

Participation and Child Protection: The Importance of Context

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SUMMARY

This paper examines the effects of discourses about participation on child protection practice. The paper critiques the prevalent conceptualizations of participation on the grounds that, often, these ideals have been imported from other disciplines without due regard for the specificities of child protection practice. Initially, the critique is focused on how participatory discourses have resisted adaption to the child protection field. For example, participation and paternalism are often paired dualistically, with the consequence that participation is seen as an unquestionable good, whilst practices that do not conform to this ideal are associated with paternalism and considered to be antithetical to just child protection practice. By examining some of the typical responses, within the child protection literature and amongst child protection professionals, to the prevalent discourses about participation it is argued that these discourses have actually thwarted the development of participatory processes in child protection work. This is because these discourses do not engage with the expectations associated with child protection work, particularly the use of statutory power that such practice demands. The final part of the paper identifies how post-structural theory, particularly the work of Foucault, can highlight and dismantle some of the assumptions about power on which participatory models have rested and allow for the development of a participatory ethos which is receptive to the specificities of child protection work.

Participatory approaches to practice have gained considerable popularity in discussions about child protection and the past decade has seen participatory practice processes enshrined in child protection legislation and policy in a number of countries. Participation, it seems, is widely considered to be of unquestionably positive value as it is often associated with empowerment and

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best outcomes for families in child protection practice (see Ryburn, 1991b; Calder, 1995; Mittler, 1995; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995). Despite the enthusiastic embrace of participation there has been some acknowledgement of the limits to this ethos within child protection contexts. In various literatures, the service users, the professionals and the organization of child protection work are considered to present obstacles to participatory practices. The key concern motivating much of the discussion about participation in child protection practice seems to be: why isn't child protection practice more participatory? By contrast, I seek to ask why so much of the debate is premised on approaches to participation that are of little relevance to the child protection field. It is my position that a critical stance should be adopted towards conceptualizations of participation that have been imported from other fields or disciplines with little recognition of the specific demands associated with child protection work. I consider that, all too often, these ideals are not only unhelpful but actually detrimental to the development of participatory practices in this field of work. A key purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which the ideal of participation has been constituted in the child protection literature and to outline the kinds of participatory processes that are envisaged and those that are obscured by the prevalent discourses about participation.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?: A DISCOURSE ANALYTIC APPROACH

It could be argued that the approach I am suggesting, that of examining and rethinking notions of participation in child protection practice, is largely irrelevant; that is, it could be asked, 'who cares how we define participation as long as we do it?'. None the less, the importance of attending to how we define what we do has gained considerable impetus with the post-structural recognition that discourses have 'real' or 'material' effects (White, 1996). As Parton (1994) defines it, 'Discourses are structures of knowledge, claims and practices through which we understand, explain and decide things. . . They are frameworks or grids of social organization that make some actions possible whilst precluding others' (p. 13). Discourses fix norms and truths and, in so doing, shape what can be written, said and even thought within a given context (McHoul and Grace, 1993). Furthermore, according to this view, discourses do not simply construct ideas but also material realities, that is the 'field of objects', through which the social 'world' is experienced (Foucault, 1977, p 199).

In this paper, I intend to examine the effects of participatory discourses particularly in terms of how the tensions between ideals of participation and the demands of child protection practice are managed or suppressed, and also the possibilities for participation that are obscured by the prevalent concep-

tualizations. In this examination, it is not my intention to lambaste notions of participation and partnership; indeed, it is apparent that these ideals often form a fundamental base for empowering practice. Rather, I seek to cultivate approaches to child protection that can acknowledge the specificities of child protection work. In this paper, I will outline how the ideals of participation are constituted in the child protection literature. I will overview the limitations to participation in child protection practice and examine how social workers have responded to the tensions between the ideals of participation and the demands of child protection practice. In the final section, I will consider the implications of post-structural theory, particularly the work of Foucault, for the identification and deconstruction of assumptions about power that underpin the prevalent models of participation. I will demonstrate the relevance of this approach in relation to the issue of professional judgement in participatory approaches to child protection.

