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A Critical Overview Of The Significance Of Power And Power Relations In Practice with Children In Foster Care: Evidence From An Irish Study.

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Abstract

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This paper is based on findings from an Irish study of permanence and stability outcomes for children in long-term care which involved biographical narrative interviews with 27 children, young people, parents and foster carers. The study concluded that power and power relations featured significantly in the narratives of our interviewees. To advance guidance for practice, this paper aims to build on the findings of the study reported with an emphasis on the theorisation of power and power relations to inform practice. To do this, we use illustrative quotes from children, young people and their families to demonstrate how power markedly affected their experiences. The findings are considered in the context of an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model with a focus on the interaction between the social work system and individual social workers (exo system) the young person and their wider family (micro-meso- system) as perceived by the latter. The wider impact of policy (macro system) and transitions and experiences over time (chrono-system) are considered in the context of this interaction. In the discussion, the need for more explicit studies of power and power relations within the context of an ecological model to capture the complexity of layers and interactions of each child's social system is highlighted. The contribution and limitation of the research is discussed. We end with a commentary about the importance of promoting an increased voice for children and young people in the development and improvement of public child welfare services.

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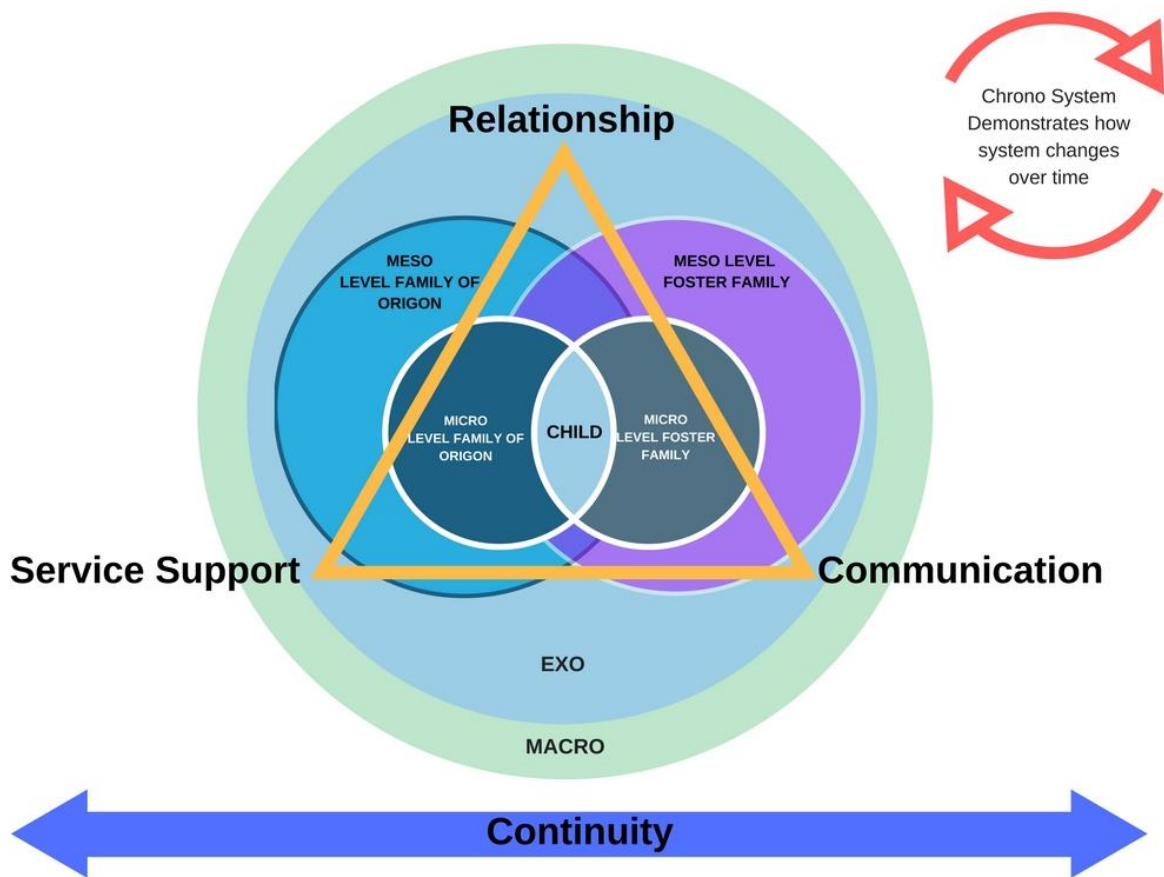
This paper is based on findings from an Irish study of permanence and stability outcomes for children in long-term care which involved biographical narrative interviews with 27 children, young people, parents and foster carers. The study concluded that power and power relations featured significantly in the narratives of our interviewees. To advance guidance for practice, this paper aims to build on the findings of the study reported with an emphasis on the theorisation of power and power relations to inform practice. To do this, we use illustrative quotes from children, young people and their families to demonstrate how power markedly affected their experiences. The findings are considered in the context of an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model with a focus on the interaction between the social work system and individual social workers (exo system) the young person and their wider family (micro-meso- system) as perceived by the latter. The wider impact of policy (macro system) and transitions and experiences over time (chrono-system) are considered in the context of this interaction. In the discussion, the need for more explicit studies of power and power relations within the context of an ecological model to capture the complexity of layers and interactions of each child's social system is highlighted. The contribution and limitation of the research is discussed. We end with a commentary about the importance of promoting an increased voice for children and young people in the development and improvement of public child welfare services.

