

The Father Absence-Mother Blame Paradigm in Child Protection Social Work: An Italian Feminist Single Case Study

Author: Andrea Fleckinger – University of Trento (I)

andrea.fleckinger@unitn.it

Keywords: child protection, father absence-mother blame, social work practice, gender-based violence, feminist single case study

Abstract

International research shows how gendered and androcentric practices in child protection social services increase the risk of harmful consequences for mothers and children. This paper discusses the results of a feminist single case study carried out in Italy, extracted from a wider research project on the experiences of single mothers in the field of child protection. Adopting the voice-centred relational method, an analysis was carried out of an in-depth interview with Flora, a single mother who has survived gender-based violence and has been an addressee of child protection social services. The results show the potential consequences of the father absence-mother blame paradigm coined by Strega et al. (2007) when applied to social work practice. The method of critically discussing a paradigm used by Krumer-Nevo (2016) in developing the poverty-aware paradigm provides insight into various ontological, epistemological and axiological facets. Flora's account highlights how harmful the father absence-mother blame paradigm can be for those experiencing it, via several means: an unquestioned ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family, actions by social workers based on positivist, risk-focused approaches, and an exclusive focus on children. The conclusion emphasises the importance of including the expert knowledge of addressees to develop more supportive social work practices.

Introduction

The feminist single case study provided in this paper connects the addressee's knowledge of child protection social work interventions with actual critical discourses on the professionalisation of social work and the consequences of risk -focused approaches.

A growing body of evidence critically discusses the processes involved in the professionalisation of social work, characterised by a tendency towards neo-liberalisation that further promotes the abandoning of its mission, as already discussed by Specht & Courtney in 1994 and more recently analysed by Brandt, et al. 2019; Featherstone et al., 2018; Anhorn & Balzereit (eds.), 2016, Bertotti, 2016; Fargion, 2014; Folgheraiter, 2011. Pentini & Lorenz show how, through a neoliberal agenda: *'Social workers and social pedagogues... were compelled to enact the shift in the meaning of 'social' contained in their title from a reference to the entire social community to an emphasis on failed individual social adjustment competences...'* (Pentini & Lorenz, 2020: 546). This neo-liberalisation of social work goes hand in hand with depoliticisation, evidenced by less interest in the structural origins of social problems, a growing commitment to welfare conditionality, and a continuous reduction in the discretion of social workers (Brandt et al., 2019).

Focusing on the field of child protection, international research discusses the consequences of risk-focused practices for addressees of social work (Featherstone et al., 2018, Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019, Fargion, 2014). Furthermore, highly gendered practices in child protection social work, hidden by gender-neutral language, e.g. "parents", particularly increase the vulnerability of mothers in the child protection system (Fleckinger, 2020 & 2019, Anderson, 2015).

European and other international data show that single mothers are overrepresented in the field of child protection, a circumstance that demonstrates the high vulnerability of single mothers often linked with poverty (Gupta, et al., 2018; Waterhouse & McGhee, 2016; Nakagawa, 2016). Strega et al. state that, with regard to the relationship between child protection and poverty: *'The poorest of these poor are single mothers'* (Strega et al, 2017: 706). The single case

analysed forms part of broader research focusing on the experiences of single mothers in the child protection system in South Tyrol, northern Italy.

During my professional experiences as a social worker since 2007 at a women's shelter in South Tyrol (I), I have also mediated the relationship between child protection social workers and mothers seeking help. Linking my reflections and practical experiences with critical discourses on the professionalisation and ongoing neo-liberalisation of social work, as well as with critical feminist discourses on the hierarchies of knowledge and the (im)possibility of participation in discourses, I observed that the knowledge of addressees is often missing or undergoes several forms of denigration. With the aim of reducing this gap, the knowledge of addressees, as experts by experience, became central within my research project.

This paper presents the knowledge of a single mother who survived gender-based violence and provides a feminist in-depth single case analysis of how child protection social work practice is experienced. The discussion of this single case helps to illuminate the underlying father absence-mother blame paradigm discussed by Strega et al. (2007) and provides food for thought regarding a different approach for child protection social work, inspired by the poverty-aware paradigm (Krumer-Nevo, 2016).

Background

A growing body of research shows tensions and misunderstandings in social work practice between child protection social workers and mothers who have survived gender-based violence (Fleckinger, 2020; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019; Featherstone et al. 2018, Fargion, 2014, Lapierre, 2008). Based on the "three planets model" of Hester (2011), these difficulties result in different approaches ~~and tensions~~ between the planet of child protection, the planet of protection from gender-based violence and the planet of child contact.

International researchers provide evidence of widespread emphasis on mothers in the field of child protection, these being understood as primary caregivers who must bear the entire

responsibility for raising the children whilst fathers are ignored (Sinai-Glaser & Peled, 2016; Mulkeen, 2012; Hester, 2011; Leichentritt, et al., 2011; Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Strega et al., 2007; Mulak, 2006; Dominelli, 2004). Along with this focus on mothers, the dynamics of gender-based violence and its possible repercussions on mothering are in danger of being unacknowledged, resulting in mothers having to deal with unrealistic expectations (Lapierre, 2010). These expectations can include that the mother should take control regarding the violence and immediately leave their violent partner to protect the children, ignoring the evidence that separation significantly increases the risk of femicide (Hester, 2011). The analyses of Strega et al. (2007) have come to a similar conclusion: *'When men batter mothers, the "problem" is also defined in terms of the mother's alleged "failure to protect" rather than in terms of the actions of the perpetrator'* (Strega et al, 2007:707). Failure to protect and child neglect are accusations almost exclusively made against mothers (Badinter, 1991; Mulak, 2006). Referring to the US and Canadian context, Strega et al. (2007) show just how gendered child protection social work can be, as they could not find a single situation where the father was accused of a failure to protect: *'A father or father figure can leave his children without being seen as abandoning them, and can fail to feed, clothe or otherwise care for them without being seen to be neglectful'* (Strega et al., 2007:707).

