social sciences

Article

The Productive Uses of Conflict in Child Protection

Doug Magnuson

School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Box 1700 STN CSC,
Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2, Canada; E-Mail: dougm@uvic.ca; Tel.: +1-250-721-6479

Abstract: Some child protection cases exemplify a certain kind of cooperative interdependence, a consequence of the ways in which practitioners and clients are entangled. Client and practitioner are "stuck" with each other and need each other to succeed. There is also an intrinsic power imbalance that technique, ideology, and skill cannot hide and that has risks for the well-being and success of the practitioner-client relationship. There is also a risk to the practitioner of biases caused by successful influence. "Productive conflict," defined as conflict under conditions of cooperative interdependence, may compensate for these challenges and lead to "integrative solutions." In these cases the conflict itself is a kind of collaboration.

Keywords: child protection; social interdependence; productive conflict; metamorphic effects of power; child welfare practice

1. Introduction

Child protection practitioners go to great lengths to mitigate conflict with clients, even though the context makes conflict probable. Most researchers do not include conflict between practitioners and parents as a variable, even though conflict is a frequent occurrence in everyday practice. In recent years solution-focused [1], response-based [2], relationship-based practice [3,4], and similar frameworks have been adopted by policy-makers, trainers, and practitioners with the aim of making collaboration more likely, and a background assumption is that collaboration and conflict are inversely related. That is, as collaboration increases, conflict should decrease.

Perhaps, but the benefits of conflict are under-theorized in the child protection research literature. Practitioners know a lot about it, but they do not receive much help, and in everyday practice they may receive the message that conflict is bad; still, experienced practitioners know many cases of good outcomes coexisting with serious conflict. Collaboration is a laudable goal, yet most practitioner-client relationships are unpredictable, and the emphasis on collaboration, partnership, and participation suggest a kind of stability and predictability that does not always fit the everyday practice.

Some researchers over the years have documented these gaps between our ideals of collaboration and participation and everyday practice. Bell cited Thoburn, Lewis, and Shemmings, who found that only 16 percent of parents described having a "full partnership" ([5], p. 439) with the caseworkers, and Bell suggests that the promise of partnership can have the risk of raising parental expectations that are often disappointed. Corby, Millar and Young [6] found that professionals and parents disagreed widely about the experience of parental participation, with professionals being overwhelming positive, while only 18 percent of parents thought it was positive. Parents approved of the idea of participation, but they did not feel as if they influenced the process.

Trotter said that parents and practitioners disagreed about the frequency of practitioners' use of collaborative skills. "…the clients felt that their practitioners used the skills about half the time, whereas the practitioners believed that they used the skills most of the time…" ([7], p. 46). Platt [8] summarized several studies of congruence and similarity of perception and reported rates of congruence between practitioners and clients from fair to high, although one study that found a high rating also found that parents' expectations of relief from stress were higher than that of practitioners. Another study cited by Platt found that half of the mothers in the child protection sample disagreed with the findings in the early stages of an investigation.

Dumbrill says that "Parents reported responding to intervention in three ways: (1) 'fighting' through openly challenging and opposing practitioners in court; (2) 'playing the game' by feigning co-operation; and (3) working with services in what appeared to be genuine and collaborative relationships" ([9], p. 33). Altman found that professionals had difficulty being honest with clients about their true feelings and were afraid of confrontation. In contrast, clients said, "Come out and tell me, don't beat around the bush just tell me. You know, don't sit there and worry about my feelings. Just tell me. You know I might not like what I hear, you know, but I'd rather somebody be honest with me" ([10], p. 49). It is easy to misread compliance as cooperation, even seeing it as the first step on the way. An additional risk of the differences in role and perception is the gap between how services are intended to be used and how they are implemented: "fidelity to practice". For example, Vesneski [11] described how family group decision-making models are too often used without private time for the family, the most important feature.

Rather than seeing these differences as issues of inadequate skill and training, some have argued that they are consequences of the structure of the situation and that it is unrealistic to expect them to go away. Mayer [12] says that the child protection situation is such that "…the power of the family has to be circumscribed and enhanced at the same time". Similarly, Maiter, Palmer, and Manji [13] said that "The imbalance of power in the CPS (Child Protection System)-parent relationship is a central aspect of the relationship." Their parent participants described the positive aspects of professionals as caring, genuine, empathetic, exceptionally helpful, listening, non-judgmental, and accepting. They did not like practitioners who were "judgmental, cold and uncaring, poor listeners, critical and insincere".