The paper is grounded in my experience and research as a child and family worker in both statutory and non-government contexts. These experiences contributed to my awareness of the deleterious effects and, indeed, the dangers of a participatory ethos that is unresponsive to the specificities of child and family work. The paper is also based in my ongoing research into the potential of post-structuralism for the analysis and reconstruction of emancipatory social work practices. My project involves the refusal of transcendent frameworks for change in favour of the development of practice theories that can engage with, rather than ignore or devalue, the actual contexts of social work practice. Before turning to the main body of the paper, I will briefly overview some of the legislative and policy changes that appear to have strengthened the importance of service user participation in child protection practice. As I am writing within the Australian context I will make some comparison between the changes to British legislation and the situations in Australia and New Zealand.

THE RISE AND RISE OF PARTICIPATION

Over the past decade, a number of countries, amongst them Britain and New Zealand, have enshrined notions of participation in child protection legislation. The Children Act 1989 (covering England and Wales) and the New Zealand Children, Young Persons and their Families Act of the same year take some important steps towards ensuring that families are involved in decision-making about child protection matters, though they approach the matter in different ways. In Australia, the analysis of legislative and policy change is somewhat complicated since child protection legislation is a state responsibility and there is considerable variation from state to state (Wilkinson, 1993). None the less, the push towards greater involvement of

families in decision-making can be seen in a number of legislative changes instituted in various States of Australia. Campbell (1997) has recently reported on the Victorian child protection legislation, the Victorian Children and Young Persons Act 1989, which has required that statutory child welfare officers maximize opportunities for families to be informed about and, as far as possible, involved in decisions about the care of their children. Similarly in Queensland, there has been the recent formation of the Children's Commission, a legislative body which is aimed at providing a forum for families and children to address concerns and grievances about statutory child welfare authorities.

While the introduction of legislative changes towards the protection of families and of children's rights has often been accompanied by a rhetoric of family participation, it is wise to be cautious in one's acceptance of these claims. Indeed, many of these legislative changes have arisen in the context of perceived community concern about the action or, indeed, the inaction of child protection authorities (Campbell, 1997). Moreover, the ideals of participation have been developed in a political context in which individualism is emphasized, with the often explicit purpose of 'winding back' the welfare state (Jack and Stepney, 1995; Jamrozik and Sweeney, 1996; White, 1996). In essence, the participatory ethos embedded in recent legislation is not necessarily reflective of a concern with social justice but, rather, arises from an emphasis on individualism that has become increasingly widespread over the past 50 years throughout much of the Western world (Fairclough, 1989).

DEFINING PARTICIPATION: IMPORTING A PARTICIPATORY ETHOS

Despite the popularity of notions of partnership and participation, these terms have remained 'loosely defined' (Calder, 1995, p. 753; Morrison, 1996, p. 133). None the less, within the social work and social policy literature, participatory practice is often allied with the ideal of social justice and, as such, it is associated with a number of key values such as: service user control and leadership (Ryburn, 1991a); trust and respect (Ryburn, 1991b; Mittler, 1995); equality between professionals and service users (Mittler, 1995); and mutuality (Shemmings and Shemmings, 1995). Importantly, it would appear that participatory approaches in child and family welfare are heavily influenced by models that have been developed in disciplines and areas of practice which are markedly dissimilar to child protection work. Indeed, ideals of participation have been imported from a range of disciplines such as: community development, social planning and social movements, particularly feminism (Wise, 1990). For example, in their study of participation in child protection

TABLE 1. *Degrees of consumer involvement*

<i>Arnstein's Ladder</i>	<i>'Ladder' as adapted for rating of each case</i>
Citizen control	Delegated power
Delegated power	Involvement in service design
Partnership	Partnership
Placation	Participation
Consultation	Involvement
	Consultation
Informing	Keeping fully informed
Therapy	Placation
Manipulation	Manipulation

Table adapted from Arnstein (1969) in Thoburn *et al.* (1995, p. 33).

practice, Thoburn *et al.* (1995) propose the use of 'Arnstein's Ladder' (Arnstein, 1969) as an evaluative framework, as illustrated in Table 1.

