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Less than human: A qualitative study into the experience of parents involved in the child protection system

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings from a qualitative study into the experiences of parents who were involved in the English child protection system in 2013. 17 in-depth interviews were conducted involving 19 parents and/or partners and a framework approach was used to analyse the data. There were positive experiences of individual social workers and some positive experiences of the child protection system. However, the overwhelming theme of the parents' experiences was that the system was uncaring, inflexible, and for some harmful to both themselves and their children. Despite being included in the child protection process, parents felt they were not afforded the same rights as a participant, as a decision maker, or as a partner in seeking to improve the situation. The threat of consequences silenced parents who felt unable to speak out or challenge the things they disagreed with or coerced others into signing agreements they did not agree to. Such experiences related to a sense that they were being treated as 'less than human'. These findings are considered within the context of recent reforms within the English child protection system.

Introduction

While the purpose of a child protection system is fundamentally about protecting children from harm, what this means in practice and how to achieve it have long been contested. The system has been subject to public and political criticism almost since the birth of social service departments in the 1970s (Parton, 2014) and significant changes have taken place in recent years in response to such criticism. A foundation for many of the reforms has been a focus on early intervention to address issues as soon as possible so that problems can be prevented in the future. Certainly more recent reforms have sought to embed this into the system (see Every Child Matters, 2003; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010). However, along with such intentions Wastell et al. (2010) argue that these reforms sought to regulate the practice of social workers "with

professional work increasingly structured into formal processes embedded in information technology" (p.310). Their ethnographic study identified an atmosphere of performance management and highly formalised rules and procedures which firmly placed the locus of control in the hands of management diminishing the professional discretion of social workers (Wastell et al. 2010). Furthermore, Baginsky et al.'s (2010) study identified the significant amount of time social workers had to spend on the computer. And over the same period, a survey of local authorities in England found 60 per cent of children's social work services to be reporting retention difficulties (Local Government Association, 2009).

While there has been a focus on the experiences of social workers in the child protection system, parental views have perhaps been less of a focus for researchers and practitioners as a means to evaluate and inform practice. Past studies in England have shown that parents' experiences of the child protection system have been mixed, with some finding it helpful in addressing the issues and others finding it harmful to them and their family (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Dale, 2004). Equally, the experiences of social workers were found to be mixed with some experiencing them as cold and aloof and others as caring and supportive (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Dale, 2004; Ghaffar et al., 2012). It is perhaps inevitable some parents involved in the child protection system will have negative experiences, given the process may ultimately lead to a child being placed in local authority care. However, some argue that parental views are an essential component of a more holistic approach to evaluating practice (Tilbury et al., 2010; Ayala-Nunes, 2014). Certainly, existing research demonstrates the importance parents place on supportive practitioners both for the way they engage with them and in making changes in their lives (Dale, 2004; de Boer & Coady, 2007; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Gladstone et al., 2014).

There have again been significant changes to the English child protection system with Parton (2014) arguing that the death of Peter Connelly "marked a watershed in contemporary child protection policy and practice" (p.78-9). While the resulting Social Work Reform Board (2010) and review of the

child protection system (Munro, 2010, 2011a, 2011b) argued that the overreliance on procedure, guidance, and targets had eroded professional practice; and the resulting recommendations were designed to refocus practice on developing relationships and give practitioners the freedom to exercise their skills and judgement. Parton (2014) argues that there has also been a rise in authoritarian attitudes in relation to child protection. Together with the foundation in early intervention, Featherstone et al. (2014) argue that the most recent reforms of the system have sought to reconstruct social work practice through a "focus on using the law, removing children decisively and getting them placed for adoption early" (Featherstone et al., 2014 p.1736). Consequently, there are currently a number of pressures upon the child protection system both in terms of seeking to satisfy the governmental objectives, such as adherence to targets and measures, and in terms of retention problems in the social work workforce.

