A relationship-based approach to engaging involuntary clients: the contribution of recognition theory

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ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on the process of engaging with families where a child is at risk of harm, and considers a relationship-based approach to work with ‘involuntary clients’ of child protection services. Contextualizing the discussion within a broader understanding of the role and importance of relationship-based practice, a conceptual and ethical framework is outlined that can, it is suggested, support effective relationship-based work and moral decision-making with involuntary clients. Making use of psychoanalytic and more broadly psychodynamic insights, along with perspectives drawn from recognition theory, it is argued that relationship-based practice offers the potential for recognition, respect and reciprocity, and that these three aspects of relationship provide a foundation for ethical engagement with involuntary clients. However, such an approach is not without tensions, so the latter part of the paper considers some of the challenges and dilemmas that accompany the process of trying to engage parents who do not want to be ‘worked with’.

INTRODUCTION
The challenges of working with ‘involuntary clients’ or service users (see Note 1) have been considered within research and literature from a range of perspectives (Trotter 2006; Calder 2008; Rooney 2009). Various aspects of the practitioner/service user relationship have been addressed within these discussions. However, although Lefevre (2008) offered a thoughtful discussion and some relevant issues are addressed by Turnell (2004, 2008), overall there has been less attention paid so far to the nature and meaning of a relationship-based approach in the context of statutory and compulsory work (Turney et al. 2010, p. 246). Yet, the need to think about relationships, and the particular challenges they pose in these often difficult cases, is of paramount importance for a number of reasons.

In the first place, parents are, of course, likely to be the source of much useful information about the child, the current family situation and the broader family history. They can also facilitate or obstruct access to the child. Furthermore, as the Munro report identifies, it is more likely that help can be both effectively offered and accepted when parents have been successfully engaged – i.e. where there is a sound professional relationship. Child protection work draws on

... a difficult combination of skills: being able to be authoritative and ask challenging questions about family life as well as engaging with parents in order to work with them to resolve their problems and improve their parenting capacity. Professionals can struggle with this [... ] but overall, successful engagement with the parents is a key contributor to effective helping. (Munro 2011, para. 2.24)

Munro’s emphasis on the importance of the professional relationship acknowledges the challenges of establishing these connections with some parents. But her observations reinforce a point made previously by Howe (2010, p. 331), who suggested that ‘parents who feel understood are less likely to experience stress and so less likely to be a danger to their children’ (see also Howe 2008). In addition, we know that the quality of the relationship between parent and professional has a
significant impact on decision-making (Platt 2007; Holland 2010). So, for these reasons at least, a focus on relationships seems relevant.

But beyond the pragmatic, there are perhaps broader ethical imperatives that apply here. The professional encounter provides an opportunity to work both in and with the relationship to promote change; it is ‘not just the foundation on which the working alliance is built but also the medium in which psychological change takes place’ (Howe 2010, p. 334). Indeed, person-centred approaches that put the (therapeutic) relationship at the heart of practice and insights from psychoanalytic theory suggest that ‘a thoughtful and emotionally receptive stance to clients can have therapeutic value without anything fancy being done’ (Bower 2005, p. 11). This moves the notion of relationship away from the merely instrumental and recognizes its potential contribution to emotional and psychological understanding, self-development and well-being. If, as Howe (1998, p. 45) proposed, the ‘level of social understanding and social competence that people develop depends on the quality of their relationship history’, then the way in which social work practitioners understand and manage relationships becomes a significant part of their approach – and their ethical commitment – to service users whose prior experience of relationships may have been anything but good. Relationship-based practice essentially recognizes the moral claim of the service user – whether voluntary or involuntary – to be treated as an individual in his or her own right; to be seen as an ‘end in themselves’ rather than simply as a means to the end of protecting their children from harm.

This ethical claim is important, but we also know from cases such as ‘Baby P’ (Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board 2009) that in the context of child protection work, apparently positive professional/service user relationships can be founded on very shaky ground and become sources of dangerous misunderstanding. So, this is a difficult arena within which to develop relationships – one where practitioners need to offer the possibility of genuine engagement and ethical decision-making without being misled by false compliance. This paper therefore acknowledges the complexities of a relationship-based approach and offers a contribution to the theorization of this problematic area of practice. It starts though by locating the discussion within a broader understanding of the nature and role of relationship-based practice in social work and the challenges to this approach.

