

Child protection investigations as first interviews

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Child protection investigations are difficult tasks that many social workers undertake as part of their everyday work. Roles that seem contradictory, use of power and authority, and angry clients all serve to create tension for parents, workers and organisations alike. This paper seeks to address these issues and argues for the conceptualisation of the child protection investigation as the first interview of a potentially ongoing relationship.

Child protection investigations are usually undertaken by authorities invested with the statutory power to intervene in cases of suspected child abuse and neglect with neither parental or child permission. These investigations occur after initial screening, when agency personnel have reason to believe child abuse or neglect has occurred. They are usually the first contact between an agency representative and family. Essentially, they are seen as risk assessment exercises; aimed at ensuring child safety. Unfortunately, little has been written about child protection investigations, outside of agency manuals describing practice and policy. They have largely been ignored in the literature but as one of the tasks many social workers regularly perform are surely worthy of proper regard as intervention in their own right.

This paper will discuss child protection investigations as a form of social work intervention, and argue they should be regarded as the first contact in a potentially ongoing relationship, rather than as a piece of work separate from the 'helping' function. This paper will further propose a humanistic role be adopted by workers, and will explore issues of relationship, authority and power as they relate to the initial contact between worker and family.

Social workers as investigators

Child protection organisations typically use social workers as their primary professional field workers. This implies that such organisations recognise the skills and values of the social work profession. The reality, however, is that often the social work skills of rapport building, and values and attitudes of client right to self determination, empathy and unconditional positive regard, become seriously challenged in this work (Cooper & Ball, 1987). This challenge occurs throughout the intervention, beginning with the investigation.

During the investigation stage, the focus is on gathering evidence to assess the presence, and/or degree, of abuse or neglect. This differs from usual conceptions of social work practice, supported by the profession's values, of beginning with what the family defines as the problem. The challenge continues throughout the assessment process, where the focus is on ascertaining the level of severity of abuse and associated risk factors, as well as attempting to predict the ability and willingness of the family to move to a non abusing state. The tension is often exacerbated should the matter proceed to a contested court case. Once the matter of State care is determined, the problems continue as the agency seeks to engage the family in intervention with a view to preventing further abuse or neglect.

Roles

It has been argued that there are two roles evident in child protection work; the authoritarian and the humanistic (Filip et al, 1991). The authoritarian role perceives parents as responsible for their actions, while the humanistic role perceives the parent as a victim as well as the child. Workers who adopt the authoritarian role may focus on the collection of evidence to assess the presence of abuse and neglect. Adoption of the humanistic role by workers would mean attention may be on the provision of services to the family with a view to preventing the recurrence of abuse. These roles are not mutually exclusive, nor are the same tasks required in each. Thus the roles can be confusing and seem, at times, to be contradictory (Schmitt et al, 1976; Fusco, 1983; Filip et al, 1991; Cooper & Ball, 1987).

The difficulty emanates from the dual expectations of child protection agencies by the broader community, which gives social workers their power to intervene in social problems (Palmer, 1983; Costin et al, 1991). Society places high regard on its children being protected and, at the same time, places great value on the role of parenting. Society sees the child's place as being with the natural family where the family should be free to raise their children with as little state intervention as possible (DiLeonardi, 1980). Social workers are castigated for being too intrusive and, at the same time, blamed when children are harmed through too

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little intervention (Corby, 1987; Parton, 1991). Where abuse has occurred, social workers are expected to provide all intervention necessary to enable the child to be raised safely within the familial environment. Where removal is necessary, the expectation is for work to be focused on the child's return to the family. Thus is spawned the worker's dilemma in practice (Billingsley, 1965).

Child protection agencies struggle with how to bring order to the confusion. One method used in an attempt to achieve this is splitting the roles of investigator and helper, on the grounds that the roles are incompatible and confuse both worker and family (Stone, 1990). Conversely, a number of writers acknowledge that it is possible for workers to fulfil both roles (Hegar, 1982; Fusco, 1982; Palmer, 1983; Corby, 1987; Filip et al, 1991).

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This paper will argue that the process of separating the roles into investigator and helper is unhelpful and results in largely short term gain with potential for long term loss. It will suggest the focus on evidence gathering impedes the quality of information, and potentially damages the worker-client relationship. In the longer term, more is to be gained by utilising skills already known to the social work profession. That is, building rapport to create a trusting environment, where families feel free to state their concerns and needs. A long term view must be taken in the event that the abuse or neglect is so severe that removal is necessary. This is critical because if children are to return home quickly, and safely, a positive working relationship is necessary from the time of initial intervention.

