Post-pandemic: Moving on from 'child protection'

Introduction

> 'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew…It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through it lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it' (Roy, 2020, p, 214)

Covid-19 has obliged a painful reckoning with the destructiveness of our contemporary ecological, economic and social practices. A light has been shone on the inequalities scarring our landscape as it has become increasingly apparent that while we are all in the same storm, we are not all in the same boat. Going forward, something of a consensus is emerging around the need to engage with the 'causes of the causes' of so many of our social ills and to recognise

the collective risks to our planet, health and wellbeing generated by policy choices made during the preceding decades; collective risks which have been obscured within an individualising frame. Central to constructing a new social settlement will be tackling inequalities and developing more solidaristic and sustainable ways of living together as human beings.

What might this mean for the policy and practice of 'child protection' where a focus on individual families and individually generated risks has dominated with a corresponding lack of attention to social harms? We consider this an opportune moment to suggest 'child protection' should not survive in its current form.   Its emphasis on individuals and individually generated risks is profoundly problematic and the continuance of its current trajectory poses very serious concerns for all involved.

First, we start by exploring the inequalities and fractures in our contemporary landscape, newly laid bare by Covid-19. We then discuss the fault lines in current policies and practices

in relation to such inequalities with a particular focus on social work as the lead profession in this work. Finally, the possibilities being advanced for a more hopeful social settlement, and the contours of a future landscape where children and their families are supported to flourish, are explored.

Everything is connected!

> **The first lesson a disaster teaches is that everything is connected**….At moments of immense change, we see with new clarity the systems – political, economic, social, ecological – in which we are immersed as they change around us. We see what's strong, what's weak, what's corrupt, what matters and what doesn't. I often think of these times as akin to a spring thaw: it's as if the pack ice has broken up, the water starts flowing again and boats can move through places they could not during winter. The ice was the arrangement of power relations that we call the status quo – it seems to be stable, and those who benefit from it often insist that it's unchangeable. Then it changes fast and dramatically, and that can be exhilarating, terrifying, or both' (Solnit, 2020, emphasis added, no page numbers)

As we attempt to understand and decode the individual tragedies of lives cut short, we are forced to make connections that have been disavowed for decades: connections between the individual and the social, the public and the private, the economic and the political. Such connections refuse to be silenced when we confront the following evidence:

> Put differently, we estimate over 58,000 and 35,000 additional deaths from Covid-19 would have occurred if the white population had experienced the same risk of death from Covid-19 as the Black and South Asian populations respectively (IPPR and Runnymede Trust, 2020, no page no).

In seeking to understand and eradicate such gross inequalities we need to lay bare the inadequacies of a frame that is focused solely on the role of individual choices and behaviours to manage and control risk. A wider frame is needed to drill down into why individuals, particularly those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, may, for example, put their own lives and health at risk by going out to work and not self-isolating if ill. This requires making connections between individual choices and public troubles, notably, the systemic

racism underpinning occupational arrangements and policies that bake in long- standing health, income and housing inequalities. There are specific causes that amplify inequalities such as employment in frontline occupations and living in crowded multi-generational households. These last two, along with deprivation, account for much of the excess mortality from Covid-19 in groups from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

During the pandemic, not only has the unspooling of a direct causation frame occurred with a recognition of systemic complexity, but there has also been an associated recognition of the resultant ethical demands placed upon us as individuals, members of families and society. What does it mean to be a good father or mother? Stay at home and avoid infection but risk not feeding my children or go to work to feed them and risk my health, theirs, and that of others?

 Such desperate 'choices' have exposed how threadbare the social fabric had become due mainly to deliberate policy decisions impacting on income support systems as well as family support resources. Changes in work have meant too that, over the decades, insecurity has become baked in as over 7% of the workforce have had unpredictable hours and pay as well as few protections or benefits to support people in times of emergency. The two million low-earning self-employed people, or those not given notice of changing and cancelled shifts, are also vulnerable. Statutory sick pay has been set at a very low level and many do not qualify for it. Thus, when the pandemic hit, so many people had nothing to fall back onto (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020).

