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Using friendship to build professional family work relationships where child neglect is an issue: worker perceptions

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Abstract

Effective working relationships are those which are characterised by close personal contact, even friendship-like in nature, contained within professional boundaries. However, such personal ways of working remain a contentious aspect of professional relationships. Indeed, workers operating in this way commonly experience disapproval from colleagues. Guidance regarding how workers build personalised professional relationships while operating in a disapproving environment is limited. This is even more pronounced for building relationships with families where child neglect is an issue. This paper draws on a study of perceptions of eight parent-family worker relationship cases in New South Wales, Australia. The study utilised qualitative research methods to analyse and compare participants' perceptions of the experiences and meaning of working relationships with families where child neglect is an issue. The paper will explore how the workers' use of friendship-like characteristics to build highly personalised, yet professional and ethical, relationships created discord with some

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colleagues, including accusations of unprofessional and unethical practice. Drawing on these workers' experiences, along with literature that challenges traditional ways of working with clients, it will be argued that dominant ideas about ethical and professional practice hinder the development of effective relationships with clients, create unnecessary stress for workers, and should be challenged.

Keywords: *Friendship; Family Work; Child Neglect; Working Relationship*

The past decade has seen a gradually increasing interest in the process of helping in family-based practice, particularly in the area of child welfare work (Ruch, Turney, & Ward, 2010). Although most of this research has focused on the process of engagement more generally, some studies have focused specifically on the client-worker relationship, and noted that this is a central factor to successful engagement, and positive outcomes for families (Altman, 2008; Howe, 1998; Ruch, et al., 2010).

Research on the relationship in child and family welfare has shown that effective relationships are those which are characterised by close personal contact, which clients frequently consider to be “friendship-like” in nature, contained within professional boundaries (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Doel, 2010; Drake, 1994; Lynn, et al., 1998; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002). How workers operate in such an environment is not well understood, where empirical literature and professional dialogue provides only limited guidance regarding how workers are to maintain friendship-like professional relationships with clients. This is partly due to limited in-depth empirical exploration regarding the nuances of personal/professional boundary issues (Pugh, 2007), and of the working relationship from the worker’s perspective in particular (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Doel, 2010; Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2006).

Limited understanding of working relationships with neglecting families is even more pronounced. This is due to issues and processes relating to building working relationships with these families remaining largely unexplored (Girvin, DePanfilis, & Daining, 2007). This is concerning when one considers that families where neglect is an issue have been found to be among the most difficult to engage and retain in child welfare services (Berry, Charlson & Dawson, 2003). Furthermore, practitioners who work with families where neglect is an issue report higher feelings of apathy, hopelessness, helplessness and experience higher rates of burnout compared with child welfare practitioners who do not work with such families (Watson, 2005).

The aim of this paper is to build understanding of professional boundaries through focusing in-depth on the friendship-like dimension of effective professional family work relationships with families where neglect is an issue. It will examine this dimension from the worker's perspective. It does this through analysis of data taken from a qualitative study of perceptions of the parent-worker relationship in family work that was conducted in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The paper will argue that workers are placed in a vulnerable position due to the variable professional discourse regarding personalised ways of working with clients, and professional boundaries.

Effective Relationship Qualities and Professional Boundaries

Without doubt, professional boundaries are important for building effective relationships. They create a sense of assuredness for workers regarding appropriate ways of relating with clients (Austin, Bergum, Nuttgens, & Peternelji-Taylor, 2006). Boundaries also keep the focus on the professional purpose of the relationship (Doel, 2010), and help to mitigate issues of power imbalance between participants (Austin, et al., 2006).

However, relationships where workers have maintained professional distance have been found to be not valued as highly by clients (Kirkpatrick, Barlow, Stewart-Brown, & Davis, 2007), and not as effective in building trust (Trevithick, 2003), facilitating client openness, and subsequently meeting clients' needs (de Boer & Coady, 2003; McMahon, 2010; Trevithick, 2003) as workers who develop more personally close professional relationships. Furthermore, effective relationships often have friendship-like qualities (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Doel, 2010; Drake, 1994; Lynn, et al., 1998; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002), and artificially promoting professional distance may actually be harmful to clients (Doel, 2010; Green, et al., 2006).

