
Empowerment and Child Welfare Clients

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Empowerment is a key element of social work practice. The NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) begins with the statement “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (p. 1). Although the Code of Ethics clearly states an obligation on the part of social workers to empower their clients, it does not define this complex concept. A 1994 article in the NASW journal *Social Work* does define it, saying that empowerment has two parts: (a) personal empowerment, which is similar to self-determination and recognizes the inherent uniqueness of each client, and (b) social empowerment, which acknowledges that individuals cannot be separated from their environment and that people must have access to certain resources to be able to influence that environment (Cowger, 1994).

The Code of Ethics does not explain how, or under what circumstances, empowerment should occur. Although the implication is that empowerment should always be a goal of social workers, it does not discuss the circumstances in which the empowerment of a client might not be beneficial, or where it is difficult to comprehend how the empowerment could take place within a disempowering system. There are several examples of situations like this. One is that of a social worker who is working with a parent whose children are in the custody of the state. These parents are often working closely with the state’s child welfare services.

A child welfare agency most frequently becomes involved with families due to allegations of abuse or neglect. When these allegations have been substantiated and children are taken into state care, parents must work with child protective services (CPS) on a service plan. The parents must work on the goals highlighted on the service plan before the case will be closed or the children returned home. Recent national child welfare legislation has placed legal pressure on parents and caseworkers to accomplish this task within twelve months or determine another permanency plan for the child, such as adoption or guardianship. Noncompliance with the goals of the service plan, commonly defined as not attending mandated treatment, often leads to the child remaining in state care (Atkinson & Butler, 1996; Jellinek et al., 1992).

Clients often feel disempowered and powerless in their interactions with child welfare services and feel like the power of CPS is unlimited (Diorio, 1992; Dumbrell, 2006). Parents who are already experiencing oppression due to their race, gender, social class, education level, or lack of access to resources are at higher risk of being further disempowered when working with a government agency like child welfare services. Statistics show that more than half of the children involved with child welfare are non-white and the majority of families are affected by poverty (Sedlak & Broahurst, 1996; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2009).

With this basic understanding of child welfare services and the parents they serve, the empowerment of parents appears to be a desired goal for this population. However, a deeper understanding of the child welfare system accesses the realization that this system does not reward empowerment. Expressions of empowerment, either personal or social, can be interpreted by the system as disrespectful or a demonstration that the parent does not place a high priority on regaining custody of the child (Reich, 2005). As a result, parents and families can experience serious consequences from empowerment actions.

The child welfare system and empowerment

Although child protection agencies ideally work collaboratively with parents and families, research that has looked at the child welfare system in the United States suggests that the system responds more positively to deference and compliance than to engagement and empowerment (Reich, 2005; Smith, 2008). Deference to a child protection worker and to the system is understood as an expression of a parent's commitment to regaining custody of the child and willingness and motivation to change. It is also seen as recognition that there is a problem and that the parent is seeking help with this acknowledged problem. Parents who attempt to be empowered or "stand up for themselves" are often labeled as non-compliant, angry or unwilling to change, and can be penalized for those actions, either through a delay in the child's return home or through termination of their parental rights. Expressions of anger, even self-righteous, justified anger, can be seen as evidence of a parent's loss of control or lack of desire to make the changes necessary to regain custody of the child. Some parent who remain angry during their involvement with child welfare services are never able to reunify with their children (Reich, 2005).

Compliance and deference, which can be seen as the antithesis of empowerment, are surprisingly highly valued in the child welfare system. Some research shows that compliance is valued even over behavioral change (Reich, 2005; Smith, 2008). Although, unsurprisingly, compliance with mandated treatment services is strongly correlated with family reunification (Atkinson & Butler, 1996; Jellinek et al., 1992); this relationship is stronger than might be expected. Compliance influences the speed at which children are returned home even when controlling for continued substance use or the presence of another problem that led to the child being removed (Smith, 2003)

The context of child welfare services leads to an ethical dilemma for social workers who are working with parents who are receiving child welfare services: Should they empower clients when they are involved in a system that does not reward empowerment? While the Code of Ethics sets forth empowerment as a goal for social work clients, it does not address what action to take in a context where empowerment is not appreciated or whether empowerment is always an ethical clinical choice.

