Helping, rights and love in child protection: understanding difficult conversations and how we might do them better

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Overview

 What is the point of child and family social work/child protection services? (UK perspective)

 Argue that often there seems to be a lack of clarity – what are we trying to achieve?

 The answer has important implications for research, policy and practice



Overview

 Much of my research has focused on how child and family social workers help people – over 800 recordings

Assumption social work is about helping people

 Yet when we listen to practice "helping" does not seem a good description of what they are doing





Overview

Three problems from my research:

- 1. What workers are doing often does not sound helpful
- 2. If it is meant to be helpful, they are not doing it well
- 3. Is it helpful? There is a weak relationship to outcomes

Maybe need to understand what workers are trying to do differently

Introduce the idea of rights focused practice – which leads to profoundly different ideas about practice, policy and research



Summarising from my research studies of last 25 years

1. What do social workers actually do? Does it sound like they are trying to "help"?





The worker's response:

A 23 year old father telephones you to say:

"I'm not going to be able to keep my appointment at the child protection meeting tomorrow; we just learned that my Dad has cancer"

Source: own table





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The meeting is important for you to attend. Unfortunately we can't postpone it. If you can make it to the meeting it would be greatly appreciated. I hope things work out for your father

Source: own table





A 23 year old father telephones you to say:

"I'm not going to be able to keep my appointment at the child protection meeting tomorrow; we just learned that my Dad has cancer"

A 32 year old woman says:

Last night Joe came home drunk again, and kicked in the TV set while the kids were still watching it, and then he knocked me down. He scared us all half to death.

Source: own table





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A 32 year old woman says:

Last night Joe came home drunk again, and kicked in the TV set while the kids were still watching it, and then he knocked me down. He scared us all half to death.

What did you do with the children? Did you call the police?

Source: own table





A referral is received of a mother who often picks up her 8 year old child when she seems drunk. You visit, and explain the nature of the referral to the mother. If the mother said, "That's not true. I am on anti-depressants and they make me appear drunk" what do you think you would say next?

• "This is contradictory to what the school is saying; the school feel you have presented drunk and this is why we've got the referral and we're concerned. If you're saying it's the anti-depressants, you need to go back to your GP & adjust the dose as it's clearly a problem".

"Can I see the bottle of anti-depressants? Where does it say that on the label?"





A practice example

The mother had been seriously injured by the child's father to the extent that they had to go to hospital. The mother has just explained that they did not call the police during the attack as they were fearful that the violence would escalate and that they have no intention of resuming the relationship:

Worker: I'm just really concerned that if you resume the relationship, you know, you're going to be putting yourself at serious risk and you're going to be putting your child at serious risk as well because it's not something you're able to predict really, you understand?

Mother: You can't predict how somebody is when they're drunk... at all... I have ended it. I don't want to

go back there.

Worker: Because, from the information shared by the [Dr]... I just find it concerning, you understand, given that... given that you've ended the relationship before and you have resumed it again, you understand. So, what has changed now, because if he should come back next week, next month, when we close this case. Then if he come back and say to you—





A practice example

Mother: I understand what you're saying

Worker: What you have to bear in mind is, you know, I've told you, if you put yourself and the child at risk

again, you understand, if we're not able to ... what has happened now has demonstrated that you are not able to protect yourself and [child], you understand because you didn't call the police when you're supposed to. You even went as far as not telling the professionals at A&E the truth

when you were at the emergency service

Mother: I don't want to go back there though. Never again. That's why I'm selling and moving on. I haven't told him I'm moving, I haven't told him where... It's just easier... not to have any involvement any more. He wasn't a good dad to [Child] anyway, so... I'm not losing out on anything for [child]. I'm too interested in starting my own career to bother about relationships.

Worker: So what I expect you to do is contact Women's Aid. They offer counselling, they offer legal advice as well. So whatever support you feel, they can always advise on how to go about it and also, they will help you process the injunction and... you have to report it to the police and they will give you

criminal reference you understand.





