Moral agency in everyday safeguarding work: reclaiming hope in the 'small stories' of family support: some lessons from John Dewey

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This article engages with international concerns about the negative impact of an expanding neoliberal project on the professional values of social work. Examining theoretical debates about human agency, a case is made for cultivating a moral sensibility in the practitioner workforce to resist the excesses of the neoliberal paradigm. Rejecting depictions of the practitioner as 'institutional dope', discussion excavates the early work of classical pragmatist John Dewey to counter assertions that institutional context simply *determines* practitioner beliefs and actions. A number of illustrative examples are provided from the author's fieldwork in sites of local authority children's services, which challenge a presumed singularity of ethical disposition. Excerpts from practitioners' case deliberations are offered as 'small stories' of hope and illustrate the heterogeneity of frontline practice. The article aims to speak to readers in search of a more hopeful imaginary for social work and who are wary of monolithic accounts of practice.

Introduction

[A]s hope is eroded and if our profession fatalistically accepts its relative powerlessness to 'speak back' to the prevailing conservative moral climate of neo-liberal risk society, then we are 'at risk' of further marginalisation and regulation as a profession.... In this context, then, identifying concrete examples that demonstrate social workers' purposive enactment of their profession's 'ethical will' is an important research focus to support hope and optimism. (Stanford, 2011: 1516)

This opening excerpt from Stanford (2011) in Australia captures sentiments that will no doubt resonate with practitioners in a number of international contexts who are faced with an expanding neoliberal project. The dominant politics of neoliberalism, based on a conservative moral philosophy, has endemically shaped public services of social welfare in ways that can pose unpalatable challenges for client and worker alike. There is pervasive international concern that social work values are eroded, on account of externally imposed changes that undermine the core values of the profession. In this article, I respond to Stanford's timely call for a more hopeful imaginary for social work – and in particular her imperative that social workers 'connect with an active sense of moral agency in their efforts to secure good outcomes for clients' (Stanford, 2011: 1516). Focusing on a number of sites of local authority safeguarding practice

Key words neoliberalism • family support • moral agency

in England, where a highly formalised institutional context can mediate against the provision of family support, I offer some ‘small stories’ of hope. Specifically, I aim to show that the practical ethics of frontline practitioners can resist a narrow, instrumental rationality suggested by a neoliberal ethic. Drawing on the work of Smith (2005: 5), I underscore the importance of examining the ‘small stories’ of family support that, in their variability, challenge a ‘presumed singularity’ of ethical disposition. This is not to deny an expanding neoliberal project, but to challenge monolithic accounts and underscore the active moral agency of the practitioner.

This article is divided into four parts. The first section discusses the rise of neoliberalism in regard to public services. This section focuses on the *social relations* that are suggested by the excesses of a neoliberal ethic and the consequences therein for both service user and welfare provider. The second section takes up the issue of moral agency and asks whether practitioners as local policy actors are simply neoliberal ‘dopes’ or agents with transformative potential. Drawing on classical pragmatism and focusing on the work of John Dewey (inter alia, 1896), I argue that lessons from this early work offer explanatory precepts for understanding the possibilities for human agency. Here I excavate Dewey’s work (inter alia, 1896) on ‘deliberative action’ to counter assertions that institutional norms simply *determine* practitioner beliefs and actions. In the third section of this article, a number of illustrative empirical examples are offered from my own studies of child safeguarding practice, which evidence the variability of practitioner ethics. While we might presume a powerful child protection episteme to be hegemonic, here I illustrate the indeterminacy of normative judgement. In offering empirical illustrations I make no generalising claims. Rather, my intention is to bring theoretical debate and empirical observation into fruitful dialectic relation. A final section restates the value of nurturing the ‘small stories’ from frontline practice, such that they may serve to colonise and disrupt normative neoliberal formulations of welfare and its subjects.

