Going Home: Managing 'Risk' Through Relationship in Returning Children From Foster Care to Their Families of Origin.
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What is This?
Going home: Managing ‘risk’ through relationship in returning children from foster care to their families of origin

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Abstract
This article reports on how workers and clients in child protection social work services manage the return home process. Social workers in these cases attempt to build relationships with clients that have therapeutic, educational and social control functions. Within these relationships, workers must manage competing tensions between ‘risk’ and ‘safety’ while they attempt to build collaborative relationships with parents. This article draws on a qualitative study that interviewed workers and clients within a child protection agency in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It found that workers constructed clients’ problems in ways that avoided attributing moral failure or judgment, resisted ‘knee-jerk’ reactions, and had high frequency contact with both parents and children. They viewed ‘good enough’ parenting within the context of the case, believed in parents’ ability to change, and used solution focused approaches combined with contextual support to build parenting competence and confidence. These findings are discussed with regard to concepts of risk and in light of the aims of social work.

Keywords
child protection, reunification, risk, safety, social constructionism

Introduction
One important aspect of child protection social work is the return home of children after periods of time in foster care. An increasing emphasis on the rights of children to, where possible, be returned to their families of origin creates a practice process...
that is often fraught with competing demands and undertaken in a context of conflicting ideologies and aims. This article draws on a qualitative study of child protection practice that examined the reasoning processes of social workers that lead to decisions. This broader study examined how workers co-constructed reasoning rationales with clients in cases workers felt ‘pleased with’, and the judgments, kinds of relationships, and practices that this co-construction lead to (Jones et al., 2008; Parton and O’Byrne, 2000). These constructions, in turn, are influenced by particular discourses relating to theoretical and moral-value positions (White, 2003). The processes of construction of meaning are crucial in order to understand the kinds of relationships clients and workers were able to form, and how these relationships functioned throughout the practice process, where both worker and client are ‘entered into’ particular roles and identities (Baistow et al., 1995). Within this wider research question, an emerging question was how clients and workers were able to maintain collaborative working relationships, utilizing particular discourses and practices as they did so, in cases where children were being returned home after time in foster care.

The return home process requires a high level of collaboration and motivation from both social workers and parents to be successful, and workers must constantly manage the tensions between the potential risks and rewards for children in family reunification. This article uses two case studies drawn from the wider data to illustrate how workers and clients manage the delicate task of returning children from care to their natural parents. In this process, parents may feel they must be ‘super parents’ in order to reassure social workers, and social workers are constantly assessing risk, safety, and the oft-murky ground of ‘good enough parenting’ while trying to facilitate the functioning of the parent-child relationship.

The child protection context: Competing demands and ‘risk’ management

The context of child protection practice is influenced by discourses relating to a number of concepts. These include presumably objective factors taken to increase ‘risk’; abuse as determined by identifiable causative factors; children’s rights and their need for protection; the family as ‘inner sanctum’ and therefore its exemption from state intervention; and increasingly, the ideals of strengths-based and solution focused approaches (Child Youth and Family, 2009; Parton, 1999). Some authors argue the tension between children’s need for protection and the family’s freedom from state intervention is exacerbated by an increasing emphasis on ‘child-centric’ practices that consider the child as an individual, downplaying their embeddedness within a social context (Broadhurst et al., 2010, Hall et al., in press). Others argue the use of solution focused approaches minimises and exacerbates the influence of important structural factors such as poverty and discriminations, and encourages the neo-liberal ideal of the self-responsible, individualised citizen (Dermer et al., 1998; O’Connell, 2003).
These discursive and ideological tensions are evident here in Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ) within both law and practice. The Children Young Persons and their Families Act 1989 enshrines the child’s ‘best interests’ as an overriding principle, but also establishes clear family rights and responsibilities relating to decisions regarding children. These aims of the paramountcy of children’s best interests, maintaining children in their families of origin, and including families in participatory decision making processes can create complex and conflictual aims of practice familiar to many Western countries (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Connolly, 2004; Parton, 1998). In practice, the meanings of behaviours in relation to the discourses these aims produce are wrestled out in processes of negotiation between not only workers and their clients, but between workers and their managers, the court system, and social and media scrutiny (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Buckley, 2000; Gillingham, 2009; Jokinen et al., 1999; Ruch, 2005; Schon, 1991).