Not surprisingly perhaps, the use of food banks has soared during the pandemic. The Trussell Trust (2020) reported an immediate and sustained surge in need across its food banks as Covid-19 and the first lockdown hit.   In April there was an 89% increase in the number of emergency food parcels given out compared with the same month in 2019. This included a 107% increase in the number of parcels given to children, compared to the same period in the previous year. Almost 100,000 households received support from a food bank in the Trussell Trust network for the very first time between April and June of 2020. For the second quarter of 2020 need remained much higher than normal.

The government has been forced to provide emergency help to deal with the consequences of its policies and the insecurity baked into work. However, significant gaps have continued even with the support provided and overall, at the time of writing, the pandemic has pushed

the total number of people in the UK living in poverty to more than 15 million – 23% of the population (Legatum Institute, 2020). The Institute also estimates that an additional 700,000 people have been prevented from falling below the breadline by the chancellor's temporary £20-a-week boost to universal credit.

In February 2020 just before the impact of Covid-19 became apparent, ten years on from its original report, a review from Marmot et al (2020) highlighted the impact of austerity on health inequalities and the deterioration in the life expectancy rates of specific groups. The findings in relation to life expectancy made headline news. From 2011 the pattern of improvement slowed dramatically, almost grinding to a halt. For part of the decade 2010-2020 life expectancy actually fell in the most deprived communities outside London for women and in some regions for men. For men and women everywhere, the time spent in poor health was increasing.

The social gradient, the term used to describe the phenomenon whereby people who are less advantaged socio-economically have worse health than those who are more advantaged, became steeper, years spent in ill-health went up, and the social gradient in disability-free life was steeper than that for life expectancy. The increase in inequalities in life expectancy was played out regionally. For people living in neighbourhoods in the least deprived decile, there was little difference among regions of England. However, for women living in the poorest decile, there were large regional differences – lower life expectancy in the north compared with the south. For this poorest decile, life expectancy rose in London and went down in virtually all other regions.

The review was published in February and then came the pandemic. Far from being a great leveller, mortality from COVID-19 followed the social gradient. The immediate cause of COVID-19 is, of course, a virus. But the 'causes of the causes' are the same social conditions that give rise to the social gradient in health more generally (Marmot, 2020a)

A subsequent report in December 2020 from Marmot et al (2020b) provides detailed data on the way in which pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities worsened the impact of the virus. In the most deprived areas age-standardised mortality rates were almost double those in more affluent areas both for Covid-19 and for other causes. Those living in overcrowded housing, working in low-paid insecure work such as in public transport, leisure, hospitality, care work or service industries and their children have been disproportionately affected, as

well as affected by other health inequalities. They were also disproportionately likely to be from an ethnic minority background.

What is meant by tackling 'the causes of the causes'? This takes a population approach rather than simply focusing on high-risk individuals. It argues that tackling 'upstream' risk factors, that is the social, economic, political and environmental issues that cause the problems, and intervening early, lessens 'downstream' consequences and takes a system wide multi-agency approach to a host of social concerns.

This approach is increasingly shared by researchers working in other areas. For example, Rose and colleagues (2020) note that the evidence collected over a long period on the relationship between socio-economic factors and mental health problems reinforces the importance of attending to the 'causes of the causes.' Researching the impact of the pandemic, whilst they urge caution about predictions of a 'tsunami' of mental health problems and emphasise that feelings of anxiety and sadness are entirely normal reactions to difficult circumstances, they note that the disproportionate effects of Covid-19 on the most disadvantaged people were entirely predictable and argue that mental health is best ensured by urgently rebuilding the social and economic supports stripped away over the last decade.

As we indicated above, connections between different issues are becoming increasingly apparent and, moreover, the intersecting nature of inequalities. We explore this now in more detail.

Inequalities and intersectionality.

We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.

— Damian Barr (@Damian_Barr) [April 21, 2020](#)

This tweet spoke to so many in April as we locked down and surveyed the differential 'choices' available to work, play, study and eat. For example, home achieved an intensified significance and the disparities, so often hidden, were laid bare (Brown, 2020). The stories emerged of mothers and fathers struggling to keep themselves and their children nourished, and safe from infection and safeguarding risk, often living in temporary bed and breakfast

accommodation or unsuitable damp private rented sector housing. These stories bear witness to a housing crisis that has been warned about for decades (Bimpson and Golding, 2020).