Introduction

‘This paper is based on a research project entitled *Outcomes for Permanence and Stability for Children in Care* (Moran et al, 2017a). The aim of the research was to explore how young people, their foster parents and their parents of origins thought about permanence and stability and how it could be enhanced for children in care. As shown in Figure 1, the main themes that emerged highlighted the centrality of relationships, communication and social support, the overarching importance of continuity and the need to understand permanence from an ecological viewpoint. In the study, while not explicitly sought, the discourse of power regularly featured throughout our core findings from young people, children and their carers. We noted in the conclusion of the study that ‘Power and power relations featured significantly in the narratives of our interviewees. Given the context of children being in care, such an acute awareness of power and power relations is not surprising and is indeed inevitable given the role Tusla play as ‘corporate parent’ (2017b, 14). This influenced the development of practice guidance that had a focused commentary on this. We made recommendations about how practice in the field of alternative care could take more cognizance of power relations (Moran et al, 2017b). For example, we argued that ‘(g)iven the duty Tusla has once a child is in long term care to support the day to day foster carer to provide a permanent living arrangement for the child alongside providing the practitioners from the service to deliver the required interventions and supports, the powers and responsibilities of all relevant persons in the child’s eco-system need to be explicitly stated and acknowledged’ (2017b; 14). Readers of the practice guide were encouraged to accept that such powers are necessary to intervene and ‘have the potential to be used either positively to enhance or negatively to diminish’ (ibid). We recommended that further

critical reflection on the nature and impact of inevitable power differences and sometimes power struggles can be explored through supervision with staff working with young people and their carers and families. For example, we suggested the use of questions like:: what personal power do I have in this situation? (e.g. legal, personal, and professional); what organisational power does Tusla have (e.g. statutory, legal; resources)?; what personal and positional power has the family of origin? (e.g. through communication; level of co-operation)? what power has the foster family (e.g. in day to day interactions; communication; relationships)? And what power has the child (e.g. participation in review; expressing preference and opinion; engaging; communicating)? We used Figure 1 to illustrate the complex ecological context of the young person in care that needs to be taken into account especially in terms of the often dual identity and indeed dual ecological system a child in care is often trying to manage.