In parallel to these highly gendered practices, at a linguistic level we can also observe how increasingly neutral terms such as "parents" mask gender-different approaches, apparently trying to refer to an egalitarian idea of caring. Based on an assumed situation of equally shared parenthood, these gender-neutral terms risk reinforcing the tokenism of the neutral assessment made by the child protection social worker. It is therefore crucial to include the knowledge of addressees in order to realise how such genderblind discourses in highly gender-specific contexts might produce new taboos and could aggravate the difficulties faced by mothers as the solely responsible "parent", with the consequent demand for a fairer (i.e. more equal)

assessment of caring responsibilities that takes into account the specific gendered context of the family (Motapanyane, 2016; Hicks, 2015; Lapierre, 2010, Lapierre, 2008)

Anderson (2015) shows that an unarticulated gender-specific approach in child protection social services can be linked to traditional patriarchal gender models. In her critical approach, she sees the adoption of a gender-neutral language within a highly gendered context as a modern misogynist strategy to strengthen androcentric assumptions within a patriarchal society. Decoding gender-specific approaches in child protection social work as a means of reproducing the patriarchal order opens the door to critical reflection of the dominant assumptions regarding good and bad motherhood/fatherhood (Possinger, 2019; Maurer, 2010; Muraro, 2006, Tazi-Preve, 2017 & 2013).

Focusing on the role of mothers, we can observe a general devaluing of mothering activities; i.e. care. (Tronto, 2017; Anderson, 2015; Brown, 2006, Tazi-Preve, 2017). The capitalist division of production vs. reproduction has intensified forms of female exploitation, increasing women's dependency on men (Federici, 2015). This division of work vs. care has been highly gendered from the start and is a key mechanism which, based on the core patriarchal value of androcentrism, legitimises the as female characterized care-work to be devaluated. Alongside the general lack of acknowledgement of care is the assumption that mothers should carry out their unpaid work properly. No particular attention is paid and almost no recognition is given to mothers unless inadequate, failed motherhood is suspected (Brown, 2006).

Based on a critical analysis of patriarchal motherhood (Tazi-Preve, 2013, Mulak, 2006, Badinter, 1991), a brief overview of the current neoliberal shaping of care work and motherhood will be given. Tronto (2017) draws upon three core assumptions which distort care in a neoliberal sense. First, the idea that the market is the best institution to respond to people's needs as they are free to choose. Which is why the emphasis is on (failed) personal responsibility. Second, the assumption that a society works best when rational actors make free

choices to offer responses to people's needs. This suggests that what the market offers for childcare, elderly care and so forth responds exactly to the needs of people. Third, that humans fit best within a capitalist-driven world and the nuclear family is where care is best located. This assumption reinforces the ongoing process of refamiliarisation we can observe globally.

Given that the nuclear family was established as a condition for and a consequence of capitalism (Federici, 2015; Tazi-Preve, 2013; Badinter, 1991), a critical analysis of this neoliberal shaping of care, and particularly of the role expectations of family members, is crucial. O'Reilly (2016), in her matricentric feminist approach, provides a thorough analysis of how mothering shapes women's lives. She highlights discrepancies between the significant gains women have made and the gridlock experienced by mothers. In her analysis of the '*maternal wall*' (O'Reilly, 2016:2) O'Reilly illustrates the actual discourse of normative motherhood, along with what she terms 'the ten ideological assumptions of patriarchal motherhood', namely: '*essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification and depoliticalization of motherhood*' (O'Reilly, 2016:14). These ten assumptions that shape the ideas of good/bad motherhood can also influence the relationship between social worker and addressee, as Flora's story highlights. In particular, the value of normalization '*limits and restricts maternal identity and practice to one specific mode: the nuclear family*' (O'Reilly, 2016:14).

In accordance with these assumptions, single motherhood in itself is a form of deviation that can be equated with failure (Tazi-Preve, 2017). The risk is that, in child protection social services, single mothers can get trapped as they can only fail. According to Strega et al., state child protection social workers tend towards: '*holding mothers responsible even when fathers, or men, are either the source of the problem or, minimally, equally responsible.*' (Strega et al., 2007:6) The researchers gave the practices they observed a very strong name, "the father absence-mother blame paradigm" (Strega et al., 2007). The way this paradigm is perceived by

addressee lies at the heart of this article and provides an important, additional view of a perspective that tends to be hidden.

To guarantee a broader understanding, some insights into the local South Tyrolean context will be given. From a legal point of view, the most relevant laws in the field of child protection in Italy are law 184/83 'Regulations governing the adoption and foster care of minors', and law 54/06 'Provisions on the separation of parents and shared custody of children'. Currently, there is a critical discussion of law 54/06 because of situations in which it was used to introduce and legitimise the concept of PAS (parental alienation syndrome), which is a misogynist way to evaluate maternal behaviour as alienating, connected with masking gender-based violence as "high conflict". When these misogynist approaches influence social work practices, they can cause harm to mothers and children and strengthen the perpetrators (Lapierre et al., 2020). In Italy recently, this indirect application of PAS had been clearly rejected by the Supreme Court of Cassation (Ordinance 13217/2021).

