

# In Whose 'Best Interests'?

## Some Mothers' Experiences of Child Welfare Interventions

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### RESUME

This paper reports on a small study in the south-west region of Sydney, in which mothers discussed their experiences as recipients of child welfare interventions for alleged child abuse.

The research methodology is within a feminist framework, utilising qualitative data and placing importance on the impact of the implementation of a specific public policy on aspects of private functioning.

Data was obtained from focused interviews conducted by students on placement. The analysis highlights major themes of women's experiences of service delivery, using their own words. Themes concern feelings of powerlessness, factors determining the perception of interventions as 'helpful' or otherwise and issues of rights to information and access.

The findings of this study are considered in relation to feminist analysis of 'mothering' and State intervention; previous research on recipient experiences of service delivery and implications for future policy development and research.

### INTRODUCTION

*(Carolyn Noble-Spruell and Leonie Gibbons made helpful comments on earlier drafts of the paper)*

The reporting, recording and associated surveillance of families where children are considered 'at risk' of abuse or neglect has increased dramatically in Western countries in the last two decades. Yet, as Hepworth (1985) has remarked in describing the Canadian situation, there exists a general confusion as to how to define child abuse and neglect and "our remedies" for dealing with it "remain uncertain and may do more harm than good" (p. 160). Policies formulated to extend mandated reporting and intervention into families, ignore our lack of knowledge of the consequences of such policies for the families and children at whom they are directed.

A lack of research into the consequences of child protection policies can be attributed to paternalistic concepts according to which, as Fox describes it, the "politically neutral and beneficent" state intervenes in families in order to promote children's best interests, in instances where standards of parenting are considered to fall below socially accepted norms (1982, p. 288). Parton (1988) describes two small studies into the effects of surveillance on families where children were considered to be 'at risk' of abuse and neglect. In a study by Brown (1986), 23 parents and in a study by Corby (1987), ten sets of parents were interviewed. In these studies it was reported that parents had experienced surveillance by child protection workers as very traumatic. A major issue emerging from

the research was the extent to which parents were uninformed about investigations.

This research project was developed in response to discussion by students in class, of their personal experiences of child protection agency interventions. These students reported trauma resulting from such interventions which exacerbated their parenting problems.

The major aim of this research was to make 'public' the 'personal' experiences of some recipients of child protection policies in New South Wales. It was assumed that in the implementation of child protection policy it is women on whom the major responsibility for adequate nurturing is placed. Wilson (1983) has noted how social policy generally, because it focuses in its operation on the private world of the family, has particular consequences for women. The fact that the impact of interventions on women has received little attention may reflect what Burden and Gottlieb (1987) have remarked on as the trend for social scientists to trivialise or ignore the perspectives of women.

Child welfare policies have traditionally been vehicles for imposing on women models of appropriate mothering. Much child protection practice and research rationalises intervention in families by focusing on the effects on children of inadequate parenting. It was hoped that making public some personal experiences of these interventions would contribute to the development of more effective child protection policies.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology utilised in this research project was essentially qualitative, influenced by the principles identified by Reinharz (1983) as basic to feminist research. In particular, the qualitative nature of the research was developed from open, empathetic interaction between interviewers and interviewees, using the language of participants. The project co-ordinator and research assistants incorporated an awareness of their own values and roles in the research process. Collaborative, non-authoritarian relationships were established between interviewers and interviewees. Important in implementing the principles of this research was the fact that the research assistants were female students who volunteered for the project as part of their social welfare work placement requirement.

Participants in the project were provided with opportunities to contribute to the research process. Participants in the main project were shown transcripts of their interviews prior to data analysis and the participants were invited to a session to discuss this paper in its written form and if necessary make amendments.

Data were obtained by the use of relatively unstructured interviewing techniques. The three pilot interviews were extremely unstructured, enabling participants to focus on issues of concern to them in the intervention process. The ten interviews in the main study were focused interviews, which enabled the researchers to follow-up on issues they had identified as salient in the initial interviews. The decision to focus on specific areas meant some structuring of the interviews to ensure attention to these areas. There was variation between interviews in the degree of structure imposed — the more verbal participants requiring minimal structuring, the less verbally fluent, in particular two persons with severe hearing deficits, requiring more structuring.

The participants in the pilot study were contacted because the project co-ordinator had become aware through various avenues, of their interest in discussing and making known their experiences with the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS). These participants differed somewhat from those of the main study, in particular in that they were not all sole parents at the time of the interviews.

