Social Control and the Use of Power in Social Work with Children and Families

Edited by

Toyin Okitikpi
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Introduction

There is little doubt that the role and practices of social work continue to evolve and adapt in response to socio-cultural demands and socio-political expectations. Although there have been extraordinary changes in the lives of people and in the social, economic and physical environment in which they live, the social and cultural problems and economic difficulties that were endemic throughout the 20th century are still very much in evidence. Areas such as child neglect; domestic violence; killing of children by their parents/carers; physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse; poverty; homelessness; teenage pregnancies; youth crime; anti-social behaviour and drug and alcohol misuse continue to be causes of concern and their persistence blights the lives of many children and their families. These areas continue to be the focus of attention and intervention and there is a great deal of expectation and assumption about how the profession, and child care social workers in particular, should respond. Childcare social workers are at the sharp end of these concerns and they are expected to approach their duties as part of a multi-professional, multi-disciplinary and multi-agency team. As Gaynor Arnold, a social worker turned novelist, highlighted from her experience of social work ‘... When I went back to “children and families” work five years later, I found a more structured world of priorities and time limits. There was far less preventative work, far more court work, far more young people with extreme behaviour and an explosion in the number of sexual abuse cases’ (Arnold, 2009: 3).

Children and families social work is considered by social work practitioners, as well as people outside the profession, to be one of the most complex and difficult areas of social work practice. This is not to suggest that other areas of social work such as working with adults, people with learning difficulties, alcohol and substance misuse, mental health and people with impairment is not challenging. Indeed anyone with practice experience with any one of these groups would attest to the associated complexities and difficulties (as well as pleasures) involved. Having acknowledged the relative difficulties of working with various service user groups it is worth stating that there is something quite different about working with children and families that sets it apart from all other areas of social work. There is a heightened level of anxiety and scrutiny in this area of social work practice from which others
are spared. As well as having to work with vulnerable and at-risk children/young people and their families, practitioners may also have to contend with aggressive, uncooperative, manipulative and untruthful parents and carers. The task of supporting and keeping children safe is further complicated by central government’s ever-changing priorities. There is continual introduction of, what some may describe as, bureaucratic systems and processes in an effort to improve practice and prevent further deaths and abuses. The pronouncements made about the profession by successive government ministers and the media has done little to engender public trust in the social work profession or the work that they do. The public are often baffled by why social services and social workers are unable to prevent children been abused or killed by their parents/carers. People’s incredulity towards the profession is further compounded by the fact that many of the children killed or abused are generally known to social services as they are often already identified as in need of social work support and protection. Moreover they are usually assessed to be at risk of harm, and may already be on the at risk or child protection register.

The public’s anger and negative perceptions about social workers is not assuaged in any sense by general acknowledgement that the profession faces a difficult and uphill struggle in their attempt to help and support families who do not want social workers involvement with their family. It could be argued that social work itself has done very little to make its case, to those outside the profession that it has been a force for good and has prevented far more abuse and deaths than is generally recognised. Rather than challenge the negative assumptions and misinformation about their work the profession has remained silent about the myriad of obstacles and problems that practitioners experience in trying to discharge their duties and safeguard children from being abused by their parents/carers. It is only since July 2009 that the profession and central government have taken the necessary initiatives to improve both the negative image that the public has of social work and social workers. It has already been documented, (Adams, Domieli and Payne, 2002; Horner, 2003; Okitikpi and Aymer, 2008) that while the nature and scope of social work is contested the practice of social work itself is pretty straightforward. At its heart social work practice is about building a working relationship with people in order to bring about change. It may seem an obvious point to make but people come to the attention of the social services for a reason. There are of course those who only seek information; ad hoc advice and provisions which social work could help them access. In effect these are not the groups that this publication is focusing on. Instead the focus is on the people that social work attempts to help and support so that they could better cope with, or deal adequately with, whatever difficulties they may be experiencing in their lives. It is during the process of working with these groups of service users that social workers may be called to exercise their legal responsibility and take draconian measures that may be deemed necessary.
In fear of power