From a cultural point of view in Italy and with a particular focus on South Tyrol, gender-based violence is a widespread phenomenon among all social classes (Astat, 2020; FRA, 2014). From a legal point of view, Italy takes a clear position to end gender-based violence against women. The most significant legal changes had been: law 154/01, which introduced the possibility of temporary removal orders, law 38/09, which recognized stalking as a criminal offense, the law 119/13 against femicide, the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence by law 77/13, as well as the so-called: red codex, law 69/19. Furthermore, in 2017 the Cismai [Italian coordination of services against child maltreatment and abuse] published guidelines defining minimum requirements for social work practice when children witness gender-based violence against their mothers (Cismai, 2017). Irrespective of this, there are still framework conditions in child protection social services that lead to the concealment of gender-based violence. To mention a concrete example regarding the South Tyrolean case recording system, unlike in other regions in Italy

(Cismai et al., 2015), the social worker cannot use gender-based violence as the main reason for taking over a case. As a result, most situations of gender-based violence are declared as ‘family and relational problems’ (Autonome Provinz Bozen, 2017:20), a circumstance that hides gender-based violence and minimises it as a ‘problem’ or ‘conflict’. This concealment poses the risk that the social worker might neither refer to the specific legal framework nor to the minimum requirements when working with women and children that survived gender-based violence.

Method

Prior to presenting Flora’s story and analysing the dynamics of the father absence-mother blame paradigm, some methodological aspects should be mentioned. Flora’s story forms part of a feminist participatory research project that focused on the experiences of single mothers in the child protection social services in South Tyrol, northern Italy. Based on a purposive sample, 24 single mothers were contacted and 14 participated in the research. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted which lasted on average 2½ hours. Recognising the vulnerability of research participants due to the highly sensitive topic and the potential feelings of powerlessness which research participants may have encountered while collaborating with child protection services, ethical considerations were crucial. Based on reflections regarding ethical aspects in feminist research (Kirby et al, 2010, Banks & Brydon-Miller (eds.), 2019), the ethical standards requested by the university were met throughout the research process. Concerning ethical aspects, it is important to emphasise that the participatory approach remains central also for the chosen dissemination strategies.

The specific feminist approach adopted in this analysis is guided by the principles of an intersectional perspective, which emphasises that a holistic understanding of the oppression experienced by women can only be achieved by recognising the intersections of different elements (Crenshaw, 1989). The following relevant categories were identified: survivor of gender-based violence, single mother and addressee of child protection. Furthermore, the

feminist approach that shaped this analysis recognises knowledge as situated (Haraway, 1988) and that the view of marginalised people enables power relations to be discussed from a different perspective. This also entails changing the terminologies used by the research participants as little as possible (Naples & Gurr, 2014; Shpungin et al., 2012, Ossanna, 2011). The interview with Flora lasted 2 hours 38 minutes and was semi-structured, starting with the open question: ‘what experiences have you had with child protection social workers?’ To enable a structured discourse, the researcher could choose from a set of questions to construct the narration when necessary (Kirby et al., 2010). Focusing on Flora's story, the additional questions were: ‘*How many social workers have you been in contact with?*’ and ‘*What did you need from your social workers?*’ To prepare the recorded interview for analysis it was transcribed verbatim.

With the aim of applying a method of analysis consistent with the feminist approach, the voice-centred relational method (VCR) was chosen. This method, developed in feminist educational psychology, is used in feminist research to highlight the voices of research participants, allowing a critical discussion of power dynamics, roles, relationships and the socio-cultural context of the story (Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008). The VCR-method consists of a repetitive process that follows 4 stages of data analysis.

1. The content of the story and who narrates it. In the first cycle the whole story is reflected, the plot and characters are identified, as well as the feelings expressed by the interviewee.
2. Does the interviewee speak about herself in the first or third person? In the second cycle the focus is on the interviewee, attempting to understand how Flora speaks about herself.
3. What does the story tell us about relationships and power dynamics? Who has a voice? Who asks the questions?

4. In which socio-cultural framework is the story narrated? In the last cycle, the focus is on cultural, political and institutional aspects. (Montgomery et al., 2015; Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008; Frost, 2008).

This intensive process of data analysis captured several nuances in Flora's story that will be presented partly in the next chapter and further analysed in the following sections.

Flora's Story

At the moment of the interview Flora was 27 years old and had been in contact with child protection social workers for 2½ years, mainly due to the experiences of gender-based violence she had survived in her relationship with the father of her two children and also to instances of post-separation abuse to which she was still exposed. She changed her social worker six times and gave an overall negative description of her experiences, marked by several moments of feeling misunderstood and powerless.

Flora experienced several forms of violence on a psychological, physiological, and economic level carried out by her partner/father of her children. After a serious incident of physical violence in which Flora was beaten all over her body, her hair pulled and her face scratched in front of her children, she broke her silence regarding the years of violence she had experienced and complained to the local police authority. Directly after the complaint she was given a safe place at a women's shelter together with her children. Child protection social services were informed by the public prosecutor and a social worker started to assess the family situation. Flora remembers her anxiety before her first meeting with her social workers, a feeling that was further confirmed during the conversation. *'They (social workers) asked me why I had two children with a man who beats me, and the other social worker asked me why I hadn't left him before'*. 2½ years after the event, Flora still precisely recalls the questions asked in the first conversation with her first two social workers, who stopped her from building up a relationship of trust and blamed Flora for the violence she had survived.

After a few days at the women's shelter Flora decided to leave and go to her parents, as she felt alone and was suffering from the pain caused by blows to her head. Furthermore, she needed support for her children and felt ashamed of the signs of violence all over her body. This decision was interpreted with scepticism by the public prosecutor and her child protection social worker, as they suspected a possible reunion with the perpetrator. Flora said: *'they were sceptical, but they never asked me about my thoughts and decisions'*.