The employment of Arnstein's ladder in the research and evaluation of participation in child and family welfare (see also Shemmings and Shemmings, 1995) is remarkable in that Arnstein's work was initially intended for an audience of social planners. While it is self-evident that the demands of child protection work are quite distinct from social planning, there appears to be little transformation of Arnstein's ladder to accommodate some of the specificities of such work. Indeed, the ladder constitutes a hierarchy that may be highly inappropriate for child protection practice. Although Thoburn *et al.* (1995) do acknowledge that there is a small but significant proportion of service users for whom a participatory model of practice is unrealizable, their reference to a hierarchy does privilege the ideal of 'delegated power' in comparison to other forms of participation. This privileging is problematic for, while it is indeed true that statutory power has been used in some instances for the regulation and control of populations (O'Connor, 1993; Jamrozik and Sweeney, 1996), statutory workers have an obligation to protect society's most vulnerable members, such as children experiencing severe abuse and neglect (Wise, 1990; Van Krieken, 1992). The danger of hierarchies in which certain forms of participation are considered to be innately superior to others is that they can lead to a devaluing of and, in some instances, a retreat from this obligation.

The imposition of participatory models from other disciplines limits the development of a participatory ethos within child protection practice for at least two reasons. First, these models are often based on universalist definitions of what counts as participation. For example, Ban (1992) suggests that notions of partnership and participation are meaningless unless practitioners 'are comfortable with *the* practice implications that accompany these ideas' (p. 6, italics added). The inference is that there is 'a' set of universal practice

implications that will accompany a commitment to participation, regardless of the context in which social work practice occurs. What I am arguing for, by contrast, is a recognition that practice values can only find their meaning within specific contexts of practice; that is, that what it means to be 'participatory' in child protection practice can only be established in recognition of the specific demands and expectations the context involves.

A further impediment to the rethinking of participation is the dualistic pairing of participation and paternalism (see Calder, 1995; Shemmings and Shemmings, 1995; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995). As Calder (1995, p. 751) sees it, 'paternalism is synonymous with enforcement and compulsion' whereas participation is not. The problem with the oppositional construction of participation and paternalism is that it makes it difficult to acknowledge the complexities, particularly in relation to power, that are inherent in child protection work. These dualisms leave little conceptual space in which to acknowledge those elements of child protection work, particularly the productive and necessary use of statutory power, that are outside the typical definitions of participation but which must be grappled with if participatory models of relevance to the field are to be developed.

LIMITS TO PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE

While participatory ideals have been widely espoused within the recent child protection literature, many authors acknowledge the limitations to the achievement of participatory practice processes. First, service users are sometimes considered to present significant obstacles to the realization of a participatory ethos. It is suggested that the personal, social and economic deprivations to which many service users have been subject may impede their capacity to engage on 'an equal footing' with statutory child protection officers (Campbell, 1997, p. 3; see also, Smith, 1992; Healy and Young Mothers for Young Women, 1996) and their ability to sustain interpersonal relationships, let alone an equitable or mutual relationship with a statutory child welfare officer (Daro, 1988; Belsky, 1993; Dore and Alexander, 1996). Indeed, not so very long ago in reporting their research about neglectful families, Polansky *et al.* (1979) urged workers not to underestimate the onerous task of engaging with marginalized families, as they asserted:

Given their lifelong patterns of non-participation, they appear poor prospects for general programs of family support or family life education. Their deficits in ordinary social skills require us to meet them well over half way; their unresponsiveness contributes to worker burnout (Polansky *et al.*, 1979, p. 152).

The point is not that workers should retreat from participatory practice processes; but rather that it is important, in child protection work, to acknow-

ledge that the consumer's life history is one factor, amongst many elements, that will impact on practice interactions. In addition, service users who have had previous negative involvement with statutory authorities are, quite rightly, likely to be reticent to engage with statutory authorities in a spirit of participation (see Healy and Young Mothers for Young Women, 1996).

