A Relational Approach to Practice: An Ethical Alternative to Working With Parents in Out-of-Home Care Processes

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored a relational practice approach with parents whose children have been removed into out-of-home care. Where these parents commonly experience practitioners as intimidating and unsupportive, the case studies of two families provides an alternative, arguably more care-centred, approach to working with parents. The paper discusses this alternative in light of ethical social work concepts. Findings suggest positive outcomes for parents and children alike when parents and workers engage using a relational approach where care is the central feature.

Keywords: out-of-home care, working relationship, ethical practice, child neglect, relational practice

Introduction

Removing children into out-of-home care is long established as a way to respond to children being maltreated within the family. In Australia, it has been common practice since the earliest days of the British colony for collaborations between governments, philanthropic individuals and charitable organizations to develop a variety of ways to house poor and maltreated children outside the family home (Gandevia, 1978; Picton & Boss, 1981). Moreover, it remains a common response today, where current figures from 2014, put more than 43,000 children living in formalised out-of-home care arrangements throughout Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2015). This is not counting informal arrangements of this nature.

A relational approach with clients is of central importance to many fields of practice in the human services, including psychotherapy (Lambert, 1992), social work (Howe, 1998; Ruch, Turney, & Ward, 2010) and child welfare (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Kroll, 2010). However, limited empirical exploration of relational approaches sensitive to the kinds of extenuating conditions that are present in child protection practice has occurred (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Drake, 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002). This includes where clients may be attending interventions involuntarily, or where threat of child removal exists. In addition, little is known of the perceptions of clients regarding what is occurring during such an approach (Doel, 2010; Friedlander, Escudero, & Heatherington, 2006). This is particularly the case regarding how parents who have had their children removed from their care and professionals work together, where few published studies exist exploring these parents' experiences of out-of-home care systems (Dumbrill, 2006; Healy, Darlington, & Feeney, 2011; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014). This is concerning given that parents who

have had their children removed are an important stakeholder group involved in out-of-home care processes. In addition, many social work professionals are employed in out-of-home care work, making this an important area of practice.

This paper argues that a relational approach is a style of working where workers can work ethically to create an environment to meet childrens'safety and wellbeing requirements, while still ensuring parents' need to be treated as human beings are met during out-of-home care processes.

Literature Overview

While research with parents who have had their children removed is limited (Harries, 2008), the available evidence shows that parents experience child protection and out-of-home care process as adversarial, intimidating, impatient, unsupportive and, at worst, even dishonest and deceitful (Dumbrill, 2006, Thomson & Thorpe, 2003; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Gallagher, Smith, Wosu, Stewart, Hunter, Cree, & Wilkinson, 2011; Harries, 2008; Healy, et al., 2011, Thorpe, 2008). Moreover, there is growing evidence that many workers have little understanding of parents' experience, needs or perspectives, and even that they do not seem to care (Harries, 2008; McArthur, Braithwaite, Winkworth, Wilson, Conroy, Thomson, Reinhart, 2011; Thorpe, 2008; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014).

Parents whose children have been removed experience a profound sense of loss, grief, powerlessness, helplessness, anger, guilt, depression, stigma, voicelessness, being judged and not being treated with respect and trust (Harries, 2008; Healy et al., 2011; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003). In addition, it is well reported that a power imbalance operates between parents and workers, especially workers with statutory powers (Dumbrill, 2006; Harries, Lonne, & Thomson, 2007; Healy, 1998; Healy et al., 2011). However, workers seem to have limited appreciation of parents' life experiences of deprivation and abuse, limitations to rights, and powerlessness (Healy, 1998; Healy et al., 2011). Furthermore, some research has found that professionals seem reluctant to genuinely engage, and build trusting and

respectful working relationships, with parents once children have been removed (Healy et al., 2011; Thomson & Thorpe, 2004; Thorpe, 2008). This is despite research on parent participation in child protection processes which has found that providing support for parents improves their confidence and sense of power, participation and satisfaction (Darlington et al., 2010; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014). It has also been found that parents' participation improves outcomes for many children in out-of-home care (Darlington et al., 2010; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003; Thorpe, 2008). Clearly this way of treating parents is problematic, especially given it is contrary to conceptualisation of social work as underpinned by an ethic of care (Gray & Webb, 2008; Harries et al., 2007).

