Theorising the signs of safety approach to child protection social work: Positioning, codes and power

CrossMark

Emily Keddell *

University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, Aotearoa/New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Many countries are struggling to reconcile the conflicting demands of heightened risk aversion cultivated by a reactionary public and media, and recognition of the rights of parents and children to family maintenance where possible. One approach that seeks to grapple with these demands is the signs of safety (SoS) approach (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). This article is a theoretical paper discussing the SoS approach, drawing on a qualitative empirical study of decision-making in a context where the SoS was used. As practice tools affect knowledge production, the SoS approach is analysed using the social constructionist concepts of positioning and investment, Bernstein's codes, and Foucault's knowledge/power and discretion/surveillance ideas. It is argued that the SoS approach offers morally attractive subject positions to parents which may contribute to client engagement and personal change. This is achieved by focussing on future safety, implying future parental competence, and including parents in decision-making processes. The SoS approach uses both corrective and appreciative 'codes' in its approach to knowledge production. That is, it allows clients some input into constructing problems and finding solutions and thus de-privileges the social worker's 'expert' view, reflecting an appreciative code. However, this does not extend to 'bottom-line' concerns that the social worker defines as essential for the case to close, thus reflecting corrective elements. In terms of knowledge/power and discretion/surveillance, the approach helps social workers to differentiate between when to lend discretionary power to clients and include them in knowledge production, and when to retain control over knowledge production. Importantly, it is underpinned by a traditional 'respect for persons' ethic that assumes the potential for parental functioning, and parental right to autonomy, in an environment that has traditionally begun from the opposite premise. However, while it holds much potential for humanising responses to risk that are productive in terms of personal change, client engagement and child safety, its focus on the micro context of client's lives only may omit significant structural causes of risks to children, or overstate social worker's power within organisational and wider political policy contexts.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Houston and Griffiths (2000) challenge social work to move beyond the 'risk paradigm' in child protection social work, arguing that a focus on measuring objective risk factors has resulted in a partialised practice approach that emphasises "prediction, control and culpability" (p.1). They and others argue that this focus damages the client/social worker relationship, dehumanises clients, and promotes practice characterised by blame, hostility, and conservative interventionism. This kind of risk measurement is related to psychological stress for both social worker and client, and a past, rather than future orientation to practice (Ferguson, 2008; Gillingham & Bromfield, 2008; Howe, 2010; Keddell, 2011a; Parton, 2006). Conversely, Baird and Wagner (2000) and Shlonsky and Wagner (2005) argue that validated actuarial risk assessment approaches are an aid to practice, as they improve an ability to

assess future risk of harm beyond professional judgment alone. Munro (2010) attempts to embed both actuarial and professional judgment concepts in her systems approach to child protection practice. Both sides of the now well-rehearsed debate agree that an ability to assess and manage risk in child protection social work is a crucial aspect of the role, and requires careful balancing of children's right to protection with their right to, and need for, family relationships (Keddell, 2013; Schwalbe, 2008; Turnell, 2008).

Whichever type of decision-making approach is utilised, the interpretive, constitutive and morally categorical nature of the discourses governing the approach are often under-theorised, despite numerous calls to better understand the underpinning rationalities operating in everyday practice (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Buckley, 2003; Taylor & White, 2000). The discourses implicit in decision-making tools not only affect the ways client behaviour comes to be understood, but also have a direct impact on the relationship formed between social worker and client, as discourses (ways of conceptualising behaviours and situations) determine roles, rules,

* Tel.: +64 3 479 5867.
  E-mail address: emily.keddell@otago.ac.nz.

categories and subject positions in everyday interactions (Gergen, 2003; Parton, 1999; Shotter, 1997). The worker–client relationship, in turn, has an ongoing impact on many of the aims of child protection social work practice including family engagement, goal negotiation, decisions around removal, motivation for personal change, monitoring, empowerment, and the ongoing management of risk. Furthermore, decision-making tools and their associated discourses interact with and reflect the wider politics of practice, that is, politics in a broad sense, those that "…influence the ability of participants in the service process to define needs, implement alternative strategies of helping and evaluate their effectiveness…It determines the roles that social workers and clients play in the helping process, the different forms of authority…and the vocabulary that describes the service transaction itself" (Reisch & Jani, 2012, p. 1136). Thus, the nexus between the discourses used to interpret client behaviour implicit in decision-making approaches, the ongoing relationship between client and social worker, and the process of knowledge production about clients deserves attention. The dynamic between these components influences decisions to remove or return children, as well as the broader goals of the profession including social justice, self-determination, and protection of the vulnerable.