While there have been some recent studies of parental experiences of the English child protection system (Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Ghaffar et al., 2012) none of the fieldwork was conducted since the start of the implementation of the new reforms in 2010. This paper therefore reports on the findings from a qualitative study conducted in 2013 into the experiences of parents who were involved in the child protection system at the time within a large English metropolitan local authority. Ethical approval was gained from the local authority's research governance board and the study had a broad explorative aim: To gain an in-depth understanding of parents' experiences of child protection processes with a view to informing current practice. This exploratory study provides an indication of the style of practice and overall experience of the system within one large local authority in England since these policy changes have been implemented. The findings also contribute more widely to the evidence base of parental experiences of child protection practice more generally.

Methodology

Sample

A series of 17 in-depth interviews were conducted involving 19 parents and/or partners (the term parents is used to refer to both). In five cases both parents were interviewed, hence 14 cases were covered. Of the 19 parents: eight were men and 11 were women; 11 were of White ethnic origin, three Black Other, two Black Caribbean, two Pakistani and one Indian.

The cases were selected from an anonymised list, provided by the local authority's children's services, of child protection cases that had been opened since 2010. Cases were categorised by duration of involvement in the process, and then by the child's ethnicity and age, the allocated team and child protection category (e.g. emotional, physical, sexual or abuse, neglect, or multiple). Cases were randomly selected from the duration categories and screened for involvement. The randomisation was achieved using a SQL computer programme. A number of cases were rejected due to the screening criteria (outlined below). As such, additional random selections were made and worked through to achieve the end sample. As an initial sample emerged, a purposive approach was adopted prioritising cases to be screened; the aim was to include a diverse range of cases in terms of ethnicity, age, allocated team, and child protection category.

To protect parents and staff, and to ensure parents were capable of taking part, each case was screened on three criteria: potential emotional harm to participant, participant capacity, and staff safety. The decision to exclude or invite parents to participate was made in conjunction with the relevant social worker and/or independent reviewing officer (IRO), based on their assessment against the aforementioned criteria.

The process of screening cases for potential involvement in the research was very time consuming, taking several months. The allocated social worker was asked to approach the parent/s to ask whether they would consider taking part. Tailored explanatory materials were provided. All participants were offered a shopping voucher to participate. Two parents withdrew after providing their details. Commonly social workers were not easy to contact. Often they were not contactable on the phone, and spent considerable time away from the office or in meetings with clients. Usually

they needed to be prompted to respond to emails and chased through the various research stages. Sometimes social workers stated that working with their families was their top priority, and the research requirements came second to this. The parents were, therefore, hard to reach as a consequence of the practicalities of organising the research through the statutory service, with several layers of screening and permission needing to take place before the research team had access to names and contact details to invite them to participate. Once approached, however, approximately three quarters of parents agreed to take part.

Study Limitations

As with all research this study has its limitations, perhaps most importantly in sample composition. Firstly, the study was conducted to understand parents' experiences. The focus was, therefore, on parents as agents of change, as opposed to the voice of the child. This, perhaps, limits the study's wider applicability to child protection discourses. Secondly, the social workers knew that the parents had agreed to be contacted for the research, although they did not know if this resulted in an agreement to take part. With knowledge that their social worker was aware, the parents may have altered what they said. The confidential nature of the research was stressed to participants and reporting on the findings was written carefully so that no one could be identified. Thirdly, during the screening process the research team also reviewed lists of closed cases and cases involved in child protection legal processes. Considerable efforts were made to contact closed cases through social workers; this was not possible due to their restricted time and lack of contact with previous families, compounded by changes in contact details and addresses. And while the research team also sought to involve cases which had been through legal processes, these were screened out as parents were currently involved in traumatic situations. The social workers and researchers agreed that adding a request for research engagement at this time was not appropriate. While every effort has gone into minimising bias in the sample, we acknowledge that the sample will be inevitably biased to some

degree. The exclusion of cases subject to legal proceedings, however, could be seen as beneficial, as it provides a sample of similar cases which are more comparable.

Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured and included open ended questions relating to their understanding of the issues, their relationship with the social worker, their experience of child protection conferences, core groups, plans, the local authority, and how helpful the process was. The majority took place in parents' homes and, at the request of some, in local authority venues. They lasted between one and two hours. All interviews excluding one were conducted by two interviewers. Interpreters were used in two interviews where English was not the parent's first language. With the exception of one, all were recorded and professionally transcribed.