Effective Relationships have Friendship-like Qualities

Notions of friendship-like relationships with clients could be said to have begun in the late 19th century, when volunteer family workers were instructed to engage in ethical and empathic “friendly visiting” (Richmond, 1899/1969). Such pre professionalised approaches to social work practice were later superseded by a push to professionalise social work by adopting practice approaches that created an image of the professional as “expert” over the client’s life (Green, et al., 2006). These newly emerging “professional” approaches to social work were influenced by disciplines such as law, medicine, psychotherapy, and business (Green, et al., 2006).

Despite the dominance of notions which led to such distance in client-worker relationships, social work practitioners, and theorists utilising critical and postmodern approaches continued to discuss alternative ways of professional engagement (Green, et al., 2006). These proposed an idea of professionalism that consisted of workers engaging with clients in egalitarian ways, rather than as “expert” professionals (Doel, 2010; Green, et al., 2006; Ruch, 2005). More recently authors from these perspectives have conceptualised ways of negotiating professional relationships using metaphors such as “a stretchy piece of elastic” (Green, et al., 2006, p. 450), and a neutral “territory” (Austin, et al., 2006). These authors, and others, challenge the discourse of professionalism that values managerialist ideas of practice, and tries to limit organisational and worker risk by reducing opportunities for professional discretion (Cooper, 2010; Doel, 2010; Freud & Krug, 2002; Green, et al., 2006; Maidment, 2006). They argue that workers in such environments feel compelled to relate to clients in more rigid and distant, and less warm and personalised, ways, or else be disciplined by colleagues, managers, and the wider profession (Cooper, 2010; Doel, 2010; Freud & Krug, 2002; Maidment, 2006). Furthermore, specific to work with families where child neglect is an issue, some have noted that effective interventions involve a nurturing-type approach

(Gaudin, 1993; DePanfilis, 1999). Gaudin (1993, p. 71) has even adopted the concept of the worker “parent[ing] the parent”.

Given this, a friendship-like approach to working with clients is characterised by an egalitarian approach, recognition of a common humanity, mutuality and reciprocity (Doel, 2010; Lynn, et al., 1998; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002; Turney, 2010). Workers often adopt a highly personalised, rather than distant, approach to clients (Cooper, 2010; Doel, 2010; Green, et al., 2006), but with acknowledgement of the power differential involved (Pugh, 2007; Turney, 2010). This involves appropriate use of self, for example gift giving (Maidment, 2006), self disclosure, and even, on occasion, physical touch between workers and clients (Maidment, 2006; Turney, 2010). However, while the effectiveness of professional relationships may be improved by friendship-like characteristics, client outcomes must remain the priority (Austin, et al., 2006; Doel, 2010).

How Such Discourse Affects Workers

While softening of notions of the need for rigid relationship boundaries has occurred in some professional codes of ethics (Austin, et al., 2006), other codes and policies for practice have not decoupled these ideas (Doel, 2010; Freud & Krug, 2002; Maidment, 2006). Working in professional contexts that recognise and value a more distant approach to relationships can have serious implications for workers practising friendship-like qualities in professional relationships.

Research into the emotional labour of social work has shown that workers operating in organisational settings that restrict professional discretion, and personal responses to clients in favour of predetermined, professionally distant ways, leads to worker stress, demoralisation, and burnout (Freud & Krug, 2002; Green & Lonne, 2005), to loss of identity (Bone, 2002), to even to denial of their humanity (McMahon, 2010). An example of this includes evidence of workers speaking about working in ways that have been shown to be

effective, yet breach professional norms about violating boundaries, who display guilt, fear, and remorse when discussing their friendship-like approach to practice (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Riley, Brady, Goldberg, Jacobs, & Easterbrooks, 2008).

Others have found that workers respond in emotionally protective ways when they realise their practice is different from professional expectations, such as emotionally distancing themselves from, and even physically avoiding, clients (Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2003; Green, et al., 2006; Green & Lonne, 2005). This occurs despite workers preferring to engage “with less professional formality” (Freud & Krug, 2002, p. 478). Equally as concerning is evidence that workers prefer not to describe their professional relationships with clients in this manner even when it is clear the workers are engaging in ways others argue are friendship-like (Trotter, 2006).

