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20 Using Documentary Analysis to Reveal Narratives of Mothering

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This paper will outline a piece of research that did not aim primarily to use a narrative approach or to rely upon narrative inquiry. The initial focus of the research was concerned with using documentary analysis in order to investigate whether or not an integrated model of individual and group decision making processes (Whyte, 1989; 1991) could be used to explain and predict decision making in cases of child protection in the UK. The research involved using a 'background concept' (Layder, 1993) in order to analyse child death inquiry documents and documents relating to ongoing cases in child protection within a local UK health authority. However what emerged from the research appeared to be the way in which documentary analysis could reveal instances where community and cultural narratives with regard to mothering had impact upon the decision making processes of individuals and groups.

Introduction

A number of high profile child protection cases in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s prompted a reformulation of national policy in order to deal with the problem of 'child abuse'. Over this time period there emerged two views with regard to intervention into family life that questioned the competence and professional judgement of social workers.

On the one hand instances where children already known to social services died at the hands of their caretakers (DHSS, 1974; London Borough of Brent, 1985; London Borough of Lambeth, 1985) resulted in a belief that individual social workers were not best placed to undertake risk assessments of children in cases of high risk. The suggestion being that interventions were not carried out where they should have been. On the other hand the decisions and actions in other cases, for example in allegations of widespread sexual abuse in Cleveland (DHSS, 1988), resulted in the public belief that social work interventions had been unwarranted and unnecessary. In these instances the state was considered to have intervened into family life in an intrusive and undesirable manner with little evidence that the courses of action were appropriate. In both instances the consequence was a public castigation of social workers professional judgement and decision making.

The Children Act 1989 sought to address this dilemma by trying to strike a balance between the rights of children to express their views on decisions made

about them, the rights of parents to exercise their family responsibilities and the duty of the state to intervene where the child's welfare required it. The Act encompassed two cardinal principles, the 'welfare principle' and the principle of 'non intervention'. In essence what this meant was that wherever possible measures should be taken to keep children with their families and this can only be shown to be inappropriate if a risk assessment demonstrates that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm in relation to what could reasonably be expected for a similar child. For the first time in child protection, if compulsory intervention was to be embarked upon, it was not enough to demonstrate that the child was suffering harm, but it had to be demonstrated that future harm could be predicted. The Children Act then can be seen as an objective piece of legislation that places certain requirements upon social workers when making risk assessments and decisions.

Several documents were developed to provide social workers with some explicit criteria under which to make risk assessments. Most notably these include *Working Together* (DOH, 1991b) and *Protecting Children: A Guide for Social Workers undertaking a Comprehensive Assessment* (DOH, 1988). These present various checklists that provide 'norms' for the development of children and the functioning of families, and guidelines on effective interagency working. In cases of 'low risk' individuals and teams of social workers assess risk and support families; in cases of 'high risk', the case has to be taken to a multidisciplinary group (the case conference) where their mandate is to assess the risk to children and to develop formally care plans to deal with the situations. Whilst it is recognised that there is a certain amount of 'practice wisdom' or subjective influence involved in judgements of risk to children (Scott, 1989, 1990; England, 1986; Imre, 1985) this is rarely investigated in research and the basis for this 'practice wisdom' is seldom elaborated.

There is significant and influential research that addresses the decision making of child protection practitioners however, it could be argued that most of the literature focuses on outcomes for children rather than on the process of decision making and risk assessment (for example see Gibbons, Conroy and Bell 1995; Hallett, 1995). There appears to be a lack of consideration of the role of psychological theorising into child protection decision processes under conditions of uncertainty or risk. Notable exceptions to this are the work of Daniel (1999) Munro (1999) and Scott (1989; 1990).

This piece of work aimed to investigate the utility of an integrated model of decision making (Whyte, 1989; 1991) that incorporates aspects of individual decision making, that is the 'certainty effect' (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), and group decision making, that is 'group polarisation' (Moscovici and Zavalloni, 1969) and 'groupthink' (Janis, 1972). This model provided a 'background concept' (Layder, 1993) by which to explore child protection decision making where objective aspects of the process could be investigated

but also where it might be possible to explore the subjective nature of 'practice wisdom'.

Methodology

Forster (1994) and Hakim (1983) propose that documentary analysis can be a useful technique for investigating decision making within organisations. They suggest that there are benefits to using such an approach which include the pre-existence of data, the relatively unobtrusive and non reactive process of collecting information and the application of a somewhat different perspective to a topic. Given the highly sensitive nature of child protection decision making and the focus on decision process rather than outcome it seemed appropriate to consider the use of this approach.

There are general concerns about the nature of the information included in organisational documents, for example Forster and Hakim express a reservation about 'hearing only one side of the story'. Within child protection research there are precedents for the use of documentary data (Jones, 1996; Gibbons, 1995) yet Parton, Thorpe and Wattam (1997) express specific reservations where they suggest that documents that provide written statements of risk assessments and decisions may reflect only what the organisation has to report in order to be accountable. In this research these concerns were noted, however it is argued that documentary analysis can reveal more than the institutional or organisational agenda.