Neoliberal ethics and social work as uncomfortable bedfellows

There is no doubt that the neoliberal project is expanding. In all forms of everyday life and across many nation states, experience reflects a neoliberal ethic. Many traditional public goods such as rail networks, airways and even the utilities of gas, electricity and water have been turned over to the profit makers. In the United Kingdom (UK), we are currently witnessing further ongoing efforts to expand the privatisation of healthcare, social services and education. In regard to frontline practices of social welfare, this neoliberal expansion has been the subject of significant critique on account of the kinds of *social relations* it invokes (Dean, 2004, 2010; Rose, 2008). Promulgating an essentially economic view of the human condition, strong versions of a neoliberal ethic propose that ‘[e]verything for which human beings attempt to realise their ends, from marriage, to crime, to expenditures on children, can be understood “economically” according to a particular calculation of cost for benefit’ (Read, 2009: 28). It is not just that the structures of the market are extended across society, but also that the market is seen as *in* human nature. A neoliberal anthropology proposes

a society of self-interested, self-governing subjects, who assume market-based values in their daily lives to amass economic capital. As Brown (2005: 704, emphasis added) writes: 'the model neo-liberal citizen is one who strategizes for her or himself among various social, political and economic options, not one who strives *with* others to alter or organise these options'. Within a neoliberal anthropology we encounter a 'citizenry of responsibilised subjects' whose primary orientation to the Other is instrumental – relationships are founded on self-interested, calculative practices (Campbell, 2010: 35).

Notwithstanding the nuances in UK governments' responses to a neoliberal turn (Harvey, 2007), it is possible to identify convergence in political beliefs during the past three decades around a reduced role for the state in regulating markets and/or making reparations to those who do not appear to benefit from free-market transactions. An emotive anti-dependency discourse has served to justify efforts on behalf of successive governments to organise welfare spending in (workfare) ways that 'activate' an individualistic ethic of self-sufficiency and self-governance. Critics of this expanding agenda have pointed to the consequence of welfare reform since the 1980s for relationships between service users and service providers, claiming that this project has served to devalue the emotional labour within the caring professions in favour of more calculative, cost-benefit rationalities (Haylett, 2003; Lonne et al, 2009). For example, the shift from a case work to a case management role has resulted in practitioners positioning themselves *outside* the helping relationship – brokering packages of care for families and signposting 'self-governing' subjects to relevant services. The values of efficiency within this market paradigm do indeed foreground the measurable rather than affective elements of practice and, taken together, risk decentralising the relational aspects of help (Broadhurst et al, 2010a, 2010b). Critics have described an 'emotional cooling' in the helping relationship, which contributes to a deficit in care (Hochschild, 1995). Moreover, where the state attributes social ills to problematic lifestyle choices, this serves to legitimate punitive welfare sanctions based on truncated conceptions of human need.

For family support practitioners there has been a discernible shift in the UK towards behaviourally focused interventions such as parenting skills classes, with far less priority given to families' broader welfare needs. Issues of housing and material disadvantage have been increasingly designated private concerns, despite the rising context of inequality (Dean, 2004, 2010). Where the family support role is more attuned to behaviour modification, this serves to bracket off critical elements of human need to the detriment of relationships between welfare provider, child and family. In the cases of vulnerable families, demands from professionals that assume standards of 'good-enough' parenting *sui generis*, will likely see parents fail. In this context, it is not surprising that studies have reported practitioner dissatisfaction with their roles (Lymbery and Butler, 2004). Findings are echoed in more recent literature, with Ayre and Preston-Shoot (2010) describing a vicious cycle of decline in children's services that threatens relationships between practitioners and families. In England and Wales, such sentiments have found their culmination in the Munro Review of Child Protection (Munro, 2011) and responses to that review (Featherstone et al, 2011).

However, as the UK coalition government's social policy agenda takes shape, a welfare landscape is emerging that clearly sees the boundaries between public and

private responsibilities further re-drawn. With care pushed deeper into the domestic or private domain under the auspices of the Big Society, a more radical neoliberal agenda proposes a further reduction in state intervention to mediate disadvantage. To legitimate a reduced role for the state in the context of rising inequalities, the current UK coalition government gives further emphasis to moral individualism and personal responsibility (Featherstone et al, 2011). Such changes are not just particular to the UK, but, in the context of a global squeeze on public spending, commitment to social welfare as a public good is waning. Clearly, this does not bode well for family support practitioners or the families they serve. Thus, it is of no surprise that commentators such as Stanford (2011) urge professionals to 'speak back' to an expanding neoliberal project.

However, rallying calls to professionals to exercise their transformative potential do run into some tricky philosophical questions about the very nature of the moral agency – to what extent are professional subjects able to resist a neoliberal ethic? Houston (2010: 1737) has cautioned against calls to critical or radical practice that leave 'renderings of human agency opaque'. As Houston (2010: 1737) observes, without at least some explication of the potential for human agency, 'it is doubtful whether empowerment-led practice can mature and flower'. With this strong indictment in mind, I now turn to some empirical and theoretical material that has sought to explicate human agency.