Despite this difficult start, one of the two social workers took up a clear position during the hearing at the juvenile court some months later. The man/father/perpetrator denied the violence he had allegedly enacted but the social worker stopped his account, referring to the statement given by Flora's son, who had talked about the violence against his mother he had witnessed. At the same time as this trial, a restraining order and prohibition to return to the apartment were pronounced by the criminal court. This allowed Flora and her children to return to their apartment.

Flora remembers the phone call some days later, when her social worker, who had spoken clearly at the court, informed her that she had to hand over the case to her colleague as the man/father/perpetrator was upset because he felt he had been treated unfairly, arguing that the social worker was biased. Although the social worker rejected these accusations, her superior decided to hand over the case, the reason why the second social worker became the new case manager, and another new social worker began to familiarise herself with the family's situation. Some weeks later, the man/father/perpetrator ignored the restraining order and tried to enter the apartment by force while Flora and her children were there. As Flora explained, this was a well-planned assault, as the man/father/perpetrator had tried to create an alibi for himself. He had registered at the A&E department of the hospital, knowing the long waiting times, and had then driven immediately afterwards to Flora's apartment, where he first slashed the tyres on Flora's car and then tried to force his way into the apartment. He destroyed the shutters that Flora had closed to protect herself and her children, turned off the power and banged against the door.

The police arrived and arrested him in the act. Despite the bad fright, no physical harm was caused to Flora and her children. Flora, referring to his alibi strategy, said: '*...imagine if they hadn't caught him... no-one would have believed anything I said...no-one...*'. Her social worker was also informed by the public authorities about this incident. As the new case manager, she immediately wrote a report to the juvenile court, without speaking beforehand to Flora.

In this report, the social worker pressed for immediate removal of the children, to place them in foster care, arguing that the mother had failed to protect them. She informed the judge that she had already enrolled the son in a school and the daughter in a kindergarten in a location that is approx. 60 km from the mother's home. In a longer discussion with the judge, with the support of Flora's lawyer, a compromise was found with Flora moving to the next women's shelter to stay with her children. '*... and then I had to move to a women's shelter, just so they wouldn't take the children away from me...*' (Flora).

Regarding the man/father/perpetrator, he suffered relatively minor consequences. One of these was that he could only see his children accompanied. At the same time, neither the social worker nor the court requested any alimony payments from him in the first year of separation and, at the time of the interview, the criminal court's judgement was still pending. Furthermore, it was never verified whether he had actually attended the perpetrator programme, as ordered by the court.

After 3 months the social worker changed again. This time Flora was very happy with her new social worker as she took up a clear position to protect Flora and her children from further violent episodes and requested the man/father/perpetrator should assume responsibility for his behaviour. Due to diverse subtle forms of post-separation abuse, the new social worker was highly critical of the accompanied visits between the father and children, evaluating whether these should be temporarily stopped.

About 5 months after this new social worker had started working with the family, she was forced to hand over the case because the man/father/perpetrator started stalking and threatening

her and her family. Flora stated '*...they were all very scared of him...*'. The new social worker changed the evaluation of her predecessor without ever having seen the children and reported to the court that the supervised visits were going well and that no further supervision was required. As a result, the man/father/perpetrator was able to spend more time alone with the children and Flora was resigned, knowing that she could not protect her children any longer. Flora said to her 5th social worker '*if you give the children to such a person and my children end up in psychiatry at the age of 18, then it's your fault*'

Findings

The following figure illustrates the four-step analytical cycle. Based on the focus of each stage, four themes were identified. These are entitled: Flora's narrative of her experiences, Flora's narrative of herself, Flora's narrative of the relationships with child protection social workers and Flora's narrative of the context. All these themes echoed aspects of the 'father absence – mother blame' paradigm' described in the literature, significantly conforming to the construct of a good and bad mother. This overarching link provided a particular frame of reference for Flora's experiences, as well as enabling a discussion of the interconnections and reciprocal shaping of these themes.

