**Poverty, Exclusion and Child Protection Practice:**

**The contribution of ‘the politics of Recognition&Respect’**

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**Abstract**

The affective dimensions of poverty, including the impact of wider policy discourses and services that ‘other’ and shame people in poverty, are increasingly recognised. In response, Lister (2013) advocates for ‘a politics of recognition&respect’ that centralises the voices, participation and lived experiences of those who live in poverty. This paper considers how applying Lister’s theory could improve child protection social work in England, from a human rights and social justice perspective. The paper draws on findings from an ATD Fourth World participatory research project aimed at updating the course content for a pre-existing social worker training module on poverty awareness. The project brings together families with experience of poverty and child protection interventions, social work practitioners, and academics.

**Keywords:** poverty, child protection, participation, recognition, shame

**Introduction**

*“Society needs to have trust in people experiencing poverty. They have skills, and abilities, and gifts, and a way of creating policies – if they are listened to”.* (Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (CoPPP), 2000, p.vii)

Poverty is undoubtedly about material disadvantage, but it must also be understood in terms of relational and symbolic injustices in a deeply unequal world. Humiliation and shame, fear and distrust, instability and insecurity, isolation and feelings of powerlessness feature heavily in the social and emotional landscapes of families in ‘austerity’ Britain (Psychologists Against Austerity, 2014). In England, alongside government policies to reduce benefit payments and family support services, increasing numbers of children have been made subject to child protection (CP) plans and care proceedings (Featherstone et al, 2016). Within this context, social workers cannot ignore the complex relationship between poverty and parenting. Whilst this article focuses on practice in England, the issues raised have global relevance, particularly for countries with similar neoliberal policies.

The relational experience of poverty is one of social and political exclusion and discrimination, including the absence or marginalisation of the voices and participation of the poor in policy, political and social circles (OHCHR, 2012). As an antidote, Lister (2015) urges us to reconceptualise how we understand poverty by listening to people who directly experience it. Only then can we begin to create truly effective and respectful anti-poverty policies and practices. This is as true for social work as for any profession that works alongside individuals facing material and financial deprivation.

This paper discusses findings from a workshop which explored Lister’s (2004) theory of ‘the politics of Recognition&Respect’ and its possible application to social work practice with families facing poverty. The workshop was part of a series in the *Giving Poverty a Voice – Social Worker Training Programme*, a participatory research project aimed at reconceptualising the child protection system and developing course content for a poverty awareness training module for social workers. The project brings together family members from ATD Fourth World, an international anti-poverty organisation; social work practitioners; and academics.

**Poverty, Exclusion and Shame**

Inadequate income and material hardship, perpetuated by economic and social policies reinforcing unequal distribution of resources, lie at the heart of poverty. However, from a human rights and public policy perspective, material hardship cannot be isolated from other wrongs that people living in poverty experience. This is increasingly recognised in international law and policy, most notably, the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights (Guiding Principles), adopted by the Human Rights Council in 2012, which offers principles to guide policy-makers in advancing human rights in the context of poverty. The document operates on the premise that poverty is ‘not solely an economic issue, but rather a multidimensional phenomenon’ (OHCHR, 2012, p.2), and opens with the words:

People living in extreme poverty are often neglected or overlooked by politicians, service providers and policy-makers due to their lack of political voice, financial and social capital and their chronic social exclusion. They are disproportionately affected by many human rights violations. Discrimination against people living in poverty is widespread and widely tolerated.

The Guiding Principles urge states to promote the participation of the poorest in society, categorically affirming that excluding such people from the development and implementation of public policy and practice aimed at improving their lives is both discriminatory and ineffectual.