The aim of this paper is to build understanding of professional boundaries through focusing on the friendship-like dimension of professional family work relationships from the worker’s perspective. This is important because empirical literature and professional dialogue provides only limited guidance regarding how workers are to maintain friendship-like professional relationships with clients. To achieve this aim, the paper will explore in-depth what eight such relationships mean for workers engaging in this way. Direct quotes will be used throughout.

Method

Methodology

The data under consideration are taken from a small scale qualitative study of perceptions of parents, family workers, and supervisors involved in eight working relationships (Reimer, 2010). This methodology enabled in-depth and holistic exploration and interpretation of participants’ perspectives of the complex multiple and layered dimensions of the relationship dyads (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw, & Firrek, 1994; Stark & Torrance, 2004). The research

questions included: how do family workers experience the parent-worker relationship, including their perception of the purpose, value and meaning of this relationship?, and how do family workers make sense of the factors which affect how parent-worker relationships develop over time, and the impact of these? The findings presented in this paper concern only the workers' perspectives, while the parents', family workers', and supervisors' perspectives on the development of relationships between family workers and parents where neglect is a concern are reported elsewhere (Reimer, in press).

Ethics

The author, who was the sole researcher, secured ethics approval from the University of South Australia. Ethical issues included potential perceived power differences between the participants and author, and the participants and services (Macdonald & Macdonald, 1995). To ameliorate such issues, the research was conducted after the parents had ceased the period of intervention with the worker. Also, participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary, and independent of the service. Maintaining confidentiality was another ethical consideration that was intensified by the research being conducted in a sparsely populated regional area of NSW.

Context

The workers involved in this study delivered multiple programs such as home visiting, information and referral, playgroups, parenting groups, centre based support, and counselling services (NSW Family Services Inc., 2009). The services operate within a framework of voluntary, strengths based, community embedded, and empowerment practice that include building connections to the broader community through universal support mechanisms such as playgroups (NSW Family Services Inc., 2009). The location of the services was chosen because this region had a high concentration of families with characteristics common to neglecting families. This included social isolation, poverty, high unemployment, a significant

Indigenous population, and high numbers of people with a disability (Vinson, 1999).

Furthermore, although these services operated as voluntary services, they did so in a statutory child protection context. The services were not explicitly an agent of the statutory child protection system; however parents usually felt, at least initially, that the threat of child removal was real.

Eligibility

Eligibility to participate in the study depended on the clients being referred to the service for child neglect-related issues, where neglect was defined in NSW legislation as “the continued failure by a parent or caregiver to provide a child with the basic things needed for his or her proper growth and development, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical and dental care and adequate supervision” (NSW Department Community Services (DoCS), 2006).

Eligibility also depended on the relationship having ceased in the previous three months. This was because the research was examining aspects of the working relationship from beginning to end. Furthermore, due to adopting case study methods (Yin & Campbell, 2003), parents who participated had to have been a client of a worker who was also a study participant.

Sampling

Recruitment involved informing workers of the study and inviting them to participate. Workers who agreed to participate were asked to provide eligible parents with minimal information about the study, just prior to ceasing a family work intervention. This included an invitation to parents to inform the worker’s supervisor, or researcher directly, if they were interested in being involved, and inviting them to participate after a conversation where further information was provided.

Participants

Twenty one people participated in the study. This included 9 parents (where a couple had been engaged with 1 worker in a relationship), 8 workers, and 4 supervisors. Each relationship varied in duration, however all lasted from over 1 year in all cases to over 5 years in two cases.

Apart from 1 parent and 2 workers, all of the participants were female. Six of the parents and all of the workers and supervisors identified as being from Anglo Celtic background. One parent had emigrated from Ireland within the past 10 years and one parent identified as being from an Aboriginal background. Furthermore, one parent and one supervisor identified as being from a New Zealand Maori background. The ninth parent did not specify her cultural background. Consequently, there may be cultural and gender limitations, where most participants were female, and of Anglo Celtic origin.