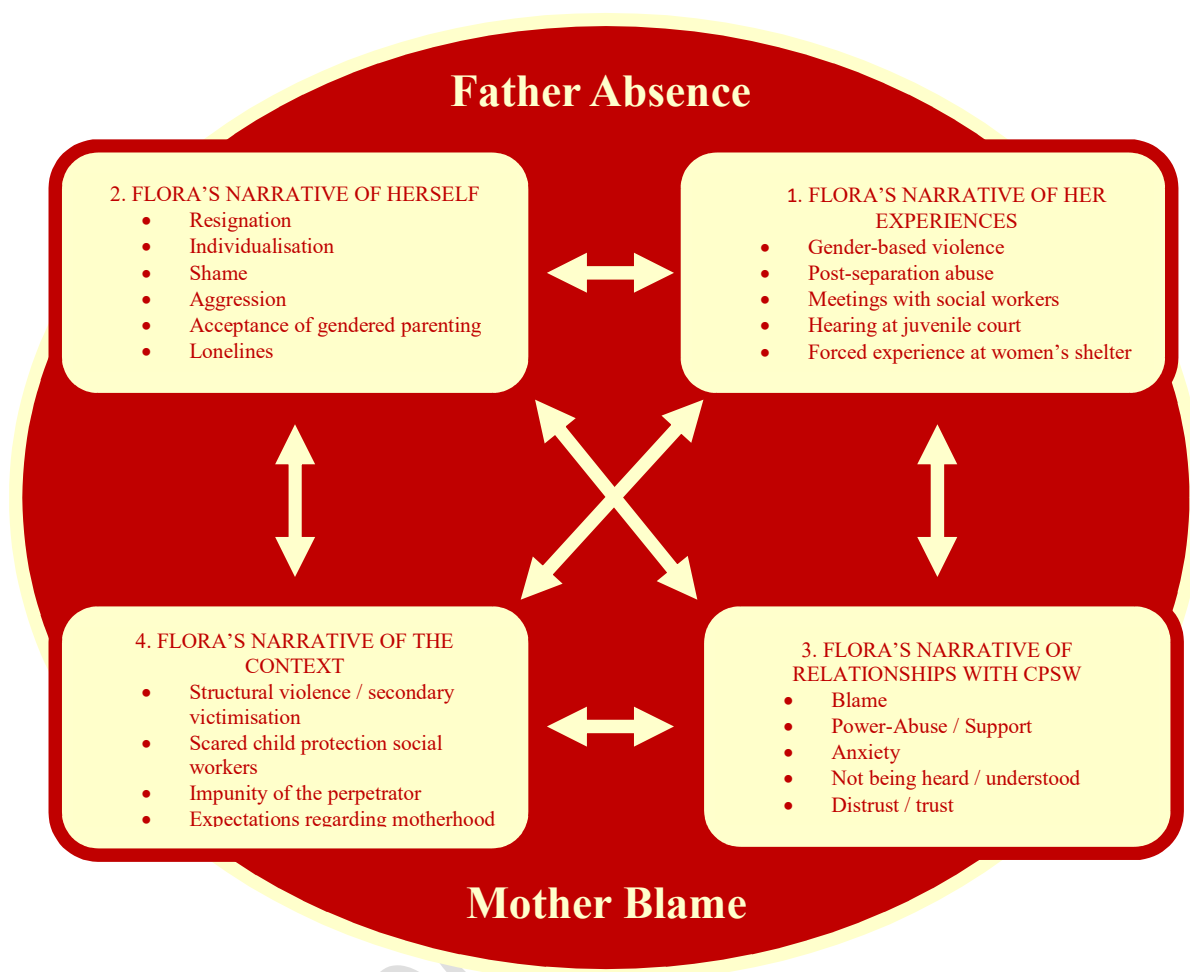


Fig. 1 Representation of the analytical cycle

As indicated by the work of Sinai-Glaser & Peled, 2016; O'Reilly 2016, Mulkeen, 2012; Hester, 2011; Leichentritt, et al., 2011; Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Strega et al., 2007; Mulak, 2006 and Dominelli, 2004, Flora experienced forms of individualisation, becoming solely responsible for her children. Flora felt accused of failing to protect them, this echoes the highly gendered practices in the field of child protection (Brown, 2006, Tazi-Preve, 2017). Furthermore, strong parallels can be drawn to the three planets model discussed by Hester (2011), in which the child protection planet is in danger of ignoring the dynamics of gender-based violence.

The Father Absence-Mother Blame Paradigm

The following presentation and discussion of the findings is centred on the overarching link identified; i.e. the 'father absence – mother-blame paradigm'. Based on the assumption that a deep understanding forms the basis for change, the challenge was to find a way to systematically analyse this underlying paradigm that has significantly shaped Flora's experiences but without jumping into an overly theoretical discussion, ensuring a strong connection to Flora's voice as well as her strategies to cope with the situation.

Particularly helpful was the method adopted by Krumer-Nevo (2016) in developing the poverty-aware paradigm, also discussed later, in relation to child protection social services, by Saar-Heiman & Gupta (2019). According to this method of analysis, a paradigm is '*...a comprehensive set of basic beliefs ... that deal with primary principles...and connects ideas regarding the nature of the world (ontological notions), the ways knowledge is acquired (epistemological notions), and ethics (axiological notions).*' (Krumer-Nevo, 2016:1794). Every paradigm is in equilibrium and its elements shape the way it is experienced. To achieve greater understanding, it could be helpful to divide up the father absence-mother blame paradigm and focus on its ontological, epistemological and axiological notions, connecting these constantly to Flora's narratives.

Ontological notions

The ontological notion of the father absence-mother blame paradigm attempts to understand the "nature" of the family and the "natural" roles within a family. Across all four themes we can observe that the naturalness of the nuclear family is unquestioned. The mother-father-child triad, understood as the correct family model, forms part of Flora's personal perceptions, shapes the relationship with her social workers and is reinforced by the cultural context. Flora indirectly refers to this importance of the nuclear family when she says that: '*they (social*

workers) *don't want you to separate*'. Along with this ideal come gender-focused role stereotypes based on patriarchal-androcentric assumptions regarding the nature of women and men that form the neoliberal perspective on motherhood (O'Reilly, 2016). In Flora's narrative, elements of individualisation, essentialisation, naturalisation and normalisation of motherhood became evident. Flora bears full responsibility for the upbringing, education, and care of her children. A responsibility with ambiguous elements as Flora, according to her self-description, identified with these gendered role expectations, her belief of being entirely responsible becoming distorted to feelings of entire guilt. This implies that, if the children are in need, Flora must meet these needs, or the state takes over.

Meanwhile, the father has the possibility of caring for the children but does not have to and, as he bears no responsibility, he cannot fail as a father (Mulak, 2006). At the same time, to keep up the ideal of the mother-father-child triad, the man/father/perpetrator enjoyed impunity as his violent behaviour was disregarded. Thus, the prerequisites for shared legal custody were met and continuous contact between children and father took place. As Hester (2011) explained, the legal framework reflects what, for the state, are the child's best interests. Embedded within a patriarchal ideology, implicit androcentric role models shape the application of laws as already critically discussed above.