In the English context, the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (CoPPP, 2000)[[1]](#footnote-1) documented how people in poverty are consistently excluded from meaningful political participation, including on matters directly affecting their lives. Yet, the Commission found that ‘we all lose out if people experiencing poverty are not participating fully’ because the ‘genuine participation’ of people in poverty offers ‘great rewards – including ‘setting the record straight, stopping cock-ups, empowering individuals, and creating communities’’ (CoPPP, 2000, p.6). Exclusion results from limited access to spaces of power and influence, the implicit disregard of the potential contributions of people in poverty, and the subsequent feelings of suspicion, powerlessness and hopelessness that triggers disengagement. The Commission reported that ‘we need to change the assumption that people living in poverty are only people with problems, and that they cannot contribute creatively to solutions’(CoPPP, 2000, p.49). Such dismissive attitudes are tantamount to disrespect and as the Commission stated ‘[t]he lack of respect for people living in poverty was one of the clearest and most heartfelt messages’ (CoPPP, 2000, p.3).

The social and political exclusion of people in poverty highlights poverty’s relational component, which is linked to prejudice or implicit beliefs about the relative incapacity of those on low incomes. Lister (2013, p.112) refers to poverty as:

a shameful social relation, corrosive of human dignity and flourishing, which is experienced in interactions with the wider society and in the way people in poverty are talked about and treated by politicians, officials, professional, the media, and sometimes academics.

She describes how corrosive presumptions culminate in the ‘othering’ of people in poverty, which shapes how the ‘non-poor’ think, talk and act towards those living in poverty, at both inter-personal and institutional levels (Lister, 2015, p.4).

Whilst the concept of ‘othering’ is the subject of extensive literature across many disciplines, we adopt Lister’s (2004) premise that ‘othering’ is a process of differentiation and demarcation, that draws a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, allowing social distance to be established and maintained (Lister, 2004). The application of differential moral codes to varying social categories facilitates the difference of certain ‘others’ to be interpreted as inferiority (Schwalbe et al., 2000). Negative value judgements constructing the poor as moral contaminants, as threats, as ‘undeserving’ economic burdens or as objects of pity are examples of ‘othering’ processes that cause people in poverty to be treated as different and inferior. (Lister, 2004).

A growing body of research considers how such negative social attitudes towards the poor produce the affective dimensions of poverty and inequality, reflecting Sen’s (1983, p.159) assertion that shame lies at the ‘irreducible absolutist core’ of poverty. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010, p.33) argue that more unequal societies have diminished social cohesion and augmented social problems, suggesting that ‘individual psychology and societal inequality relate to each other like lock and key’. Similarly, Frost and Hoggett (2008) describe how the experience of domination and exclusion produces social suffering, which has destructive consequences for the self and others. Chase and Walker (2012) have found that poverty-related shame can increase social withdrawal and exclusion, reduce self-esteem and social capital, and inhibit effective agency.

A recent international study focusing on the poverty-shame nexus (Walker et al., 2014) found that shame is individually felt but socially constructed, imposed on people in poverty by dominant discourses and dealings with others, including public services. Worryingly, these ideas feed back into policy circles. Chase and Walker (2012) found the insidious repetition of particular narratives or prevailing ‘truths’ about people in poverty – such as the fecklessness of the poor – infiltrate the media, political discourses and ultimately professional policies. In the social work context, Jo (2012, p.524) argues that ‘social policy and its administration also become discursive and symbolic practices’ that construct the nature of the problem and stigmatise people in poverty through their interactions with welfare and other social institutions.

**The Politics of Recognition&Respect**

To counteract the social exclusion, shaming and othering of people in poverty, Lister (2013) advocates for ‘a politics of recognition&respect’, alongside traditional redistributive approaches. Adapting Fraser’s (2008) three-dimensional view of social justice that treats redistribution, recognition, and representation as three analytically distinct but practically intertwined facets of justice, Lister (2013) adds the notion of ‘respect’ to the politics of recognition, which reflects how those in poverty articulate their demands. Lister notes that while the identity politics often associated with recognition asserts group difference, people living with poverty struggle not to be seen as different, but for ‘recognition of and respect for their common humanity and dignity’ (Lister, 2015, p.16).

Lister frames the politics of recognition&respect as a human rights approach to conceptualising and addressing poverty. As such, it invites structural analysis of poverty’s causes, countering narratives that blame the individual and their life choices. A human rights approach holds governments responsible for ensuring people’s rights and for promoting people’s capabilities to achieve a life of dignity (Lister, 2013). As human rights germinate from the premise of universal equality and common humanity, they do not single out those in poverty as privileged ‘recipients of state largesse’, but rather recognise them as ‘legitimate claimants of entitlements from an accountable state’ (Lister, 2013, p.116).