Child protection professionals are also seen to present an obstacle to the realization of a participatory ethos. Frequently it is asserted that, despite the popularity of notions of participation and partnership, professionals are often highly reluctant to relinquish their professional power and status in order to engage in more equitable and participatory relations with service users (Calder, 1995, p. 757; see also Ryburn, 1991a; Ban, 1992; Mittler, 1995; Shemmings and Shemmings, 1995). Moreover, differences between workers and service users, especially differences in power and life experiences, are considered inevitably to result in exploitative practice relations. As Calder (1995) argues:

Most practitioners in child protection are white and middle-class, and have often been socialized into the oppression of class, culture and gender. If they remove children from the home, they refer the matter to the courts, thus inviting decisions based upon the values of predominantly white, male upper-class judges (Calder, 1995, p. 752).

From this perspective, the worker is charged with a propensity to impose his or her values and beliefs on the service user and it is this dominatory approach that is seen as impeding the achievement of participatory practice processes.

Third, the organizational contexts in which child protection occurs are identified as limited, if not entirely hostile to, a participatory ethos. The rhetoric about participation in recent child protection policy and legislation has not usually been matched by significant changes in the organization or the funding of child protection work. The characteristics of many child protection agencies, particularly the high caseloads and limited resources, detract from the quality of relationships between workers and service users and from the development of an infrastructure to support participatory processes. For example, despite legislative and policy initiatives aimed at ensuring family involvement in case planning (see McCallum, 1992), it has been observed that attendance of families at such meetings does not, of itself, guarantee their participation (Campbell, 1997). A variety of advocacy and support processes may be required, at least in some instances, to ensure that some of the power differentials between workers and service users are addressed, yet rarely are these resources available in child protection contexts (Smith, 1992; Campbell, 1997).

The limited professional autonomy and support for workers within child protection agencies is also recognized as deleterious for the achievement of a participatory ethos. It would appear that child protection organizations do

not often deal well with the highly emotionally charged character of child protection work (Killen, 1996; Morrison, 1996). Indeed, workers often feel unsupported and devalued as both the complexity and emotional costs exacted by their work are minimized or overlooked altogether in the organizations in which they work (Cornford, 1993; Morrison, 1996). This failure to offer support or to acknowledge professional skills and knowledge contributes to effects which are antithetical to the emergence of a participatory practice culture, including: a defensiveness about one's practice and a resistance to sharing, reflecting on, or seeking to improve practice (Morrison, 1996, p. 131); a tendency towards toughness and detachment amongst workers, particularly those who have been in the field long term (Thoburn *et al.*, 1995, p. 214); and disillusionment and high staff turnover amongst child protection workers (Cornford, 1993, p. 137).

RESPONSES TO THE TENSIONS BETWEEN PARTICIPATION AND CHILD PROTECTION

The barriers to participatory practice are formidable, yet, a key premise on which this paper rests is that the limits to participation in child protection practice lie not only in the people (workers and service users) involved in child protection practice and in the organization of this work, but also in the way in which the ideal of participation has been constituted. It is my view that the dissonance between the *definitions* of the participation and the *practice* of child protection work is actually deleterious to the development of participatory processes in this field. In this section I will demonstrate what I consider to be the negative impact of the prevailing ideals of participation by identifying some responses to this ethos that are present in the child protection literature and amongst child protection workers themselves.

The first response is essentially that of resignation to the constrained possibilities for participatory practice in statutory welfare contexts. It is widely considered that social workers, both in child protection contexts and in other arenas of practice, are inevitably more powerful than the service users with whom they work (Laursen, 1975; Spicker, 1990; Ryburn, 1991b; Calder, 1995). One response to the recognition of power differences between workers and service users is for workers to minimize their involvement with service users. As Spicker asserts, 'Social workers should limit their intervention to a necessary minimum—while recognizing their intervention does infringe the . . . liberty of their clients' (Spicker, 1990, p. 235). One obvious problem with this response is that, in many instances, workers have no choice but to have lengthy and in-depth involvements with service users. This is particularly the case for practice with those families who experience a multitude of personal, social and economic deprivations which bring them into frequent

and lengthy contact with a range of statutory welfare systems (see Dore and Alexander, 1996).