The aim of returning children to their families results in a particular expression of these demands for the child protection social worker and the families they work with. Social workers must find ways to constantly evaluate and balance risk against the need to work with families in collaborative ways that allow ongoing monitoring and support, all the while maintaining a focus on the child’s needs and perspective. While numerous studies examine the decision to remove children, and a number explore statistical associations that lead to return or remaining in care, little has been done on the process of decisions to return home, or how social workers might work with families to achieve this (Biehal, 2007; Davidson-Arad and Wozner, 2001; Saint-Jacques et al., 2006).

Relationships in child protection social work

The Rogerian/humanist ideals of social worker/client relationships are sorely challenged by the child protection context, where concepts of ‘participation’ require adaptation for a field characterized by a marked power imbalance and children’s vulnerability (Healy, 1999). These challenges are heightened by the involuntary nature of the relationship, the differences in perception this is likely to produce, the ethical overriding of parent’s self-determination in favour of children’s protection, and a focus on ‘risk’ identification. These factors provide a difficult context for the development of relationships characterized by partnership, collaboration or participation (Maiter et al., 2006; Ruch, 2005; Turnell, 2004). Discourses of ‘risk’ are drawn on by social workers to legitimate the decisions they make – but this can limit participatory relationships with clients where a forensic approach to establishing the presence of ‘objective’ risk factors creates differing agenda. Families may hold very different understandings of the meaning and purpose of social work intervention (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Ferguson, 2004; Houston and Griffiths, 2000; Stanford, 2010; Stanley, 2007). Bell (1999) states that despite the consumer and rights-based approaches implicit in recent child protection legislation, the ways abuse is investigated still provides a fundamental challenge to a worker’s ability to form participative and collaborative relationships with clients.
Maiter et al. (2006) found in a study of recipients of child protection services, that clients appreciated those workers that were experienced as caring, genuine, empathetic, non-judgmental, accepting, and who went out of their way to be helpful. They propose that despite the power imbalance inherent in the child protection worker-client relationship, these qualities help to maintain and repair damaged relationships. In a study of social work practices very similar to this one, Saint-Jacques et al. (2006) note the need, given the increasing emphasis in Western countries on family maintenance and returning children where possible, that the skills of relationship building are needed more than ever for social workers in this difficult field. They found in a focus group study of 38 workers in Canada that the broad attitudes of flexibility, openness and sensitivity to the client’s life experiences were those most felt by workers to be influential on securing parental involvement.

Finally, constructionist approaches emphasize the forming of relationships as a social, mutual activity, influenced by the roles, meanings and positions of both worker and client in the child protection process, and how these are enacted through language and dialogue (Hall et al., 2003; Houston and Griffiths, 2000; Ruch, 2005).

The Study

The study set out to examine how stakeholders in child protection social work construct and negotiate the reasons for the decisions made about children’s lives, and how this construction of meaning shapes the worker-client relationship trajectory. The organizational context of this study was within a large NGO (Non-governmental organisation) registered under S.396 of the Children, Young Person’s and their Families Act 1989 as a Child and Family Service. This provides it with the necessary legal status to engage in child protection social work activities such as assessing family need, referring for Family Group Conferences, applying to the Family Court for orders (both with and without parental consent) and providing foster care services.

Methods

The study was based on constructivist research principles that stress qualitative methods, collaborative and cyclical research, the importance of gaining contextual understanding, and acknowledging the researcher’s role in the resulting production of knowledge (Creswell, 2007; Rodwell, 1998). In light of this, data collection was varied and included: visits to seven offices of the organization, observations of case consultations, team meetings, interviews with twenty-two social workers using a semi-structured interview based on a critical incident technique that asked workers to describe a case they felt ‘pleased with’ (Creswell, 2007; Flanagan, 1954; Fook, 2002; Norman, 1992). This methodological choice was influenced by ideas from Critical Best Practice (CBP) that aim to: ‘promote positive learning about social work by setting out examples of best practice;... analyzing instances where it is
argued that what social workers did was done well, with all the benefits that can accrue from this for service users’ (Ferguson, 2008: 15). The initial open-ended question was followed up by specific question probes.