Fortunately some research with parents who have had their children removed has found that practice exists that supports parents to bring about the change required to work towards family reunification (Dumbrill, 2006; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Gerring, Kemp, & Marcenko, 2008; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014). This approach to parents involves workers being respectful, non-judgemental, honest, hopeful, and engaging in active communication, including sharing information of the process (Gerring et al., 2008; Harries, 2008; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014). There are also elements of practice which include providing support and assistance, as well as flexibility and patience on the workers' behalf (Dumbrill, 2006; Gerring et al., 2008; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014). Such practice has been found to involve developing collaborative and friend-like relationships with parents (Dumbrill, 2006; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014), where workers provide a confidant type of relationship, power is acknowledged and shared, knowledge is shared, advocacy provided and decisions are made together (Dumbrill, 2006; Gerring et al., 2008 Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014; Harries, 2008). Furthermore, it is important that workers have some genuine care and empathy for parents, including that they acknowledge and validate what may have led parents to be in this situation, along with the deep negative emotions parents may be feeling about losing their

children, and that they treat parents as human beings (Dumbrill, 2006; Gerring et al., 2008 Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014; Harries, 2008). This is to take place under circumstances that acknowledges the child protection issues involved, and where parents are challenged to learn and practice behaviour that supports children's wellbeing (Gerring et al., 2008; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014).

These are characteristics consistent with a relational approach to working in social work. A relational approach to practice involves social workers adopting a trusting, empathic, respectful, non-judgmental, hopeful, positive and open approach when working with clients (Altman, 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2003; Drake, 1994; Reimer, 2013; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002; Trotter, 2006; Turney, 2012; Zeira, 2007). Moreover, in a relational approach, participants develop willingness, patience, flexibility and a broad focus to work in genuine partnership to meet clients' needs (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Reimer, 2013).Workers engage active listening and open communication techniques to act as a confidant and advocate for clients (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Doel, 2010; Reimer, 2014b).

A relational approach is characterized by an emotionally close and informal style of professional relationship, compared to an emotionally distant one (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Doel, 2010; Reimer, 2014b; Turney, 2012). It has been considered as having friendship-like qualities, such as, recognising a shared humanity that exists between the worker and clients, and egalitarian qualities, including shared power and mutuality (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Doel, 2010; Drake, 1994; Reimer, 2014b; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002; Turney, 2012). Such working relationships are similar to friendships in the sense that they involve participants relating in a highly personal manner, even developing affection for each other, yet they are different in the sense that they are bounded and supported by a professional context (Reimer, 2014b).

While professional purpose remains crucial (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Reimer, 2013; Zeira, 2007), a relational approach is centred around professionals demonstrating a genuine sense of care

and authenticity in dealings with clients (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Doel, 2010; Drake, 1994; Maluccio, 1979; Reimer, 2014b; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002). In this way, a relational approach to practice is central to ethical social work practice, as noted by Turney (2012) it "essentially recognizes the moral claim of the service user—whether voluntary or involuntary—to be treated as an individual in his or her own right; to be seen as an 'end in themselves' rather than simply as a means to the end of protecting their children from harm" (p. 150).

While such an approach is possible in statutory and non-statutory child protection contexts (Doel, 2010; Trotter, 2006; Turney, 2012), little guidance is given to workers regarding how to work with families in such a way. This paper aims to further develop understanding of a relational approach to practice in out-of-home care processes, in order to guide practice. It will examine two professional relationships that were established between family workers and parents whose children had been removed into out-of-home care in light of ethical considerations relevant to social work. To do this it utilises data from a qualitative study of parents', workers' and supervisors' perceptions of parent-family worker relationships working in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Pseudonyms have replaced actual names of study participants and family members, and direct quotes from participants have been de-identified and will be used throughout.

Method

The study explored perspectives of parent-family worker relationships in a sample of regional family support services in New South Wales, Australia. The eight families participating had completed a period of intervention with a family support service after some level of child neglect-related issues had been identified. The study provided multiple perspectives on the eight relationship dyads by including the perceptions of the parent and worker involved in the relationship, as well as each worker's supervisor.

The study made use of qualitative methods to conduct an in-depth holistic analysis of the

dimensions of eight parent-worker relationship dyads (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw, & Firrek, 1994). This included case study methods (Yin & Campbell, 2003) to organise the data, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to rigorously analyse the findings and present them without identifying the participants. Consistent with case study methods (Yin & Campbell, 2003), each working relationship dyad was discussed from the perspective of the parent and family worker directly working together, and worker's supervisor who was supporting the worker throughout the working relationship. The worker's supervisor, who was also the worker's direct line manager in all cases, was included because of their influence on worker practice. Supervisors have been found to influence practice via their expectations and actions to provide a buffer from outside pressures, for example, related to workload and output expectations of funding agencies, and ethical practice as articulated by the social work profession. Including supervisors' perspective enhanced the richness of the information attained about the parent/worker relationship dyad (Stark & Torrance, 2004).