The second response is a denial of the tensions between the ideals of participation and statutory child welfare practice. In their work on child protection practice in the United Kingdom, Marsh and Fisher (1992) found that the response of many workers to the increased emphasis on participation embedded in the Children Act was to insist that their practice already reflected participatory principles. Indeed, Marsh (1990) observed that:

Because of a general ethos within social work which approves of partnership, many workers have a vision of their practice as already carrying out most, and sometimes all, of the elements of a partnership-based approach. They say, implicitly or explicitly, we 'Do All This Already'. It is not the reality (Marsh, 1990, p. 30).

It is perhaps to be expected that, given the high premium put on notions of participation and partnership both within social work training and in contemporary theorization and policy about practice, social workers should want their work to be aligned to these ideals. It would seem that statutory workers are in a no-win situation. For, to acknowledge one's 'failure' to realize these values is to leave oneself open to charges of lacking commitment and care for the populations with whom one works. Yet, to make claims to a participatory ethos is to be vulnerable to charges of duplicity (see Shemmings and Shemmings, 1995). It is my position that the 'duplicity' often observed by researchers and theorists is a logical outcome of the kinds of standards and ideals which have been grafted on to child protection practice without due consideration for the specific demands associated with such work.

The denial of the tensions between a participatory ethos and the specificities of child welfare practice is concerning. My concern, however, lies less with the failure of workers to reach particular and often imposed ideals, than with the potential for the exploitation of service users that arises from an inability to come to terms with the tensions in practice. The scope for exploitation and disappointment are particularly great for service users who are especially vulnerable, such as those who are dislocated from their families and from other forms of informal social support. As one respondent to a study about young mothers and the child protection system observed:

If you've got no family and workers say they're there for you, you [the worker] gotta make it clear how much and however it's gonna be. It's like family You gotta make it clear the limits and the boundaries, otherwise they're [the client] gonna resent you for giving false hope (Healy and Young Mothers for Young Women, 1996, p. 28).

The issue of duplicity, that is a dissonance between the espoused ideals and the realities of practice, is widely observed by researchers, theorists, professionals and clients of the welfare state. The problem is what to do about it. Some argue that workers should try harder to effect a shift in their practice

towards participatory ideals (see Ban, 1992; Mittler, 1995). Another response is for workers to develop greater clarity about the boundaries and the limits within their particular context of practice to the participatory values they espouse.

A third response to the tensions between the ideals and practice of child protection work is that of guilt, whereby the workers carry a sense of self-blame about the nature of their role and their failure to effect the kinds of practice relations and change processes they consider to be ideal. Indeed, in her empirical study of statutory child welfare workers, Cornford (1993) demonstrated the considerable anxiety experienced by many workers about the effects of the status and power that were attached to their role and their limited capacity to effect change in the lives of service users. As one worker asserted:

I really don't like the statutory authority. I guess I tend to have a more low key approach to families. But I think it doesn't matter how much you're low key you still wield power . . . It's hard for me even now to deal with how threatened clients are (Cornford, 1993, p.133).

Child protection work requires the use of statutory power; this is a role for which many workers feel unprepared. The caricature of the controlling professional, accustomed to believing that they 'can determine the best interests of others' (Ryburn, 1991b, p. 11), obscures the fact that many workers are so aware of the dangers of professional and statutory power that they are paralysed from using this power in a productive way. In contrast to the over-zealous and uncaring worker, frequently portrayed by critics of child protection practice, there is considerable evidence to suggest that child protection workers often experience extreme difficulties in making negative judgements about the families with whom they work (see Dingwall *et al.*, 1983; Minty and Patterson, 1994; Tomison, 1995; Stevenson, 1996). Ultimately, such difficulty can lead to the minimization of neglect and abuse to the detriment of the families with whom child protection workers have contact.