These are not surprising lists, and they are often presented as "should". Yet it is possible that these are *post hoc* descriptions rather than causes of good outcomes, a kind of tautology. Another example of this tautological conclusion comes from Dore and Alexander who said that the "helping alliance" ([14], p. 182) was characteristic of success. But this is a *post hoc* judgment: It's a helping alliance when it helps, and it begs the question how that success is achieved when a relationship modeled on therapeutic ideals is not possible. There may be fewer cases where "helping alliances"—in the counseling sense of the phrase—are possible and more cases where other interpretations are needed.

As Reich said, a practitioner's implicit message to clients is: "We work for the government. We're here to help." ([15], p. 22). Also Trotter [7] said that practitioners act in the legalistic/surveillance helping/therapeutic/problem-solving roles at the same time. This is an uneasy alliance and suggests that an easy integration of principles adopted from other kinds of practices, like therapy, is not always possible. Practitioners and theorists have made progress in reconceptualizing collaboration and in integrating collaboration into child protection practice. Family group conferencing is one good example. Still, in most practice the unequal power relationship will persist, not all relationships will be rosy and, especially, imposing the expectations of a warm relationship, at least initially, is not always realistic even if it is desirable. As well, some of the research cited above suggests that some warm relationships may be characterized by "feigning cooperation" and compliance rather than true collaboration. Yet the uneasiness with unequal power relationships is legitimate and well-intentioned. One reason to be concerned has to do with what Kipnis [16] called the "metamorphic" effects of power.

2. How Power Affects the Powerholder

In a series of studies Kipnis [16,17] and his colleagues studied the "metamorphic" effects of power on the powerholder, and their findings can help us interpret the particular and unusual characteristics of the practitioner-client relationship in child protection. Kipnis [18] says there are two main elements of the metamorphic effects of power: (1) the strength of the influence tactics used to persuade, and (2) the subsequent attributions of the influencing agent concerning who controls behavior—the target or external forces. The stronger the tactic the more the influencer attributes change to him- or herself [19,20].

Kipnis studied these effects in a wide variety of settings, including counseling, where therapists who used more behavioral technology and more technique were found to (a) distance themselves from their clients; (b) attribute changes in clients to their own abilities; and (c) attribute a lack of change to the client's inabilities. Moreover, Kipnis says, "…the very act of successfully influencing causes devaluation of the target person" ([16], p. 177). In this dynamic is the potential for metamorphic effects in child protection. Even convincing a family to participate in a collaborative method such as mediation or family group conferencing is an act of influence.

I suggest here two additional metamorphic effects that warrant further study. One is that the use of empathy in child protection, when aligned with standard interpretations and ideologies, is subject to metamorphic effects. Kipnis argued that the use of technique, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, increases the chances of influencers attributing change to the technique and their own skill rather than to the competence of the target [21–24]. Empathy, as an attitude, skill, and value in child protection,

may have a similar effect in that in an odd way it risks mechanizing the work such that the practitioner comes to view the client as a victim of poverty, of oppression, of violence, of the system, and the client's own abilities are unintentionally devalued and the practitioner's abilities to free the client from oppression are overrated. This interpretation has been suggested by practitioners.

It is consistent with Trotter's [25] work, where he suggests that empathy in non-voluntary work has risks of giving approval to client behavior. There is also an intriguing, if undocumented, application of the theory to the ways in which organizations attempt to monitor and supervise child protection practitioners. There is substantial literature these days [26] debating how much discretion professionals do or should have. Of interest to this discussion is that one of the implications of the social psychology of power is that organizations themselves, when they manage by rules, may be subject to metamorphic effects, attributing success to the organization and blaming professionals for failures. Yet again, even when practitioners adopt collaborative practices, the context makes more likely over-confidence in one's own abilities and the devaluing of clients' agency. Kipnis' studies, described above, suggest that it is not easily escaped.

In the light of these challenges of and to child protection practice, is it possible that there is some proportion of practice that results in successful outcomes despite few of our preferred characteristics of collaborative practice? For example, Rooney [27] cites Cingolani who believed that practitioners have been taught to value the therapeutic relationship as the good relationship. Everything else gets defined as "not-good". Perhaps a collaborative relationship understood as a therapeutic relationship is not always necessary—even if it would be fantastic if it were possible—and perhaps there is at least a substantial minority of child protection cases in which conflict is not a barrier but an impetus to better outcomes, in part by compensating for metamorphic effects. Perhaps conflict of a certain type is evidence of a different kind of collaboration. In the studies from which this argument is drawn professionals and clients reported in interviews and casual conversations some cases in which there was a successful outcome, as measured by both client and professional satisfaction, in which there was neither much congruence of understanding nor much warmth, augmented by serious and sometimes intense conflict. Moreover, this conflict seemed—by all accounts—to have a beneficiary effect on the outcome. How can we understand these cases?

