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Strengthening Social Worker–Client Relationships in Child Protective Services

Addressing Power Imbalances and "Ruptured" Relationships

Sarah Maiter, Sally Palmer, and Shehenaz Manji

Introduction

Few researchers have set out to explore parents' feelings about their experiences with Child Protective Services (CPS), but some have included parents' responses as part of a broader study. These studies (Farmer, 1993; Haight et al., 2002; Winefield and Barlow, 1995) have tended to focus on parents' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with CPS interventions rather than on specifics of the worker-client relationship within the CPS context. Research-based information about positive and negative aspects of the worker-client relationship within CPS is needed as 'considerable evidence exists to show that the skills of direct practice can make a difference to client outcome' (Trotter, 2002: 39). Given the intense emotions generated by interventions

between parents and their children, it is essential that this work be done by someone trained to handle human interactions that are potentially explosive and that may have lasting traumatic effects.

The imbalance of power in the CPS-parent relationship is a central aspect of the relationship. Lundy (2004), basing her views on the work of Moreau (1989), highlights the importance of the worker-client relationship in social work generally and the need to increase client power within this relationship. She suggests, 'reducing the power between client and worker is integral to the helping relationship' (Lundy, 2004: 66). Moreau and Frosst (1993) expanded on this earlier, noting that the power differential between workers and clients in social work settings can be reduced by 'maintaining respect for the client's dignity and autonomy, validating strengths, articulating limits to the professional role, clear contracting, encouraging self-help and the use of groups, and self-disclosure' (1993: 126). Furthermore, this process can be achieved by 'using first names; demystifying the social work role by employing simple language and avoiding jargon and diagnostic/medical terminology; ensuring that clients see what is written and hear what is being said about them; and protecting confidentiality' (Lundy, 2004: 66).

The demands of CPS work, in terms of investigation and written reports, sometimes tend to draw attention away from building a helping relationship. It has, however, been claimed that 'all social work helping takes place in the context of a caring relationship between the social worker and the client' (Lundy, 2004: 113). A social worker likely to develop a positive relationship is one who is 'respectful, attentive, interested, caring, trustworthy, friendly, genuine, unpretentious, sympathetic, warm, concerned, empathetic, accepting, compassionate, understanding, supportive, reassuring, patient, comforting, solicitous' (Kadushin and Kadushin, 1997: 103). Although this may seem to be a daunting expectation for a child protection worker, Trotter (2002) identifies important skills for CPS workers that can contribute to developing a positive relationship. He notes: 'Effective child protection workers have skill in clarifying their role. They have frequent, open and honest discussions about: the purpose of the intervention; the dual role of the worker as an investigator and helper, the nature of the worker's authority and how it can be used, what is negotiable and what is not, and the limits of confidentiality' (2002: 39). Thus, characteristics of the worker as noted above and skills identified by Trotter together can contribute to positive relationships in CPS. This article reports on findings from a qualitative study of 61 parents who had sustained involvement with CPS. The article focuses on the findings pertaining to the positive and negative aspects of the worker-client relationship as identified by service recipients.

Literature Review

Research over the years has shown that workers' qualities, i.e., their personality and character, are central to the satisfaction of social work service participants, and are often more important than the agency functions (Mayer and Timms, 1970; Sainsbury, 1975). Some researchers found that parents tended to dissociate workers from their agencies: they might object to interventions they viewed as agency driven, yet be positive about their workers, viewing the workers as relatively powerless against agency operations (Drake, 1994; Sainsbury, 1975).

Positive Qualities

Many parents who become involved with CPS have been abused or rejected as children, and/or marginalized by society as adults, e.g., by classism or racism; thus, it is difficult for them to form good working relationships. Accordingly, parents valued service providers who were caring, respectful, accepting, friendly, genuine, responsive, supportive and trustworthy.

All 10 parents in a qualitative study by McCallum (1995) mentioned the importance of service providers showing caring, compassion, and commitment. Caring by workers was also an important contributor to satisfaction in Sainsbury's findings (1975); parents in Packman et al. (1986) valued workers who showed an interest in them; and mothers in McCurdy and Jones (2000) appreciated workers who had been kind and gone 'the extra mile' for them. Respect was mentioned in Wilford and Hetherington's (1997) study, by both English and German parents: 'All I ask is to be treated like a human being and not a number' (1997: 62). Acceptance by workers was also mentioned by parents in other studies (Drake, 1994; McCurdy and Jones, 2000). McCallum (1995) noted that fathers in her study who had been charged with sexually abusing their daughters were gratified when workers accepted them as people.