FIGURE 1



To advance this guidance for practice further, this paper aims to focus in particular on the findings of Moran et al (2017a) that illustrate the nature and challenge of power and power relations. We concentrate on one of the main proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986) with a focus on the interaction between the child welfare system (exo) and the child/family (micro-meso). The focus is on power as perceived by the young people and their carers based on interviews with them. We note the limitation of this is the lack of reciprocal perceptions of the social workers and the need to widen the research into the future to capture this. We use illustrative quotes to show how young people, foster parents and parents perceived and understood power and power relations in their narratives about permanence and stability.

To follow, we present a summary of the project methodology. A literature review that comments specifically on writings on power and power relations is then provided. This is then followed with an illumination of how the theme of power permeated research findings using illustrative quotes from the voices of young people and their carers. In the discussion, we argue that in order to give a stronger voice to children in care, and their families (of origin and foster), a more overt and explicit engagement with the nature of power and power relations and its impact on relationships, communications and support to young people is essential. The discussion also draws out the implications for practice; focussing on the learning about power and the power relations from the young person in care's perspective. We argue for the need to move beyond paternalistic and passive construction of practices with young people towards a stronger culture of co-production for public service within a children's rights framework.

Methodology

This paper draws upon findings from an Irish study of permanence and stability outcomes for children in long-term care, on behalf of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency from 2014 to 2017. The overall research project involved a partnership approach where practitioners and researchers worked together to achieve the objectives which were: to produce a literature review to inform and guide practice; to carry out in-depth narrative interviews and to provide practice guidance for practitioners. The overall intention was to enhance ability to improve stability and permanence for children and young people given its central impact on outcomes for children in care (See Biehal, 2014; Farmer et al, 2013, Fernandez, 2008, Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014; Scott and Gustavsson,2010; Stein 2008; Stein & Dumaret, 2011, , Pine et al, 2009; Ward, 2009). This was a mixed method study that resulted in the production of a literature review (Moran et al, 2016a), a summary of the literature review (Moran et al, 2016b), a qualitative research report (Moran et al 2017a) and Practice Guidance (Moran et al, 2017b).

The original sample included 506 children and young people in long term care between 2006 and 2013 in two different counties in Ireland. The criterion for sampling was that the young person was designated as being in long term care through their care plan or their care order. Consent was sought from parents and foster parents and young people with assent sought from the children. This lengthy and complex process (See Moran et al, 2017a) resulting in a final sample of 27 participants. This included 10 children or young people who were in care or had left care, 13 foster parents and 4 parents of origin. In this paper, quotes from the 27 participants that spoke specifically or implicitly about power and power relations are used.

The methodology for the interviews was Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM). This approach is concerned with the 'lived life' and with how participants tell stories about events that happened across the life course (Wengraf, 2001). It supports use of biographical data to elicit meaning and understanding (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). Narrative interviewing methods are led by participants who tell stories of events, people, and places and specific turning points in their lives. It is a method that invites a story and brings the possibility of responses that could not have been previously anticipated (Wengraf 2001 Hogan and O'Reilly's (2007).

We used a method of framework analysis (see Ritchie & Spenser, 1994) to elicit the themes and write up the study. This involved creating frameworks to represent the most common codes to emerge from each dataset. The data was coded, themes were synthesised, and the predominant findings were represented in matrices (Smith and Firth, 2011).

This research posed considerable ethical concerns and considerations throughout. Ethical approval was provided by the university ethics committee. The research was carefully managed via a project team approach involving senior practitioners from the two teams involved in the project. Ethical considerations included: questions about consent and assent for access to child and family information; sensitivity in relation to maintaining confidentiality and anonymity so that the narrative could not be linked back to one family or individual and how to respond to possible disclosure of poor practice or experience of harm or abuse. The child protection protocol for the research was used on a few occasions and various measures were in place to provide back up and support to interviewees as required. On occasion, certain negative comments by some children in care about their current situation

and the exposure of poor practice were fed back to relevant agency representatives on the project team (see Moran et al, 2017b for more information).

Brief overview of Relevant Literature on power and power relations

In this paper, the focus is specifically on power as perceived and experienced from the child welfare system and its practitioners from the point of view of young people and their carers.