All of the parents experienced multiple risk factors that have been found to be present in families where neglect is an issue (Watson, 2005). They experienced these prior to and throughout the relationship period. These included: intellectual disability (1) and mental health issues (6), unstable housing (5) and homelessness (2), domestic violence (4), drug and alcohol misuse (5), and limited, and at times hostile, and unsupportive, extended family and social networks (2). Although nine parents reported receiving government financial support as their primary income, by the time intervention ceased, five parents had engaged in casual employment.

The eight workers had from 2- to over 30-years family work experience and all were tertiary educated. Qualifications included bachelor level qualifications in social science, social work, nursing and counselling (5) and diplomas in community services (3). Professional experience was eclectic and included: family violence (2); early childhood health (2); early childhood education (2); nursing/midwifery (2); mental health (1);

counselling (1) youth work (1), and the disability (3) fields. Some reported having worked across more than one of these fields.

Procedure

Using in depth and semi structured interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995), and drawing on literature about the notion of phases in relationships (de Boer & Coady, 2003), participants were asked to “tell the story” of the relationship. Participants were asked to explore how they experienced the relationship, including their perception of the purpose, value and meaning of this relationship.

Interviews ranged from forty five to ninety minutes duration, and included a focus on the period prior to the relationship beginning, as it was forming, once it had established, and at the end. Interviews were conducted with each of the workers individually and as soon as possible after completion of their involvement with the service. Each worker was interviewed once about one relationship.

All interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analysed by the author, and each interview was digitally recorded. Analytic induction (Denzin, 1978) was used to examine the de identified transcribed data for key words in three relationship cases. This involved highlighting, and then grouping, words that concretely described parent, worker, and supervisor “actions” and “attributes”. These key words described the experiences of the participants, which is what the research questions related to, and became subthemes under the themes “action” and “attribute”. A list of other key words was also developed. These recorded who was speaking, who was being spoken about, the phase of relationship, where the relationship took place, other contextual issues, and the purpose, value, and meaning of the working relationship.

These helped develop a more standardised thematic analysis across the eight relationships, which enabled the author to rigorously analyse and describe patterns between different peoples’ lived experiences of like relationships and confidential presentation of the

data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this process, the manually analysed data were entered into NVivo qualitative analysis software (Bazeley, 2007), and the remaining transcripts were analysed using the inductively derived subthemes.

Once completed, the author developed a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organise the action and attribute subthemes by ‘person speaking’ and ‘relationship phase’ themes. This spreadsheet helped discern how common subthemes were to the participants’ experiences of the relationship, and it was used for closer examination of patterns between the relationships. Disconfirming evidence in particular stood out clearly. While the interviews, transcriptions, and analysis were conducted by the author, the author’s primary supervisor provided an internal reliability check for each transcript (Bryman, 2004).

Findings¹

Workers’ Perspectives of Friendship-like Relationships in Family Work

While many of the workers clearly stated that these relationships were not friendships, they utilised characteristics common to friendships to build professional relationships that were as authentic as possible. Workers who spoke about friendship-like elements to the relationship described an informality and care which went along with a supportive role. Workers perceived themselves to care genuinely for, and be available to, the parents in the kinds of ways that friends are, and even more so in some cases, as noted by one worker,

I think she felt quite let down by her friends. Maybe her anger was around well here’s this worker - that’s not even a friend - and she’s managed to find something to support me with, and these friends that she actually gone to for support hadn’t followed through. (Family worker 4)

Other friendship-like characteristics included being a confidant who was genuinely interested in what the parent had to say, and providing support around identified needs. Descriptions such as how they would “sit around and chat” (Family Worker 2), or “we had

¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants’ privacy.

cups of tea and we just talked” (Family Worker 1), understated how the workers intentionally used informality to create an atmosphere where the parent could relax into the relationship and concentrate on their needs, rather than the worker or the relationship. Furthermore, friendship-like characteristics helped the workers model positive relationships that were perceived to assist parents in their personal relationships, as noted,

I feel like I was her reflection. A one way glass kind of thing....Similar things were happening there as what was happening between her and I. I was able to, when she was talking about those relationships, reflect back to her things that have happened between her and I. And she just applied them. (Family worker 3)

These friendship-like elements were a key to engaging with the parents. The professional relationship would not have occurred without some connection at a human level. By the very nature of the work being focused on meeting people’s human needs, personal aspects were inseparable from professional ones. In the worker’s view, being seen to be “real”, authentically relating to the parent as person-to-person, and sharing something in common, was reported as helpful to building the relationship as it enabled parents to build trust with the workers. In seeing the parents as human beings first, and clients second, the workers tried to hold the parents in close emotional proximity, while being bounded by professional relationship norms.