Friendliness was the worker attribute most highly rated in Winefield and Barlow (1995), and was also important in Sainsbury (1975) and in Magura and Moses (1984). Being genuine was cited as important by parents in Packman et al. (1986). The importance of workers being trustworthy was mentioned in McCallum (1995) and McCurdy and Jones (2000). In the latter study, a parent defined trust as being able to trust the worker to do the right thing for both parents and children. Another aspect of trust was reported in Thoburn (1980): parents wanted workers to be honest with them about plans for their children.

Negative Qualities

Researchers also noted negative comments made by workers, including workers being judgmental, uncaring, lacking in understanding, authoritarian, and denigrating. Judgmental attitudes included labeling parents as poor money managers (Callahan and Lumb, 1995: 804), as abusers (McCallum, 1995), or treating them as guilty until proven innocent (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995).

The theme of workers being uncaring was evident in a number of studies. A number of parents described some workers as inhuman (Diorio, 1992) or dehumanized (Drake, 1994). As noted earlier, parents in the Drake (1994) study blamed the system, saying the work of CPS workers required them to become desensitized and dehumanized. McCallum (1995) found that parents were unhappy when service providers seemed uncaring toward their children. This fits with Thoburn's (1980) finding that parents of children admitted to care felt deeply about their children and wanted to do what was best for them.

Lack of understanding by workers was noted by parents attending child protection case conferences in the UK (Corby et al., 1996): interviews with parents after 29 conferences revealed they had concerns about not being understood by professionals. In Fisher et al. (1986), some parents felt workers did not seem to understand the difficulties they were facing with their child's behavior; when workers tried to normalize behavior that parents found problematic, parents felt they were being judged as incompetent. They wanted their concerns to be accepted as valid. Some parents in a US study by Magura (1982) said workers seemed to have

their own agendas, e.g., asking questions about their childhood that parents viewed as unrelated to their present situation.

Authoritarian attitudes by service providers brought a negative response from parents. In Drake's (1994) study, parents mentioned workers who took a superior attitude, giving orders to parents rather than working with them. In Packman et al. (1986), parents described some workers as 'pushy', and as taking control away from parents, even when the parents had themselves requested help.

Parents also reported feelings of being denigrated. Parents in Thoburn's (1980) study said workers viewed them as having little to offer their children, at home or in the admission process. Similar feelings were expressed by a First Nations caregiver, who felt that CPS workers had an accusing attitude and always looked for faults in parents (Anderson, 1998: 448). In Farmer (1993), non-offending mothers of abused children felt they were blamed for allowing the abuse, and this caused them to close ranks with their offending partners.

Most research on parents' perspectives of CPS interventions has been qualitative, using small samples of parents (Anderson, 1998; Diorio, 1992; McCallum, 1995). The few quantitative studies (Fryer et al., 1990; Magura and Moses, 1984; Packman et al., 1986) indicate that most parents were more positive than negative about the services they received. Yet the reports on qualitative studies tended to give more space to negative than positive comments.

Method

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative design was employed in order to access parents' thoughts and feelings about CPS and the qualities of the worker that they found to be helpful or not. Similar to Sherman and Reid's (1994) thinking we decided to conduct a qualitative study as we wished to fully understand the context of our research participants' lives that the 'controlled' and 'reductive' procedures of quantitative research tend to miss. A qualitative approach could provide a holistic understanding of the lives of child protection service recipients while also providing insights into significant factors about interventions by social workers (Fetterman, 1989; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Our thinking was that this picture, namely the context of client lives together with interventions by social workers, provided the in-depth understanding necessary to assess interventions and make suggestions for change (Hartman, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Pieper, 1989; Sherman and Reid, 1994). We wished to obtain a better understanding of what goes on in the actual process of practice rather than just focusing on measurable outcomes while also seeing the need 'for more knowledge about the interactive and subjective experience of the client in the clinical change process' (Sherman and Reid, 1994: 3). In essence we wanted to consider the 'life world' of the client as this life world is so different from that of the practitioner that it is difficult to enter and to understand (Ruckdeschel et al., 1994).