Consistent with the CoPPP, Lister (2006, p.96) posits that ‘[e]nabling the voices of people with experience of poverty to be heard is one way of counteracting the lack of recognition and respect accorded to them’. Ensuring recognition and respect is also implicit in a human rights approach (Peel, 2003), a link the Guiding Principles expressly draw (OHCHR, 2012, p.8). While meaningful political participation for people in poverty should be guaranteed, the politics of recognition&respect also applies to day-to-day interactions and service provision, and calls for professionals and academics to respect individuals’ expertise regarding their own lives and experiences (Lister, 2013). As a family member from ATD Fourth World explains:

People who live in poverty know the solutions to their problems better than anyone else. Asking their opinions and giving them a voice is essential if we are to come to any true understanding of poverty and what can be done to eradicate it*.* (ATD Fourth World, 2005, p. 7*)*

**Poverty, Exclusion and Social Work**

Social work is fundamentally directed towards managing and reducing the effects of social inequality, so it is no coincidence that social workers regularly engage with families living in poverty and material deprivation (Zilberstein, 2016). Children from deprived backgrounds are overrepresented in the care system (Bywaters, 2015). Indeed, the interaction between poverty, parenting and maltreatment is complex, and poverty and allegations of neglect are particularly interwoven (Hooper et al.,2007). Pelton (2015) argues that poverty is the predominant context in which harm and endangerment to children thrive, with multifaceted social and psychological consequences.

Accordingly, social workers will often work with individuals who face the social and cultural pain of the exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination that accompanies their financial circumstances. Yet, the links between wider structural factors, social policies and their impact on vulnerable children and families are largely absent from dominant child protection discourses (Zilberstein, 2016). Current government policy demonises families in poverty, seeks to ‘rescue’ children, speed up the family courts and prioritise adoption, whilst simultaneously reducing support services and narrowing social work’s focus (Gupta et al. 2016). Thus, a theoretical framework that could trigger a paradigm shift within social work, based on poverty awareness, human rights and social justice, is urgently needed.

This paper considers the relevance of Lister’s ‘politics of recognition&respect’ to social work practice. We discuss whether the theory could enable an approach that better locates individual experiences within wider social structures, challenges power dynamics that perpetuate oppression, domination and exploitation, and furthers societies that are more equal, humane and peaceful.

**Methodology**

This paper presents findings from the third *Giving Poverty a Voice – Social Worker Training Programme* workshop, which focused on ‘the politics of recognition&respect’ and included Baroness Ruth Lister as a guest participant. These workshops bring together: family members with experience of poverty and child protection interventions; academics; and social work and legal practitioners. The project aims to develop updated content for a pre-existing poverty awareness training module for social workers, delivered by family members living in poverty (ATD Fourth World, 2005). More ambitiously, the project also seeks to initiate conversation about how social work practice could operate within a social justice framework. To date, six workshops have covered themes ranging from poverty and shame, material deprivation, recognition&respect, social work expectations, reimagining child protection, and child protection and risk.

The ‘recognition&respect’ workshop involved 20 participants: seven family members and three team memebrs from ATD Fourth World; five academics; five practitioners. Through facilitated activities, and small group and peer discussions, participants linked ‘the politics of recognition&respect’ to their lived experiences and its implications for social work. The workshop was audiotaped, transcribed and thematically analysed. All participation was voluntary. Participants consented to the content’s dissemination through journal articles and conference papers.

The *Giving Poverty a Voice* project follows a participatory approach which emphasizes: collaboration between researchers and participants as equals; power-sharing in decision-making; and drawing on each other’s knowledge and insights (Humphries, 2003). The project especially relies on ATD Fourth World’s participatory methodology (see Bennett & Roberts, 2004, pp.5-14; Faujour Skelton, 2015, pp.74-77) and the organisation’s founding tradition of working in solidarity alongside families living in poverty. Families are involved in the organisation as ‘activists’ who themselves contribute to developing and implementing the anti-poverty work that ATD Fourth World undertakes. The family members who participated in the workshops have worked with ATD Fourth World for many years, during which time, relationships of trust have developed. Importantly, these participants have ownership in the social worker training programme itself, some having devised and advanced the project since its inception.

