**The Poverty-Aware Paradigm for Child Protection: A Critical Framework for Policy and Practice**

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**Abstract**

This article aims to present a Poverty-Aware Paradigm for Child Protection (PAPCP). The increasing scholarly recognition of the damaging impact of poverty, inequality and the neoliberal politics of ‘risk’ on child protection policy and practice, has highlighted the need for a justice-based and poverty-aware analytical framework for child protection social work.

In order to create such a framework, we build upon Krumer-Nevo's Poverty-Aware Paradigm (PAP) – that was first presented in a previous issue of the *British Journal of Social Work* – and adapt its paradigmatic premises to the context of child protection social work. By addressing ontological, epistemological and axiological questions underpinning the construction of risk and the practices utilised to deal with it, the article provides a clear, practical and applicable link between critical theories and everyday child protection practice. The PAPCP is presented against the background of the risk-focused paradigm currently dominating the child protection systems in both the authors’ countries – Israel and England.

**Keywords**

poverty-aware social work; child protection; risk; critical practice

*"The uniqueness of the framework of the [Poverty-Aware] paradigm lies in its integration of the way social work sees, knows, commits itself and works with people in poverty."* (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p.1805)

**Introduction**

A growing body of evidence highlighting the relationship between poverty, inequality, and child protection has prompted some social work scholars to voice two main claims: First, that the current neoliberal era has created a punitive, individualised and pathologising child protection system that obscures poverty and social context. Second, that an alternative poverty-aware and social justice-based approach to child protection social work is needed (Featherstone *et al*., 2018a; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Morris *et al*., 2018a).

This article seeks to enrich this body of knowledge by developing a Poverty-Aware Paradigm for child protection. The focus of the article is the adaptation of Krumer-Nevo's (2016) Poverty-Aware Paradigm (PAP) to the context of risk and child protection practice. By deepening our understanding of PAP in relation to child protection, the article aims to accomplish two goals: First, to present a conceptualisation of the paradigmatic assumptions– notions about the phenomenon at hand (ontology), about knowledge (epistemology) and about ethics (axiology) – underpinning poverty-aware social work practice in the context of children at risk. Second and importantly, to provide a clear, practical and applicable link between critical, poverty-aware theories and everyday social work practice.

Although the authors of the article come from countries with different historical, social, and political contexts, they are both preoccupied by the way child protection is conceptualised and practised within the neoliberal project in their countries. This concern relates to the fact that the authors are both social work academics who maintain links to practice and seek to implement poverty-aware notions in their work – the first author as a social worker and supervisor in the Israeli child protection system (Saar-Heiman, 2019a) and the second as an independent social worker in the family courts in England (Gupta, 2017). Therefore, the theoretical framework presented in the article is densely embedded in real-life experiences and frontline practice.

The article begins with a review of the relationship between risk and poverty. We then present the PAP and a detailed description of its adaptation to the context of risk. Finally, we conclude with practice implications for working within a PAP in child protection.

**What does risk have to do with poverty?**

The risk society thesis posits that late modern life is dominated by a preoccupation with safety and security (Beck, 1992). The perception of threatening risks is subject to social construction processes, where powerful groups play significant roles in defining risks, the consequences of which are social and political. In a ‘risk society’ inquiries into child deaths and other forms of abuse and the subsequent media and political responses have fuelled calls for state bodies and social workers in particular to identify and eliminate these risks (Warner, 2015). Aligned with the risk society analysis, it has been argued that the politics of neoliberalism has led to risk replacing need as the focus of social and economic policies and, accordingly there has been a shift towards social control and regulation of particular communities, such as those living in poverty (Webb, 2006; Wacquant 2009).

What is seen as a child protection ‘risk’, how this is explained, and how the state responds are influenced by historical, social and political contexts (Parton, 2014) and by the meta-theoretical paradigms underpinning professional practice (Houston, 2014). In relation to harms identified as child maltreatment and requiring protective action, in England and Israel the focus has shifted from primarily being about physical and sexual abuse to encompass neglect and emotional abuse. This widening of the ‘child protection net’ has led to the majority (83.1%) of children on child protection plans in England being deemed to be at risk of neglect or emotional abuse (DfE, 2018). Similarly, in Israel, neglect is the most prevalent reason for new referrals to the child protection system (Gottfried & Ben-Aryeh, 2018). Paradoxically, even though a correlation between neglect and poverty is evident and the attribution of social determinants to emotional harm have been identified (Pelton, 2015; Bywaters *et al*., 2016), these societal injustices are obscured by a focus on individualized risk factors.