It is possible that some literature on the social psychology of conflict and the metamorphic effects of power may help us understand the psychological and phenomenological experience of conflict in child protection. More strongly, I argue that in certain cases conflict may be a practical and ethical necessity for serving the client well. Conflict, at least of a certain type, may make integrative solutions possible.

3. Background

Child protection in Canada is a legally mandated profession with the responsibility to investigate possible cases of child abuse and neglect. In the Anglo-Canadian liberal political model [28] the right of government to intrude on individual and family life is limited, and child protection is a boundary-crossing profession: It has a legal mandate to investigate the most private acts of family life within a political system where such acts are usually prohibited [29]. Not surprisingly, in this context

the majority of initial contact with families involves some explicit and implicit conflict. It is shocking to be visited by a child protection practitioner.

The cases that are cited here are from two different but related studies. For a year, the offices of two child protection teams were the location of an ethnographic study using observation and interviews. Two researchers participated in team meetings and meetings with community partners, listened to phone calls, observed case conferences between practitioners, and conducted several interviews each day with practitioners about cases and about their thought processes and work strategies. In the second study, a researcher selected domestic violence cases from one of the teams and then interviewed the practitioners and the clients and collected data from the case files. In each setting there were several cases that resulted in successful outcomes but that began with intense disagreement and conflict. The theory and observations here are from both studies, although in the case of the ethnographies we have data only from practitioners.

Fine [30] distinguished between ethnographies that are peopled, postulated and personal. Although the ethnography from which these case are drawn was peopled, with extensive, detailed data, the format of this essay is postulated, focusing on theory development, supported by a small amount of empirical data about cases in which collaborative expectations for how practitioners and clients should or do behave were not present but whose outcomes were positive and acceptable to client and practitioner.

4. An Example

This extended quotation is from a woman who was the victim of domestic violence. The police called child protection because the children witnessed the violence—which in British Columbia is considered a risk of emotional harm—and because no family member was willing to take in the children. Familial reasons for reluctance to take children are often complicated and may be as simple as availability but can also be a result of the threat of having to cope with the violent father or it may be because cooperating with the child protection authorities is perceived by some to be a betrayal. This woman was not the target of the intervention: The perpetrator of the problem was the father, who beat her badly in front of the children. The situation would seem to invite a collaborative, participative approach. Yet the mother initially rejected the very terms of the relationship.

> It was kind of hard at first actually because I wasn't in the greatest state, physically or in any way really. And I know that, here specifically, a lot of the Native people have problems with that—with their families and their children and they like to...I don't know, they pretty much stereotyped me. I specifically said "Do not stereotype me, I'm not like the other Native people in this town. I'm not like that, and I have to tell you that." Because of the way she was talking to me, I knew what she was doing and I knew what she was trying to put upon me. I told her, "Don't do that, because I'm not like that. I've gotten myself into a really bad situation but…." I just told her not to. That was a really big thing was that she did stereotype at the beginning me along with the other families that she has dealt with in the Native community…
>
> So can you give me an idea of how she stereotyped you?

It was—she actually, just the certain terms that she used. She said "Native people" and I knew what she said and I said "What do you mean by that?" I asked her about it and I asked her to explain it to me and she was like "Oh, it's not like that." And I said "You just said that." And I was mad and I knew what she was doing and she knew it. I said "Yeah, I may be messed up but you can't look at me like this. Because she wanted to take my kids away from me. And I told her "no." And they did actually take away my kids for like a week and it was really hard for my kids and myself. Like my kids will never forget that... I thought that they would be with family but they were actually with mandated people. I don't know how it works out like that or why it works out like that but that's just what happened. And that didn't bother me because I told her that I was going to get my kids back and they're maybe not with me right now, but I'm going to get them back as soon as I can. And I think that it took less than a week for me to get my kids back from them. They didn't think that was okay, that's how bad it was, they didn't think that I was okay enough to take care of my kids. But I didn't care. I didn't want anyone taking care of my kids.

How did you get your kids back so quickly? That's a pretty quick turnaround time.

I told them I was going to take care of my kids and that's all I told them. I told them, I don't want anyone else watching my kids. I said, "I know I'm not in the greatest state but I want to take care of my kids." and they let me...When we were all done with her she apologized to me. And she said sorry to me for doing it.

And in terms of the violence how did they respond to that?

...they were really good with that part. They really made sure that we did what we needed to do and got where we needed to go and got what we needed done done and everything was thoroughly taken care of when it came to that.

So how did that work?