The study was conducted towards completion of a PhD, where the author conducted all interviews, and data transcription and analysis. Participant recruitment and data collection interviews took place between April 2007 and 2008, after ethics approval was secured from the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. This process took longer than anticipated because none of the workers who subscribed to the study were close to completing eligible working relationships at the time they subscribed. Using in depth interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995), and drawing on literature about the notion of phases in relationships, participants were asked to provide a chronological account of the relationship. With the exception of three of the supervisors, each participant was interviewed once only. The duration of interviews was between 45 and 90 minutes, and all participants gave consent to record them. Analysis involved using analytic induction techniques (Denzin, 1978), to examine over 400 pages of de-identified transcribed data

for key words that described parent, worker, and supervisor "actions" and "attributes". These key words described the experiences of the participants, which is what the research questions related to, and became subthemes. A list of other key words was also developed, which recorded who was speaking, who was being spoken about, the phase of relationship, where the relationship took place, other contextual issues, and the purpose, value, and meaning of the working relationship. A senior researcher independently conducted a similar analysis on the same transcripts. This trustworthiness check helped avoid possible "cherry-picking" of concepts similar to the author's preconceptions (Scott, 2002, p. 92). These methods, which have been described in depth elsewhere (Reimer, 2010), facilitated the author to analyse and describe patterns between participants' lived experiences both of mutually experienced working relationships, but also the perspective of a relative outsider to the relationship.

The study participants were part of the tradition of family work in Australia dating back to the late 1970s (Wolcott, 1989). The services provide multiple programs such as home visiting, information and referral, playgroups, parenting groups, centre based support, and counselling services (NSW Family Services Inc., 2009). Family work practice in these services continues to be underpinned by long held principles, such voluntarism, a strengths-based approach, community embeddedness, and empowerment practice that includes building connections to the broader community through universal support mechanisms such as playgroups (NSW Family Services Inc., 2009). However, while operating as voluntary services, they still operate within a statutory child protection context; where many parents have been referred due to their involvement with the statutory child protection system. Although not statutory agencies, parents often perceive, at least initially, that involvement with the service has an implied risk of child removal.

Eligibility to participate depended on the parent having been referred to the service for child neglect-related concerns, and the working relationship having ceased within the last three months. At

the time of the study, neglect was defined in NSW legislation as "the continued failure by a parent or caregiver to provide a child with the basic things needed for his or her proper growth and development, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical and dental care, and adequate supervision" (NSW Department of Community Services, 2006 , p. 6).

As Figure 1 notes, 25 people were initially recruited to the study; that is, 10 parent/worker relationship cases. Two cases were excluded after it became apparent that either child neglect was not a concern, or the worker resigned prior to the study interviews being conducted. The eight remaining cases involved eight family workers, nine former clients (parents) of the family workers involved in the study, and four supervisors of the workers. One case involved two parents wishing to be interviewed together. One

supervisor managed three worker participants, two managed two each, and one supervisor managed one worker participant.

The working relationships had varied in duration, from over 1 year in all cases, to over 5 years in two cases. All but one parent and two workers involved in the study were female. Two fathers were involved in the family work, but only one of these men was available to be interviewed at the time of the study. Six of the parents, all of the workers, and three supervisors identified as being from Anglo Celtic background. One parent had emigrated from Ireland within the past 10 years, while one parent and one supervisor identified as being from a New Zealand Maori background. One parent identified as being from an Aboriginal background. The ninth parent did not specify her cultural background.