Indeed, risk within dominant child protection discourses in England and Israel is focussed on harm deemed to be caused by parental actions or inactions, with an absence of attention to harms because of structural inequalities. Yet, the harm caused by poverty on children is well documented in relation to the range of developmental dimensions (see Cooper and Stewart, 2017). In addition, there is a clear link between social deprivation and a child’s life chances in relation to their ability to live with their family of origin (Bywaters *et al*., 2018).

A review of the evidence on the relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect (CAN) concluded that there is a strong association between families’ socio-economic circumstances and the chances that their children will experience CAN (Bywaters *et al*., 2016). There are of course many children who are living in poverty who will not experience abuse and neglect, and many from more affluent families who will experience abuse and neglect. Poverty is only one factor, but perhaps the most pervasive. The evidence suggests that the influence of poverty works directly and indirectly (through parental stress and neighbourhood conditions), and also in interaction with other factors, such as domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse (Bywaters *et al*., 2016). This results in greater surveillance rather than support for families living in poverty, in the context of what Wacquant (2009, p. 290) refers to as the ‘remasculinization of the state’ under neoliberalism.

Government policies in the UK over the past nine years have increased material hardship, as highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (Alston, 2018). At the same time as the support services available to families are decreasing, the numbers of children on child protection plans and in out-of-home care has been increasing (FRG, 2018). Similarly, in Israel, the rise of a liberal, neo-right orientation in the last forty years generated a steep increase in poverty and inequality rates (Lavee & Strier, 2018). Accordingly, the incidence of child poverty in Israel has reached a peak of 33.1% (NIII, 2017). Meanwhile, the number of children recognized by the social services as 'at risk' has elevated by 12% between the years 2007-2016 (IMLSASS, 2016).

A disconnect (and deep hypocrisy) is increasingly apparent allowing governments to claim they are improving child protection while simultaneously implementing policies that increase the numbers of children living in poverty, families relying on foodbanks and in homeless accommodation, and reducing support services thereby increasing social harms children are exposed to (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018a). Paradoxically whilst families living in socially deprived circumstances are much more likely to come to the attention of child protection services, tackling poverty and inequality is often not seen as the ‘core business’ for social workers, instead the assessment of risk and parenting capacity is(Morris *et al*., 2018a).

Poverty and other structural inequalities are not just ignored, but in the context of individualised neoliberal discourses can also be used as a further source of blame (Morris *et al*., 2018a). The use of individualised discourses to explain the sources of families’ problems linked to neoliberal politics of ‘risk’ have reduced the complex, multifaceted causes of parental difficulties to one of individual deficit and responsibility, with little attention to social determinants of harm or contexts of families’ lives (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018a). Need has become refracted through a prism of risk.

**A Poverty-Aware Paradigm for child protection**

The PAP was developed in Israel with the aim of outlining a full theoretical framework to counteract the individualistic and conservative ideology that dominates the current policy, research, and practice regarding poverty (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, 2017). Based on the understanding of social life as a political arena, i.e., ‘a web of power relations between heavily marked status-laden groups’ (Krumer-Nevo, 2017, p.813), the paradigm perceives poverty as the result and expression of multilevel oppression with harsh and far-reaching consequences for the lives of individuals and families (Lister, 2004).

The paradigm aims to integrate three interrelated facets – ontology, epistemology, and axiology – and to examine the bidirectional influence between theory, ethics and practice. In ontological terms, the paradigm's answer to questions such as ‘What is the nature of poverty?’ and ‘What are the characteristics of poor people?’ is that poverty is a violation of human rights and that people in poverty *fight* against poverty and *resist* it on a daily basis. In epistemological terms, the PAP's answer to the question ‘What kind of knowledge is needed when working with people in poverty?’ is that professional knowledge production is a critical-constructivist process based on an ongoing dialogue and *close relationships* between social workers and service users. In axiological terms, the paradigm's answer to the question ‘Where should a social worker position herself ethically when working with people in poverty?’ is that PAP entails social workers *standing by* people in poverty, representing their knowledge, and advocating for their interests in society.