**Themes from the workshop**

***Recognition and Respect in social work practice***

Following a presentation by Lister, the workshop opened with each participant sharing (anonymously) their perspective on what respect and recognition mean. Descriptions were resoundingly similar, regardless of background. For participants, recognition and respect require an individual to be treated as an equal, free from classifications that lead to judgment or stereotyping. Someone who is respected and recognised is seen, listened to, and taken seriously and has autonomy and power over their life. Their value, potential and individual role is accepted. Positives and achievements are acknowledged, and aspirations validated. One family member expressed the notion of mutuality, stating that she expects people to respect her ‘*the same as they would expect me to respect and recognise them... because I’m a person and a human being’.* The desire to be ‘*treated as a human being and not a number*’, with empathy and due acknowledgement of individual circumstances, was another repeatedly expressed tenet of recognition and respect.

**FIGURE 1 - *What does ‘respect’ mean to you?***

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**FIGURE 2 – *What does ‘recognition mean to you?***



Participants articulated several recurring issues when applying the ideas of recognition&respect to their experience and understanding of social work practice. These issues can be framed through the lenses of othering, deficit-based approaches, and a failure to understand families.

*Othering*

Participants believed that individuals receiving child protection services are often othered and denied recognition and respect. Participants stressed that if a social worker believes (consciously or unconsciously) that an individual with whom they are working is ‘different’ or ‘less worthy’, that social worker cannot treat that individual respectfully because they do not consider them their equal. One example of othering behaviour cited was a lack of empathy. Family members described social workers’ lack of appreciation that parents might interpret certain decisions, processes or behaviours as ‘attacking’ or provocative. In such situations, social workers often demonstrated an inability to recognise parents’ subsequent emotions or responses as normal, misinterpreting them as emotional, defensive, aggressive or detached. Meetings where professionals excluded parents or did not speak to them directly were cited as occasions where failure to demonstrate empathy belied a lack of recognition and respect. As one participant explains, unless:

*… social workers realise that the person walking in to them is already scared of them, protective, panicking for their children – unless they know that, they don’t understand the human reaction – you know they think ‘why’s she so aggressive?’ Because I’m bloody terrified they are going to take my children away! It’s normal, it’s not abnormal.*

Another aspect of othering that participants highlighted is the double standards family members face ‘*across the board*’ when navigating social work practices and systems. Such double standards lead family members to infer that they are somehow distinguished from the rest of society, and held to different expectations. Participants identified how families’ time appears to be ‘*worth so much less than professionals’ time*’, recounting experiences of social workers cancelling meetings and home visits with little or no notice or explanation, or setting gratuitous tasks that were not followed-up, leaving people feeling ‘*a bit taken the mick out of’.*

Further examples of double standards addressed differing expectations about how parents should raise their children versus expectations regarding children’s treatment once within the care system. One participant noted the irony of being told she was providing a ‘chaotic’, ‘unstable’ life for her autistic son who, once taken into care, was moved eleven times in three years, without receiving any assessment of his special needs or educational support. Family members also compared how social workers scrutinised injuries on children in their parents’ care, against how similar injuries were disregarded once children were in care. One participant compared her intrusive treatment after her son fell on an exposed nail while in her care, with what happened after her daughter broke her leg in foster care:

*The way the two incidents happened and how they were handled were so different. No one went to check on my child when she broke her leg. No social worker went to check that foster care placement because she was a foster carer and ‘we trust what she says’*.

Anecdotal evidence of discrepancies between investigations of poor parents and middle class parents, were also raised. Family members expressed their belief that social workers’ parenting assessments seemed to reflect middle-class bias regarding what parenting should look like, rather than what quality parenting might actually be. The failure to empathise with families’ expressions of love in different socio-economic circumstances, and the subsequent moral judgment if families’ approaches sit outside preconceived notions of ‘good’ parenting, ‘others’ parents by suggesting that their approach differs from the ‘norm’ or is deficient and infers a lack of love between parent and child.