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were recruited from two CPS agencies servicing two of 53 regions in Ontario, Canada, (population eight million) utilizing a convenience sampling approach. Thirty-nine parents (64%) were recruited from one agency and 22 (36%) from the other.

Each participating agency generated a list of open ongoing cases, as well as a list of closed cases going back approximately one year. Cases that had made it past the investigation stage and had been open to family/ongoing services were contacted. Participants were first contacted by an administrative person within the agency and asked if they would consent to having their name passed on to researchers. Once the researchers received this list, two trained research assistants called parents to tell them more about the study and enquired if they were interested in being interviewed using a previously developed phone script. It is not known whether any parents declined to have their names passed on to the researchers, or were unable to be contacted by telephone (i.e., no answer, not home). From the list passed on by the agency 100 percent of the participants contacted agreed to be interviewed.

The sample comprised both open and closed cases. The participants were randomly selected from the agency's cases with the requirement that parents had a basic capacity to speak English. Throughout the contact script used, it is mentioned a number of times that their service involvement would not be affected by whether or not they chose to participate. It was also noted that no one from the agency would know that they took part in the interview, including the administrative person who initially called them.

Data Collection

Three master's-level social work students who had experience working with child welfare service participants conducted the interviews. Using only three researchers to conduct the interviews had the advantage of the interviewers becoming familiar with the topic and practiced at working with the interview schedule. In addition to bringing their experience to the study, the interviewers were given two days of training on conducting qualitative interviews. The training comprised interviewers taking part in several mock interviews that were audio taped. These mock interviews were then listened to in a group setting by the Principal Investigator and the research coordinator as well as the other interviewers. Critique of the interview and suggestions for improvements in technique were made. Additionally, a handbook of readings about qualitative interviewing theory and technique was provided to each interviewer. Finally, a half-day meeting was held with a community group so interviewers could hear what advice community members had about doing research interviews with a child welfare population.

Interviews were from 1½ to 2 hours in length and usually took place in participants' homes. The interviews were with the family's primary caregiver, in most instances the mother; only with one family were both parents interviewed. Participants were given a choice about where they would like to be interviewed. They were informed that if they did not wish to be interviewed in their home, a private room at the public library was available, or they could be interviewed at the university. This process was used to give parents control over where to meet and thereby reduce, as much as possible, any actual or perceived power differential between research participants and the researcher. It was also expected that increasing the comfort of research participants during the interview would contribute to better conversations with participants and enhance the quality of the data obtained (Berg, 1989; Tutty et al., 1996). In addition to a research stipend, they were offered a babysitting subsidy, but were responsible for arranging their own childcare.

Participants were given detailed information about the purpose of the study and signed consents that had been approved by the University Ethics Review Board. Interviewers collected limited demographic information from participants at the beginning of the interview, such as age,

gender, marital status, and number of children. In keeping with the purpose of the study and the qualitative approach of the research design (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) participants were engaged in one-on-one dialogue with the researcher to explore dimensions of their everyday lives and were encouraged to reflect on their service experiences. The semi-structured interview guide was developed from a review of the literature which identified contextual issues present in the lives of parents involved with child protective services along with intervention issues that needed consideration. This data collection strategy has the potential to obtain rich information about the everyday lives and experiences of people, can provide information on experiences relating to clinical interventions, and can provide the context within which such intervention is provided (Berg, 1989; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Service participants were asked to think about the important events in their lives, particularly events that occurred over the past 5 years, and to describe these events. Participants were then asked about when they became involved with the child welfare system and when this involvement stopped, followed by questions that asked them to discuss the most important things, both good and bad, that had had an impact on their lives. Questioning was then divided into three broad categories—daily living, service involvement, and conclusion—with each category having a number of sub-questions and probes. The goal of the semi-structured interview was to obtain as comprehensive a picture of service participants' lives as possible with a particular emphasis on child welfare services and on family life.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio taped and subsequently transcribed by two research assistants. Care was taken that all identifying information was removed from the transcribed data, and that numbers were assigned to each interview to ensure confidentiality—a central ethical issue during this phase of research (Tutty et al., 1996). During analysis, all three authors became familiar with the data set by reading through several interviews as recommended by Tutty et al. Content analysis (Berg, 1989) was utilized as an overall approach to analysis to ascertain the common themes in participants' experiences with CPS. During first-level coding the three authors read four transcripts to examine for similarities and differences between data segments and connected these similar 'meaning units' together as categories. At this predominantly concrete level, information evident in the text was coded (Berg, 1989). A tentative coding scheme was developed, consisting of categories and sub-categories with clear rules developed for assigning data to certain categories and sub-categories. Although 'categories may emerge from the questions you ask, or they may simply reflect the critical events that you identity in your research participants' stories' (Tutty et al., 1996: 102) the rich information in our interview data led us to develop our categories from the critical events reflected in the participants stories relating to both interventions and their lives generally.

