
Statutory Child Protection Assessment: Working with parental attitude

Tony Stanley and Niki Hannan

Tony Stanley is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Community Studies, Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT). He is a registered social worker and previously worked as a social worker with Child Youth and Family.

Niki Hannan teaches at the Faculty of Humanities, CPIT. She has been an Adult Education Practitioner for over 20 years, primarily involved in teacher education. Niki specialises in designing and delivering training courses, and evaluating and giving feedback to teaching staff. She has been a past winner of CPIT's 'Teaching Excellence' awards.

Abstract

Assessment is a defining function of child protection social work, and risk assessment tools have been increasingly introduced to assist this work. Importantly, these tools can serve organisational needs at the expense of parent/caregiver involvement and this can compromise the client/worker relationship. This paper argues that child protection assessments need to take place within the context of an established relationship, and this is important because of the key messages contained within the child death review literature; the most notable being 'disguised compliance'. While recent practice initiatives are aimed at the enhancement of child protection practice, the day-to-day reality is still one of time and resource pressure for child protection workers, and this may result in them not detecting 'disguised compliance'. To address this, we draw on two bodies of work, namely the social work and adult education literatures, and conclude that the 'child protection/client' relationship is an important model for the assessment of disguised compliance, and one in which the safe management of it can occur.

Introduction

Assessment is by far the most widely known and accepted practice imperative that defines child protection work. In fact, ecological assessment practice that involves a professional relationship is a defining feature of child protection social work; it distinguishes us from other human-focused disciplines (Coulshed and Orme, 2006). It is important to see social work assessment as a dynamic process, one that involves social workers working *with* people in particular contexts, and working together to build, that is construct, understandings about particular situations and lives (Milner and O'Byrne, 2002), including the subtleties and nuances of parental/caregiver attitude. This paper takes as its focus the assessment of parental/caregiver attitude, within the context of statutory child protection work, and argues that this is crucial if we are to locate and work with parental attitudes that may actually mask solutions to child safety. While this paper is focused on child protection social work, there are key messages for New Zealand social work more generally, because child protection

social work increasingly relies on working relationships with the NGO and community social work sector (Stanley, 2007).

The paper begins with a brief review of the child protection assessment literature. Importantly, this literature has shown that parents / caregivers can mask actual or potential harm during the assessment process. This has been termed 'disguised compliance' (Reder, Duncan & Gray, 1993), and this is explained. Assessment work is complex and we are not suggesting that all parents / caregivers set out to mask actual attitudes. Rather, we appreciate that the assessment process itself may produce stress and anger for parents / caregivers, particularly in the work of statutory child protection (Tilbury, Osmond, Wilson & Clark, 2007).

This paper argues that attitudinal assessment requires an established relationship between social workers and client, and that adequate time is needed to do this. This is noted within the social work and adult education literature, and we draw on this work. Child protection social work is an environment fraught with institutional, public and political pressures to produce efficient and justifiable assessments. This being the case, adequate time and skill to assess parental attitudes is necessary (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). The safe management of disguised compliance begins with a sound assessment of it.

Child protection assessments

According to Gough (1993), a crucial component of child protection is the process and practice of assessment; a practice that is 'embedded within an understanding of the social, environmental, economic and cultural influences that impact on individual, family and community functioning' (Anglem and Maidment, 2004, p. 112). Assessment is the process of gathering and analysing information to inform intervention decisions (Tilbury, Osmond, Wilson & Clark, 2007). According to Webb (2006) social workers must also consider the political and ideological context that influences and regulates their assessment practice. He argues that this is important in neo-liberalist societies, where political and economic policies that favour market competition and individual responsibility have become dominant discourses that pervade social work. Social work has been significantly influenced by neo-liberal ideology, and this has produced a working context where efficiency, accountability and individual responsibility discourses now shape assessment practices.

The child protection worker as judgement *and* decision maker distinguishes their assessment from other disciplines (Coulshed and Orme, 2006). To assist this, risk assessment tools have been increasingly introduced, most notably within child protection and mental health social work, where increasing anxiety continues to drive political and managerial responses in these practice domains. Aiming to expedite structured decision making, risk assessments can serve organisational needs at the expense of family involvement (Stanley, 2007) and this may compromise the social work relationship.

To illustrate: Child Youth and Family (CYF) introduced the Risk Estimation System (RES) in 1996, to assist social workers with their assessment practice. The RES is an adaptation of the Manitoba Model, modified to incorporate the specific cultural factors for New Zealand (CYFS, 2000; Smith, 1995). Cultural guidelines are incorporated into the risk assessment framework and, as with other sections of the tool, composite scores are established fol-

lowing a narrative recording by the social worker. Twenty-two risk scales contribute to the overall risk analysis; and this includes paying explicit attention toward parental attitudes (Appleton & Craig, 2006; CYFS, 2000). Stanley's (2005) doctoral research found that CYF social workers used the risk assessment tool to legitimise their assessment decisions. This research also found that child protection workers favoured the language of 'high risk' and 'low risk', as this allowed assessments to be presented, without equivocation, to parents and caregivers for their acceptance. When families indicated that they accepted the risk assessment as presented to them, social workers felt more satisfied that the family was less likely to act in a way that increases the likelihood of harm (Stanley, 2005).

