

Empowerment in Child Protection Work: Values, Practice and Caveats

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the employment of an empowerment framework in the context of child protection work. In order to explore this we offer a definition of empowerment that is based on its three key essential values: self-determination, collaboration and democratic participation, and distributive justice. Following an explanation of these values we identify possibilities and limitations for applying these principles in child protection practice. The discussion centres around necessary and sufficient conditions for the employment of empowerment guidelines, and dilemmas associated with their implementation. Finally, we reflect on the challenges of advancing an empowering agenda in child protection.

In recent years there has been increasing interest in empowerment as a philosophy of practice in many social work settings, including the field of statutory child protection (Boushel and Lebacqz, 1992; Durkin, 1990; Fox, 1981; Hasenfeld and Chesler, 1989; Hegar, 1989). Child protection agencies are those organizations which hold the statutory authority and responsibility to investigate and intervene in circumstances of abuse and neglect perpetrated by parents against their children. These agencies operate as social control agents of society and are characterized by the use of authority and power in order to secure the safety of children (Parton, 1991).

Taken at face value, there would seem to be incongruence in the notion of undertaking empowering work in an agency characterized by the overt use of power and control. A number of authors, however, consider that such work is possible and appropriate (Bann, 1993; Boushel and Lebacqz, 1992; Costin and others, 1991; Hegar and Hunzeker, 1988; Koerin, 1979; McCallum, 1992). Boushel and Lebacqz (1992) and Hegar and Hunzeker (1988), for example, argue that given the essentially powerless position that most perpetrators of child abuse hold in our society, empowering work is a necessity if child protection work is to be done in a truly ethical and respectful way. Others, such as Bann (1993) and McCallum (1992) give practice examples of how empowering work can be done in this setting.

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The challenge is to define clearly what is meant by empowerment in the context of statutory child protection and to illuminate in which circumstances it can be used. We hope our contribution will throw some light into this important and timely debate. Unless workers and policy makers have a clear idea as to what is meant by empowerment and how best to actualize this notion in daily practices, the danger exists of calling 'empowerment work' the same old services that workers have been offering for years.

Our paper will explore the possibility of employing empowerment principles in a statutory agency. It will argue that empowering work is possible in elements of child protection practice and that this is largely dependent on how one exercises authority when working with parents who have perpetrated abuse. The main argument to be advanced is that empowering principles can be enacted only after parents have accepted the need for help, and only if workers adopt an attitude that goes beyond the exercise of sociolegal authority. In order to elaborate and further explain these points, we present our propositions in four sections. The first one gives an overview of the child protection process and helps us identify at which stage empowering practices become possible. The second section offers a description of the values that constitute empowerment work and philosophy. The third part of the paper discusses the challenges involved in enacting empowerment principles in child protection work, and the last portion of the article examines several caveats and limitations of the philosophy of empowerment in a child protection context.

The child protection process

The process to be described here refers to those families who do not request input or intervention from child protection agencies. These are families who usually come to the attention of such agencies by a complaint lodged by somebody outside the immediate family. Typically, for such families, there is a well-developed path of response. The response begins with an investigation and assessment of the family's situation. Should abuse or neglect be substantiated, then case planning and intervention follow. This process continues until the child's safety is ensured, in either the parent's care or alternative care, at which point termination may occur.

While the stages of the child protection process which follow investigation are fluid, the components of assessment, case planning, intervention and termination are usually included. Assessment, for example, continues throughout the life of the case, and intervention can be said to have begun at the time of investigation. Should abuse recur, then the process may begin again with another investigation.

Parents choosing to engage with child protection agencies in order to ensure that their children will remain in the home, or will be returned to the home, indicates an acceptance of a relationship in which the worker has authority and something meaningful to offer them. Costin and others (1991) provide a helpful discussion of the connection between sociolegal authority and psychological influence. They assert that while sociolegal authority allows a worker to make contact with the family, it is not enough to ensure engagement for the purpose of making changes. Reliance on sociolegal power alone can result in resentment and resistance. It is also not likely to result in an empowering situation for parents.

In order for work to become empowering, the practitioner needs to quickly build an open relationship with both the offending and non-offending parents. If situations that create

resentment and resistance are avoided, then motivation to change and willingness to work with child protection workers will increase. This, in turn, is likely to enhance the chances of successful intervention (Andersson, 1992; Costin and others, 1991; Moss, 1963).