*Deficit-based practice and dismissive behaviour*

Deficit-based practice presumes that individuals with whom one is working are somehow incapable or ‘lacking’ and is therefore inherently disrespectful and shaming. Deficit-based practice is infused by neoliberal ideas that blame individual parents for their problems and for the harm to their children, irrespective of social context (Rogowski, 2015). Problems that an individual faces, which may derive from poverty and material deprivation, are perceived as intrinsic to the individual. Deficit-based approaches can manifest in dismissive behaviour that sidelines the individual or cause practitioners to “privilege services, such as psychotherapy, that aim to change individuals, over other types of help directed at rectifying the material deprivations of poverty” (Zilberstein, 2016, p.222). Deficit-based thinking also fails to recognise individuals’ strengths, ideas or potential contributions.

Family members noted that meetings where they were included and their contributions sought and considered, made them feel recognised, and their knowledge respected and valued. Contrastingly, families cited the indignity of professional reports that analysed their lives, as if these were somehow more accurate or reliable than their own perspectives. They described feeling disrespected by reports, which did not accurately represent them or their situation, especially if compiled without their active input. This disrespect was amplified if such professionally produced documents were used in court proceedings while families’ subsequent objections were accorded less weight or simply disbelieved. As one lawyer said:

*When the person says, ‘no, that’s not what I said’ or ‘the context in which you have written is not correct’ … they’re not believed and that’s a complete lack of respect because there is an assumption that what is written, the writer, was correct, that they didn’t come with any kind of view as a person when they wrote what they wrote…*

Families can feel dismissed when denied sufficient time or care. Accordingly, participants identified effective communication as ‘*a way of recognising and respecting*’. Family members complained that social workers often fail to communicate adequately on important matters, including expectations and timescales. Poor communication leaves families in the dark, feeling as though they are unworthy of updates on important matters, or that their understanding is somehow unnecessary to the process. Substandard explanations of families’ rights and responsibilities in any given situation also imply disrespect for those rights and responsibilities. Social workers need to know that these suspicions can arise, even if such inferences were unintentional. For families on the receiving end, poor communication is corrosive regardless of the reasons behind it.

*A failure to understand each family and the effects of intervention*

For many participants, social workers seemed unable to prioritise getting to know families personally in order to recognise their unique characteristics or circumstances, whether positive or negative. Participants emphasised that social workers do not often recognise circumstances beyond families’ control, such as the impact of poverty. The symptoms of these unrecognised circumstances may be misinterpreted or families blamed. One participant recounted her first visit by a social worker, who described her as ‘*living a chaotic lifestyle rather than getting my act together… incapable of learning, improving and doing the best for my children*’, despite having just left a violent relationship, miscarried from moving, living in wholly new circumstances, under an unfamiliar benefit system and in temporary accommodation*.* When children are taken into care because parents cannot change their material circumstances and mitigate the interrelated social and psychological impacts, parents and their children are effectively punished for factors beyond their control. Participants questioned whether such punitive practice could ever accord with a human rights approach.

Participants also complained of some services’ apparent inability to recognise and appreciate a family’s progress over time. In some cases, a family’s history as represented in written reports receives greater weight than any subsequent changes the family has made. This shortfall is often accompanied by social workers’ failure to praise for progress made, as one ATD Fourth World worker noted:

*… even when there is recognition for the families, I find it very hard for a social worker to admit it and to say it. A good example is* [name redacted]*, they were seeing her every day, they stopped, they didn’t come and say ‘You’ve improved, you’ve done this so well and now we will come once every 2 or 3 or 4 weeks’, they just vanished!*

That social workers miss opportunities to acknowledge parents’ progress is disappointing. Recognition of achievement can boost self-esteem and counteract dispiriting emotions, such as shame, that arise from involvement in the child protection system.