Data Analysis

A framework approach was used to analyse the data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The data were coded by the researcher undertaking the interview. Interview extracts or summaries of findings were allocated to themes and placed in matrices allowing for analysis between cases. Interviewee reference ID's were allocated to all responses to enable cross-referencing. The coding themes were initially deduced from research into parental experiences of child protection, the local authority's internal audit reports, and Ofsted reports, which were then further developed through discussions with local authority social work staff and a panel of academics from the University of Birmingham. Further themes were induced from issues emerging within the data.

Findings

Overview

While the ability to recall the different stages of the process varied, most parents spent considerable time talking about their social workers, the conference process, the level of progress made on their case, barriers to change, family separation and whether their case should be a child protection case.

While there were some positive experiences reported, the overwhelming theme was that the child protection system was not supportive of parents and did not recognise the emotional impact on families. This discussion focuses on these findings.

Social Worker

Relationship with Social Workers

Parents articulated mixed experiences regarding their relationships with social workers; often comparing good social workers and those with poorer practices. Consistent with Dale's (2004) study, half described the positive relationships they had developed. Valued attributes were often those where social workers treated the family in a human way: taking an interest in the parent, making an effort to build links and spend time with the family, and demonstrating empathy and an understanding of the parents' circumstance:

> *"The social worker that we've had…a year now and she understands everything. She understands my frustrations. She understands the kids and she understands what needs to be done"*

Good relationships were also grounded in good communication, with social workers being contactable, keeping parents informed and listening to them. Again this underpinned a sense of social workers being genuinely interested in the family, viewing them as a family, rather than a case on their workload:

> *"Every time she comes, 'Is there anything or are there any questions you need?' and she listens to me. Just like having a friend really. We just talk. Even about things that have probably got nothing to do with [it]. She makes you feel comfortable and at ease"*

Poor social worker relationships were often characterised as not having these attributes. In particular half the parents said they felt social workers had pre-judged them, rather than seeking to understand them and their situation:

> *"The social worker never met me in her life. She only knew me from what she'd read on a bit of paper... So she'd draw up this big bad image of me already before she's met me and it's wrong"*

Families talked about social workers not getting to know the family, and not taking the time to find out about that family's situation before deciding on actions:

> *"actually try seeing how we operate as a family before they start slapping restrictions here, there and everywhere. They should take into consideration how it's going to affect my child… but social workers don't"*

Nearly half the parents also spoke about a lack of compassion and empathy when working with families:

> *"it could have been made a whole lot more bearable if my social worker just listened… was a bit more helpful, she wasn't so down on her job… it feels like she's just stopped caring, not about me… she doesn't have a care about me [but] you're supposed to care about my children... [but] I'm not getting that vibe from her at all"*

For the parents, the sense that the social worker cared about them, or at least the children, was crucial to a positive perception of the social worker. A perception from the parents that the social worker failed to see the emotional strain of the child protection process as a whole on them and their children was criticised, with greater criticism being given when this was not taken into consideration, or at least acknowledged, in their decision making and actions.

Support Provided

Parents were very complimentary when they received hands on support from social workers to address their family's needs, this included: help with home improvements, organising funded childcare, access to services, developing parents' confidence and helping with housing needs:

> *"my social worker has been brilliant. He's helped me and the kids really a lot… I wouldn't*
>
> *have had this place decorated if it weren't for him putting me in touch with Action for*
>
> *Children… Everything that I've needed to happen… like, I needed to write a supporting letter*
>
> *to the Job Centre or whoever… There's nothing he hasn't done"*

However, ten parents said they wanted more hands on support to change their families'

circumstance:

> *"I think that they could do more hands on work with people, rather than coming, sitting in*
>
> *your house, questioning you, looking around, belittling you, making you feel like you are not*
>
> *worth anything"*

As this parent demonstrated, the experience of not being offered the support that the parents' felt

they needed, having their parenting questioned, and being treated as a risk to their child was a

belittling and dehumanising one. Furthermore, the instability in the workforce affected the level and

type of support they received. Over half the parents reported a turnover in social workers, on

average parents had three different social workers, although one had experienced around ten.

