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Systemic practices for supervision and assessment in child protection

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...if we look with love, then the colours of heaven are revealed to us ...

Stephens 1982

We get wise by asking question.

Stephens 1923

Something has become clear to the two of us in our work over thirty years with child protection social workers in many countries in Europe. And it is this: while these social workers perform admirably in extremely difficult social and professional contexts, one of the major stumbling blocks for them stems from the dual, seemingly contradictory assignments of support and protection (control). In our work we describe this as the *help vs. control dichotomy*. We also want to draw attention to the possibility of a democratic systemic practice in complex systems where professionals clarify for themselves as well as for their clients and supervisees, the basis and reasons for actions taken and not taken (Featherstone et al 2014). In this chapter, we offer thinking and practices from two systemic approaches developed in Sweden and Ireland respectively – the Commission Model (Salamon et al 1991; Salamon 1994a, 1994b) and the Fifth Province Approach (Byrne 1995; McCarthy 2010; O'Brien 2014). The approaches will be interwoven throughout the chapter.

How we see what we see!

In our writing of this chapter we want to offer an analysis of complex help-giving situations so that we can foster more systemic and reflexive seeings, positionings and interventions in ourselves and for others who would find this way of working useful. Working as a social work academic (Imelda, IMcC) and as supervisors (IMcC and Ernst, ES), we have witnessed that child protection workers have been publicly criticised BOTH for being over-judicious AND for incompetence in dealing with situations of disclosed and suspected abuse (Wintour 2015). For many workers in this area it is a lose-lose dilemma and can lead to large-scale resignations in child protective services (ISPCC 2015). Prejudicial over-reaction that a

suspected abuse is indisputable without adequate corroborative evidence AND an apparent non-acknowledgment of the seriousness of disclosed abuse are the most frequent complaints (see also Payne 1999, p.255). At a time of huge media comment and demands for accountability everywhere, we are among the many colleagues who feel that there is a need to recognise the social reality of a vigilant press and the needs for more open, clearer assessment criteria as part of the professional context.

We suggest therefore, that approaches are needed which, (1) help us to deal with the dual functions of support and control/protection; (2) clarify *who* asks for help with what; and (3) make explicit who our commissioners are. We attempt to accomplish that clarification in this chapter.

Support and control: towards non-contradictory practices in child protection

We have seen that when we do not clarify who defines the situation as problematic or what counts as help then it can hide an execution of power, justify controversial interventions, and enable the violation of individuals or groups. We have also seen this recursively captured in the macro relationship between social institutions and citizens and also in the micro relationship between an individual social worker and his/her clients. Within the Fifth Province Approach we have referred to this recursion as a way that a control of abuse can often re-present as an abuse of control by statutory services (Byrne & McCarthy 1988). This was poignantly captured in the words of a young adult who described her childhood disclosure of abuse to a State agency as "my own personal holocaust".

Many child protection service workers have told us of their difficulties in integrating and uniting the double functions of social control and support in their work due to heavy caseloads and the pressure of risk and safety issues. So, we have come to the conclusion that these difficulties emerge largely from the ambiguity that is built into systems of help-giving. We say this as the split becomes harmful and often abusive in cases where the child protection worker, on the discovery of neglect and abuse, must let the control and authority function take precedence over the support function. In these scenarios the professional frequently has to carry out actions against the client's will and become the focus of their anger. Having to work constantly in situations of ambiguity and frequent client anger does not lay conditions for good practice or worker – client satisfaction! So, how can we be "helpful"?

Who does what for whom?

In order to be helpful in such ambiguous situations we feel that we need to clarify *who* is doing what for *whom* as we have found in our work that the incongruity between support and control diminishes when we take into account whom the professional is serving in any one instance. Furthermore, when we think about it, the words, "social services" are indeed an accurate description of the task of the child protection worker. These words encompass most of the functions of the profession, but only if it is stated clearly whom the professional serves at any point in his/her duties. In our view, it is most important to acknowledge that primarily a child protection worker is a public servant who carries out the services, which society's institutions (including their profession), laws and elected representatives define. We, as child protection workers, therefore can be said to serve society both when we act in a role of social control on behalf of the State/Society and when we offer supportive services to the public.