 The term, intersectionality, has spoken to attempts to understand how the interconnections operate and, crucially, reveal the power relations that characterise them. Intersectionality is a conceptual framework concerned with social justice that conceives experiences of privilege and oppression as shaped by interacting social constructions, such as class, 'race', gender and sexuality. It evolved from the Black feminist civil rights movements of the 1970s. One of the earliest of such movements was the Combahee River Collective in the US, which argued that inequalities arising from 'race', class, gender and sexuality were intersecting forms of oppression that created new categories of suffering.   In relation to domestic abuse, Nixon and Humphreys (2010) have argued that while it might be correct to say that domestic abuse occurs in all classes and cultures, it is not correct to say that there is *equal vulnerability* across all classes and cultures and point to the importance of poverty as a risk factor and of using an intersectional lens.

Recent research from Scotland, using nationally representative data from a longitudinal study into children's development, found mothers in the lowest income quintile were far more likely to experience any form of abuse. Age played a protective factor prompting the researchers to also argue for the need for an intersectional lens to understand the issues facing young mothers in poverty (Skafida, Morrison and Devaney, 2021).

In an analysis that is of vital importance for 'child protection', intersectional policy research addresses the fact that any given policy problem or intervention will not be experienced by groups in the same way. Day and Gill (2020) argue the goal of intersectional policy research is to identify how specific policies address or fail to address inequalities across different social groups. Heightened, coordinated responses from police and other agencies can ensure a more equitable outcome for some marginalized survivors. However, reducing risk via the criminal justice system is more complex for others. For instance, the criminal justice system primarily tries to reduce risk by removing those who perpetrate the risk, but their involvement may heighten the risk of institutional control through immigration controls. Thus, a key point here is that state intervention is experienced differently and may have different consequences for differently marginalised groups.

To conclude, a host of evidence has reinforced the need to think beyond individual risk factors and to explore the 'causes behind the causes' of many issues and recognise the intersecting nature of inequalities and the consequences for how policies and practices are developed and experienced. Coming to grips with what this means for policy and practice is going to be key in constructing a new settlement post-pandemic. Moreover, this poses acute challenges for approaches such as those in child protection that focus on framing risks as well as strengths in individualised terms and responding correspondingly.

Exposing the fault lines in child protection policy and practice

Before the pandemic, developments in relation to evidence and ethics had begun the process of fracturing the following long-established child protection story:

- *The harms children and young people need protecting from are normally located within individual families and are due to acts of omission or commission by parents and/or other adult caretaker with the assessment of intra familial risk as well as strengths key*
- *These acts are normally understood through frames that focus on the role of individual choices or psychological and relational dynamics*
- *Developing expert practice methodologies to change behaviours and choices is a key policy objective particularly since 2010*
- *Developing procedures, multi-agency work and professional expertise are all key to protecting children from their families* (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris and White, 2018)

A growing empirical base has expanded the challenge to the focus on intra-familial harms rooted in parenting behaviours and choices. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project found that children in the most deprived decile in England were over ten times more likely to be looked after than children in the least deprived decile and, moreover, that there was a social gradient. Increasing rates of deprivation increased children's chances of becoming subject to a child protection plan (CPP) or looked after (LAC) with each 10% increase in neighbourhood deprivation bringing a 30% increase in LAC and CPP rates. The data from this project on ethnicity and deprivation also highlighted some complex and paradoxical findings illustrating intersectional power relationships and structural inequalities. Thus, the research overall countered assumptions of a unique group of highly stressed families separate from the rest and pointed to the dynamic and shifting contours of deprivation and, moreover, to the way in which a growth in deprivation was likely to impact upon demand for services (see final report by Bywaters and colleagues, 2020). This is a key observation in light of the

evidence above about the impact of the pandemic on poverty and the consequences going forward.

The research with social workers, carried out by the CWIP team, found that they did not consider engaging with income and food security as 'core business' and, indeed, such business was defined as 'assessing parenting capacity and risk' (Morris, Mason, Daniel, Bywaters, Featherstone, Brady, Bunting, Mirza, Scourfield, and Webb, 2018). A curiously abstract and often closed world emerged where constructions such as the 'toxic trio' or 'disguised compliance' seemed to act as a heuristic, a device to short-circuit detailed analyses. These were responded to with a limited and rapidly shrinking repertoire of services. Parenting classes or freedom programmes for women struggling with domestic abuse were a staple of such responses.