What options does a clinician have?

Social workers have several options for addressing empowerment with CPS involved clients. These options involve making choices around how to acknowledge the power issues and lack of empowerment clients often experience in CPS work, as well as deciding whether to actively advocate for clients and change within the system.

One option is to take a collaborative approach to work with clients, acknowledging the power issues inherent in CPS involved work and addressing them both directly and through techniques designed to help mandated clients successfully engage in the work. Altman and Gohagan (2009) suggest doing this through the framework of Reactance Theory, which understands that people have predictable, normal responses to a loss of freedom. These responses include specific behaviors, such as anger and defiance, which can lead to a client being labeled as resistant or non-compliant (Brehm, 1966; Rooney, 2009). Child welfare involvement is accompanied by many such losses of freedom, such as the loss of custody of a child or the requirement to attend treatment services. Clinicians can apply techniques drawn from Reactance Theory, such as being clear about the boundaries of the work and confidentiality, naming and clarifying power differentials, offering choices and highlighting the client's right to self-

determination. All these can lead to successful collaborative work with clients. Although collaborative work gives some power back to the client, ultimately compliance with a mandate to attend treatment, and work on specific goals from the client's service plan will probably be necessary for the client to quickly regain custody of the child.

A second approach reflects a Freirian analysis of the individual problem (Freire, 1993). Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and consciousness raiser, believed that the role of social workers lay in helping clients gain an awareness of the larger issues of oppression and power that may explain the etiology of individual problems. Through this awareness and knowledge, he believed that change could occur (Carroll & Minkler, 2000). Although clients may be penalized for seeking empowerment within the CPS system, social workers can discuss with clients issues of power, compliance, and oppression within this system and increase awareness of the lack of appreciation for empowerment. Increasing critical consciousness, as Freire recommends, and having an honest discussion about the choices available to a client and the possible consequences of those choices can be a personal empowerment approach, placing priority on the client's right to self-determination. This approach acknowledges the client's powerlessness within the system but also highlights that her response to the system is her choice—and she may choose to gain power by showing deference and continuing to appear powerless.

A third empowerment approach focuses on social workers themselves advocating for systemic change within the child welfare system. This reflects the concept of social empowerment, that individuals are closely intertwined with their environment and must have access to necessary resources, and recognizes the power and privilege inherent in the position of social worker versus client (Weinberg, 2006). Several changes in policy and agency culture would support increased parental empowerment in a population whose demographics suggest many are already disempowered. An effort to educate direct service child welfare workers about psychological reactance and resistance would help workers develop alternative, less negative explanations for parental noncompliance and lack of deference and be able to better tolerate and understand empowered parents. A push towards more collaborative work with families is already happening at the administration level of some states' child welfare agencies. More education for direct service workers around how to work collaboratively with parents would benefit both parents and workers. Changes that bring child welfare practices more in line with the Code of Ethics, which identifies dignity and worth of the person and the importance of human relationships as two of social work's core values, would also be valuable to both families and workers.

Making these changes within child welfare services would allow the institutional culture to better match the values set forth in the Code of Ethics: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence. These changes would not cause children to be removed less often or returned home more quickly but by acknowledging parents' own worth, treating them with respect and dignity and allowing them to advocate for themselves in positive ways, the relationship between child welfare services and parents could be strengthened and changed. In a child welfare agency with a culture which welcomes empowered parents, social workers working with these clients would be able to work with them towards both personal and social empowerment without being concerned about the potential cost of that work to the parent and to the child.

Conclusion

Social workers face difficult decisions when working with parents who are involved with child welfare services. Although the NASW Code of Ethics requires that social workers work towards empowering clients, especially those who have experienced oppression due to their minority status, the child welfare system rewards deference and compliance, not empowerment. Social workers must seriously consider the possible consequences of empowerment for their clients before acting and explore ways to work towards empowerment within this system.

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