As such, the primary mandate and what we are calling the commission of a child protection worker comes from the state via an employing body and not from its service users. Put another way, the Social Service Agency is the Primary Commission Giver (PCG) while the service user may become a Secondary Commission Giver (SCG) should they agree to the service being given. Otherwise, should they not agree they may not have a choice and can become Target Persons (TP) in relation to "imposed" or mandated actions. We refer to these latter actions as "Taking Measures" and differentiated them from the actions of "Help-Giving".

Defining the actions of 'help' and 'taking measures'

As a result of this analysis of the systemic context of "help giving" in social services we have therefore always found it important to define clearly the terms, "help giving" and "taking measures". Unpacking these terms and discourses as it were helps to reveal where relationships of unequal "power" and control have the potential to operate. The term or concept of "help", in our approach, refers to those collaborative actions taken only with the prior agreement of the client. In other words for an intervention, premised on co-operation and co-creation, to be classified as "help" there needs to be prior agreement for the actions to be taken in the future both by the social worker and the service user/client. However well-intentioned the protective mandates or actions taken by professionals may be they are referred to by us as "taking measures" (Salamon et al 1991; Salamon 1994b).

We believe this distinction between "help" and "taking measures" to be important for the following reasons. Very often, as professionals, we can assume that actions are helpful which have not been agreed and are frustrated and upset when clients do not seem to understand or appreciate our efforts. In order to work with this conundrum we propose that when we understand that only commission-givers may tell us whether our actions have been helpful or not then we have a way of clarifying the situation for ourselves and the people who use services. The Primary Commission Giver who is requesting or employing our services might deem certain actions to be protective or helpful for children whilst at the same time these very actions may not be viewed as helpful by the parents of the children. So, what might be helpful to the Primary Commission Giver (PCG) in trying to prevent child abuse may not be experienced as helpful by a parent suspected of abusing or neglecting their children. In this instance where the parent does not agree with the action taken they become Target Persons (TPs) for the intervention. In this instance what is seen as "help" by the PCG is experienced by the non-agreeing TP as the professional taking measures against them.

This is also a situation that we referred to earlier and that is that we could see where attempts to control abuse may in a recursive flip flop end up as being abuses of control? In distinguishing clearly between these twin tasks, support and control, help and taking measures we feel that we can become more transparent in relation to our own systemic positionings and involvements. This is why we would stress that as the issues in child protection refer to children, adults and professionals in particular family and social contexts, it is always important, in our experience, to subjectively and socially situate each assessment and evaluation. In this way each analysis for us always involves a second order systemic positioning. We, as supervisors, therapists and social workers are inevitably part of the frame of analysis. A commission is therefore clarified according to the situation and place in which one is living and working and is never based on objective criteria. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron's threats to imprison social workers, show us clearly who is the primary commission giver in the context of Britain (Wintour 2015). Forgetting this can trap us into either ignoring hierarchical implications of this work and so risk further abusing those coming for both supervision and social services or imagining that we can only work to the mandates of those who use our services. Both these stances obscure the complex contexts of social service mandates and policies even when we may not like them! To illustrate these systemic dilemmas let us introduce an example from Ernst's work in Sweden.

Case presentation

The context is a Swedish social services agency, divided into two groups, one caring for adults while the other cares for children and youth. Together they had external supervision with Ernst every third week.

In the supervision group, two of the social workers, Monica and Eva, whose names we have altered together with those of family members, presented the following case:

> *Monica worked in the children's section and was commissioned by social services to carry out to an assessment following the request by a mother we are calling Gun, to resume custody of her ten year old daughter who we are calling Rachel. The other social worker, Eva, served with the unit for adults and was involved in the task of helping Gun to resolve the difficulties of drug abuse, housing, and unemployment in her life with the aim of having her daughter live with her again.*

> *Eight years previously, when Rachel was two she had been placed in foster care against Gun's wishes. The reason for the removal from her mother was that, at the time, Gun was judged by social services to lack the ability to adequately take care of her daughter. This was mainly due to drug abuse and its accompanying lifestyle, such as irregular attendance by Rachel at the day care centre, inadequate hygiene, financial debts and threats of eviction. At the time of this first assessment Gun denied any drug abuse on her part and did not go along with any measures instituted by the social services. A further complicating factor was that, at the time of the investigation, there was a serious suspicion that Rachel had also been sexually abused. The social workers were unclear whether this abuse was perpetrated by Gun or by one of her temporary boyfriends. The suspicion itself was based on observations by staff of the little girl's behaviour at the day care centre.*

> *However, at the time it was judged that the suspicion of sexual abuse was difficult to prove due to Rachel's young age and Gun's lack of co-operation. The key social workers had decided not to investigate the suspicion further as there were sufficient other reasons to remove Rachel from the care of her mother. A short time later, when Gun was confronted with the suspicion by her social worker, she had protested her innocence and also expressed doubts about whether there had been any abuse at all. Eight years on, it*

was now reported that Gun had made great changes in her life and that she would like to have her daughter live with her again. Over the previous year she had admitted her drug-abuse, received and completed treatment for it. She had also started training towards employment, was taking good care of her finances and had regular contact with her daughter and with her social worker, Eva.

