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Book Review

Protecting children: A social model

Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K., & White, S. (2018). **Protecting children: A social model**. Bristol, UK: Policy Press. ISBN 978-1-4473-3275-6 paperback. £29.59. A$55.58 at 17th Sept. 2018. pp. 192.

Reviewed by Dr Frank Ainsworth, Senior Principal Research Fellow (Adjunct), School of Social Work and Human Services, James Cook University, Townsville campus, Queensland 4811, Australia.

In 2014, Featherstone, White and Morris published *Re-imagining child protection. Towards humane social work with families* which was favourably reviewed by myself in *Children Australia* (Ainsworth, 2014, pp. 253–255; Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014). I indicated that reading that book had 'clarified my thinking about how the current child protection legislation and casework practices need urgent reform' (p. 255). The new book written collaboratively by four Professors of Social Work takes these matters much further. As a result of this authorship, child protection caseworkers are always referred to as social workers as in England where child protection caseworkers *are* social workers. This is not necessarily so in other places.

To review this book was a challenge as it draws on a wide range of social science and other disciplines and sets forth a dense argument to support the case for the proposed 'social model' of child protection. The book consists of nine chapters which are as follows.

Introduction

This chapter sets out the thesis of the book which is that across a 50-year period, national or state child protection services in Anglophone communities have increasingly adopted a model of child protection practice that focuses on individual or family psychopathology compounded by a heavy reliance on assessments that focus on risk aversion. This assumes, of course, that these theories or constructs offer a sound explanation as to why some parents abuse and neglect their children.

This, in turn, leads to social circumstances such as poverty, lack of employment, poor housing, disadvantaged schools, limited public transport and other indicators of social disadvantage largely being ignored by government. It is as if such circumstances have no connection to child abuse and neglect. In essence, the argument is that national and state governments have ignored these social factors and, instead, have blamed disadvantaged individuals, families and communities for cases of child abuse and neglect. In fact, state and national governments, by ignoring well-established evidence about social and health inequalities and the consequences, have themselves become neglectful of an important section of

their own population. Furthermore, governments, by relentlessly pursuing austerity policies in relation to family and other support services, have further disadvantaged already disadvantaged individuals, families and communities.

This is a powerful thesis that is explored in the next eight chapters of this book. The author's intention is to change the child protection debate by putting forward an alternative 'story'.

Trouble ahead? Contending discourses in child protection

In summary, the authors indicate that

> In this chapter, using the UK system as an exemplar, we consider the history of attempts to improve the way families look after children. We trace the current child protection system and its twists and turns. As we have argued in the introduction more and more of the sorrows of life are being defined as the proper business of a child welfare system predicated on surveillance. While the state and its resources allegedly shrink, its gaze is harder and its tongue sharper. As part of an increasingly residual role, the system has become narrowly focussed on an atomised child, severed from family, relationships and social circumstances: a precarious object of 'prevention' or rescue. As its categories and definitions have gradually grown, the gap between child protection services and family support or ordinary help has, somewhat paradoxically widened. (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris, & White, 2018, p. 27)

The overused 'best interests of the child' construct that was heavily influenced by Anna Freud and her psychoanalytic perspective (Goldstein, Solnit, Goldstein, & Freud, 1996) has been the dominant paradigm for decades. The focus of this paradigm is individual parental pathology and individual deficits; a position which this author and others now question (Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009, 2011).

In spite of Departmental media releases that seek to create a glossy image of child protection services in NSW, this chapter is an accurate portrayal of the current state of play in NSW and probably in other Australian states and territories. After all, poverty is not 'neglect' and surveillance is not 'support' (McMillan cited by Cocks, 2018a). Atomising a child and severing them from family in the 'best interests of the child' is not the 'least detrimental alternative' (Goldstein et al., 1996), except in rare circumstances. And certainly not for all of the 47,915 Australian children in out-of-home care at 30 June, 2017.

Building better people policy aspirations and family life

Chapter 3 addresses how 'a vocabulary has emerged in which notions of toxic parenting and the quest for optimum developmental flourishing create a new mandate for the state to act' (p. 45).

The critique of this development largely follows the line of argument put forward in my review of *Re-imagining child protection: Towards humane social work with families* that was in *Children Australia* in 2014 (Ainsworth, 2014) and *Blinded by Science: The social implications of epigenetics and neuroscience* (Ainsworth, 2017a) that was in the same journal in 2017. The argument is about the use of unsettled science to promote an overly

deterministic and linear view of child development. Nevertheless, these debatable perspectives are promoted by well-financed lobby groups who, in turn, shape government policy in relation to child protection and early intervention. They do so in the name of child saving or child rescue from these toxic parents. See, for example, *Challenging the politics of early education: Who's 'saving' children and why* (Gillies, Edwards, & Horsley, 2017) that was also reviewed in *Children Australia* in 2017 (Ainsworth, 2017b).

In fact, the content of these three books, and the current book under review, represents a major challenge to child protection thinking and service interventions as we now know them. This is the right time for new debate.

Family experience of care and protection services: the good, the bad and the hopeful

This chapter is about parents' experiences of involvement with child protection services. It tells a tale that has been the well told in various forms in Australia starting over a decade ago in Queensland and with similar studies covering Western Australia and New South Wales (Cleary, Klease, Thompson, & Walsh, 2007; Harries, 2008; Holmes, 2009). Overall, these studies report on essentially negative experiences with a few rare cases of positive interactions by child protection personnel with parents.

A social model for protecting children: changing our thinking

Chapter 5 begins to articulate an alternative system of child protection. In doing so, it draws on ideas from other areas of practice.

