

A Qualitative Examination of Power between Child Welfare Workers and Parents

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Summary

This qualitative study examines the distribution of power in the working relationship between child welfare workers and parents mandated to services due to child abuse

and/or neglect. In child welfare settings, the relationship between workers and parents is complicated by institutional power structures governing rules and regulations for practice. Paradoxically, workers are expected to share power with families through the implementation of empowerment, collaboration and strength-based practices. This article focuses on three emergent themes: parents' and workers' feelings of powerlessness, their ability to each wield power in the relationship, and their perceptions of how power should be distributed. The emergent themes are discussed through the lens of three power constructs—hierarchical and imbalanced, negotiated and reciprocal, and shared and balanced power—as a theoretical and conceptual framework. Our findings indicate that *how* workers and parents choose to interact may influence service outcomes.

Keywords: Child Maltreatment, Child Welfare, Power, Working Relationship

Introduction

In the USA, approximately 899,000 reports of child abuse and neglect were substantiated in 2005, of which 80 percent of the perpetrators were identified as parents (United States Department of Human Services, 2007). Parents mandated to receive court-ordered services are often angry and resentful of the intrusion in their lives, which at times results in their being labelled as 'resistant', 'difficult' and 'hard to reach' (O'Hare, 1996). From the onset of services, there exists a clear power differential between parents and child welfare workers. If a parent disagrees with the worker or the direction of services, it is often difficult for the parent to voice his or her perspective. Parents are in the least powerful position whereas child welfare workers occupy positions of authority.

Despite this hierarchical tension between workers and parents, child welfare scholars continue to advocate for a change in service delivery, urging workers to share power with parents through a mutual collaborative process in goal planning and decision making (Briar-Lawson *et al.*, 2001; Milner, 2003; Ohl, 2003) opposed to a process that is solely worker-driven and controlled (Beyer, 1997; Cowger, 1994; Parsons *et al.*, 1998; Saleebey, 1997). Despite this recommended shift in practice, child welfare workers receive very little training on dealing with their professional power and, as a result, are unsure how to handle the authority inherent in the position (Sheafor *et al.*, 1994).

This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative study that explores the distribution of power within the worker–parent relationship, and begins to answer the following questions: (i) How do parents and child welfare workers perceive 'power' in the working relationship? (ii) How do parents and child welfare workers perceive goal planning and decision making in their working relationship? The intent of this study is to understand child welfare worker and parent perceptions of power in order to better inform child welfare practices and outcomes. The word *power* has numerous definitions, depending on situation and context. In order to

situate *power* in the context of child welfare practice, a theoretical and conceptual framework is presented.

Theoretical and conceptual framework for power

For the purposes of this research, *power* is grounded in two major assumptions. The first assumption is that power is a relational concept, occurring in the context of two or more people. The second assumption is that power has multiple meanings. In the social sciences, there is currently no agreed-upon definition of 'power'. Power theories developed in the political and social sciences provide a rich foundation for understanding power in the context of social work practice. Not unlike social work theories, each power theory provides a unique and varying perspective. Thus, a conceptual framework is presented that identifies power theories along a linear continuum. On one end of the continuum, power theorists believe that power is hierarchical and imbalanced. On the other end of the continuum is the opposing belief that power should be shared and balanced. The middle represents both—a belief that power is both hierarchical and shared through a negotiated and reciprocal process.

Hierarchical and imbalanced power

Numerous power theories exist which characterize power as hierarchical, where one person is believed to have control and influence over another (Emerson, 1962; French and Raven, 1962; Weber, 1986). French and Raven's (1962) social influence theory, based on Cartwright and Zander's (1962) empirical work with small groups at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, asserts that change occurs through the leader's ability to exercise five types of power: *referent power* (leader's ability to establish rapport and connection with client), *expert power* (leader's professional competency), *reward power* (leader's use of positive rewards), *coercive power* (leader's use of negative consequences) and, lastly, *legitimate power* (leader's assigned authority and job position). Examples of both reward and coercive power are frequently used within child welfare practice as child welfare workers decide whether children should remain at home with their families or be removed to alternative care.

Power theories based on the hierarchical and imbalanced distribution of power focus on the ability of the person in power to influence change over another. Diorio (1992) found that parents receiving mandated child welfare services struggled with blatant power imbalances, resulting in overwhelming feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability and fear. Diorio emphasized the need for child welfare workers to learn from parents and fairly address complaints regarding caseworkers' abuse of 'authority and power

to influence, affect, or determine [parents'] lives and their relationships with their children' (Diorio, 1992, p. 228).