The social worker practitioner: moral agent or institutional dope?

[T]he potential for human agency as including the capacity to change one's environment is obviously important; it is hard to promote the need for activism if we are so thoroughly captured by the constitutive priority of the social that we can do no more than seek to understand this.... (Carle, 2005: 307)

A range of post-structural critiques have well and truly discredited the notion of a Cartesian subject who exists *prior to* nature and social surroundings. In particular, the edifying work of theorist Michel Foucault (inter alia, 1970a, 1988) has described how human knowledge and action are shaped through socially constructed values and understandings. Providing a strong critique of Cartesian notions of immediate knowledge, variants of social constructivist scholarship describe human actions as resulting from social environments, bounded by specific historical and material conditions. However, it is one thing to accept such philosophical precepts, but quite another to accept what Carle (2005) alludes to in the above excerpt, which is the *death of agency*. By death of agency I refer to a radical decentring of the human subject, which depicts the human condition as essentially passive – subjects are simply the conduits, bearers or sites of discourses of power/knowledge. If we accept this latter formulation of the human subject, then we are indeed lost in the face of an expanding neoliberal project.

For those who would retain a more hopeful imaginary for social work, there is thankfully a wealth of theoretical and empirical work that rejects the death of agency. Somehow, to posit a 'subject-less-subject'¹ (Foucault, *inter alia*, 2008) does not square with our instincts about the human condition. An extensive literature subsidiary to Foucault attests to this objection (Colapietro, 1990; Hartsock, 1990; Newton, 1998; Bevir, 1999; McNay, 2000). Of particular relevance to the arguments that I develop in this article, is the wealth of anthropological research on resistance. For example, Scott's (1990, 2009) much-heralded work on everyday forms of resistance highlighted the 'hidden transcripts' (critiques of power that go on backstage) of subordinate groups, which indicated their resistance to domination. Such studies show that while human behaviour may be historical and relational – this does not imply singularity of disposition. Here, the following words from Bevir (1999: 76) are prescient:

[A]lthough we are not autonomous beings able to discover ourselves or to reach a neutral standpoint, we are agents capable of producing ourselves and of questioning any received standpoint. Thus, the freedom we attain in ethical conduct is not a liberation of a true self from all social influences, but rather an ability to modify ourselves in the context of the social influences at work on us.

In Bevir's (1999: 68) argument, the subject 'sets off against a social background that influences' them but they can still reason and act in novel ways. Because we cannot *individuate* beliefs or actions by reference to a particular social context (ie, all people in this organisation behave like this....) then we cannot hold that any particular institutional or personal knowledge/power episteme determines beliefs or actions. Upon this premise, Bevir (1999: 68) concludes that we cannot reject agency:

Different people adopt different beliefs and perform different actions against the backdrop of the same social structure, so there must be at least an undecided space in front of these structures where individuals decide what beliefs to hold and what actions to perform. If some beliefs and actions are not shared in a given episteme or regime of knowledge/power, we cannot individuate every belief and action by reference to that episteme or regime of power/knowledge in the way we would need to if we were to reject agency.

In theorising the space between the Cartesian autonomous agent who avails themselves of 'free' choices and the 'subject-less-subject' whose actions can simply be conflated with particular knowledge/power epistemes, we find an impressive scholarship. Take, for example, Archer's (*inter alia*, 2000) ground-breaking work, which offers a critical realist account of the ontology of the subject, maintaining something of a half-way position on metaphysical priority. Offering one of the most eminent re-vindications of human properties and powers, Archer's work offers a well-established coherent theoretical framework. While a review of the literature finds argument and counterargument, a case for the 'subject-less-subject' is simply not won. Hence, strong versions of Foucault's governmentality thesis, which posit an institutional dope,

appear overstated. To further substantiate these arguments, I now turn to some early work from the classical pragmatists, which has provided the scaffolding for many contemporary debates.