Parents gave many negative examples of how this impacted on their experience, including: children

having to speak to different people; social workers being unable to participate in meetings due to

lack of background understanding; having to repeat information and relive traumatic experiences;

and feeling judged by social workers who did not seem to know their case. Parents also talked about

the impact of turnover on their relationships with social workers, feeling 'stranded' by outgoing

workers, and as a result being more reserved and less engaged with new social workers. However,

individual social workers could alleviate some of these distressing experiences through developing a

good relationship with the parents, making the instability in the workforce at times a positive

experience:

> *"to be quite honest to you… my previous social worker was here for like two or three weeks… she did more, she had a better relationship in the two times or three times she saw my child…than my current social worker's had in months"*

Experience of Power

Six parents also described the presence of a power imbalance between them and their social workers. The power of social workers in determining what will happen with their family, and the parents' lack of influence, combined with the fear their children may be removed, left some feeling threatened. Such attitudes are arguably indications of the more authoritarian approach to practice that Parton (2014) and Featherstone et al. (2014) suggest, as demonstrated by one parent who stated, *"I felt that we have been blackmailed…'If you don't do this, this will happen, so do it'"*. For some, the use of such power by social workers minimised dissent, silencing parents who felt they could not challenge what was required of them:

> *"I'm scared to do or say [anything] and if she says I've got to do something, I'm scared to challenge it in case I'm seen as uncooperative"*

Engaging in Conference

Feeling Unprepared for Conference

Half of the parents could not recall meeting with social workers and/or chairs before the conference. Often parents felt ill prepared, both in terms of understanding the impact this meeting would have on their family's life, and having access to social workers' assessment report in advance. Only three parents recalled receiving their reports before conference, at three stated they were given this in a conference pre-meeting:

> *"I didn't even finish the first page…and then the IRO was like 'have you read all of this?'... 'no we haven't had the chance', [if I had] it... might have prepared me emotionally a bit better for the way it was going to happen"*

It was not simply the amount of time these participants had to read the report, but the context in which they were reading it that influenced whether they could take it in and understand what is being said:

> "the proper report was given just before I went into the conference… she told me to have a read… I wasn't even reading it properly… I was just flicking through it because I was that nervous"

From the parents' perspective, there was a lack of appreciation for what they were experiencing. The report was seen as critical information for a potentially life changing discussion and being provided it so late limited their ability to understand the detail of the concerns. This may arguably reduce some parents' capacity to engage in the conference discussion or development of the plans, both of which were substantively about them.

Feeling Attacked and Belittled

For most parents conference was an extremely stressful and emotional experience. A third said they were nervous or anxious; a third said they were daunted; a quarter felt attacked or ganged up on; and a quarter talked about the emotional strain of the meeting.

> "I felt attacked to be honest with you… When you're sitting around that table, it just feels like everyone is against you"

The parents' reports illustrate the alien setting they were confronted with, in which a number of professionals were critically assessing their family, and the risks they present. Parents talked about their frustration at hearing professionals' views and not being able to respond, as well as their belief that what they said would not be listened to and being 'cut off' by professionals when speaking:

> "I wish that I'd been able to talk more…but you can't say anything. If you disagree, you can't say anything…you've got to keep quiet and you can talk when everyone else has"

The use of professional authority in such a manner was experienced as belittling by a number of the parents who felt their opportunity to contribute was marginalised:

> "'You're the parents, you sit there, and we'll discuss it'. You feel like children instead of parents…I think really we could be [more] involved in what happens with our children"

Such experiences again indicate a highly authoritative approach to practice (Featherstone et al., 2014; Parton, 2014). Furthermore, the emotional drain of attending conferences impacted on the parents' ability and capacity to be an active participant in the process, leading some to just 'give in':

> "everyone…is bashing you down and…you're sitting there thinking…over everything everyone has just said and you're just so emotionally drained and you're upset…because you know half of them are not true and then it's like you just can't be bothered. You just say, 'Okay', you just give in"

Only two parents provided positive feedback about the conference, of which one was from a parent who was invited to write a pre-prepared statement to be read out at the conference when they could not attend. Other positive comments included being spoken to as an adult, feeling they could challenge, receiving the information they needed and discussions focusing on their child's needs.