A key factor to bringing more personal features of the relationship into the foreground and ahead of the professional dimensions was self disclosure. Some workers noted how they used self disclosure to appear “real” to the parents, for example,

I am very real. I mean that I don’t hide behind a façade of being a worker. I will share my own little stories. I will share the impact of the sort of parent I was, and I only repeated the pattern that I learnt....That’s part of being real. It’s like gently challenging them. Doing it in a way that they can hear without them feeling like I’m criticizing. (Family worker 1)

However, three workers described how in some cases it was more difficult to find some point of similarity with the parent for the parent to identify with, so they adapted themselves in a way they perceived the parent would identify with. While sometimes having to portray

themselves in a certain way was further from their “real” selves than at others, at all times it was considered important to present their humanness authentically, that is, to be real in the professional role and to feel comfortable with what they were doing. The following quotation provides an example of the differences involved,

I think we just gelled, personality wise, although we’re totally not living the same lives and not relating outside of work or anything like that. The comfort-ability became very easy for both of us. I think speech comes into it...I talk similar to her. Like, not talking with a plum in my mouth. And I would mirror her speech...[but] I am me, so that has to be comfortable for me as well. I probably feel a lot more comfortable with her than a different type of client. I didn't have to adjust that much with her... I felt okay in saying to her, ‘Geez, you look really good today...I can see that you’re making an effort in how you’re dressing.’ Whereas other clients I wouldn't dare say that... because I don't feel that they would see that as appropriate. (Family worker 3)

How Balancing the Personal and the Professional Impacted Upon Workers

Balancing friendship-like characteristics with professional roles created stress and required skilful professional judgement to manage. Perhaps the biggest difficulty was that workers were left vulnerable to being “worn down” (Family worker 6) by the pressure associated with responding to the parents at such a close emotional level. This manifested in multiple ways.

Firstly, workers experienced stress by becoming aware of highly personal, and often distressing, issues through the close relationship. They noted that these were issues which would usually be limited to close kith and kin relationships, meaning they would not have come to light without such a close relationship. Seven workers talked about how the close emotional connection, and associated empathy and affection the workers felt for the parent and their circumstances, resulted in having similar feelings to the parent. This included feeling excited about parent change, overwhelmed by the complexity of issues, frustrated at limited access to resources, a sense of injustice when they felt the parent was treated unjustly, and deep concern at disengaging they perceived that the parent would become unsupported.

Perhaps the biggest professional challenge related to notions of deep affection and connection. Although no workers explicitly reported strong feelings such as 'love', seven workers talked "around" such ideas in terms of talking about responding to the parent in ways that could be considered to be breaching professional norms. This included some workers discussing doing more for a parent with whom they had a particularly strong connection than they would normally, or doing more than they knew other professionals would do. It also involved workers discussing supporting parents to deal with issues additional to the reasons the parent was referred, or workers' funding requirements allowed. This was particularly potent for workers who felt inexperienced. Moreover, some workers reported thinking it could have been possible to have developed a friendship with the other person if the relationship had occurred outside the work context, for example,

[Catherine] asked me to ring Narelle [from a partnering organisation] because she had no money for nappies. And for Narelle to ring [Catherine's mother-in-law].... Narelle refused, and said, 'I think it's time Catherine started doing those things for herself. And don't you think so too? If I were you, I'd be saying to her, "Catherine, you need to do it"'. So I did. That's exactly what I did. I said this is what Narelle said. [Catherine] promptly burst into tears. Was an absolute mess again....She said, 'I can't talk to her'. And I said 'Alright, I don't feel comfortable doing this'. She said, 'Can you do it, Lorraine?' I said, 'I don't really think that's...' 'But I need the nappies'. And I could see the good reason....So I rang. (Family worker 6)

