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Participation and emotion: troubling encounters between children and social welfare professionals

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The paper explores the emotional and affective aspects of children's participation within social welfare contexts by exploring the way professionals such as social workers and children's rights workers articulate, manage and negotiate the emotional when working with children and young people. The professional dilemmas involved in this emotional management are discussed in relation to work with children. A number of examples illustrate the complexity involved in negotiating and managing participation, as well as showing how this provokes a range of anxieties and strain for some individual and professional groups as well as for the institutions of welfare. This analysis is important because it helps us understand emotionality as one of the less considered aspects of participation. Furthermore, this insight into the process of participation within the institutions of welfare assists understanding of potential resistance to participation and as such contributes to a rethinking participation project.

The research involved analysis of social care policy texts and interviews with policy and children's rights officers. The study is based on original work carried out by the author involving analysis of 166 policy documents from Children's Services in England and Wales (Pinkney, 2005). The collection of policy texts forms a possibly unique collection of policies relating to children and young people's participation around the time of major restructuring of Children's Services and implementation of the Every Child Matters legislation . The main part of the analysis related to the 166 policy texts. This detailed analysis was followed with interviews with key professionals working within policy and/or practice within 5 different English authorities. The interviews used semi-structured questions and were transcribed by the author.

This paper supports, draws upon and aims to extend existing theorising on social policy and emotion (Pithouse, 1996; Hoggett, 2000; Froggett, 2002). The psychosocial lens adds richness to the analysis of social policy texts by helping to reveal some of the emotional aspects of social welfare work with children and young people. The analysis also draws upon work that falls within what has been called ‘the new sociology of childhood’ including the idea of children as agentic with a capacity for competence and children ‘being’ people now as well as ‘becoming’ future citizens (James and Prout, 1997; Hill and Tisdall, 1997). The policy analysis was complemented by previous professional experience in social, community, youth and play work where I gained insight into participation processes by listening to children and hearing them talk about difficulties they experienced such as child abuse, bereavement, loss and bullying, as well as their concerns about their own involvement in decision-making processes. In earlier years as a youth and play worker I was also involved in work with children and young people to develop local play and youth facilities as well as talking about their feelings of wellbeing in their own communities. These experiences gave me access to a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in the emotional management of participation work with children and young people in a range of settings. During the analysis of the policy documents I was interested to discover the ways they refer to children and young people as subjects in relation to emotionality and to understand the difference between the absence of this dimension within the policy texts and the expression of it within the interview texts.

Participation work provokes an emotional response for professionals and their organisations involved in work with children and young people. This was crystallised by the texts which capture a sense of both potency and disjuncture:

We regard the interests and welfare of the individual child as paramount at all times, even when these interests conflict with others. This is both a legal requirement and the Department's policy.

(Department A)

PO yeah they don't always want the child there to speak because they wouldn't know what to do with the information. And I don't think it is protecting the child. I think they are actually scared of what could potentially be said. And then they are in a position of 'now that we know that what are we going to do with it'? And I think there are occasions where it has been like this. I think if the young person says something they then want to see or hear something as a result.

(Participation Officer, Department Y)

The two extracts above contrast in that the first is taken from a policy text and the second from an interview with a participation officer employed to work with Looked After children and young people. The first illustrates the way that generally 'the best interests of the child' is presented in the formal policy texts as if it is uncomplicated even when a conflict of interests between the parent and child is acknowledged. Within the Children Acts (1989 and 2004) we see a similar representation of 'best interests'. In contrast to the policy documents the interviews were littered with

references to the emotional complexity involved in this work with children and in assessing their ‘best interests’. One reading of the interview narratives illustrates that anxiety and strain is part of the everyday experience of work with children in these settings. The Participation Officer describes his sense of ambivalence about social work professionals’ ability and willingness to listen to children. Here we see that listening is being constructed as involving a responsibility for taking action. We sense the frustration from a sense that it is not always possible to make a difference or change anything to demonstrate to the child that they have been listened to. What starts to emerge is a more complex story of children’s participation. I wished to explore this disjuncture between the formal policy texts and the interview texts further.

