Marxist and feminist critiques of child protection

To protect children or to change society?

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This paper critically examines Marxist and feminist literature on child protection, and identifies both their strengths and weaknesses. The author concludes that, while both ideologies call for broader policy reforms to address the prevalence of poverty and male violence, the core responsibility of statutory systems remains the protection of children and their rights.

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In recent years, there has been increasing local and international criticism of child protection policies and practices (Myers 1994).

Much of this criticism has come from the conservative side of politics – from pro-family and parents' rights groups concerned that child protection systems may be undermining the traditional nuclear family (Mendes 1996; Muehlenberg 1994, pp.17-18).

However, an equally powerful and arguably more influential critique has come from structuralists on the Left side of the spectrum. Marxists believe that child protection is often about the regulation and social control of poor families, rather than the protection of abused children. Similarly, many feminist writers argue that child protection interventions focus on investigating and punishing those who are already victims themselves – oppressed and abused women – rather than tackling the root causes of patriarchy and structural disadvantage.

The common theme in both ideologies is the concern to prevent child abuse by changing society, and eradicating structural inequities based on class or patriarchy. However, the potential danger of such macro-approaches is that they may fail to ensure the adequate treatment of individual cases.

This paper critically examines Marxist and feminist literature on child protection, and identifies both their strengths and weaknesses. Analysis is limited principally to instances of physical and emotional abuse and neglect, rather than child sexual abuse which arguably merits a separate essay in its own right (Bambacas 1998).

MARXIST CRITIQUES OF CHILD PROTECTION

The traditional Marxist Left has long been critical of the welfare state and the social work profession. In general, Marxists have argued that welfare interventions are principally about controlling the poor and blaming the victim, rather than tackling structural inequities and empowering the disadvantaged (Mendes 1997, pp.482-483).

This critique has also been extended to child protection interventions. Marxists do not deny the existence or severity of child abuse, particularly that of a physical or sexual nature. However, they argue that much child abuse (particularly that pertaining to allegedly milder forms of neglect or emotional abuse) can be attributed to poverty and structural disadvantage, rather than to the individual pathology of parents (Caddick 1992, p.16).

Their recommendation to child protection authorities is to place more emphasis on addressing and preventing the broader structural causes of child abuse, rather than focusing resources on the investigation and policing of poor (often single parent) families. In particular, they suggest that a major egalitarian programme of social and economic reform is required to eliminate child abuse (Archard 1993, p.157; Gil 1998, p.110).

The Marxist critique of child protection assumes that child abuse is not a classless phenomenon. Attention is drawn to numerous studies, locally and internationally, which have found a correlation between lower socio-economic status and child abuse (Belsky 1978, p.42; Carter et al 1988, pp.29-31; Clark 1994,

pp.98-99; Corby 1993, pp.100-101; Costin, Karger & Stoesz 1996, pp.145-151; Eccleston 1998; Fernandez 1996, pp.84-85; Green 1993, pp.5-6; Mason 1994, pp.4-5; Mowbray 1992, p.11; Parton 1985, pp.165-172; Pelroy 1985; Vinson & McArthur 1988, pp.71-73; Vinson et al 1989).

One complicating factor here is the greater vulnerability of the poor to patterns of social surveillance. For example, people living in lower socio-economic areas are more likely to have social workers, social security files, police records, and public hospital files. In contrast, middle class parents involved in child abuse or neglect may be able to divert the treatment of family problems to private counsellors or psychiatrists (Carment 1989; Gelles 1992, p.259; Martin 1985, p.60; Mason & Noble-Spruell 1993, p.26).

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that even when the disproportionate reporting of the poor is taken into account, there is still an overwhelming link between poverty and child abuse (Goddard 1996, p.52; Pelroy 1985, p.27; Vinson et al 1989, p.21).

Whilst Marxists have hardly played an exclusive role in drawing attention to this correlation, they have been particularly outspoken in calling for structural reforms that address the broader issues of poverty and structural inequity (Archard 1993, p.157; Frost & Stein 1989, pp.48-49 & 54; Jamrozik & Nocella 1998, pp.119-121).

In addition, Marxists have provided a valuable critique of the history of unwarranted State intervention into the lives of working class and Aboriginal families (Caddick 1992, p.14; Jamrozik & Sweeney 1996, p.100; Platt 1977). As noted by numerous authors, too often alleged parental incompetence has turned out to be synonymous with poverty. Much protective intervention has been based on moralistic 'blaming the victim' judgements, and concerned with the control and regulation of poor families, rather than their empowerment (Callahan 1985, p.4; Carrington 1991, p.116; Jamrozik & Nocella 1998, p.120; Jamrozik & Sweeney 1996, pp.89 & 97; Sweeney 1983, pp.42-43; Sweeney 1989, pp.305-308; Thorpe 1994, p.196; Van Krieken 1992, pp.16-17).

Whilst the Marxist macro-approach to the causes of and solutions to child abuse has

its merits, its principal limitation is that it may fail at least in the short term to protect individual children from often severe neglect or emotional abuse at the hands of individual carers (Goddard & Carew 1993, p.263; Parton 1985, p.173).