> In particular the 'social model' has challenged thinking across a range of fields, including disability and mental health. I has provided a philosophy and frameworks for articulating practices that challenge the dominant bio-medical models and their narrow focus on individual impairments, disease and risk. It draws attention to economic, environmental and cultural barriers faced by people with differing levels of (dis) ability and built a movement where those needing services were instrumental in articulating their rights to full participation in service design. (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris and White, 2018, pp. 83-84).

The best Australian example of the force of this model is the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) that was pushed across time by a vital disability lobby and which is projected to cost more than $32 billion a year by the end of the next decade (Morton, 2018). This figure is higher than any estimates of the cost of child protection services (Ainsworth, 2018; Ainsworth & Hansen, 2014). That parents of children in care need advocacy for change in the way the current Australian child protection system works is clear. In New York City, this is being achieved with parents who have successfully engaged with a child protection system and have succeeded in retaining or regaining custody of their child, now being employed by child welfare agencies to advocate or coach a parent currently embroiled with child protection authorities. This, in turn, has reduced the number of children being taken into the care of the state (Cocks, 2018b; Tobis, 2013).

A similar position was taken by the families and friends of mental health patients that influenced mental health services through an emphasis on patient's rights. From that initiative, there are now former patients who have successfully recovered from illness being engaged as service advisors (Bate & Roberts, 2006; Cleary, Freeman, & Walter, 2006).

A social model in practice

Chapter 6 continues this process starting with the claim that the preceding chapters show that there is a need for 'new conceptual and applied frameworks for supporting children and families' (p. 108). Then there are sections such as 'disrupting the paradigm' and 'disrupting the system'. English examples are given of projects that have commenced this process such as the Poverty-Aware Paradigm (PAP) and Community Mobilisers (CM) scheme.

Australian examples are cited, such as the 'Signs of Safety' practice model that was developed in Western Australia and now used worldwide (Turnell & Edwards, 1999), but which has received little attention in other parts of Australia. A further Australian example that gets mentioned is the 'Family Inclusion Network' (FIN) that was started in Queensland in 2006 and is still active (Ainsworth & Berger, 2014). This is a network of parents and professionals that supports parents through the child protection process and after. At various points in time, FIN has existed in other Australian states and territories.

Domestic abuse: a case study

This chapter contains various case studies that illustrate the all-too-common overlap between domestic violence and child abuse. In doing so, the authors are cautious about embracing a social model of child protection where domestic violence is present. They also highlight how a failure by social workers to understand the dynamics of domestic violence can inadvertently reinforce the power of a perpetrator of violence (of whom the mother is invariably afraid and who does not know how to protect herself from the child's father/perpetrator). In turn, this leads to a mother being blamed for not protecting a child that may then lead to the removal of a child from her care (Radford & Hester, 2015).

Much of the chapter is devoted to discussion of masculinity and some practice approaches that aim to socially empower men. A scenario that is considered is when circumstances brought about through loss of work, and other sources of legitimate male identity, morph into anger that finds unacceptable expression in domestic violence or other negative and abusive behaviours.

Crafting different stories: changing minds and hearts

Here, the focus is on how to change 'the conversation on "child protection"' (p. 143). This discussion draws on a wide variety of disciplinary sources that inform the way the debate can be shaped so that the hearts and minds of opinion makers and the public can be changed. It echoes Warner's important book *The emotional politics of social work and child protection* (Warner, 2015). Warner's book was described as introducing the concept of emotional politics. In doing so, the text shows how emotions such as anger, shame, fear and disgust are linked together to reinforce notions of risk and blame. These notions get imported into political debate and the media in very sensational and destructive ways. A forerunner of this book from the USA is Gainsborough's *Scandalous politics: Child welfare policy in the States* (Gainsborough, 2010) which paints a similar picture about how in collective emotional responses to dreadful cases of abuse and neglect legislators change child protection policies, but to little or no effect on the incidence of these types of cases. The four authors of the book under review will almost certainly endorse these two perspectives as they are not too dissimilar to those put forward in this chapter.

The story about child abuse and neglect needs urgent reframing and retelling.

Concluding thoughts

This chapter presents the following statement:

> Our premise is that we need to 'do differently' as we watch the year-on-year rise in the numbers of children being removed from their families of origin, and the translation of stories of need and trouble into categories of risk and shame. (Featherstone et al., 2018. p. 159)

That is the heart of the matter. A caring state would not engage in such distortion. There is also a question as to how social work, a profession committed to responding to need, has become so supportive of child protection practice that focuses on risk and shame?

As indicated earlier, the number of Australian children in out-of-home care in 2016—2017 was 47,915. This is a rise from 40,549 in 2012—2013 or almost 12% in just 4 years (AIHW, 2018). The question is how much longer can this go on?

The next parts of this chapter are about talking across disciplines and with a wider range of members of the public as well as with those who experience services. It also talks about bridging the divides within social work itself, the choices and challenges for national policy makers and, likewise, the challenges and choices at the level of the local state. The concluding sentence is

> We offer this book as a contribution to redefining whose voices are valued in protecting children. It is a plea to root out practices in the voices and experience of those who are struggling to live, love and care in conditions which make it difficult to do so with dignity and respect. (Featherstone et al., 2018. p. 167)

To get to such a place will require long-term effort and much reform. Let us try to get there.

Final comment

This is a block buster of a book. Every chapter challenges conventional thinking about how to best protect children from abuse and neglect. It does so by outlining a social model that seeks to take back child protection from the legislative and legal arenas in favour of community-based initiatives that support disadvantaged families in humane and socially inclusive ways.

The book raises a question about where are the Australian Professors of Social Work in this debate. Indeed, child welfare is 'core' social work business. Australian child protection legislation and casework practices are just as much in need of reform as is the English system, but urgent calls to address these issues in Australia are largely absent. Instead, we get a blitz of Departmental press releases which glorify these services or media reports which condemn them as woefully incompetent, when neither is completely true.

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