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# Practitioner–Mother Relationships and the Processes that Bind Them

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TITLE: Practitioner–mother relationships and the processes that bind them

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ABSTRACT

*This paper outlines a theoretical contribution to conceptualising practitioner-mother relationships in child protection social work. It examines what is represented when these face-to-face encounters takes place. It suggests an inter-subjective dimension where mothers are in effect asked to give an account of themselves. Drawing on humanities and social science writing, practitioner-mother relations are examined to analyse their symbolic and literal significance and the underlying purposes and assumptions that bind them. Butler's theory of recognition is utilised to alert us to the importance of supporting the narrative capacity of women caught up in child protection processes and of allowing the mother to give an account of herself as a woman and as a mother.*

INTRODUCTION

In social work the concept of relationship has proven durable, reproduced between generations of its writers (Hamilton 1940, Perlman 1957, Biestek, 1957, Forder, 1966, Butrym 1976, Stevenson 1986, Cooper and Lousada 2005, Howe *et al* 1999, 2010, Ruch *et al* 2010). Towle (1946:168) regarded a 'consciously controlled professional relationship' as the central component of social casework. Hollis (1966) emphasised the value of an accepting relationship for its supportive and corrective contribution to the private and public ills of vulnerable citizens. These post-war pioneers drew on psychodynamic theories while setting them within a broader psychosocial understanding of the impact of social forces on the individual in society. They built on Richmond's (1917) concept of social casework. Historically individual freedom to grow formed a common principle (Perlman 1957) contained in the functions of the formal organisation (ibid 47, Towle 1946). Further tenets included a non-judgmatic approach, confidentiality, a neutral but understanding response and a relationship that could be used to some advantage by the person, taking account of their social circumstances. These tenets were mainly based on a model of relationship building between adults. More recently the importance of relationship in modern practice has been re-examined (Ruch *et al* (2010); Howe (2010) and re-emphasised in child protection policy (Munro 2011). Child protection in the context of this paper refers to state intervention in the lives of families by child and family social workers. In most cases child welfare statutes underpin this involvement.

Drawing on humanities and social science writing, this paper examines practitioner-mother relationships in child protection social work to analyse their symbolic and literal significance and the underlying purposes and assumptions that bind them. We have adopted a conscious partiality (Mies 1993) in deciding to examine practitioner-mother relationships for three reasons. First, the central place allocated women in current child protection processes; second, the importance attached to maternal care in

society; and third, disaggregating 'parents' in order to examine in-depth one set of relations to better understand the nature of the whole from first principles.

This paper explores what is represented when face-to-face practitioner-mother encounters take place in child protection where a dual professional obligation to assist parents and children and a public duty of child safety surveillance is present. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of recognition it examines an inter-subjective process where mothers are in effect being asked to give an account of themselves. It argues this process constitutes a foundational stage in establishing relationships with women and is essential to building productive relationships in child protection. This paper contributes to the developing literature on the relevance of Judith Butler to social work especially in the generation of fundamental questions about what it is to be human and to recognise the experience of marginalised individuals and groups (Featherstone and Green 2009).

CONTEXT OF CHILD PROTECTION SOCIAL WORK

In the UK the goals of child protection processes are predominately associated with an exercise of social control (Parton *1998*), although not exclusively (Ferguson 2011). Practitioners, as in some legal practice (Nelson 1985), may have to act as a restraining force on parents who are not at liberty to withdraw. Practice revolves around parties of unequal status and resource. Parties are resource challenged. The children of minority ethnic and indigenous women are found to be over-represented in child protection statistics (Tilbury 2009). Parents may not operate with the same values as social workers (Dingwall *et al* 1995, Packman 1968) nor see the same social implications of their actions.

The practitioner-mother encounter takes place against a social, political and moral context so that any interaction is both literal and symbolic (Goffman 1963). Socially state surveillance of families is found to be associated with poverty and single parenthood, especially single mothers (Davies and Krane 1996). Politically child protection may serve to embed cultural expectations of women's role in child rearing and family life, reinforcing dominant political ideology about the status of women in society and gendered division of family responsibilities (Humphreys and Absler 2011). Morally, women may be blamed for alleged failures in the upbringing and protection of their children and at the same time women are perceived as the 'main alternative source of child protection' (Scourfield 2001: 83). Howe (1994: 524) observes that women comprise the majority of social workers and clients.

Hacking (1999) argues that 'an idea, a concept or kind is formed' (p.10) within a particular social setting or matrix. In child protection the literal matrix consists of a set of institutional practices and policy that include a forensic approach to responding to child abuse, a narrow definition of child harm (Buckley 1999), professional practice that foregrounds the risk paradigm (McLaughlin 2007), interrogative approaches which emphasise procedures and recording, case conference proceedings, joint police investigations, child abuse registers, courts, foster carers, reports and supervised visits.