This scenario needs to be seen in the longer term context of the relationship, especially considering another scenario which the worker described by retelling the parent's account of a visit, months later, to a doctor whom the parent did not know. The difference in the parent was stark, as noted, "Finally she did get to Mental Health....I said, 'Would you like me to come in?' And she said, 'No. I'll be right. I can do it'....She's...was definitely becoming empowered" (Family worker 6). During the research interview it became apparent that the worker felt that the deep affection she felt for the parent meant that she understood the parents' capacities in a way the other professionals did not. The worker described how she

used this to build capacity slowly and gently, until the point where eventually the parent could advocate for herself, for example,

I felt like I was advocating a little bit on her behalf. Assisting her, more facilitating I suppose, just the expression of her struggle. I knew that through the working relationship with her, it would help with perhaps trust, being able to share things with me. But I felt that I would somehow become closer with her or she would maybe, I suppose trust is the only word I can think of...and acceptance. Acceptance of where she's at and that she maybe isn't such a bad parent....I think that when she saw that I didn't think that way, that it was more of a struggle with her postnatal depression, she was okay with that. And she started soon seeing that in a similar light...she started changing her attitude about her parenting. (Family worker 6)

This worker was clear that her response was due to the empathy she felt for the family, for example she stated clearly, "I think I could just empathise with their life circumstances and their day to day struggles and I thought, maybe I could make it just a little easier on them" (Family Worker 6). In line with this, other workers expressed feeling torn between what they perceived their managers and other professionals expected they do, and what their conscience, honed through practice wisdom, urged them to do when dealing with another human being.

Similar professionally-based challenges ranged from how to interact with parents upon chance meetings out of work time, to dealing with feeling genuine affection for parents. One such challenge, experienced by all of the workers, related to contact with parents outside of work hours. This was particularly complicated if the reason for contact fell in a grey area of not being directly related to the case plan, but related to the relationship nonetheless.

Examples included being invited to attend important family events such as birthdays or weddings, for example,

As soon as they introduce you as their friend you get shivers up your backbone. It's a professional relationship....There's one in particular who sends me invitations to birthdays. And you're always declining them. But you feel a bit bad about doing that. I've got enough with my family...[Researcher: Are they treating you like family?]
Yeah. (Family worker 5)

Some workers reported that although they agreed to interact with the parent out of work hours, or assist when they saw the parent incidentally, they felt uncomfortable about this as they felt they might be seen to be breaking professional norms. This was expressed the following way by one worker discussing such matters with her supervisor,

Vera is really clear on [professional boundaries] so that it keeps me a bit more on track...She is always the one with the big stick, 'Now that's not okay.' And I sort of said once, 'Matthew's invited me to his birthday party'. 'Well, you won't be going will you!', Vera said. 'Well, I won't be telling you if I go' (laugh). (Family worker 7)

Interestingly, the workers who reported how they cared about, and felt affection for, the parents also, and one could say almost defensively, noted that they were guided by norms about professional conduct when discussing such notions, for example,

It was like an old mateship. That's how easy it was for me... It's weird, in the outside world if it hadn't been this relationship we would have been real good mates. But there's limits to that too because of your professionalism. (Family worker 2)

This worker also raised concerns about how people who were aware of the situation who saw them might judge them, as follows,

It's grown into this little lounge-style thing. We could have even gone and met at a café but then, people would talk...[saying], 'They've taken that counselling relationship a bit further'. (Family worker 2)

These kinds of situations were reported to create more difficulties for workers during the building phase of the relationship. Workers expressed concern that adhering strictly to professional norms created barriers at the phase, as there was a danger it placed workers in what was perceived to be a distant and unempathic "expert" role. However, as the relationship strengthened, workers felt more comfortable challenging parents.

In addition, tensions between being "friendship-like" and maintaining some professional distance put pressure on some of the worker-supervisor relationships. This was especially so where worker behaviour evoked challenge from their supervisor. Workers noted that they sometimes needed the supervisor's more objective perspective to help them regain focus.