It has already been acknowledged that children and families social work is one of the most difficult areas of social welfare practice. From the outset once attention has been drawn to the family because of concerns about a child the family would have to go through a level of scrutiny unbeknown by most families. The term initial assessment or investigation conveys a tone of neutrality and value free process. In reality, however sensitive and caring the professionals are in their approach, the experience for the family is not so benign. Families have to endure the presence of strangers probing into the minutia of their lives and are required to provide credible and verifiable explanations of events that led to a social worker contacting their family. The situation is not helped by the unspoken knowledge amongst those involved (families and professionals) that they are operating within an adversarial environment. Despite the reality, the impression generally given by the press to society at large is that all social workers are incompetent; poorly trained people who either take children into care unnecessarily or fail to act appropriately leaving children to suffer in the most appalling circumstances. Families who have been contacted because of child protection concerns may undergo emotional, psychological and, in some cases, physical pain. Despite their anger, fragility or unhappiness about the involvement of the agencies with their family they are still expected to cooperate with the authorities.

Although social workers have a range of powers that they can utilise in their day-to-day practice it is generally the case that they are often reluctant to make use of the full extent of these powers. There is a sense that practitioners view their role primarily as supporting children to stay within their social and familial environment. Indeed it could be argued that key legislation governing their practice supports this premise. Social workers appear, from the outside at least, to place a higher premium on keeping families together, at all cost, rather than (accommodating) taking children into care at the first opportunity. This is because accommodating children into care is not viewed as a good option with the possibility of a positive outcome. Instead it is seen as a last resort after all attempts to maintain or re-establish equilibrium or ‘good-enough’ parenting have been tried and failed. In essence rather than removing children from an abusive or poor nurturing environment in the first instance the situation is sometimes left to deteriorate beyond repair before any action is taken. Why this should be the case is of interest in this publication. Of course practitioners work within the parameters of the Children Act (1989) and the welfare threshold. However it is evident that local authorities operate at different levels with thresholds beyond which a child is deemed to be at risk of harm is set high in some authorities and higher still in others. It may be argued that the higher welfare threshold is further compounded by the fact that practitioners are uncomfortable being seen as over-zealous arbiters of draconian powers.
Children and families social work practitioners see themselves as sensitive, caring and non-judgemental people who are primarily concerned with the welfare of the children and their families. Cree and Davis’ (2007) study reinforces the point that practitioners see their role as being that of an enabler and facilitator working alongside people. The entrenchment of user-involvement in all areas of the profession has also done much to reinforce practitioners’ perception of the centrality of the caring aspects of their role.

The use of legal powers that distort the perception of social workers as an enabler and facilitator of change appears counter intuitive. Dominelli, (2002: 3) identified three different practice world view adopted by practitioners in the field. These approaches are characterised as:

- therapeutic helping approaches
- maintenance approaches
- emancipatory approaches

Similarly Cree and Myers, (2008: 2) highlight Payne’s (2006) review of the profession of social work in which he characterised three views of social work thus:

1. Therapeutic views: social work is understood to be about ‘seeking the best possible well-being for individuals, groups and communities, by promoting and facilitating growth and self fulfilment.
2. Transformational view: it is argued that social work must develop cooperation and mutual support in society so that the most oppressed and disadvantaged people can gain power over their own lives.
3. Social order view: social work is seen as an aspect of welfare services to individuals in societies. It meets individual’s needs and improves services of which it is a part, so that social work and the services can operate more effectively.

Although both Dominelli (2002) and Payne (2006) each set out their different perspectives and approaches in social work however on close inspection it is evident that they are in fact both exploring and discussing the same areas. While there are practitioners whose approach is consistent with a particular perspective many practitioner are perhaps more pragmatic and would take, what could best be described as, an eclectic approach. For these practitioners their primary interest is to adopt whichever approach is most likely to achieve the desired outcome. However, in my view, despite these different approaches and perspectives that unites them all is the focus on care and support rather than control and the use of their powers.