Data collection included interviews with fifteen other stakeholders from ten of the cases selected by workers. This group included foster parents, \( n = 5 \), parents, \( n = 7 \), and young people, \( n = 3 \). Data was also gained via consultation and analysis with a reference group formed within the agency, document analysis of policy and practice documents, and field notes. Access was negotiated with the National office of the organization, and ethics was gained from the author’s University ethics committee.

**The sample**

In terms of the characteristics of the sample, of the twenty-two social workers interviewed, 86 percent were female. ‘Social workers’ for this study were defined as those employed in the role of social worker by the agency. The range of experience in social work was from one to twenty years, with a mean of 7.1 years (SD 5.5). Nineteen (86%) had professional qualifications in social work, and/or professional competency as determined by the National Association of Social Workers. They had a range of ethnic and national characteristics: thirteen were NZ European/Pakeha, five NZ Maori, one Pacific Islander, three were other European, and one Canadian métisse (one person gave two ethnic groups). In the heterogeneous group of other stakeholders interviewed, \( n = 15 \), twelve were female and three were male. Eleven were NZ European/Pakeha and four were NZ Maori. Six out of twenty-two cases discussed concerned children with at least one Maori parent.

The interviews resulted in twenty-two case accounts discussed by social workers, and ten case studies where at least one other stakeholder in addition to the social worker was interviewed. For example, in one case study the worker, mother, and young person were interviewed, creating one case study. The case studies were built up to create a ‘thick description’ of each case by eliciting the views and perspectives of as many relevant stakeholders to the case as possible. This added an element of triangulation, by allowing comparison of the social worker accounts to client accounts (Creswell, 2007). Nine of the total twenty-two cases discussed by social workers were cases involving the return of children to their parents after both long-term (more than two years, \( n = 3 \)) and short-term (less than two years, \( n = 6 \)) stays in foster care.

**Analysis**

Thematic analyses were undertaken in several ways. First, of all interviews as a data set, and then each case study where other stakeholders were interviewed as discrete cases, then similar cases were identified and broader themes across those cases analysed. Both main data sets (all accounts and cases studies) were coded,
using Nvivo software, for dominant patterns in the ways practitioners and clients explained the decisions that were made and the nature of their relationships. Codes were developed both inductively, from the data, and deductively from the research questions and relevant literature (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). These preliminary deductive codes were initially broad, as they were informed by previous research and theoretical ideas such as ‘risk’, then a fine-grained coding of more detailed patterns and areas of linkages between categories was undertaken (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Gilgun, 1994). However the inductive codes often began narrowly and built up in a grounded manner to develop into wider themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Hall and White, 2005). As with constructivist research in general, and case study approaches in particular, the multiple perspectives gained within each case were contextualized by examining their interrelationships with the wider organizational, theoretical and social contexts (Creswell, 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 1998).

This article reports on two of the nine return home cases as they illustrate themes found in all those cases. In this sense, they are ‘instrumental’ case studies, in that they are illustrative of the themes identified in all similar cases (Stake, 1998). They were also case studies where other stakeholders in addition to the social workers were interviewed, providing depth to the data.

**Results**

Two cases are reported directly here as exemplars of the common constructions and practices utilized by social workers in cases where children had been, or were in the process of, being returned home to their families of origin. In case five, the social worker, the mother, and the young person were interviewed. All three were Pakeha (NZ European). The mother had her child removed at about age ten after a long period of accessing respite care due to his behavioural problems and her depression. His father had been absent since he was a young child. He was in a long-term, non-kin placement at the time of return. He was returned at age fourteen, after his mother’s mental health stabilized, she entered a new stable relationship, entered tertiary education, and moved house. The young person wanted to return home and had begun to display difficult behaviour in his foster placement.