The implication here is that while sociolegal authority is useful to gain entrance into a family, coercion, on its own, is not sufficient to encourage parents to become non-abusive. There must be a shift away from the use of sociolegal authority solely to the use of rapport building techniques. Acceptance of the worker's helping attempts increases as the parent realises the worker has the skill and desire to assist.

From this discussion we discern that there are two distinct phases in working with abusive or neglectful families. The first one, which may be called the *investigation phase*, usually invokes the sociolegal authority of the worker, as he or she tries to determine the need for intervention. Offending and non-offending parents may or may not co-operate fully at this time. It will be necessary to respond to offending parents differently from that to non-offending parents, paying attention to the specific needs and reactions of both. If offending parents co-operate, and the worker is ready to adopt a non-authoritarian attitude, then the stage may be set for what we will term empowerment work. After the first phase is completed, we enter the *problem-solving phase*, at which time the family, again, may or may not co-operate. If there is even a slight attempt to resolve the issues with workers, then the door is open to empowerment work. But just as families' co-operation is imperative in creating an empowering atmosphere, so is workers' attitude. Unless protection workers are willing to go beyond a sociolegal attitude towards the families and assume also a position of non-judgmental helper, it is likely that the principles of empowerment to be described here below will not apply. As we shall see, balancing this dual role is a difficult challenge, but one that needs to be faced.

It would be a mistake, in our opinion, to pretend to be empowering when families decide not to co-operate, or when workers cannot assume a different role than the sociolegal one prescribed to them by the courts. In order to further clarify the necessary and sufficient conditions for empowerment work to emerge, we turn now to a description of empowerment values.

Values

According to Prilleltensky (1994), empowering work should be guided by three principal moral values. These are self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation. Self-determination may be thought of as 'the individual's ability to pursue chosen goals without excessive frustration' (Olson, 1978, p 45). For Rawls (1972), the capacity to carry out one's objectives in life is 'perhaps the most important primary good' (p 440). The human essence of this value is also captured in Ortega y Gasset's expression 'to live is to constantly decide what we are to become' (1983, p 190). Rappaport (1981, 1987) proposed the concept of empowerment as a vehicle towards the achievement of greater self-determination for individuals. Indeed, Riessman (1986) regards self-determination as a constitutive part of the empowerment ethos.

Distributive justice is the principle invoked to guide the fair and equitable allocation of burdens and resources in society (Facione and others, 1978; Miller, 1978). It may be defined as '*suum cuique*, to each his (or her) due' (Miller, 1978, p 20). This value puts forth 'principles from which we may work out an ideally just distribution of rights and

privileges, burdens and pains, among human beings as such' (Sidgwick, 1922, p 274). This value is premised on a belief that one's well-being is partly determined by the distribution of, and access to, goods and services. Agents and promoters of empowerment should monitor the fair and equitable distribution of goods and services, while those possessing disproportionate shares of power should be accountable for depriving others of theirs.

Collaboration and democratic participation mean that people have a right to participate in decision-making processes affecting them. The principles of self-determination and distributive justice should be enacted through a collaborative and democratic process. The belief in the intrinsic capacity of individuals to choose their goals in life and defend their interests is an ineluctable value of democracy. Indeed, 'the concept of democracy ... (is) based on the principle of empowering citizens to participate in decisions affecting their welfare' (Swift, 1984, p xiii).

Collaboration and democratic participation reflect best the ideal that individuals should be equal partners in any decision-making process affecting their lives. This principle, regarded by Riessman (1986) as central to the empowerment agenda, is a defining characteristic of empowering social, therapeutic, political and scholarly pursuits (Rappaport, 1990).

Practice

Self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation constitute the core principles of the philosophy of empowerment and should inform policy, therapeutic practices and social work efforts (Prilleltensky, 1994). However, these values may not always be applied in protection services. A careful implementation of empowerment tenets should take into account when and how are these guiding principles applicable. We discuss next these possibilities and limitations during the investigation and problem-solving phases.