This context in which child protection operates affects practitioner-mother

relationships. Contact is often not voluntary which contributes to parental resistance to engagement with practitioners (Forrester et al 2012). Intervention may be considered more punitive than supportive in its purpose (Lapierre 2010). Fear of losing care of their child becomes an overriding concern leading to wariness about seeking assistance (Humphreys and Absler 2011). The fact of involvement takes on a symbolic significance where an accusation of want of good mothering hangs in the air, remains in undecided state while containing the potential to crystallise into an indictment.

The Munro Review of Child Protection in England (2011) follows a long succession of UK public inquiries into the apparent failure of state social work to protect the lives of children under their aegis. Munro does not propose major structural change in the multi-agency system that governs child protection. Instead she focuses on professional judgment, early help and argues for strong purposive relationships with children and families in order to secure positive outcomes for children. She suggests that the centrality of forming relationships with children and families has become obscured. Munro primarily emphasises the importance of practitioner-child relationships and the significance of continuity for their development.

The particular relevance of the Munro review for this paper is the importance given to the concept of relationship as a central and not a marginal phenomenon to the reform of child protection policy and practice. Relationship is generally adopted as a concept that can be taken for granted as a recognised vocabulary within social work. It is seen as capable of transcending the complex social context of child protection. Despite its familiarity, it is argued, the concept is less than straightforward and needs to be articulated within a body of knowledge.

In order to do this it is necessary to consider what assumptions bind this social relation when maternal care is subject to question? Relationship is a kind of social relation, a form of social interaction that takes place within face-to-face situations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Judith Butler (2005) provides a philosophical and linguistic lens to begin to examine and conceptualise what underlies practitioner-mother encounters in child protection.

JUDITH BUTLER

Judith Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature, University of California, Berkeley. In her book Giving an Account of Oneself (2005) she examines notable philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, especially Adorno (1963), concluding that their differences are overshadowed by a common theme. She is concerned with the problem of ever knowing who we are. She writes on the moral and ethical issues that arise in constituting "I". The "I" derives from giving an account of oneself and what we have done (Butler 2005). The demand to account for oneself she argues 'is a matter of fathoming at once the formation of the subject (self, ego, moi, first –person perspective) and its relation to responsibility' (p.135). Butler questions whether we can ever be self-knowing when our very emergence remains opaque to us. It will always miss the constitutive beginnings. This unknowing has its origins in early relations, primary relations, not always subject to consciousness. The knowledge of partial transparency binds us as people to each other and is a resource of ethics. The terms in which we give an account of ourselves are in

part social in character, the 'impress of social life' (p.135). Therefore the ethics of responsibility must include a social as well as rhetorical critique, where the self cannot be set apart from our social life.

Butler puts in plain words the emergence of self when she writes 'I begin my story of myself only in the face of a "you'" who asks me to give an account'. In this encounter '...we must become self-narrating beings' (2005:11). This narrative capacity is the prerequisite for any account of moral agency and it is through this narrative capacity that we find a means of giving an account of ourselves and assuming responsibility. This is not the same as telling a story about oneself. The difference lies in the self-questioning acceptance of the possibility of causal agency. This is the very essence of the creation of self as a reflexive subject: 'I come into being as a reflexive subject in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me' (2005:15).

An account, to be recognisable as such, takes place within 'the structure of address' regardless of whether the 'addressee' is present or explicitly identified (Butler 2005:36). In giving an account individuals try to make themselves recognisable and understandable. This begins with a narrative account set within a social existence beyond the individual. In this way social norms frame an encounter between self and other. This constitutes the scene of recognition, the backcloth for 'seeing and judging who I am' (2005: 29). Butler cites Cavarero (2000) who suggests the fundamental question to recognition is "who are you? (2005:31). This question assumes individual uniqueness that cannot be fully apprehended by the other, thereby limiting reciprocal recognition. In other words there are inbuilt limits to knowing ourselves and knowing others.

Butler suggests the question of ethics emerges 'precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed' (2005:21). This builds on Arendt's politics of relations where 'exposure and vulnerability of the other makes a primary ethical claim upon me' (Arendt, 1958 cited in Butler, 2005: 31). In Butler's terms giving an account is '...a kind of showing of oneself, a showing for the purpose of testing whether the account seems right, whether it is understandable by the other, who "receives" the account through one set of norms or another.' (2005:131). Judging is a form of address. Prior to judging another, we must be in some relation to them. The relation will inform the ethical judgements we finally make.