In the first stage of this research the documents chosen for analysis were inquiry reports into the deaths of children already known to social services (London Borough of Brent, 1985; London Borough of Lambeth, 1985; DHSS, 1988). These inquiries were held in the public domain and resulted in available documents outlining the sequence of events and decision making in relation to cases, alongside social workers reports and evaluations of decision making in situations of risk assessment. They also included recommendations for future child protection practice. In the second stage of the research documents in relation to nine ongoing cases in a local authority included individual social worker reports, minutes of group meetings attended only by representatives from social services departments and minutes of meetings from the case conference.

The hermeneutic spiral which underpins stages three and four of documentary analysis (Forster, 1994) describes a process where the researcher interprets texts in such a way that allows analysing the meaning of individual texts, consideration of those in relation to the totality of the life world in which they originated and the reinterpretation of the texts once more. This involves immersing oneself in the data, allowing themes or subthemes to emerge, considering the themes in relation to the overall situation and 'standing' of the documents and a constant reflectivity on the interpretation of the text in

relation to other forms of data. In this research the use of hermeneutic interpretation was in some senses bounded by the theoretical premises of the integrated model. This model as a 'background concept' (Layder, 1993) provided a guideline for the coding frame for the analysis of documents that might be unusual in the tradition of qualitative approaches. Given the complex real world nature of the decision making however it was felt necessary to adopt an approach that could investigate the utility of an already existing theoretical perspective and that could remain open to themes that may emerge in the hermeneutic tradition.

Analysis and Preliminary Findings

In the first instance the documents were coded according to the conceptual foundations of the integrated model. Where individuals and/or groups had recorded information and decisions in relation to a case the first order analysis involved coding for the 'certainty effect', 'group polarisation' and 'groupthink'. Whilst the nature of one of the concepts (group polarisation) made it difficult to explore using documentation only, it did become apparent with both the inquiry reports and the ongoing cases that there was evidence for the operation of the integrated model. Aspects of the individual and group decision making that the model outlines did appear to explain and predict the process of decision making in these cases of child protection. For further elaboration see Kelly and Milner (1996).

What was also interesting however was that following the hermeneutic spiral allowed a number of themes to emerge. These themes were the *focus of cases*, *relationships in cases* and the *control of cases* and the analysis of the documents revealed a possible basis for practice wisdom and subjective influences on decision making. Each of these themes provides support for the interpretation that it is the mother child relationship that is important, not the family, and that there is a community narrative and dominant cultural narrative (Rappaport, 1994) surrounding the nature of mothering that influences decision processes.

Whilst all of the themes interrelate examples of the beliefs underlying the narratives in relation to only one theme, *focus of the cases*, will be presented. In both the inquiry reports and the live cases a refocussing of issues seemed to occur where the needs of the children became subsumed under the needs of the families, or more explicitly, the needs of the mothers, if the initial decision to keep the children with their families, in line with the Children Act, were to remain unquestioned.

The Inquiry Report into the Death of Tyra Henry

This case occurred in the 1980s and concerned Tyra Henry, a child born to a mother and father in circumstances where the father had previously physically abused an elder brother to the point where the child was brain damaged and

had been removed from the family into public care. The case involved a key individual social worker and there were four group case conferences held over a period of just under two years.

Over these conferences the focus changed from the risk to Tyra of physical abuse by the father, to the risk of neglect by her mother, to the needs of the mother herself. Lambeth Council held a policy at the time that stated that children were to be kept with their family of origin wherever possible and this was reinforced in a statement of personal belief by the key social worker. She stated in a written report:

I worked with a number of children who had lost contact with their parents entirely many years ago and this strengthened my conviction in the child care policy in Lambeth that children should not be removed from their family of origin if it was possible to keep them with them.

(Statement provided to the inquiry by key worker, inquiry report, 1985, p.16)

At the first case conference this belief was apparent in several verbatim comments where the key worker recorded that she felt the mother wished to keep the child and where she stated that she believed that all relationships between Tyra's mother and father had ceased. Although the father was in custody at the first conference there was in fact no evidence that the mother would not resume contact with him on release and as the case progressed it became clear that the mother was seeing him whilst she had Tyra in her care. Concern was expressed at the first conference should the father have access to Tyra, but this was in the main expressed by representatives other than social services, ie. the police, the health visitors, the medical officer. This seemed to provide support for the concept of 'groupthink' and alongside many other examples as the case progressed, support for the possibility that members of social services form a community sharing beliefs, experiences and identity (Salzer, 1998).