Investigation phase

During the investigation stage of statutory child protection practice, these values are undermined by the sociolegal intervention. When parents are investigated by workers for the purpose of determining the presence of abuse or neglect, they have no choice about the action. Statutory child protection agencies have the sociolegal authority to investigate, and power to remove a child if necessary, regardless of parental wish or permission. There is no self-determination in this beginning stage of intervention.

With regard to the value of distributive justice, many families come into contact with the protection system in the first place because they have not had adequate access to goods and resources. It is unlikely that a distributive justice exercise may take place when workers are investigating families for the possibility of abuse or neglect. The lack of preventive services to avert alternative placement, as well as the paucity of services once children are returned to the home, exemplify the deprivation of fair allocation of resources based on families' needs (Maluccio and Fein, 1985; Mnookin, 1973; Newberger and Bourne, 1978; Pelton, 1982). Many families do not have access to the goods and services necessary to meet their needs, either prior to or after intervention by child protection authorities. Distributive justice, then, is largely absent.

Collaboration and democratic participation are also absent. Parents do not have the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process about whether their family will be investigated for abuse or not. If an abuse or neglect complaint is substantiated, and children are seen to be at risk of harm, they will also have no choice about whether intervention occurs.

Thus, it would seem that in the initial stages of investigation empowering work is not possible with child protection clients. The nature of the work, which is essentially social control, makes it not possible for parents to exercise self-determination, to experience distributive justice or to participate collaboratively and democratically in the decision-making processes that impact on them.

Problem-solving phase

Empowerment work would seem more feasible during the problem-solving phase, where workers try to restore a sense of control to the families. Rappaport (1987) states that 'empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights' (Rappaport, 1987, p 121). This statement indicates that in order for empowering practice to occur, workers need to be cognisant of both micro and macro issues that contribute to child abuse and neglect. That is, they need to be able to work with parents and children in order to facilitate opportunities for personal control and influence by their clients and, at the same time, attempt to address the structural inequalities which exist for most parents who abuse or neglect their children.

Although there may seem to be incongruence with the notion of empowering those who exert abusive power over others, as occurs in child abuse and neglect, it has been suggested that most parents, given assistance and opportunity, will become non-abusive. It is lack of opportunity to assume control over their lives which creates situations of high stress which, in turn, may lead to abuse or neglect being perpetrated (Jorgensen, 1992). There are, of course, exceptions to this. There are some parents who are unable or unwilling to become non-abusive. Fixated sex offenders or parents with severe mental health conditions may fall into this category. While such cases exist, they are not the norm in a child protection worker's caseload. Conversely, it is well noted in research that parents who are clients of child protection agencies experience feelings of shame, guilt, stigmatization, low self esteem and powerlessness (Corby, 1987; Fisher and others, 1986; Hegar and Hunzeker, 1988; Jenkins and Norman, 1975; Thorpe, 1974). Further, parents who abuse typically suffer from low self-esteem and the effects of having experienced poor parenting themselves (Costin and others, 1991).

It is also clear that children from poor families, and black families, are over-represented in child protection and alternative care systems in many Western world countries (Channer and Parton, 1990; O'Connor, 1993; Pecora and others, 1992; Pelton, 1982). Arguments have been made by a number of authors to the effect that the child abuse problem has been constructed so that parents are held accountable for it, rather than contributing societal factors also being taken into account (Boushel and Lebacqz, 1992; Parton, 1985).

Therefore, it would seem that an empowerment philosophy is warranted in a child protection setting. In order for this to occur, however, both the powerlessness experienced by individual parents, as well as the societal factors which contribute to this sense of powerlessness, and abuse and neglect, would need to be addressed. Empowering

individual parents is appropriate in child protection work. People who are empowered are more likely to be able to assume control of their lives and deal with problems and changes (Zimmerman, 1990). This is necessary if the aim is to maintain the child in, or return the child to, the family home. Social workers also have an ethical responsibility to work in an empowering way and to address inequality. To do otherwise, particularly to practice in a de-powering way is to not accord people with basic human dignity.