I was really mad at her. I told her that I was going to do what I needed to do. And they told me that if I was to go to—because I kept saying that I wanted to have my children—they said that I would have to go into a transition house to have my kids back and I did.

And so would you have done that anyways do you think or was that something...?

I don't know. I don't think that I would have done that. They made me do it and it was a good thing that I did it; it helped a lot. I learned a lot and I got a lot of help with my kids. I got a lot of help. Well the whole thing was that it happened and it was going to happen again, is what she said....I mean I was pretty messed up. And she told him that he needed to get the help that he needed to get and told him what he could do and he went and did all of it because he wanted to change. And it all—I guess, with their system, it helped things smooth out in that area.

The client's portrayal of the situation is fascinating because her children were not removed under a mandated protection order; the Ministry provided temporary care because no one else was available. The mother was not a suspect. On the face of it, there was no obvious reason for a conflict between

practitioner and client; they ought to be allies. But this did not happen. One source of conflict in cases like this is disagreement about how to protect the children from witnessing further violence, and another is how to protect the victim from further assaults—and these were certainly concerns.

Most fundamentally, though, the mother initially rejected the definition of the situation, including the terms of the relationship and any suggestion that she was a typical "Native" or a typical protective services client. She insisted that she wanted to reunite with her husband. She rejected sympathy and empathy as patronizing and perceived attempts to help as stereotyping. The argument here, based on interviews with the client and the practitioner, is that the client's forceful rejection of the terms and the initiation of a conflict is not adequately accounted for by ordinary ways of conceiving collaboration and client participation.

Her position led to almost everything being negotiated. At this point it was a bargaining relationship. Client and practitioner are not allied around mutual goals and collaborative processes. For example, even though the children were under a voluntary care order and mom had rights to see them and have them back, she says they made her go to a transition house before she could have her children back. Whether they "made her" or not, she felt pressured, and she reports that it was a good thing. The immediate outcome, important to the practitioner, was that the children and mom were safe. An immediate outcome, important to mom, was that she be perceived as being in charge of her children. Eventually her husband completed treatment for alcohol addiction, stopped being violent, and they reunited.

5. Influence, Resistance, and Bargaining: Persuasion in Child Protection

In social psychological studies, the target of a powerholder's influence is usually in a situation where they can leave if it is too uncomfortable. Employees are an example [31]. Families, though, who are the target of child protection cannot usually flee, and while they do have available to them methods like feigning cooperation, as described above, they also do in fact quite frequently resist and bargain in somewhat surprising situations. They may resist because they feel they have no other choice. They may resist because they are aggrieved, offended, and sense the loss of dignity. They may resist because they are innocent. Power operates in a unique way, because families cannot usually escape and the powerholder has an interest in a resolution of the situation.

In these studies families used compliance, which can mislead practitioners and slow down their progress. They make the professional life of practitioners uncomfortable. They try to embarrass practitioners for using their authority. They befriend and "warm up to" as an ingratiation strategy. They work to delegitimize the practitioner and the Ministry by portraying them in unflattering ways. They may charge the practitioner with unethical practices. It can be punishing to practitioners to remove a child. Reder, Duncan, and Gray [32] documented some of these strategies, and they also described "disguised noncompliance" and "feigned compliance". On the one hand, clients pretend to comply, and on the other they also offer capitulation as a way to get rid of the practitioner. Families manage their availability. They move to make it harder to track them. They move activities out of public view. Without a doubt, clients have less power. Still, because of their interdependence with practitioners, they have a forum for both active and passive resistance.

The choice of influence strategy by practitioners may indicate something interesting about how the ambivalence practitioners feel about their own authority. O'Neal, Kipnis, and Craig [33] describes several influence strategies such as foot-in-the-door, door-in-the-face, collegial decision-making, one or two-sided arguments, communicator credibility, and dissonance arousal. They say that these strategies are typically used by the less powerful to influence powerholders. Practitioners commonly use these strategies. They have an incentive to use the least aggressive approaches, sometimes because they perceive more direct approaches as raising the possibility of retaliation by clients, using strategies noted above. It also reflects the perception by many practitioners that while they have ultimate authority, this authority is somewhat dichotomous, with softer approaches on one side and more aggressive approaches on the other.

This is the location of one kind of gap between practitioners' viewpoint and families' viewpoint. Under conditions of unequal power, families may perceive weak influence methods as less as an offer of collaboration than as a kind of ingratiation strategy on the part of practitioners to gain influence to find out what they want to know. Altman [10] reports that clients preferred practitioners to be direct and honest and come to the point, for example—the language of partnership and cooperation can be deceptive and dishonest. To build relationship, one practitioner in this study reported lying about having children. In the dynamics between practitioners and some families, it is likely that—in some cases—the offer of assistance will be perceived as disingenuous, and this may be a realistic assessment on the part of families.