Some lessons from John Dewey on human agency

From a personal perspective and longstanding engagement with everyday practice, I have found much value in returning to the work of the classical pragmatists to theorise human agency (eg, James, 1890, 1907; Dewey, 1896; Mead, 1913; Peirce, 1931–58). Here, I make brief reference to a range of contemporary scholars who have sought to revise fundamental tenets of this progressive school of thought (Bernstein, 1971, 1983; Shusterman, 1997, 2004; Carle, 2005) but focus in particular on the early insights of John Dewey (inter alia, 1896, 1917, 1927, 1929, 1944). To date, there is a dearth of social work literature that engages with classical pragmatism² and coverage of the early philosophers is markedly scant. This omission is surprising, given much resonance between this scholarship and social work's aspiration to reflective practice. The appeal of classical pragmatism lies in a principle orientation towards *pragma*, in regard to theorising human agency. *Pragma* are our everyday affairs – the practical and intellectual matters of everyday life. Moreover, when we unearth the early work of those such as John Dewey, we find a strong ameliorative impulse cognisant with social work's project of improvement in individual and collective wellbeing.

A first reading of Dewey's work will find his arguments echoed in much contemporary social constructivist thought – human beliefs and actions begin their construction in and through pre-existing associations of human beings (Dewey, 1922). On morality, Dewey (1922: 319) writes that the 'means, customs, folkways, established collective habits are acquired just in the same way that individuals inherit the speech of their social group'. However, delve deeper into his thesis and it is also clear that he does not simply conflate agency with structure. For Dewey, the possibilities of transformative agency lie in the fact that *the environment is many and not just one*. While we develop 'habits' through our social locations and experience, because context is never uniform, the human agent must act on the environment(s) to resolve conflicting lines of action. Thus, an active subject is proposed, who resolves the plurality of the environment(s) through 'deliberative action' (Dewey, 1896, 1922). The active subject is always in a process of interaction with, and adaption to, the environment(s) because of 'temporal and local diversifications' (Dewey, 1927: 47). Of particular relevance for social work is Dewey's stress on both the inherent sociability of action, and the idea that conflicts thrown up by the environment are settled through their 'testing' in the lived experience. Dewey gives primacy to experience – it is through experience that thinking and understanding are developed.

Placing morality as central to human judgement, Dewey describes moral consciousness as always embodied in institutions, although never entirely consistent. In endowing the human subject with a moral sensibility, the human subject formulates beliefs about, acts on and transforms the social world through a deliberative process between facts and values. Here, we see the interpretive thrust of Dewey's theorising, which offers much hope for social work's aspiration to 'speak back to' an expanding

neoliberal project. Practitioners' moral decisions are indeed made against a background of normative values, but there is an incomplete relationship between institutional norms and practitioner actions. In emphasising the indeterminacy of normative judgement (Dewey, 1917, 1929), we arrive at what Carle (2005) has described as a soft perspectivism. Soft perspectivism recognises the fallibility of all socially constructed viewpoints, but there is scope for their modification through interaction. Moreover, healthy conflicts in institutional contexts are to be encouraged and can produce the impulse for deliberation and positive change.

In regard to the plurality of the environment, Dewey's (1917, 1922, 1929) theoretical work emphasises the aesthetic (emotional or tactile) quality of argument and judgement. Aesthetic factors play a part in the reconciling of options thrown up by environment(s). Here, an emphasis on the aesthetic has ready appeal for social work where feelings and connections with others are central to social workers' everyday deliberations. For Dewey, the self is constantly constructed and reconstructed through ongoing relations with others. Because of this – concern about the consequences of actions has an inherently *social* character – the Other is never far from our evaluations. Indeed, Dewey (1927) sees 'the Public' as called into being on the basis of a fundamental concern for the Other. From this standpoint, the moral individualism of a neoliberal ethic prompts cross-questioning, because it pre-supposes an atomistic, rational subject, abstracted from the lived experience.

On account of his belief in the transformative potential of the human being, Dewey (1944) considered education and pedagogy as central to social progress. In particular, and of critical relevance for the arguments advanced in this article, is Dewey's emphasis on inculcating 'habits' of practice that are flexible and sensitive – a reflective intelligence. While not to be confused with a 'crude epistemological relativism' (Barnes, 2006: 1543), contingency is at the heart of the thinking of classical pragmatism. In this context, tools of the trade must be dynamic and complacency resisted. Here we see a nascent reflexive practitioner who is wary of uniformity in institutional context and seeks out experimentation. While environment(s) always throws up a range of conceivable options, where they encourage uniformity through rote and sanction – they will fail to maximise the reflective intelligence of the practitioner and their capacity to question the embodied morality of the institution. Dewey's maxim resonates strongly with current concerns about the stifling effect of standardisation, which has been part and parcel of a neoliberal transformation of public services.