Negotiated and reciprocal power

The concept of negotiated–reciprocal power, midway along the continuum, could be considered the mediator between the two opposing views on power: hierarchical and shared. The concept of negotiated–reciprocal power was introduced by a number of notable theorists (e.g. Arendt, 1986; Dahl, 1986; Lasswell, 1948). This is best articulated in Dahl's power theory, which identifies two components of power: first, the 'regulator' of power (the person or group *with* power); and, second, the person or group that is 'responsive or dependent' on power, considered *without* power (Dahl, 1986, p. 40). This theory is unique in that either person or group can have and hold power. The regulator of power is not inherently the one in control. Dahl acknowledged that the role of the dependent party (the person or group perceived as having no power) may be more powerful than the person or group perceived with power. His attempt to define the causal relationship in power relations creates uncertainty about who really has power. Dahl's theory suggests that the construction of power between two or more people can be viewed as negotiated and reciprocal, albeit perhaps unknowingly between both parties.

Follett's (1951) work builds on the construct of negotiated–reciprocal power in her conceptualization of *joint power*. She writes:

It seems to me that whereas power usually means power-over, the power of some person or group over some other person or group, it is possible to develop the conception of power-with, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power (as cited in Graham, 1995, p. 103).

Follett's notion of a co-active power framework implies that both parties are active in the relationship. In social work practice, both the worker and client can have active roles in the change process, unlike social influence theory, in which the professional would be identified as the primary change agent.

Cohen's (1998) research on power supports the construct of negotiated–reciprocal power. Situated in a residential setting for persons in need of psychiatric hospitalization, Cohen elicited the perspectives of social workers and clients on how decisions are made in the treatment process. Cohen found that participant responses were on a continuum from partnership to mentorship: 'partnership' representing equality and the sharing of power and 'mentorship' in which 'the client [is] granting the worker authority to make decisions' (Cohen, 1998, p. 437). Consistent with Diorio (1992), Cohen found that power is a significant factor in the helping process and that 'clients' want to have a say in decisions made in the treatment process that affect their lives.

Shared and balanced power

At the other end of the continuum, theorists advocate for and believe that a shared balance of power between those with power is attainable (Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman, 1986; Freire, 2000). The shared power perspective focuses on the possibility of an equitable balance, unlike a negotiated–reciprocal relationship in which power can be both balanced and imbalanced.

Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman (1986) conceptualize power from the perspective of collective action: ‘Power is rooted in energy, strength, and effective communication, and it is limitless’ (Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman, 1986, p. 12).

Empowerment practice is consistent with the shared power perspective, as the worker acts as a “‘facilitator” or resource rather than a director’ so that goals are ‘participant driven’ and developed in the context of a shared partnership (Parsons *et al.*, 1998, p. 9). One of the core features of empowerment practice is working from a strengths-based perspective. Strengths-based practice is the antithesis to the medical model that focuses on individual deficits and an ‘unequal power relationship between the worker and the client’ (Cowger, 1994, p. 63). It is believed that focusing on client strengths and building a collaborative relationship ‘equalizes power’ (Beyer, 1997, p. 3).

The power theories discussed provide a linear conceptualization of power. On one end of the continuum, power is viewed as hierarchical and imbalanced, in the middle of the continuum, power is viewed as negotiated and reciprocal, and, on the other end of the continuum, power is viewed as shared and balanced. This continuum provides a framework for examining power in child welfare practice between child welfare workers and parents. The study sought to understand how power is perceived and distributed in the relationships between child welfare workers and parents.

Methodology

Study design

This study utilized qualitative methods to collect data from child welfare workers and parents. To study power in the context of child welfare practice, a naturalist paradigm was applied (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The rationale for using naturalistic inquiry was guided by the importance of an emergent design acknowledging that perceptions of reality are multiple and constructed. Naturalistic inquiry is conducted in the participants’ natural environment with the belief that an unaltered setting can lead to a richer understanding of the phenomenon. Lincoln and Guba also embraced the notion that all research is ‘value-bound’ and subjective; therefore, the researcher needs to be cognizant of biases that may affect the data collection and analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 37). A naturalistic study

design accounts for the complex nature of relationships between the researcher, child welfare workers and parents, with the understanding that a 'mutual simultaneous shaping' will occur and potentially result in a co-constructed reality of the phenomenon under study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 37). Erlandson *et al.* (1993) assert that *how* we arrive at knowledge is the result of our interactions and interdependency with others.