The common theme in both ideologies is the concern to prevent child abuse by changing society, and eradicating structural inequities based on class or patriarchy. However, the potential danger of such macro-approaches is that they may fail to ensure the adequate treatment of individual cases.

Two key factors, in particular, render Marxist structural analysis inadequate on its own. Firstly, whilst many poor and working class families are exposed to stressors such as poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, violent neighborhoods, etc, most families subjected to these experiences do not abuse or neglect their children (Archard 1993, p.157; Corby 1993, p.101; Merrick 1996, pp.29-30).

In fact, child abusers do appear to have particular personal characteristics. According to Belsky, the difference between abusive and non-abusive caregivers is that the former group lack adequate personal coping skills (Belsky 1978, p.44). Similarly, the Victorian Auditor-General's Report refers to typical personal deficits of perpetrators such as 'problems with coping, self-control and low levels of self-esteem...and a general deficiency in interpersonal skills' (Auditor-General 1996, p.25). In addition, US research by Gelles suggests that particular types of poor people – young parents or single mothers – are most likely to use abusive violence towards their children (Gelles 1992, p.271).

A second and related factor is that the personal characteristics of some caregivers may also prevent them from accepting or utilizing structural supports that are offered. For example, those who suffer from substance abuse or intellectual or psychiatric disabilities may be incapable of benefiting from support networks. In such cases, placement of the child with alternative carers may be the only option (Costello 1998, pp.113-114; Holborow 1997, pp.172-174; Thompson 1995, pp.2-3 & 72-75).

The limitations of rigidly applying the Marxist approach to complex cases of child abuse and child protection can best be illustrated through a case study.

CASE STUDY

The McCarthy family consists of two parents and four children aged 4-10 years. They live in a Housing Commission unit in the Melbourne working class suburb of Port Melbourne, and have been known to local non-government and statutory authorities for nearly a decade. They live in considerable poverty including long-term dependence on unemployment benefits, poor housing, poor hygiene, and inadequate food and clothing.

After a notification by a local community agency, Protective Services Victoria issued a protection application by notice on all four children. Concerns included domestic violence, excessive alcohol intake by the father, emotional abuse, the low intellectual capacity of both parents, and the developmental delay of three of the four children.

Marxist theory would correctly emphasize the importance of addressing the material deprivation of this family. Concern would also be expressed that the family not be blamed or punished for their poverty. In fact, considerable material assistance and non-punitive support had been provided to this family over the years including family support workers, early intervention programmes, intellectual disability services, child care, a women's group for the mother, Big Brother/Big Sister, and direct cash and food grants.

However, the McCarthy parents had generally been unable to effectively utilize the structural supports offered. In particular, the father's alcohol abuse and related violence, and both parents' incapacity to meet their children's developmental needs, had necessitated

renewed protective service involvement. This case example demonstrates that whilst structural interventions are required to address questions of poverty and material disadvantage, protective interventions must also address the personal characteristics and dynamics of individual carers and families.

FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF CHILD PROTECTION

Feminist theory sees women as oppressed by gender stereotypes and limiting social institutions such as the nuclear family. Whilst a number of different feminist perspectives exist including liberal, socialist, radical, and postmodern feminism, all feminists seek to end women's subordination to men (Lewis 1998, pp.85-86; Orme 1998; Pascall 1997, pp.21-22; Williams 1989, pp.43-86).

Feminists view child abuse as closely related to the impact of patriarchal power relations. They argue that child protection systems are gender-blind in that they ignore the different levels of power and responsibility held by male and female parents (Farmer 1997, p.157; Featherstone 1997, p.173). In particular, feminists criticize:

1. The mother-blaming ideology prevalent in much of the child protection literature which assumes that women should care for and protect their children, and therefore blames them when anything goes wrong. For example, mothers are often viewed as secondary perpetrators when violent abuse is committed by their male partner (Farmer 1997, pp.60-61; L'Hullier 1996, pp.15-16; Mason et al 1994, p.99; Parton 1990, p.43; Thorpe 1996, pp.111-113). Often, women who have themselves been the victims of severe domestic violence are publicly blamed and even criminally charged for failing to protect their children (Armstrong 1995, pp.31-33; Featherstone 1996, p.180; Parton 1990, pp.43-44).

Feminists instead note the enormous pressures – psychological, social and economic – which lead women to form and maintain relationships with violent men (Bretag 1998; Clark 1994, pp.92-93; Mason et al 1994, p.97; Parton 1990, p.44; Thorpe 1996, pp.116-118). They call for the

collective empowerment of women, and their recognition as allies not colluders (Stark & Flitcraft 1988, p.115).

2. The related failure of protective systems to intervene with and address the abusive behaviour of male partners. Increasingly, feminist theory is calling on the findings of hostage theory which suggests that (mainly female) social workers are often intimidated by violent male partners, and instead focus their attention on the mother (Farmer 1997, p.63; Gair & Thorpe 1996, p.91).