Dewey's early rendition of classical pragmatism has seen more recent revival in the work of Bernstein (1971) who also underscored the importance of fostering institutional cultures in which dialogue among difference of opinion is encouraged. Similarly, Shusterman (1997, 2004) further developed a particular line of pragmatism inspired by Dewey's articulation of the aesthetic quality of human deliberation. A discussion of contemporary developments is beyond the scope of this article; however, suffice to say that ideas from the early pragmatists continue to hold contemporary appeal. Lessons from this early work underscore the possibility of *hopeful* solutions in the face of an expanding neoliberal geography, which we can see as conditioning but not determining action.

Re-presenting deliberative action in the 'small stories' of family support

Drawing on Smith's (2005: 5) concept of small stories I offer excerpts from a number of sites of safeguarding practice, to illustrate the 'rich texture' of ethical decision making on the ground and the possibilities of moral agency. While a body of literature has certainly suggested that discourses of child protection practice constitute a hegemonic knowledge/power episteme (Garrett, 2009), empirical observation does not suggest *singularity* of ethical disposition. In order to substantiate this point, I have purposively selected extracts from highly formalised settings of local authority practice. In drawing attention to differences in opinion, formulation and counter formulation, as well as practitioners' own personal articulation of ethical conflicts, I draw attention to the heterogeneity of practice.

I have drawn illustrative material from three separate studies of safeguarding practice undertaken in the past five years. A discussion of the three projects is beyond the scope of this article; however, all three were concerned with how support might be provided to families to prevent family breakdown. Local Authority Project A with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) (2011–13) is ongoing and examines the role of the Children's Guardian in bolstering the pre-proceedings process. Local Authority Project B (2010–11) was focused on thresholds for intervention, in particular the boundary between initial assessment and longer-term work. Local Authority Project C (2008–09) examined family support offered in the context of longer-term work to families with children on the 'edge of care'. As part of the work of a series of funded studies, research was subject to full ethical clearance by participating agencies and Lancaster University's Central Ethics Committee. Consent has been sought for this secondary presentation. While the overarching conceptual intents of this article do not require the presentation of a large volume of data, the material I present is not idiosyncratic. All excerpts have been anonymised to protect the identity of participants.

The selected qualitative material is drawn from practitioner accounts of their practice. Semi-structured interviews that invite participant deliberation are particularly valuable in teasing out ethical conflicts and their resolution. In reflective dialogue with practitioners, researchers found that decision making did not involve a calculative register – an instrumental rationality detached from any sense of a relational ethic – rather, practitioner values and actions were subject to ongoing revision in and through the 'flesh and blood' environment(s) of practice (Colapietro, 1990). The supportive ethos of practitioner actions in each illustrative example is very clear and hence I have chosen to describe them as 'small stories' of family support. The illustrations all concern lone mothers and their children. This is not to exclude fathers; rather, they reflect the typical presentation of families in local authority practice.

Case example 1: Local Authority Project A with CAFCASS

The first extract is taken from a novel pilot that is ongoing and aims to examine whether the non-standard deployment of the Children's Guardian can contribute positively to pre-proceedings practice under the Public Law Outline. Here, my interest is in the Guardian's account of her challenge to the local authority and, in particular, how she frames the *needs* of the mother and children in question. In the first excerpt below, the Guardian reflects on her own actions and the welfare of the mother during the local authority's formal Pre-proceedings Meeting.³ The mother in question is a victim of domestic violence and is now struggling to care for five children on her own on a housing estate characterised by high levels of antisocial behaviour and crime:

Guardian: 'She was really anxious about the meeting. She had managed to get a solicitor but ... she said yes to everything. There was a huge list of things that she had to do, which I thought was too much and needed to be broken down into what is essential and what's not. What's first and what's second and some of it is really good ... other things weren't really necessary. She just said yes to everything because she was probably not feeling very well and terrified that they were going to remove her kids.'

