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Telling different stories about poverty, inequality and child abuse and neglect

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Abstract

Mainstream discussions about child abuse and neglect remain disconnected from wider appreciation of what harms children and how such issues are related to wider social and economic forces. This paper draws from on-going work on framing and the role of stories in rendering poverty and inequality either irrelevant or invisible and offers some thoughts on how an alternative story needs to be developed and fought for in order to improve children's welfare and safety.

Keyword

Framing

Introduction

In too many cases, social work training involves idealistic students being told that the individuals with whom they will work have been disempowered by society. They will be encouraged to see these individuals as victims of social injustice whose fate is overwhelmingly decreed by the economic forces and inherent inequalities which scar our society. This analysis is, sadly, as widespread as it is pernicious. It robs individuals of the power of agency and breaks the link between an individual's actions and the consequences. It risks explaining away substance abuse, domestic violence and personal irresponsibility, rather than doing away with them.

This is a quote from, the then Minister for Education for England, Michael Gove, in 2013 taken from a wide-ranging speech on child abuse and neglect and child protection work. It marked a very clear repudiation of the view that social injustice and inequality are factors that need to be considered when trying to understand and deal with the harms that children and their parents and carers experience and, indeed, of the considerable scholarship linking levels of inequality within countries with a range of societal ills (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

While unusual in its forthrightness, the speech in many ways was not breaking new ground but rather reinforcing tendencies already apparent at a range of levels from the kinds of data collected by government through to guidance on practice. For example, robust data is not gathered routinely on the economic circumstances of birth families of children becoming subject to child protection investigations or becoming looked after. This is problematic ethically and methodologically. Ethically it is hard to justify the systematic non-collection of such data in a context where highly consequential interventions are being used, given that there is evidence of a clear link between deprivation and a child's chances of being removed from birth parents. Moreover, the lack of such data means robust comparative work on outcomes for those who remain in deprived birth families and those who are removed often to very different economic and social circumstances is not feasible.

At the micro level, the meanings of home visits for those living in poverty has received no attention at the level of government guidance despite the evidence, as outlined by Gupta et al in this issue of *Open Space*, of the profound social and psychological consequences of the shame associated with poverty for families.

However, while Gove dismisses inequality and I would suggest implicitly poverty as a factor in the harms children suffer, there is an alternative, more long-standing view represented by the following quote:

Why are some children at greater risk of abuse and neglect than others? Answering this question is an immense challenge. The evidence on risk is inconsistent and limited. We cannot say that any single factor – or collection of factors – causes maltreatment and we are far from being able to predict who will perpetrate abuse or who will experience it. It is nonetheless possible to identify certain contexts and environments that are more frequently associated with child abuse and neglect... Although there is no evidence which shows that poverty causes child maltreatment, poverty and child maltreatment share many similar risk factors, and frequently overlap. The impact of the stress associated with poverty and social deprivation on parenting is the most common and widely accepted explanation (Jutte et al, 2014, 10 and 13).

While undoubtedly holding out more positive possibilities for struggling families to be recognised and understood as well as to receive more help, it is suggested that this quote and the position it represents shares problematic territory with Gove in that it constructs child abuse and neglect as a largely individual matter and fails to recognise the socially constructed nature of much of what is considered as abusive. For example, neglect can encompass the inability of parents to feed or house their children and the focus on the individual can too often morph into rendering the causes of such inability as lying in the inter-personal dynamics of relationships within families and,

thus, structural issues relating to poverty and inequality invisible (see, for example, Gupta and Featherstone, 2016).

As Parton (2014) has noted, the dominant discussions about child protection are largely disconnected from any wider appreciation of what harms children, how their welfare might be improved and how such issues are related to wider social and economic forces. This paper draws from on-going work on framing and the role of stories in rendering poverty and inequality either irrelevant or invisible and offers some thoughts on how and why an alternative story needs to be developed and fought for.

Why let the facts get in the way of a good story?

In seeking to understand what policies and standpoints are persuasive, why, and to whom, in the political arena, many academics, think tanks and advocates have turned to framing theory (see Chong and Druckman, 2007). The New Economics Foundation (NEF) (2013) is one such think tank in England that has sought to understand why, for example, voters were persuaded by the 'austerity story' developed by successive politicians over the last six years despite what would appear to be its manifest inconsistencies and dangers. Before discussing this analysis, some brief words on framing are offered to set the scene.