**SOCIAL WORK AND RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRACTICE: A BRIEF HISTORY**

Relationship-based practice has a long, if somewhat chequered, history in social work. Rooted in the psychodynamically influenced clinical and casework approaches of the 1950s and 1960s (Biestek 1957; Hollis 1964), an approach to practice was defined in which the relationship took centre stage, providing the medium through which the practitioner worked, as well as the focus for much therapeutic intervention. Relationship-based practice fell out of favour in 1980s/1990s with the emergence of more overtly political approaches to practice. While some of the early casework practitioners identified themselves as having a psychosocial perspective (cf. Hollis 1964), Marxist and feminist writers and practitioners disputed the way in which the ‘social’ was addressed. They challenged the potentially pathologizing nature of a casework response that, it was argued, focused on individual difficulties, without locating these in a broader context of interconnecting forms of social disadvantage and oppression.

‘Radical’ approaches to practice identified the situated nature of the social worker/client relationship and critiqued the casework approach for failing to recognize the attendant power dynamics. It was argued that there was an assumed neutrality and equality in the casework relationship that ignored (or minimized) the effect of factors such as race/ethnicity, class and gender, and also failed to acknowledge their impact ‘outside’ the immediate relationship, i.e. in terms of the experiences and opportunities available to the client in the wider society.

However, more recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in relationship-based approaches. This has been well documented in a range of practice-focused texts (Howe 1998, 2008, 2010; Sudbery 2002; Trevithick 2003; Ruch 2005, 2009; Ruch et al. 2010; Hennessey 2011), and a renewed emphasis on the value and significance of the professional relationship is reflected in a range of social work research and policy documents (Barlow & Scott 2010; Brandon et al. 2010; Munro 2011). This re-connection with relationship stems from a recognition that the increased proceduralism and prescription of recent practice have not led to the hoped for improvements in work with vulnerable children and families. On the contrary, the downplaying of relationship has led to serious gaps in practice. The thoughtful analyses of the
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THEORIZING RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRACTICE — THE CONTRIBUTION OF RECOGNITION THEORY

Social work has traditionally taken a rather eclectic approach to theory, borrowing and incorporating elements from a range of positions and disciplines. Critical theory — notably the work of Habermas — has proved a rich source of ideas and debate (e.g. Blaug 1995; Hayes & Houston 2007; Garrett 2009; Houston 2009). More recently, the ‘important psychoanalytical, existential and social insights’ (Hayes & Houston 2007, p. 1002) of the ethics of recognition developed by Honneth, in particular, have been used to inform thinking in different areas of social work practice (Webb 2006, 2010; Hayes & Houston 2007; Houston & Dolan 2008; Houston 2009; Juul 2009). This paper builds on those earlier discussions. Starting with an outline of three key concepts — recognition, respect and reciprocity — drawn from the work of Honneth, I will then look at the critiques that have been put forward, and consider their impact on the usefulness or otherwise of Honneth’s ideas for a politically and socially grounded relationship-based practice.

Recognition

Developmental psychology and psychoanalytic thinking emphasize the significance of early experiences of relationship for the infant’s developing sense of self, identity and agency, and for longer-term emotional and psychological well-being. Psychoanalytically informed child development theory identifies the processes of differentiation and separation that the infant must go through to develop a sense of him- or herself as a separate and autonomous being (Hollway 2006, pp. 31–32). Of particular importance, in the context of this paper, is the work of theorists such as Benjamin (1990a,b), Stern (1985) on understanding intersubjectivity and the emerging ability of the infant to engage in ‘subject–subject relations’. Benjamin argues that ‘the concept that unifies inter-subjective theories of self development is the need for recognition’ (1990a, p. 21, emphasis added). It is through the relational experience of recognition — recognizing and being recognized by the other — that the infant learns to understand him- or herself.