This article theorises these connections between risk assessment tools, discourse, knowledge production, and social worker–client relationships in child protection social work. It draws on a study of decision-making undertaken at a site of practice that uses the signs of safety (SoS) approach (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). This context is a large child and family NGO in Aotearoa/New Zealand that decided to adopt the SoS approach some years ago, and worked closely with one of its founders to ensure consistent and rigorous implementation across the organisation. The influences of the SoS on knowledge production about risk and safety will be analysed drawing on several theoretical tools. These tools are: the constructionist concepts of positioning and investment; Bernstein's codes; and Foucault's knowledge/power and discretion/surveillance ideas (Bernstein, 1977; Burr, 2003; Featherstone & Fawcett, 1994; Foucault, 1980; Healy, 2005; Holloway, 1994; Rodger, 1991). By describing and theorising a relatively recent approach to managing risk and safety, this article hopes to 'extend the conversation' about risk by exploring the ethical, philosophical and pragmatic influences of this innovative approach on current risk management practices. It gives particular attention to the discursive production of knowledge that takes place within a relational context of unequal power.

2. Setting the scene: risk assessment in context

Risk assessment, that is, evaluating the likelihood of future harm to a child is an integral aspect of child protection social work. The ever-increasing need of governments worldwide to be perceived as responding adequately to risks to children, particularly in response to high profile media reports of child deaths and an increased focus on children's rights, places immense pressure on social workers to respond preventively to risk of future harm (Cashmore, 2009). This places an unrealistic burden on social workers in the face of the known limits of risk prediction tools to accurately predict harm in an absolute sense, when their main purpose is to provide workers with valuable known associations, ideally as part of a broader response to risk (Cashmore, 2009; Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005; Spratt, 2012). A view of risks as predictable and therefore avoidable is gaining significant traction in many Western societies, where the advances of technology and increased faith in technical responses privilege numeric prediction instruments as the singular, most effective tool to categorise 'risky' people in many social work settings (Beck, 1992; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Kemshall, 2010; Webb, 2006). Macdonald and Macdonald (2010) explain that in this climate, organisations become increasingly risk averse in an attempt to lessen low-probability, high-cost outcomes, that is, to protect against 'extreme bads' (in this case, child deaths) (p. 1174). They emphasise that when

risk management is conceptualised in this way, it "…detracts from a focus on those aspects of social phenomena that might prove more effective in safeguarding children from significant harm" (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2010, p. 1180). This emphasis, some have argued, has replaced 'need' as a central organising concept in child protection practice, and is used to establish forensic functions that are fundamental to the development of systems of blame (Douglas, 1992; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003). In response to this risk/blame dynamic, "…audit becomes a key element in responding to the inherent uncertainty of risk…In this climate it is not the right decision that is important, but the defensible one" (Parton, 1998; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003, p. 399). While radical accounts of social work assume that social workers follow this pathway to risk aversive, blaming practice uncritically, some research provides a more complex account of social worker's agency and its constraints, suggesting that social workers are well-placed to provide a buffer, of sorts, between neo-liberal states and clients (Keddell, forthcoming; Kemshall, 2010). These writers instead point out the ways social workers are both shaped by and resist notions of risk in their direct practice. For example, Stanford (2010) found that some social workers in her study drew on their commitment to social justice concepts to resist the 'fears' generated by a risk-saturated environment when responding to people deemed either 'risky' or 'at-risk'. White, Hall, and Peckover (2008) describe the ways in which social workers, while filling in standardised forms, may exert 'wiggle room' in the way in which they choose to describe clients, while Spratt (2000) examines the ways social workers attempt to retain a focus on need but nevertheless are often pressed to construct their work as a narrow child protection response instead.

2.1. The signs of safety — an overview

In an attempt to formalise resistance to risk aversion in child protection practice, and the perceived tendency that traditional risk assessment tools were producing excellent accounts of risks with little direction for how to manage or lower those risks together with parents, Turnell and Edwards (1999) together with 150 frontline social workers in Western Australia, developed the SoS approach in the 1990s. It has currently been implemented in thirty-two jurisdictions and eleven countries (Turnell, 2008, 2012). The approach argues that a narrow focus on risk causes a risk averse approach that results in poor quality relationships with clients and a conservative, overly controlling approach (Parton, 2000; Turnell, 2004). Practice that focuses only on risk, and the factors statistically associated with risk, such as past abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, poverty, or family histories of violence is like:

> mapping only the darkest valleys and gloomiest hollows of a particular territory…it is vital to obtain information regarding past, existing and potential safety, competencies, and strengths. This balancing of information regarding family functioning allows the worker to achieve a comprehensive assessment of risk in child protection cases.

> [Turnell & Edwards, 1999, p. 101]

Premised on the imperative question: "How can child protection professionals actually build partnerships with parents where there is suspected or substantiated child abuse or neglect?", their approach combines aspects of risk management within a relationship focused model (Turnell, 2012).

The approach is built on humanistic, strength-based and solution-focussed philosophies that emphasise the importance of establishing client's views on their own lives, respecting clients as 'people worth doing business with', (Turnell & Edwards, 1999, p.42). It avoids pathological or psychodynamic analyses of personal problems. The SoS approach rests on the general premises of social constructionist therapeutic approaches that contend that if language constructs reality,