There is a considerable literature on framing from a range of disciplines (Chong and Druckman, 2007). According to framing theorists our minds use stories to understand the world and we think in frames. These are a quick way for us to understand the world based on existing preconceptions about it. It is argued that framing is a powerful means of persuasion because once people hold a frame strongly enough, they will reject facts that do not fit with it. Moreover, the more we hear a frame repeated, the more it is strengthened in our minds and eventually, any facts we hear that do not fit our frames will be disregarded.

As indicated, NEF (2013) has used work on framing to interrogate the example of 'the austerity story'. It draws from evidence that our minds process arguments presented in stories differently and we become more interested in issues that do not affect us personally, more likely to change our minds and less sceptical. It draws from the research that identifies the elements of a good political story. Such a story must be:

- consistent
- memorable
- full of vivid images and emotional metaphors
- simple enough to be readily understood and retold.

NEF argues that 'the austerity story' has been compelling because it has a plot, characters and a moral that is easy to identify and identify with. A good

plot involves challenge and choice. In 'the austerity story' there are a number of challenges: tackling the deficit, curbing excessive government spending and making the economy work for those who deserve to be rewarded. There are also a number of linked choices: whether to be a 'striver or a skiver'; whether to work hard or be reliant upon state hand-outs.

In terms of characters, a compelling story has heroes and villains. According to the analysis from NEF the heroes of 'the austerity story' are those who work hard and play by the rules. The main enemy they face is government as it interferes, imposing unnecessary regulation and wastes money. Skivers are also villains, but they have been enabled in their villainy by governments that have allowed them to live off welfare.

The moral of 'the austerity story' is clear: you cannot live beyond your means. We must all pay our own way, whether that is by paying off the deficit, or getting a job. The lesson we learn is that we cannot have something for nothing.

The framing of the story and its structure are both of relevance if we want to understand the powerful stories about child protection currently circulating. But first we need to consider the values 'the austerity story' taps into as it is argued the most effective stories and frames connect with people's values. Appealing to values increases the chance people will engage with and respond to what is said, because they are things we hold in common, that resonate at a deep emotional level. Furthermore, the more we appeal to a value, the stronger it becomes. A powerful story like 'the austerity story' will affect more than just attitudes to economic policy; it will influence how we feel about a range of issues such as social security for example.

NEF identifies five values that are central to 'the austerity story': self-discipline, independence, reciprocity, ambition and wealth

Self-discipline is central to 'the austerity story'. Self-discipline was lacking when the debts were built up, leading to economic crisis. Self-discipline separates 'strivers' from 'skivers'- those who get up in the morning and go to work and those who choose not to. It is also what is required to get us out of the crisis- austerity is painful, but by appealing to our self-discipline, the Government asks us to endure that pain.

Independence is associated with choice and freedom. The 'austerity story' is a highly individualistic story. The economy is likened to an individual household, for example, and people are considered as individuals and, in the main, as rational economic actors.

Reciprocity is a value associated with seeking stability and safety and means believing positive actions should be rewarded with positive actions (and,

thus, negative actions punished with negative actions). It can also be associated with an 'us' and 'them' mentality and a lack of compassion for others. The 'austerity story' appeals to our sense of reciprocity when criticising the welfare state: how can it be fair to support people who do not contribute by working? Instead we should be rewarding those that make a positive contribution; hard-working families and businesses that create jobs and wealth.

Ambition is another value that separates 'strivers' from 'skivers', a desire to achieve and be successful. Those who choose not to work show no ambition. Social recognition is closely related to ambition, and in 'the austerity story' both are about financial success.

Wealth is a power value, associated with status and control over resources. The 'austerity story' implicitly values wealth by making debt a measure of our economic failure.

Overall, 'the austerity story', and the values it embodies, speaks most forcefully to and for a neo-liberal mentality that permeates our social worlds. At its starkest this offers us hope only through our ability to craft an individualised life project, looking after our own needs and taking responsibility for whatever befalls us in terms of either cause or consequence

Clearly these values are contested within countries and across them with differing welfare settlements attesting to their relative strength or weakness. While 'the austerity story' appears to have had most purchase with particular regions in the UK, there is and has been an on-going battle not only about the status of the story but also its values.