Sample

This study received approval from three different Institutional Review Boards: a university review board, a state child welfare review board, and a voluntary agency review board. Participants were recruited in 2003 from one of two large private, not-for-profit child and family services agencies, providing services to multiple counties in a north-eastern State of the USA. Child welfare workers were recruited through the distribution of flyers and presentations at staff meetings. Parents were recruited through letters written by the researcher and accompanied by a letter of support from the director of prevention (also known as family preservation) services. The directors mailed a total of eighty-five letters to parents meeting the following criteria: the parents were at least eighteen years of age, English-speaking, the family was receiving services for child abuse and neglect, sexual abuse was not identified as the presenting problem, and the family received home-based services. Mandated family prevention programmes were chosen for this sample, as families in these programmes were more likely to be receiving intensive, family-based services on a weekly basis. Home-based prevention services were chosen based on the assumption that child welfare workers and parents in a home-based setting have more time and opportunity to develop a relationship, thus discussing more fully their perceptions of power.

Twenty-three participants were recruited for this study: eleven parents receiving services for child abuse and neglect, and twelve child welfare workers providing home-based prevention services to this population. Parent participants consisted of eleven mothers: five were African American, five were Caucasian, and one was Latina. Of the eleven households, there were seven single-parent homes and four two-parent homes. The self-selection of single mothers and mothers who identified as primary caretakers was not surprising given that custodial mothers represent 84 per cent of the population, whereas custodial fathers represent only 16 per cent of the population (US Census Bureau, 2001).

Child welfare workers consisted of nine women and three men, nine of whom were Caucasian and three who were African American. Workers held varying degrees: three with an associate's degree, two with a bachelor's degree, and seven with a master's degree.

Data collection

All interested participants called the researcher directly to learn about the study. The researcher explained the intent of the study, emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and confirmed that participants could withdraw at any time for any reason. Prior to the start of each interview, participants received a cash stipend with the understanding that they could end the interview at any time and keep the stipend. Participants were informed of their rights through informed consent procedures. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded with participant permission.

This first author conducted all interviews in a location most comfortable to the participant (home or private office/room setting). Each participant engaged in two in-depth, semi-structured interviews resulting in forty-five interviews (except for one parent, who chose not to participate in the second interview). Participants were not asked direct questions about defining power; instead, questions focused on the working relationship and the interactions between workers and parents. The key questions asked in the first interviews were: (i) Would you be willing to tell me about an experience you have had with a worker/parent (past or present) that you have felt particularly good about? And an experience that you did not feel good about? (ii) Describe your relationship with your current worker [or a family that you are currently working with]. The key questions in the second interviews were: (i) The relationship between your worker and your family is a working relationship intended to make things happen: can you describe your role in this? And parents were asked, can you describe your worker's role? (ii) Pretending that you were told that you were to get a new worker, what would you want to know about this person? What would your hopes and concerns be about your new worker?

Data analysis

The conceptual and theoretical constructs of power guided the interview questions as well as the analysis of this study (Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman, 1986; Cowger, 1994; Dahl, 1986; French and Raven, 1962; Weber, 1986). All transcribed interviews were coded and categorized. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define coding and categorizing as two essential operations in the data analysis process. Coding involved sorting through the data and distinguishing units of information that would eventually be placed into categories. Based on these groupings, categories began to emerge and were constantly compared and analysed to identify similarities and differences (Glaser and Strauss, 1999).

Throughout the coding and categorization process, the goal was to focus on emergent themes and patterns from the data. The constant comparison

method (Glaser and Strauss, 1999) was applied to the data of both parents and child welfare workers separately, and collectively, to identify similarities and differences in their points of view.

Study limitations

Parents and practitioners were specifically targeted from two participating private child and family agencies and clearly defined parent selection criteria. One of the limitations of this sample is that it represents only a small portion of the total child welfare population. Different themes may have emerged, such as if participants had been recruited from foster-care programmes or residential treatment facilities.

Another limitation is that all eleven parents and twelve child welfare practitioners were self-selected, based on their willingness to participate in the study. One of the reasons parents and workers cited for choosing to participate in the study was based on the researcher's association with a university. A number of participants shared that they were interested in returning to school and valued education. It is also interesting to note that, at the time of this study, all the parents except one were experiencing a positive and productive relationship with their current child welfare worker. Therefore, it is possible that this self-selected sample was different from the general child welfare population, potentially biasing the results of the study.