Epistemological notions

On analysing the epistemological aspects of the father absence-mother blame paradigm that deal with the ways knowledge is acquired, Flora's experiences evidence a risk-focused approach. This connects to the observations made by several researchers of how patriarchal-capitalist-neoliberal states tend towards a risk-focused paradigm in the field of child protection (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019; Fargion, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018). The needs of the family as a whole and of its individual members run the risk of fading into the background due to positivist risk assessment tools based on assumed objective criteria. Fargion (2014) reflected critically: *'The legalistic side implies that... someone must be blamed, and even punished.'*

(Fargion, 2014: 25). Flora's narrative highlights elements of individualised responsibility and guilt that could be connected to the epistemological notions of the father absence-mother blame paradigm. In accordance with the ontological notions discussed earlier, this illustrates further how it was possible to place the blame on Flora as the sole person responsible. A failure which Flora felt accused of from the first meeting onwards, when her irresponsible behaviour of having children with a violent partner was questioned, and up to the report in which the social worker asked for the children to be placed in foster care because of Flora's failure to protect them. An important intermediate step for individualisation that characterises risk assessment practices is to split the family into its constituent parts along patriarchal role expectations. To individuate Flora's personal failure to protect her children it was important to decontextualise the dynamics of gender-based violence and place it within the family, shifting this from a social, public problem back into a private one.

Furthermore, such decontextualization was important in enabling the dynamics of post-separation abuse to be ignored. The standardised assumption of the best interests of the child i.e. every child needs his/her biological father irrespective of his behaviour, shaped Flora's as well as her children's experiences and enabled continuous visits between father and children.

Additionally, Flora's experiences highlight how positivist, objective risk assessments limit a co-constructed knowledge production and make the specific knowledge of addresses irrelevant.

Neither Flora nor the children were heard by the social worker when she asked to have them placed in foster care, nor when the other social worker decided that no further supervision of visits between father and children was necessary. Flora adopted several strategies to cope with her experiences of not being heard, ranging from resignation and aggression to feeling guilty and powerless. With reference to her 2nd social worker, who advocated the out-of-home placement of her children, Flora said: *'that was so cruel; she destroyed me'*.

The epistemological perspective helps to understand these moments of not being heard or understood that Flora mentioned. Flora describes the impossibility of herself or her children

having a say linked to her experiences of guilt and blame *'everything you do is wrong. If you say too much to the children, then they (social workers) would say the mum is trying to force the children to the visits, but if the children don't want to go to visit their father, that's because you're not doing enough...so whatever you do, it's always wrong.'*

Over the years, Flora adopted various strategies to cope with this situation and searched actively for ways to be heard. In particular, she described an episode of direct aggression towards her social workers, when she raised her voice once to communicate her disapproval: *'then you can tear down the poster out there (posters on children's rights hanging in the hallway of the building)... you don't give a shit, so that's exactly the situation we're in right now!'*

Axiological notions

When discussing the axiological aspects of the father absence-mother blame paradigm, the focus is on how Flora experienced the position taken up by her social workers and the connections that can be drawn regarding the ethical elements of a professional attitude. The axiological perspective provides additional understanding of Flora's experiences and the constructions encountered of a good and bad mother. The processes of splitting up the family are also linked to a professional stance that may lead child protection social workers to perceive themselves as "the social worker for the child" (Fargion, 2014). This exclusive focus on the children means that the responsible parent i.e. the mother, may be seen as a potentially harmful element from whom the children need to be protected (Brown, 2006). This aspect explains, to some extent, the inner logic at work when identifying a possible failure to protect or neglectful motherhood. Additionally, an exclusive focus on the child justifies ignoring the dynamics of gender-based violence, reframing this as a relationship issue. Such decontextualisation is crucial to maintain the focus on the mother's failure to protect (Hester, 2011).

Implications for Social Work Practice

Flora's story provides great insight into how social work in the field of child protection is experienced by addressees of the service. Connecting to international research this feminist

single case analysis cannot be described as a one-off or special case but rather forms part of a series of harmful child protection practices (Featherstone et al., 2018; Fargion, 2014; Hester, 2011; Mulkeen, 2012; Lapierre, 2010; Brown, 2006). Given such a complex paradigm, a structured, holistic response needs to be generated. Therefore, further research on the experiences of social workers is required, to work from a multidimensional perspective on possible solutions.

This paper attempts to provide an impetus for further discussion and the development of the necessary paradigm shift.

The poverty-aware-paradigm (Krumer-Nevo, 2016) and its specific discussion within the context of child protection (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019), emphasising at an ontological level the centrality of a human rights perspective, are of particular inspiration. In relation to the strongly androcentric assumptions that are present in the father absence-mother blame paradigm, it might not be enough to talk about a human rights perspective; however, it is important to remember that human rights also apply to women. The analysis of Flora's story has uncovered these rarely articulated and hidden dynamics and has therefore contributed to a deeper understanding of the specific androcentric symbolic order (Muraro, 2006) and the consequences of a neoliberal perspective of care (Tronto, 2017). Irrespective of whether this shift from androcentrism toward a gender-egalitarian model is adopted radically or gradually, one important initial step could be to refuse gender-blind discourses. As discussed earlier, gender-blind terminology can be understood as a modern misogynist method to strengthen androcentric concepts (Anderson, 2015).

At an epistemological level, we can draw upon the poverty-aware-paradigm which shows the importance of a needs-oriented epistemology, in which the creation of knowledge is relationship-based, and standardisation is kept at a critical distance. This entails critical reflection of the power dynamics and incorporating the knowledge of addressees in decision-making processes (Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019). Furthermore,

importance is given to a context-sensitive approach which takes account of the dynamics of gender-based violence. Along the lines of Hester (2011), this could be implemented through a coordinated multi-agency network.

At an axiological level, both Krumer-Nevo (2016) and Saar-Heiman & Gupta (2019) argue for ethics of solidarity, adopting an approach of advocacy that minimises othering; i.e. an ethical approach that connects with principles of feminist social work in which advocacy is a core element.