3. The over-representation of female-headed single parent households in the child protection system which is linked to the feminisation of poverty. Feminists argue that instead of being policed, female sole parents should be provided with financial and other forms of practical assistance (Callahan 1993, pp.182-187; L'Hullier 1994, p.21; Mason 1989, p.5; Thorpe 1996, p.124).

The feminist critique of patriarchal assumptions within protective systems has considerable merit, and has arguably contributed to a more gender-sensitive approach to child abuse. In particular, it has encouraged greater empowerment of women subjected to male violence, and has placed a badly needed emphasis on the inclusion of males in child protection practice and research so that they don't evade responsibility for their actions (Cooper 1993, p.54; Corby 1993, pp.149-150).

However, the feminist approach also has some obvious weaknesses, a number of which have been identified by other feminist writers influenced by postmodern ideas which emphasize differences and complexity amongst women (Orme 1998, pp.220-221).

Firstly, feminism assumes an inviolable alliance between the interests of women and children. For example, Dominelli & McLeod suggest in the case of physical abuse of children by women, the need 'to create ways in which the interests of both parties can be kept on an equal footing' (Dominelli & McLeod 1989, pp.112-113).

Yet such rhetoric ignores the fact that a power imbalance exists not only between men and women, but also between adults

and children (Featherstone & Trinder 1997; Fitzroy 1998, p.5; Lyall 1998; Macleod & Saraga 1988, p.47; Parton 1990, p.61; Wise 1995, p.111). Children are more vulnerable than their adult care-givers, whatever the extenuating social circumstances. A system that focuses principally on the empowerment of women rather than children is unlikely to ensure the right of children to be protected from abuse.

Secondly, women are not only victims of abuse, but also perpetrators of abuse (Fitzroy 1998, p.4). Both local and international evidence suggests that men and women are equally likely to participate in physical or emotional abuse or neglect of children (Corby 1993, p.149; Featherstone 1996, p.183; Fitzroy 1998, p.1; Gordon 1986, p.69). As noted by Featherstone, whilst it is unacceptable to burden women with sole responsibility for their children's welfare, it is equally unacceptable to absolve them of any responsibility (Featherstone 1997, p.178).

Thirdly, feminism uses overly reductionist methods to explain particular circumstances. As noted by Merrick, much feminist literature gives the impression that there is never individual pathology in the world, only oppressive social relations (Merrick 1996, pp.29-30). Child abuse cannot be solely attributed to patriarchy at the expense of all other explanatory accounts. The individual characteristics of male and female perpetrators also play a part (Cooper 1993, pp.52-55; Corby 1993, p.102).

The limitations of rigidly applying the feminist model to the complexities of child abuse and child protection can be further explored through a case study.

CASE STUDY

John and Katherine Hall live in a Housing Commission house in the Melbourne suburb of Moorabbin with their two children, Sharon aged 8 years, and Kevin aged 14 months. After a notification by the Community Policing Squad, a protection application by apprehension was taken out on their children as a result of a severe incident of domestic violence and associated alcohol abuse.

According to the police, they had attended the home on numerous occasions after John had assaulted Kathy. Kathy had always informed the police that she did not wish to make a complaint against John.

The police had even taken out an intervention order on Kathy's behalf, but no attempt was made by either John or Kathy to observe the terms of the order.

During the most recent incident of domestic violence, the toddler Kevin had been hit by his father on the arm. The eight year old had also attempted unsuccessfully to stop John hitting her mother. When the police attended the premises, they found Kathy running down the street covered in blood, and the toddler in her arms. The police found the house to be covered in blood.

Both Marxist and feminist critiques have arguably contributed to more effective child protection systems by identifying structural factors that may contribute to child abuse and neglect. ... However, ... the core responsibility of statutory systems is (and should remain) the protection of children and their rights.

Kathy informed protective workers that she was not willing to leave John in order to protect her children from further harm. Nor was she willing to go to a refuge. She believed the children were not affected by exposure to the violence, and stated that 'there were worse things than seeing parents argue and fight'. She also stated that she had provoked John.

Feminist writers would quite correctly identify the considerable social and economic barriers to Kathy leaving John. They would also rightly emphasize the importance of not blaming Kathy for the children's exposure to such violence, and for ensuring that John took responsibility for his violence and alcoholism. However, such an analysis does not in itself ensure that the children would be protected from further violence and harm.

To be sure, protective workers could seek to empower Kathy, and to ensure that she was given every opportunity to protect herself and her children either within or outside her relationship with John. However, given that Kathy was so heavily socialised to accepting the pathological behaviour produced by oppressive social relations (Wise 1995, p.110), it is highly unlikely that an intervention based on structural assumptions about patriarchy and gender inequity would produce much if any change in the family situation. In such circumstances, protective workers would have no choice but to pursue their core mandate to protect children from harm.

CONCLUSION

Both Marxist and feminist critiques have arguably contributed to more effective child protection systems by identifying structural factors that may contribute to child abuse and neglect. In particular, they have identified the need for broader policy reforms which address the prevalence of poverty and male violence.

However, such reforms do not preclude the need for protective interventions to protect children from harm at the hands of individual carers. The core responsibility of statutory systems is (and should remain) the protection of children and their rights, rather than the restructuring of society. ☐

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