With discussion, we were able to reach agreement on a set of categories to guide the ongoing coding of interviews. Another three interviews were coded independently by the third author and a Master's-level research assistant, followed by discussion by the authors to reach agreement on further modification of the code guide. The remaining interviews were coded by one person each, using the qualitative software package NVTVO (QSR NUD*IST Vivo) for organizing non-numerical data. Coders were asked to code all statements that were relevant to the coding scheme developed to guard against selective attention to points of particular interest to the coders (Coffey and

Atkinson, 1996). As the coding progressed, a few additional categories were identified and added to the code guide, using the same process. Because so many interviews were being analyzed, the saturation point was reached long before all 61 interviews had been coded. The first two authors were available for consultation to the two coders throughout the process, when new points emerged that did not fit existing categories.

With the completion of coding, the three authors undertook the next level of analysis, comparing and contrasting the categories to discover the relationships between them. The goal at this second level of analysis was to collapse the categories into themes and sub-themes by locating patterns that appeared consistently in our data set (Tutty et al., 1996). The three authors discussed the possible themes suggested by parents' comments under the various categories, such as their views of helpful and unhelpful interventions by child protective service workers. Our development of themes was also guided by our goal of understanding the nature of parents' histories, their daily lives, and their perceptions of agency/worker interventions. Another dimension was added to the analysis by having the coders keep journal memos of their own reactions to the data in the interviews; sometimes a theme was suggested by the accumulation of comments in one interview, e.g., a parent's sense of being under siege with a myriad of family problems and the unwelcome intrusion of CPS. These journal memos were used by the authors to enrich their development of themes.

Findings

The demographic information of the research participants is provided along with the most common themes, illustrated by quotations that best seem to express the parents' views of workers' qualities that they found to be helpful or unhelpful. All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

The Parents (Research Participants)

For the 61 parents in the sample, 57 (93%) of the interviews were with mothers only, three (5%) were with fathers only, and one was a joint interview. The age of the parents ranged from 16 years to 47 years, with a mean of 31.66 years. The marital status of the parents was: single = 17 (27.9%); married = 15 (24.6%); living common-law = 10 (16.4%); divorced = 10 (16.4%); separated = 8 (13.1%), and widowed = 1 (1.6%). Fifty-eight (95.1%) of the parents were born in Canada, and 60 (98.4%) spoke English as their first language. The number of children in families ranged from one to six, with a mean of 2.18. The length of time that parents had been involved with CPS ranged from one month to 15 years, with a mean of 2.4 years.

Major Themes Identified: Positive Qualities

Parents mentioned the following positive qualities that they appreciated in workers: caring (51%); genuine (43%); empathetic (31%); exceptionally helpful (21%); listening (18%); non-judgmental (13%); and accepting (10%).

Caring

Thirty-one parents (51%) identified aspects about their worker that made parents feel cared about, particularly during their most difficult times. These workers made special efforts to support them during crisis periods, and provided instrumental help such as organizing Christmas gifts

and bringing groceries, baby formula, and baby food. With regard to support during crisis, Wendy, 37, recalled: 'She took me—she talked. We worked things out when I was going through difficulties . . . at one point I just wanted to give up everything . . . and she was right there for me'. Not surprisingly, instrumental help was especially valued, as noted by Tanya, 24, single mother of one: 'Then we had this one worker who came in *every* week . . . and said, "Oh how's everything doing" and she brought formula every time she came—baby food for him and things like that, every time. And she just said, "What's the problem, any problems or anything?"' Similarly, Tess, 23, noted: 'She was willing to help. There was one incident where I got myself in a situation where I didn't have groceries for myself, so she brought me some. She brought the blanket that's on the couch for [daughter]. She's a great person'.