Achieving Change

The process of achieving the changes required by children's services was a key discussion point for most parents. They spoke about parts of the process and 'behaviours' or 'practices' of social work staff that facilitated and inhibited change. Child protection plans are a key tool in child protection work, guiding the actions of parents, social workers and agencies to meet the child's needs. All parents commenting on plans said they had received a copy and had good access to this. However, parents were critical of the plans and questioned how effective they were in facilitating change. Four parents described care plans as very emotive documents, and three felt they back tracked on the past and were too negative. They recalled plans consisted of both an assessment of the issues and

risks, and an action orientated section. The former was difficult and distressing to read due to the sensitive nature and gravity of what was articulated. This was not necessarily because parents were suggesting it was inaccurate, or that they did not want to acknowledge it, but that once the initial conference had occurred, and their child was subject to a plan, they wanted to focus on moving forward and not on the past:

> *"I already knew that. I didn't need to see it in writing...I'd calmed down emotionally from the*
>
> *first conference, and when I received it and I read it all my emotions went sky-high again"*

Often conference was described as an extremely negative emotional experience which was difficult to endure and get over. Receiving the plan in the post, with the issues laid out again, was another difficult experience because of the way the concerns were described and how the parent was portrayed:

> *"it's very upsetting...the way they word things and, you know, 'Your child is in significant*
>
> *harm' and…to say you shouldn't be around your own child…Hard to listen to, hard to read,*
>
> *hard to speak about"*

Plans outline the actions required to keep children safe. Often parents felt that they were expected to undertake too many actions, many were unrealistic, and what they needed to achieve was not clearly set out.   One parent described this as, "w*e're, kind of, in a no-man's land".* Parents wanted more information about the progress they had made, outstanding change needed and indications of when they can expect conditions, e.g. family separation (see below), to be removed. Some said they were left drifting without a clear sense of how far they have travelled and their current status of risk.

Moving goalposts

At least a quarter of parents said they experienced 'moving goalposts', with new actions being added to their plan and timelines extended without, in their view, a sufficient explanation:

> *"As fast as we're putting one thing off the plan, she seems to be coming up with, 'Well, we need you to do this and we need you to do that'. So, it feels like we're going round in circles and nothing we're doing is good enough"*

These parents' responses indicate they did not feel social workers gave a clear sense of why they were maintaining, or increasing the length of the plan, or adding further 'conditions'. The sense that the goalposts kept moving without a clearly articulated reason led some to start losing faith in their social worker, even when things were progressing well:

> *"it is looking good. I am not going to say I am going to get signed off, because they will probably pluck something else up"*

The language used by some parents, e.g. 'plucking something up', implies they did not feel social workers' actions were well thought through or had clear purpose, yet the authority to enforce these changes in the plan we keenly felt. Parents' impressions of some social workers were they did not care about them and did not recognise the hard work they felt they had committed:

> *"[progress]…seems to go straight over the social worker's head. She doesn't seem to care. She's always coming up with something else that we need to do"*

Some parents seemed to describe a feeling of being strung along, being given the impression that once they had met the plan requirements their case would move forward, but that this did not transpire:

> *"they kept dangling the carrot…saying, 'If you do this, if you do that, next core group meeting we'll sit down and we might be able to take away these conditions' …but nothing, nothing… it's like every time they move the goalposts"*

These responses suggest social workers were not seen to be communicating, or perhaps as having, a longer term strategy for cases. But rather, that case planning and next steps was being formed

through a more incremental and reactive approach. Again parents often felt social workers did not appreciate the emotional impact this state of 'limbo' had on them and their children.