Butler (2005) accepts that judgements are necessary for political, legal and personal reasons. She recognises that problems of power arise and should cause us to ask of ourselves '... how ought I to treat you?' (p. 25). Social recognition sometimes obligates us to suspend judgement in order to apprehend the other. She goes on to argue that it may only be under conditions of suspended judgement we create the conditions necessary to render us capable of an ethical reflection on the humanity of the other. The point she makes is that suspended judgement is needed when we are least able to understand the other and their actions, namely, when these arise at the outer periphery of human behaviour, human annihilation. She explains that, notwithstanding the necessity of judgements, not all ethical relations are reducible to acts of judgement. It is possible to judge without recognising the individual, judgement is not a theory of recognition as elucidated by Butler.

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Outright condemnation without recognising our common humanity and without asking the question – who are you? - deprives us of an ethical recognition of the individual's personhood. It also deprives us of knowing what humans are capable of doing to themselves and others. This 'knowing' allows us to prepare ourselves for or against things that may happen. Condemnation is the way we make the other unrecognisable and can work against self-knowledge and self-disclosure.

A rhetorical dimension is intrinsic to giving an account of oneself. The individual is responding to the premises of the other and seeks to influence the other's view of them and their actions. This is not deliberate deception but arises from the limits of human self-knowledge and suggests the importance of 'generosity to the limits of others' (2005:80). This recognition must become inherent to moral judgements otherwise there is a risk of a kind of violence to the ethics of speaking *with* another about their actions. Butler is neither abdicating individual responsibility nor holding individuals to account for their actions. Her theory of recognition incorporates the idea that we can never fully know ourselves because our identity encompasses a pre-speech history and the stamp of social life.

In giving an account to the other a complex interaction is taking place. The self is constituted and reconstituted within social relations both formal and informal. In any conversation the individual responds to the reactions of the other and this contributes to the shaping of their account. In this interaction the process of giving an account of oneself causes a 'certain rupture' with the self, as elements of the 'I' 'do not bind together' (2005:69). This brings the potential for individual harm as well as individual growth and in either case does not return them to the same position as before. It brings 'hope' that the other will be able to make sense of the different threads of their account and will offer it back to them in a new form that does not absolve responsibility but retains the integrity of an 'I'. This brings responsibility for the connection with the other, especially in the context of an unwanted address, and is the nucleus of an ethical claim each to the other.

DISCUSSION

Child protection is a context in which human encounters take place. Butler helps us to see there is more than meets the eye in the practitioner-mother encounter. Her philosophical critique points to the problem of ever knowing who we are and the ethical dimensions present in every human encounter. While the origins of self-emergence and the consequences for self-knowledge may remain open to other interpretations, Butler provides a language to think about the essence of what happens when one person addresses another. This has relevance for all professional relations, but holds special resonance for practitioner-mother encounters in the case of child protection social work given what is at stake.

The scene of address concerns women as the potential cause of harm to their child either through acts of commission or omission for which they are to accept responsibility (including harm that may be done to a child by others). This accountability is twofold: first through a system of justice and punishment for their actions or inactions; and second, through legal disposals that may remove the child from their care. The women are being asked by an established authority, in this case

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represented by social work on behalf of the child protection system, to give an account of themselves as mothers for the wellbeing of their child.

This background raises inevitable tension between the need to establish meaningful practitioner-mother relations when the reasons for contact may provoke fear and threat for both parties. Butler's formulation of the scene of address, the demands of giving and receiving an account of self and the ethical claim this imposes to prevent violation of the other provides a theory for explaining and analysing the roots of this tension. Children experience a number of risks to their well-being. Douglas (1966, p. XIX) suggests 'naming a risk amounts to an accusation'. In child protection women must give an account of themselves as mothers. They must defend against the accusation of child maltreatment, qualify it or accept causation.

Butler discusses Nietzsche's (1969) argument that moral accountability only follows an accusation. He suggests individuals give an account of themselves because someone with delegated power from a system of justice where a threat of punishment is present has asked them to do so. This causes us to reflect through fear and terror. For these reasons alone we become conscious of ourselves only after some injury has been inflicted and when someone suffers as a consequence. A representative of authority, in a position to mete out punishment, seeks to find the cause of the suffering asking of another if they might be the cause. This makes the individual reflect upon him or herself for two reasons: first to question whether by their actions or inaction they may have caused suffering; and second, whether to take responsibility for these actions [*or inaction*] and their consequences. It is through this process we become morally accountable and reflective beings, constituting the subjective "I".