Lastly, one of the limitations inherent in qualitative research is the inability to generalize from a small sample to the general population. Although this study is not generalizable, there is the potential for 'transferability and fittingness', meaning that the themes in this study could potentially be applied to similar populations if they were 'sufficiently congruent' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 124).

Emergent themes

To begin to understand power in the context of the child welfare relationship, workers and parent participants were asked questions about the nature of the working relationship. Three major themes emerged from the data. One pervasive theme for both workers and parents was feelings of powerlessness. The second emergent theme focused on how workers and parents wield power in the working relationship. A third theme—workers' and parents' perceptions of how power is and should be distributed in the working relationship—also emerged.

The emergent themes supported two out of the three power constructs outlined earlier. Specifically, the power constructs 'hierarchical–imbalanced power' and 'negotiated–reciprocal power' were supported by the

emergent themes within the data but the construct 'shared and balanced power' was not supported by the data. Emergent themes regarding how the child welfare workers and parents perceived power, goal planning and decision making are now discussed in the context of this power continuum.

Hierarchical and imbalanced power: perceptions of powerlessness

The relationship between child welfare workers and parents exists in a complex system with rules and regulations designed to keep children safe. Child welfare workers and parents discussed their perceptions and feeling of powerlessness within this system. Child welfare workers reported that the responsibilities associated with the child welfare system, especially the family court and the public child protection system, could place a strain on the working relationship. *How* the tension within the system was addressed by both the worker and parent could affect the relationship.

Parents said that they were directly affected by the overarching power structures of family court and the public child protection system (CPS). Child welfare workers viewed their prevention programmes (also known as family preservation) as voluntary, yet, in reality, parents had been mandated by the family court system to participate in these prevention services. Workers reported that parents had few choices when mandated to participate in these services, unless their status changed from mandated to voluntary, or the public child welfare caseworker felt continued services were needed.

An emergent theme within powerlessness, expressed by workers, was the expectation that they are the 'eyes and ears' for CPS. Workers and parents both expressed feelings of powerlessness in the face of the authoritarian power structure of CPS. A number of workers reported role confusion and described CPS as indiscriminately wielding power, depending on the CPS worker. As a result, workers reported that they often felt conflicted in their work with families. In the following excerpt, a worker reported that she and her office colleagues were discussing the expectations of one CPS worker:

At one meeting a CPS worker described the prevention job as the eyes and ears of CPS which is kind of funny instead of counseling, which is what we are supposed to be doing.

In the next excerpt, a worker was discussing the court ordered services that parents were required to attend and, without prompting, she added the following:

I'm supposed to be their therapist but then I have CPS calling me saying what they're doing. I actually had a CPS supervisor tell me I'm supposed to be their eyes and ears in the home.

Similarly, another worker felt that the local district wanted him to remain involved with the family so that he could be the ‘eyes and ears in that house to know that the husband wasn’t there’. Being both counsellor and the ‘eyes and ears’ for CPS are an examples of the pressures that workers are under to adhere to public child welfare rules and regulations, and to also fulfil agency responsibilities of providing family preservation services. Workers identified their primary goal as helping families, and emphasized the importance of developing a productive, trusting relationship. However, they reported that balancing their role responsibilities was challenging.

Parents’ perceptions of feeling powerlessness were associated with not fully understanding the child welfare worker’s relationship with CPS. Some parents felt that everything they said to their worker was being reported back to their public child protection worker, resulting in mistrust. However, others also reported feeling more trustful; whilst they were aware that workers talked with each other, more importantly, they expressed trust that their child welfare worker was talking about matters of significance. Some parents reported knowing whom they could and could not trust, based on their long-term involvement with workers within the child welfare system. In the following excerpt, a parent reported her struggles with her child welfare worker, who disclosed their conversation to her CPS worker without her knowing. She commented:

I have worked with workers for so long, what I’m getting from her [is that] you need to always be on your P’s and Q’s with me because everything you tell me I’m going to right to [CPS worker].

Within the child welfare system structure, workers and parents are challenged to work together in a manner that is therapeutic and productive. Child welfare workers and parents both discussed a number of challenges they encountered and their feelings in reaction to these challenges.