Perceived Barriers to Change

11 of the 19 parents interviewed felt they were doing all they could to bring the child protection process to a close, yet nine felt their cases had continued for too long. In contrast to previous research (e.g. Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Dale, 2004; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Ghaffar et al., 2012; Gladstone et al., 2014), three mothers felt their cases were being prolonged because of the lack of engagement by fathers or partners. They felt trapped in a process that they could do nothing to move forward. As a consequence their children were still subject to a plan, despite the fact the mothers said they had not been identified as posing a risk. From the mothers' perspective, such use of authority, to remain in the families' lives without legitimate reason, resulted in a feeling of victimisation:

> *"Even though I've done everything that they've said to…I feel like I'm going to be just punished again because he hasn't spoke to them…I've got a feeling now…because my partner…ex-partner, hasn't spoke to them, that I'm going to be put on it for another six months"*

In three cases parents felt they had remained subject to plans for too long because of delayed decision making. In two of these cases parents said they had completed all their actions, but had to wait several months to the next review meeting before they could be 'deplanned'. They were frustrated by this abstract fixed point determining their future, and being bound to a timeline that did not account for progress made. In the third case, the parents felt the social worker was unable to make decisions outside of core group or conference meetings, or without their manager, suggesting a lack of discretion by the practitioners as suggested by Wastell et al. (2010). Two parents also felt positive progress reports by agencies were not being listened to and recognised by social workers or IROs, prolonging their case. Four parents felt delays were caused by the inaction of social workers in

performing tasks required of them in the plan. And others reported delays in the delivery of services by agencies; these included counselling services, learning disability assessments, and psychiatric assessments.

Family Separations

Also in contrast to previous research (e.g. Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Dale, 2004; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Ghaffar et al., 2012; Gladstone et al., 2014), five cases included a requirement for family separation through working agreements. These working agreements set out the conditions by which the parents could not live together, and/or under which they could or could not interact with their children. In all but one case, this meant the whole family could not be together at once. Such working agreements were used in a quasi-juridical fashion to coerce consent as the parents felt they had no choice but to agree to very difficult decisions in order to avoid their child being removed from their care. Such action, perhaps, provides the clearest example of the authoritarian type of practice that Featherstone et al. (2014) and Parton (2014) highlight, as one mother demonstrates:

> *"she brought a working agreement [requiring family separation] out to me and says that if I didn't sign it they would look at seeking legal custody of my child"*

In all cases where separation arrangements were still current, parents felt the adult in question had never, or no longer, presented a risk to the child, and considered on-going agreements as unwarranted. The setting up and maintenance of these arrangements was experienced as highly distressing for the parents and children. Their frequent separation after short periods of time together was said to cause children on-going distress:

> *"when I…leave….he screams for hours and he's always, 'Daddy, daddy'. When I'm not there, that's all that comes out of his mouth, 'Daddy, daddy, daddy. Where's daddy?'"*

One parent described the child's reaction to a social worker discussing the situation with them:

> *"the last couple of times my social worker has spoken to them on their own they had to stop*
>
> *halfway … because my child is in floods of tears"*

Five parents felt the negative impact the separation was having on their family was in direct contradiction with social workers saying they were doing the best for their children:

> *"they talk about the effects this could have on the children, but then what effects are they*
>
> *having when their parent is not allowed to stop all the time….for six months now…they keep*
>
> *saying it's in the best interests for the family, but how is it when they've split the family up?"*

While another parent described the experience of complying with the conditions as dehumanising:

> *"None of them actually care about how this is affecting my child and what it's doing to them.*
>
> *It just seems like my child is just a number on a piece of paper…They don't care how it affects*
>
> *day-to-day…We should be taking my child out to the park…swimming…We're not even*
>
> *allowed to take them to the shop down the road because he's not allowed to leave this house*
>
> *with me and partner"*

These narratives highlight the other side of child protection practice, the potential damage resulting from actions intended to protect children, as opposed to the risks of not acting. While the child was considered to be safer as a result of the 'agreement' for the family to separate, the parents themselves felt these arrangements were in place for too long. Timescales reported ranged from six months to a year and a half. In two cases the parents thought their agreement would be much shorter; in one case a matter of weeks and the other three months. Consequently parents were unprepared for what lay ahead:

> *"I was under the impression that I was stopping at my mum's for two weeks so when we*
>
> *signed it, I was fine with it…but I was under the impression it was just for two weeks…I'm still*
>
> *not back now [after seven months]"*

The parents did not feel their social workers had given them clear messages about the likely duration of the agreement when they were made and that they did not seem to work towards ending the arrangements leaving them disillusioned and distrustful of the child protection process.