As noted, the salience of recognition has also been addressed — and critiqued — within critical social theory (Fraser & Honneth 2003; Honneth 1997, 2007; Thompson 2006). Honneth identified three forms of social recognition, which, he argued (2007,
The first, recognition of love, is, for Honneth, the most fundamental and seems highly consistent with social work understandings of the importance of early relationships. Drawing closely on psychoanalytic understandings of the development of intersubjectivity, particularly within object relations theory (Honneth 1995), it addresses the process by which an individual ‘learns to relate to themselves in such a way that they conceive of their physical needs and desires as an articulable part of their own person’ (Honneth 2007, p. 136). When a person receives this form of recognition – a level of emotional concern in the context of a social relationship of love, friendship or care – then they are able to develop a sense of ‘self confidence’ or ‘security in one’s own sense of being’ (Hoggett 2000, p. 6). Failure to experience the recognition of love, e.g. within an abusive or neglectful family, is likely to affect the individual’s perception of themselves as someone worthy of being of genuine concern and interest to another, and leave them at risk of impaired ‘self-confidence’ in this particular sense.

The second sense of recognition is rights-based and involves seeing the individual as ‘a morally accountable member of society’ (Honneth 2007, p. 74), which accords them a form of ‘self-respect’. The third form of recognition comes through social acknowledgement of the individual’s achievements and abilities. Thompson (2006, p. 15) summarized this as follows: ‘Esteem is the positive acknowledgement of a particular type of person in light of the distinct characteristics that they possess. It may refer, for instance, to ideas of identity or difference, culture or community’. It does not seem too big a jump from this account to a social work commitment to anti-oppressive practice and respect for difference. Together, these three forms of recognition support the development of a secure identity and a positive sense of self for the individual, within their social context.

Respect

Honneth outlined the positive effects on identity formation that come from affirming experiences of recognition but is also centrally concerned with the consequences of the failure or refusal of recognition. As recognition is closely associated with respect, so the withdrawal of recognition, or the experience of misrecognition, is seen as a form of disrespect. The significance of disrespect is addressed in Honneth’s (2007) collection of essays exploring the normative foundations of critical theory, and the moral nature of the ‘injury’ it inflicts is clearly articulated. When a person is denied recognition, ‘they will generally react with moral feelings that accompany the experience of disrespect – shame, anger or indignation’ (2007, p. 72). Moral injury, he suggests, threatens the individual’s sense of self and of autonomy.

Drawing on Kant, Honneth proposed that the concept of respect ‘contains the core of the categorical imperative to treat every other person only as an end in him or herself’ (2007, p. 129), an injunction that has clear resonance for social work ethics and values (Clark 2000; Banks 2006). Indeed, the importance of respect as a ‘fundamental moral principle’ (Sharlow 2009, p. 42) for social work is well established (British Association of Social Workers 2002; General Social Care Council 2002; Beckett & Maynard 2005) and has particular resonance for person-centred and relationship-based approaches, providing a significant point of connection with Honneth’s position.

Reciprocity

According to Honneth, human subjects ‘encounter each other within the parameters of the reciprocal expectation that they be given recognition as moral persons’ (2007, p. 71, emphasis added). Reciprocity implies a degree of ‘give and take’, a relationship where each participant has something to offer and to receive. ‘It involves recognising the separate subjectivity and agency of the other person and calls for a way of working that deals openly with differences of power’ (Turney 2007, p. 71), a point to which I will return. Again, there is an identifiable link to relationship-based practice. A number of studies have shown that service users are clear about the qualities they value in social workers (Turnell 2004; De Boer & Coady 2007; Howe 2008) – and reference is reliably made to the importance of reciprocity or mutuality.

This three-cornered framework of recognition, reciprocity and respect fits well with the practical and ethical concerns of a relationship-based approach. As Houston and Dolan observed, theories of recognition ‘maintain that identity formation hinges irrevocably on social relations that acknowledge and validate personal existence; and that respect and understanding should be at the forefront of our relationships with
others’ (2008, p. 459; also Honneth 1995). So far, so positive, but recognition theory has itself been subject to critique – both from within social theory (e.g. Fraser & Honneth 2003; Thompson 2006; McNay 2008) and in relation to its application to social work (Garrett 2010; Webb 2010). It is not possible in this paper to give a comprehensive account of this literature, so in the following section, I will briefly outline the basis of this critique and consider its validity specifically in relation to the understanding of social work practice that has been proposed.