Although this paper has focused on the dominant aspect within Flora's story, i.e. the father absence-mother blame paradigm, her positive accounts show traces of how interventions by social workers could be experienced as helpful support. Such best practices can be individuated looking at Flora's narrative of her first and third social worker, who both had to hand over the case to someone else because of threats received from the man/father/perpetrator. On closer examination, her positive experiences are related to a feeling of being heard, understood, and taken seriously. In summary, Flora's positive and negative accounts highlight the importance of the addressee's knowledge as a crucial element for understanding social work and thereby encouraging the development of more supportive practices.

Acknowledgments

The author reports no conflicts of interest.

Notes on the contributor

Andrea Fleckinger is a post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies in the Sociology and Social Research department at the University of Trento (I). She worked for 13 years as a social worker: first at a women's shelter, supporting women and children who survived gender-based violence, and then as part of a child protection service. Her research projects adopt a feminist approach and focus on gender-based violence, social work

practices, care, mothering, and the possibilities for social change. As a feminist and activist, she promotes social transformation, inspired by contemporary egalitarian societies of peace.

References

Anderson, K.J. (2015). *Modern Misogyny: Anti-feminism in a post-feminist era*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Anhorn, R. & Balzereit, M. (Hrsg.) (2016). *Handbuch Therapeutisierung und Soziale Arbeit*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Astat, Landesinstitut für Statistik. (2020). *Gewalt an Frauen: Frauenhäuser und Kontaktstellen gegen Gewalt – 2019 und 2020*. Online [30.11.2021] https://astat.provinz.bz.it/de/aktuelles-publikationen-info.asp?news_action=4&news_article_id=645838.

Autonome Provinz Bozen, Abteilung 24. (2017). *Sozialstatistiken*. Online [30.11.19] <https://www.provinz.bz.it/familie-soziales-gemeinschaft/soziales/veroeffentlichungen-statistiken/veroeffentlichungen.asp>.

Badinter, E. (1991). *Die Mutterliebe: Geschichte eines Gefühls vom 17. Jahrhundert bis heute*. Munich: Piper & Co.

Banks, S. & Brydon-Miller, M. (eds.) (2019). *Ethics in participatory research for health and social well-being: Cases and commentaries*. London: Routledge.

Bertotti, T. (2016). Resources reduction and welfare changes: tension between social worker and organizations. The Italian case in child protection services. *European Journal of Social Work*, 19:6, 963-976. DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2015.1030363.

Brandt, S., Roose, R. & Verschelden, G. (2019). The caged bird sings: the voice of the workfare generation. *British Journal of Social Work*. 0. 1-18. Doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcz101.

Brown, D. J. (2006). Working the System: Re-Thinking the Institutionally Organized Role of Mothers and the Reduction of "Risk" in Child Protection Work. *Social Problems*, 53(3), 352-370. Doi: 10.1525/sp.2006.53.3.352.

- Cismai. (2017). *Requisiti minimi degli interventi nei casi di violenza assistita da maltrattamento sulle madri*. Online [02.02.2022]: https://cismai.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Opuscolo_ViolenzaAssistita_Bassa.pdf.
- Cismai, Autorità garante per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza, Fondazione terre des hommes. (2015). *Indagine nazionale sul maltrattamento dei bambini e degli adolescenti in Italia: Risultati e prospettive*. Online [10.10.2021]: <https://cismai.it/documento/indagine-nazionale-sul-maltrattamento-dei-bambini-e-degli-adolescenti/>.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of Race and Sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1(8). 193-167.
- Dominelli, L. (2004). *Il nuovo femminismo nel servizio sociale*. Trento: Edizioni Erikson.
- Douglas, H. & Walsh, T. (2010). Mothers, Domestic Violence, and Child Protection. *Violence Against Women*. 16(5), 489-508. Doi: 10.1177/1077801210365887.
- Fargion, S. (2014). Synergies and tensions in child protection and parent support: Policy lines and practitioners' cultures. *Child and Family Social Work*, 19(1), 24-33. Doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00877.x.
- Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K. & Warner, J. (2018). Let's stop feeding the risk monster: Towards a social model of "child protection". *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 7(1), 7-22. Doi: 10.1332/204674316X14552878034622.
- Federici, S. (2015). *Caliban und die Hexe: Frauen, der Körper und die ursprüngliche Akkumulation*. Wien: Mandelbaum.
- Fleckinger, A. (2019). Child protection and gender-based violence: How to prevent the risk of secondary victimization? *Czech and Slovak Social Work –Eris Journal Summer*, 4, 4–18.
- Fleckinger, A. (2020). The dynamics of secondary victimization: When social workers blame mothers. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 30(5), 515-523. DOI: 10.1177/1049731519898525.

- Folgheraiter, F. (2011). Reti e facilitazioni di reti nella tutela dei minori. In P. Donati, F. Folgheraiter & M.L. Rainier (eds.) *La tutela dei minori: nuovi scenari relazionali*. 64-71. Trento: Erikson.
- FRA, European union fundamental rights agency. (2014). *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Main results*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Frost, J. (2008). Combining approaches to qualitative data analysis: Synthesizing the mechanical (CAQDAS) with the thematic (a voice-centered relational approach). *Methodological Innovations Online*, 3(1), 25-37. DOI: 10.4256/mio.2008.0008.
- Gupta, A., Blumhardt, H. & ATD Fourth World. (2018). Poverty, exclusion and child protection practice: The contribution of the politics of recognition & respect. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(2), 247-259. Doi: 10.1080/13691457.2017.1287669.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of a partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Hester, M. (2011). The three planets model: Towards an understanding of contradictions in approaches to women and children's safety in contexts of domestic violence. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(5), 837-853. Doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcr095.
- Hicks, S. (2015). Social work and gender: An argument for practical accounts. *Qualitative Social Work*, 14(4), 471-487. Doi: 10.1177/1473325014558665.
- Kirby, S.L., Greaves, L. & Reid, C. (2010). *Experience research social change: Methods beyond the mainstream. 2nd edition*. Ontario NY: University of Toronto Press.
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2016). Poverty-aware social work: A paradigm for social work practice with people in poverty. *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(6), 1793-1808. Doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcv118.
- Lapierre, S. (2008). Mothering in the context of domestic violence: The pervasiveness of a deficit model of mothering. *Child & Family Social Work*, 13(4), 454-463. Doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00563.x.