In case seven, four children were returned after two years in foster care. The reasons for their intial removal were their parent’s heavy marijuana use, negative parenting style, parental conflict, ‘chaotic’ lifestyle and occasional physical abuse. The mother in this case was Maori, and the father Pakeha. The worker was Pakeha. The children had been placed with kin caregivers on the Pakeha side of their extended family. The parents had managed to cease all marijuana use, completed several parenting courses and established a safety plan to ensure both parents and children had planned courses of action to pursue when feeling stressed or unsafe. Both these cases represent children who had been in care for substantial periods, a group found in other research to be less likely to be returned home (Biehal, 2007; Millham et al., 1986). Both return home cases were considered successful by all stakeholders, although the children in case seven were unable to be interviewed directly.
The process of returning children home in both these cases was managed in a phased process, by increasing the length of access times, ensuring good support for the parents in terms of high frequency social work support, counselling, vocational guidance and contact with the children to elicit their views and feelings as reunification progressed. However, as is common in reunification attempts, there were several threats to the reunification, for example, when the young person in case five was involved in a fire-lighting incident and took marijuana seeds to school. He said he had found them at home. Ongoing work was done with the family to ensure he was not being exposed to drugs, and he was being adequately supervised. Likewise, in case seven, the mother’s tendency to ‘blow up’ and become verbally abusive under stress posed a threat at times. The meaning of these events had to be considered in the context of the questions: what constitutes ‘good enough’ parenting; and what should be interpreted as conferring risk or safety. These questions guide social worker’s patterns of attention to, and interpretation of, child and parental behaviour. This selective and interpretive process is, in turn, influenced by the nature of the negotiated, dialogic relationship between the worker and the clients as much as the cognitive mechanisms of information processing. Several themes relating to these relationships can be identified: those most of interest to practice based readers are as follows.

**Lack of culpability in the construction of original problems**

How the causes of clients’ problems are interpreted are intrinsically related to the focus and aims of intervention, and the positions practitioners offer clients in interaction (Burr, 2003; Milner and O’Byrne, 2002a). Within most accounts, and in these cases in particular, explanations of parents’ original problems were most often constituted as related to mental health, addiction or a ‘cycle’ of abuse. This interpretation of their problems functioned to construct clients in non-blaming but individualized ways – thus notions of moral failure or intentional negative consequences for children were avoided. The use of language in this respect excepted clients from a category of ‘blameworthy’ (Austin, 1962; Silverman, 1998). In case five, for example, this meant that the mother’s original problems were construed as relating to her mental illness, her own childhood abuse, and the effect of this on her son’s development were constructed as his ‘needs not being met’, rather than intentional abuse:

I think a lot of it was the mother was abused as a child, she was depressed as an adult, and she was depressed around the time of X’s birth... and I think that that affected her ability to relate to X, and I think that he didn’t get his emotional and psychological needs met at that right stage... as a very young child, so he felt quite alienated. (Social Worker, C5)

It could be argued that this kind of construction, while avoiding direct blame, may be experienced as constructing the client as the passive victim of ‘mental
illness’. However, the mother in this case also noted the lack of moral failure attributed to her when discussing her perception of the social worker’s attitude to her:

I was able to – I didn’t feel as though I was made to feel guilty, like it was all my fault... I felt as though they sort of like, listened, that I suppose they’ve seen all sorts haven’t they, and I felt as though I wasn’t made to feel guilty for what – for how things had developed... because I had done my best. (Mother, C5)

**Resisting ‘risk’ reactivity while monitoring safety**

The fundamental tension for workers in these return home cases is the constant evaluation of risk of harm parents might pose to their children, while simultaneously attempting to assist in the development of positive parenting strategies and support networks. This tension can lead to an uneasy collage of controlling/surveillance and educational/therapeutic goals. Waiting for a parent to prove themselves perfect before children are returned is unrealistic, but nor can children be exposed to further abuse or neglect while parenting capacity is ascertained. Workers in these cases managed their monitoring role through constant contact and the development of safety plans with both parents and children so as all members had concrete strategies in place if they felt threatened in any way. Safety plans provided a practical way to monitor parental behaviour, ascertain children’s experiences, provide practical strategies if a parent became abusive, enlist the support of other family members and agencies, and work on family dynamics. While this was at times intrusive into family life, it allowed an ‘intermediate’ use of power, a buffer between the children being in care and the withdrawal of social services that mediated the children’s return:

Interviewer: She (child) wanted to be back but she was...