Following Costin and others (1991), it would appear that empowering work becomes a viable option once sociolegal authority is replaced by efforts to engage the families in collaborative and democratic processes that promote their self-determination. This can only occur when parents accept responsibility for their child having suffered harm and are willing to work with agency staff to ensure abuse or neglect does not recur. While the relationship between parents and worker may become a trusting and positive one, it must be remembered that it is developed in an environment where workers hold statutory power which can be exercised at any point in time. As such, workers with sociolegal authority have determined the parameters of interaction and this needs to be acknowledged so as not to create a false sense of equality. In other words, it would be misleading to imply that the worker will not invoke this power if he or she determined that the child was in danger. This necessitates a very open and skilful attitude on the part of the worker, trying to balance collaborative participation, affirming parents' efforts at positive changes, and continuing to act as a watchdog of parents' behaviour. This is a serious challenge that cannot be undermined. In our view, it is not an insurmountable one, but one that cannot be denied. The integrity of the worker-client relationship demands that these tensions in the application of empowerment principles be acknowledged and openly discussed between worker and families.

Once the safety of the child is secured and these issues are openly discussed, parents should be free to exercise their right to self-determination when making choices about how they wish to make the necessary changes to their family to ensure their child's safety (Costin and others, 1991; Foren and Bailey, 1968; Keith-Lucas, 1961; Moss, 1963). Workers should facilitate this process by conveying to the parents that their 'freedom is restricted in only one direction—they are not free to abuse or neglect their children' (Costin and others, 1991, p 352). If, at this point, workers engage parents in collaborative efforts, try to enhance their self-determination and act on their behalf to secure needed services and resources, empowering practice has begun.

Self-determination by parents is enabled when workers provide the necessary climate for it to occur. This process is reinforced by focusing on strengths and assets of the family, rather than solely on problems and needs. The worker's role throughout the life of the intervention should include reinforcement of parental strengths and conveyance of a belief in their capacity to change. Once the climate for self-determination has been established, case planning can proceed in an empowering way. Workers can provide information about services and resources available to parents and parents can choose those that are most relevant to their circumstances and needs.

In order for the empowerment value of distributive justice to be achieved, agencies and workers must first recognize the structurally powerless position held by most parents in the child protection process. The development of holistic or ecological approaches (see, for example, Gil, 1974; Laird, 1979; Vondra and Toth, 1989), in which both individual and societal factors, such as poverty, homelessness and health care, are acknowledged, can be seen as an attempt to facilitate such recognition. While workers do not control social

policies which determine the resources available to families, they have greater access to resources than most clients, as well as better information in relation to the availability of goods and services (Pinderhughes, 1983).

A very serious challenge concerning the application of distributive justice principles is the fact that social work efforts should not be limited to work with the particular family or families. Changes at policy levels ought to accompany efforts at helping individual families. Otherwise, nothing is being done to ensure that the incidence of protection cases decreases in the future. Social workers may object to the implication that their work should go beyond their serious efforts at helping a particular family, at a particular point in time. However, if all social workers held this attitude, the profession would not procure a reduction in the prevalence of abuse and neglect. While we acknowledge that front-line workers cannot be expected to do all these things, we regard it as imperative that thought be given to ways of combining front-line work with strategies to prevent the occurrence of new families entering the system. This issue is at the heart of distributive justice. As Miller (1978) put it, social justice

concerns the distribution of benefits and burdens throughout a society, as it results from the major social institutions—property systems, public organizations, etc. It deals with such matters as the regulation of wages and (where they exist) profits, the protection of persons' rights through the legal system, the allocation of housing, medicine and welfare benefits, etc. (p 22)

Unless the social and economic factors implicated in the creation of child protection problems are addressed in ways that restore distributive justice in society, the empowerment agenda cannot be said to be completed.

Collaborative and democratic participation also becomes viable after the investigation stage. Both collaboration and participation have received attention in the literature on child protection (see, for example Fisher and others, 1986; McCallum, 1992), although there would seem to be a fundamental difference between the two. 'Collaboration' implies that the agenda of protecting the child is established between parents and worker. This is not the case unless parents request intervention, and even then, the great power and authority of child protection agencies raise doubt about the possibility of parents being really able to 'collaborate with'. 'Participating in' seems to suggest that parents participate in an agenda that is inherently determined by statutory authorities. This would seem to be a more realistic reflection of what is actually the case in child protection work. Parents can participate in case planning decisions and interventions appropriate to their needs. Where trust is well-developed, it is also possible for parents to assist in the decision about the necessity for ongoing involvement with child protection workers.