- Lapierre, S. (2010) Striving to be a “good” mother: Abused women’s experiences of mothering. *Child-Abuse-Review*. 19(5). 342-357. Doi: 10.1002/car.1113.
- Lapierre, S., Ladouceur, P., Frenette, M. & Côté, I. (2020). The legitimization and institutionalization of ‘parental alienation’ in the Province of Quebec. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 42:1,30-44, DOI: 10.1080/09649069.2019.1701922.
- Leichentritt R., Davidson-Arad, B. & Peled, E. (2011). Construction of Court Petitions in Cases of Alternative Placement of Children at Risk: Meaning-Making Strategies That Social Workers Use to Shape Court Decisions. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81(3), 372–381.
- Motapanyane, M. (ed.) (2016). *Motherhood and Single-Lone Parenting: A twenty-first century perspective*. Bradford: Demeter press.
- Montgomery, E., Pope, C. & Rogers, J. (2015). A feminist narrative study of the maternity care of women who were sexually abused in childhood. *Midwifery*. 31(1). 54-60. Doi: 10.1016/j.midw.2014.05.010.
- Mulak, C. (2006). *Der Mutterschaftsbetrug: Vom Unwert zum Mehrwert des Mutterseins*. Ebersdorf: 1-2 Buch.de.
- Mulkeen, M. (2012). Gendered processes in child protection: Mother-blaming and the erosion of men's accountability. *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*. 12(1). 74-88. Doi: 10.2142/D7H721.
- Muraro, L. (2006). *L'ordine simbolico della madre*. Rome: Editori riuniti.
- Naples, N.A. & Gurr, B. (2014). Feminist empiricism and standpoint theory. In: S. Hesse-Biber, (ed.) *Feminist research practice: A primer*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Ossanna, M. (2011). *Il politico è personale: Percorsi di femminismo nelle donne di nuova generazione*. Roma: Carocci editore.
- O’Reilly, A. (2016). *Matricentric feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice*. Bradford: Demeter Press.

- Paliadelis, P. & Cruickshank, M. (2008). Using a Voice-Centered Relational Method of Data Analysis in a Feminist Study Exploring the Working World of Nursing Unit Managers. *Qualitative Health Research*. 18(10) 1444-1453. Doi: 10.1177/1049732308322606.
- Pentini, A. & Lorenz, W. (2020). The Corona crisis and the erosion of 'the social': Giving a decisive voice to the social professions. *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(4), 543-553, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2020.1783215.
- Possinger, J. (2019). Familie: Wandel und Persistenz von Geschlecht in der Institution Familie. In: B. Kortendiek, B. Riegraf, K. Sabisch (Hrsg.), *Handbuch Interdisziplinäre Geschlechterforschung: Geschlecht und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 65. 1281-1290. Springer VS, Wiesbaden. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-658-12496-0_89.
- Maurer, S. (2010). Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen GeschlechterUnOrdnung? Eine Zukunftsvision Sozialer Arbeit. In C. Engelfried & C. Voigt-Kehlenbeck (Hrsg.), *Gendered Profession: Soziale Arbeit vor neuen Herausforderungen in der zweiten Moderne*. 193-212. Springer Fachmedien: Wiesbaden.
- Nakagawa, S. (2016). Single mother's activism against poverty governance in the U.S. child welfare system. In M. Motapanyane (ed.) *Motherhood and single-lone parenting: A twenty-first century perspective*. 335-366. Bradford: Demeter.
- Saar-Heiman, Y. & Gupta, A. (2019). The poverty-aware paradigm for child protection: A critical framework for policy and practice. *British Journal of Social Work*. 0, 1-18. Doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcz093.
- Sinai-Glazer, H. & Peled, E. (2016). The perceptions of motherhood among family social workers in social services departments in Israel. *British Journal of Social Work*. 47. 1482-1499. DOI:10.1093/bjsw/bcw111.
- Shpungin, E., Allen, N, Loomis, C. & Dello Stritto, M. (2012). Keeping the spirit alive: Using feminist methodology to address silencing as a structural issue. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 40(1) 44-61. doi:10.1002/jcop.20481.

Strega, S., Fleet, C., Brown, L., Dominelli, L., Callahan, M. & Walmsley, C. (2007). Connecting father absence and mother blame in child welfare policies and practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(7), 705-716. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.11.012.

Specht, H. & Courtney, M.E. (1994). *Unfaithful angels: How social work has abandoned its mission*. New York: Free Press.

Tazi-Preve, M.I. (2017). *Das Versagen der Kleinfamilie: Kapitalismus, Liebe und der Staat*. Opladen, Berlin & Toronto: Barbara Budrich.

Tazi-Preve, M.I. (2013). *Motherhood in patriarchy: Animosity toward mothers in politics and feminist theory – proposals for change*. Opladen, Berlin & Toronto: Barbara Budrich.

Tronto, J. (2017). There is an alternative: Homines curans and the limits of neoliberalism. *International Journal of Care and Caring*, 1(1), 27–43. DOI:10.1332/239788217X14866281687583.

Waterhouse, L. & McGhee, J. (2016). Agamben and the political positioning of child welfare-involved mothers in child protective services. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 5(1), 97-108. DOI: 10.1332/204674314X14041323069042.