There are a range of theories about power to draw from and apply. The *Sage Handbook of Power* (Clegg & Haugaard, 2013) offers a comprehensive overview through their edited text that can be applied to understanding power at various levels from personal/micro to organisational and structural/macro levels. Lukes provides a critical overview of power in wider organisations offering his three-dimensional view of power which he describes as involving a critique of a behavioural focus and a focus on ‘decision making and control over political agenda’, ‘issues and potential issues’, observable (overt and covert) and latent conflict’ and ‘subjective and real interests’ (2005; 29). He also offers an authoritative guide to further reading that maps the terrain for theoretical and conceptual analyses (p. 163-168). Clegg et al (2006) provide analyses of organisations and consider power frameworks and relations in depth concluding that ‘power is an irreducible element of any imaginable form of life’ (2006; 403). When it comes to social work, Foucault is particularly influential (see for e.g. Tew 2006, Smith 2008, 2013, Chambon et al , 1999, Gilbert & Powell, 1999; McGregor, 2016, Winter & Cree, 2016, Mooney & McGregor, 2017). He gives a language to describe and express the complexity of human and system relations (See Foucault, 1980; Skehill, 2007) that can be applied to study of interactions at different levels such as cultural, structural, historical (Skehill 2007). As discussed in McGregor (2016) his work includes a view of power as multi-directional and non-linear, not in itself either good or bad. The need to avoid an over-generalised analysis of power and encourage power to be considered

specifically in a certain time and context is another important aspect (See Skehill, 2004). Also, the way in which Foucault theorised the nature of subjectivity and power (e.g. Foucault, 1982) has a particular contribution to make to understanding social work especially in relation to the duality of regulation and support it entails (see also Foucault 1977; Skehill, 2007)

The recent application of Foucault's theory to home visiting by Winter & Cree (2016) gives an example of the how the application of Foucault's theories to a specific context- home visiting in their case, for generalizable learning. As the authors argue:

‘...Foucault has provided us with an ideological toolbox that has allowed us to interrogate the everyday—to ask questions about power, knowledge and truth in the social work home visit. It could be argued that, together with child protective and family assessment home visits as sites of construction and negotiation of the regime of knowledge/power/truth, the oppressive populist views of ‘troubled families’ may itself be the perceptual site of resistance perpetuating Foucauldian privileged discursive practice’.(2016; 1187)

While extremely relevant and influential in the discipline of social work and availed of in the analysis that follows, focus on Foucault's theorisation of power is limited to the emphasis on theorisation through analysis of discourses and discursive relationships. While this can lead to in-depth analysis of practices expressed through these formations, there is an argument that we need to get beyond this too. For example, Satka & Skehill (2012) and Skehill et al (2013) considered how Foucault's work in relation to theories of power and subjectivity (e.g. Foucault, 1982) could be combined with that of Dorothy Smith (e.g. Smith, 1990) to extend the emphasis beyond a primary focus on discourses and discursive relations to more in-depth analysis of materiality also in the context of power relations. In doing this, they bring a

stronger feminist and practice perspective that in our view enhances a theorisation of power and power relations for social work. Other important analyses of power in the broad social space derive from authors such as Bauman – who emphasises the constraining and enabling aspects of power; Habermas – with a focus on communication and Bourdieu who develops ideas around symbolic power (See Westwood, 2002).