Dilemmas: Contradictory needs and rights

During the supervision session, the dilemmas that Monica and Eva, presented related to many seemingly contradictory needs and wishes which were brought forward in Gun's, request to have Rachel, back to live with her.

These different commissions, issues and possible dilemmas are highlighted below under the following headings:

- Rachel's right to safety and stability vs. Gun's right to have the situation reassessed: Introducing a hierarchy of commissions

- Family reunion from the child's and the parent's point of view

- Child Protection: Hope for safety versus fear of risk

Key questions

When faced with complex system's issues, which are often contradictory and potentially dangerous to a child's welfare, we have experienced that we need to be clear about the mandates we are working to. Therefore, these, two key questions have emerged:

1. Has Gun changed enough to offer safety and a good enough life to Rachel?

2. If Rachel returns to Gun will this be a good or bad situation for Rachel?

To clarify the presented dilemma further, Ernst asked Monica and Eva what the present status of their assessment was. It emerged that both felt torn between the different needs and rights of those involved and experienced themselves facing a crucial choice between two radically different alternatives:

They must *either* i) immediately initiate the beginning of a long and cautious process of having Rachel move back home with Gun or ii) work for a permanent foster care placement by applying for a custody order for Rachel whereby the foster parents would be awarded full custody. We

are deliberately using the terms, "good" and "bad" as these are the words that the social workers themselves used during supervision. Of course different contexts will generate different words to capture the situations of protection and risk being worked with.

Why either/or – emotional factors?

Because the dilemmas were presented so starkly and the perceived alternatives had far reaching consequences Ernst proceeded to ask both Monica and Eva about their feelings in regard to different aspects of the case. It emerged that the most common emotional difficulties were worry and fear in relation to two issues:

1. The delicate task of removing Rachel from her foster home where she had been rooted. They also feared that irreversible injury might occur if she were to be uprooted for a second time, together with the fear and risk if her return to Gun did not work out.

2. The outstanding suspicions about the sexual abuse of Rachel when she was in the care of her mother eight years previously and the resultant worry for Rachel's security if she did return to her mother.

Through the ongoing discussion about the social workers' emotional reactions, it became clear that many in the group felt antipathy towards the mother. This was because they were concerned that she might either have sexually abused her daughter or that she did not protect her against abuse. Furthermore, they had the impression that she did not show any signs of remorse or worry when confronted with the suspicions of the day care centre staff eight years previously.

From this brief vignette one can see how the social workers' antipathy towards Gun was producing a context of fear in relation to Rachel's safety. However, in talking further it became clear in the group that this was also occurring for them in the absence of a sound assessment of what was happening at this point in time. Introducing the element of time, then and now, allowed the team to begin to shift their perspective. Given that Gun had made a request for help to have her daughter home the team began to realise that if they were to be helpful in this situation that they needed to address how these previously unrecognised past prejudices, fears and ideas might recursively constitute their current fears and risks. In this way drawing the distinction in time (then and now) and between the concepts of "help" and "taking measures" together with the recognition that Gun had shifted her position from being a Target Person to being a Secondary Commission Giver also recursively

enabled the team and the supervision context to shift in a more democratic and collaborative direction.

Deconstructing fixed ideas through the assessment process

Following on from the previous example and in order to begin such a collaborative and democratic process we propose that supportive actions in the arena of child protection work could be construed as, deconstructing fixed ideas through introducing scales of difference and thereby co-constructing possibilities for new solutions and ideas to emerge for service users and social workers.

In simple terms child protection endeavours would begin to address themselves towards the movement from an either/or position to both/ and positions as in the example above. This means moving from a mutually excluding dichotomous position to positions which consider apparent oppositions as positions of difference on continua and scales. This deconstruction of dichotomies (either/or scenarios) introduces possibilities (more and/or less) for greater manoeuvrability for professionals and greater opportunities for co-operative democratic participation with help-seekers and in supervision.