Workers also needed a good relationship with their supervisor in order to speak frankly and work in a flexible manner with parents, for example,

[Supervision] also challenges me. Because doing this day in and day out can be really easy to give in, in here [pointing to his heart], and get stuck there. And without some kind of support system, or release valve, then it could be detrimental to me....I do believe in testing it. I put things out there because I expect the client to do that....I don't have to take it on and the more I can explore it with the supervisor, who is detached from that client relationship, then we can actually make a lot more headway. (Family worker 8)

While the supervisors displayed empathy when dealing with the workers in these situations, they also informed the workers of the professional context of the relationship. Such reminders evoked a pragmatic response from most workers, who were able to refocus on the task at hand, put the emotional aspects of the situation aside, and act according to professional norms. However, other workers reported how their personal relationships, and the relationship with their supervisor, suffered. For example, while one worker noted that she could discuss issues with colleagues when her supervisor was not supportive, the other said, somewhat in agreement to the worker quoted above, that she “carried it” and it affected her out of work time.

How Workers Dealt with Relationship Challenges

Despite these challenges, all of the workers developed a variety of strategies to keep the boundaries clear. Some workers were clear that a professional approach did not override the personal if the professional purpose would be better met by responding in a personalised fashion, despite concerns professional norms might be breached. Others were clear that the professional purposes were to be given primacy, albeit managed sensitively by meeting parents' needs for a personalised approach, for example,

I became unclear of whether I was achieving anything and whether I was just being a sounding ear for her to debrief each week. Which wasn't good enough because I needed to look at accountability for the service and my time. And two, I'm not her friend. This is a working relationship...Bottom line was she was coming for counselling and I felt like she needed to step up to look at what could be done better. I became really emphatic about that. I took on the goal that I would let her have that

first hour to bitch or whatever she wanted to talk about... then get down to at least to one serious issue. (Family worker 3)

One strategy included respectfully engaging parents upon meeting them outside of work hours if the parent initiated contact with them, reminding the parent about their professional role, and inviting them to make appropriate contact. In addition, two workers noted how they set what amounted to boundaries for the relationship early on, which they referred to throughout the interaction as required. This included setting the relationship apart from the notion of friendship right from the beginning.

None of these workers talked about pre-empting this situation by discussing with parents what to expect if they did meet. However, one situation highlights the value of this strategy as, were it not for the strong relationship, the relationship might have been disturbed as the parent was obviously upset by the workers' behaviour.

We bumped into each other in the supermarket. And I didn't know if I should (pause), because she was with her Aunty... You don't wanna intrude. She said, 'You didn't wanna stop for a chat?', next time she came in. I said, 'I didn't know if your husband was there. I wasn't tryin to snub ya. I wasn't sure if it was you. Cos she had all her hair braided, so she did look different. I wasn't sure. She said, 'You didn't stop to chat long'. I said, 'I didn't know if you wanted to'. She called me an 'up-imself-whitey'. She said, 'You're gettin up yourself ya whitey', just jokin around. As you do. You kid around when you're comfortable with someone. (Family worker 2)

Moreover, other workers expressed feeling conflicted when faced with the kinds of challenges noted above, and responded by avoiding parents. Some workers managed this by deliberately living out of the area where the families resided. Others referred parents to other workers in order to cope. Interestingly, one case showed how the second approach may be as stressful to workers as being faced with the situation in the first place. In this situation the worker reported "pulling back" from the parent and referring her to other services when it became clear that the focus had gone on to the relationship, and not the parent's needs. While involving other services meant that this worker could keep working with the parent, without being the sole professional the parent relied on, the worker expressed that she regretted how

she handled the situation. Throughout her research interview it became apparent that she had only acted this way due to pressure brought to bear on her through her understanding of professional norms, and her supervisors' advice, about professional distance.

Finally, developing and maintaining a culture and ethos in the service which enabled feelings of safety, informality, and flexibility regarding practice that was both personalised and professional was found to be important. In particular, colleagues and supervisors played an important role in supporting workers to practise, and reflect critically on, ethical personalised professional relationships, for example,

It lightened the load...just talking to [two coworkers and my supervisor] about [boundary issues/professional practice]. Realising...that it is not just me. It does happen...Just being able to banter that stuff around. Just to make me feel that it's okay. That I actually haven't overstepped the boundaries too much. And we do struggle with that, you know, supporting and creating a dependent relationship. (Family worker 7)

Discussion

The findings provide an account of how workers in this study operated in ways others have found to be effective. These workers were highly personal, incorporating friendship-like characteristics and using self appropriately, they were egalitarian in their approach, and kept professional outcomes the priority for parents (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Doel, 2010; Drake, 1994; Green, et al., 2006; Lynn, et al., 1998; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002; Ruch, 2005).