The passage of time and subsequent changes in the socio-cultural and socio-political landscape has not completely decoupled social work from its historical influences (Cree and
Forged from philanthropic, religious (primarily Christian) and political (interestingly of the left, liberal and one-nation Toryism) background the profession has always seen itself as being partisan in favour of the poor and the dispossessed. It views itself as an advocate for the disenfranchised, the poor and those that are deemed to be on the margins of society. It does not see people as walking problems but rather as human beings with problems. Its starting point is that, for whatever reasons, people may experience a difficult period in their lives when they have to deal with situations and conditions that render them powerless and incapable of finding the appropriate solution without assistance. It recognises that although people do not always act in their own best interest and that sometimes people compound their problems by making the wrong choices this should not be used as justification for treating them unfairly and differently from everyone else in society. It could be argued that, in an effort not to appear to be judgemental about people’s lifestyles and life choices, a culture has developed within social work whereby great latitude is afforded to many service users. For example, low level violence within families is ignored; poor school attendance is not seen as serious enough to act on; poor hygiene and lack of parental control is excused; drug and alcohol addiction are not by themselves seen as a cause for concern; a child growing up at home with a parent suffering from chronic mental health problem is not viewed to be vulnerable or at any particular risk. One of the explanations for such a relaxed attitude and lack of urgency is a combination of the rules of optimism and the unspoken belief that people who are victims of circumstance must be allowed to live their lives as they choose but with additional care and support. As such, practitioners should therefore not be judgemental or act unfairly by being ‘control’ led in their approach. The aim should therefore be to avoid further compounding people’s situation or condition by assessing their parental capacity and capabilities using the same criteria as one would use for those outside the welfare system.

**Increasing policing role**

Social workers have always been viewed by some people, on the far left of the political spectrum, as part of the social problem because they are agents of the state. This perspective sees social workers’ role as a sop for the poor and the marginalised by a brutal capitalist system. Although this view is not incorrect the difficulty with making such blanket statement is one of context, emphasis and the reality of individual experiences. It is the case that social workers operate within set criteria and clearly defined welfare thresholds and they are required, by law, to intervene where they have cause for concern. However, the argument being advanced is that trying to protect people from harm and preventing neglect and abuse should not be viewed as a negative or inconsequential endeavour.
For the first time in its history the profession is expected to play a far greater role in the policing of children’s lives. However, the intriguing point is that societal expectations about a greater level of policing are implicit rather than explicit, although the controversial Vetting and Barring Procedures has changed the landscape dramatically. More than ever children and families social workers, in partnership with other professions, are required to exercise their powers more readily, while at the same time there is a great misgiving about practitioners being allowed to exert such powers. This particular point illustrates the contradiction that exists at the very heart of the duties and responsibilities placed on those working within the childcare field. In addition practitioners are not always going into passive environments where they are welcomed with open arms and a cup of tea and a biscuit. It is no longer unusual for practitioners to face intimidation, threats, verbal abuse, physical assault and malicious complaints.

The tension for practitioners in this climate is how to intervene earlier in order to prevent abuse and at the same time build rapport and develop the necessary relationship with the children and their families. In essence practitioners are expected to exercise their powers while at the same time not be discriminatory, judgmental or infringe on aspects of the human rights acts that relates to the children and their families’.

**About this book**

This is an edited book and its aim is to highlight the changing role of childcare social work and explore the complex nature of power and the use of power in social work in general and in the child care field in particular. As already mentioned although social work as a profession has always been about care and control, in reality practitioners are generally more comfortable with the care element of their role. Primarily social work believes in building a trusting relationship with services users and as a result they have always found the control aspect of their role problematic. Why there should be such a reluctance of social workers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to embrace the powers which have been vested in them is unclear, but there is evidence from social inquiry reports, (Maria Colwell; Jasmine Beckford; Thrya Henry; Victoria Climbe; Baby Peter) to suggest that practitioners, as a result of not exercising their powers, may have missed ample opportunities to act more decisively in order to prevent child abuse in general and child deaths in particular. While it is acknowledged that power is a far more complex concept than is general assumed; one of the tasks of this volume is to explore and reconsidered the nature and application of power in social work practice.