Figure 1
Configuration of the relationship dyads/cases, including exclusion of two
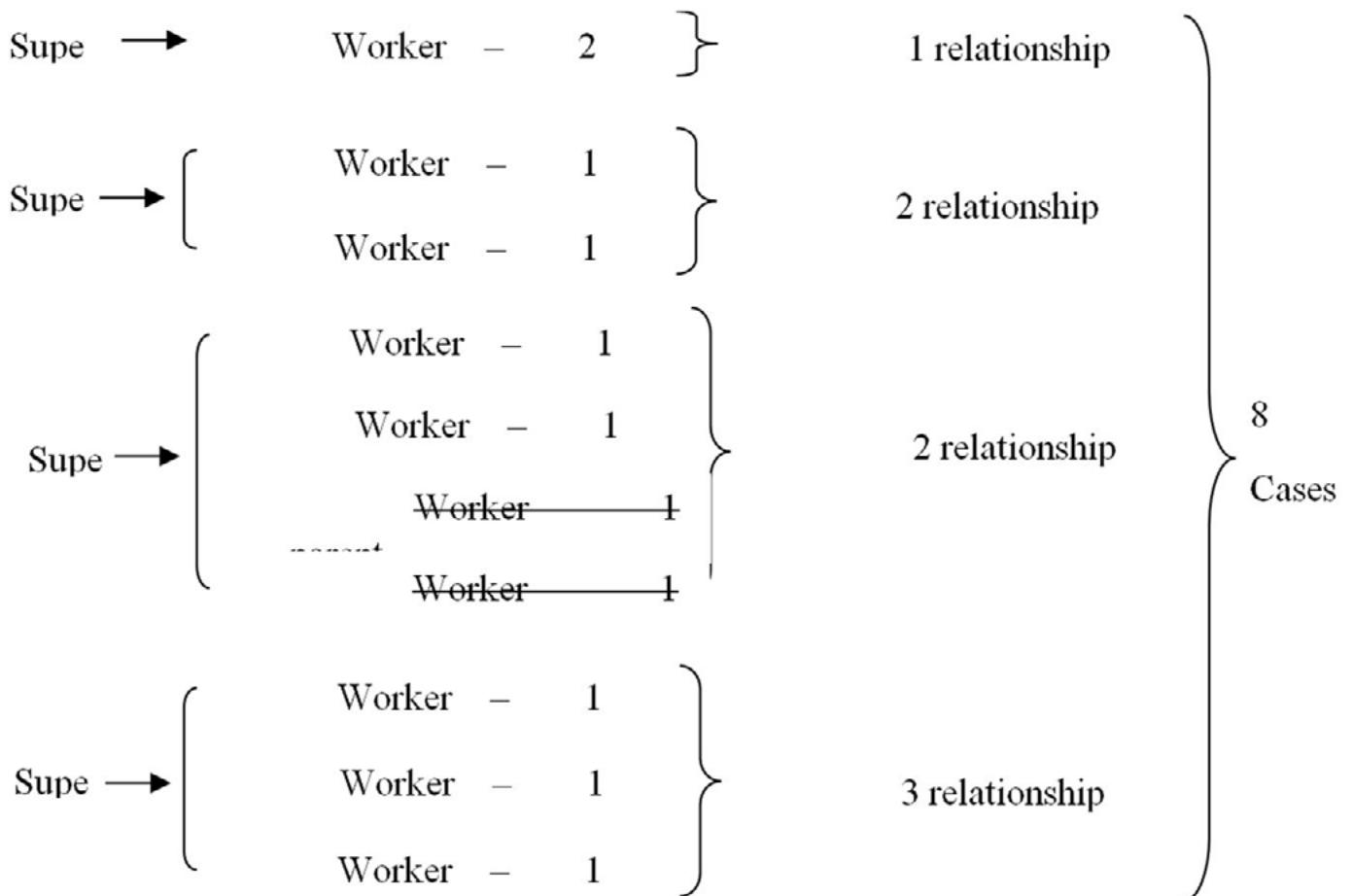
Consequently, there may be cultural and gender limitations, where most participants were female, and of Anglo Celtic origin.

The eight workers had from 2 to over 30 years family work experience and all were tertiary educated. Five held bachelor degrees in areas such as social science, social work, and community work. The other three held vocational diplomas in community welfare. The supervisors were all tertiary trained. One had completed a Master's degree, two others held Bachelor degrees, and one had received vocational education in community work. They had from 3 to 12 years family work experience.

Findings

This paper will present the findings pertaining to important aspects of a relational approach described by the participants of two of the eight working relationship cases, involving two parents, two workers and two supervisors. This is because, while all the cases demonstrated the same relational approach, only two involved removal of children into out-of-home care during the time of the working relationship under discussion. In both instances the children were removed prior to the development of the working relationship, while in the case of Georgina only, the children were returned to her care while the working relationship was underway. In the case of Mary and Peter, only Mary's perspective on the working relationship was attained as Peter was unavailable for interview at the time of the study.

Mary and Peter

'Mary' and 'Peter' were parents to three children; 'Debra', aged 6 months, 'Caroline', aged 5 years and 'Brett', aged 8 years. Mary also had an 18 year old daughter named 'Alison' from a previous relationship. Mary had a diagnosed intellectual disability and Peter was a trained motor mechanic who struggled to find employment. Their family worker is known as 'Fiona, and Fiona's supervisor is named 'Vera'. 'Faith' is the name given to a disability support worker who was employed at a government disability support service (called 'DADHC').