Summarising from my research studies of last 25 years

 What social workers are doing does not sound very... helpful

2. This is a fairly consistent picture





Adapted a coding scheme from Motivational Interviewing

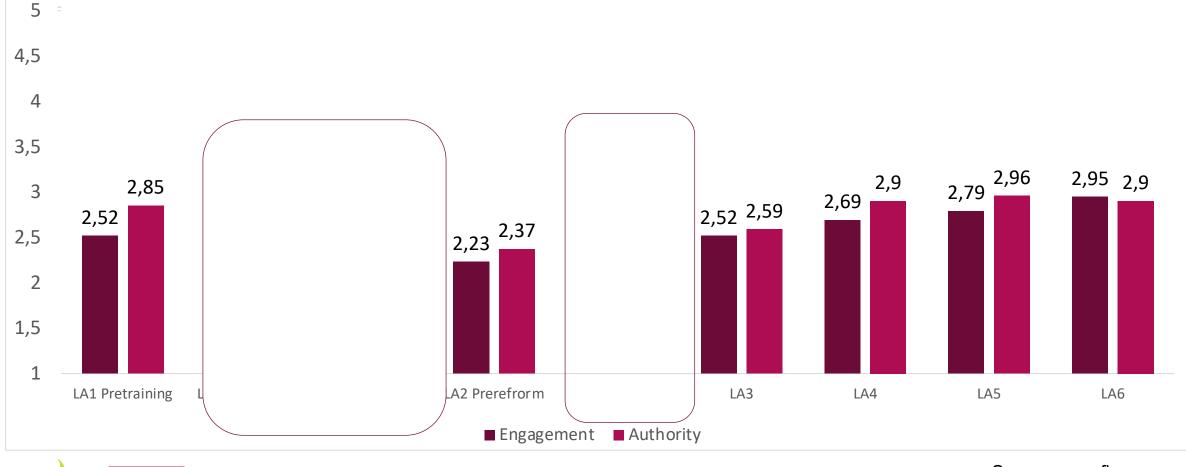
Code from 1 to 5















Current analysis (Whittaker, 2024)

- Only 20% was there ANY discussion of a "behaviour change" issue
- Lots of information collection, some general "checking in"
- About a quarter could not work out what the point of the interview was





Summarising from my research studies of last 25 years

 What social workers are doing does not sound very... helpful

2. This is a fairly consistent picture

3. And the relationship with outcomes is ... complicated





Relationship between skills and outcomes

- Skills at c. 2nd visit
- Follow-up 20 weeks later
- Outcomes:
 - Working Alliance Inventory (WAI)
 - Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS)
 - Life Rating
- Found relationships but fairly weak
- Correlations of 0.2 to 0.3





How to understand this?

- Lots of sifting/assessment
- Stronger relationship with small number of families where worker visited 8 or more times
 - 0.3 to 0.44 (not bad...?)
- Partly a dose/effect relationship
- Partly... they actually definitely had a problem to change?





How to understand outcomes?

- Often problems resolve themselves
- Underlying issues are... big!
 - Poverty, trauma etc
 - Loads of other relationships
 - Lots of stuff happens in people's lives
 - People not asking for help as for counselling

How realistic is it to expect a big effect?

But also – social workers generally not trying to "help"





Why were social workers doing what they were doing?

- Just "deficits"?
- Or systemic problems
- Or something about the purpose of social work that makes such conversations likely (though not inevitable)
- Maybe social work is not about helping people?
- And if not (just) about helping people, what IS the purpose of social work?





What is the purpose of social work?

- Social workers "Aim to improve people's lives by helping with social and interpersonal difficulties, promoting human rights and wellbeing" (BASW - UK)
- Social work "promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people." (IFSW, 2014)
- What is the purpose of social work and of child and family services – in Germany?





What is the purpose of social work with families?

- To protect and promote human rights
- But particularly involved when rights may be in tension or conflict
- Practice (direct work and assessment) therefore needs to:
 - Work with multiple perspectives
 - Bring them into "purposeful dialogue"
 - Provide some resolution eg decisions, plans, goals, help
- The way we do this is vitally important for people we work with and for society





What is the purpose of child and family social work?

In a liberal society people are free to do what they wish so long as they do not harm others (the "harm principle")

- But some people do not have such capacity
- Such as children (also other groups social workers work with)
- In general we allow parents considerable freedom to bring up kids as they wish
- ... but sometimes this freedom needs to be limited





The purpose of child and family services is

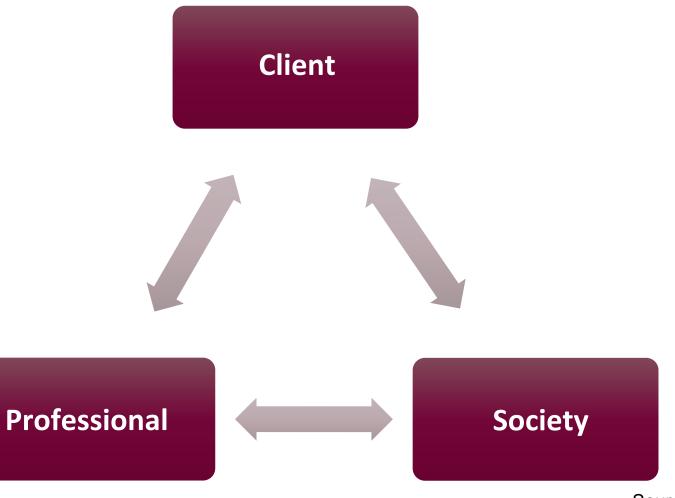
- To protect the rights of children, parents and others in a free society
 - Consider capacity
 - Proportionality of involvement
 - Protecting rights to family, contact etc