CHALLENGES TO RECOGNITION THEORY

A key argument against Honneth’s formulation of recognition theory is its alleged ‘psychologism’. Garrett (2010) and Webb (2010) outlined some cogent objections, drawing particularly on Fraser’s (2003) identification of the need for a broader theory of social justice based on both recognition and ‘redistribution’. Webb (2010) developed the idea of an integrated theoretical framework and sees the ‘coupling of the politics of redistribution and recognition as the foundations for a Critical social work’ (2010, p. 13). Garrett, however, goes beyond the terms of the recognition/redistribution debate. He argues that, while it is an advance on Honneth’s position, even Fraser’s principle of ‘parity of participation’ fails to give sufficient attention to the part played by the neo-liberal state in structuring (potentially oppressive) relations of recognition and misrecognition. Garrett does not entirely dismiss the relevance of recognition theory for social work but argues that it encourages an over-emphasis on ‘micro-encounters and interactions’ (2010, p. 1517) at the expense of a more textured understanding of the broader role of the state in the production of particular relationships of (mis)recognition.

Garrett’s critique provides an important corrective to a naïve and narrowly psychological account of relationships but does not negate the utility of recognition theory for social work. It is precisely in the micro-encounters he identifies that the day-to-day business of social work takes place and recognition theory can support understanding of these interactions. So, while it is not being claimed as a ‘total theory’ for practice, and both Webb’s and Garrett’s positions add to an understanding of relations of power and oppression, the remainder of this paper will focus on the particular contribution of recognition theory to understanding issues of engagement with involuntary clients. I have proposed that relationship-based practice needs to be recalibrated to get a better balance between the ‘psy’ and the ‘social’ in psychosocial. Honneth’s work highlights the significance of both the affective and the social dimensions of experience – it brings together the internal, intra-psychic experiences of the individual with an understanding of inter-subjective processes and locates this explicitly in the context of broader societal relationships. A relationship-based approach informed by recognition theory may still emphasize the ‘psy’ more than the ‘social’, but the psychological understanding allows for engagement with the social. Recognition theory identifies the tension between these different levels of experience and their interconnectedness and can therefore provide some insights into the relational dynamics within which individuals operate.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRACTICE WITH INVOLUNTARY CLIENTS

Social work must always tread a path between ‘care’ and ‘control’ and this can be a particular tension in situations where there are child protection concerns. The difficulties of working in such cases have been highlighted by a number of child death inquiries and serious case reviews (for recent examples, see Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board 2009; Laming 2003). Relationship-based practice is not being offered as a panacea for all social work difficulties in relation to engagement, and working from a relationship-based perspective with involuntary clients is likely to give rise to some significant ethical challenges. As Trotter points out, trying to engage involuntary clients involves ‘working in a value-laden environment. What is needed is a recognition that this is so and debate about how the ethical and value-based issues should be dealt with’ (Trotter 1997, p. 26). The remainder of this section looks at how an approach based on recognition, reciprocity and respect may help both to frame and respond to these issues. The areas that will be addressed include

- Resistance
- Trust and
- The use of power in involuntary relationships

Resistance, recognition and misrecognition

Client reluctance to engage with different welfare services has been explored from a variety of angles and using a range of terminology. There is little clarity around definitions or explanations, and the situation is further complicated by inconsistent use of language: ‘Terms such as resistance, denial, motivation,
readiness and responsivity have all been used to describe reluctant client behaviors (sic), sometimes interchangeably (Scott & King 2007, p. 402). Arkowitz (2002) and Scott & King (2007) helped clarify the range of meanings and possible professional/therapeutic responses to different forms of ‘non-engagement’. Arkowitz (2002), in particular, explored the meanings of ‘resistance’ and suggested that in some cases it may be understood as an expression of the client’s ambivalence at the prospect of possibly quite profound change that could follow serious engagement with a process of professional intervention. In a similar vein, I want to consider here whether in some situations, the notion of misrecognition can inform an understanding of non-engagement/resistance.