These types of persuasion and the context in which it occurs is conflictual, a "negotiated relationship" ([27], p. 176), and are better characterized as bargaining than as therapy. However, conflict can be constructive or destructive.

6. Productive and Destructive Conflict

A key to whether conflict is helpful to the relationship and to the outcome in child protection hinges on whether practitioners and clients share a common fate. Morton Deutsch [34] said that conflict can be either destructive or constructive, and whether it is destructive or constructive depends on whether the structure of social interdependence is cooperative, competitive, or individualistic. Cooperative interdependence is present when my success depends upon your success and my failure results in your failure. Competitive interdependence is present when one can succeed only when the other party fails. Individualistic interdependence is present when my failure or success does not depend on your failure or success. In sum, conflict is more likely to be productive and helpful under conditions of cooperative interdependence and destructive under conditions of competitive interdependence.

On the face of it, a child protection case appears to be a competitive situation. If I am the client who is being investigated, the practitioner—and the State—have far more power, and because of that power I may perceive that I have fewer options and that doing what the practitioner—and the State—wants is my only option, even when I disagree. I may feel forced to comply, hardly a cooperative relationship. Also, the presence of conflict suggests a competitive interpretation. Yet it is not the presence of conflict that matters: It is the reward structure, that is, whether the reward structure is such that practitioners and families succeed or fail together.

One of the symptoms of an unusual reward structure in child protection is that families and practitioners do not always respond to each other in the way we would expect: Conflict is likely, yet there are interesting elements of an interdependence, although of an unusual kind. Second, coupled with this interdependence is a situation where an imbalance of power is intrinsic to the context, and the stark reality of this imbalance of power may bias our interpretation.

The child protection relationship with families may need to be reinterpreted with social interdependence in mind. From the point of view of the parent, most of the perceived, possible outcomes of the investigation are bad. The issue is emotional, often embarrassing, associated with other life conditions of which he or she is often not proud, including poverty, drug or alcohol abuse, or poor parenting. An audience of neighbors and relatives waits for the drama. From the point of view of the practitioner the situation is no better. It is an investigation, not a counseling visit, and she is legally required to look for evidence of bad behavior. There is always the potential to be required to remove the child or to demand that the parent change behavior. It is painful to find harm to a child. She faces a family that is not happy to see her. She is expected by her agency to "collaborate" with the family, but she is expected by the law and society to protect the child at all costs.

Therefore, we have a practitioner and a family in a difficult position. The practitioner has to act. The family may feel "up against it", and so they resist because they cannot walk way and for the sake of their own dignity, it would seem that the parents would want to resist cooperating, to deny any problems, and to stake their claim to the right to raise their children as they see fit. Thus families and practitioners are stuck with each other. This "stuckness" is a kind of interdependence from which neither party can easily extricate themselves and that usually requires them to work together, even if that working together is conflictual. As Ansell and Gash say, "…deadlock itself imposes a serious cost on both sides of dispute…. high conflict *per se* is not necessarily a barrier to collaborating" ([35], p. 553).

7. Reframing Success

I have described some child protection cases as being characterized by a certain kind of cooperative interdependence, a consequence of the ways in which practitioners and clients are entangled. Client and practitioner are "stuck" with each other and need each other to succeed. There is also an intrinsic power imbalance that technique, ideology, and skill cannot hide and that has risks for the well-being and productivity of the practitioner-client relationship. The power imbalance is intrinsic, and the solution is not to take away the practitioner's power but to recognize the consequences of that imbalance for practice. "Productive conflict", defined as conflict under conditions of cooperative interdependence, can lead to good outcomes and "integrative solutions" that leave both parties satisfied with the result. In these cases the conflict itself is a kind of collaboration.

In this interpretation, the meaning of conflict depends on the underlying goal structure of interdependence, as described by Deutsch [34], and whether the practitioner is skillful enough to recognize the nature of her interdependence with the family. When the goal structure is cooperative, even when created by negative interdependence, there are very good chances that the conflict can result in good outcomes that are satisfactory to both parties. Experienced practitioners are often not threatened by conflict or afraid of it. They recognize the inevitability of conflict in practice and

recognize the long-term possibilities that might be enhanced by conflict. One has to be aware that the weaker party in the relationship, the family, will feel threatened, and that conflict might serve the interests of the family and the interests of a long-term, sustainable integrative outcome.