Furthermore, these findings sit alongside those of others who challenge traditional notions of what constitutes ethical ways of relating with clients (Green, et al., 2006; Maidment, 2006; Ruch, 2005). This study has provided examples of how professional norms can accommodate feelings of deep affection, but how this can have negative implications for workers where professional ideologies do not keep pace with research and practice. By incorporating friendship-like characteristics in their professional relationships with clients, these workers were prepared to work with the risk and uncertainty. However, it was clear that, at times, while they did this to the benefit of the clients' personal growth, they suffered both personally

and professionally. The study reinforced the findings of others that workers working in such ways experience stress, guilt, fear and remorse about their friendship-like approach to their professional relationships (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Freud & Krug, 2002; Green & Lonne, 2005; Riley, et al., 2008). Moreover, the study has added detail regarding where this stress comes from. It showed the extent to which much of the stress comes from the actual and perceived disapproval, and accusations of unprofessional behaviour, directed at them by other professionals, and which they then direct at themselves.

This has provided additional insight into Maidment's (2006) propositions that current understandings of ethics and codes of practice may better serve the needs of professionals than clients. Through the experiences of these workers, it could be further argued that such understandings of ethics and codes of practice do not adequately serve some of needs of workers. Considering these findings it may be timely to rethink professional practice so as to value more highly expressions of genuine and deep affection in relationships between clients and workers.

Moreover, this study has shown that a flexible professional culture can provide a level of support which means workers do not experience the level of demoralisation, loss of identity, and denial of their humanity that others have noted workers engaged in similarly personalised relationships, but within rigid professional contexts, experience (Bone, 2002; Freud & Krug, 2002; Green & Lonne, 2005; McMahan, 2010). A key to these workers continuing to engage in ways that were effective were the family-support principles these agencies and workers followed. The workers drew strength from a professional context with a tradition of building genuine relationships between people, and which continues to be influenced by the foundational notion of "friendly visiting". They felt able to take such a risk because they were guided by the principle that these relationships were focused on the professional goals of meeting parents' needs, and parent change and growth. This was mostly due to relationships

between the workers and their colleagues, including supervisors on most occasions, who also valued personalised professional relationships, understood the uncertainties and difficulties involved, were prepared to discuss similar experiences, and supported the workers to find professional and ethical ways of responding. These findings are particularly salient when one considers higher rates of workers who work with families where neglect is an issue report a sense of hopelessness, helplessness, apathy, stress and burnout than workers who work with families with other types of needs (Watson, 2005).

Conclusion

While ideas relating to highly personal ways of working have been raised throughout the history of social work, this remains a contentious aspect of professional relationships. This study highlighted the way in which pressure is placed on workers through disagreement in the professional sphere regarding ethical practice. These workers carefully and thoughtfully provided a sophisticated professional service, yet they did this in a profoundly personal manner. Despite this, they perceived others considered them to be unprofessional. Where some were actually accused of this, it mainly manifested through ways in which the workers judged themselves in view of their understandings of what is ethical professional conduct. However, they also understood that the family work tradition, and the context they were operating within, had a history of valuing and encouraging personalised way of working with parents.

While this study has provided in-depth insight into how the friendship-like nature of professional relationship can affect workers, further debate and research on the relationship between these types of relationships and professionalism are required. There is scope for research that aims to answer questions such as, what kinds of pressures does working in friendship-like ways put on relationships between workers and colleagues, including supervisors? When might a friendship-like approach to working relationships become

unethical? Do friendship-like ways of working result in significantly better outcomes for parents and children, and at what cost?

It is likely that over the years many family workers have found themselves carrying the burden of internal conflicts discussed throughout this paper. Let us hope that future family workers do not have to add this pressure to their already difficult and complex task.

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