Another important source of literature for social work and power is the work of Roger Smith (2008). He provides a particularly useful orientation where he draws together theories of power relevant to social work under three main headings: representations of power, modes of power and sites of power. Within representations of power, he refers to four core ways power can be considered; power as potential, possession process and product (2008; 23). This theorisation helps to make sense of different levels and processes of power relations and interactions at different points of the ecological system. The idea of power as a process (Smith, 2008) for example is notable when we think about the practices of normalisation and moralisation as applied to children in care. Donzelot (1980) extended the application of the notion of normalisation and moralisation developed by Foucault in relation to mental health (e.g. *Birth of the clinic*) and criminality (*Discipline and Punishment*) to child welfare practice in France in *Policing of Families*. This work subsequently influenced UK authors such as Nigel Parton (1991) who extended this analysis to the UK context in his work *Governing the Family* (See also, Dingwall et al, 1983). Skehill (2004) also applied it in Ireland. With reference to modes of power, those based on processes that are relational, positional and referential are especially pertinent for our study. Smith also discusses sites of power which maps on well to the ecological system where we can locate, in the instance of the children in foster care, sites of power (proximal processes) such the foster home, the community, the

locality, the social work office and so on. The particular site of power focused on is that of the professional social worker and the child protection and welfare agency.

Schmid & Pollack (2009) identify four very relevant features of child protection social work and child/family relationships that centre on power and power relations with reference to family group conferencing. These include communication and recording such as: control of information from the beginning of a child welfare procedure; recording norms, type of language used and lack of information given to families. This resonates strongly with findings below also. Johansson (2010) captures the intrinsic nature of power in child welfare in her paper on child protection in Sweden with ethnic minorities and argues that 'professional workers have several sources of power ranging from coercive to normative' (Johansson, 2010; 537; see also Fraser et al, 2016; 85).

To keep focus in this paper, we are focusing specifically on the processes of power as perceived by young people and their carers. While we acknowledge and fully recognise the wider structural aspects of power regarding, for example, socio-legal social work (Parton, 2014) and anti-oppressive practice (Domenelli, 2003), we are focused here in particular on the micro-meso to exo level interactions based on relationships -e.g. the perception of professional power as Cohen (1985) would refer to (or positional); communication – e.g. such as the processes of power centred around language and information sharing; and support – e.g. such as the sites of power (Smith, 2008) such as the individual worker or the child welfare agency or team.

Illumination of power and power relations through research findings..

In our main research (Moran et al, 2017), we found that the most significant themes that influenced permanence and stability from the point of view of young people and their families were: communication, relationships, and services supports. Underpinning these, continuity was found to be a consistent overarching theme (See Moran et al, 2017a). These themes sometimes emerged in relation to individual relationships at the micro and meso level of the ecological context (see Bronfenbrenner 1979; 1986; 1994). Other times it related to relationships within the exo-system, macro system and chrono System (see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2007). In reporting the findings here, we focus in on one proximal process – that of interaction between the social worker and the child welfare ‘system’ and the micro-meso system of the young person. Moreover, the focus is from the perspective of young people and their carers told within a narrative account of what permanence and stability meant to them. We have summarised the findings where power and power relations were observed and commented on by the respondents in telling their stories. Our ultimate aim in presenting these findings is to bring forth the perceptive way in which young people and their carers identify, describe, experience and critique power and power relations in their lived experience of being in care.

To begin with, the feeling of being ‘subjected’ to being in care and not having power similar to how Foucault (1982) explains this in the *Subject and Power* was evident when young people talked about not having access to a lot of information about their circumstances (See Foucault, 1977; O Farrell, 2005) and the powerlessness (see Tew, 2006) associated with this this:

'The thing that really bothers children in care is that they don't know where they are or where they'll be in the future. They need to feel safe' (Young Person -YP).

'You don't know who you are or sometimes why you're there, or why you're in the stranger's house or if you'll be going home. Someone else makes the decisions for you' (YP)

Lack of involvement in decision making as mentioned in the literature review (e.g. Schmid & Pollack, 2009) was discussed in the context of power, relationships and communication. As one young person stated:

Someone else makes the decisions for you. It's not my house, it's not my house... Things could change so I'm always worried about that... Home is a big part because all I've done is move about all the time; relationships because, well, I've built so many relationships and lost so many relationships.(P)

For parents, the power of removal of the child and the feeling of having no say in the matter was expressed in discussing the time before care:

Initially I disagreed with them but I had to go along with them, but I totally disagree with it. It upsets me... The social workers were very hostile to me... I've never been treated like this in my life.(P)