For example, the questions "Should Rachel return to her mother?" and, "Should Rachel stay in foster care?" pushes the professionals into either/ or (dichotomous) thinking. However, when we ask for both the possibilities and the risks of each alternative we have found that it helps deconstruct "all or nothing" reasoning and opens up possibilities for "more or less" options. Questions can then be brought forth, such as, "On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 refers to very bad situations and where 10 refers to optimal situations, what are the possibilities and risks of Rachel returning to her mother?" and "How much contact shall Rachel have with the foster home in the future?" In the posing of such questions we have the possibility to move from dichotomised Good/Bad situations, Risk/ Safety situations and Change/No Change situations towards placing the dilemmas on continua or scales towards their deconstruction.

The deconstruction of 'a bad mother'

Before he could proceed, Ernst had to follow up some of the feelings that Monica and Eva had expressed in relation to Gun. So, he asked the supervision group members to dwell for a moment on their hypothesis that the

mother had taken part in the abuse or had not cared about it. He asked questions such as, "How was it that a mother might do such a thing?"

These questions prompted the group to speculate on the background of the mother, and in the generation of these reflections the antipathy against Gun noticeably diminished. The professionals stated that they realised they had become stuck in their dilemma (in either/or thinking) because they saw Gun as "a bad mother". When they realised this they could begin to view her more empathically and to look at the changes Gun had actually made in her life. Gun's capabilities as a parent in the present time could now be evaluated with less prejudice.

When Gun was deconstructed as a "bad mother" it was possible to introduce questions, which would address other possibilities on a continuum from one extreme solution to the other:

• How could the transfer of Rachel back to Gun's care be done with as little harm as possible?

• What preventative actions needed to be taken in such a scenario?

• What changes would have to take place to guarantee Rachel's safety and security with Gun?

After a thorough discussion a plan is co-constructed where the Eva and Monica would gradually increase the time that Rachel and Gun spent together and where they would monitor the developing relationship. They realised also that the foster parents would carry an important role and task. As such it was deemed important by Eva and Monica to help them consider a range of options (from fostering to support of Rachel living with Gun) in relation to their ongoing emotional involvement and positive attachment with Rachel. The child protection workers, in considering commissioning issues, realised also that they must clarify for the foster parents that part of their primary commission included the aim of striving for the reunion of the family of origin where possible. However, they would also offer to provide any support that the foster parents needed in order to carry out the decisions of the social services.

The next step in the supervision process was a discussion where the necessary and desirable, changes could be spelled out. This occurred alongside the consideration of different protective mechanisms that would provide sufficient safety and security for Rachel both in the situations

of increased interaction and access between Gun and Rachel and in any prospective move to the full-time care of Rachel by Gun.

An important factor was also an investigation of Gun's awareness of the risks and consequences of child sexual abuse. In addressing these questions, in relation to security, Monica and Eva began to include others within the child's network as resources to her and to them. A list was drawn up of Rachel and Gun's resource people in order to find persons whom Rachel had confidence and trust in and who would observe and support Rachel and Gun's relationship while also supporting the foster parents. These included the child's grandmother who could maintain links to the family and to the child's mother, a therapist with whom the child had a good relationship and her foster parents with whom she could continue to visit for weekends, etc. Within a fifth province approach these activities has been referred to as identifying "resource systems" and creating a "safety net" to ensure ongoing protection against serious risk scenarios developing (Byrne & McCarthy 1995).

Little by little a picture emerged during the supervision session where a continuum of different alternative routes and possibilities emerged for situations of safety and minimal risk with the best interests of Rachel at centre stage. Through this emergence the dichotomised, either/or alternatives, which were present at the outset of the discussion, no longer dominated the minds and actions of the key social workers and their team.

We have found that what is often designated as, "forbidden" in relation to child protection depends largely on whether the worker has a feeling of "hope" that the situation can change within a specific time frame and in a particular direction. Certain behaviours may be permitted in the short term while some change is taking place but not in the longer term. The fact that time frames often play a part in what might happen also indicates for us that hope plays a big part in what will happen in relation to a child and his or her parents. If we analyse what contributes to feelings of hope then we may find that it depends on the parent(s) co-operating in protective actions with the social worker and showing a willingness to change their behaviour and/or situation. Conversely we might say that if the parent does not co-operate within a designated time frame they are deemed not to be willing to change along the parameters desired by social workers and child protection systems. The inclusion of hope into the scenario links to the definition of "Problem" in the Commission Approach (Salamon et al 1991). Here, a "problem" is defined as being a person's hope/desire for change that they do not know how to achieve.