The fact that the paradigm regards poverty as the key axis of its analysis, combined with its focus on social context, power relations, and oppression, makes PAP highly relevant for creating an alternative, critical framework for child protection social work. By adapting the PAP to the context of child protection we present a framework that highlights the interrelatedness of social inequality, poverty, parenting and risk and social work practice. Thus, enabling child protection practitioners to critically reflect on their practice and to translate critical social work ideas into everyday practice.

We discuss the PAP for child protection (PAPCP) against the background of the Risk-Focused Paradigm (RFP) that currently dominates child protection in both Israel and England. The following part of the article will include three sections, each of which will focus on one of the paradigm’s facets, on the questions it poses and the answers it gives to issues of risk and child protection. Specifically, the ontological facet will address the questions ‘What is the nature of risk?’ and ‘What are the lived experiences of parents and children ‘at risk’?’; the epistemological facet will deal with the question: ‘What kind of knowledge is needed in order to identify and asses risk?’; while the axiological facet will raise the question ‘what ethical stance should guide social workers when working with children at risk and their parents?’.

Each section will include examples from the authors' research and practice for the purpose of enlivening theoretical concepts and exemplifying the implications of a PAP analysis to practice in the child protection arena.

**PAP for child protection - ontology**

The ontological premise of the RFP is that risk is the consequence of inadequate parenting and individual failure. In 1985, Parton argued that a disease model of child abuse was dominant, with an emphasis on parental pathology and a failure to recognise the strong relationships with inequality and poverty. The basic elements of that explanation developed in a very different context have proved remarkably enduring to date (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018a).

Increasingly influential to this ontological stance has been a ‘biologisation of risk’ that draws upon research from neuroscience and more recently epigenetics. Critics have suggested these arguments are based on flawed interpretation of the science and a highly reductionist construction of the child, alongside the idea that parenting is the main factor in child development (Wastell and White, 2012; Edwards *et al*., 2015).

A PAPCP ontology rejects the individualised explanation of the RFP and takes a wider view of risks to children’s well-being to include social harms and policies and practices that contribute to such harms. For example, in Israel poverty is not acknowledged as an eligibility indicator for receiving financial assistance for day-care. On the other hand, neglect, maltreatment and parental mental illness are. The definition of neglect in the multi-agency child protection guidance in England states that ‘neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter’ (HM Government, 2018, p.105). The construction of parental blame is inherent in this definition; however, increasing numbers of parents are reliant on foodbanks to feed their children because of changes to welfare benefits (Garthwaite, 2016).

A PAPCP ontology views poverty as a violation of human rights, which requires consideration to extend to all, by virtue of being human. However, some children are treated as less deserving of rights, and harm is institutionalised in a system that only views risk through the prism of parental culpability. For example, children in England are going hungry and being made street homeless because their parents are subject to immigration controls and have restrictions on their ability to work and claim welfare benefits (Jolly, 2018).

In order to understand the impact of poverty and related inequalities, the harm to children needs to also be understood as impacting on parental capabilities. We suggest that Lakoff’s (2014) ideas about systemic causation are useful when thinking about poverty and child protection. These ideas require us to move away from models of assessment that focus on risk, individual blame and responsibility, to thinking in contextual, interactional and dynamic ways about families’ lives and struggles with parenting under oppressive conditions. There is an urgent need to link child protection discourses with the increasing knowledge from other disciplines highlighting the links between poverty, inequality and problems such as mental health difficulties, domestic abuse and substance misuse (see Friedli, 2009; Fahmy *et al*., 2015).

Understanding the complex inter-relationships is crucial, as a parent advocate from ATD Fourth World (an anti-poverty organisation) explains:

*‘I am supporting a couple of families where, being aware of social work practice, it’s clear that there is material deprivation, but there’s also severe depression [on the part of] the mother and that is raising questions over whether she can look after the children. So it’s not clear-cut what the issues are at play there. If the child is taken away, no one will say [it is] because of material deprivation, but that the mother can’t cope because of [her] mental health. But it’s not that simple. There are many factors building up and material deprivation can play a huge role. Parents are judged because of the way they are suffering for things sparked by material deprivation.’* (Gupta *et al.,* 2016, p.169).