The analysis from NEF has proved useful in helping us to begin to understand the stories that are most dominant in relation to child maltreatment and child protection. It is also useful to note the work of Jo Warner (2014). In her book on *Emotional Politics* she identifies 'feeling frames' These are frames mobilised in relation to child deaths which are very powerful also in crafting stories which have very powerful effects on policy. Crucially politicians appeal as parents of young children themselves to other parents in order to cast 'the other' as monstrous and outside common normal parental feelings.

Child protection stories: *Story One*

The quote from Mr Gove above fits with an old story about children, parents, abuse, neglect and the roles and responsibilities of the state and families that has been re-invigorated with some new twists added since 2010. It runs as follows:

1. Child protection is a specific activity that is largely concerned about stopping children dying or being harmed/neglected by their parents or carers
2. Many parents and carers make dangerous or poor lifestyle choices. They choose violent men and/or to waste their money on drink and drugs.
3. Their lifestyles are aided and abetted by a dangerous and 'out of control' welfare system
4. They are able to outwit gullible social workers who, though well-meaning, are let down by their training
5. This training tells them not to blame or condemn parents, but rather to see them as victims of poverty or inequality
6. But poverty and inequality have nothing to do with child abuse
7. Social justice is about rescuing children from these feckless parents as early as possible and having them adopted

This is used by politicians and the media in England currently and drives system change as well as informs what is researched and, indeed, what is not researched. This framing feeds into values identified above in relation to 'them and us', independence and self-discipline. It has a plot, characters and a moral.

Clearly while a very sharply posed version is evident in England today it is important not to be ahistorical and to recognise that, as recently as 2009, under a previous government, it was not the dominant story, though elements were present and built upon by the Coalition and the subsequent government. Furthermore, it is a story that contains considerable internal tensions not least in relation to the use of adoption (see Gupta and Lloyd-Jones, 2013).

Child Protection Stories: Story Two

This is the story that is long-standing and is invested in by politicians, policy makers, senior managers, charities, researchers and practitioners.

1. Child abuse and neglect is caused usually by individuals doing, or not doing, things to others
2. Poverty does not cause abuse and neglect but impacts on parenting because of the stress it causes. Most poor parents do not abuse their children.
3. Child protection and welfare are recognised as linked but the link is poorly understood and relatively under-explored

4. A key part of the child protection task is to assess for, and deal with, risk in families and in communities
5. Early, time limited, interventions are vital to mitigate against brain damage or faulty attachment patterns developing
6. Early help at different stages of families' lives including local neighbourhood based centres is important

This story is a very valuable one and has brought concrete help to many families. Also there are really important differences between its proponents especially between those who lean more towards early help and those towards early intervention. However it does not address the growing evidence base in relation to inequality and tends not to see poverty as a risk factor in itself but as impacting upon other factors. In recent years it has proved less than robust in countering 'them and us' discourses, partly because of a concern not to be seen to pathologise poor families in general.

An alternative story?

An alternative story would draw from a growing evidence base on inequality more generally to understand the patterning of social problems such as mental health problems, addiction issues, violence and child health outcomes (see Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). This is a serious challenge to any project that relies solely on assessing and treating individual risk factors. It would also take seriously the evidence base that sees poverty as an important factor in its own right and has explored the role of financial transfers in supporting children's welfare generally and reducing child abuse (Pelton, 2015). The research highlighting the relationship between living in a deprived area and a child's chances of becoming subject to a child protection plan or looked after would also be drawn on (Bywaters, 2015). The story could run as follows:

1. Currently a child's chances of spending their childhood with their birth parents are linked to where they live and how deprived their neighbourhood is
2. This points to the need to explore inequality in life chances and opportunities between children more holistically than has been the case
3. To protect children and promote their welfare we need to re-focus some of our services on the environments and contexts in which they live with their families
4. All families have troubles at different times in life but societies where there are high levels of inequality and poverty mean more families have what could be seen as avoidable troubles
5. Equality and fairness mean paying attention to the housing, financial and environmental conditions in which children and their families are living to ensure troubles don't escalate

6. Poverty is a risk factor in its own right for child abuse and neglect and entry into care
7. Anti-poverty measures, including financial transfers, have been shown to reduce child abuse and increase child welfare .

This story has the following strengths. It is coherent and there is research evidence to draw from to support it. It appeals to values around fair play and equality. In order to thrive however, it will need like all effective stories to be taken on and owned by opinion formers and influential advocates in coalition with families who are offered the opportunities to tell their stories and to be recognised and understood.

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