**John Pitts (Chapter 1)** provides a panoramic and historic overview of the social policy shift towards policing and enforcement in social welfare. At the beginning of his chapter
explores how 'social control' is the processes by which individual and group behaviour is regulated in accordance with prevailing social norms, rules or laws. In his analysis social control is both internal and external; achieved by the introjection of the norms and values in early childhood, and the application of formal or informal sanctions or rewards in later life. Looking beyond just social workers’ powers his analysis is full and detailed and takes account of governance and social control and, intriguingly, the criminalisation of social policy. Although his chapter focuses primarily on young people, youth work and the youth justice system, there is much however that would be of interest to general practitioners in the child care field.

**Michael Preston-Shoot (Chapter 2)** offers some critical reflections as well as an outline of the legal dimensions of social work with children and their families. He explores the nature and extent of practitioners powers and he casts an eye over the organisational context of social work practice and on the interface between law and ethics. He provides an analysis of various dualities and tensions within social work such as care versus control, needs versus resources, and professional autonomy versus employer direction.

**Tom Wilks (Chapter 3)** provides a critique of the application of traditional ethical frameworks to power. He discusses how power impinges on practice with children and families. He explores two key ethical frameworks and the ethics of care and their applicability to questions of how power operates in professional practice. He posits that acting ethically involves the interplay between principle and practice. Exploring social work and power, he notes that one of the ironies of social work practice is that the world outside of social work perceives social workers as powerful agents of the state whereas social workers themselves, describing their work, can sometimes lack a sense of power and agency in their day to day practice.

**Julia Stroud (Chapter 4)** explores child deaths and the socio-legal discourse of child protection. She also discusses how safeguarding considerations has been dominant in relation to child death. She highlights how Meta Analysis of serious case reviews are developing and shaping our knowledge and understanding of the circumstances surrounding child deaths. One of the interesting aspects of the chapter is her assertion that the interrogation of child death might be said to have been subsumed under the concept of fatal child abuse and the socio-legal discourse of safeguarding, however she contend that in fact, child death is rarely examined or reviewed in its entirety.

**Toyin Okitikpi (Chapter 5)** encourages the reformulation of the rule of optimism. In his exploration he suggests that social workers understanding of and use of power is bound up with their instinctive identification and support for service users. As a result power is viewed negatively and the use of power is seen as counterintuitive to their fundamental role as champions of the weak, the marginalised and the dispossessed.
Sarah Pond (Chapter 6) explored social workers’ use of powers from a lay perspective. She provides a fresh and insightful analysis of the heavy emphasis placed upon supporting and respecting the views of clients without sufficiently acknowledging the protection role which social workers also carry. She opined that there are likely to be many occasions where social workers are placed in a ‘no win’ situation. She suggests that there is a need for some fundamental change which would allow social workers to continue to support vulnerable families but that they are in turn supported in making hard, tough decisions where those same families are at risk of causing harm.

Amanda Thorpe (Chapter 7) examines the notions of power, how social work practitioners use power in practice and the drivers and constraints involved in using the range of powers available to them. She considers the ways in which statutory powers may be used both to promote and undermine ethical practice. She looks at ideas of managerialism, de-professionalisation, reflexivity and reflective practice. She also considers social workers’ understanding and application of the legal rules. She provides a framework to help ensure that practitioners use, as appropriate, the full extent of their statutory and professional powers to promote safe, ethical and anti-oppressive practice.

Andrew Brown (Chapter 8) examines the role of social workers in a school setting and explores the impact that their role could have on children, families and the school community. He looks at the implications for the practitioner in such settings and, drawing on his personal experiences, he puts forward practical ideas and suggestions that would be of interest to practitioners in such a setting. While he acknowledges that social workers in schools have limited powers, he suggests such limitations should not preclude them from acting and exerting a degree of control whenever necessary. He suggests that exercising power and control is possible - and is readily accepted in schools by parents – but it is how it is done that is crucial.

Akidi Ocan (Chapter 9) provides a detail account of social workers in the court arena. She highlights the point that social workers are often reluctant to use the Family Courts and the full range of their statutory powers in their efforts to safeguard children. She suggests social workers need to have a comprehensive knowledge of the extent of their powers and duties. In her view they also need to understand what is considered to be a lawful exercise of discretion and how and why the exercise of such discretion might be challenged in judicial review proceedings.