The position of this vulnerable mother at this pivotal meeting is recognised by the Guardian, with the Guardian's analysis clearly attuned to the mother's emotional condition – "She was probably not feeling very well and terrified that they were going to remove her kids." Taking into account the mother's capacity, the Guardian challenges the local authority's "huge list of things" in order that the demands placed on the mother by the local authority are more realistic. Here, we see a clear incorporation of the Other into the Guardian's deliberation of the case. As the Guardian's narration of the case proceeds (second excerpt below), we see further differences between the Guardian and the local authority in regard to formulations of personal responsibility:

Guardian: 'I think she had a problem with serious arthritis ... quite painful and she was kind of in a bit of a state of shock because it isn't something that can be cured so she was coming to terms with that. Also coming to terms with coming out of these terribly oppressive, controlling relationships ... so to ask her to get to a whole load of parenting classes and such like ... professionals don't recognise how difficult it is for parents to go out to appointments. She has got, she had got nobody to do the childcare.... So it was just too much ... I was quite clear in my report about needing to define what was the priority and how they were going to support mum to do that. You know she is living in that with her children and trying to cope [referring to a violent neighbourhood]. When I went to see her she said that they [youths] had broken the door handle off the day before and she had had to get the council out and you know, it is just ridiculous and they had cut the telephone and the TV wires. They were under siege so actually I said they

need to help with housing. And I think they [the local authority] had been thinking she had created her own mess and she needs to sort it out – rather than she needs proper support to *recover* from all this....’

In the last lines of this extract, the Guardian expresses an explicit challenge to the local authority’s framing of the mother’s plight: “I think they had been thinking she had created her own mess – rather than she needs proper support to recover.” While we might propose that the dominant child protection episteme gives weight to moral individualism, here we see that there is scope for dissent. The Guardian’s assessment of the mother is closely attuned to the mother’s physical and emotional pain as well as the demands of caring for young children – and she proposes a clear role for professionals in aiding recovery and providing “proper support”. By implication, the plan offered by the local authority is not deemed sufficiently supportive. The essence of her critique appears to turn on the local authority’s assumptions of self-governance and self-sufficiency (“professionals don’t recognise how difficult it is for parents to go out to appointments ... it was just too much”), which appear completely at odds with the mother’s health needs and caring obligations.

In the third excerpt below, the mother has been told by the local authority that she should not let her older child who is in care into her house, as he is deemed to pose a risk to her younger children. Again, the Guardian suggests that the local authority’s risk-based rationality is out of sync with the mother’s relational obligations to her son:

Guardian: ‘I don’t think they were really taking on board how difficult it was for her when this 15-year-old turned up, late at night in a well-dodgy area of X town that she is living in ... she had this gang of lads outside, who were very unsavoury and she did not want her son mixing with them at 11 o’clock at night. And I think he had actually been hit by one of them in the past as well so you know, I think she had to bring him in and then once he was in he persuaded her not to ring the police and stuff – so she was seen to breach the working agreement – but I felt that ... she found it quite difficult to say to him you know that really “I can’t parent you, it is not a good idea for you to be in my house” ... I think mum was struggling with the older children because she felt guilty about what had happened to them ... he [ex-partner] had been violent to them too.’

Drawing on her knowledge of family relationships, the Guardian’s analysis is firmly rooted in an understanding of the mother’s moral obligations to her son, which she speculates may make it very difficult for her to follow the local authority’s advice: “I felt that ... she found it quite difficult to say to him you know that really ‘I can’t parent you, it is not a good idea for you to be in my house’.”

Moreover, her analysis is attuned to imagined emotions behind the mother’s response (“struggling”, “guilty”). The Guardian describes her own aesthetic deliberation – “I felt that....” – indicating that her assessment is embedded within an emotional landscape.

From a review of documents pertaining to this case, it is clear that the Guardian had been able to use her influence to negotiate further support for the mother and

children. Exercising her reflective intelligence to cross-question normative assumptions of the self-governing subject (“I think they [the local authority] had been thinking she had created her own mess and she needs to sort it out”), evidences Dewey’s assertion that moral consciousness, while always embodied in institutions, is never entirely consistent. That the Guardian’s local authority colleagues responded positively to her challenge also evidences that even in the formalised space of child protection practice, there is room for ethical manoeuvre.