The statutory child protection agency (called 'DoCS') referred Mary and Peter to the family service. The referral was initially vaguely defined, but essentially related to supporting the family to resolve child safety and risk concerns regarding ensuring and maintaining the safety, cleanliness and tidiness of the home and surrounding yard. According to Vera, the statutory child protection agency had equated poor housing and habitability with child neglect. Once involved with the family, Fiona identified other concerns related to Mary and Peter's skills when it came to providing a nutritionally sound diet, positive and child-focused parenting, and literacy and numeracy, and began working with the family to resolve these. Another social work service involved with the family at this time was the government disability support agency (DADHC). This worker was to be supportive, although it transpired that she adopted more a statutory child protection role regarding the family. This compounded the injustice as it left the family supported by the family service alone when it came to helping the family meet the statutory requirements that were required for them to prevent child removal, as explained by Vera,

> When we got the referral, we said, well, what do you want us to do? It was really vague. No one really knew. And then, it sort of spiralled out of control at the end by DADHC and DoCS. And suddenly they were coming in heavy on this family, and they were saying, you have to do this, this and this. With still no case plan about, "and here are your supports in terms of where you going to get these support services from"….and the DADHC disability worker…who really was being a DoCS worker…knowing that these kids were going to be removed from this family. Which isn't the role of that worker…[She should have been doing] a whole lot of stuff around the speech stuff. And supporting, and setting up appointments with speech therapists and demonstrating and supporting around this.

Debra became subject to Care and Protection proceedings very soon after the family worker became involved with the family. Caroline and Brett were also taken into out-of-home care within 18 months of Debra being removed. According to Fiona and Vera, removal was progressed by deception and despite Mary and Peter completing all of the care and protection requirements stipulated by DoCS workers, as noted by Vera,

> The kids were removed… well the baby was removed first and that was just by absolute trickery. Yeah, the baby was removed when they were, when DADHC and DoCS were involved and they did a whole lot of things, a lot of pressure on the family to get the yard cleaned up and to get the house, sort of, you know, that sort of shit. So, the baby went into respite for the weekend and never came back.

According to Mary, key factors influencing her decision to build a working relationship included the way in which Fiona asked about, listened to, and advocated for her with respect to things that were important to Mary, but which Mary could not access herself. Mary also noted that it was important that Fiona explained and informed Mary about the child protection system in a way Mary could understand. Mary appreciated Fiona for being trustworthy, helpful, "not bossy", actively supportive, using humour, and for teaching Mary things that helped meet Mary's needs.

> Mary: Well, we did have another lady come round, Faith. I didn't like her. Coz she was bossy. Which Fiona's not…because Faith kept at us to do things which Fiona didn't. She just asked us what we wanted to do…But this Faith. She just kept at ya. [Fiona] was the opposite.…Fiona's more funnier and talks about different things… You could talk to Fiona. You can't talk to Faith. She don't listen….You can trust [Fiona and Vera]…because

they helped me through with the kids and our problems…DoCS work different…just the way they speak and everything…cos they're more, they don't seem like they're happy…yes, they look like they're grumpy all the time…[Because Fiona's] funny, and she is a lot happier and she's actually a lot better…just the look on her face…but DoCS just seem like they're serious…DoCS wouldn't tell us half of the story…They thought that we know what was going to happen with the kids.

Mary reported experiencing this working relationship like a friend-relationship, where she noted she could talk to Fiona in the same way she does with her friend, and Fiona helped and was available in the same way as her friends. However, she understood the purpose of working relationship was for her to receive support to have her needs met and change. Part of the friend-like nature of the working relationship included Mary experiencing Fiona as like her in some way. From Mary's perspective, Fiona was someone who cared about her and talked with her across a broad range of issues (not only about parenting/child protection issues). According to Mary, Fiona also motivated Mary to make the difficult changes required, and challenged her to do so. These characteristics and actions were particularly important for being able to engage in the child removal process.

Turning now to the worker, Fiona reported an initial anxiety about working with the family. These were centred on certain assumptions she had developed that manifested as concern the parents might not be compliant or capable of working towards change.

> Fiona: Mary was well known around town. You'd see her wandering around. Never wore shoes anywhere. So you build up a stereotype picture of… She's not going to be compliant. She is going to be really hard. I just had that stereotype kind of image of a pretty

tough person who, who wouldn't want to have a lot to do with me.

However, Fiona's views considerably changed after trust was established. Once established, she perceived the parents as compliant ("they did everything expected of them"), naïve, open, genuine/real, trying to learn and change, and treating her as they treat their friends. Actually, Fiona considered trust central to the success of her working relationship.