How does this happen? The observations and interviews in this study provide a narrative but not an explanation, and for this Pruitt and Syna [36] and Deutsch [34] suggest that there are successful strategies for capitalizing on conflict and reinforcing cooperative goal structures while seeking an "integrative solution" (not simply compromise). If the practitioner recognizes this and does not foreclose by making an early decision, which happens fairly often, conflict is a means for buying enough time and negotiating the terms of the relationship such that an integrative solution is possible. A period of conflict can be useful in preparation for bargaining in these ways:

A It provides a period of "posturing" for the purpose of face-saving and establishing credibility. Being investigated is threatening, and marshalling resources in one's own defense is an element of defending one's dignity. This is a point that has been taken up lately by some solution-focused theorists. Clients rally their informal support networks around them, and they can be skillful at preparing counter arguments and explanations for the events under question. Consistent with these principles, conflict may demonstrate to the practitioner the parents' care for and commitment to their family. Parents' defense of their right to parent may be instructive to practitioners. If the practitioner is able to avoid feeling under attack and threatened by conflict, and if she is able to allow the family time and space to defend itself, good things may result. We have also seen practitioners, as in the example above, tolerate unfair portrayals of themselves and accept unfair blame in the long-term interest of sustaining the relationship.

B Helping each party to clarify their own goals and impressing them on the other party. Occasionally it takes time for the client to take seriously the intentions of the practitioner. But this principle is most important for the weaker party. A period of conflict makes it more likely that the strong party will listen to the weaker party. This is crucial to success, because it interrupts the clock-time, linear process of the unfolding of a case. The unpredictability of the client may invite—or force—the practitioner to pay attention in a different way and to look for new data. In the case cited above, the client and victim of violence refused to accept the assumption of the professional that ending the relationship with the perpetrator was the ultimate goal. She described the practitioners' interventions as based on an Aboriginal stereotype, and she insisted that her views be taken into account. It may have been a coincidence, but the outcome was that her husband successfully completed addiction treatment, she began taking classes at a local college, and parents and children were reunited in short order.

   Clarification of goals is crucial here. Practitioners aim to keep children safe, of course, but the particulars of "what safety looks like," in their phrase, take time to work out and investigate in the context of a family's daily life: rhythms, available extended family, material resources, capacities, and each party's assumptions get tested. Clients' negotiation, in conflict, may require practitioners to take a second look.

C Testing how far the other party can be pushed and impressing on each party that a dead end accomplishes little. This is a risky strategy for both parties in child protection, and it is probably

not recommended. Yet in one case we saw that its use by a family helped it grasp the difference between the practitioner's negotiable and non-negotiable interests.

D Demonstrating firmness. Interestingly, the bargaining literature suggests that "If one party refuses to engage in early competitive behavior, the other will often conclude that the first is quite flexible and hence will gain greater faith in competitive tactics." ([34], p. 76). Responding to disagreement and to bargaining positions by being "nice" or giving way too soon may backfire by unintentionally encouraging more competitive behavior. An early, firm response and careful explication of one's position may increase the likelihood of later collaboration.

E Conflict can be enjoyable and satisfying, and we have seen families and practitioners being drawn into the drama that results. It motivates clients and practitioners, although only a few practitioners will admit it. It is easily heard in any professional office, and it is often easily heard in the waiting area of child welfare offices, as families talk to each other and to receptionists, and it is seen and heard in interviews.

F Conflict demarcates groups from one another and establishes group and personal identities. It bonds family members to each other. External conflict fosters internal cohesiveness. Deutsch [34] calls this "enemy interdependence". This is quite common among clients, where extended family and friends may rally to the defense of the client. Practitioners play the role of "enemy" when it can lead to a family rallying to the care of a child and advocating for themselves.

G Conflict allows for adjustment to new norms, and once the respective power of the contenders has been ascertained through disagreement, a new equilibrium can be established and the relationship can proceed on this new basis. This is one reason why interpreting conflict with the family as "resistance" might be a limited understanding. This is a wide-spread view in perspectives adopted from therapy, such as response-based and solution-focused perspectives. These characterize resistance as a psychological strategy of preserving dignity. However, resistance is not just a psychological dynamic: It is a bargaining and negotiating tool, and interpreting it as resistance underestimates the context of bargaining and diminishes the client.

H "Conflict arouses motivation to solve problems that might otherwise go unattended" ([34], p. 361). We have seen this especially with experienced professionals, for whom a conflict may help invoke their expertise and experience in helpful ways or help them respond in less autonomic ways. Conflict encourages effort to overcome tension and frustration, and it inspires a search for creative solutions.