This also relates closely to the concept of "dilemma" used in the Fifth Province approach (McCarthy & Byrne 1995). In the absence of "hope" on the part of parents and professionals the professional is frequently required to take measures. Questions which address the issue of hope would include the following: "What does the parent have to do to satisfy the social worker that change is happening/possible?" and "What would have to happen so that you (the professional) can maintain the hope necessary to continue with an assessment based on co-operation and voluntary help giving?"

At one end of the continuum, in very bad, forbidden situations, it is often required that child protection workers are mandated to intervene and *take measures*. Of course, it is also expected that *help* is offered prior to measures being taken. However, in the absence of a voluntarily agreement to co-operate with social services, measures usually have to be taken to protect children. Here again as we will have seen in our case example above, the professional group would be invited to work with their prejudices and emotions in order that they can be deconstructed so that they can more clearly assess the information at different points in the process.

There are two Conditions for Workers to act without parental consent (take measures):

   A.   The situation in which the child lives is legally forbidden (as in the earlier situation of Rachel where she was removed to long-term foster care).

or

   B.   The situation will continue to be non-permissible without intervention. However, it may change with intervention thereby avoiding the necessity of removing the child or just having to remove a child in the short-term.

One of the traps that a child protection worker might find themselves in is that if one concentrates on solutions only (e.g. child protection as a solution for the problem of child abuse) then one is often confused about or does not look at what precise problematic behaviours or contexts need to change. In other words, and in our experience, we need to be asking, what are the particular goals that either the professional or the parent needs to or wants to change in order to solve the problem

of child abuse/neglect. In addition, we would also propose that there would be an exploration of the most feared situation, what security measure are already in place and if they are sufficient in this particular scenario. If the answers to these questions point to inadequate safety then there needs to be an exploration of what measures might need to be introduced. We have found that the major dilemmas for professionals working in the arena of child protection frequently centre around whether, enough sustainable change is happening or not; change is possible or not; change is happening as quickly as it needs to or not; and change is more and/or less in the desired direction or not according to the primary commission. Alongside the clarifying of precise problems in context and goal setting we have seen that there needs to be an ongoing focus on clarifying Commissions in the different circumstances, So, for example a systemic supervisor might ask, "What is your task in the specific/general situation?", "What does the law say?", "What does the Senior Social Worker/Director of the Service say?" These situating and commissioning questions have been simplified in the following four questions which are always context related:

- What do you want to do?
- What can you do?
- What are you allowed to do?
- What must you do?

Conclusion: bringing hope to child protection

Given the huge mandate on child protection workers to change a situation and to protect a child indicates and implies that "hope" really must play a big part in any evaluation. In this, it may be useful to consider what it is that "hope" depends on co-operation by parents for change within a situation that is deemed, according to the parameters of a child protection commission, a bad situation warranting intervention by the State. It has been our experience that such situations are often among the most difficult for workers charged with child protection to maintain "hope".

The violation of a child is one such problem for which we could say that child protection is a hopeful solution. However, as we have said, very often in our conversations with child protection workers and students, protection – while often thought of as a goal – is also seen as a problem. In our view the prevention of child abuse might be an initial goal in promoting safety. However, we would propose that overall child protection be seen more as a "solution" for the problem of risk and danger. For

example, child protection work in this light is no longer premised primarily on questions of whether or not to remove a child from his or her parents in situations of abuse and neglect. Rather it is premised on a process, which encompasses a range of possible actions that might be taken by both the child protection worker and the parents. In other words. we would ask, "HOW might the solution of child protection work in this situation?" Such thinking, we have found, facilitates opportunities for the generation of more collaborative conditions in the generation of safety along certain specified and hopefully agreed parameters on a scale or continuum. In our experience it also facilitates the combining of *support and control; help and taking measures* in state mandated commissions. Above all, it clarifies a complex social system and field for observation, releases us from contradictory (either/or) binds and opens up possibilities for compassion, co-operation and hope in very distressed families who are frequently living lives of great adversity.

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