> Fiona: I used to do things. And the other one that was supposed to be their [disability support] worker, and supposed to be, they felt very very, what's the word, cheated, manipulated. They didn't trust her at all, and they still don't to this day. They saw her, they don't trust her. Um, so that was just the difference between [us], they didn't trust her.

In addition, Fiona reported being present with Mary and Peter, focused on them and their needs, listening intently and providing resources and solutions as required. She explained to the parents what was happening regarding all aspects of the casework, and was a collaborator with the family in the sense of involving them in activities. She also informed them when she was on her way to visit prior to arriving, which Mary reported as respectful. She also reported that it is important to be humorous, positive, happy and hopeful, and to approach the parents as similar to herself in some way, as noted,

> Fiona: You had to go in there and you had to be at their level. And you had to sit in amongst, on the old car seats, you know, and they'd be smoking and puffing away. So you'd have a cigarette with them. So that you were one of them. So that you didn't sit there like, go in there in your nice, kind of dressed up, better than you kind of attitude. You had to go in there, and you had to talk their

language. You had to be them to, to be comfortable.

Fiona came to care deeply for the family. However, while torn at times about relational boundary matters, because of the genuine empathy and response at a human level that developed as a result of the working relationship, Fiona was clear that the working relationship was a professional relationship with goals to facilitate parent change.

Finally, Fiona experienced the working relationship as a very active champion for the family against what she perceived to be an unjust child protection system wielding its power against the family. An example of this emerged as she discussed the day the children were removed from Mary and Pater's care, as follows,

> Fiona: We came out of court, quarter past three. [The DoCS worker] said, "We'll be round to get the kids at 4". And Peter said, "They don't get home from school till a quarter to four. Can we have a little time to say goodbye?" So they gave them until 430. And that's, yeah, you can still hear the frustration there, the anger with it.

Georgina

Georgina was a single mother in her late 20s with four children, aged 1 year to 11 years of age. The three oldest children had been removed from Georgina's care. The children were not named throughout the interviews. Georgina's family worker is known as 'Vince, and his supervisor is named 'Rachel'.

Georgina identified as an Aboriginal woman with a long history in the region, and extensive family connections living nearby. However, apart from her father and one aunt, Georgina found few of these relationships trustworthy and supportive. Georgina's motivation to building a working relationship with Vince was brought about by years of being separated from all but her youngest child. Georgina referred herself to the service because of her primary motivation to be a mother for her children via family reunification.

Both Georgina and the worker reported her sense of anger, desperation and being forced into this position by the way she had been treated by statutory agency workers. They both noted that Georgina's profound level of anger hindered the developing working relationship. Georgina noted, it was important for her to have,

> …just somebody who I could confide in and I know it wouldn't get repeated anywhere else. Um, because I was, sort of wary, because, sort of, with the Department of Community Services and, just how much anger I had inside with the Department and how things were then. Where with Vince, I could just sit down and talk and I'd just come in and I just cried because it was just so hard because not having contact with the kids at all.

Georgina said that she found it hard to trust Vince initially. However she reported responding to Vince's friendly, happy and relaxed approach to her. She also reported that when she did trust and feel some sense of familiarly and comfort with Vince, she opened up about personal issues at the heart of her parenting difficulties; where previously she had kept the conversation to the issues related to what she had to do to have her children returned to her care. According to Georgina, it also helped that Vince was attentive and responsive to her needs, and showed that he genuinely cared about her, and her situation. Georgina noted that Vince did this by highlighting his social justice concerns regarding breaches of legislation by statutory agency workers, and his genuine willingness to collaborate with Georgina to help her achieve her outcomes.

Georgina reported that she relied on Vince as a confidant, "mate", "good friend" and someone she could trust. She recognised that she could not trust many other people, including her family, and appreciated his personal, friendly, respectful, non-judgmental, relaxed and humorous approach, and how supportive, collaborative, informative and empowering he was.

> Georgina: Every time I'd come here I'd ring and he was always, sort of, it was just that happy tone on the phone…And then we would just sit down and talk about things and um, he wasn't a person who, who would judge you…I guess it was just his personality, yeah…um, well he'd just, he'd let me sit there and talk about my issues and um, he wouldn't get angry.