The finding by Bilson and Martin (2016) of a disproportionate focus on the investigation of abuse rather than the provision of help has increased concerns about how systems and practices operate. Moreover, this work highlighted the increasing rates of such investigations over the decades. Further research by Bilson, Featherstone and Morris (2017) noted the disproportionate numbers of such investigations on those living in deprived areas. Other research projects have explored the perspectives of families, who have engaged with a number of services, noting their fears about seeking help in contexts dominated by concerns with risk and the, often, shaming nature of encounters with professional services (Featherstone et al , 2018).

The re-production of inequalities by state interventions inter-generationally has also become a focus of concern. Research on parents who have had repeated removals of numbers of children has highlighted that many of these mothers and fathers had themselves been removed from their birth families (eg, Philp, Youansamouth, Bedston, Broadhurst, Hu, Clifton, and Brandon, 2020). In other countries Aboriginal and First Nations people have been able to draw from collective stories of systemic and systematic injustice and dispossession to make sense of such inter-generational patterns and traumas (Lonne, Harries, Featherstone and Gray, 2016). However, in England, a stubbornly resistant individualising frame has made certain kinds of questions impossible to be even thought about, never mind articulated, with policy makers and academic researchers often reinforcing and reflecting such invisibility. Thus, there is no data collected on the socio-economic backgrounds of the parents from whom children are removed. There is no government commissioned prevalence or incidence data

gathered from which a robust picture of the harms children and young people experience not only in their families but also across multiple domains could be built up over time.

In general, there is an endlessly repetitive loop of researchers interrogating the consequences of system interactions and recommending modifications to the operation of the system. This is a bit like medical research being restricted to examining the bodies of those who have died and never extending its gaze to looking at mortality rates more systematically. Indeed, it was the inadequacies of such an approach that resulted in the growth of a public health approach to health, but such an approach to child protection remains underdeveloped in England certainly.

Alongside the research findings outlined here, other developments have involved young people, families and their allies coming together to tell their stories. Fledgling initiatives have emerged that build alliances with parents and other family members in co-constructing services. These have primarily focussed on what Fraser (1995) has named as affirmative, rather than transformative remedies within the current system, such as parent-to-parent advocacy. This work is in its infancy but holds much potential to challenge the top-down expert led approaches currently dominant.

The research findings on poverty, and the developments emerging from those who have experienced services on the disproportionate impact of state interventions on marginalised populations, have posed a profound challenge to policy directions in England particularly since 2010. For example, the Department for Education (2016) outlined its vision for child protection, identifying activity in relation to three areas: people and leadership; practice and systems; governance and accountability. It highlighted initiatives to bring the 'best' people into the profession, give them the 'right' knowledge and skill and develop leaders equipped to nurture practice excellence. It identified creating the right environment for excellent practice and innovation to flourish, using data to show strengths and weaknesses in the system, and developing innovative organisational models with the potential to radically improve services. At the heart of the vision was practice, practice that is focused on getting families to change through equipping workers with methodologies such as motivational interviewing and systemic family therapies.

However, whilst one part of government exhorted social workers to work with individual families to carry out behaviour management projects, another part promoted austerity policies that meant the risks faced by the very same families from poverty, poor housing and

the hollowing out of social and physical infrastructures mounted relentlessly with increasing numbers of children with not enough to eat, insecure housing, nowhere safe to play and no libraries to nourish them. These changes have become known as social harms; harms resulting from the policy choices and activities of local and national states and corporations which impact upon the welfare of individuals and groups (Pemberton, 2016).

As Mason (2020) notes, social harm studies have focussed predominantly on macro-level causes embedded in the systems and organizations of capitalist societies. Less attention has been accorded to the unintended consequences of state interventions, particularly those associated with 'harm reduction' services such as child protection, risk management and crime reduction. His work, alongside that of Wroe (2020), starts to fill this gap most usefully to highlight the raced and classed nature of state interventions and the experiences as well as the outcomes of such interventions. He argues that the application of a harms 'lens' can help us to engage more critically with the experiences and outcomes of state interventions for recipients, with implications for their execution and design, a point returned to below.

To conclude, pre-pandemic the seeds of challenge to a 'child protection' project that focused on individualised risks and ignored social harms were sown and an expanded cast of story tellers emerged to tell stories that highlighted the damage caused by focusing on risk rather than offering help. Fledgling challenges have also emerged stressing the need for more service user produced services and/or service user involvement in designing and running services.