From a PAPCP perspective poverty is not a background factor but is implicated in a myriad of ways in the lives of families and the decisions made (or not) every day by workers. Angela’s story, as described in her own words and reproduced with her permission, highlights the multiple levels of marginalisation experienced by her family, the absence of attention to these by professionals, and her attempts to resist and exercise agency despite structural constraints. It also highlights the importance of an advocate working alongside Angela:

*I am Angela, a mum of seven kids and I live in London. I have one daughter still at school and one at sixth form college. I believe that going to school is important. Kids need to get a good education because it will help them find a job when they are older. Two and a half years ago, in a case conference, the school complained that my daughters were late for school and sometimes missing school altogether. It was because they had no zipcards (that allow children to travel free on buses). This meant they could be thrown off the bus and the school complained about their poor attendance. It's fair to say it was disrupting their education. But I don't remember the school or social services ever asking if they could help.*

*I realised that we needed a plan to get their zipcards but it was not easy:*

* *Firstly, you have to apply online but I had no computer at home and no way to get online. I had to ask for help.*
* *Second, you also need an email address to apply online. We had to create an account for me because I didn't have one. I don't have a computer so I didn't need one.*
* *Third, to apply for a zipcard, I needed the girls' birth certificates. And I needed passport sized photos too. We had lost the birth certificates a long time ago so we had to order them online and that cost money. And we didn't have any passport sized photos so we had to buy them as well.*

*At the time, I was working with ATD Fourth World on my budgeting as we were in rent arrears and debt. But once the zipcards arrived, my daughters were able to travel on the bus and get to school on time. I was so happy. Three weeks later, in the next case conference, the school said they were still concerned about my girls' attendance and punctuality. We asked about the last three weeks and the school said everything was fine. That was because of having the zipcards. My daughter was able to pass her exams and move to college where she is studying art. I am very proud of her and all my children.*

Lister (2013, p.112) describes poverty as not only being about material disadvantage and economic insecurity but also ‘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, professionals, the media, and sometimes academics’. The inclusion of relational/ symbolic aspects in the definition of poverty adopted by PAP sheds light on the micro level of everyday experiences of poor people, in which they feel the effects of power and powerlessness. A PAPCP ontology therefore includes exploration of how these experiences of shame and humiliation, ‘micro aggressions’, consisting often of subtle behaviours by professionals impact on assessments of risks and interventions that follow. These may not be determinative of outcome but contribute to narratives of parental deficit and culpability, compounding the internalisation of shame (Gupta, 2017).

In summary, a PAPCP ontology disrupts the current RFP by requiring critical questioning of our understandings of risks to children and how social policies and structures contribute directly and indirectly to the harms children experience. It also requires recognition of poverty as having material and psychological consequences, and how assumptions about poverty and risk are implicated in everyday encounters.

**PAP for child protection - epistemology**

Risk assessment, namely, evaluating the likelihood of future harm to a child is an integral aspect of child protection social work. Houston (2014) presents a taxonomy of three meta-paradigms for risk assessment: objectivist, subjectivist and critical. In line with his objectivist paradigm, the RFP emphasises rationalisation and standardisation, and focuses on generating structured, systematic procedures and evidence-based interventions. Risk factors and measurements have been developed via a range of different tools and assessment frameworks. Broadhurst *et al.* (2010, p.1047) argued that ‘from actuarial tools generating risk scores at the front door of practice to comprehensive structured assessments, risk apparatus bearing the stamp of instrumental rationality is widespread’.

The PAP's epistemological premise entails social workers creating *relationship(s)-based knowledge* by focusing on power relationships as the context in which reality and knowledge are constructed. Accordingly, PAPCP involves questioning the ways in which knowledge about risk is produced and determining the sources that shape it. Much like Houston's (2014) description of the links between the subjectivist and critical paradigms, this epistemology builds upon constructivist assessment approaches (e.g. Signs of Safety) and aspires to extend them by adding a critical and structural component to the creation of knowledge regarding risk (Saar-Heiman and Krumer-Nevo, 2019).

Two features distinguish it from constructivist models of assessment. First, the interrelatedness of power and knowledge is highlighted and considered in the construction of knowledge about risk. While incorporating parents' points of view in assessments and decision making is necessary for knowledge production (Healy & Darlington, 2009), the PAPCP epistemology asserts that focusing on the interpersonal aspects of knowledge production can obscure its social and political nature. Thus, aside from the focus on parents' points of view regarding a given situation, relationships-based knowledge incorporates questions such as: ‘How does the power imbalance between the parent and the social worker shape their dialogue and the knowledge created in it?’

