2010; Munro, 2011). The approach of social workers tended to be investigative with at times limited evidence of positive engagement skills.

It may be suggested that the type of confrontational and investigative focus identified in these two studies are examples of what Forrester et al (2008, p. 32) call a “systematic issue”. This paper argues that the limited findings on face-to-face work may reflect the organisational culture of social work agencies. This culture is a product of a particular model of child protection, which in mainstream social work has taken over from other types of social work in child and family social work (Parton, 2014a).

There have been a number of documentaries in recent years looking at the practices of social work. Protecting our children focused on child and family social work in Bristol. This author has used this documentary in teaching social work students about contemporary child and family practice in social work. It can be argued that the documentary evidenced limited supportive intervention with families and at times parents in particular were portrayed as outside the pale of normal human behaviour (Featherstone et al, 2013). One reporter talked of the parents in the documentary being “bad” (Patterson, 2012, no page) and as being beyond help.

A social worker discussed in Community Care how she had become disillusioned with contemporary child and family social (Nicholas, 2015). She explained that people go into social work to help others and improve lives. However, heavy workloads and the lack of preventative work means there is little opportunity to work directly with service users and make their lives better. The point of these examples is that they indicate that working with others has been relegated to a secondary and limited role (Featherstone et al, 2013). In a sense it may be suggested that the social worker in the Community Care article has lost ‘hope’ (Collins, 2015) with social work because the values and humane focus of social work have become lost.

Research into social workers as a workforce tends to consider problems instead of exploring what gives hope (Collins, 2014) and joy (Pooler et al, 2014) to social workers in their work. However, recent research on resilience in social work has developed the importance of a positive approach or understanding of social work. In a study of social work students Grant and Kilman (2012) found that empathy, among others, played a central function in strengthening the resilience and wellbeing of social work students. Empathy is seen as a key feature in helping relationships. Nicholas (2015) in her article in Community Care emphasised the importance for her of helping service users. In another study in the USA of what gave social workers ‘joy’ in their work the authors found that central elements of what provided joy in their practice included developing relationships, and making a difference (Pooler et al, 2014). However, if contemporary social work in child and family tends to make use of a less humane model of practice, it may be argued that social workers are likely to lose hope and joy in their work and Nicholas’ story can be seen as an example of a loss of hope and joy.

Parents too can be seen to feel that they are treated as “less than human” (Smithson and Gibson, 2016, p.8). In a study of the experiences of parents involved in child protection investigations the respondents overall felt that the child protection process was uncaring, rigid and damaged themselves and their children. Although this finding as such is not new (Corby et al, 1996) Smithson and Gibson (2016) suggest that the techniques used by social workers may indicate a more authoritarian approach than in earlier studies.

**Cultivating our humanity: implications for social work education**

The main implications of the current approach to child protection for social work education are two-fold. First, there is a gap between wider conceptions of social work education such as the PCF and the realities of child and family social work practice. Previous studies indicate that students struggle at times to reconcile what they learn at university with what happens on placement (Barnes, 2002; Walton, 2005; Green, 2006; Nixon and Murr, 2006; Parker et al, 2006; Delaney, 2007; Wilson and Kelly, 2010; author’s own, 2013, 2015). Students are confronted at times with differing aspirations between the academy and the practicum (Wilson, 2013). For example, a study exploring the use of student reflection suggested that agency culture affected the ability of students to apply their reflective skills within placements. (Wilson, 2013). Agencies focused on processes and following procedures were less likely to be receptive to reflective skills

Second, recent reports (e.g. Narey, 2014) and the introduction of the KSS (Department for Education, 2014) indicate that the differences (Delaney, 2007) between social work education and practice may be replaced by a model of practice which adopts a more limited approach to social work education as evidenced in the PCF. In addition, the demise of TCSW may indicate that the future of the PCF is not secure. The KSS may also be seen as an alternative to the PCF. Narey (2014), for example, makes the point that the PCF needs significant reform.

The dilemma faced by social work education is therefore that there is a genuine risk that the wider conception of social work in the PCF may become overshadowed by a child protection model, which tends to affirm at times a less humane practice of contemporary child and family social work. The question is: how can we strengthen and cultivate our humanity in social work education and transfer this humane ‘face’ (Levinas, 1989) to child and family social work? It is argued in this paper that an alternative approach is needed which can challenge the dominance of such approaches as the KSS and Narey’s vision of child protection as coterminous with social work.