Family members believed that a failure to understand them can lead to one-size-fits-all approaches, or overly draconian or inappropriate interventions. Furthermore, participants described a general lack of recognition about the full implications of some interventions. They discussed how removal of children violates the right to family life, and that the long-term impact of separation on children, including siblings, and parents is often overlooked. While the right to family life is not absolute and participants recognised that some children do need protective action, they questioned whether breaches of that right were sometimes disproportionate, particularly where the psycho-social impacts of material deprivation and poor housing were minimised or ignored.

***A framework for social work practice***

Workshop participants identified a resonance between the language of ‘recognition&respect’ and their own view of ‘ideal’ social work practice. At its core social work ought to uphold the human rights, recognition and respect that all people are entitled to. One academic argued that social work should be about ‘*human flourishing… to help people survive, to thrive*’. Part of this responsibility requires social workers to challenge othering attitudes directed towards individuals facing poverty; that someone accesses social work services should not alter their status as human beings. One family member saw the fulfillment of this foundational notion as a precursor to decent treatment throughout, stating ‘*how can I get justice for me and my children when I’m seen as something so different to the norm*?’

Services that overcome othering require a welcoming ethos that encourages families to turn to them knowing that they will receive the necessary support. Respectful services are integral for ensuring a break from continual ostracisation. As one participant noted:

*… if actually you’ve got at least one person in authority that you feel is on your side and who does recognise you, that actually can be quite a turning point…*

Contrastingly, disrespectful services further isolate struggling families. One practitioner told us:

*…. people don’t have anywhere else to hide, anywhere else to turn to, anywhere else to go. And when you get there – no respect, no recognition… [e]verything is turned against you.*

Strengths-based practice that recognises an individual or family’s abilities and supports them to rebuild their lives after difficult circumstances have worn them down is crucial. Social workers must be alive to how unconscious bias and disrespectful treatment can promote deficit-based thinking, which undermines recognition of an individual’s potential and precludes effective capacity-building. More broadly, social workers must avoid inadvertently replicating the dismissive attitudes that many disadvantaged individuals experience in society. One participant noted:

*… social workers are perhaps one of the most intimate relationships [individuals] have with the state, and it’s someone who has a lot of power over them… if that person is not treating them with recognition and respect, what it’s doing to their self-esteem, their sense of themselves, regardless of the success of the social work relationship, is actually terribly damaging. It’s reinforcing all the negative stuff they’re seeing in the media or hear politicians talk…’*

Unless social workers can break this mould of deficit-based thinking, individuals are unlikely to feel empowered by social work; even worse their disillusions regarding the likely outcome of interactions with professionals may be reinforced. One academic told us that at present:

[*s]ome people are so ground down by bad treatment that it doesn’t occur to them that they should be treated with more respect, it’s just occurred to them that this is how they are treated. There is an acceptance… when there has been a repeated pattern…*

Such sentiments could result in families’ disengagement from, and lowered expectations of, Children’s Services. This situation obstructs the building of cooperative working relationships, and disincentivises families from coming forward when they need support.

Participants believed that if social workers consistently practiced the politics of recognition&respect, better social work outcomes would result. Respect, recognition and human rights are the ‘*foundation of the relationship*’ between social workers and families, helping to build trust, without which ‘*there will never be successful social work’.* Even in cases where social workers must make difficult decisions, parents will more likely accept these decisions if they were recognised and respected in the process. Respectful services can help break the cycle of shame and promote more meaningful engagement with disaffected families. Contrastingly, disrespectful social work practice is obstructive. As one practitioner described, when he sees social workers treating families without due respect and recognition, ‘*I know we aren’t going anywhere. We are not going to build anything. Whatever we build will fall apart*’.

Finally, participants noted that the ‘politics of recognition&respect’ has currency as a standard against which social workers could be held professionally accountable. Human rights and the ideas of respect, recognition and dignity are recognised by national and international bodies. Confirming them as expected standards for social workers to uphold, or at least not breach, creates an extra layer of accountability by which families’ treatment can be monitored. Furthermore, reinforcing these principles in social work education would encourage self-regulation and critical reflection. More widely, promoting these principles in the public sphere would shift the emphasis from blaming people for situations they find themselves in, towards a greater onus on social workers (and other professionals) to uphold people’s rights when circumstances such as poverty violate them.