The second feature of the risk epistemology of the PAP is a commitment to the inclusion of knowledge regarding the structural and social context in which the risk situation is constructed. Although strengths-based approaches oppose the blaming and individualised nature of the child protection system, for the most part they commonly marginalise the importance of knowledge regarding the social determinants of harm and the social contexts of families’ lives (Keddell, 2014; Roose *et al.*, 2014).

Based on the ontological premise discussed above, the PAPCP epistemology aims to incorporate contextual and structural knowledge into assessment processes in both the material and symbolic/relational dimensions. In the material dimension, social knowledge refers to the interpretation of direct risk factors evident in the assessment process, e.g., housing, food insecurity, or lack of accessible support services. Rather than attributing these factors to (lack of) parental responsibility, relationships-based knowledge strives to link them to the social structures that create them. In the relational and symbolic dimension, social knowledge refers to the inclusion of parents' everyday experiences of living in poverty, e.g. stigmatisation, discrimination, lack of voice, and shame. In order to fully understand the ways in which living in poverty influences parenting, assessment processes must incorporate this kind of knowledge.

The following example presents the application of these features to the knowledge production process in child protection:

*Rita and Shimon, a couple with seven children were referred to Goldie, a social work student in a PAP-based training program in Israel. The social worker who referred the family told Goldie that the children were at high risk and based her assessment on the following 'facts': the children arrived late to their schools, were clothed unsuitably for the season and had head lice; Rita had an untreated mental illness and refused to see a psychiatrist; the parents were unemployed, did not aspire to work, and were in debt to many creditors; the home was in very bad condition and not suitable for children – the kitchen was neglected and there were no toys. The social worker stated that if no change took place within three months, they would have to assess whether the children could remain at home.*

*Based on the principles of PAP practice, Goldie began the intervention without immediately confronting the family with the harsh reports she had received about the children's state. Instead, her initial intervention placed the parents’ functioning in the context of poverty and included intervention in a real-life context, active mediation and advocacy, and a combined focus on emotional and material needs* (Saar-Heiman *et al.,* 2016).

*After three months of intervention, Goldie recommended that the parents take part in an intensive intervention program to help them care for their children at home. She based her assessments on the relationship(s)-based knowledge she acquired with the parents. Rita was indeed in a bad mental state, but they were so afraid that any diagnosis would serve as evidence against their parenting that they avoided going to the psychiatrist. Because of Rita's mental state, she was unable to help Shimon organise the children in the morning, so he had to do that alone and take them all to their schools by bus – a two-hour route. This heavy burden was the reason that the children were so often late and their clothing was not always tidy. When Goldie asked Shimon and Rita about the lice, they shared their constant effort to get rid of them and feeling blamed for something that was not their fault. Goldie found out that mornings were also the reason for Shimon's difficulty in finding a job – he was searching for a job that started at 9:30 am because he knew that he could not get to work before then. This left the family with a very limited budget that was barely enough for basic necessities such as rent, food and electricity (not to mention toys).*

This example reveals the different aspects of relationship(s)-based knowledge that can inform a poverty-aware assessment process. Whereas the referring social worker’s assessments included negative facts that demonstrated a lack of parental capabilities and uncooperative parents, Goldie's assessment incorporated knowledge about the parents' daily struggles, the context in which their parenting was taking place, and the systematic barriers that they faced daily.

Another feature of the PAPCP concerns addressing the macro context of knowledge construction regarding risk. The relational experience of poverty is one of social and political exclusion, including the absence of people in poverty 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. Drawing upon Nancy Fraser’s work, Boone *et al*. (2018, p.12) suggest that:

‘By everyday encounters with people who experience injustices in inter-imbricated economic, cultural and political domains, social work should not only create opportunities to voice the powerless in practice, but also create cultural forums in which different voices—dominant and counter-voices—meet and interact and are deliberated upon’.

The importance of involving families in the co-construction of knowledge about living in poverty and child protection services is a crucial aspect of the PAPCP epistemology. An ATD family member explains:

*‘When families and social workers can work collaboratively in the best interests of the children, it builds a better knowledge base for both parties and the outcomes are likely to be better for the children. As you work together, you learn from each other.’* (Gupta *et al.*, 2016, p.172)

**PAP for child protection - axiology**

Lonne *et al.,* (2016) state that the dominant ‘child rescue’ narrative embedded in the ethical frameworks of Anglophone countries (and Israel) ‘speaks to a narrow duty of care to children but excludes families and begs the question of whether the duty to care for a child – perceived to be ‘at risk’– always overrides other considerations – or even for that matter, what the child wants’ (p. 8).