And the sense of the organisational power of the overall system (see Clegg et al, 2006) versus the individual parent came through strongly. As one parent said simply: *The HSE has*

so many professionals to back them up...(P) . A foster carer expressed it as follows: (t)here is a power thing for sure... And I see it in letters, e-mails, phone calls, the lot, but I call it like it is. There's a power difference. They have the power to make decisions but it puts foster carers off. It really does. (P)

From the point of view of being in care, some of the young people's narratives capture the theme of normalisation (Donzelot, 1979) and ask the question of what is normal and who has the power to define it as such:

'I thought I wasn't normal. You know? I wasn't normal. I didn't want to be looked at. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to have my own mum and dad' (YP)

'I know there is no such thing as normal but my family was slightly more abnormal than most people I say normal I mean...not dangerous (YP)

'Most people when they know that someone is in care they treat us differently and they feel sorry for us; act as if we have a disability and they like; I don't like that. I don't like being treated differently just because of something that happened to me that I had no choice in....People don't need to feel sorry for me'. (YP)

The notion of normality connected with the sense of stigma associated with being in care, as imposed by 'others' as expressed in the following statements from young people who had left care and were seeking accommodation.

'I felt he knew, he knew I was in care so he saw me as stupid or something... That made the accommodation thing more difficult'. (YP)

'He knew I was in care and he didn't give me the deposit back. I just went along with it' (YP)

Lack of knowledge as referred to by Schmid & Pollack (2009) and theorised by Foucault (Foucault, 1980) was reflected in some narratives:

'It's just the sense of not knowing.... Not knowing who you are, where you're going and where you'll be. You feel that you don't have a future'. (YP)

Lack of knowledge about their children's day to lives was expressed by a parent as follows.

They didn't give me enough information about the placement. I knew I couldn't trust her after that.(P)

I didn't know she was moved to a different foster home. And I never received any feedback regarding it. (P)

Another important view about power came about when talking about relationships with the system in terms of the individual social worker or the child welfare system generally. Power talk was often connected to talk about authority and about trust.

'You should trust the social worker. That's important'. (YP)

'I don't trust them. They have the power'. (YP)

Some comments gave the perception that it was professional power (see for e.g., Cohen, 1985; Smith, 2008) that acted as a block to good relations

'You need to make them feel like they can talk to you, like even though you're a professional.... You kind of need to get off that level of, they're a social worker fair enough but it's kind of hard when it's on that level of I'm your social worker. They kind of need to stay away from that a bit, now obviously still be professional about it but there's ways and means of going about it'. (YP)

A similar problematisation of social work and professional power relations is evident in the following statement:

'Instead of coming in and going right I'm here about such and such and I was sent from this board to talk about this and you're sitting going Jesus will you shut up. You know? It's hard because at the end of the day you are a child, so there's no reason to be so formal with you. . (YP)

The young people's foster carers see that power in social workers as positional:

'There is a power thing for sure.... And I see it in letters, e-mails, phone calls the lot but I call it like it is. (Foster Carer FC)

'They can do whatever they like and you just must go along with it. They have all the power' (FC)

'There are good and bad social workers. Power is a factor in how we communicate with them'.(FC)

One parent reinforced their children's and their foster parent's perspectives even more strongly:

'There's an aura around social workers because they have so much power'.(P)

Focusing in more on power as expressed through language, discourse and words (See Schmid & Pollack, 2009) some of the findings highlight major learning about the power of what is said and how it stays and impacts on the individual. The following comment by a young person shows, for example, the power of a single sentence that impacted significantly on their views of social work :

'The social worker said to my foster parents at one stage, 'you must manage the child's expectations about what they can do in life'. That's an example of where it's not child centred... it wasn't centred on me and my dreams, what I wanted to do with my education and all that'. (YP)

Indeed, the damage and power of language and words resonated in many of the young people's comments:

'The social worker saying I was odd... I used to think then I was odd. You know when I was young I would have been bursting with confidence and I went through a stage then I wouldn't even go into a shop myself... I wouldn't have done anything, wouldn't have went anywhere, and wouldn't speak to anybody'. (YP)

Conversely, the positive potential of power was also demonstrated where young people saw their social workers using their power to promote their interests:

'They are there if you need anything like. Last year I asked for counselling and they got it straight away; I only went once or twice but they got it for me straight away'.