Finally, the worker's caring was evidenced by particular actions such as spending time with the parent and making special efforts, so that the parent felt supported, as observed by Marilyn, 18, who was accompanied by her CPS worker for counseling services:

> So she took me to the place. She talked to me all the way there, and it was a 20-minute drive, I thought, 'Okay, now you're just going to drop me off, I don't know any of these people and all that', but she didn't. She came in, talked for a few hours, and got me settled.

Genuine

Twenty-six parents (43%) identified aspects of workers' behavior that related to being genuine: being down to earth, not belittling, keeping parents informed, having a sense of humor, being relaxed, and being 'like an old friend'. Dorothy, 47, divorced mother of three, commented: '[The worker] tends to come in, and she basically has a really good sense of humor. I really appreciate that.' Midge, 39, observed: 'She was just like somebody who you could sit down and talk to, it was just like . . . a friend—an old friend'.

Having a worker share relevant personal information gave parents a sense that the worker was being open. Nola, 27, a single mother of two, said: '[The worker] called me and said, "Okay, my daughter is going into labor any day now, so I'll be off for the next couple weeks" . . . that was very nice of her to call me'.

Bonnie, 38, married with two children, described her worker as being down to earth and open about sharing information about her son in foster care:

> he was very good . . . [son] really liked him. He [son] thought [the worker] was like a big buddy. He was so down to earth with us, he wasn't like a phony, trying to be this big office guy, he wears regular clothes, very relaxed, tells you how it is, doesn't try to put out a phony thing. Like [son] is really trying to push things lately and he [worker] lets you know what's going on, he's not hiding anything. And that's good because we need to know that, and we'd always have that contact where if there was an incident where [son] came for a weekend visit and something went on, I'd let [worker] know. And they would work with it that week.

Empathetic

Nineteen parents (31%) identified aspects of their relationship with workers that indicated empathy: the worker seemed to be 'on their side', seemed to 'feel for them', shared some of their (the worker's) own experiences, and gave them positive reinforcement. Kathy, 34, married mother of

three, noted: 'The one we started with, she was very understanding. This was the Intake worker. She was more on our side as well'. Empathy was also experienced when workers showed understanding of the parent's life situation, as conveyed by Pat, 23: 'She [worker] does feel for me, she does feel for our situation, and everything. She has been good'. Parents appreciated workers who provided positive feedback, as indicated by Tess, 23, a single mother: 'it was just very positive—she was very positive. She emphasized the good things, and she didn't always agree with some of the views I had, but for the most part she tried to understand'. From the last statement, it is evident that workers could be viewed as empathetic even when they did not agree with parents on everything.

Workers sharing relevant personal information contributed to parents having a sense that they were understood. Sheila, 31, mother of four, commented:

> I think part of it was because I knew she was a parent herself, which makes a difference for me. I don't know why—just because they know from first hand, not just observing from somebody else. She can relate more to some things that were going on in my life.

Fay, 32, a single mother of two, had a similar opinion: 'She was a single mom too, so I guess we had more things in common. So it made it easier to talk to her, and just to get it off your chest, you know'.

Exceptional Help

Thirteen parents (21%) noted that some workers did more for them than expected, by offering concrete suggestions, advocating for them, going out of their way to find suitable resources, and providing help with children's problems. Kitty, 38, single mother of three noted: 'She was very useful—she gave me [information about] some situations that I had never thought about, or things to do that I never considered, that might work for me'. Dorothy, 47, mother of three, felt that workers did a lot for her, especially recognizing how overburdened they were:

> I mean, I called them, they came out and started the ball rolling and everything . . . they did all the work, I think there's too many children and not enough workers. So, a few times they've called and said, 'We know we're supposed to meet you this afternoon and can't come, an emergency came up, we have to go to Court'.

Hilda, 23, described the worker's perseverance in advocating for help for Hilda's mentally challenged child, thereby ultimately helping Hilda in her role as parent:

> the [worker], she's nice . . . you get some of them that are mean, and you get some of them that are nice. They understand you and they're concerned about you and they're willing to help you and not willing to destroy your family. They're just there to help. That was what she was like . . . she put up with my bad attitude. She persuaded me into going for things with her that I didn't want to. Like getting her [child] tested for autism. I didn't want to do that at first and she said 'Well maybe we could try, you don't have to, but it won't hurt'.