Jan Fook (Chapter 10) illustrates how critical reflection on assumptions about power (as embedded in the everyday practice of workers) can help forge a more complex and responsive practice. As well as a brief introduction to the theory and practice of critical reflection, particularly the notion of unearthing assumptions, she also considered the sorts of assumptions about power which are common in social work thinking. Finally she outlines
how these conceptions of power might be reworked in a more complex way, through a critical reflection process.

References

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About the Editor and the Contributors

Toyin Okitikpi is a visiting Professor at University of Bedfordshire. Having started in residential care he qualified as a generic social worker and worked in the field for many years. His interest includes social work education; anti-discriminatory practice; the importance of education in the lives of children and young people; refugee and asylum seeking children and their families; social integration and cohesion; working with children of mixed parentage and, interracial-multicultural families and their experiences. He is a lay member on a number of Tribunals including: the General Medical Council’s Fitness to Practice Panel; Nursing and Midwifery; Employment Tribunal; the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal and the Mental Health Review Tribunal. He has published on a number of social work related areas.

John Pitts is Vauxhall Professor of Socio-Legal Studies at the University of Bedfordshire. He is editor of Safer Communities, associate editor of Youth and Policy and an editorial board member of Youth Justice and Juvenile Justice Worldwide (UNESCO). His research includes studies of: The differential treatment of black and white young offenders; Anglo-French responses to youth crime and disorder; The violent victimisation of school students; Inter-racial youth violence; The impact of youth work with socially excluded young people in five European cities; The contribution of street-based youth work to the life chances of socially excluded young people in the UK and Violent youth gangs in three London boroughs.

Michael Preston-Shoot is Professor of Social Work and Dean of the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at the University of Bedfordshire. He is a founding editor of the journal Ethics and Social Welfare, and an independent chair of both a local safeguarding children board and a safeguarding vulnerable adults board. He has researched and written widely on the interface between law and social work.
Tom Wilks is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at London South Bank University. He worked for many years as a social worker in a range of different settings. His research interests are in ethics, advocacy and service user involvement.

Dr Julia Stroud is a social work academic and Director of Social Work Studies at University of Brighton. She is a qualified and registered social worker. She has practised in both childcare and mental health settings and has extensive experience of statutory social work, particularly of child protection. Her research interests centre on child death, in particular on the relationship between mental disorder and child death. She is currently exploring safeguarding practices from a range of different theoretical perspectives.

Sarah Pond (MA) is a serving part-time board member with London Travel Watch and is a lay panellist for the General Medical Council. She is also a trustee of Hillingdon Carers and former Chair of a London Primary Care Trust, having spent her first 12 years of working life in the field of procurement in the private sector.

Amanda Thorpe is Principal Lecturer and Head of Social Work at the University of Bedfordshire with responsibility for the programmes leading to both qualifying and post qualifying awards in Social Work. Her particular teaching and research interests include anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice; the interface between social work law and practice; the teaching and assessment of law in qualifying social work education and reflective practice. Formerly an art teacher and later a Probation Officer, Amanda has experience of working in both the statutory and voluntary sectors with socially excluded and marginalised people, as well as with offenders in the community. She has a strong commitment to the principles of social justice which underpin her teaching and research.

Andrew Brown is a social worker based within an inner London Primary School. He has a great deal of experience in working with adults and young people in a variety of settings. He is interested in the practice of social work, in particular, direct and preventative work with children and families and young people.

Akidi Ocan has been a barrister since 1984 specialising in social services law including child protection, adult social care and mental health. Since 1990 she has represented local social services authorities in London and the South East. Akidi has trained practitioners in these areas of law extensively and she has regularly trained child protection social workers to improve their presentation in the courtroom. Akidi was appointed to the First-tier Tribunal in 2007 as a Tribunal Judge hearing appeals to the Mental Health Tribunal.
Jan Fook is Professor of Professional Practice Research and Director of the Interprofessional Institute with the South West London Academic Network (Royal Holloway, University of London, St Georges, University of London and Kingston University). Her work includes critical reflection, critical social work, professional practice and practice research. Her research work involves the empirical research of professional practice, and developing better methods for representing the complexity of this. A current interest is in developing critical reflection as a research method. She has published 13 books and over 70 book chapters and articles.