- A complex balancing exercise...
 - ... that does not have simple or obvious "outcomes"





Social work as dialogue: three parties in any meeting



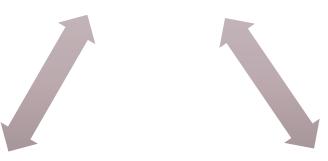




Full of tensions and conflicts eg between parties

Client

Worker thinks parent's drinking harming child – parent does not



Child wants to remain at home – society says need protected



Professional

Society

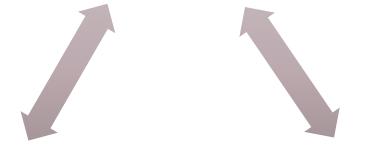
Manager will not make a payment worker says is needed

Full of tensions and conflicts eg within parties

Client

Child and parent's perspective or Child's view and their right to protection

Different types of evidence or Evidence and values



Law and local provision of services

Professional

Society





Child and family social workers

A focus on rights in conflict has important implications for what we think practice should be, how we evaluate it and leadership





Key issue is – what "outcomes" are we seeking to achieve

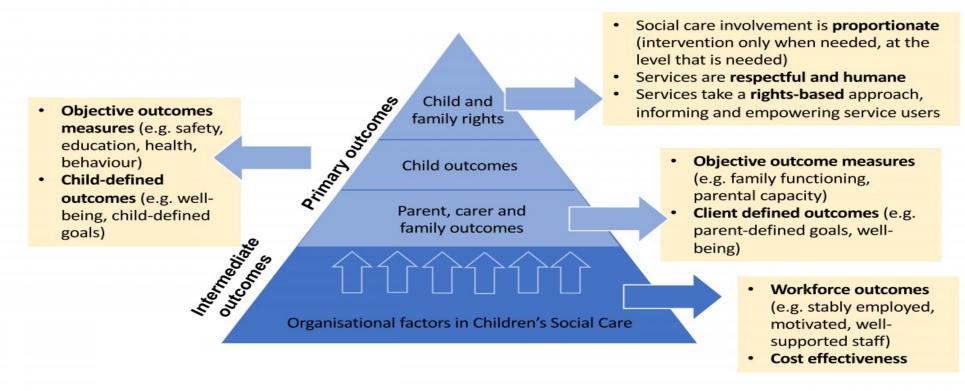
 If not (just) helping – how can we understand what good social work is?

• Intrinsic value of good practice (like courts)





Developed outcomes framework for What Works Centre







Source: What Works for Cildren's Social Care https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research/outcomes-framework-for-research/

 In the UK (and US) constant tendency to utilitarian discourse – services justified in terms of outcomes

 Need to develop a new narrative, in which social work protects individual rights and liberal democracy

 In working with people we are creating the sort of society we want to live in – not "improving outcomes"





The process IS the purpose

How we do child protection is important in its own right – not to create behaviour change or merely to improve outcomes





- Counselling skills very important
 - How to listen well
 - Strategic management of complex conversations
 - But say less about how to raise difficult issues
 - Motivational Interviewing a particularly helpful way of having challenging conversations
- Crucially, NOT creating change rather being clear with people about concerns and allowing them to make decisions about what they do, while being aware of consequences





- Ethically when we work with people we should genuinely want the best for them (Kant)
- This is a meaning of love in the Christian tradition (agape)
- More recently bell hooks has developed an ethics of love
 - Love is not merely a noun it is also a verb
 - Verbs are behaviours and so we can make choices
 - To act in a loving way is to be respectful, caring, kind, reliable and honest – including being honest about disagreements





- In doing social work we are upholding the rights of individuals, particularly when in tension or conflict
- To do this well we should be undergirded by an ethic of love genuinely wanting the best for the people we work with
- In doing so we do not merely "help" people
- We are protecting their rights
- And we are creating the sort of society we would all want, one founded on principles of caring and respect





Why we need loving rights based social work...

For those we work with... For society...

It provides the service WE We protect individual would want It is most likely to help

rights and liberty And create the sort of society we can be proud of

For social workers...

We can understand the conflict and challenge in our work And be proud of the difference we make



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Forrester, D. (forthcoming) The Enlightened Social Worker: An Introduction to Rights Focused Practice, Bristol University Policy Press; Bristol

Coding handbook:

https://cascadewales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/06/Social-Work-IM-Skills-Coding-Handbook.pdf

The link with outcomes:

Forrester, Donald, et al. "What is the relationship between worker skills and outcomes for families in child and family social work?." The British Journal of Social Work 49.8 (2019): 2148-2167.

The grouping of skills:

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And a paper on reliability of coding:

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