Case example 2: Local Authority Project B

Commentators have described an increasingly fragmented approach to family work, where an emotive child-centred discourse has served to occlude the needs of parents. Certainly, assessment formats that make little space for the description of parents’ own needs reinforce this bifurcation (Peckover et al, 2008). If we examine the excerpt below (Local Authority Project B), it is possible to see a further example of the indeterminacy of normative judgement in safeguarding practice:

- Social worker:* ‘This case has been open to me for about five months now – it shouldn’t be, because this is initial assessment – but Rebecca [the team manager] can see that I’ve managed to develop a relationship with this mother and the case is progressing well. When the referral first came to us, all professionals were saying that she [the mother] was *impossible* to work with.’
- Researcher:* ‘So how have you managed to gain this mother’s engagement?’
- Social worker:* ‘I suppose just by treading softly and not going in with a sledgehammer. Trying to listen to the mother’s own needs. I think the other agencies went in – you know community policing around the antisocial behaviour issues – with a bit of a sledgehammer. But mum needed someone to take notice of her and listen to her needs. It’s not the done thing now – to be seen to be sympathetic to mothers – but in my experience you can’t separate out the needs of children and parents. It’s chicken and egg. This mother was really struggling – and she needed practical and *emotional* support. We couldn’t just hand her a plan and say: “Right, you’ve got so many weeks to make these improvements.” It’s all about trust and forming relationships in my opinion. The mother, she was energised by feeling that there was someone there for her. I’m lucky in this team because Rebecca is flexible, she can see that what I’m doing is working and she’s not driven by procedure.’

In the above extract, the practitioner describes how her understanding of the needs of mothers and children very much differs from institutional norms. She first describes the institution’s position in regard to mothers: “It’s not the done thing now – to be seen to be sympathetic to mothers”, but then offers a direct challenge, which is legitimated by her own lived experience of effective practice: “you can’t separate out

the needs of children and parents”. For this practitioner, practice is about relationships and trust and she is overly critical of an instrumental approach to practice: “We couldn’t just hand her a plan and say: ‘Right, you’ve got so many weeks to make these improvements.’” The worker eschews a task-focused approach and places the helping relationship central to the mother’s recovery. The particular context of this team enables this practitioner and her client to flourish – a context characterised by flexibility and resistance to rote.

As Dewey (inter alia, 1896) has suggested, experience is central to deliberative action – while practitioners may set off against a backdrop of a particular knowledge/power episteme, decision making is also attuned to practitioners’ experience of action and outcome. For this practitioner, she is unequivocal in her rejection of the excesses of a child-centric approach to practice and exercises her moral agency to tailor help to the particular needs of mother and child. While the institutional context may embody particular moral formulations of the legitimate needs of parents and children, the context of safeguarding practice will always throw up ‘temporal and local diversifications’ (Dewey, 1927: 47) that give rise to heterogeneity of practice.

Case example 3: Local Authority Project C

Local Authority Project C was concerned with the provision of family support in the context of families where children were ‘on the edge of care’. Here the worker describes a very different institutional context from Project B, where risk-averse practices appeared to give rise to rather rapid throughput of cases to care proceedings. In this context, team culture appeared less than sympathetic towards the support needs of parents, with much emphasis on administrative work for court. Inviting the practitioner to recount and reflect on his work, revealed much conflict for the practitioner in regard to practical and ethical decisions. The case is of a mother who is vulnerable and unsupported in the community – her children are ‘on the edge of care’. For the practitioner, he experiences a significant mismatch between institutional context and his lived experience of the mother’s needs:

Social worker: ‘It is difficult, because she will ring me – sometimes on a daily basis and often with very minor issues.’

Researcher: ‘And how do you respond?’

Social worker: ‘I do respond and offer help, because I’m aware that she really doesn’t have anyone to turn to and that’s why she’s ringing – it’ll be very minor worries about money or the children or even some DIY issue. The problem is that, that’s not really supposed to be my role – I’ve a lot of other work to do – court reports and so forth. The problem is that we don’t really get to spend the time with people in a way that would make a difference anymore – it’s a more in the office or in court. But, your experience tells you that if you don’t respond, if you are not there as a shoulder to cry on etc, then you risk this mother getting herself into another relationship that’s going to cause her difficulties. Her ex-partner is due for day release soon

from prison – and that will be a real test – so, although there is part of me that thinks – we’re not here to encourage dependency – the other part of me fears that if I’m not there to answer her telephone calls, she’ll turn back to him.’