According to Stanley's research (2005), tools like the RES may not be achieving the desired outcomes of constructing assessment knowledge with families and caregivers, within a social work relationship. This then is a note for caution, because parental or caregiver acceptance, particularly in such a passive way, may actually be an indication of 'disguised compliance'.

Disguised compliance

The term 'disguised compliance' emerged out of the U.K. child death review literature, where tragically, children died while social workers believed families were working toward achieving or enhancing safety (Reder et al., 1993). Reder et al. (1993) caution workers to consider any uncritical acceptance of their assessment work, because this could indicate a family's tacit acknowledgment toward the assessment, while masking actual or potential harm. Disguised compliance can occur when families appear or present as being co-operative regarding a social worker's decision to take a more controlling role. Importantly, they theorised that parental or caregiver attempts to defuse a social worker's decision could be masking other more dangerous behaviours and attitudes toward children.

There is much to be gained from assessing and managing disguised compliance, particularly in our neo-liberal and risk saturated society. In one of the few published accounts of a child welfare consumer perspective, one parent made this telling observation:

For me, guilt replaces pride as an individual factor. My guilt inevitably colours my attitude to social services...I know how easy it is for my mood to be misinterpreted, and how it is possible to manipulate someone in authority. These 'breakdowns' have occurred elsewhere, with sickening consequences, and will I am afraid, occur again. A layman can sometimes spot a potential batterer a mile off, yet a trained social worker may miss one at five paces (Anonymous 1976, p. 78).

Three points are worth noting here. The first is that this statement is over 20 years old; second, note the confidence in the speaker's voice; third, parents and caregivers do balance a range of emotional responses when statutory social work services are involved. As illustrated above, these can be masked or disguised.

Social workers talking about parental / caregiver attitudes

Three social workers who participated in Stanley's doctoral research project (2005)¹ reflected on assessing parental attitudes. One worker felt 'conned' by parents because of their disguised compliance:

¹ The larger project focused on CYF statutory social work assessment practices and risk discourses.

[W]e left the children [at home] and I carried on part of the work, and then, not long after that, we got called in because a child had [been non accidentally injured] ... It's awful; you don't sleep for ages – all that kept playing on [my mind]: 'Did I ask the right questions, did I look, why was I conned by her?' you know: 'What could I have done that would have stopped me being conned by her?' (Social Worker 31)

Conversely, the next worker reflected that assurances and declarations by parents were indicators of more sinister intentions:

[A]t this meeting last night we went through the reassurances of the partner and Mum, and they will protect their children, and the partner said 'now I know definitely I will never do that again', things like that. Yeah, well every parent does say that (Social worker 24).

Another social worker remarked that a positive parental attitude may not be what it seems:

[L]ots of parents will turn around when we turn our backs [and punish the child for talking about what happened] (Social Worker 43).

The danger here is that child protection workers construct parents/caregivers as 'untrustworthy' and 'unreliable'. This may contribute to risk averse practice, where taking chances becomes more risky when '*we can't believe them*'. This is actually more risky for children and families, as decisions for removal of children may seem legitimate.

While the social work literature is unequivocal in advocating for a sound working relationship as a crucial model for child protection assessment practice (Gough, 1993; Tilbury et al, 2007; Webb, 2006), and the statutory areas of practice have received attention in managing power inequality within the assessment relationship (Tilbury et al, 2007; Webb, 2006), the adult education literature offers the social work community some practice insights.

Worker credibility emerges within the adult education literature as a key attribute for successful working relationships. According to Brookfield (2006), teachers who made a difference in adult students' lives were credible and authentic, and assisted the establishment of a trusting and sound working relationship. Explaining the role of teacher and the purpose of the work ahead helped establish the working relationship. Assessing student attitudes toward learning was easier when role and purpose clarity had been established. Kolb (1984) and Magolda (1999) noted that a change in attitudes can occur when learners are facilitated through a process of reflection on their experiences, drawing conclusions about attitudes for themselves, and applying new learning to current attitudes (Ramsden, 1992). The idea here is that parents and caregivers can integrate new learning about attitudes if they can anchor it to what has happened to them in the past, and if they themselves recreate a picture for how they want the future to be.

A working relationship where an accepting, non-judgemental, credible, empathetic, supportive approach is taken by the child protection worker, and where modelling of the desired attitude in question is demonstrated (Brookfield, 1995) is important. Another key idea from the social work and adult education literature is allowing adequate time for self reflection about particular attitudes held or experienced. Helping clients feel trusted to talk about their attitudes should facilitate more open dialogue leading to a deeper understand-

ing for the social worker and parents/caregivers (Magolda, 1999). One of the authors, Niki Hannan, illustrates this point: Niki mentors adult educators at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, where she invites educators to explore how they understand student attitudes. Her participants are given a chance to talk through a negative attitude they previously held and their observations of attitudinal change. In this process participants are empowered because they have examined how their attitudes can actually mask, or be examples of, disguised compliance.