Webb identified the distress that can be caused by misrecognition: ‘as for example, when single women are accused of being bad mothers, older people are told that they are incapable of looking after themselves, or ethnic minority communities are stereotyped as disengaged’ (2006, p. 217). And we can perhaps add to this list the experience of those who find themselves as involuntary clients of child protection services and may feel that they have been stereotyped as ‘bad parents’ and nothing more, before they start. While practitioners may aim to establish a more rounded knowledge of the parents, to enable them to feel more properly recognized and respected, this is not easy in the highly pressurized and time-constrained environment of child protection work. In this context, then, the reactions (disengagement, hostility, anger and so on) that are typically expressed by parents are unsurprising. This does not mean that the client’s perspective, or claim for recognition, should be automatically accepted (Juul 2009). Demands for recognition will need to be tested and evaluated – but determining between morally valid and invalid, genuine and false claims raises both practical and ethical difficulties, a point I consider in more detail in the next section.

As the expectation of recognition is reciprocal, either party may experience the refusal or failure of recognition. So arguably, this may apply as much to practitioners as service users. It is therefore important for practitioners to be aware of this dynamic and to be alert to their own responses to feelings of being ‘misrecognized’ by antagonistic or unwilling clients. Resistance is clearly difficult to deal with and can be particularly undermining for a practitioner to find that their efforts to engage parents are rebuffed and their good intentions viewed with suspicion or hostility. If not acknowledged, the sense of rejection – of not being recognized for oneself – can have a significant impact and lead to potentially punitive, or equally dismissive, responses on the part of the worker.

Trust and respect in work with involuntary clients

There is a notable degree of alienation and hostility that may be experienced by practitioners as service users. It is therefore important for practitioners to be aware of this dynamic and to be alert to their own responses to feelings of being ‘misrecognized’ by antagonistic or unwilling clients. Resistance is clearly difficult to deal with and can be particularly undermining for a practitioner to find that their efforts to engage parents are rebuffed and their good intentions viewed with suspicion or hostility. If not acknowledged, the sense of rejection – of not being recognized for oneself – can have a significant impact and lead to potentially punitive, or equally dismissive, responses on the part of the worker.

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anti-oppressive practice) and, on the other hand, a slide into cynicism, where compassion is hard to maintain. A well-founded relationship can incorporate the need to be both genuinely supportive but also appropriately challenging (Turney 2010). Achieving this balance is much harder where there is no real relationship to draw on. However, taking the view that every interaction is a form of relationship, however restricted, a relationship-based approach must try to work with what exists and at the level of engagement possible.

There may be good reasons why parents are reluctant to trust a worker who they fear could remove their child. Equally, a pressured practitioner may not be inclined to take the risk of offering trust when they fear that it will be unreciprocated or met with hostility. Indeed, as we have seen, in some situations a presumption of trust on the part of the worker may even be dangerous. But Smith notes that ‘an absence of trust can only be repaired by an experience of trust’ (Smith 2001, p. 297). This puts a particular onus on the worker to behave as transparently and honestly as possible – effectively, to model trustworthiness themselves, and to offer the service user the experience of being treated with respect by being explicit about concerns, risks, requirements for change and presenting this in a clear but compassionate way.

Relating this to experiences of recognition and the possibilities of misrecognition, perhaps what the notion of respectful uncertainty allows is a position of qualified trust which acknowledges that what is being presented could be the correct view of a situation, but there may be other better, or equally compelling, explanations. Maintaining a position of respectful uncertainty in the face of a hostile or dismissive response is a demanding work. Evidence submitted by the Family Rights Group to the Munro Review makes the point: ‘Practitioners need to be managed, supported and equipped to work with families in ways that are high in support and high in challenge’ (Munro 2011, para. 2.26).

And there is no foolproof way of always getting it right. We cannot prevent people from lying or misleading and it does not sit easily with a social work value base to keep this uncomfortable fact in mind. But the approach outlined here perhaps offers some ways of thinking about why service users may adopt various strategies to keep professionals ‘at bay’ and, being alert to these, encourage practitioners to keep in mind the possibility that the situation may not be as it appears. Critically, it also acknowledges the subjective experiences and attitudes of the professionals involved, and recognizes that they will have an investment in a particular understanding of a situation or family member and will respond accordingly.

The use of power in involuntary relationships

Working with parents where there are child protection concerns throws the power differences between professional and client into sharp relief. Lawrence (2004, p. 78) identifies ‘an apparently paradoxical situation’ where

The social worker has to intervene in a mandated and often seemingly punitive way, but at the same time with the aim of empowering parents and enabling parental responsibility as a means to reduce the likelihood of harm to the child.