Worker-client relationship

Workers enter the forum of investigations primarily with one goal: to determine whether abuse or neglect exists and to assess the risk factors (Costin et al, 1991), thus placing emphasis on the task of gathering evidence. This goal is supported by societal values, legislation and policies which instruct workers to act in the least intrusive manner possible and to encourage families in their parenting

function. Any rapport building that goes on, and evidence from clients would indicate there is little of this (Fisher et al 1986, Corby, 1987), is done almost exclusively to facilitate the process of gathering evidence. It is rare for workers, at this stage, to be thinking about rapport building with a longer term intervention in mind. Their aim is to determine the safety of the child and to intervene for the shortest possible time in family's lives.

Yet it is clear that the worker-client relationship is the strongest predictor of outcome in child protection work. A positive relationship, as opposed to a negative one, is more likely to result in the family engaging with the agency, and being motivated to make the changes necessary to eliminate child abuse and neglect from their family (Jones et al, 1976). It has been noted time and again that a person must feel safe, and trust the worker, for change to occur (Maluccio, 1979; Germain & Gitterman, 1980; Hollis & Woods, 1981). Ideally this same principle should apply to child protection work. The aim is to establish openness and trust, through our authority and influence, rather than relying on legally mandated authority (Dean & Locke, 1983; Fusco, 1983).

If a positive relationship does not exist and families do not believe their needs are going to be met, continuance in intervention is unlikely to occur (Ripple, 1957). In order, for caregivers to improve their parenting, and come to terms with the humiliation and guilt they may be feeling, they require an environment of understanding, including worker belief that change is possible, rather than a punitive response (Seabury, 1985).

Worker and family response to investigations

Families frequently perceive the investigation process as being negative, often seeing the worker as authoritarian or patronising. Parents are frequently unable to recall all of what was told to them during the investigation (Corby, 1987) and this is indicative of the extreme stress they are experiencing throughout the interview. The stress is largely a result of fear and a sense of vulnerability (Carroll, 1978a; Kinney et al, 1991; Costin et al, 1991). Parents know well the power of child protection agencies and while agencies and workers can argue that removal occurs relatively infrequently, they do have this power and, when necessary, can use it, regardless of parental wish. Their fear, then, is well founded and as there is little in our society to reward people for the acknowledgment of their perpetration of child abuse, it is likely that fear will

emerge as hostility and resistance (Seabury, 1979; Costin et al, 1991).

Workers also typically experience a range of responses when abuse or neglect is substantiated. Sheath (1990), in discussing intervention with a mandated client group, suggests that, in some instances, workers use society-given power to act out their own moral outrage. Such an attitude may be legitimised through the re-naming of this process as confrontation, and ensuring the parents accept responsibility for their behaviour. Far from being helpful, this kind of behaviour only serves to create greater distance between worker and parents. Responses can also include bitterness and anger towards the parents, and fear that a mistake will be made during the assessment, or a risk factor missed, putting the child in further danger (Carroll, 1978a; Costin, 1991). Conversely, there are a range of factors which serve to blinker workers in seeing child abuse, such as a pessimistic attitude in regard to the availability and quality of alternative care or fear of the court process. Workers need to acknowledge these feelings, deal with them and move on. They need to be sensitive and open and yet maintain their vigilance without becoming distanced from the family (Carroll, 1978b). While it is necessary to be conscious of the risks, failing to gain a parent's support and cooperation, may put the child at further risk. They are at risk of both further abuse or neglect, and of being unable to return home should removal be required and a positive working relationship not be achieved between worker and family.