The participants in the main study comprised what was essentially a convenience sample, from the South-Western Region of Sydney, located by visits to eleven agencies in the area. These agencies all had as one of their functions supportive activities for parents. One participant was located through personal contact with one of the researchers and two participants by contact from other participants. A number of potential participants declined to participate, claiming feeling too stressed by current interventions, or expressing fear of repercussions from discussing agency actions. This fear of agency intervention was a significant factor in limiting the numbers of persons interviewed for the study and influenced the decision to include for analysis data obtained in the pilot, as well as in the main study.

### DATA ANALYSIS

All those contacted were women. In the main project the participants were, at the time of interview, all sole parents receiving the supporting parents' benefit and occupying Department of Housing accommodation. The children of the participants ranged from unborn to seventeen and the number per parent from one to six. Four of the women mentioned physical abuse to themselves by men. The majority appeared to be somewhat to very isolated — only three mentioning having family or friends with whom they had regular contact.

The dominant feeling expressed by participants in response to intervention was of *powerlessness at the removal, or threat of removal of their children*. These feelings were associated with a *perception of the child welfare agency interventions as punitive*. Pseudonyms have been used.

Gale stated

*When they take kids out of your hands it's like they're not your kids anymore . . . it's like I haven't got the power anymore.*

Mary claimed

*They're illegal kidnapers. It's like playing with little kids — where if they don't get their way, they pack up their dolls and go home. Now I can't make up my mind on anything. I've got to ring and check with them about everything. (For example the schools to which the children are sent).*

Kate commented

*Both my children have been terrified by strangers who legally can come into your home and threaten to kidnap them, threaten to abuse them. They were set up to prevent what they are now doing . . . We were terrified because they said they could take [the child] whenever they felt like it.*

Dianne said

*I didn't know what to do . . . two men . . . came and took him . . . you just sort of felt that you had no rights.*

Vivian believed

*As far as they're concerned you've got no rights.*

and Sara

*They [the authorities] discuss something behind your back . . . I was the last to find out . . . and I felt awful.*

For Pat

*I felt, well, I can't even be a proper person because they are not even telling me what's happening. I kept thinking I must be totally stupid.*

Effie was

*really afraid they might take Marie away from me and I felt that I was not a good mother.*

Vivian, whose children were removed from school for questioning without her being notified, had threatened legal action and believed that this action prompted the cessation of intervention. Generally however, participants were apathetic, or at least wary of asserting themselves, in relation to FACS, fearing their actions could result in punitive responses.

Gale said

*You can't show that [anger] because things might get worse, so you keep quiet and take it all.*

Kerry considered that the District Officer was harassing her but couldn't say anything because *who would believe me — they always believe the District Officer.*

Kate was told by a District Officer

*that even when we get to court, we hadn't a leg to stand on.*

She was advised by a solicitor

*Keep calm because they can do what they want and there is nothing you can do legally.*

Some mothers expressed fears at the implications of being labelled as abusive. Gale said she had the feeling they were a 'labelled family'. This was *a horrible fear that if you do the wrong things they can take your kids away.*

This fear was exacerbated by the practical problem of child care — a problem which remained following intervention. Mary was due to have a baby but was *scared [to leave the children] even with Temporary Family Care, because I'm scared that while I'm in there, they're gonna take the kids.*

Sara, who was without family support, was concerned

*If I get sick or that, what will happen?*

Kim, who also had no family support, had been advised by the Health Department to request FACS to look after her children when she attended court for a domestic abuse case. She stated *I'm scared [in case they kept her children]. I don't know if I can trust them to give my children back.*

Some of the women stated that their children had been emotionally damaged by intervention. Tony described her son's hostility to her when he returned from care and his dependence on therapy for some time following return. Mary said her son 'screamed and screamed' following his return, while her daughter is now scared of having doctors examine her.

*They have to listen to her chest through her clothes.*

Both Kate and Mary claimed that their children had decided against having children, as they were scared that FACS would automatically take them.

While all the women expressed trauma in connection with FACS interventions, when questions focused specifically on the *helpfulness of FACS interventions*, many of the women discriminated between actions of different workers with whom they had contact, on the basis of whether they received *practical help*.

Pat said

*I had a really nice man . . . he got my daughter into a pre-school . . . so that she could come home . . . he gave us the practical help we needed . . . money was really short . . . and he got us into the food vouchers from the Sydney City Mission and got us a clothing order and blankets.*

She compared the action of this officer with that of another officer who had been unhelpful.

*He had the attitude 'You're doing things wrong — I'm the expert, do things my way'.*

Dianne had a worker who was

*excellent . . . he actually got me into the refuge.*

For Vivian,

*FACS were helping me financially . . . that's when they seemed to care — now they don't.*

Tony said of her worker

*Anytime I needed anything . . . he knew that I never wasted money . . . he made sure I got a cheque for some food and*

*another time a stroller. A couple of times money came out of his pocket.*

She stated that the good ones (District Officers) are very few and far between. Those women who had experienced voluntary agency assistance discriminated in a similar way.