The arena of anxieties and the emotional and affective aspects of welfare work have been explored before (Gunaratnam, Y & Lewis, G, 2001; Pinkney, 2005; Shilling, 1997). Organisations operate on different levels to insulate themselves and their staff from the emotional. The organisational systems distance professionals from the people they are working with and distance society from ‘dangerous’ individuals (Hoggett, 2000). Organisations like SSDs develop socially structured defences including elaborate guidelines and procedures which constrain the way individuals work. Welfare organisations working in high-risk areas, such as child protection, where the highest anxiety is aroused expect high degrees of accountability from staff. The institutional response is one which, it has been argued, can lead to defensive, procedural, checklist, regulation and control driven practice (Froggett, 2002).

Individual welfare professionals experience stress and distress in work with service users and they seek to manage and negotiate this in a variety of ways. This also involves managing the emotion, stress and distress experienced by service users. In this study it was the analysis of the interview texts and conversations with professionals who work in welfare services which revealed how professionals either consciously or unconsciously develop ways of working and talking with and about children which seek to minimise their own anxieties and defend them psychically from stress. Froggett (2002) called these socially structured defence mechanisms which she identified at work in social welfare organisations. My research supports Pithouse's argument that 'while workers define their relationship as 'caring' it is also a subtly but firmly managed affair, an art of skilful self-presentation that balances an affective and official identity. In short, they create a sense of normative distance between themselves and their clientele' (Pithouse, 1996, p92). In this account it is argued that emotional management involves both distance and control.

Individual professionals sometimes use strategies such as seeking to avoid 'difficult talk'; others create distance by developing a bureaucratic and defensive way of working which reduces stress by channelling energy into task or assessment completion. Some hide behind 'professionalism' by becoming inflexible in their role or using their autonomy and discretion in ways which lead them into defensive practices.

What starts to emerge are the professional dilemmas involved in emotional management in relation to this arena of welfare work with children and young people. The following examples illustrate some of the complexity and difficulty involved in

negotiating and managing children and young people's participation in decision-making about their lives. The area of listening to children is the first example where policy appears unambiguous but in practice is understood differently by children and professionals.

Staff in senior posts are committed to listening to children and parents, and to those people in closest contact with them and to do so in a variety of informal settings. In children's services information obtained informally is often more important than statistics or reports.

(Department U)

The idea that it is senior staff who are committed to listening to children raises the question about who it is who usually does the listening in practice? The idea of listening to children informally as well as in formal meetings is emphasised and is consistent with the idea that listening to children should be part of a process rather than a one-off event. In the following interview extract the CRO raises questions about SSDs' ability to listen.

CRO ... I don't think organisations are truly child or customer focussed. For example if every time I went into Tesco's they said you can't have your bag of shopping until you've committed to coming next Thursday to a consultation day to tell us how you feel about

your shopping experience, I'd stop shopping there. But they find out that information on a day-to-day basis by knowing what my pattern of buying is ... and there's no reason why we can't do the same. I get told all the time about things young people are dissatisfied about ...

If I could change one thing it would be that we built systems that listened on a day to day basis to what children were saying, in whatever way they chose to tell us. So that whether that was that they told their dinner lady or a children's rights officer or a social worker, that that information had to go somewhere. Because to me that is the kind of information we should be listening to, not the participation events and the specific stuff ... because it's almost like you can't remove participation and make it into a little side issue, it's not an add-on, we should be living that and listening to them all the time.

(Children's Rights Officer 3, Department A8)

Here the idea of listening as part of a process rather than as an event is problematised. The argument is made that Children's Services experience difficulty functioning as listening organisations either formally or informally. The reference to Tesco's is a significant one given that public services are being encouraged to think of their users as consumers or customers. What is particularly interesting is the way the CRO appropriates the customer discourse as a way of improving the organisation's ability

to listen to children. This reworking of the customer discourse into children's rights by the CRO may be one way children's rights professionals are re-branding their arguments as part of the consumer discourse as this gives them a point of leverage within the political framework. The difficulties of mapping customer discourses onto children's services have been rehearsed elsewhere and briefly involves arguments that social care is different and cannot be commodified in the same way as a bag of groceries, that service-users do not have the same choices that customers have in choosing where to shop and that children may become quasi-customers in marketised welfare services with social workers, CROs or care managers negotiating on their behalf. (Pinkney, 1998; Clarke, 2004).