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Reaching out

By their very nature child protection investigations are difficult pieces of work. The combination of family and worker responses may act to create problems in a subsequent relationship. Parents and children can be expected to be guarded and reluctant to share information, and

seek to end the relationship as quickly as possible (Seabury, 1985). The task then, is for workers to quickly create an environment where families can see the value of entering into a relationship with the agency. Haas (1959) termed this 'reaching out' and said:

The social worker who in the name of neutrality fails to participate actively or personally to respond in the casework relationship fails to understand or use the dynamic potential of relationship. (p. 44)

In fact, everything that is known about how to conduct first interviews needs to be brought to the investigation. Workers should aim to undertake the same tasks in the investigation that they expect to perform in any other first interview. This includes the building of rapport, an initial contract encompassing goals, roles and so on; while, at the same time, ensuring the immediate safety of the child. Rather than child protection work being compartmentalised into investigation, assessment, case planning, intervention and review (Filip et al, 1991), it needs to be acknowledged that investigations do not preclude a helping relationship (Hegar, 1982). Thus, this piece of work needs to be seen as part of the overall intervention.

By seeing the investigation as a separate operation, to be undertaken by someone using solely the authoritarian role for the purpose of gathering evidence, workers risk alienation from the family. Nor is it helpful to begin in the authoritarian role and then attempt to move into the

humanist role. It is artificial, in that the 'helping worker' still has a child protection function, which will have to be enacted should abuse recur - that takes legal precedence over the helping role (Hegar, 1982). Nor is a change of worker face likely to be sufficient to convince families that the agency now 'really wants to help'.

Far more satisfactory is adoption of the humanistic roles from the outset, possible because helping and authority are not paradoxical (Palmer, 1983). Rather, the humanistic role can be used to help parents acknowledge the existence of problems and the need for change. It also allows continuity of information, rather than information having to be transferred from the investigator to the helper, and it assists in avoiding the denial of abuse and neglect by both worker and client (Hegar, 1982).

In order for the humanistic role to be successfully enacted, both the investigation and helping components need to be made explicit to the family, with a full explanation of what each entails (Seabury 1985). It may be useful to frame the intervention as two separate contracts, one pertaining to the minimum the family must do to achieve the standards of child care as set by the agency, guided by societal values, while the other contract can go beyond this and seek to meet needs defined by the client (Fusco, 1983). This may include counselling, parenting skills, mediation or whatever else the family decides is necessary to their improved functioning.

It is also clear that in order to be accepted by families, workers need to offer immediate intervention to allow clients to believe their needs are going to be met. This, coupled with efficient and empathetic service so as to ensure the investigation is a reasonably positive experience, will enhance continuance, even with very angry and resistant clients (Levinger, 1960; DiLeonardi 1980).

Power and authority

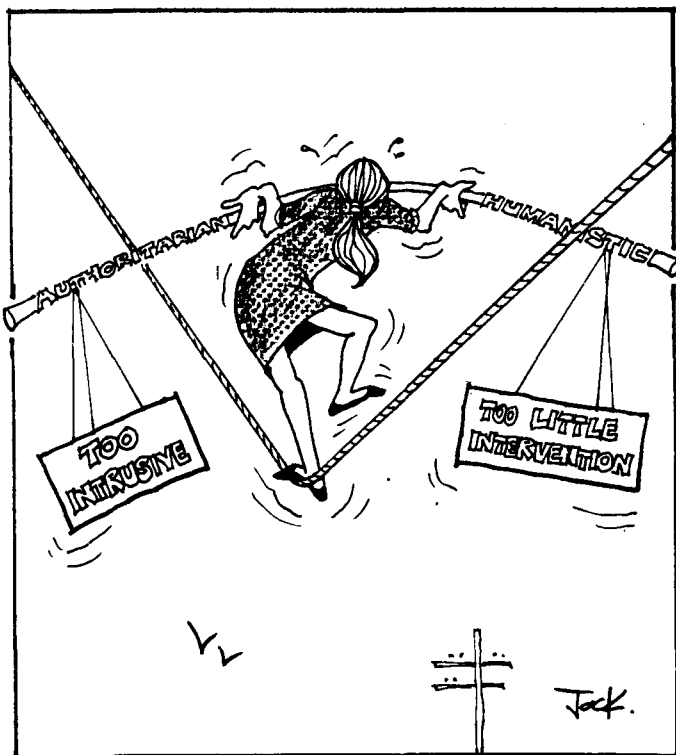
Of major importance here is the worker's ability to deal with the issues of power

and authority, an ongoing dilemma in the social work profession generally (Palmer, 1983). A number of writers agree that a large part of the role confusion occurs because social workers are often unwilling to assume the authority role, seeing it as inherently bad and incongruent with practice (Palmer, 1983; Fusco, 1983). One of the consequences of this is for workers to become vague, and so foster misunderstanding by the family, as they seek to explain their power and authority to clients in ways that try to soften its impact (Furlong, 1990). For effective practice, it is essential that workers be comfortable with their power and also be able to use it skilfully (Palmer, 1983; Seabury, 1985; Costin et al, 1991).