While Georgina perceived the working relationship with Vince like a friendship, she understood that it was a "client and counsellor" relationship. As Georgina grew in confidence she learned to deal with some of her issues differently. Vince reported seeing Georgina become more positive, confident and proud in herself and her issues as she was "getting headway" and "having little degrees of success" with respect to her agenda. This included challenging, persevering and becoming more assertive with respect to child welfare sector decisions, and acknowledging positive growth and achievements. The key value of the working relationship was that through working with Vince, Georgina was able to learn how to navigate the child welfare systems that had kept her children separated from her for so long.

Turning now to the worker, Vince reported a perception that Georgina had some preliminary trust regarding him, due to having known someone who had previously worked with him, but that she profoundly distrusted statutory workers involved in the child welfare system. He also reported that although Georgina willingly participated in building the working relationship, she was apprehensive, untrusting and under some pressure to engage with him. According to Vince, Georgina had come to a point of desperation and distrust, having been worn down by having to engage alone with uncaring, unethical and unsupportive workers while attempting to have her children returned to her care, as noted,

> Vince: Georgina self-referred. And it was in relation to her circumstances of her children being taken off her several years prior and had

no contact… She had all of this stuff that she'd obviously tried to address with, you know, the protocols and systems, bureaucrats and DoCS being (pause)...So it had an element of (pause) deep emotion. Distrust of the system. But also um, to me there was a sense of corrupt, (pause) protocols weren't addressed that were in the Child Protection Act. And so I said you need a lawyer…I also, I just clearly saw that because it was a breach of the Child Protection Act, especially in regards to Aboriginals, not to mention that any parent whose children are taken off them should have some understanding or knowledge of where they are, how they're going. Even if they're not allowed to access them or see them. And she'd been denied that.

Vince approached Georgina with a strong sense of rights and justice with respect to the racist attitudes he believed Georgina was being subjected to, and lack of justice at the hands of those dealing with child welfare matters pertinent to her. An example of this was the empathy Vince displayed for Georgina regarding his awareness of the racist social context she lived in, and complex child welfare context he knew she had been trying to negotiate. Vince began to educate Georgina about her rights with respect to the child welfare system early in the life of the relationship. This included knowing the limits of his expertise and referring Georgina to someone who could meet some of her needs better than he could. Rachel, Vince's supervisor, also linked this with his collaborative approach, which she considered crucial to the working relationship, as noted,

> Rachel: I think just the systems that have been in place that they've had to battle through. I think that has probably made their working relationship better in some ways because they've been a bit of a team against the world.

According to Vince, the working relationship was like a "dance" between "mates", where they were aware of, and responded to, each other, and where Vince could be a confidant. Vince approached building a working relationship by accommodating Georgina and being attentive and responsive to what she said her needs were. This included letting Georgina talk a lot, being emotionally available to Georgina, being patient, non-judgmental, respectful, trustworthy, positive and hopeful. It also helped that Vince identified with Georgina in certain areas, and genuinely liked her. The way Vince reported his approach to Georgina demonstrated a realness, that is, that he was natural and genuine in his dealings with, and care for, Georgina. He reported a perception that, while a contentious idea, professional boundaries which restrict being natural and relaxed can be a hindrance to building a working relationship, for example,

> Vince: You create this rapport that, see if you don't, I don't know, that's, this is very, this is a secret. (laugh) If you don't feel like you like them, or you don't feel like their narrative is hitting a chord with you, where my values and core beliefs are, it's not healthy.

Interestingly, Vince found that Georgina responded differently to him when she became increasingly comfortable and open with him. This included her challenging him, and teasing him, but also being aware of, and caring about, his discomfort when she asked him to do a home visit when no one else was home.

Discussion

These two case studies provide a small insight into what literature on parents whose children are in out-of-home care have said about their experiences of the child protection system. The reported experiences of these parents and workers supports previous research which has found evidence that parents experience out-of-home care processes as intimidating, adversarial, unsupportive, and that it involves limits to participation, information and rights (Dumbrill, 2006; Featherstone & Fraser,

2012; Gallagher et al., 2011; Harries, 2008; Healy et al., 2011; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003; Thorpe, 2008). The reported experiences of the parents in these cases also supports other research which has identified a perceived lack of care and appreciation by workers in the child protection system for parents' pain and suffering, both prior to parenting, and during the out-of-home care process (Harries, 2008; Healy, 1998; McArthur et al., 2011; Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014).

In addition, the findings have provided insight into how a relational practice approach provides an alternate experience for parents. As seen in the working relationships described, these relationships were characterized by a respectful and non-judgmental attitude, open communication, shared power, participation and collaboration, advocacy and, above all, friendship-like care for the parents by the workers. This was the core meaning all participants derived from these relationships; that is, that it is possible to separate the client and professional from the human beings in the relationship, and to deeply care for each other without crossing professional boundaries (Reimer, 2014b). In particular, these two working relationships have demonstrated the point raised by Turney (2012), about how a relational approach acknowledges underlying ethical considerations that child protection practice is as much about valuing parents as human beings as it is about protecting children.