For some of the women, once their children had been removed access to them was a major problem. In Pat's case lack of time and finances made contact with her child

*very hard, because I had a husband in jail and I had to go to Long Bay at weekends, I couldn't see him during the week, and then going out to Bondi (from Campbelltown area) during the week, it was just financially impossible to see her more than twice a week . . . I had to wait for my Mum to come up with the money so that I could go down and see her . . . when I wasn't going down to see her, they were saying — well, you're not interested in her — you know — why don't you come and visit?*

Tony described feelings of exclusion similar to a number of the women. However she was more assertive than the others.

*At the lunch time they told me get outside. I said no! I said I'm here now, it's my kid and I'll feed him.*

Tony visited every day

*And there's no visiting time allowed there on Sundays, but I was still at the gate on Sunday morning.*

## DISCUSSION

The experiences of the majority of participants in this study were of powerlessness, apathy and passivity in interactions with welfare agency personnel, whom they frequently perceived as punitive towards them.

These experiences accord with feminist analysis which argues that welfare workers typically, as agents of social control, reinforce female passivity and dichotomise women as 'good' or 'bad'. Where workers focus on children as victims and respond punitively to those closest to them — their mothers — they ignore the vulnerability of these women. This vulnerability may be only marginally less than that of their children.

In our society, age-related dependence of children is associated with childhood being clearly demarcated as a stage for indulgence and protection. The position of women as mothers is more ambiguous. As adults they are expected to be responsible for the nurturing of children. This expectation holds even when women are in positions of extreme social and economic dependency — a dependency strongly associated in the literature with allegations of child abuse and neglect (e.g. Polansky 1981, Pelton 1980, Fernandez 1986), and exemplified by the situations of nearly all the women in this study.

In those instances where interventions did provide the women in the study with financial and other forms of practical assistance, their comments indicate that intervention was seen by the women as helpful and empowered them to meet some of their children's needs. Where interventions were perceived as punitive the women frequently responded with withdrawal which, for some mothers, was exacerbated by problems in maintaining contact with their children in care.

The long-term implications of parental withdrawal for the well-being of children has been emphasised by research into the factors associated with children considered 'lost', or in a state of 'drift', following their entry into the child welfare system (e.g. Maas and Engler, 1959; Fanshell and Shinn, 1978; McCotter, 1981).

In summary, the experiences of the women in this study challenge the continued emphasis on the reporting of and surveillance of parents, as currently implemented in New South Wales, as an effective method of preventing child abuse and neglect. Interventions which reinforce the passivity and powerlessness of women who are considered to be failing to respond adequately as mothers, by ignoring the validity of their feelings and experiences, may actually exacerbate, rather than prevent, potentially abusive situations.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH FOR CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

Reporting and surveillance policies which further oppress women do little to develop a caring society in which children's rights might become a reality. Policies which recognise the validity of mothers' perspectives will help to empower them and strengthen their parenting abilities by promoting strategies which support the rights of individuals and their access to resources.

The new Community Welfare Legislation (if fully implemented) appears to incorporate such strategies, by providing for the establishment of appeal and review mechanisms and by emphasising the provision of services to parents prior to court action. However, the findings of research into the effectiveness of similar legislative provisions in the United States, indicate that implementation of such provisions is likely to be ineffective in empowering parents. The United States experience highlights the extent of the power of the state vis a vis individual parents.

For example, researchers found that in instances where individual parents were aware of and

appealed against court decisions the state's ability to defend itself inevitably 'dwarfed' the ability of parents to effectively establish cases against the state. (Beyer and Mlyniec, 1986). Further, these researchers found that where services were provided to parents in accord with legislative requirements, they were frequently not of use to the parents, as to use them parents would have had to possess a level of self-sufficiency typically lacking in parents who come into contact with child welfare agencies.

The effectiveness of legislative provisions in the New South Wales Act might be enhanced by the establishment of an independent agency to support parents in their interactions with the agency and court. A model for such an agency is the Family Rights Group in England. This organisation, established by lawyers and social workers, collaborates with families to improve the law and practice relating to children. The central group resources local parent groups formed to provide mutual support, information and assistance to parents in their interactions with child welfare agencies. The groups seem to have had some success in empowering individual parents to participate in agency decision-making. At a more fundamental level child protection policies must move away from the traditional residualist concerns of child welfare towards social policy goals of structural change. Policies which redress inequalities in class, gender and age will be more likely to reduce individual vulnerability and effectively promote the 'best interests' of children.

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