I Conflict facilitates honesty between professionals and client. Earlier I described how some parents report that when professionals make nice at the beginning of the relationship, they are more suspicious, not less, and want the practitioner to "get on with it". The professional is less likely to obscure what she wants.

8. Conclusions

The woman in the case cited earlier raged against the practitioner and the Ministry, embarrassed by their presence in her life, afraid of her husband, and afraid to lose her children. She was abusive to the

practitioner and libeled the practitioner in the community. She fought hard against the service even after her husband beat her so badly in front of her children that her friends did not recognize her. Yet she and the practitioner were stuck with each other, and the practitioner was undeterred. The practitioner later acknowledged that she did not handle everything as well as she would like, but she was honest and direct, and if she erred she erred on the side of being too honest. She told the client the bottom line and, most importantly, the client's battle for herself allowed the practitioner to take the time to listen to the possibility that everything could work out, despite the addiction and the violence. In the end, the client said, "The practitioner was terrible and also did everything possible to help." The case is over and has been closed, and the client calls the practitioner occasionally to say hello and report how things are going. In spite of the client's verbal abuse of her, the practitioner came to like and respect the client. This is a small miracle.

The conflict and renegotiation of goals is a kind of collaboration, although not a kind of collaboration modeled after any other helping relationship, especially counseling. Conflict in child protection seems to disrupt the dynamics of unequal power, temporarily, and it gains for the client a space and some time to regroup, to marshal arguments on one's own behalf, and that process may also help the client to come to understand better the practitioner's point of view.

Child protection practice has trouble when it only circumscribes the power of the family—being too controlling—and when it only enhances the power of the family, ceding authority and putting children's safety at risk. Corby, Millar, and Young said "…there is a need for an approach which more explicitly acknowledges the power differentials involved in child protection work, but which operates within these constraints of power to more genuinely give parents a voice, even if this leads to more open disagreement between parents and professionals. Disagreement can actually be construed as a positive part of the process, something to be facilitated…" ([6], p. 489).

Conflict may engage families with practitioners in such a way that capitalizes on this central dynamic. Mayer says that family group conferencing and mediation are two methods that enhance the power of the client within the context of child protection. These are wonderful tools, and they require serious commitment of time and resources. Conflict between child protection practitioners and clients is an everyday activity that enacts, in part, some of the empowerment while not pretending that practitioners do not have much authority. It is the interdependence that allows conflict to flourish and that takes the sharp edges off the worst consequences of unequal power. Clients have real power in these settings; at the same time, practitioners have no intention—nor should they—of giving up their mandated authority. Both coexist, and conflict may be a part of enacting this collaborative dynamic in productive ways.

This theoretical exploration is reporting on ethnographic data in a postulated way, with an extended discussion of theory about a limited amount of data. Extended study of many additional cases in great detail is demanded to better understand this dynamic. Further, this interpretation is based on the assumption that child protection relationships are accurately characterized as a kind of cooperative interdependence, and this needs verification. Such verification requires data about whether or not there really is a common fate shared by practitioners and clients and whether the reward structure really does operate in the way described here.

A further need is to examine the nature of integrative solutions, that is, solutions that meet the needs and interests of both the family members and the practitioner and the system he or she represents. It would be useful to study how these come about and the kinds of agreements to which they come.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Andrew Turnell. "Constructive Child Protection Practice: An Oxymoron or News of Difference." *Journal of Systemic Therapies* 25 (2006): 3–12.
2. Alan Wade. "Despair, Resistance, Hope: Response-Based Therapy with Victims of Violence." In *Hope and Despair in Narrative and Family Therapy*. Edited by Imelda McCarthy, Jim Sheehan and Carmel Flaskas. New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 63–74.
3. Gillian Ruch. "The Contemporary Context of Relationship-based Practice." In *Relationship-Based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice*. Edited by Gillian Ruch, Danielle Turney and Adrian Ward. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010, pp. 13–28.
4. Gillian Ruch. "Relationship-based Practice and Reflective Practice: Holistic Approaches to Contemporary Child Care Social Work." *Child and Family Social Worker* 10 (2005): 111–23.
5. Margaret Bell. "Working in Partnership in Child Protection: The Conflicts." *British Journal of Social Work* 29 (1999): 437–55.
6. Brian Corby, Malcolm Millar, and Lee Young. "Parental Participation in Child Protection Work: Rethinking the Rhetoric." *British Journal of Social Work* 26 (1996): 475–92.
7. Chris Trotter. *Working with Involuntary Clients*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006.
8. Dendy Platt. "Congruence and Cooperation in Social Workers' Assessments of Children in Need." *Child & Family Social Work* 12 (2007): 326–35.
9. Gary C. Dumbrill. "Parental Experience of Child Protection Intervention: A Qualitative Study." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 30 (2006): 27–37.
10. Julie C. Altman. "Engaging Families in Child Welfare Services: Workers versus Client Perspectives." *Child Welfare* 87 (2008): 41–61.
11. William Vesneski. "Street-level Bureaucracy and Family Group Decision Making in the USA." *Child & Family Social Work* 14 (2009): 1–5.
12. Bernie Mayer. "Reflections on the State of Consensus-Based Decision Making in Child Welfare." *Family Court Review* 47 (2009): 10–20.
13. Sarah Maiter, Sally Palmer, and Shehenaz Manji. "Strengthening Social Worker-Client Relationships in Child Protective Services: Addressing Power Imbalances and 'Ruptured' Relationships." *Qualitative Social Work* 5 (2006): 167–86.
14. Martha Morrison Dore, and Leslie B Alexander. "Preserving Families at Risk of Child Abuse and Neglect: The Role of the Helping Alliance." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 20 (1996): 349–61.
15. Jennifer A. Reich. Fixing Families: Parents, Power, and the Child Welfare System. New York: Routledge, 2005.