Listening

The worker's ability to listen to the parent's story was identified by 11 parents (18%) as contributing to a positive relationship. This made parents feel respected and valued, and gave

them the opportunity to explain their side of the situation. Angela commented: 'I felt like she was listening to me, and she believed me, and that my side of the story was being heard. It I had to listen to all this, then I better get to tell my side too'. Sometimes parents felt that it was the first time they had really been heard. Natalie, 32, a single mother, stated: 'Well, I felt—for the first time, I felt that somebody was actually listening to me'. Wendy felt similarly, noting: 'She listened to me. She didn't jump in like the other workers and say how it is. She listened and understood what I was saying'.

Non-Judgmental

Eight parents (13%) made favorable comments about workers who did not judge them or 'put them down'. These workers appeared to remain neutral, encouraging parents to sort out differences with their children, and not placing value judgments on the parents.

Carrie, 41, commented on her relationship with her worker, whose non-judgmental attitude made her feel: 'a lot more comfortable. If I had a bad day with her [child] I could say, "You would not believe what that kid did to me today" and it was just comfortable talking to him'. Valerie, 18, put it very simply: 'What was helpful was basically that she never judged me'.

Accepting

Seven parents (10%) appreciated workers who accepted them, treated them with respect, 'like an adult', and approached them with encouragement, rather than scrutiny. Wendy, 37, described her worker's accepting attitude:

> she used to catch me in lies a lot . . . but then I stopped all that . . . and got back on track but . . . she was good to me. I used to smoke dope and she knew I did . . . and I would never deny it to her, you know what I mean. One day I tried to deny it to her, but she could smell my apartment, so how are you supposed to deny it? But that was the only bad thing that I had at that point when she was there . . . and she just says: "Work on it, you'll get through it, you can quit".

Major Themes Identified: Negative Qualities

Parents mentioned the following negative qualities about their workers: judgmental (46%); cold and uncaring (44%); poor listeners (38%); critical (38%); and insincere (20%).

Judgmental

Twenty-eight parents (46%) felt their workers passed judgment on them without acknowledging the limited choices the parents had in their lives. Judgmental attitudes were inferred by parents from workers' tone of voice; their physically checking the home; and the parents' feeling that they were being prematurely accused of mental and/or emotional instability. Being judged by workers was especially threatening to parents in view of the workers' power. Pat, 23, shared her interactions with a worker in this regard:

> She told me, 'You realize you're never going to get your daughter back until you admit the truth?' I am admitting the truth—my husband only hit me once, and my husband is not an alcoholic, like a diehard alcoholic. He does have a drinking problem—not a major one—but he has slowed down.

Cold and Uncaring

Twenty-seven parents (44%) spoke about their workers being cold and uncaring, describing them as rude, abrupt, unhelpful, and showing a lack of concern for the parent's feelings, e.g., when removing a child. Christine, 39, mother of five, recalled the insensitive words of the worker who removed her children:

> 'Oh, well, just consider it a long vacation,' she said, 'You could use one.' You don't go saying that to a parent. And she was a parent herself—that's why it took me off guard, I thought to myself, 'you must be a real bimbo'. But that's what she said. 'Consider it a long vacation'. I said, 'I don't want a long vacation . . . of any kind'.

This uncaring attitude was captured by Melinda, 38, separated mother of three: 'Every emotion is getting torn apart and I'm going crazy and she's asking for my address. So—"unfeeling" is what I felt'. Pat, 23, had a sense of coldness from her worker when he took her baby into care: 'He did not show that he cared at all. He was more concerned with taking the baby . . . they should have more feelings towards the people they are working with'.

Not Listening

Twenty-three parents (38%) felt that workers did not listen to them, describing workers as being preoccupied and busy, only interested in questioning while not listening to the parents' answers. Georgia, mother of two, spoke about her experience regarding her child in foster care:

> That [not listening] was one of the frustrations that we found—we've known this child for a few years, we do understand what you're dealing with, please accept some of what we're saying, and you know act on it, rather than waiting until you find it.

The parent's sense that workers were not listening tended to invalidate the parent's relationship with, and knowledge of, their child, and to prevent the formation of a positive alliance that could result in case resolutions.