Butler provides an alternative conceptualisation of what it means to give an account of yourself based neither on the wish to punish by a legitimate authority nor prompted by fear in the individual. She suggests being addressed by another carries other valences besides fear. She describes a narrative form of knowing and narrating that provides, in essence, a non-coercive account of the coming into being of the reflexive subject, the "I". The story of self originates only in the face of a "you" whether present or in the mind who asks "me" to give an account. To know and be known requires us to become self-narrating beings.

Telling a story about oneself is not the same as giving an account of oneself. Giving an account depends on four elements. First, a capacity to set out a events sequentially, second to connect these events coherently and convincingly, third, to draw upon a 'narrative voice and authority' for an audience, and fourth for the purpose of persuading them. This narrative capacity is the prerequisite for any account of moral agency, an account of whether we caused injury and take responsibility.

The implications of this approach for practitioner-mother encounters are non-trivial. Hooper *et al.* (2007: 85/86) quote an example of a child protection investigation by social services where a women who was unable to give an account was highly damaging, leaving her required to live with the perpetrator of rape in order to retain custody of the child. She was unable to tell the whole story to the social workers in the face of what she perceived to be accusatory demand prompting fear and inhibiting her ability to give an account of herself in her own terms.

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The interaction is immensely complex and has the potential to constitute ' a linguistic and social occasion for self-transformation' (Butler: 130). Herein lies the possibility of creating an ethos in child protection practice that provides an ethical foundation to address the mothers as women in their own right and as reflexive self-narrating beings. Butler identifies the importance of communication that does not evoke fear or terror but instead conveys an ethics of equality between the two parties. This ethos is captured when she writes 'spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me' (Butler: 15). In this way she alerts us to two possibilities. First, the creative potential for women to engage with practitioners as reflexive subjects through establishing a narrative account of themselves. Second, the potential for ethical harm through a failure to respect the women's individual personhood.

For creative potential to be harnessed it needs to be recognised the women are being asked to do something that is highly risky for themselves and potentially for their children. First, no assumption can be made that state intervention is without iatrogenic effects on the lives of the children. Women may be as concerned to protect their children from the state, as the state may be to protect children from their parents. Brown (2006: 368) found that women took deliberate steps to offset the 'risks inherent in the child protection system itself'. Second, there are inbuilt limits to knowing ourselves and knowing others, a common predicament for us all. This brings foreignness to the self and in turn places a limit to narrative accountability (Laplanche 1999).

Third, the profound implications for the women and their legitimate fears of what lies before them and their child at the other side of self-questioning and self-disclosure need to be acknowledged. The development of the mother-infant bond is a complex process and demands an integration of contradictory feelings towards the child. To give an account of themselves as mothers they must accept the possibility that the self has causal agency. Frosh underlines that 'stating one's feelings is a complex process at the best of times' (2011:54). Cases of alleged child abuse and neglect are not the best of times. In essence the women are facing an existential fear that their account of themselves may render them unrecognisable by others, and as significantly unrecognisable to themselves (Agamben 1995).

Asking women to make themselves objects of possible knowledge brings an ethical responsibility to the form of address in face-to-face encounters in child protection. The ethos to this form must take as its starting point an awareness of self-limits and a generosity to the limits of others. Women in giving an account to practitioners may hope the fragments of their story may be linked together and may be given back in some new form. This ethical connection between practitioners and women brings the potential for self-knowledge and self-development and the potential to benefit the child.

Our capacity to reflect upon ourselves, to tell the truth about ourselves, is also limited by what is and is not 'speakable' within the discourses and social norms of the day (Butler 2005: 21). These norms are situated within social and political contexts. Hacking (1999) makes the distinction between ideas and objects in philosophy - objects are 'in the world', ideas are 'conceptions, beliefs, attitudes, theories about objects which need not be private' (p.22). There is no doubt that some children are harmed by the actions and inactions of their parents. This is the object in the world.

There is also an idea of women, classed as a good or bad mother based on public evaluation of the quality of their child rearing. There is an interaction between objects in the world and the ideas about them that in turn may influence self-perception (Hacking 1991). Ideas about women as mothers influence the organisation of child protection practice and vice-versa. There is rarely a need for physical force but there is an overriding necessity for women to do two things in the system. First, they must give an account of themselves as mothers. Second, this account must earn them the status of good mother within the public systems. Failures on either count risks personal and parental autonomy.


IMPLICATIONS

When the interests of children are paramount in law, policy and practice those of all other parties are by definition secondary. Social work is committed to ethical standards where public interest comes first, to act as officers of the court, to keep public trust, to apply technical expertise for conflict resolution and to avoid scandals. The current child protection policy and legal context does not encourage social workers to act autonomously as social advocates for wider social interests despite the centrality of advocacy and social mediation to the ideology and history of social work. The scope for offering pragmatic help to any problems raised is limited. The arrival of a social worker in a household now appears to signal a potential threat to the mothers' autonomy and identity.