Costin et al (1991) distinguish between socio-legal and psychological aspects of authority. Socio-legal authority is defined as that which is granted by society and gives workers the power to enter a family's home, against their will if necessary, for the purpose of ascertaining the occurrence of abuse or neglect. Psychological authority exists when the worker is able to demonstrate competence, and parents, in response, demonstrate a willingness to be assisted by the worker. This type of authority is developed through an understanding of the laws and policies in relation to child protection, societal expectations in relation to the care of children, demonstrated assessment, intervention and treatment skills (Costin et al, 1991). Unfortunately, child protection agencies are typically characterised by the use of legal authority to control and confront abusing parents (Dean & Locke, 1983), thus acting out the authoritarian role solely.

Investigations are done differently according to how authority and power are perceived by individual workers, in conjunction with how they visualise their roles. When using only the authoritarian role, authority and power are used to gain entrance to the house and to compel the parents and children to speak the truth. This may be reified by such things as threatening to use the police, carrying identification badges that proclaim the authority, arriving at homes and expecting to enter and hold an interview without prior consultation, appointment or request. In these situations, there is an implicit or, sometimes, explicit, threat. It is rarely the case that social workers can undertake this role skilfully, as it is not usually part of formal education or training (Cooper & Ball, 1987). It is therefore unlikely that much will be gained from using socio-legal power alone.

In the humanistic role, authority is seen as a resource. It gives workers the right,



and the responsibility to talk to the family. Workers expect to be given psychological power and so use authority as they would any other resource, rather than enacting the authority as an end in itself. Thus, authority is implicit, rather than explicit. In this role the worker enters the house with a belief she/he has something to offer, both as a skilled social worker supported by a large bureaucracy complete with a myriad of resources; and with a belief that families given the opportunity will usually choose to become non-abusive. The worker also enters conscious that he/she can, and will, use the full force of his/her legal power if required, but this is as a means of motivating clients to engage rather than as a threat if they fail to comply (Costin et al, 1991). Social workers are educated about relationships and are trained to facilitate their development. This is their most powerful tool (Hegar, 1982). Haas (1959), in discussing this, says there exists:

a frame of mind, a psychological readiness, a determination of the social worker to find a way to help the client...it is the quality of this active interest of the case worker that generally proves the decisive factor in determining whether some kind of therapeutic relationship will develop through which the individual will be motivated to obtain help. (p. 44)

Training and education

It is likely that one of the sources of difficulty for workers in successfully enacting the humanistic role, is that social work training and education does not equip them for it (Cingolani, 1984; Cooper & Ball, 1987). This same criticism can be made of the bulk of the recent social work literature (Corby, 1987; Borowski, 1989). Typically, social workers are trained to work with voluntary clients, not involuntary ones. Social workers, armed with a range of skills and techniques, find themselves working for agencies where clients do not seek them out. Rather than forming relationships with people who seek their assistance, they have to struggle with attempting to build rapport with someone who may not want to see them (Ohlin, 1958 in Billingsley, 1965; Borowski, 1989).

The risks

It needs to be recognised that there is a risk in approaching child protection investigations in this way. It implies that by beginning to develop the relationship at the same time that allegations of abuse are being investigated, it is already assumed that abuse has taken place and thus the relationship will continue. There is also the possibility that the investigation will take longer and therefore con-

tradict usual agency policy of minimising the intrusiveness each intervention. Given, however, the potential problems with the alternative, that is using the authoritarian role solely, there seems to be less risk attached to using the humanistic role from the outset.

Conclusion

Child protection investigations are difficult interventions and little can be done to make them easier. It may be possible however, to make them more effective and less distressing to both families and workers. Through the skilful use of authority and the employment of the humanistic role from the first contact, workers have the opportunity to develop relationships with parents and children which are more likely to result in change than attempts to engage through implicit and explicit threats. While such an approach may increase the amount of time spent with the family, this time can be seen as short term loss with potentially long term gain. This would seem to be preferable to the current problems child protection agencies face.

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