

## **Thinking about thinking about children's social care**

### **How does children's social care survive the effects of neoliberalism?**

To do so we need more people from more diverse voices involved than currently.

### **We need to purposely change what we are doing, who is being involved.**

We need to consciously understand the idea of the 'public sphere' in relation to the generation of RCC knowledge and its dissemination. It is not a question of expanding what we do now as this sort of greater inclusivity will mean a greater burden being placed on a few, and this piece argues this will likely not include the diversity of views that will be beneficial.

### **We need to think about things, and do, differently.**

It is observable that the public discourse and publications of recent times have routinely been concerned with instrumental action, purely goal-oriented behaviour, often primarily with the economics of children's social care rather than the effects of children's social care. We have developed a thoughtfulness on some matters and as a result a thoughtlessness on others; we have left undone some important things whilst doing other things.

Scientific (research and policy) thinking has been kept separate from our reflective thinking, that this occurs prevents the critical thinking from the position of a reflective researcher-practitioner.

This doing differently will need arguing for in the current Value-For-Money accountancy perspective that sees little return on this task and role.

- Who has the research role in your organisation?
- How is development of your organisation driven by research?
- How is research disseminated in your organisation?

In the UK we scrimp on research, often it is deployed to prove a case, often to gain an ascendancy in a discussion. We then do its development and dissemination by default rather than by design.

One means of moving on from this impasse is the role of an intermediary organisation to ensure all get everything necessary to meet needs. 20 years ago NCERCC was funded by government to provide this service. In today's world knowledge is income and is protected rather than distributed.

Our understanding of the pragmatics of each person, agency and organisation often become secondary to promoting the experience that we have at that time. It is a matter of have our anxiety or practice recognised and validated as 'evidence'.

Now taking a much wider view we can see we are at a moment of economic and social decomposition, and before the cycle turns to re-composition. The domination of a particular economic view. The 'living within fiscal rules' is something that no

political party will seek to challenge, stands to define and steer the care that is offered in directions that no one could have predicted even ten years ago. At this moment we need all the voices present in the thinking about the re-composition that will involve us all. Looking at the voices we can see that national and local government and their agencies along with a few organisations dominate the discourse. These direct discussions, what is to be discussed and how.

We have drifted into this sphere. Social work has had a connection to social theory. The academics have been producing perspectives from social theory on the practice of social work. There are many journals with these insights.

Residential Child Care has had less connection made to social theory

- In England it has an oral tradition with practice handed down
- It is a small sector with 'thinkers' often full time 'doers' opening, holding and developing homes
- And, academics and think tanks have been writing from the perspective of solving the issue of Residential Child Care rather than seeing it as a social symptom of a specific set of social relations.

Most writing on RCC does not start in the place we need it to.

Where it is written of in academic journals it is often research analysing statistics.

### **New task and role needed - practitioner action researchers**

There are few practitioner action researchers. There are few RCC specific journals linking social theory and practice. RCC is a lesser presence in the professional journals, understandably as social work focus is their prime focus. Often the papers are accounts of practice or evaluations of providers/projects.

### **New deliberative learning process**

We need to validate, fund and develop a collaborative learning process that operates through discussions. Currently the gold standard is of research, including evaluation. The conclusions being made by a researcher are often taken as the justification of a finding and this taken as reason for implementation. There is caution needed in the Foundations approach of evaluation partners sharing the same outlook. The context of the research and researcher are vital ingredients of our understandings of conclusions.

How does this occur? In plain sight, incrementally.

### **A reading of the work of Jurgen Habermas over the decades gives us insight into the deliberations concerning RCC.**

The premise of aligning his thinking to an understanding of RCC is that currently the everyday experience is approached as a research object to be measured and classified, leaving no room for critical reflection on the inter-subjective and symbolically structured lifeworld

In his first book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), he traced the emergence of the 'public sphere', a space between civil society and the

state where citizens could engage in processes of democratic deliberation. Habermas drew attention to the organisation of opinion by political parties and others disrupting the possibility of widespread, well-informed debate. Modern democracy, he argued, was increasingly characterized by the technocratic organisation of interests, rather than by the open discussion of principles and values.

In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), Habermas addressed the question of how we might understand our shared interests, distinguishing between the production of technical knowledge, the development of interpretative understanding and the emancipatory insights achieved through critical theories.

In the 1970s Habermas turned his attention from what we can credibly believe to what we can justifiably argue (a road taken in the development of Ofsted's SCCIF). In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), he offered a new conceptual framework to explore this challenge: how the "lifeworld", characterized by the development of normative learning processes that support social integration, might protect itself against colonization by systems of economic, technological and political power, which achieve their goals without cultivating public consent.

In his next major work, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), Habermas argued that the formation of power and the formation of knowledge are inextricably linked.

How reasoning processes become embedded in our social practices is the theme of *Between Facts and Norms* (1992). He presents the law as an institution residing between the scientific research leading to the establishing of norms for social interaction (one might think of Quality Standards). One might think of the development of national standards for care and the ensuing regulatory activity as being the procedural conception of law that generates the blend of legality and legitimacy required to maintain social cohesion without unjustifiable coercion. Habermas conceives of legal reasoning as a quest, neither for truth nor for goodness, but for legitimacy: justice as fair communicative process. This view underpins the practice of 'lawfare' and judicial reviews that have been mostly productive in defending children's rights in policy changes.

In *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* Habermas notes that social media have improved access for a wider range of voices to participate. That said, he argues there are 3 challenges created by a lack of editorial oversight:

- A weakening of debate prior to formal decision-making, as public attention is diverted away from one set of issues to others, there is not a comprehensive and inclusive attention
- Tendency of participants to congregate in like-minded networks, unwilling to engage with those whose interests differ
- The erosion of the public sphere itself, as participants adopt social media anonymity in the sharing of views without regard for the inclusiveness and engagement that is required by a democratic public sphere.

We need diversity of views to resolve the current challenges. We need not only to study the conclusions of research but also the ways they have been constructed. The idea of a deliberative democratic approach is a worthy investment.

(With many thanks the above draws extensively from the Times Literary Supplement 6309 23 02 24 'Defending democracy' by Mark Hannam, Institute of Philosophy University of London).