RETHINKING POWER AND PARTICIPATION IN CHILD PROTECTION

In the previous section, I considered some responses to the way in which participation has been constituted in many discussions about child protection. At the heart of the tensions between participatory discourses and the specificities of child protection practice is the issue of power. Typically, statutory authority is associated with repressive power, while participatory practice is identified with the diminution of power differences and ultimately the absence of coercive power relations altogether (see Ryburn, 1991b; Mittler,

1995; Shemmings and Shemmings, 1995). By contrast, I propose an approach that transcends the dualism between paternalism and participation towards a recognition that power is present in all forms of practice and, thus, that participatory practice in child protection requires not a refusal of worker power but rather an ongoing assessment of the operations of power within specific contexts of practice. As Van Krieken (1992) asserts,

The focus of our critical attention should therefore not simply be power and control in themselves, but the *forms* they take, the point at which we can genuinely say they have turned into *domination*, as well as how we could turn a cruel, self-serving and unjust authority into one which is humane, accountable and just (Van Krieken, 1992, p. 145).

I consider that the work of Foucault, particularly the principles he adopts for the analysis of power, can assist in acknowledging the repressive as well as the complex and potentially productive operations of power in child protection contexts.

Foucault rejects a model of power that sees power as something held by one individual or group (for example, workers) and imposed on others (for example, service users), on the grounds that this model cannot comprehend the operations of power through the local practices associated with 'our bodies, our existence, our everyday lives' (Foucault, 1978, p. 70). A Foucauldian approach to power involves a recognition that power is not a possession, rather it is exercised through discourses and practices that are specific to particular institutional contexts. This means that power relations are rarely singular or unilateral, although individuals may experience different relations to power within any one context. The importance of Foucault's insight for social work is that it warns against a divide between workers as powerful and service users as powerless and alerts us to the multiple relations of power that may exist within the practice context. This view is reinforced in Gordon's (1988) historical analysis of family violence and social service intervention, as she asserts that:

it is a mistake to see the flow of initiative in these social control relationships in only one direction, from top to bottom, from professional to clients, from elite to subordinate. In fact, the clients were not usually passive but, rather, active in arguing for what they wanted (Gordon, 1988, p. 295).

To state that workers and service users exercise power is not to deny inequalities but rather to refuse constantly to situate service users as passive victims of the state. For, while certain groups have experienced undeniable violence, such as the genocidal role the state played in relation to aboriginal children in Australia, frequently the relationship between workers and service users is much more complex.

In addition, Foucault (1980b, p. 100) advocates that the investigation of

power should involve an ascending order of analysis. Foucault rejects deductive accounts that prioritize broad systems such as capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism in analysing local relations of power on the grounds that such approaches cannot grasp the multiple and differentiated operations of modern technologies of power (Foucault, 1980a, p. 122). The refusal of a deductive approach is consistent with the criticisms raised by Wise (quoted in Hudson, 1989, p. 93) that structural analyses have 'oversimplified the realities of social work practice, with the consequence that the needs of society's most vulnerable groups (for example, children) are sometimes disregarded' (see also Van Krieken, 1992).

The work of Foucault necessitates a suspicion and transgression of the dualisms between victims and villains that have pervaded much of the debate about power in child protection literature (Goldner *et al.*, 1990; see also Featherstone and Fawcett, 1994; Healy and Peile, 1995). While in some instances these divisions may hold true, an approach to power that is suspicious of dualisms can allow for the complexities of power to be articulated in the analyses and practice models of child protection work. These complexities include, first, a recognition that individuals may be situated across multiple positions of power at any one time. For example, feminist authors in the child protection field have had to grapple with the reality that, while a woman may be a victim/survivor in one situation, such as in relation to her partner, she may be in a position of power in relation to others, particularly her children (Featherstone and Fawcett, 1994, p. 75; see also Wise, 1990). A post-structural approach to power can also allow for an acknowledgement within participatory models of practice of the complex power relations between workers and service users that can emerge, particularly in long-term statutory work. As Wise (1990, p. 242) reflects on her experience as a statutory social worker: 'the myth of compliant and powerless clients is belted by the reality of the complex process of interaction and negotiation that goes on in defining the problem and finding the solution' (see also Van Krieken, 1992). Thus, rather than seeing power as something that is transferred from one to the other, a post-structural approach to participation demands a recognition of the multiple and complex power relations that may be present within the practice context.