Building on this, it is useful to turn to ethics to develop deeper understanding of the relational approach described, and what was it about this that may have inspired such a different approach to that described of other workers in the cases. The following discussion will draw on conceptions of ethics as expressed by the philosophers Bauman (2000), Løgstrup (1997), Noddings (1999), and the social worker Gray (1995), to analyse aspects of the relational approach described.

Both Gray and Bauman talk about the ethical implications of social work, whereby building a connection at a human level makes us mindful of the parents' value as a human being. Further to this Løgstrup (1997) discusses trust as being an important factor in

what it means to be human, as follows, "Through the trust which a person either shows or asks of another person he or she surrenders something of his or her life to that person. Therefore, our existence demands of us that we protect the life of the person who has placed his or her trust in us" (p. 17).

Løgstrup (1997) argues that by asking for another person to trust us, and in trusting another, we lay ourselves open to the Other. Thus, we become dependent on each other. Furthermore, as Bauman (2000) notes, the other person's wellbeing depends on what we do or do not do or, as Løgstrup (1997) argues, the other person is in our power, and we are in theirs. Thus, we are being challenged to care for the other. However, Løgstrup (1997), further argues that being moral is not simply about doing what people want in the situation, but involves meeting the challenge to recognise the shared basic humanity and care equally for all those involved (children, parents, other family professionals). This involves responding to peoples' human needs and interests, and to challenge injustice (Bauman, 2000; Gray, 1995; Noddings, 1999). For people like Løgstrup, Bauman, Noddings and Gray this notion of care is at the heart of ethical practice.

If we turn our attention to parents involved in the statutory child protection system, this argument follows that failing to respond to parents this way means that we fail to see these parents like us at a fundamentally human level. In failing to take this approach to parents, we dehumanise them. Thus, they become the Other, and we no longer need to care about them. Also according to Bauman (2000), when we treat them as the Oher we relegate them to a position where we no longer need to respect their voice. In doing so, we completely disempower them.

There is much evidence that shows that the child protection system in Australia treats parents as the Other or, as Harries et al. (2007) argue, negated as human beings. This is particularly in the extent to which it discriminates over parents through disallowing them genuine opportunities to engage in child protection processes at multiple points along the care and protection continuum. As noted, these exist through limits to socially funded knowledge,

resources and support for parenting to prevent child maltreatment, and later through processes described by parents as demonstrating a position of "power over" them; that is, through processes that are adversarial, intimidating, dishonest and deceitful (Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2011; Harries, 2008; Thorpe, 2008). Furthermore, there is much evidence to show that Australian child protection processes treat parents in the most brutal of ways, and that these are actually not in the best interests of the children who have been removed from their families (Bruskas & Tessin, 2013; Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2011; Swain & Musgrove, 2010; Thorpe, 2008). It seems clear that while traditional approaches to child protection might have the best intentions, they do not always have the best outcomes for the parents and children involved, in what appears to be experienced as dehumanising processes.

This begs questions about possible alternatives, as the current moral undertones of "bad" and "deviant" parents coupled with the explicit power imbalances and limits to care inherent in the system, are clearly unethical. As argued, an alternative response to parents and children alike comes through the development of humane parent-worker relationships which are characterised by genuine care for the parents and children involved. The kind of relational approach described opens up opportunities for workers to genuinely care for the parents, whom researchers have found to be experiencing loss, grief, powerlessness, helplessness and other similarly profound feelings. Through putting genuine care for the human being in front of them at the heart of the working relationship, workers are acknowledging that the parent is not the Other. While this will not necessarily mean doing everything the parents want in relation to removing or not removing their children from their care, it will mean ethically being able to balance the needs and interests of parents, children and workers.

This paper has sought to argue that professionals working in statutory child protection settings have an ethical imperative to care about the rights of the parents subject to risk and harm allegations and substantiations. For workers involved in the statutory child protection system, this means that where a genuinely caring and humane working relationship exists between parents and workers, and where the work is underpinned by empowerment and social justice principles, the ethical conditions arise for the worker to advocate for parents in matters of child protection. The challenge for workers involved in child protection systems relates to how to enable such relationships in the context of an increasingly dominant neo-liberal ideology that privileges the rights of children over those of their parents, despite evidence that suggests that this is not always in the best interests of children or parents.

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