

## BOOK REVIEW

## Re-imagining child protection. Towards humane social work with families

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This is a book that needed to be written. It is a book that has a clear focus on social work and child protection rather than on the contribution of other occupational groups. It is also provocative as each of the nine chapters challenges many of the accepted tenets of child protection practice. This is not a text like some recent books about child protection (Arney & Scott, 2010; Goodman & Trowler, 2012; Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2009). Instead, it is more like a collection of essays on topics of concern. In that regard, the chapters occasionally feel slightly disconnected. The chapters are, however, never boring.

At the core of the book is a challenge to what has been termed ‘child centric’ practice (p. 16), with its narrow focus on the child to the exclusion of parents, extended family – including grandparents and others – as well as place and community. A prime example of child centric practice is the New South Wales (NSW) forensic/investigatory/prosecutorial (FIP) model of child protection. This prosecutorial model ignores recent research findings about parent’s perception of the way child protection caseworkers treat them and misuse their power. A child centric approach is also rebuffed by the West Australian ‘Signs of Safety’ approach to child protection (Turnell & Edwards, 1999; see [www.munrotunrnellemurphy.com](http://www.munrotunrnellemurphy.com)) that is receiving applause overseas, but less so in other parts of Australia.

In the Introduction to this book, the authors examine critically the moral and political climate in England in which child protection services currently operate, and critique the related policy assumptions that have shaped today’s child protection and social work practice. This examination highlights the influence of the child wellbeing movement—and the political embrace of individualism—on the way in which the State views children and families. Within these frameworks the authors suggest that children are not seen in relation to family, but as a State social in-

vestment for the future; with the focus on individualism, in turn, treating children and parents separately with the State taking responsibility only for the child (as the investment) at the expense of parents, extended family and community.

The largely unquestioning acceptance of these positions by social work is seen by the authors as an abdication by the profession and a loss of social work’s historic commitment to work with the poor and disadvantaged. Hence, the plea for a re-imagining of social work and child protection as humane practice. This is a theme that permeates the rest of the book.

The authors’ outlines of the remaining chapters are as follows:

### 2. Re-imagining child protection in the context of re-imagining welfare

The authors indicate that this chapter ‘explores how welfare has been reshaped in the last decades as a transactional form that came to reign in a society in love with the market. It explores the trajectory of child protection and borrows from a more general re-thinking of welfare states to begin to sketch out possibilities for a different settlement’ (p. 17).

### 3. We need to talk about ethics

This chapter ‘Argues for the importance of engaging with the work (*child protection*) as an ethical project and the necessity of continuing moral conversations using a variety of perspectives (p. 17).

**Observation.** Yes, we do. All too often action is taken to intervene in family life because social workers as child protection workers have the power to do so. Rarely is this power questioned or moral issues about intervening in family life examined critically. Instead, more power is sought through amendments to child protection legislation. That is illustrated by the May 2014 changes to the *NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1989*. It is as if there is a belief that more power for social workers to intervene

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in family life will lead to a reduction in the incidence of child abuse and neglect. This is an outcome that is most unlikely, given the grounding of child abuse and neglect in poverty and disadvantage, which power alone can do naught to address.

#### 4. Developing research mindedness in learning cultures

The authors indicate that this chapter ‘Concerns itself with understanding both how evidence can be used to narrow down conversations and also open them and again stresses the importance of debate rather than closure and orthodox thinking’ (p. 17).

#### 5. Towards a just culture: Designing humane social work organisations

This chapter ‘explores the importance of developing just culture in organisations so that the kind of social work we are promoting which places human beings and human factors at its heart can be developed’ (p. 17).

**Observation.** This chapter emphasises how an audit approach to services and the associated blame culture all too readily undermines the morale of the child protection workforce and promotes a risk-averse approach to practice. The authors spend time challenging the management of child protection concerns via the use of proceduralisation or manualisation of practice and the use of timelines and targets to manage the workflow. Instead, the authors argue for the creation of a social work organisational culture that can tolerate uncertainty and is based on trust and confidence. The intention is for clients to receive the services they need without having to jump artificially created barriers, while the workforce is trusted to provide these services. This is the embodiment of their concept of a ‘just culture’. This is desirable but a very tall order given that child protection and social work practice is embedded in local government services in England.

#### 6. Getting on and getting by: Living with poverty

This is my favourite chapter as it ‘explores the lived experience of poverty and makes a case for social work practice that incorporates fully a recognition of the extraordinary power of ordinary help and strengthening the capacities of neighbourhoods and communities’ (p. 17).

**Observation.** Having recently read a host of NSW Children’s Court files as part of a research project, I can report that not a single departmental application for initiating care proceeding contained any reference to the parent’s living circumstances (other than reference to dirty houses), employment or income. Poverty and disadvantage are ignored. Lives are de-contextualised. This is in spite of the fact that we know poverty compounds parental stress and can create

circumstances that lead to child neglect and abuse (Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Weatherburn & Lind, 2001).

What this chapter does is underline the extent to which parental poverty should be a crucial consideration in child protection assessments and subsequent decision-making, especially when removal of a child from parental care is under consideration.

#### 7. Thinking afresh about relationships: Men, women, parents and services

As the authors say, in this chapter they ‘address neglected areas such as the relationship between men and women as partners or ex-partners. We will argue that while parenting and parenting capacity are seen as critical in terms of impacting on children’s welfare, an irony of the current policy and practice climate is how little effort is made to understand parents themselves and their lives, what they want from each other, and for and from their children. We take the issue of domestic abuse as an example’ (p. 17).

**Observation.** Both this chapter and Chapter 8 contain interesting observations and commentary about the way social workers have ceased to explore the nature of relationships between men and women as participants in family life. Instead, in the context of child protection what is offered are questionable stereotypic responses with regard to domestic violence and risk of harm to a child. This is a stilted process that denies the adults, especially women, as mothers, the opportunity to rethink their current circumstances and gain the help and support that they hope for.

#### 8. Tainted love: How dangerous families became troubled

In this penultimate chapter the authors ‘argue that the notion of family as the context for the resolution of children’s needs extends the scope for supporting change and reflects most children’s lived experience’. They then go on to say ‘we suggest barriers to family engagement in the care and protection of children have in part been a product of our reluctance to go beyond the presenting unit (however fractured that may be) despite the evidence that family networks are fluid, diverse and rarely geographically specific’ (p. 17).

**Observation.** This is an excellent discussion of family policy in England and the way much of recent policy has been based on flawed assumptions about family life. These policies are paralleled by much of Australian federal and state government thinking about family matters.

#### 9. Conclusion

Finally, the concluding chapter, as the authors say, ‘pull[s] our sundry threads together to offer a mosaic of possibilities for how we move forward together’ (p. 17).

This is not a book for the faint hearted. It calls on knowledge from a range of disciplines and is densely and cleverly

argued. It is a book I would not have wanted to miss reading as it clarified some of my thinking about how the current child protection legislation and casework practices need urgent reform. Reform is needed to prevent over-eager child protection workers from doing harm, as they do now, to some children and their families.

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