While the challenges outlined above have seeded important possibilities for change, it is vital to acknowledge their fragility in the face of powerful institutional dynamics towards continuity. Indeed, as we now explore, the pandemic exemplifies both tendencies towards continuity and towards change.

What of the pandemic and child protection?

Covid-19 prompted massive disruption to professional lives and routines. For social workers, the home visit, the lynchpin of practice, was put under serious pressure and there has been a high degree of interest in exploring what practices emerged to deal with this. As health professionals were re-deployed to deal with the pandemic and schools were restricted in who they catered for, a degree of reflexivity about the problems of relying on the professional gaze emerged, echoing wider reflections on how covid-19 exposes already existing fault-lines:

In normal times we don't seek to link families to communities around them, but rather make interventions personal and individualised… and then criticise families if we feel they're becoming 'dependent' on us…. this crisis has highlighted how dependent we are on individualised home visit (Social worker account in Featherstone, 2020, no page number)

There was a degree of reflexivity too about the difficulties that may be attached to the professional gaze, certainly in the early days of the first lockdown with some recognition that families might find endless agency engagement a source of strain rather a support (0rr, 2020).

Digital inequalities were highlighted with practical measures taken to equip families with the means to engage with meetings and services generally. Such practicality had not been in evidence, pre-pandemic, for example in relation to the provision of bus fares to attend meetings. More responsive family support type approaches became evident also across many studies with some evidence of their role in improving relationships (Featherstone, 2020).

The response to the pandemic, particularly during the first lockdown, also showed possibilities for a re-crafting of the relationship between state-led services and local communities. Indeed, research by the New Local Government Network (2020) during the initial stages of the pandemic found community cohesion and trust had never been higher with over 95% of council leaders noting the contribution of community groups to their Covid-19 response had been very significant or significant.

While the pandemic provided opportunities for more solidaristic responses, it also exposed more worrying tendencies. This is not surprising. As Galea (2020) argues, while Covid-19 highlights our common fate and should reinforce solidarity, the recognition of differential levels of vulnerability can also lead to stigmatization and othering. Some of the research emerging suggests that certainly there may be some distancing in operation with important differences in perceptions between professionals from a variety of agencies and those experiencing services emerging highlighting the different worlds they often occupy. For example, research by Baginsky, Eyre and Roe (2020) has revealed a disconnect around the experiences of the use of digital means to hold the child protection conferences. While professionals evaluated the use of such means very positively and noted their potential for the future, this was not at all the case for families. They often lacked the means to fully participate and did not feel confident they were heard and were able to understand what was going on.

A study of remote family court hearings similarly noted that whilst most professionals felt that fairness and justice had been achieved most or all of the time, a majority of parents and relatives reported having concerns about the way their case was dealt with, and two thirds felt that it had not been dealt with well. There was particular concern about hearings where interim orders are made to remove babies shortly after birth, with mothers having to join by phone from hospital, or final hearings where care orders or placement or adoption orders were made, again with hearings accessed by parents on their phones. Specific difficulties were experienced by parents who required an interpreter or who had a disability (Ryan, Harker and Rothera, 2020).

To conclude, during the pandemic, contradictory tendencies among social workers and other professionals have been evident but it is vital to celebrate and build on the more supportive ethos evident. While we recognise this ethos is not new and has historical antecedents, a very significant difference is the broader societal and cultural shifts that are happening. These mark an important opportunity for a different story to become established.

From the individual to the social and from 'child protection' to human flourishing

A settlement that has denied our interdependence as human beings, our vulnerability and our need for care at all stages of the life cycle has been exposed as quite simply delusional as well as utterly cruel by Covid-19. It has become commonplace to observe that we must not go back and that we need to construct a different more **care-full** and equal world post-pandemic. Such observations feed into and echo long standing efforts by a wide range of constituencies, including the New Economics Foundation, to construct a new social settlement (Coote, 2015). This connotes a framework for deciding how we live together, what we expect from our governments and what we want to achieve for ourselves and others. NEF outline three goals for this social settlement: social justice, environmental sustainability, and a more equal distribution of power. They argue that all three are intertwined and must be pursued together in order to tackle severe problems: widening social inequalities, accelerating threats to the natural environment, and accumulations of power by wealthy elites. This provides a framework that seems to be broadly shared with differing emphases by a wide range of academics and activists from a broad range of disciplines.