As this suggests, there may be particular tensions in trying to manage both the care and the control functions of the professional role where there is a risk of harm to a child. We have noted that in such situations, the absence of parental engagement can provoke a potentially more coercive response from practitioners who have the responsibility to safeguard that child’s welfare. While it would be disingenuous and probably dangerous to ignore the power social workers have, there are nonetheless different ways to use it, and the notion of reciprocity may help to frame approaches to practice that contribute to less anxiety-driven, more reflective, and potentially less oppressive, responses.

In this connection, I want to consider the concept of ‘not-knowing’ and its role in relation to the use of power in professional relationships. Although ‘not-knowing’ is more typically discussed in relation to the interaction between therapist and patient, it also has application to the social worker/client relationship. In both contexts, practitioners face the challenge of holding an attitude of ‘not-knowing’ and retaining an open-minded curiosity (Ruch 2009, p. 352) in situations of uncertainty, while resisting a premature rush to judgement.

The importance (and the difficulty) of keeping an open mind has been emphasized by a number of writers who highlight the ways in which different forms of cognitive bias arise and influence judgement and decision-making (Galanter & Patel 2005; Gambrill 2005; Munro 2008; Holland 2010). Writing about the application of systemic ideas to social work with children, Daniel observes that ‘[o]ne of the most helpful systemic ideas is that of conceptualising uncertainty as a rigorous, intellectually robust and ethical position, rather than a sign of weakness or equivocation’ (Daniel 2005, p. 60). Applying this observation to social work more generally gives the practitioner
permission to stay with uncertainty and anchors the process of hypothesising at the heart of thoughtful and reflective practice. Framing and testing hypotheses, tentative explanations for situations or behaviours encountered, can help keep the practitioner alert and focused – neither adrift in an undifferentiated mass of information nor overly committed to a particular account or outcome before there is adequate warrant for it.

This kind of open-mindedness can also contribute to the development of the professional relationship by helping practitioners to ‘open themselves up to being influenced more by the clients’ perspectives’ (Mason 2005, p. 161). It offers the possibility of a more reciprocal relationship, which acknowledges the client’s understandings of their situation alongside those of the practitioner. But ‘not-knowing’ needs to be managed with care. Reflecting on relationships between therapists and their clients, Mason observes that adopting this stance has, in some cases, constrained rather than enabled therapists by ‘encouraging them (perhaps inadvertently) to refrain from expressing ideas and knowledge that might be beneficial to clients in addition to taking a stance of curiosity’ (Mason 2005, p. 161). That is to say, some therapists have felt unable to use their expertise (clinical experience, research knowledge, etc.) in the form of ideas ‘as if to do so might be seen as marginalizing the client and thus oppressive’ (ibid. 161) and similar dynamics may be found in the social worker/client relationship. But as Mason points out, this takes the idea of ‘not-knowing’ rather too literally: being open to the possibility of not-knowing is not the same as ‘knowing nothing at all’.

Mason himself offers the notion of ‘authoritative doubt’ as a way of allowing practitioners to acknowledge that they do not have all the answers while at the same time owning their own experience and expertise. ‘This gives us space for curiosity and exploration, which of course involves taking some risks. The more you know about a particular issue, the more you appreciate what is missing and can see where to explore for new answers’ (Flaskas et al. 2005, p. xv). But uncertainty also has the capacity to generate anxiety, particularly in situations where children may be at risk of harm. Relationship-based practice takes account of the practitioner’s affective responses to their situation and acknowledges the effect of the emotional climate on the way in which professionals work with families:

‘This gives us space for curiosity and exploration, which of course involves taking some risks. The more you know about a particular issue, the more you appreciate what is missing and can see where to explore for new answers’ (Flaskas et al. 2005, p. xv). But uncertainty also has the capacity to generate anxiety, particularly in situations where children may be at risk of harm. Relationship-based practice takes account of the practitioner’s affective responses to their situation and acknowledges the effect of the emotional climate on the way in which professionals work with families:

... it is readily possible to recognize how acute and chronic feelings of anxiety about difficult cases or work situations impede the capacity for practitioners to think clearly and exacerbate the tendency to resort to defensive behaviours as responses to the emotionally charged situations they face (Taylor et al. 2008). (Ruch 2009, p. 351)

Recognising and responding to the practitioner’s emotional responses plays a key part in managing anxiety and promoting safer, more effective (and possibly less coercive) practice (Ruch 2005). This is most likely to take place in an organizational culture that values reflection and supports practitioners to ‘stay with’ difficult feelings rather than seeing them as inherently problematic and to be avoided.