Yup. She was scared about it. And... She was also able to – like I asked her ‘if you were worried about something, who would the people you would talk to be?’ you know, in other words, she found – she identified her own safety people. Um, so when I talked with X and Y (parents), um, and Z (child)... I was able to say ‘One of the things that, um, the kids have said to me is that they get scared when there’s yelling and fighting’, and so on. So, when we wrote that safety plan, Mum and Dad agree that there won’t be yelling and swearing in the house. (Social Worker, C7)

However, these workers, perhaps due to the safety plan, were able to tolerate some element of risk and resisted what was often termed a ‘knee jerk’ reaction. For example, workers in these cases noted that there were points when other professionals or family members questioned the decision to return home, for a variety of reasons. This could have been met with a reactivity that did not allow enough time
to effectively trial the transition home:

I mean, we could have knee-jerked and gone ‘oh cripes, we can’t do that’, you know what I mean, it could have been so easy to do that... it was quite a scary time for us, we were justifying what we were doing and making sure we had a pretty robust plan around that, and talked to X (young person) about it... but you know now he’s 15, he’s a really bright boy, doing well at school, he’s settled with his mum and stepdad, and there were issues between the stepdad and him but he’s really matured... you know for me the pleasure is in seeing him walk in the culture of his family, and the family have progressed, just seeing that movement in mum and you know (that) is because she was entrusted with the care of her child again, she was – you know, that was the impetus to actually build on that... (Social worker, C5)

Some parents also perceived ‘risk’ of a different kind: a fear that once they took full legal custody back, support systems would be withdrawn:

... for me to agree to having custody back, I had to make sure that they were still gonna have the support in place for the kids. You know, like, if things were getting hard I could ring and say ‘this ain’t working. You need to come in and do something’... well, I just said, I’m sorry but I’m not going to take custody back until you’ve said that in paperwork, that you were still gonna have the support in place for the kids. (Parent, C7)

This dynamic highlights the discrepancies between theory and practice. Both law and policy presume enough support exists in the parent’s wider family and community to assist nuclear families in their parenting endeavours when formal services withdraw. Likewise, theorizing about ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’ often presume parents and workers alike have as an ultimate goal the withdrawal of social services. However for many families the idealized supportive extended family is a ‘mythical family’, and social service agencies quite literally become this extended family in the absence of other supports. This can be perceived as inappropriate ‘dependence’ on formal services, but often reflects the realities of isolated families in today’s world where the mobility of people primarily for employment reasons has resulted in changes in family form that can leave some families vulnerable. Thus ‘risks’ were not only actively managed by workers, but also by clients to avoid a return to family life that would be unacceptable to them both.

‘Good enough’ parenting

Many workers used the conceptualization of parenting in this study that ‘most parents keep their children safe, most of the time’, drawing on the Signs of Safety approach used in this agency (Turnell and Edwards, 1999). This resulted in the construction of parenting problems as short-term exceptions to an overall life landscape of functioning adequately as a parent, and an acceptance that real-life
parenting exists on a continuum, rather than easily identifiable ‘good’ and ‘bad’ categories. This social worker, in explaining the early parenting relationship in case five, for example, stated that:

... although Y (mother) wouldn’t have been parenting at full capacity she still obviously did enough for him to – because he respects his mum and he listens to his mum and he values her so she obviously did something at that point that was good as well, so it wasn’t like he had reactive attachment disorder, it wasn’t like, that extreme,... she must have... done enough for him, yeah. (Social Worker, C5)

However, this optimistic view was balanced in return home cases with a careful weighing up of possible harm to children, most often ‘measured’ through direct contact with the children involved to ensure their perceptions of the situation were elicited.

However, beyond these basic over-arching ideas, the criteria for return were often idiosyncratic, negotiated (rather than unidirectional from the worker to the client) and specific to the case, rather than the social worker making a decision based on an objective ‘check list’ of factors. In case five, the specific factors used as criteria of ‘good enough’ parenting by the worker and the mother were the mother’s vast improvement in her mental health, and the threat of the existing foster placement breaking down due to the young person wanting to go home. The young person, on the other hand, perceived going home as a reward for, and as dependent on, his ‘good behaviour’. He was well aware of his mother’s fragile mental health and knew that his ‘bad behaviour’ or her inability to stop him wandering and stealing would result in his removal again. These differing perspectives illustrate the highly social and dialogic nature of case negotiations, where each person’s perception is structured by their position in relation to the decision being made.

This focus on the particulars of the case and whether or not they confer adequate safety, clearly supersedes the need to identify some identifiable, generic protective factors. This complexity and the social, situated nature of these ongoing decisions has been noted by other researchers (D’Cruz and Gillingham, 2009; Holland, 2000).