 In the context of the concerns of this article, the work on re-thinking and re-shaping a welfare settlement by Hilary Cottam (2018) is very pertinent. She interrogates the original promise of

Beveridge's welfare state highlighting how despite opposition and doubts, much of that promise was realised: 'A well-housed, healthy, educated workforce, protected by social insurance from the worst vicissitudes of poverty, contributed to the post-war recovery and enjoyed the decades of prosperity that followed' (p, 25). But Beveridge himself became increasingly ambivalent about his own reforms according to Cottam. He had envisaged both a strong role for the state and for volunteer organisations and he was alarmed to see the state increasingly taking over. Cottam surveys how this process evolved via New Public Management from the 1980s onwards and identifies a series of polarised debates. 'On the right, neoliberals emphasised the financial costs of welfare systems and argued for the creation of privatised markets that might deliver a reduced welfare state more efficiently. On the left, the socialists dug in, continuing to believe in the transformative power of the state and the potential of a neutral bureaucracy to serve everyone, regardless of their starting point in life' (p, 27).

Cottam argues that debates about how to manage the institutions are the wrong debates as they ignore profoundly important challenges that have emerged from a changing world. She identifies the key challenges as follows: poverty and inequality, ageing, the crisis of care and globalised patterns of work. She identifies a mismatch between what is on offer and what is needed. Crucially, the debates also ignore the potential that surrounds agencies – the new ideas, resources, inventions and energy that is available but seldom tapped into.

Developments have been emerging in relation to 'child protection' that draw from this work and the work on social harms. The Social Model of protecting children argues for a story that roots the protection of children within broader understandings of what all families need to flourish (Featherstone et al, 2018). It draws from the evidence on poverty and social harms to highlight the tendency of current individualised approaches to reproduce inequalities. It argues for the state to be bigger and yet smaller, closer to home. Thus, it argues for robust social protections, a re-imagining of the promise of the welfare state with decent income support strategies, housing, education and health for all. But drawing from the work of Cottam and others it also argues for the need to re-think how services are delivered with a focus on the local, on community and, crucially, a commitment to co-production. It notes the importance of fostering social connections and argues for a de-centring of the professional and professionally led approaches to child protection. It argues that collective strategies need to be considered in a project that promotes community work, locality-based approaches and

peer support and is on seeing children, young people, families and communities as sources of expertise about system design and best practice.

This work has a high level of synergy with the work that has developed around contextual safeguarding and scholarship in the areas of young people and drug crime. Wroe (2020) has exposed critical tensions in the praxis of multi-agency, child welfare responses to 'county lines' affected young people. Generalising these findings to the child welfare sector, she argues that the contextual dynamics of child harm via 'county lines' must be understood in a broader sense, including how multi-agency child welfare practices contribute to the harm experienced by young people. Mason (2020) too, drawing on his study of policing drug crime in one neighbourhood, notes the need to interrogate state interventions in marginalised communities in the light of evidence that some interventions compounded the difficulties experienced by young people and the community. He argues that a more effective response to the local drugs problem might have attempted to address the conditions that bolstered the drugs market in the first place and extended the opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful and productive activities. Working *with* the community (including community police) to identify needs and develop appropriate responses would be central to that process, according to Mason.

Whilst the contexts and communities differ, similar discussions are occurring across the world. In the USA, because of the disproportionate representation of poor, Black children in the foster care system, there have been calls for the abolition of the system that Roberts (2020) refers to as a 'family regulation' system. By promoting abolition, Roberts does not suggest taking a *laissez-faire* approach, but instead argues for a system (and a society) that cares more, not less, for the safety and well-being of children and their families.

In going forward, we argue for the following questions to be at the heart of our endeavours:

- What do children, young people and families need from each other, their communities, and the local and national state to flourish?
- What fora are needed to tell and hear multiple stories?
- How can children, young people and families help local and national agencies to work with them to flourish?
- How can we rebalance our approaches to the safe care of children so that we understand and deal with the harms experienced in ways that support sustained change?

In addressing these questions, we have already identified above some of the resources, in terms of scholarship and practice developments, available to us. We offer the following suggestions to help us with building on those:

- change our language;
- broaden our conversations;
- be paradoxically more ambitious as well as more cautious.