Secondly, a post-structural approach can also allow for the recognition of the productivity of statutory power in child protection practice by acknowledging the diversity of power relations *within* families. This recognition calls into question the assumption, often espoused by advocates of participatory practice processes, that statutory power is necessarily experienced as coercive by those subject to it. As Van Krieken (1992) asserts 'what might be the imposition of control to one can be a way out of an untenable situation for another' (p. 141). Once differences within families are highlighted, it becomes much more difficult to maintain the conflation of power and social

control that has underpinned much of the current theorization about participation and, instead, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the potentially productive effects of statutory power, particularly in relation to the protection of those family members who are most vulnerable to abuse.

In summary, post-structural theory can be used to highlight and critique the assumptions about power that underpin participatory models. Post-structural theory is useful for a reconceptualization of the statutory power in participatory practice insofar as this theoretical approach invites not a refusal of power but, rather, a constant reflection on its complexities and specific effects within practice contexts. I will now demonstrate the relevance of this approach by considering how professional judgement, a notion that has long been critiqued by the advocates of participation, may be incorporated in a participatory approach to practice.

ACKNOWLEDGING AND REFINING JUDGEMENT AND ASSESSMENT IN PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE

Professional workers in child protection practice are required to make judgements which have enormous implications for service users' lives. Although assessment is fundamental to practice in many social work settings, the idea of making judgements is not something with which most social workers are comfortable. Indeed, the ideal of non-judgement is inscribed at the very core of liberal humanitarian social work (Biestek, 1961). For advocates of participatory practice, the notion of professional judgement is further critiqued on the grounds that it involves the imposition of middle-class values on service users (see Ryburn, 1991b; Calder, 1995) and that it is antithetical to the mutual and egalitarian relationships on which, it is argued, participatory practice should be based (see Mittler, 1995; Shemmings and Shemmings, 1995). The critique of professional judgement that is central to much of the current discourse about participation is, however, problematic for child protection practice for at least two reasons.

First, the rejection of professional judgement on the grounds that such judgement is inevitably based on social norms, particularly middle-class values, is unhelpful for assisting workers to deal with the complexities associated with assessment in front line practice. As Stevenson (1996) asserts:

Who are we, the argument runs, to make an assessment of what is 'good enough' parenting and adequate child development when cultural mores and ethnic variations show such wide variations? It is indisputable that child abuse is a social construction and that such variations exist. But agencies involved in child protection cannot opt out of defining minimum standards and ways of behaving that are acceptable to our society at a given time in our history. . . . When it comes to the crunch . . . (and it *is* a crunch, not an

intellectual foray), these judgements have to be made (Stevenson, 1996, p. 15).

Indeed, in contrast to the portrayal of professional workers as overly confident in their scientific knowledge (see Ryburn, 1991b; Calder, 1995), the value laden character of much social work knowledge is an idea with which many social workers are only too familiar. What has been an important insight for social workers, namely the differences in lifestyles and experiences between themselves and the service users with whom they work, risks becoming overemphasized to the point that it is no longer useful for child protection practice. For, while social workers should be sensitive to differences, a participatory ethos that demands a rejection of any form of criteria for the assessment of abuse and neglect is ultimately unhelpful in the decision making required in child protection practice.

A second problem is that criticisms of professional judgement are often based on ideals of mutuality that not only are difficult to attain but may be highly inappropriate in some situations of child protection work. The ideal of mutuality is taken to mean that workers should transcend professional boundaries and develop non-hierarchical relationships (see Mittler, 1995; Shemmings and Shemmings, 1995). To some extent, I would contend that personal engagement is not only positive but, indeed, inevitable in child protection practice, particularly where the worker has long-term involvement with service users (see also Wise, 1990). However, within the highly emotionally charged terrain of child protection work, the failure to maintain some degree of separation from service users can detract from the workers' capacity to ensure minimum standards of care and protection for the most vulnerable members of the families with whom they work (see Dingwall *et al.*, 1983). For example, Killen (1996) has observed that workers may enact a number of psychologically defensive strategies in order to deal with the emotional intensity of child protection practice; one of the most common of these is over-identification. Killen uses the term over-identification to denote the process whereby workers project on to parents their own feelings and desires about how they want the situation to be, rather than 'empathising with and facing the parents' and childrens' realities' (Killen, 1996, p. 793). Over-identification is problematic for child protection practice because it can lead workers to make assessments which minimize the abuse and neglect being suffered by children and, in some instances, to the 'postponement of placement of a child for many years . . . until it is almost too late at least for a successful outcome for the child' (Killen, 1996, p. 793; see also Dingwall *et al.*, 1983; Tomison, 1995).