Unfortunately, there appears to be little written about the techniques of empowering work with parents. Exceptions are papers on case conferencing (McGloin and Turnbull, 1987a); contracting (Fusco, 1983), case planning (McCallum, 1992) and family decision making (Bann, 1993). Also potentially useful to statutory child protection are the range of techniques and strategies developed by many of the home preservation agencies. While these agencies work with clients who are essentially voluntary, they have much to offer in regard to the use of authority and development of relationships with families (see for example Berg, 1992; Cameron and others, 1994; Kinney and others, 1991).

Caveats

While it would appear that employment of an empowerment philosophy may be possible under certain circumstances, there are four fundamental issues which cannot be ignored. The first is in relation to the appropriateness of using empowerment principles where clients are involuntary or mandated. Even if parents accept responsibility for harming their children, and genuinely desire a relationship with a worker in order to make changes in their family, the extent to which they are able to do so feeling free of coercion is debatable. It is also important to make a distinction between offending and non-offending parents. In the case of child sexual assault, this is usually men and women respectively. Offending and non-offending parents should be treated differently. The less powerful position of women in such circumstances needs to be taken into account and empowerment principles applied accordingly.

The second issue is in regard to whether it is truly possible for parents to participate in decision making about safety issues for their children. While the honesty and integrity of parents are not in question here, it is the case that workers are ethically accountable for ensuring safety for children wherever possible. Should a mistake be made, and a child harmed, workers can be called to account, as has occurred in a number of cases in Britain (Parton, 1991). As such, it is difficult for workers to relinquish this decision-making power and it is unethical to indicate to families that such relinquishment has occurred. The knowledge of over-riding worker power may, in turn, negatively affect the relationship between worker and client. This is particularly so in the termination stage, that is, the point where agency involvement is no longer necessary. In keeping with the empowerment philosophy, parents should be able to participate in this decision and determine their own needs for continuing input from the worker. Problems arise, however, when parents and worker cannot agree on the time of termination. The dilemma for the worker is between acknowledging parents' rights and ensuring child safety. While child safety has to be the primary concern, alienation of the parents will do little to ensure a positive working relationship.

The third issue is the case of parents who do not accept involvement by the statutory authority, by either denying the child has been harmed by them, or refusing to engage with workers to ensure child safety. Included here are those parents who are deemed unable to care for their children, such as some sex offenders and those parents who suffer from debilitating mental health conditions. In these circumstances, the values of self-determination and collaborative and democratic participation cannot be met as workers will be forced to continue working to protect the child, essentially over-riding parents' opinions and desires.

Finally, care needs to be taken to ensure that attempts to empower families do not become further means for them to be disempowered. Corby and colleagues' (1994) study of case conferencing provides a good example. Case conferences are seen as useful ways of encouraging parental participation and allowing the sharing of power (McGloin and Turnbull, 1987a, 1987b). The study by Corby and others (1994) indicates, however, that in some cases parents feel unable to disagree with professionals. They acquiesce to plans, rather than explicitly agree with them, and thus become further disempowered.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the application of empowerment principles in the context of statutory child protection services. In order to clarify what is meant by empowerment, we provided a definition that builds on its three key essential values: self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation. We then examined how these values may be applied in practice. As noted throughout the paper, this enterprise is fraught with challenges and difficulties. To make progress in the application of empowerment principles, we indicated when and how self-determination, collaboration and democratic participation, and distributive justice may be employed, and when they may not. These guidelines are not applicable during the investigation stage, at which point families are approached in a sociolegal manner that puts the rights of children ahead of the rights of parents. Once parents and workers assume a collaborative attitude during the problem-solving phase, the door is opened for the implementation of the three key empowerment values. But these values need to be incorporated into the work with great care, as they can be easily undermined by a number of factors. Among these factors are the constant threat of workers needing to re-invoke sociolegal power; workers' authoritarian attitudes, even after parents have assumed responsibility and tried to reunite the family; and the plain difficulties involved in trying to balance the rights and self-determination of parents against those of their children. The prospect of employing an empowerment philosophy in child protection work is a very serious challenge indeed. If, however, we are serious about enacting those humanistic principles that should lead to better and more dignified lives for children and families, then the challenge is worth pursuing. Future case studies discerning the specific dilemmas encountered in trying to apply an empowerment framework should help clarify further when and how this type of work can be done.

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