Discussion

The relationship between child protection worker and client is, therefore, crucial, and provides a vehicle where talking about what one feels and thinks can be invited and valued. A key message in the discussion thus far is that assessing parental and caregiver attitude is more possible if the relationship between the child protection worker and client is one where trust and role clarity has been established, and a working relationship where adequate time to achieve this is allocated. In this way the worker creates a realistic opportunity for accurate attitudinal assessment; the child protection worker's role may shift from 'judge and jury' to a more collaborative role where parents/caregivers can share frustrations, stressors, and anger more constructively. This information is needed if we are to learn about parental attitudes toward children and, how they, in turn, can apply such learning to sustained attitudinal change.

Increased criticism of public child welfare has been the case in most Western nations, particularly neo-liberal societies such as ours (Stanley, 2007) and the UK, where risk, blame, and a decreasing trust in 'the expert' to detect child abuse, both potential and actual, has emerged (Reder et al., 1993). This has produced a working environment where demands on social workers to produce efficient and 'objective' assessments can invite parents/caregivers to *present* compliance and an outward positive approach to working with statutory social workers. Such demands may result in workers producing risk assessments simply to fulfil administrative work requirements (Stanley, 2005), and miss the opportunity to learn from parents and caregivers about any stress emerging from statutory social work involvement. There are important implications here for the wider social work community, as the organisation of child protection work will increasingly rely on collaborations between statutory agencies and NGO partners (Stanley, 2007).

The compliance that parents can demonstrate, most commonly expressed verbally, told the social workers in Stanley's (2005) research that the parents accepted the risk issues and they were able to manage them. This may mask attitudes of frustrations and anger toward statutory involvement. Such attitudes can reveal much about coping, resilience and safety mechanisms when explored and assessed within an established social work relationship (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Social work supervision and training are two important forums where child protection workers can continue to reflect on and increase their skills in parental attitude assessment work.

Reder et al (1993) make a compelling argument that social work assessments should include examples and illustrations from parents and caregivers that can demonstrate attitudes about 'care' and 'control'. Distinguishing between idealistic and actual examples is important. They argue that care includes age-appropriate needs and the ability to anticipate

what particular children may need. Further, being able to prioritise the child's needs over those of parent/caregiver is an important indicator of care and protection attitude. Importantly, the assessment of risk can and should include the perspectives, definitions, stories and experiences of parents and caregivers to assist social workers assess and safely manage disguised compliance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper affirms the place of parental attitude assessment in child protection practice, and that adequate time to achieve this is important. New Zealand's shocking level of child abuse and neglect will continue to fuel public anger and political responses. This pressure may compromise relationships between child protection workers and family members, and make assessing disguised compliance more difficult. Social work theorists, supported by colleagues within adult education, argue for a sound relationship to be established between worker and client, and that adequate time is made available within them to assess and work with parental attitudes; attitudes that may be examples of 'disguised compliance'.

References

- Anglem, J. & Maidment, J. (2004). Introduction to assessment. In J. Maidment & R. Egan (Eds.), *Practice skills in social work and welfare*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- Anonymous. (1976). 'Consumer's viewpoint', by a battering parent. *Social Work Today*, 7(3), 78.
- Appleton, C. & Craig, A. (2006). Preparing human service workers for risk assessment and management: Training for child protection risk assessment in the statutory social work setting. In K. McMaster & L. Bakker (Eds.). *Will they do it again? Assessing and managing risk*. Christchurch: HMABooks.
- Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Brookfield, S. (2006). *The skilful teacher: On trust, technique and responsiveness in the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Child, Youth and Family Service (CYFS). (2000). *RES: Risk Estimation System Reference Manual*. Unpublished Manuscript.
- Coulshed, V. & Orme, J. (2006). *Social work practice* (Vol. 4). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gough, D. (1993). *Child abuse interventions: A review of the research literature*. London: H.M.S.O.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Magolda, B. (1999) *Creating contexts for learning and self-authorship: Constructing developmental pedagogy*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Milner, J. & O'Bryne, P. (2002). Assessment and planning. In R. Adams, L. Dominelli & M. Payne (Eds.). *Critical practice in social work*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moon, J. (2004). *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning*. London: Routledge Palmer.
- Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to teach in higher education*. London: Routledge.
- Reder, P., Duncan, S. & Gray, M. (1993). *Beyond blame: Child abuse tragedies revisited*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, C. (1995). More than a gut feeling. *Social Work Now*, 2, 8-12.
- Stanley, T. W. (2005). *Making decisions: Social work processes and the construction of risk(s) in child protection work*. Thesis. University of Canterbury, Christchurch.
- Stanley, T (2007) Risky work: Child protection practice. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand Te Puna Whakaaro*, 30, 163-177.
- Tilbury, J., Osmond, J., Wilson, S. & Clark, J. (2007). *Good practice in child protection*. Frenchs Forest: Pearson Education.
- Turnell, A. & Edwards, S. (1999). *Signs of safety: A solution and safety orientated approach to child protection casework*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Webb, S. A. (2006). *Social work in a risk society: Social and political perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
-