In terms of language, it is more than time to face the reality that the term, 'child protection', carries too much baggage for many children and families and is ground down by its history and its scars. It is limited and limiting- the focus is too often on individual families 'behaving badly' and the dominant approach ringfences who has the necessary knowledge and means to deal with such behaviours with professionals and experts at the centre (rather than children, young people and families).

We consider that the word flourishing, most often associated with the philosopher Aristotle, opens up new possibilities for re-imagining different futures for children, young people and their families. According to Aristotle, human flourishing, *eudaimonia,* is a life in which one fulfils one's potential as a human being. As Cottam notes, flourishing is a collective and political concept that embraces participation in the structures of society- the household, the market, the community and the state.

Martha Nussbaum has drawn from Aristotle in her work in developing the Capability Approach with Amartya Sen (Nussbaum, 2011). She argues that what makes him of continuing centrality for political thought is the way in which he coupled an understanding of choice and its importance with an understanding of human vulnerability, and the role of government to make all citizens capable of leading a flourishing life. According to Nussbaum (2011: 127), 'any decent political plan, then, would seek to promote a range of diverse and incommensurable goods, involving the unfolding and development of distinct human abilities. Moreover, it must seek to promote them not just for some overall aggregate but for each and every citizen'.

As a starting point, Nussbaum identifies a list of core capabilities necessary for a good life. These are: life; bodily health and bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; the freedom to affiliate with others; the ability to live in relation to other non-

human beings (animals, the environment); play; and control over one's own environment. For Nussbaum, any political or social system that cares about human flourishing should attend to all of these core capabilities. Nussbaum's list has been criticized, including by Sen (2005) who leaves his framework deliberately vague, because of the importance for him of communities deciding what capabilities count as valuable. This is a key point for us and returns us to the work of Cottam in stressing the importance of participation.

But what of our last question above? How can we rebalance our approaches to the safe care of children so that we understand and deal with the harms they experience in ways that support sustained change? This is where we marry ambition and caution.

Being cautious is imperative not least because we know how vulnerable any rethinking of child protection is, given the anxieties caused by examples of children suffering terribly as a result of intentional harm to children by adults (parents, carers, strangers). And this may be where the real challenges lie, with the most difficult of conversations ahead in this process of change. If the 'causes of the causes' are to be unpicked and understood to support children and families to flourish, then the same lens must be used to consider those situations where intentional harms occur. What role do social and economic determinants play in these circumstances? How can we utilise systemic change projects to meet the needs of those children and young people facing intentional harm? We know that for the majority of families, within existing child protection systems, child welfare concerns are a product of a complex interplay of factors and are rarely driven by adults' intent on causing anguish for their children. Research also tells us that a minority of cases of intentional harm can drive public narratives and system management (Warner, 2016).

Taking such harms seriously and exploring hopeful and progressive possibilities would benefit enormously from developing dialogue with those developing work on transformative justice and restorative approaches, developments that are increasingly the subject of research and scholarship nationally and internationally. Transformative Justice is rooted in an understanding of trauma and resilience, as well as an understanding of how oppression and systemic injustice both create and encourage a range of abuses of children. A defining feature of Transformative Justice is its commitment to change conditions in order to prevent further and/or future harms (Mingus, 2020). An example in this country is the 4Front Project, a youth-led movement in North London, empowering young people and communities to transform the way peace and justice are understood by centring healing rather than punishment for young people with experiences of violence and the criminal justice system.

Restorative approaches have had some influence in contemporary child protection systems (Featherstone et al, 2018). Too often, however, they can be unmoored from their origins in concerns to right historical wrongs against marginalised communities and long-standing endeavours to deal with harms and harm doers within communities rather than through expulsion and rupture. Their fate reminds us of the dangers of inserting hopeful possibilities into a pre-existing framework premised too often on risk and removal rather than healing and accountability. However, they also offer us a sense of anticipatory possibilities, pre-figurative means to help us realise a better future.

Conclusion

To remind ourselves of the quote from Roy with which we started this article. The pandemic is a portal; we can go forward dragging with us our familiar patterns of reproducing inequalities and continuing the removal of the poorest children from their families and communities. Or we can take a different path, confront the reality that the child protection is not working for so many children and families and work together to build a different settlement.

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