'I got a girl and she was lovely. She helped me with loads of stuff like an apartment and the council and things like you need to do to get help when you're leaving care. I don't think they can do much else'. (YP)

'She is one of the best really. I'd say they're all like that but so much help. If I had any questions around anything like money or anything like that... she would know all that'. (YP)

'She works hard to keep the contact going, the social worker. It might be only a letter here and there but it makes you feel better'. (YP)

Discussion

The complexity of power and power relations has been emphasised in both the literature review and findings. Power is multi-directional and non-linear. This can be recognised through using the ecological framework represented in Figure 1 and emphasising the way power relations influence young people's experiences from the micro-level (e.g. of powerlessness within the foster home) to the exo (sense of power and authority of the

individual social work relationship) and the macro level (views about the care system and lack of choice or control for young people in much of their lives). Power is not in itself either good or bad but rather exists and can be used to either effect, the illustrative data reinforces this point. In such a claim though, a thorough recognition of the range of power factors, looking at power within each level of the ecological system is essential (e.g. power of worker, legislation, procedure). And while indeed we can see especially at individual level where young people can perceive their workers power (for e.g.) in positive or negative terms, this illustrative data highlights the importance of recognising and seeing the relative powerlessness of the child in care within the overall picture. The potential and actual power- positive and negative- of Language, communication, relationships and how we support is illuminated in this work and has influenced the practice guidance significantly (See Moran et al, 2017b).

We must emphasise also that where power exists resistance will also be found. Through participating in this study, the young people, with some of their parents and foster parents, have held a light up to the foster care system in Ireland and has shown the effect of external relationships, basic communication and level of appropriate service report on stability and permanence.

From this study, we argue that power needs to be understood from a range of dimensions and can relate the findings back to frameworks offered by authors such as Lukes (2005), Clegg et al (2006) and Foucault (1980; 1982) . The use of the ecological framework based on work of Bronfenbrenner allows for us to bring together these dimensions to be articulated with regard to levels of the ecological system. In this paper, the emphasis has been on understanding power and power relations from the point of view of the young people who have experienced

long term care – one dimension of a complex set of power relations and interactions in that system. The processes described give voice to how the exercise of power over knowledge, information and decision making is experienced by a young person from their micro position in the ecological system directly as a result of interactions at the meso level (e.g. individual worker), exo-level (e.g. the general child welfare team or office) and macro level (e.g. the wider child welfare policy and procedure informing practice) . This should alert a worker reading such narrative to their responsibility to be aware of the impact of their words and actions, even in simple short moments in an micro-meso interaction and in the work processes within their exo and macro context. It also reminds us how powerless a young person placed in a new care placement may feel in their home environment intended to offer security and stability. Referring back to Smith (2008), the product aspect of power is its potential use to empower or disempower is another important learning point. In social work and social care, the product might be the service including both how a worker individually delivers their support through communication and relationship (meso level) and through the child care system more broadly (exo and macro level). The power relations can generally be understood as the interactions and the proximal processes described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) within the ecological system) which are imbued with levels of power that has potential to be exercised to constrain, liberate or most likely balance somewhere along this continuum (See Foucault, 1980).

Overall, we have highlighted the importance of thinking about power and power relations in a way that puts the subject(s) in the frame (Foucault, 1982). We have highlighted the widespread power of ‘normalisation’ (Donzelot, 1979) and how ‘not being normal’ is constructed and imposed in day to day interactions that impact on the lived life and experience of the young person in care or recently having left care. We have highlighted

themes around the exercise of authority and we have illustrated that the specific is as important as the general and that individual moments matter – a lot. In Lukes (2005) words, this relates to power in terms of ‘real and subjective interests’. So what are the implications to draw out for practice? In response to this question, the conclusion provides a commentary on the implications of this work for practice and policy referring back to the literature discussed earlier. In so doing, we offers signposts for further developments from both a theoretical and practice oriented perspective.