Bringing an element of reciprocity into practice can be seen as part of a broader commitment to building an ethical foundation for work with involuntary clients. Different strategies have been proposed to achieve this, although there is a strong unifying commitment to a dialogic approach. For example, Rooney (2009, p. 60) identifies ‘commitment to honest communication’ as a key requirement and De Jong & Berg (2001) discuss an approach that, they suggest, facilitates ‘co-constructing cooperation with mandated clients’ by building mutual confidence and understanding. This includes negotiating shared access to, and ownership of, information. A dialogic approach that sees the other as ‘conversible with’ may then contribute to a less oppressive practice: ‘In dialogue, we are subjects seeking understanding and to be understood rather than objects seeking to act upon or to be acted upon’ (Hoggett 2008, p. 76). This accords value both to the practitioner’s and the client’s experience, expertise and knowledge, and shows respect for the perspectives of both participants in a relationship of mutual – although not necessarily equal – influence. As Juul (2009, p. 41) puts it:

... action as far as possible is based on mutual confidence and common understanding, that the client’s narrative is the point of departure and that the social worker – within the existing possibilities – makes an effort to find a good and just decision and communicate it to the client so he or she understands and accepts it.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has focused on the benefits and challenges of developing a relationship-based practice that is sustainable and realistic and gives particular regard to the difficulties of working with ‘involuntary clients’ of statutory services. There are sound pragmatic reasons for attempting to build relationships even with involuntary clients on the grounds that ‘a good deal of what helps to keep at-risk children safe depends on the quality of the relationship between the worker and the
parent’ (Howe 2010, p. 331), and that the more ‘recognized, acknowledged and contained’ (Howe 2010, p. 332) the parent feels, the more the practitioner can help them to keep the child ‘in mind’. At the same time, an ethical case for relationship-based practice has been made, which acknowledges the client as someone with anxieties, hopes and strengths who can be seen as an ‘end in themselves’ rather than simply as a means to the end of protecting their children from harm. Contributing to the theorization of this aspect of practice, the paper draws on recognition theory to enhance understanding of professional interactions with involuntary clients. Effective professional relationships that engage with the individual, in all their emotional ‘messiness’ and complexity, do this by offering the possibility of recognition, respect and a degree of reciprocity – key elements of an ethically grounded practice. But such an approach also raises a number of ethical tensions, e.g. in relation to issues of resistance, trust and the use of power.

Relationship-based practice with unwilling or involuntary clients is always going to be challenging and raise difficult questions about the application of social work values. It requires practitioners to keep asking themselves searching questions about the ethical grounds for pursuing such an approach and trying to establish ‘helping relationships’ with people who do not feel able, or simply do not want, to participate. But at its best, relationship-based practice informed by recognition theory can provide the client with the experience of being valued and recognized as an individual, and the practitioner with a conceptual and experience of being valued and recognized as an individual, and the practitioner with a conceptual and experience of being valued and recognized as an individual. But at its best, relationship-based practice informed by recognition theory can provide the client with the experience of being valued and recognized as an individual, and the practitioner with a conceptual and ethical framework within which they can strive for a position of ‘safe uncertainty and authoritative doubt’ (Flaskas 2005, p. xxv).

REFERENCES


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**NOTE**

1 A note on terminology: this paper is concerned with the process of engaging parents who are involved with social services because there are child protection concerns but who have not voluntarily sought help. It uses the term ‘involuntary clients’ to refer to these individuals, following the terminology adopted by Calder (2008), Rooney (2009) and Trotter (2006) to refer to people who have not chosen their involvement with social services and who are ‘under some formal or informal pressure to seek help’ (Rooney 2009, 4).