***Barriers and opportunities for implementation***

Participants considered the practicalities of mainstreaming ‘the politics of recognition&respect’ throughout social work practice. Practitioners viewed organisational contexts as barriers to upholding recognition, respect and human rights. They acknowledged that many of social work’s shortfalls originate from systemic flaws, such as case overloads, spending cuts, target-driven and risk-averse cultures that undermine tailored, conscientious services. As one practitoner noted, these barriers present ‘*a real struggle for some very good social workers who are perhaps not as good as they could be given the environment*’. Other participants agreed, observing that social workers who provide more respectful services often have to bend rules or defy managerial pressure to do so. Participants called for a culture-shift within Children’s Services to build an ‘*empowering ethos*’ for social workers, rather than ‘*punishing [them] for trying to have a human rights approach to the families they are working with*’.

Barriers also exist beyond the social work profession. Participants noted that ‘the politics of recognition&respect’ is grounded in rights-based language. Unfortunately, in England, the current political climate is unfavourable to human rights (for example, the ongoing discussion about repealing the Human Rights Act 1998). Furthermore disrespectful treatment of people in poverty, and discourses blaming them for circumstances beyond their control are endemic, rooted in societal perceptions that require broad solutions. Without a wide focus, even if shifts in social work practice were realised, ‘*you’re coming across possible barriers in attitudes or thinking in other areas, whether it’s in healthcare or education or whatever*’.

Nevertheless, participants posited various feasible changes. Even in the context of structural systemic limitations, critically reflective practice can help individual workers develop respectful practice on an ‘in-person’ level. Critical thinking must be woven into social work education, encouraging students to challenge ideologies, policies and processes from the perspective of what they consider social work’s purpose to be. Practitioners themselves proffered that social workers should more readily consider it part of their role to critique the profession and policies that may foster disrespectful outcomes, rather than simply acquiescing to the fickle tide of political or institutional opinion.

Some participants suggested closer consideration of where human rights language could be used to progressively expand human rights approaches. For example, when social workers enter households and make assessments, concerns could be framed as human rights ‘needs’ rather than ‘risks’; the latter is blaming language while the former connotes an unfulfilled entitlement. Practically speaking, social work educators and organisations such as ATD Fourth World could develop further guidance regarding poverty awareness, rooted in human rights principles, for social workers to use in their practice.

Finally, some structural changes are possible. Participants highlighted the Parent Advocate model currently under development in one London local authority. This model assigns an advocate with direct experience of the child protection system to families currently going through the system to provide valuable peer advice and support. The model helps avoid some of the possible communication deficiencies, while the involvement of someone with personal experience of the system helps to address issues surrounding lack of empathy.

**Discussion**

The experiences workshop participants discussed resonate with other workshops in the project (Gupta et al, 2015), as well as the wider literature on poverty’s psychological impact and the influence of dominant discourses on child protection practice. The sociological literature identifies the framing of poverty as an individual failing and the inter-relationship between discourses on parenting and poverty (De Benedictis, 2012). The intensification of parent blame under neoliberalism sees parents (usually mothers) as fully accountable for their children’s outcomes, positioning them as the architects of their children’s poverty and deprivation (Edwards et al., 2015). The othering of parents involved in the child protection system is reflected in workshop participants’ accounts of deficit-based approaches that individualise blame and fail to consider the socio-economic and environmental contexts of families’ lives.

The othering dynamic actively constructs families involved in the child protection system as ‘different’ from ‘us’, which dehumanizes and reinforces feelings of shame and worthlessness. Warner (2015) clearly links this phenomenon to media and political responses following the death of Peter Connolly that further othered families living in poverty and enabled more intensive moral regulation and social control of ‘them’. This rationalisation was also constitutive of ‘our’ middle-class notions of ‘respectable’ family life, and the accompanying socially constructed presumptions about what ‘good’ or ‘bad’ parenting entails.