What became evident **during this** research was the range, complexity and depth of anxieties experienced by welfare professionals in listening to children and hearing what they have to say. **Research by McLeod** alerts us to the complexities involved in listening and the different ways that adults and children listen as well as the different ways they assess whether they have been listened to (McLeod, 2000, 2005). **My research findings are consistent with McLeod's research** findings. One part of this anxiety is that disclosure of experience or information might make welfare professionals responsible for some action as a result. This sometimes makes them into 'reluctant listeners'. In one interview the CRO discusses children's extensive efforts to ensure they are listened to and the way young people have to plot ways of getting adults to listen, which gives us a clue that their experience is more usually one of not being listened to. Underpinning this is the idea that children have to demonstrate competence whereas adults are assumed to be competent. The assumption that children and particularly younger children, are essentially

incompetent becomes part of a justification for not involving them in decision-making. In the next interview extract another CRO also discusses a different aspect of listening to children:

CRO so that I think to make sure that children's voices remain pure you have to look at the way, erm ... focus on the way that you are really listening and that's not just about hearing its actually about understanding.

... we have a group that was set up very early on called 'The Lively Trainers' and that is again about listening to children's voices and children being the experts. In the mid 90s when this was still very new and any group that was up and running was invited to go to the House of Commons or talk to Ministers, address national conferences or talk to managers. And what the young people were saying is this is, you know, quite interesting work and we like doing it but we're actually very angry about the things that happened to us and the things that happen to other children and young people and we're not very good at managing that anger but the adults are not very good at seeing beyond the anger.

(Children's Rights Officer 2, Department F)

The CRO use of the idea of 'pure' voice is an intriguing one. 'Pure voice' evokes the innocent child of normative discourse. An 'impure' voice, in this scenario, might be one that was mediated, muffled, directed, coached, constrained or interpreted. This involves an understanding of the way children's voices are sometimes appropriated by professionals or adults who may use them as 'decoration' or to add weight to their own arguments or perspectives. The other distinction made here is that listening is about understanding. In this extract the difficulties for adults/professionals in hearing children express strong emotions such as anger helps to illustrate another aspect of discomfort around listening to children. Angry children disrupt and seriously challenge the normative image of childhood as a time of innocence, playfulness and happiness.

I argue that taken together, these extracts provide illustrations about the complexities involved in 'listening' to children and that listening to and hearing children is not as simple as it is sometimes presented within legislation and policy. The institutions of welfare sometimes appear to be organised around practices which give the impression of listening although the children involved frequently report that they do not feel listened to. Individual professionals also find listening difficult and sometimes develop strategies that mean they avoid listening or hearing, especially when children are angry. The psychoanalytic framework assists in understanding this avoidance of listening to and hearing what children say. Klein (1975), for example, developed an understanding of how 'splitting' was sometimes used by professionals to avoid hearing the emotional register. In my research this could help explain how welfare professionals sometimes turn away from the emotionality involved in listening to children.

Within the next extract from an interview with a CRO a different set of issues are raised about professionals managing their anxieties about difficult talk with children:

CRO ... like I was talking to you earlier about a young woman aged 17 yrs who had been in care, got pregnant, had the baby removed at birth and was having contact with this baby. And this was a surreal child protection situation where the conference was about to make a decision to have the child adopted and it was all going through. And they were saying things like 'when the board have met' and 'the panel have met' then the baby will be adopted. So they were referring to ... they were talking about processes which only they were aware of. ...it is an awful thing to have to present to somebody so you present it in coded ways.

(CRO3, Department A8)

This extract could be interpreted in several ways. One interpretation is to view the 'talking in code' as an avoidance strategy being used by professionals. Viewed in this way it becomes a way of professionals avoiding dealing with the pain of talking directly and openly with children. Another interpretation is to view the 'talking in code' as an illustration of performance anxiety by professionals who are avoiding acknowledging that they have more power than children. Professionals may know it is important to have power, but somehow it becomes impolite or inappropriate to show

they have it. Previous studies have shown how welfare professionals such as social workers are often reluctant to use their considerable statutory powers (Satyamurti, 1981, Pithouse, 1996). When viewed in this way the ‘talking in code’ becomes significant as an exercise in power (and I will return to this theme later).