Worker challenges

Given authoritative power in the context of the child welfare system, workers have the responsibility of ensuring a child’s safety and well-being in their family environment. Workers were constantly balancing the roles of mandated reporter, link person to public child welfare, and family support worker. This responsibility was also confounded by cultural issues, such as socio-economic status, race and ethnicity.

Workers reported the challenge of engaging families who are struggling but opposed to services and perhaps mistrustful and suspicious of their involvement. One worker commented:

They didn’t want services from the start and they made it difficult. The fact that they were really, really really having a rough time. I guess it wouldn’t

[have] felt as bad if I felt like they were doing really well and they didn't want the services there.

Child welfare workers expressed a number of feelings in reaction to the stress and strain of the job and working with vulnerable families. They shared stories of feeling frustrated and overwhelmed when a family member was unwilling or unable to change and they also reported discomfort when they felt that other professionals were being abusive towards parents. Workers shared stories of colleagues making judgmental and patronizing statements about families and their powerlessness to confront these situations. These are illustrated in the following excerpt:

You'll hear people say when a clients walk out a door sometimes, 'God! She's such a maggot'. Sometimes it just like 'oh God' that makes my stomach turn. I can't believe it when I hear other co-workers talk about clients like that. It's like why are you in this job? That's what we're doing. We're part of that system. We're part of giving a service and you don't call them maggot or consumer.

This worker provided an explicit example of worker reactivity expressed in an unprofessional manner. The other examples of negative worker reactivity were more subtle. A number of workers stated their goal of empowering parents but their use of language appeared more patronizing than empowering. Patronizing comments were reflected in such statements as 'He is starting to accept guidance and he is doing excellent' and 'I mean, praise them on that but you know just being supportive, but not too much'.

Parent challenges

Parent challenges, as opposed to worker challenges, focused on life struggles, which brought them to the attention of the public child welfare system, as well as experience with past workers that they perceived as unprofessional.

Parents in this study reported a number of obstacles, such as mental illness, substance abuse, trauma, isolation and lack of resources. One parent told of her foster-care experience:

I went to a foster home, I was, it all started out at _____ shelter, it started there first and then from there on I was bounced. And my mom fought to get me out, which I don't understand why because her home life is like mine but the only difference is that my kids are hearing it verbally but they are not seeing me full of blood, they are not seeing [my child] knock me the frig around all through the frigging house. My kids don't see what I had to see, you know. My kids don't deal with a drunk.

Parents reported their ability to confront their childhood challenges by talking openly with a trusted worker. Parents acknowledged that dealing with painful issues and trauma was difficult and almost impossible in isolation of support and community resources.

Parents reported a range of feelings in the process of dealing with their own challenges as well as the difficulty of dealing with workers whom they perceived as unfair or abusive. They described feeling angry, overwhelmed and fearful, and they also acknowledged becoming defiant or too paralysed with emotions to move forward. One parent shared the following:

I had a worker that used to always say to me, 'Well, you know today could be the day that your child is removed completely?' And she used to say this all the time, right before we go to court. So like my counselor and them started listening to her and hearing like, 'This woman is not really for her. This woman is more against her. This woman really wants her parental rights to be removed.' So they would help me 'cause see then ... at times, my hurt and my anger would like blind me.

Some parents reported feeling treated like a 'child' or 'less than' by some workers. As one parent shared, 'She would always make me feel like I was less than her because she didn't have [the same] problem'.

Worker and parents' perceptions of powerlessness appear to be associated with inherent hierarchical power structures within the child welfare system. How a worker exerted his or her power in the relationship and how a parent reacted to this imbalance of power could potentially complicate and strain the working relationship. The majority of workers struggled with their use of power and believed that some parents, with or without their consent, needed to be given firm direction and guidelines. The majority of parents disagreed with this position, instead seeking a more collaborative, give-and-take relationship with their worker.

In the midst of these expressions of hierarchical power structure, both workers and parents shared perceptions of power that were distributed reciprocally. The next section addresses this relationship.

Negotiated–reciprocal power: perceptions of wielding and distributing power

Eleven parents reported their perception of having power in the relationship with their current child welfare worker, whereas one of the eleven parents in the study reported only feelings of powerlessness. The parents in this study discussed the importance of being actively involved in decision making for their families, and being treated with respect and dignity. The majority of child welfare workers emphasized the importance of parents being involved and included in service decisions and a number shared their philosophy of 'empowering' families and using a 'strengths-based' approach. As stated by one worker:

You see I'm all about empowerment; I'm all about helping the family to help themselves. This is how they learn better coping skills and when they learn better coping skills, then they are able to deal with their day-to-day issues because everybody's got issues that they deal with in a more appropriate way.