The workshop findings demonstrate that the empathy required to foster recognition and respect demands an awareness of the relational impacts of wider discourses about poverty on families. Gibson (2015) argues that parents in the child protection system may feel shame from their own negative self-evaluation. Social workers who are insensitive or oblivious to this social suffering or who do not recognise how wider discourses fuel inequalities, can compound these destructive dynamics by behaving disrespectfully, or misunderstanding natural responses. For example, resistance or avoidance may not necessarily arise from a parent’s irresponsibility, but could be a reaction to the anticipation or experience of controlling and shaming practice. Resistance may be the only way families feel they can exercise power and agency (Pease, 2002), demonstrating why ensuring parents’ genuine participation is important, to allow agency to manifest productively instead.

The participation of people in poverty must be meaningful and not tokenistic (CoPPP, 2000). Achieving this in practice will be thwarted unless professionals and politicians shift their attitudes to view securing the perspectives of people in poverty as worthwhile. Similarly, treating people with respect is a core social work value. However, it must be linked to wider social and political contexts and underpinned by a fundamental belief in equality and human rights. As one participant explains:

‘*If you don’t believe the person in front of you is equal – how can you treat them with recognition and respect?’*

One example of successful parent participation in the child welfare field is an inspiring project in New York City that challenged the city’s protection-focussed child welfare system by partnering with parents experiencing poverty and marginalisation. The parents’ advocacy movement helped transform the system, leading to significant reductions in the numbers of children going into care (Tobis, 2013). Greater dialogue with families and involving them in service development and delivery through, for example, parent advocacy projects, could achieve similar results for social work organisations in England.

If social workers can effectively communicate with parents, actively involve them in decision-making and facilitate meaningful participation in meetings, the solutions and options discussed could produce better outcomes for children and their families (Fine and Mandell, 2013). Creating an environment where families can be recognised and truly participate requires sensitivity and empathy, especially in highly emotive circumstances. As noted in a prior workshop (Gupta et al., 2015, p. 6-7), attempts must be made to conduct meetings in an accessible manner (without being patronising). Effective inclusion and participation also requires moving beyond individualising blame. Whilst participants criticised deficit-based practice and called for an acknowledgement of families’ strengths, expectations must be established within the often substantial socioeconomic and sociocultural constraints that frame families’ lives. Strengths-based models can reinforce a process of individualisation if social, political, and economic contexts are not explicitly recognised and addressed. In this sense, Roose et al. (2012, p. 14) posit a more ambitious challenge when they contend that “dealing with delicate power issues is not solely a matter of building a reciprocal and empowering relationship with families, but demands a broadening of the focus of strengths-oriented social work from a relational to a political level”.

**Conclusions**

Financial cuts in the name of ‘austerity’ in England are making the lives of many poor families harder, increasing material deprivation, decreasing available support services and reducing parents’ capabilities to adequately care for their children (Gupta et al., 2016). What Parton (2014) describes as ‘neoliberal authoritarianism’ continues apace under the Conservative government. The dominant political ideology and policy context are challenging for social workers in over-stretched, under-resourced and risk averse local authorities. Nevertheless, avenues for social workers and services to confront hegemonic narratives must be explored, for the sake not only of a profession founded on ideals of social justice, but also, most importantly, for the children and their families who receive social work services.

This paper has discussed one potential avenue: situating social work practice within the framework of Lister’s theory of ‘the politics of recognition&respect’. Although based on a small project, the *Giving Poverty a Voice* workshop findings resonate with developments in the wider literature and in international human rights law, which consider how exclusion and disregard of people in poverty damages their lives and undermines social policy. The findings suggest that to deliver effective and humanising services, social workers must listen to, involve, and collaborate with the families with whom they work. Further study is also needed on how poverty and parenting inter-relate and on how macro-level structural inequalities influence the lived experiences of families and social workers within the child protection system. Whilst challenging dominant discourses, policies and practices will not be easy, it is necessary to achieve a poverty-aware social work practice that complies with social justice and human rights.

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1. The Commission was set up by the UK Coalition against Poverty to examine why people experiencing poverty do not influence decision-making and policy. Half of the commissioners were from ‘public life’. The other half had direct experience of poverty. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)