This powerful narrative combined with the notion of 'the best interest of the child' serves as the base of the RFP axiological premise. Meaning, protecting children from what social workers perceive as potentially harmful is valued as the ultimate moral duty of child protection. This ethical stance has far reaching policy and practice implications, for example, in the Israeli welfare system, there is an organisational separation between the general treatment of families in social services and the treatment of children at risk. In England, it is common for social workers in the child protection system to define themselves as ‘the social worker for the child’. This is a definition that decontextualises the child’s life and undermines relationships (Gupta and Featherstone, forthcoming).

This practice culture often reinforces rather than ameliorates families’ struggles. A number of studies have highlighted examples of parents feeling powerless and shamed in a climate that was seen as highly risk averse; and being judged and stigmatised simply for having a history of care or for being poor (Gupta *et al.*, 2016; Morris *et al*., 2018b). In a risk-saturated system, feelings of blame and shame dominate and can lead to avoidance and defensiveness, dynamics that inevitably disrupt the potential for effective protective and supportive work.

In line with the PAP ontology, which sees harm as having systemic causes and poor parents as active agents fighting poverty in order to be the best parents they can be, the PAPCP axiological premise emphasises an ethics of solidarity. An ethical commitment to make an ‘active effort to include the other in the ‘we’, based on the acknowledgement of the differences between us in terms of power, history and social position’ (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p.1802).

In the context of risk, creating solidarity with parents in the child protection system is a difficult and formidable task. Child protection work places social workers at the intersection of multiple paradoxes, including caring for others, but also preventing others from being harmed (Weinberg, 2016). In a RFP, children’s rights are often juxtaposed with parents’ rights, with the primary focus on children’s right to protection. We would argue, however, that such binaries are unhelpful. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have a right to protection from violence, abuse, and neglect (Article 19), and there will always be a need for the state to impose limits on parental rights in order to protect their children from significant harm. However, children also have a right to live with their families if at all possible, and the state should provide support in order to achieve this (Articles 9 and 18). Children’s rights, under the UNCRC and general human rights instruments, are interwoven with and inseparable from those of their parents, family, and communities (Melton, 2010).

The tension between perceived children’s rights and perceived parents’ rights intensifies in the context of poverty. ‘Othering’ of poor families is rife in risk-averse child protection systems and reinforced by extremely imbalanced power relations with practitioners. Thus, parents are more easily blamed and held responsible for their children’s situation. Warner (2015) argues that the media reporting following the death of Peter Connelly in England served to further ‘other’ families living in poverty, enabling more intensive moral regulation and social control of ‘them,’ and in the process reinforcing ‘our’ middle-class notions of respectability. Morris *et al*. (2018a) found that the notion of an underclass permeated many social workers’ responses.

In order to address the described tension and promote solidarity with parents, the PAPCP axiology calls for a relational and contextual ethical stance towards what is perceived as the ‘best interests of the child.’ Accordingly, social workers should take a stance with regard to injustice and perceive themselves not as merely technical or ‘objective’ risk evaluators. Instead, they are encouraged to behave as partners of parents in their struggle against oppressive social contexts in which their parenting takes place, as well as in their attempt to establish and maintain good relationships with their children.

This ethical stance guided Rani, a social worker in a poverty-aware programme in a child protection community centre in Israel, during his work with Salim*:*

*Salim was on the verge of reuniting with his five-year-old son, Haled. Rani was designated to accompany Salim in the reunification process. Under the court order, Salim was instructed to meet Haled once a week at a visitation centre located three hours away from Salim’s home. At the time, Salim was working illegally as a construction worker and lacked even minimal labour rights. He received a daily cash payment, had no guarantee of steady employment, and had to rely on his boss’s good will for a day off.*

*These conditions made it extremely difficult for Salim to follow the reunification plan, and he cancelled some visits at short notice due fear of losing his job. As might be expected, these cancellations had a negative impact on the process and on Haled, who reacted to the instability that resulted from the cancelled visits. Rani faced an ethical dilemma when he was asked to write a report on the reunification process. On the one hand, he knew that the cancellations were extremely problematic and harmful for Haled. On the other, he knew that Salim’s employment conditions made carrying out the reunification plan difficult. He also knew that the judge and social services department might interpret Salim’s cancellations negatively.*