**Belief in change**

Another major theme in these cases was the belief of workers that parents were capable of change. This was often linked to an attitude of fundamental respect for them as a person, a belief that they were ‘honest’ with the worker, and contributed to the worker allowing some elements of managed risk with support. The worker in this case, for example, noted that:

... because I could read the court reports and the notes but I didn’t see the parents entrenched in where they were, I viewed them differently and I think
that – and – just – X and Y feeling that they didn’t have to watch – that they could
trust me I guess and they could speak their mind and I wasn’t going to hold a
grudge… like judge them for it… just being open with them… I guess my emotional
response that made the biggest difference was my belief… in the mother’s potential to
actually do it and my belief that getting behind her would be the thing that would yield
something positive. (Social Worker, C5)

This belief in change was premised on ‘noticing’ the times when things were
going well – but bolstered by enough contact to be able to say with some certainty
that parental care was adequate. This paradoxical function of searching for excep-
tions and safety building aspects while monitoring risk was a common theme:

Int: What do you believe – that even though they stuffed up it is possible for them to
change?

SW: I did, Yeah. And that was because I saw enough times when it was going well. So,
I mean there were – there were a lot of hiccups along the way. Um, and sometimes it
felt like, you know two steps forward and one step backwards… and I know that
(mother) and (father) would say exactly the same thing… one of the things that came
up was the – in that case – was what is good enough parenting?… in those early stages
I was visiting… sometimes two, maybe three times a week. It might only be for 15
minutes – 10 minutes sometimes, but… now that I look back at that I realize that that
was really important because that was building up that relationship with (mother).
Sometimes… I’d deliberately call around unannounced so that I could get a bit of a
picture… (Social Worker, C7)

**Building parenting competence and confidence through solution focused approaches**

Parents may not only have been parenting in harmful ways prior to removal, but
also may have had quite some time without the care of their children. This seemed
to further erode their skills and confidence in parenting. Parents are often only too
aware of their failure as a parent previously:

… mainly I was so nervous having kids back. Because two years without children…
You adapt to a whole different lifestyle. Yeah, I was working all the time. That was
me; work, and then I’d travel down here every fortnight. (Parent, C7)

Factors identified by parents as re-building their parenting confidence
included parenting courses, social work support availability, and an attitude
of support and recognition of the changes that were being made, rather than
criticism. This latter aspect may be related to the use of solution focused methods,
springing from a strengths perspective used in the agency. This was evident in many
accounts:

... well, we went and did our parenting course again... But, I think having (the agency) there just to say – you know – you’re doing OK. Everything’s going OK. This could be switched a little bit, but you’re doing good. You know having that input – it’s a load off the old shoulders.

Int: How do you think the social workers you’re involved with viewed your family?

Um, I’m not sure how they’d think – like, the first time we come along. But, um, they have commented that, you know, we are doing awesome with the kids. So, I mean, that in itself was just ‘whew!’ At least someone had seen that we were doing ok. (Parent, C7)

The worker in this same case also illustrates this exception finding, encouraging, and eliciting detail method common in solution-focused approaches and associated with the Signs of Safety approach used in the agency (Berg and de Jong, 1996; Turnell and Edwards, 1999):

I mean, getting yourself off a dependence on marijuana, that itself, you know, that is not an easy thing to do... one of the things... one of the questions I used a lot with (mother) in the early stages was ‘Wow’, one kind of comment was ‘Wow, that was, that was pretty hard. How did, how on earth did you manage to do that?’

Int: And she responded to that?

Yeah, yeah she did. (Social Worker, C7)