Discussion

Of course the purpose of the child protection system is to ensure the child's safety and promote the child's health and development; the voice of the child has therefore been a central feature of child protection reforms (Munro, 2011b). An effective system, however, is one which produces the desired outcome and a system which is concerned with the experience of the child, to the exclusion of the experience of their parents, is one which is arguably less effective. Yet the findings from this study support the idea that a positive experience for the parents was not considered necessary, or perhaps even important. Given the experience of many of the parents in this study we suggest that the intended reforms of the Munro review towards a relationship based approach to practice were not evident, with a greater focus on the use of authority than the facilitative and supportive component of the helping relationship (Heron, 1990). Indeed, the reporting of the continuing of child protection plans as a result of fathers failing to engage with social workers and the separation agreements are findings not identified in past studies (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Dale, 2004; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Ghaffar et al., 2012; Gladstone et al., 2014) and certainly indicate the authoritarian practice that Featherstone et al. (2014) and Parton (2014) outline.

We do acknowledge, however, that the opinions and perceptions provided, while sincerely expressed, do not provide the full picture of the situation and cannot tell us what actually occurred. Nevertheless, the parents, did not consider such an approach to be helpful to them in making the changes asked of them. Many parents felt an unfairly negative impression was presented of them and this impression became the basis of the discussions and plans. Indeed, most parents in this study felt they were not afforded the same rights as a participant, as a decision maker, or as a partner in seeking to improve the situation. Not having access or time to read the report prior to the

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conference and not having a central part in writing the resulting plans can be considered symptomatic of this. It is inevitable that such treatment will be experienced as shaming and devaluing, leading to a sense that they are being treated as less than human (Rorty, 1989). While we found that there were positive experiences of social work practice, this was seen as one component of the overall system. A parent could feel the social worker treated them in a humane way yet still experience being treated as less than human by the system overall, as the paperwork, the discussions, the meetings, and the demands and expectations overall were often perceived to be unfair, inflexible, and for some harmful to both themselves and their children. Having a social worker who came across as uncaring, unsupportive, and judgemental only served to make the whole process an even more difficult experience.

The finding that parents can feel excluded and treated with less respect than they feel they deserve is not new to child protection research (see Corby et al., 1996). What is new, however, is that some of the methods used by the social workers in this local authority could be categorised as more authoritarian than previous studies. Furthermore, while we have had significant amounts of research demonstrating the importance of positive experiences for parents in effecting change (e.g. de Boer & Cody, 2007; Fauth et al., 2010) and significant reforms of the child protection system over many years (Parton, 2014), this study indicates little positive change in the experiences of parents. There are, of course, a number of potential directions for practice with the 'Reclaiming Social Work' and 'Signs of Safety' approaches providing more positive experiences for parents (see Skrypek et al., 2012; Forrester et al., 2013) along with the England Innovations Projects potentially providing new directions. Such innovations, however, still have to fit within the current arrangements that provide the administrative and organisational burdens that make it difficult for social workers to focus on providing practical help and emotional support to families (e.g. Baginsky et al., 2010; Wastell et al., 2010). Indeed, it was these burdens that led Munro (2011b) to argue the need for reform. Yet, from the parents' perspective, the social workers' focus was predominantly on meeting the requirements of the organisation, such as preparing for meetings, meeting timescales, and checking with their

managers. In addition to innovative practice methods, the structure of social work services and the expectations placed upon local authorities and individual social workers need to be reformed to encourage compassion while undertaking challenging child protection work. If we can imagine what the parents in this study might suggest would help: less shaming, less blaming, greater clarity on what the concerns are, more listening, more practical help, more working together, more involvement in making plans, more flexibility to change/end plans, more contact with the social worker, and more understanding of the emotional impact on parents. Arguably, all social workers are capable of providing this; they just need a system that enables them to.

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