Concerns are often raised by professionals about the difficulties of working across different organisational structures and boundaries. The Inquiry Reports into child deaths continue to highlight the importance of co-ordination and co-operation across agency boundaries. The Victoria Climbié Inquiry report (Department of Health, 2003) and the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (Department of Health, 2004) led to the reorganisation of Child Welfare Services in England and similar developments took place elsewhere in the UK. One of the significant aspects of this reorganisation in relation to this research was the aim to improve co-ordination of services for children. In this research I emphasise how multi-agency working can be difficult for children as well as professionals. The policy texts reveal how multi-agency working is assumed to be unproblematic. Child protection conferences and review meetings are one example where the differences between professionals in ways of talking, thinking and working with children are played through and often become tense (Pinkney, 1998).

The following interview extract explores the way one particular group of professionals is situated in a complex position regarding participation of children.

CRO I think social workers really want the young person to contribute to their reviews more but young people don't tend to like reviews and how they're set up. And there are certain people who

they don't want there. Consistently we are told they do not want their teachers at their review.

...Mainly because young people will say nobody knows about me at school, and there's that thing that they just want to be another young person in school.

... actually it's about sitting in your classroom and looking at your teacher and you have to see that person every day who has just sat and listened to all that horrible stuff about you. And they find that really really difficult. And we've often been told well if someone needs to be there can't it be the Head of Year, so that in their heads they know that the form teacher must have had information passed on but they didn't have to sit in a Review and look at them.

(Children's Rights Officer 3, Department A8)

The difficulty here seems to be located in children's anxieties and the problems they face in attempting to construct 'normal' narratives of self when they are Looked After. This perceived breach of boundaries is an interesting one relating to their problems of constructing and managing public and personal/private boundaries.

The issue of the adult/professional gaze may also be significant here. Foucauldian analysis focused attention upon the idea of the gaze and in this extract it is the specific gaze of the teacher that is being constructed as problematic for children. This alerts us to the idea that there are differentiated adult gazes, with differing implications and

consequences for children. Organisations such as ChildLine have argued that sometimes it is the absence of the adult gaze that is crucial to their work in providing confidential support to children (Morris and Wheatley, 1994). This suggests that the issue of the differentiated adult gaze needs to be acknowledged within child protection and Looked After processes and may be more significant for children than has been accounted for so far within policy and practice frameworks in social welfare. This alerts us to other emotional registers and that seeing (and smelling), for example, may also be important as well as listening and hearing (Ferguson, 2004).

Questions arise about children and young people who either do not wish to participate or who find the current emphasis on participation as talking, listening and hearing problematic. Participation of younger children and children with disabilities have challenged the idea that participation involves attending an event and saying how you feel about an issue. More creative ways of enabling children to express how they feel, involving play, for example are encouraged. This involves an understanding that participation must embrace a diversity of methods to enable a diverse range of children to be involved. Hoggett argues that 'this, then, is a non-discursive world, in which the primary currency of human interaction is emotion rather than language' (Hoggett, 2000 p109).

The next extract is part of a much bigger theme that emerged during this research which related to what I am calling 'adoption stories'. I am using part of it here:

CRO I've got one girl at the moment who thinks she's going for access when she's in fact going for her last contact. He (brother) is being adopted and the recommendation is she has no contact with him.

SP And she wasn't prepared for that?

CRO No she has no idea about that. She rang our Helpline to say that she wanted help because every time she goes for contact she cries all the time. She's 11 years old. It upsets her so much to leave her brothers behind. And when I looked into it I found that they are in the final stages of adoption and she is absolutely unaware of this.

SP So why wasn't anyone talking to her about the plans?

CRO She lives with Grandparents who haven't come to terms with it themselves and are frightened that it will upset her ... so they don't talk about it ... and the social worker has gone along with that.

... they might as well be shipping them off to Australia. To me that is absolutely no more shocking than this.

(Children's Rights Officer Department A8)

This narrative links back to earlier discussion on the 'best interests of the che child'.