*A child rescue ethical stance, voiced by some of the professionals involved, focused mainly on the damage inflicted on Haled and framed Salim’s inconsistency as a reflection of his irresponsibility, his ambivalence towards the reunification, and his parental capabilities. In contrast, taking an ethical stance of solidarity with Salim, Rani emphasised Salim’s struggle to continue with the process, pointed to the importance of making the process more flexible, and warned that if Salim lost his job and remained without any income, the reunification process would not continue – a far more devastating outcome for Haled than a small number of cancelled visits.*

*When submitting the report, Rani was subtly criticised by the social worker for focusing on Salim and not on Haled and for demonstrating sympathy with Salim in light of the reasons for the cancellations, perhaps at the cost of providing an ‘objective’ assessment of Salim’s parental competence.*

Following this report, Rani had to tell Salim that missing any more visits could lead to the cessation of the process and that, no matter what, he must not miss meetings with Haled. It was difficult for Salim to hear what he first experienced as a threat, but he understood that Rani was being unequivocal because he truly cared about him and his son.

Indeed, one of the challenges of taking such a stance is that social workers are likely to need to tell parents that they do not agree with them or that they think they are acting in a way that harms their children and themselves. However, as Krumer Nevo (2016, p.1804) explains: ‘paradoxically, taking the side of service users creates a space in which social workers can actually criticise them, because clients believe social workers really care about them and the relationships are built on trust’.

**Practice implications**

As discussed above, the PAPCP connects poverty and risk, recognising the range of harms to children and families living in socially and economically deprived circumstances. It moves away from a narrow focus on parental risk to harmful contexts and ways of addressing these in which society, communities and families can provide environments where harm is minimised and children enabled to flourish. PAPCP provides a complex analytical framework (ontological, epistemological and axiological) to inform practice and policy. Some practice implications include:

* Poverty being central to assessments and work with families, including the material and affective impacts on their lived experiences. This includes an approach that utilises different aspects of relationship(s)-based knowledge to inform assessment processes.
* Provision of financial and practical support to help children and families, as a birth parent explains: *‘a washing machine for example would have made a big difference’* (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018b, p.23).
* Developing a poverty-aware lens, which on an individual practitioner level means critically reflecting on own values and assumptions regarding poverty and risk; challenging micro-aggressions towards families in both self and others; and responding to poverty in line with the profession’s commitment to human rights and social justice.
* On an organisational level undertaking an audit, ideally with families that aims to ‘poverty-proof’ policies and practices. For example ensuring all families have access to welfare rights advice.
* Relationships-based practice and active rights-based advocacy; recognising the importance of ‘standing-by families’ and the symbolic capital and emotional benefits to families of having a professional bear witness to and challenge the injustices that many face in dealings with public institutions and wider society.
* Working in a real-life context (Saar-Heiman *et al.,* 2017) – understanding what life is like for a specific child and his/her family, in his/her home and his/her community. This can provide more detailed and nuanced pictures of how families both struggle in poverty, but also actively resist on a daily basis.
* Reflective and effective supervision is essential in order to recognise the inherent challenges of child protection work, as in some cases there will be a need to remove children from their families.

**Conclusions**

In this paper we have built upon Krumer-Nevo's (2016) PAP, to develop a framework for child protection. The increasing recognition of the damaging impact of poverty and policies increasing inequality provides a clear rationale for why we need to develop rights and justice-based child protection practice. We suggest that PAPCP provides a complex analytical framework that challenges the dominant risk paradigm and we have made recommendations that aim to connect abstracted understandings and practice actions.

For some children additional resources/ poverty aware practice can’t solve the problems and they will need to come into care, but the process will be fairer and more humane. Individual practice is important but not enough; structures and systems need to put poverty and social deprivation at the heart of planning and service development, and engage in meaningful dialogue with families to develop more effective services (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018a). Importantly a PAP paradigm for child protection offers a wider political and social justice agenda for deconstructing risk. Boone *et al.* (2018, p.12) suggest that:

‘social work has to take on an active role in challenging injustices in the different domains of social justice by engaging in reframing and projecting individual and collective concerns and lifeworlds of people in poverty ‘from the private sphere of commodities and market relations, on the one hand, and family and personal relations, on the other, into the public forum of political debate’ (Dean, 2013, p. S42).

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