Research suggests that mothers are evaluated across a number of factors. These include: her impact on the child; her care of the child's body in neglect cases; her capacity to put the child first; and her capacity to protect her child from the father/male partner (Featherstone 1999; Scourfield 2001). Sykes (2011) carried out empirical work to understand mothers' responses to accusations of child neglect in a rural Michigan county. She found mothers developed a number of strategies to resist being classified by the state as 'neglectful mothers'. The mothers she interviewed like almost all mothers needed to preserve their identity as good mothers and protect it from being spoiled (p.449).

Waterhouse and McGhee (2009) suggest that in the 'conversation-like' encounters between parents and child protection social workers tension surfaces creating, what Goffman (1963) calls an uneasy unanchored interaction. This partly lies in any parents desire to communicate information in ways that will not discredit themselves or their parenting. The evaluation of risk of harm to the child at least in part depends on the mother foregoing the protection of her identity as a 'good mother'. For the social worker the evaluation of risk creates an urgent need for information. It is important that professional skills of empathy and sensitive communication are used transparently and not as devices to disarm mothers' resistance to the possible attribution of a negative maternal identity. Mothers need to be confident that they will get a fair deal – that the norm of fairness is applied and that their child will benefit from what they tell the social worker. Second, the conditions need to be created that allow women to speak frankly about their philosophy of child rearing and their direct experience of raising their own child.

Butler's theory of recognition alerts us to the importance of supporting the narrative

capacity of women caught up in child protection processes and of allowing the mother to give an account of herself as a woman and as a mother. Recognition obligates practitioners to be able to suspend judgment in order to apprehend the other, in this case the mother, as fully as possible. It has to be more than a way to get to the child and has to respect the woman. Recognition reflects an egalitarian, non-threatening register and offers women an opportunity to narrate an account of themselves in their own terms, as women often struggling to survive in distressed social and economic circumstances.

Relatively little is known about the impact of different kinds of relationships between parents and social workers practitioners and their influence on child outcomes. Shemmings *et al.* (2012) provide evidence from a systematic review on so-called 'highly resistant' families (Fauth *et al.* 2010) that confirms the significance of supportive, respectful relationships as a necessary condition in child protection work. Honneth's (2005) concepts of respect and recognition and its significance for human flourishing are being used to conceptualise the factors associated with relationship development (Houston and Dolan 2008, Turney 2009). Garrett (2010) points to a limitation in Honneth's work, particularly the insufficient attention to broader social and economic determinants of life course development and the role of the state.

The social worker is delegated to represent the state in the child protection system. Institutional practices emphasised forensic and interrogative approaches. Maternal moral accountability is fore grounded against what in effect amounts to an accusation of possible child maltreatment. A threat of punishment is ever present either through forcible removal of the child and/or prosecution. It is within this social setting women are required to account for their child rearing. In this way the child protection system is vulnerable to constituting a punishment matrix.

Butler opens up for us fresh possibilities in conceptualising practitioner-mother relations when she recognizes what it means to be asked to give an account of self that is neither prompted by fear nor a wish to punish. We argue that to realize a non-coercive narration a child protection matrix must be formulated that has at its core an ethics of equality. Under this matrix the approach changes to asking women to give an account *of* their child rearing rather than asking women to account *for* their child rearing. This is the very opposite of abdicating individual responsibility. The beginning of moral agency depends on the creation of conditions for a narrative capacity that is not founded on fear. We suggest that in a reconfigured matrix the question - Who are you? is the starting point for practitioner-mother relations. This supports self-recognition and self–knowledge and the recognition of the other.


CONCLUSION

This attempt to conceptualise practitioner-mother relationships in child protection suggests that it is not sufficient to rely on an unexamined concept of relationship or to treat them as unproblematic in UK child protection policy. This is not to assert that Butler's theory of recognition is a panacea. Nor is it to suggest a fall from a golden age. Neither is it to downplay the importance of the child's well-being nor to suggest individualised remedies for social problems. Judgments must ultimately be formed. Instead Butler offers us another way to find our bearings to understand practitioner-

mother encounters. Her alternative formulation of human relations is important in child protection social work for three reasons: first in its own right as a conceptual tool to understand the immense complexity of practitioner-mother relations and the premises, which underpin their encounters; second as a basis for investigating differential approaches to human relations and their significance to child outcomes; and third, for interrogating the social setting in which these encounters take place.

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