As the case developed, and with the ongoing appearance and disappearance of the father the major shift in focus became that of risk of neglect by the mother to the needs of the mother. As this became the concern for the key worker, and the case conference, resources were provided so that the mother could care adequately for Tyra. Over the four conferences resources were escalated and included extra input from health visitors, direct financial assistance and substantial resources concerned with re-housing. This re-housing ultimately meant that the mother had care of Tyra away from the maternal grandmother which was in direct breach of the original care order. By the last conference the needs of the mother were paramount and no reference at all was made to the initial source of risk to Tyra. In fact by this time it was known that the mother and father had resumed their relationship. The actual needs of the child had become subsumed under the needs of her mother in order to ensure that the mother child relationship was not broken. The last case

conference minuted the decision to consider removing Tyra's name from the child protection register despite the fact that the father now had direct access to the child. Tyra died at his hands several weeks later when he also physically assaulted her mother.

Ongoing Cases

In all of the nine ongoing cases that were analysed the needs of the mothers if they were to keep their children also seemed to become paramount. In particular in two cases that were unusual, as the children were removed temporarily from their mothers, the texts revealed instances of a community narrative around mothering held by members of social services. That narrative seemed to incorporate notions whereby children are seen as their mothers responsibility and one in which mothers are expected to care for and protect children, perhaps at the cost of their own needs and wishes. Examples from these two cases will be provided following background information presented at each meeting

In one case there were five group meetings over 13 months. The mother had a history of alcohol and overdose behaviour, the father worked away from home and there were two children both under ten years old.

At the first meeting the children were in foster care as the mother had rang a helpline threatening to take her and the childrens' lives. The minutes of this meeting recorded "*The children to return home as soon as convenient*" and listed resources to support this including the provision of day care for the youngest child. By the second meeting the children were staying temporarily with their Aunt following the mothers continued drinking, violence towards her husband and threats to give the children away. The decision was to return the children to the family home but to create a protection plan that provided more support, day care, taxi services and alcohol and anger management courses. The children were reported to have "*done well*" whilst with the Aunt. Prior to the third meeting the mother had deliberately engaged in an act that resulted in her arrest and she was charged with intent to endanger life. She resided with a family member under bail conditions but requested alternative accommodation. She continued drinking and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The father was at home looking after the children. The recorded decision was that children should remain at home and this would be reviewed on the release of the mother from hospital. By the fourth meeting the mother had remained in hospital but visited the family and her sister at nights and weekends. She was placed on a probation order on the condition of attending alcohol rehabilitation and she returned home. The mother expressed "*feelings of emotional detachment and depressions and anticipated a long convalescence*". Minutes of the group meeting included "*childrens' names to remain on register (child protection) whilst the mother gradually moves forward toward taking more responsibility for the children*". More resources were committed to ensure that the mother

had support in order to achieve this aim. By the last meeting the mother had continued to make suicide threats, had been in psychiatric hospital once more and *“it was noted that she could not care for her family”*. The behaviour of the youngest child when the mother was not in the home was described as *“bubbly, confident, happy and relaxed”* as opposed to *“withdrawn and needing a lot of support”*. The children were removed from the child protection register as it had finally been acknowledged that the mother was not going to return to the family home.

In this case then the mother repeatedly returned to the home with increasing support in order that she care for her children. Her behaviour and personal wishes did not change, in fact, her behaviour deteriorated as time went on. However up until the point that it was acknowledged she would not return (by her own choice), individual and groups of child practitioners kept to the suggestion that she move to taking more responsibility for her children. In this case the welfare of the children was commented upon favourably when the children were not in the care of their mother and was considered problematic when they were under her care. This does appear to support the idea of a community narrative concerning the ‘available and protective’ mother (Featherstone, 1999) and the mother as responsible for the children.

In a second case of 8 meetings over 2 and a half years the initial source of concern was physical abuse of an elder boy by a male cohabitee. There were three children, a boy aged 11, and two girls under ten.

By the second meeting the parenting of the mother and the levels of care and protection that she provided for all three children became the issue. Here the mother requested interim care for the elder boy and consistently expressed and displayed an inability and unwillingness to parent him. Throughout the documents there were comments by the mother that she needed a break from the children, she described herself as being *“at the end of her tether”*; comments by social services staff that reflected the aim of keeping the children with her, for example *“the purpose of the meeting was to ascertain ways of support to prevent the children going into care”*, *“all agree that the children remain with the mother”*, *“mother is aware that the children are her responsibility”* and comments that expressed a concern that the mother was unable put her own needs beneath those of her children. Yet the meetings consistently recorded the comment *“mother to be encouraged to undertake parenting help”*.

Considerable resources were provided in order to keep the children with their mother despite accumulating evidence that the children were not attending school, displayed behavioural problems and experienced physical harm; and despite the fact that there was no real evidence that the mother was going to parenting classes or was in any better position to care for her children. In this case the welfare of all the children was compromised.

Anxieties about mothering are deeply entrenched within our society (Elliot, 2001) and this research seems to suggest that documentary analysis can reveal underlying beliefs and narratives surrounding child protection decision making. Alongside the objective influence on decisions, the premises of the Children Act 1989, subjective influences or 'practise wisdom' may be grounded in a community narrative held by members of social services and a dominant cultural narrative held by society. The operation of these narratives suggests that decisions and judgements in child protection are influenced significantly by fundamental beliefs that children should be, and are best cared for by their mothers.

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