16. David Kipnis. *The Powerholders*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

17. David Kipnis. "Accounting for the use of Behavior Technologies in Social Psychology." *American Psychologist* 49 (1994): 165–72.

18. David Kipnis. "Using Power: Newton's Second Law." In *The Use and Abuse of Power: Multiple Perspectives on the Causes of Corruption*. Edited by Annette Y. Lee-Chai and John A. Bargh. New York: Psychology Press, 2001, pp. 3–17.

19. Bruce Rind, and David Kipnis. "Changes in Self-Perceptions as a Result of Successfully Persuading Others." *Journal of Social Issues* 55 (1999): 141–56.

20. David Kipnis. "Can Social Behavior Be Influenced by Events That We Are Unaware of?" *American Psychologist* (1998): 1079–180.

21. Philip C. Kendall, David Kipnis, and Laura Otto-Salaj. "When Clients Don't Progress: Influences on and Explanations for Lack of Therapeutic Progress." *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 16 (1992): 269–81.

22. David Kipnis. "Technology, Power, and Control." *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 3 (1984): 125–56.

23. David Kipnis. "Psychology and Behavioral Technology." *American Psychologist* 42 (1987): 30–36.

24. David Kipnis. "The Consequences of Technological Control." In *Recent Advances in Social Psychology: An International Perspective*. Edited by Joseph P Forgas and J. Michael Innes. North-Holland: Elsevier Science, 1989.

25. Chris Trotter. "Worker Skill and Client Outcome in Child Protection." *Child Abuse Review* 11 (2002): 38–50.

26. Eva Hjorne, Kirsi Juhila, and Carolus van Hijnatten. "Negotiating Dilemmas in the Practices of Street-level Welfare Work." *International Journal of Social Welfare* 19 (2010): 303–09.

27. Ronald H. Rooney. *Strategies for Work with Involuntary Clients*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

28. Evelyn G. Khoo, Lennart Nygren, and Ulf Hyvonen. "Resilient Society or Resilient Children? A Comparison of Child Welfare Service Orientations in Sweden and Ontario, Canada." In *Promoting Resilience in Child Welfare*. Edited by Robert F. Flynn, Peter M. Dudding and James G. Barber. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2006, pp. 72–93.

29. Harry Ferguson. Protecting Children in Time: Child Abuse, Child Protection, and the Consequences of Modernity. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

30. Gary Alan Fine. "Towards a Peopled Ethnography: Developing Theory from Group Life." *Ethnography* 4 (2003): 41–60.

31. David Kipnis. "The Use of Power in Organizations and Interpersonal Settings." *Applied Social Psychology Annual* 5 (1984): 179–10.

32. Peter Reder, Sylvia Duncan, and Moria Gray. *Beyond Blame: Child Abuse Tragedies Revisited*. London: Routledge, 1993.

33. Edgar C. O'Neal, David Kipnis, and K.M. Craig. "Effects on the Persuader of Employing a Coercive Influence Technique." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 15 (1994): 225–38.

34. Morton Deutsch. The Resolution of Conflict: Constructive and Destructive Processes. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

35. Chris Ansell, and Alison Gash. "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice." *Journal of Public Administration, Research, and Theory* 18 (2007): 543–71.

36. Dean G. Pruitt, and Helena Syna. "Successful Problem Solving." In *Productive Conflict Management: Perspectives for Organizations.* Edited by Dean G. Tjosvold and David W. Johnson. Edina: Interaction Book Company, 1989, pp. 69–90.