Not listening was also linked to not providing concrete help, as noted by Lara, 28, a mother of three who recalled: 'I find her just—telling us what to do—she's not helpful, she complains every time we ask for a voucher, and it's like she doesn't want to listen to our feelings or our thoughts or anything'. Parents' desire and need to have their full story heard was captured by Sheila, 37, mother of four: 'I feel really frustrated because they don't realize . . . they just look at the small picture'. In a similar vein, Emma, 31, commented: 'it's like they're not even paying attention to you half the time that you're talking to them'.

Critical

Twenty-three parents (38%) commented on workers being too critical of them: being 'one-sided' and not allowing parents any 'say'; not seeing the parent's viewpoint; making parents feel as though they were on trial; only focusing on the negative and not mentioning the positive, particularly in written court documents; constantly bringing up past problems; and not understanding

the life problems confronting the parent. Lack of understanding of the many problems confronting parents was commented on by Nellie, 24:

> but when it came to [the worker], who was about my age, she didn't have a clue what was going on. She would sit there and say, 'Oh, it's not that hard'. And I said, 'Are you a mom?' She said 'No'. And I said, 'Well, you don't know what you're talking about'.

Kathy commented on the tendency for workers to be negative: 'Everything's negative, so how is the family supposed to get anywhere when they put nothing positive in [worker's written statement for Court]? So of course the judge is going to see negative'.

Laurie, 23, noted the feeling of being extremely criticized by her worker: 'He just made me feel like I was on trial'. Sheila, 27, also commented on how critical her worker was:

> My worker, I know, doesn't have children. To have your own children or to read a book, I know it's different. [If you] have your own children, especially to deal with the difficulties that my two have, you would understand more instead of being so critical.

Insincere

Twelve parents (20%) felt that their workers were insincere. Parents described workers as sarcastic, devious, or 'conniving', and withholding information from the parents. At worst, they found it unconscionable for workers who were in communication with the parents, yet would apprehend a child without the parent being forewarned. Sarcasm in the worker's tone was perceived by Lara, 28, mother of three, who disagreed with her children's worker that their counseling could be discontinued:

> I said, 'Well, they should go a bit longer as they need it'. And she said, 'Well, I can't force them'. I said, 'Well, when they come home, I'll be bringing them to counseling,' and she said, 'Well, good luck to you'. You know, like she's sarcastic.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

As with most qualitative studies, we cannot claim that the findings are generalizable to other populations, but they provide insights into the lived experiences of this group of parents involved with CPS. The transferability of the findings is increased, moreover, by the large sample size compared to other research described in the review above. The quality of the data collection was also ensured by the considerable initial training given to interviewers, and the quality of data analysis was ensured by having two researchers and two research assistants examine the same transcripts to develop the coding scheme.

Our sample, however, did not capture people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, firstly because of lesser diversity in the geographical area where this study was conducted, and secondly as we also required that participants had a basic working capacity for the English language because we were unable to accommodate translation expenses (i.e., the budget did not allow it). Care should thus be taken when considering these findings for culturally diverse families as the experiences of these families with CPS, to a certain extent, would be qualitatively different.

Discussion

Parents in our sample reported many qualities of workers that they found to be positive, that they valued, acknowledged, and appreciated. These qualities included workers being caring, genuine, empathetic, exceptionally helpful, non-judgmental, and accepting. That a substantial number of parents receiving services from CPS social workers were able to identify specific positive qualities about their workers provides evidence that these workers have much to offer their clients in terms of a social work relationship that is both caring and professional. This is particularly useful information given the mandatory and sometimes adversarial nature of CPS as it suggests that a positive relationship can be established by social workers even within this context.

The parents in this sample provided rich information on the very specific nature of the relationship that they found to be helpful as well as aspects of the workers' relationship with their families that were positive for their children. For example, in the findings regarding genuineness of the worker, Bonnie speaks about the relationship between her son and the worker and its positive impact on all members of the family. Much evidence is also provided about workers not agreeing with parents on some issues but gently urging them to make positive decisions for the sake of the family. The worker urging a mother to have her child tested for autism in order to access services and resources for the child is a further example of the difficult but positive nature of this relationship.