There can be little doubt that child protection practice has the potential to exact enormous personal costs on the worker. In particular, workers must frequently confront the serious dilemmas of choosing between the costs of removing a child from an abusive situation, particularly the costs associated

with the risk of repeated abuse or neglect of children within notoriously under-resourced substitute care systems, and, alternatively, leaving the child in a situation in which abuse and neglect are known to be occurring (Wise, 1990; Tomison, 1995). The emphasis on mutuality found within much of the participatory literature can deprive social workers of an important and indeed fundamental resource; namely, the capacity to stand both within and outside the various systems (such as family systems and alternative care systems) in order to negotiate at least a minimum standard of care for those members of our society who are vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

A rethinking of participation in child protection requires not a retreat from assessment and judgement but, rather, clarity and openness about one's judgements and the processes by which they were reached. Very often, members of the families who are the subject of these assessments will dispute them, at least in the initial phase of statutory involvement (see Thoburn *et al.*, 1995). However, a refusal to make these assessments constitutes a denial of our ethical and professional responsibilities towards addressing situations of child abuse and neglect (see Wise, 1990; Killén, 1996). Indeed, if statutory workers are to have any chance of inducing change in these situations, it is necessary that they be willing to acknowledge their observations and the sense they make of them. The problem, then, lies not in the judgement of itself but, rather, in a lack of reflexivity in the way that judgement has been developed and applied. For, while it is certainly the case that labels such as 'neglectful parent' have been too quickly applied to certain groups of service users, particularly those from indigenous populations, for many who have entered child welfare systems 'their preceding family life was nothing other than sad, and many were in fact neglected and abused by any criteria' (Van Krieken, 1992, p. 145) and, in our professional work, we cannot shy away from acknowledging, assessing and indeed judging abusive and neglectful situations.

It is my view that participatory practice models which are responsive to the specificities of child protection work will acknowledge the relevance of professional judgement to this work. A participatory approach to child protection practice requires, however, that our judgements are accessible and accountable to those with whom we work. As Campbell (1997) asserts:

Active participation by family members requires professionals to demonstrate their willingness to *inform* and *listen* respectfully: to give full and frank information on their evidence of risk to the child, their interpretations of that evidence, and the resources and services they have to offer the family; and to hear what the family has to say about the evidence, their own views and interpretations and what resources they have at their disposal and feel that they need (Campbell, 1997, p. 8).

This approach to assessment differs from a hierarchical relation often associated with traditional practice in which the professional knows best, yet it also

differs from an approach which demands that workers eschew power altogether. The nature of statutory work, particularly the demand that workers identify and intervene in situations of abuse and neglect, means that workers cannot avoid judgement, but a participatory ethos demands that these judgements are reflectively applied and that workers are accountable to the families who are the subjects of them.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have outlined the serious difficulties that can emerge both for workers and services when ideals of participation are imported from other disciplines without due regard for demands of child protection practice. These ideals are detrimental to the development of participatory practices in child protection because they establish practice benchmarks that are both unrealizable and inappropriate in this field. I have argued that post-structural theory enables the deconstruction of the opposition between paternalism and participation towards an acceptance of the repressive and the productive aspects of power in statutory work. This recognition is important in developing modes of participation which are responsive to the demands of child protection work, such as centrality of professional judgement in this practice arena. For too long, the debate about participation has been burdened by references to models of participation that have only peripheral relevance to the work that child protection workers do. It is time for those of us who work, whether as researchers, theorists, or practitioners in this field, to cultivate modes of participation that struggle with, rather than retreat from, the specificities of child protection.

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