The semi-structured interview stimulates the practitioner to reflect on his actions. Here we see what Dewey (inter alia, 1896) has described as the environment(s) throwing up conflicts for the practitioner. Conflict arises for the practitioner on account of a mismatch between normative institutional values around dependency (“part of me that thinks – we’re not here to encourage dependency”) and the actual dependency needs of the mother as manifest in her repeated calls to the social worker (“the other part of me fears that if I’m not there to answer her telephone calls, she’ll turn back to him”). The practitioner describes a conflict between what is supposed to be his role – and the role he finds himself in in the lived world of practice (“a shoulder to cry on”). His actions remain cognisant with the normative goals of the institution – to prevent family breakdown – but depart from institutional formulations of need and dependency. Here the worker’s face-to-face encounters with the mother find the agency’s moral repertoire inadequate in regard to achieving positive outcomes for this family. His struggle is both cognitive and relational given the inherent social context of his practice and indicates departure from the ‘feeling rules’ associated with calculative, risk-based rationalities.

Discussion

In the context of an expanding neoliberal geography, academics and practitioners are right to be concerned with what Stanford (2011) describes as the potential erosion of professional social work values in favour of an instrumental approach to practice. However, if we accept an ‘undecided space’ in regard to ethical judgement, then all is not lost.

In the case examples presented, practitioners set off against a backdrop of normative assumptions about children, parents and the like, but each excerpt suggests that we cannot simply ‘individuate beliefs or actions by reference to a particular knowledge/power episteme’ (Bevir, 1999: 68). Indeed, all three examples indicate processes of active moral deliberation on the part of practitioners. Drawing on Dewey’s (1922) sense of the aesthetic quality of deliberative action, social workers as flesh and blood actors continuously redefine their own fact/value assumptions through ongoing incorporation of the Other. Where practitioners find a neoliberal ethic wholly institutionally and ideologically inadequate in the face of the lived experience of practice, a moral sensibility gives rise to dissent. The last three decades of change for public services have seen an expansion of market values and this, coupled with an increasing formalisation of practice, has served to narrow the undecided space in ethical practice. In this context, the small stories I present do indeed deliver a message of hope.

For those seeking a more hopeful imaginary of social work in the UK, I suggest that the current turn to localism may yield increased scope for resisting dominant knowledge/power epistemes. Notwithstanding the potentially dire consequences

of current public sector cuts in the UK, localism may enable flexible responses to families that are more attuned to the lived experience of practice. Currently, local authorities are charged to move away from 'command and control' and this requires the cultivating of practitioners' reflective intelligence and the stimulation of Dewey's (1944) notion of a 'parliament of ideas'. Indeed, this is the longstanding project of the reflexive practitioner. In order to maximise transformative moral agency, both new and old institutions need to examine *how* they can cultivate ethical deliberative action and be mindful of sanctions that may deter this quality. If practitioners choose from a repertoire of skills and options, then this underscores the importance of nurturing ethical capacity. Inculcating political awareness, and ensuring a continued critique of the social relations that can emerge from the excesses of a neoliberal paradigm, should be curriculum essentials for educators. Part of the responsibility of pedagogues is to invigorate the *agentive* self – encourage practitioners to be sensitive to received vocabularies and the 'enslavement' of old habits (Dewey, 1927). The task of public policy is to loosen the constraints on those who care about the consequences of public actions and to accord respect and recognition to their moral decisions. Moreover, healthy conflicts in institutional contexts are to be encouraged, rather than a pursuit of uniformity as suggested by New Public Management. The arguments I make, while they are supported by reference to illustrative material from English case study sites, are of broader international relevance.

To consider the small stories of family support is to tread lightly trodden conceptual ground – in that such work may be seen to depart from the conventions of evidence-based social science. However, in highlighting the small stories of family support, I give some profile to moral repertoires that are generated bottom up. It is important to nurture such stories, such that over time they may serve to colonise and disrupt normative neoliberal formulations of welfare and its subjects.

Notes

¹ For an alternative reading of Foucault, see McLaren (2002). This book addresses criticisms of Foucault's work in regard to his articulation of subjectivity. McLaren provides a detailed articulation of how a notion of embodied subjectivity can square with aspirations of empowerment/political praxis.

² The social work literature has tended to engage with work that can be described as neo-pragmatist. For example, Paul Michael Garrett has made much use of the work of Pierre Bourdieu. However, there are fundamental differences between classical and neo-pragmatists. For example, Bourdieu has been described as tending to offer a 'darker' version of early classical pragmatists' notion of 'habits' – proposing less scope for human agency.

³ This formal child protection meeting is called by local authorities when they are considering issuing care proceedings. Parents are entitled to legal aid to enable them to be represented by a legal advocate at the meeting. The meeting is critical in deciding the likely trajectory of cases and, in particular, agreeing a programme of support that means that risks can be managed safely within the family.

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