These findings, however, beg the question of whether a positive worker-client relationship has an impact on child welfare outcomes. Studies in general practice and in the field of psychology suggest that the quality of the worker-client alliance is related to positive outcomes for clients (Horvath and Greenberg, 1994; Krupnick et al., 1996; Palmer et al., 2001). Others (Dore and Alexander, 1996; Trotter, 2002) also identify a link between positive outcomes based on the worker-client relationship in CPS. Indeed in a CPS context various interventions are likely to be used but Dore and Alexander (1996) found in their review of studies that the successful outcome of specific interventions utilized when working with families at risk of child abuse and neglect is contingent upon the formation of a 'helping alliance'.

While parents in our study identified many positive qualities of CPS workers, they also noted some negative qualities. These included workers being judgmental; cold and uncaring; poor listeners; critical; and insincere. The inevitable gathering of information by CPS workers requires the asking of many questions to ensure that the child is safe. Along with this, workers may check out cupboards for food if there has been a report of neglect. This questioning and scrutiny is understandably construed as intrusive and disrespectful. Yet workers also have a responsibility and a mandate that they cannot put aside. Efforts can, however, be made by workers to increase the positives in their relationships with their clients. Ongoing self-reflection about their power and its impact (or perceived impact) on the worker-client relationship and ways of countering this could be useful. Our findings suggest that clients wanted to be fully informed, appreciated the extra support they received from their workers, valued workers who did not judge them, appreciated workers who emphasized the positives, and those who disclosed some personal information, making them appear more human in the process.

Unfortunately, sometimes service delivery is constrained by systemic issues. An important positive finding of the study is that participants valued workers who spent extra time with them. Yet child welfare caseloads, responsibilities such as preparing for and attending Court, and increasing paperwork and recording demands can make this goal difficult to attain. Indeed, CPS workers themselves are sometimes disillusioned by the number of hours they have to spend on

other responsibilities rather than on direct work with their clients (OACAS Steering Committee for Workload Measurement Project, 2001). Nonetheless, some workers are able to form positive relationships with their clients to the extent that this was a finding in this study.

Workers may be more inclined to work harder in situations where they see a change occurring or where they feel rewarded for their efforts. However, the reverse can also be true in that clients will make greater efforts because of their perception of their worker's commitment to them. Other than spending more time driving clients to appointments, the participants in the study also noted smaller, less time-consuming items that resulted in their feelings of connection with their worker. This included sharing of some personal relevant information, notifying clients if they were not able to make the appointment, and providing some instrumental support such as food vouchers. Our findings suggest that there are ways to form positive relationships within a CPS context.

Relationships within a CPS setting can shift from negative to positive and vice versa depending on the problems being addressed at a specific time. It is likely that during the initial 'investigation' or during removal of a child, the relationship can be particularly challenged. It is during these times that workers should be careful not to use their power inappropriately. It is also during these times when clients will feel the most vulnerable, will feel most judged, and will need the most support. The complex and variable aspects of the worker-client relationship, along with the assaults on it due to the nature of CPS, require that methods be explored that can target the building or rebuilding of these relationships. One such method developed by Young and Poulin (1998) for general social work practice can be adapted to CPS. Their tool—The Helping Relationship Inventory (HRI)—was developed to measure the strength of helping relationships between social workers and their clients in agency settings. In their study, workers and clients both completed questionnaires. Interestingly, both sets of participants reported that just completing the questionnaire and discussing their responses was a helpful process. Clients reported that the HRI gave them a sense of empowerment to bring up issues of concern that may not have been addressed with workers otherwise and workers found that the instrument allowed them to gain more focus in their work with clients. More importantly, the authors found that the HRI could be used to modify alliances that were initially poor or to assist in rectifying 'ruptures' in the helping relationship.

Even without such tools as the HRI, workers can seek feedback from clients, revisit relationships that have deteriorated, thus empowering clients, and increasing the strength of the worker-client relationship. We agree with Trotter (2002: 48) who states that 'Despite the complex and often overwhelming problems which face clients, and despite the difficulties workers face, with excessive workloads, exposure to public scrutiny and contracting out of many direct services, child protection workers can make a difference' and it is for this reason that we advocate revisiting the worker-client relationship in CPS. In our study, some workers were able to work within their CPS role to develop good relationships with parents; ultimately, these alliances may be expected to result in better outcomes for children.

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