Conclusion

From theorising the study more explicitly within a power analysis the overall intention of this article is to demonstrate the unique learning we have gained about perceptions of power from the views of young people in care especially and how these findings add more meaning and understanding to the theories about power that are used to problematize and guide social work. Based on the work, it seems imperative that we find ways to give greater recognition to the power of young people to inform practice through their narratives and experiences and greater explicit use of power talk and analysis in our work practices. This means the need to avail of the useful theoretical analyses of power discussed earlier and apply them specifically to practice. Moreover, finding ways to give more attention to the views of all participants about their power and others using an ecological framework advances both theories about power the framework itself. Precedence should be given to the perspective of young people (See O' Reilly & Dolan, 2016) who are most impacted personally by those power interactions and dynamics when it comes to alternative care. One could say, with reference back to Smith (2008) that we should consider young person's power as *product* with great *potential* over *processes* of intervention (Smith, 2008). Developments within Ireland (for example) with regard to their participation strategy are vehicles to help drive this recommendation forward as advancements are already evident since this study was completed (see Lundy, 2007; Kennan et al, 2016; Hogan & O' Reilly, 2007). We would also emphasise more strongly the necessity for practitioners and policy makers to appreciate the level of powerlessness a young person in care can experience as a form of constraint where they often have limited say or decision making power. This must not be constructed as powerlessness within the

subjectivity of the young person in a paternalistic way but rather the external power of a system charged with their basic right of survival in terms of a home, shelter and basic care and support. A limit of this research is that we did not hear from the social workers involved in the individual cases and this is something important to capture in future research. One may expect, as in the case of the participants discussed here, given a chance they would add more depth and insight to our understanding of power and power relations based on their in-depth and intensive experience of helping to balance and manage power relations as a core part of their child protection work, And balanced with that, the potential positive use of these powers to advocate for, promote the rights of and listen carefully, respectfully and attentively to the young person in care and after their care experience can be emphasised. Following from this, we need to progress the development of a culture for alternative care services which shifts away from paternalistic and passive engagement with young people and gives greater space for partnership and co-production with young people (see Lundy, 2007; Kennan et al, 2016). We suggest that advancing this using the ecological framework, with an emphasis on interactions and proximal processes, alongside theories of power. There are a number of dimensions to this of particular relevance for social work with children in care focused on individual subjectivity (e.g. See Lukes 2005; Foucault 1982, Satka & Skehill 2012) , power and power relations (e.g. see Foucault, 1980; Tew, 2006; Smith, 2013), impact of powerlessness (e.g. Tew, 2006), impact on practice (e.g. Gilbert & Powell, 1999) and interaction with wider organisational (e.g. Clegg et al, 2006), societal and political contexts (E.g. Haugaard and Clegg, 2013) .

To conclude, we have made the case for the need to develop further studies of power and power relations in relation to work with young people in and after care which aim to capture both the objective nature of discourses of policy and procedure alongside the subjective

practices of individual workers as perceived by young people and their families in the complex realm of child welfare and protection. In so doing, the intention has been to bring about a better balance in service development and delivery that gives greater space and attention to the views, experiences, opinions and recommendations from young people who have experienced the services we are trying to improve. We support the conclusion of Clegg et al (2006; 403) advise that: ‘one should speak of power, write about power, and contest power –*often* – and never concede its analytical defeat by abstractions such as efficiency as these abstractions are, as it were, already instruments of power’. We would go further also to argue that we must talk about power, apply in in our care and work planning, discuss it in supervision and interrogate it daily as part of our core critical reflection on practices and procedures that have such a powerful impact on young people who are in care and their families.

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