Discussion

In these case study examples, the social workers often worked in creative ways to manage a perception of inherent ‘riskiness’ in returning children to parents previously deemed inadequate. Their creative management of risk included constructing adult clients in non-culpable ways, keeping constant contact with parents and ascertaining children’s views directly from them. They refused to be driven by a sense of reactivity to perceived or claimed risk by others, but instead took a more reflexive approach, that did not ignore potential risks, but sought to find ways to ameliorate and manage them, rather than simply ‘reach for removal’ as the only possible response. They achieved this through the use of safety plans developed with the family, maintained a belief in the possibility of personal change, premised on a notion of respect, and resisted ‘risk’ as the only ‘organizing principle’ (Houston and Griffiths, 2000; Stanford, 2009, 2010). Based on similar philosophical foundations, they also used solution/safety focused approaches that attempted
to recognize and build on periods of functional behaviour, and in this way actively co-constructed changes in parenting styles and family dynamics. In doing so they traversed the meaning minefields as to what should be considered ‘risky’ and what should be considered ‘safety’, and attempted to resist the easy dichotomies such notions provide, while maintaining a working relationship with clients as they returned children to their families of origin (Stanford, 2010). The effect of what has been called the risk of ‘extreme bads’ (i.e. Child deaths) has an ever-present impact on social worker’s reasoning and reactions but in these cases this was ameliorated through careful case planning, and a construction of parents that viewed them as able to ‘move on’ (Macdonald and Macdonald, 2010).

Building relationships characterized by honesty, collaboration and solution finding are important in managing the risks and uncertainty involved in returning children. In this process, as in so much of social work, retaining a ‘respectful uncertainty’ while still making wise judgments in complex and unpredictable contexts is perhaps the best that can be hoped for (Taylor and White, 2006). Relationships in this context become the lynchpin of those wise judgments. They rely not only on social worker skill, but on the wider discursive and material systems of which they are a part, and the clients’ reactions to the worker and what they represent to them (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000). In this process, both are embedded in their own ecologies, and must find some common ground in order to make themselves intelligible to one another. Within this process, workers adapt notions of participation and collaboration carefully to the child protection context that requires they manage risk of harm to child clients, while simultaneously maintain a trusting relationship with parents that requires the use of their hierarchical power only when necessary (Bundy-Fazioli et al., 2009; Healy, 1999). Workers’ attention can be completely captured by the risks and deficits of parents in this situation, leading to conservative reactivity, with little or no focus on actual personal therapeutic support or education. However, these workers were able to acknowledge and build on client strengths, and build relationships that were not only about the specifics of the concerns, but included the ‘wider territory’ of clients’ lives (Turnell and Edwards, 1999). While this may not be possible in every child protection case, these ways of approaching practice offer pragmatic practice implications for those cases where return is possible.

As Dean (1999) points out, establishing ‘risk’ ‘... does not lie with risk itself, but with what risk gets attached to’ (p. 131). In social work practice this interpretive process of assigning meaning to behaviour that symbolizes ‘risk’ and ‘safety’ is negotiated via an active co-construction by workers and parents to strengthen both discourses and practices that build safety for children as they return home. These processes of re-constructing an acceptable family life (both discursively and materially) were managed by both parties in this study through working on parenting confidence, maintaining support for the family post-return, utilizing safety plans, constructing original problems in non-blaming ways and using solution focused approaches premised on a belief in change.
Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the tacit meanings and associated practices embedded in social work practice in the child protection context. Engaging in cyclical, collaborative research that included a range of data collection methods enabled a ‘thick description’ of these processes, including those associated with return home cases (Creswell, 2007). The gathering of qualitative data is always a collection of narratives, and should therefore be treated as a partial, selective and constructed version of ‘truth’, influenced by the position of the researcher and participants within the context of data gathering (Fook, 2002). Accepting this as a given, this study drew on ideas from appreciative inquiry to elicit those constructions and practices within cases workers identified as those they were ‘pleased with’, with a view to contributing to the critical best practice literature (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2007; Ferguson, 2001; Grant and Humphries, 2006). Describing and analysing those cases that workers (and, ideally, clients) felt were successful leads us to a pragmatic examination of the associated meaning making processes and practices that were experienced as useful, and the criteria workers use to evaluate cases as positive or otherwise.

Managing ‘risk’ within the context of returning children is a difficult task. It walks the fine line of trying to build collaborative, trusting relationships that support parents in their personal change efforts while protecting and engaging children. Stanford (2010) notes that the ‘rhetoric of risk’ is often utilized within neo-liberal discourses as a method of evoking fearful and reactive responses by social workers. She argues that this obscures ‘genuine attempts to respond meaningfully to need’ (p. 1065). These cases provide some examples of the messy realities of practice, describing and analysing how workers and clients have attempted to ‘respond meaningfully to need’ and enhance well-being through the complex process of returning children home.

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