The importance of ‘hope’ (Collins, 2014) within social work was considered earlier. It may be suggested that the role of social work education is to provide the possibility or option of hope (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2011) in contemporary social work. Social work education can offer a pedagogy of hope, which provides ways to intervene in practice. A pedagogy of hope aims to inspire students to put their hopes and aspirations into their practice. Arguably, what contemporary child and family social work needs is the belief that “different futures are possible” (Giroux, 2011, p. 122) for the profession. Making children safe is compatible with treating parents and carers as colleagues and co-partners. Making children safe goes hand in hand with improving the lives of families before child protection concerns arise (Featherstone et al, 2013). A more humane future for social work means educating our students about hopeful futures for social work and their role as practitioners to implement a hopeful practice in contemporary social work (adapted from Giroux, 2011)

There are a number of ways in which social work education can develop a more hopeful and humane social work and influence practice. These include: assessments; ethical exercise; parent advocates; and ‘grassroots’ education. Assessments are rightly seen as essential in child and family social work (Narey, 2014; Department for Education, 2014). The problem, however, as discussed above, is that contemporary approaches to assessment reflect an underlying linear model of assessment. For example, a study explored how assessments considered children’s identity (Thomas and Holland, 2010). The authors found that out of the 32 reports considered only 5 addressed essential identity factors such as culture, ethnicity, or linguistic identity. Only 3 assessments provided the views of the children. Instead of focusing on the individual children the assessments tended to consider what ‘every child’ requires to develop instead of identifying the needs of the real individual child. Reports were formulaic and provided standard responses. Thomas and Holland suggest this may be due to time restraints. The argument of this paper, however, is the use of standard formulas is a symptom of an underlying and limited notion of humanity.

Bringing the actual living and human child back into social work necessitates a more human centred and humane approach to child assessments. Seeing reports as a type of ‘life story’ (Author et al, 2015) allows social workers to tell an individualised narrative of living, breathing children. Life stories are well established tools in child and family social work. Making use of this approach in assessments provides an opportunity to re-humanise social work practice with children. The ‘every child’ of standard formulas is replaced with a holistic, developmental and growing tale of a young person’s lived experience.

‘Ethical exercise’ is taken from an international study of social workers and other professionals’ engagement with ethical dilemmas (Doel et al, 2010). The findings indicated that social workers and other professionals tended to avoid ethical issues. Using prescriptive bullet points or list of ethical obligations was not seen by the authors as helpful. They recommended encouraging the use or exercise of professionals’ ethical thinking by providing them with vignettes containing ethical dilemmas. Promoting the exercise of ethical discretion and debate may contribute to a more humane practice because social workers become engaged with the ethics of practice instead of its process. Social workers can learn to distinguish between doing the right thing and doing things right (Munro, 2011).

Parent advocates arose from a project in New York to reduce the number of looked after children by transforming the way in which child welfare agencies worked with birth parents. Child welfare in New York and the rest of the USA was a “residual service” (Tobis, 2013, 211) in which parents and children were provided support only after children had been abused. As part of the project parents whose children had been removed were recruited and trained to support and advocate on behalf of birth parents. Of course it is an expectation that service users are involved in social work education in England. However, parent advocates are different in that they advocate and explain the views and experiences of parents in the child protection system. Setting up a parents advocate group in social work education can enable the voice of parents to be heard and to step into their shoes. A parent advocate scheme will help social work students (and academic tutors) to go beyond the horror stories of Victoria Climbie and Peter Connelly and to become readers of the parents’ live stories.

The last example is also taken from the New York model (Tobis, 2013). Grassroots education means students learning from service users within their own communities and daily narratives. Two examples are provided from the social work programme of this paper’s author. The course has set up a service user-led placement and a service user module developed and run by service users. To recognise our service users’ humanity we must understand them from within their own contexts and lives. These projects are based on pedagogical approaches to social work education developed within the international ‘PowerUs’ partnership (<http://www.powerus.se/>). Providing grassroots education may contribute to the narratives of services users’ human lives being brought into the narratives of the academy and the practicum.

**Conclusion**

The key message of this paper is two-fold. There is a tendency in contemporary child and family social work to become synonymous with a particular version of child protection. The type of child protection adopted tends to be authoritarian with at times a limited consideration of the humanity of parents and adult carers in particular. Reviewing contemporary reports and models of social work such as the Narey report (2014) and the KSS (Department for Education, 2014) indicate that social work in child and family tends at times to be seen as a particular version of child protection. The culture of social work and the research available on how social workers engaged with families reflect this approach in practice.

This paper argues for a more humane or less authoritarian approach in social work. This approach engages with the ‘face’ (Levinas, 1989) or humanity of service users in child and family social work. Examples of a more humane practice have been suggested.

Social workers need to cultivate their humanity both in their learning and practice in order to restore the humanity of the profession. As social workers we must recover not only the humanity of service users but our own humanity by seeing ourselves reflected in them (Levinas, 1989). Services users are as human and fallible as we are ourselves as social workers:

“I’m human, so any human concern is my concern” (Terence, 1976, p. 104).

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