The approach of working with the family so that the family could ‘help themselves’ was echoed by many workers and appears to be based on a level of trust and respect that was fostered mutually by both child welfare workers and parents. Parents and workers perceived that their ability to work together was fostered through open discussion, negotiation and emotional closeness. This section discusses in more detail the nature of co-active behaviours and more specifically worker and parent behaviours and actions that fostered a negotiated–reciprocal distribution of power.

Parents and workers described co-active behaviours (those involving action of both the worker and the parent) in which power was negotiated through a process of mutual exchange. This interdependency evolved over the course of the relationship, and was characterized as a trusting and respectful relationship with a comfortable level of emotional closeness. Child welfare workers described the importance of parents feeling supported and valued:

I think one of the most successful things for me that I work hard on is to build that rapport with a parent. I don’t necessarily have to agree with their perceptions, as long as I’m aware of what mine are. It’s kind of just to validate the struggle that they’re going through and ask where they’re coming from, which is hard, especially when CPS might be involved with abuse and neglect charges, and then coming in with what they need to do and parents don’t always agree with that.

Parents also emphasized the importance of developing a trusting relationship, and the importance of give-and-take interaction:

Really getting to know me and knowing, you know, what I need from him and then getting to know my children and know what they need from him. So, I mean, we both got to be on the same playing field. And see that’s where they show us status, especially when we get a new worker I let the kids go around and do some stuff, tell them what they like and what they don’t like, and then we all ... you know just basically sit down together and just get to know each other, you know, for the first couple of sessions I try to do that with the worker then get to details and problems.

Worker characteristics

Parents identified three key worker characteristics that they perceived as fostering a productive interaction: a positive disposition, compassion and authenticity. Regarding a worker’s disposition, one parent said:

There’s an openness. There is a lot more openness than before. We still have other workers that, you know, there’s not a lot of openness. It takes a little while for any family to open up, but with the one new worker that we have, she’s very nice, very easy going. And it also helps when you have, I don’t know what’s the word, more pleasant attitude. It kind of helps for, you know

Parents and workers also identified three key worker activities perceived as contributing to a negotiated–reciprocal relationship. These activities were identified as: acting as a buffer and mediator between imposing power structures (family court, child protection services and social services), empowering parents, and being knowledgeable. As one parent stated:

So not only are they teaching us to be more responsible, they're also teaching us how to better ourselves. So that we're constantly ... the ones that are doing the programme are constantly bettering themselves.

Parents reported feeling heard, valued and included in decision making and goal-planning, with at least one or more workers (prevention, child protection services and family court judge) involved with their family. As one parent stated, 'You get to make your own decisions, make them understand'.

Parent characteristics

Child welfare workers identified a number of parent characteristics that they perceived as contributing to growth and change: the ability of parents to open up, share what they thought, take risks and make choices. It was also important that parents contributed to discussions, shared knowledge and, lastly, took responsibility. Workers perceived the parents' ability to create changes as imperative for creating changes for the family.

A number of parents provided some poignant examples of how their action(s) were changing the lives of their children:

See I used to be a crack head, but I'm not a crack head no more. Moved on, you know. They talked about Jesus Christ regardless of what He did good or bad indifferent, you know what I'm saying? So, you know, we've got to make choices today and I'm really trying to teach them it's about choices. And today, for me, I want to make the right choices, so I can set an example for my children to make the right choices in their lives, you know.

The ability of workers and parents to develop a relationship that could endure the process of negotiation appeared to be built on a foundation where trust, respect and closeness were nurtured. This distribution of power was closely linked with perceptions of shared power but 'shared and balanced power' did not occur as a consistent, on-going form of interaction. Instead, shared power appeared to be a feature of 'negotiated–reciprocal power'. A number of child welfare workers held the value of an equally shared distribution of power in the relationship, although they knew that at any point, they could exert power based on the hierarchical nature of the relationship. In fact, a number of workers felt it was their responsibility to exert power over a parent to ensure the child's safety.