The comparison made here between contemporary adoption practices and the forced migration of children to Australia (which took place mainly during the 1950s). Fink

(2003) showed how the child migrant story became a powerful claims-making lobby

resulting in Britain's newly elected Labour Government reporting that 'Child migration was a bad and, in human terms, a costly mistake' (Department of Health, 1997-8). Fink argued that the child migrant lobby became symbolic of anxieties about children not being 'heard' within public welfare discourses in the 1990s. Linking these events is a way of arguing that this situation is a contemporary illustration of an equally shocking part of the history of social and welfare work with children which will one day be viewed with similar distaste. In my research this calling up and invoking of child migration to illustrate contemporary practices in participation and adoption practices is a powerful narrative device which adds weight to the story being told. Used in this way the child migrant story becomes a rallying call to illuminate the undermining of rights for children in a contemporary setting. Here we see how it disrupts the narrative that professionals will always act in children's best interests and instead alerts us to the way what is constructed as being 'the best interests' will vary historically and can be used to support a variety of practices.

One of the ideas that came across in many of the interviews with professionals was their discomfort about the event or story being told but also about their own organisations. My interpretation of this was that these are professionals who are passionate and committed to working with children within a rights framework and their discomfort arises when they see their organisations working against and undermining the child's participation rights. In this interview there was a strong underlying criticism of Children's Services in the way they are interpreting and operationalising participation. The issue of where Children's Rights and Participation

workers are situated (within Children's Services or voluntary organisations) may also be significant here.

The avoidance of difficult talk emerges here and is multi-layered with grandparents, social worker and to some extent the CRO being complicit in not talking openly to the child about the impending adoption. We can see how adult/professionals avoiding difficult talk with children and 'talking in code' may be a defence against the pain of telling the child what is happening. The strain of knowing but not telling is clear.

The extract also links with the idea of emotional literacy and competence of adult relatives and professionals to be able to communicate with children about difficult and sensitive issues. This is a powerful illustration of the importance of participation as part of a process rather than a one-off event which is 'done to' a child. We are left with concerns about the child's understanding of the situation and the impact this may have on her future well-being and development.

To return to the earlier theme, understanding the dimensions of power involved in these troubling encounters between children and professionals became an increasingly important aspect of the analysis. Welfare professionals may have become comfortable with a particular and appropriated model of participation which is not threatening or challenging. The complaints of young people sometimes being 'too empowered' alerts us to the way that participation can create resistance within social welfare organisations.

In these extracts we can view power as operating in various ways between professionals and children. In this research I am using a post-structuralist understanding of power as dispersed, relational and dispositional (Foucault, 1977, 1979 and Lukes 2004). One reflection from analysing these policy texts is that organisations like Children's Services live in fear of power. This fear may be associated with several aspects of power. Firstly there is loss or erosion of professional power in relation to changing practices or policies. Secondly there is concern about power in relation to its use and abuse (as in child abuse inquiries into residential abuse, for example). Thirdly concern is about undermining or diffusing of professional power (as in partnership or multi-agency work and so forth). These interpretations relate to the idea of power as relational and constituted within all exchanges between professionals and children. In relation to children and young people's participation, I am arguing that it is the tension between the fear of possession of power and fear of loss of power which is most significant. When viewed through this lens we can see how power is constituted, in various ways, within the organisation and practice of relations between different groups of professionals as well as between professionals and children. While problems of abuse of power are much discussed in professional and policy settings it seems that there is a more uncomfortable relationship to the possession and use of power in professional groups such as social work and children's rights whose professional practice is profoundly shaped by notions of enabling, empowering and participatory ethics.

There seems to be three levels of anxieties, relating to power, that are invoked in the participation process. Firstly there are the anxieties and stress of the institutions of welfare themselves as they try to balance the competing rights between parents,

children and professionals. Secondly there is the anxiety and stress experienced by individual professionals within those organisations who are working directly with children and trying to balance children's rights within a complex field of rights. Thirdly there are the concerns of children and young people about their difficulties with participation in decision making processes that relate to their lives. This research makes visible some of the difficulty of working with this complexity.

Understanding the emotional dilemmas for professionals within participatory policy and practice with children and young people is essential as part of a rethinking participation project which this research makes a contribution to. Participation practices need to move beyond the current state of play where many children and young people report not feeling listened to, taken seriously or having their views heard. Understanding some of the challenges and resistance to change involves further research and insight into the different ways that adults and professionals negotiate and enact participation. Within the field of social care and particularly in relation to children who are Looked After or at risk this presents ongoing challenges to social care professionals who operate at the boundaries between children and young people and social welfare institutions.

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