The themes reported above discuss parents' and workers' perceptions of power in the context of the child welfare working relationship. Participants

shared their perspectives on the working relationship, demonstrating not only how power was distributed between worker and parent, but also how decisions and goals were affected by this relationship. Parents in this study reported having benefited from relationships with their child welfare worker where there was mutual respect and negotiation. However, the process of acquiring and sustaining a negotiated–reciprocal relationship took time and energy. Time and energy were limited resources for child welfare workers, who reported juggling numerous responsibilities. Therefore, this raises the question: If child welfare workers were aware of what behaviours promote either a hierarchical or negotiated–reciprocal relationship, would this increase their ability to be effective?

Discussion

The field of child welfare appears to be in a transformative stage of learning how to ‘share power’ with parents through mutual decision making and goal planning (Briar-Lawson *et al.*, 2001; Milner, 2003; Ohl, 2003). The data in this study support this transformation, but also highlight an emergent theme of parent and workers feeling powerless. Parents and workers alike shared struggles with the role of child protection as well as worker unprofessionalism. This raises the question: Is the role of professional power being addressed in training? This study supports the need for explicitly addressing the issue of how child welfare workers and parents wield power in the context of their relationship. It is interesting to note that, at the time of this study, the majority of parents were experiencing a child welfare relationship in which they were able to exert or perhaps ‘share’ power with their worker. Yet, each of these parents had a story of feeling powerlessness with prior workers. This raises a number of questions: Was the parent not ready for services? In what ways might the worker have contributed to the problem by using hierarchical power? In what ways might the worker have contributed to the solution (productive change) by using negotiating and reciprocal power? Further research that replicates this study in other child welfare settings is needed to see if similar themes emerge. Is professional power the neglected proverbial ‘elephant in the room’? As stated by Sheafar *et al.* in 1994, social workers receive little training on how to handle their authority in practice settings. Now, thirteen years later, we continue to struggle with teaching social workers and, more specifically, child welfare workers about professional power.

The language of ‘sharing’ power may need to be reconsidered. In the literature, ‘sharing’ suggests an equitable distribution of power in which service delivery is ‘participant driven’ (Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman, 1986; Parsons *et al.*, 1998, p. 9). Is this attainable in child welfare practice? The participants in this study did not perceive an on-going, consistent sharing of power. Yet, power was shared in the context of negotiating

service delivery and learning how to foster a give-and-take working relationship. The reality is that family court orders mandate specific service delivery and child welfare workers are mandated reporters—this hierarchical power cannot be denied. Perhaps, therefore, shared and balanced power as described in the literature is unrealistic in the context of child welfare practice. Instead, sharing decisions through a process of negotiated–reciprocal power may be more realistic and, as perceived by workers and parents in this study, is occurring in practice.

Parents' and workers' perception of power focused on a negotiated and reciprocal power relationship; this included the ability of parents and workers to negotiate power through a constant give-and-take collaboration. Co-action and worker–parent interaction provide important information for future research (Follett, 1951). Both workers and parents perceived characteristics that contributed to productive interaction. Worker characteristics included a positive disposition, showing compassion and being authentic. Parent characteristics included a willingness to be open, to take risks in trusting the relationship and in making choices. Are these worker and parent characteristics key variables in fostering a productive working relationship? If so, are these variables associated with positive service outcomes?

Conclusions

The challenge for child welfare practice is to meet the needs of children and families more effectively. This qualitative study examined the distribution of power between child welfare workers and parents, focusing on parent–worker interactions in order to explore participant perceptions of how power was distributed in the relationship. Based on the emergent themes in this study, it would appear that both workers and parents can contribute valuable knowledge toward the advancement of child welfare practice.

It is important to acknowledge that not all parents remain angry and resentful of services, nor do they remain hard to reach. Clearly, the distribution of power between workers and parents in child welfare practice is complex and multi-faceted. How workers and parents engage in the relationship and how they move from inaction, action to co-action involve the constant negotiation of power. How workers and parents choose to interact is a key variable influencing the quality of treatment and one that either facilitates or impedes negotiation. Therefore, it is imperative that workers are cognizant of power dynamics and behaviours that foster rather than impede parent and familial openness and motivation to change. Workers need to become cognizant of the power they wield and learn to use this power wisely. Workers need clarity about how to use their professional power in a manner that abides by county, state and federal mandates, yet also nurtures a productive working relationship in which

long-term change is fostered over short-term compliance. Not an easy undertaking, thus it is important that child welfare workers receive training on how to handle their professional power in the context of a complex system.

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