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Challenging Belief Systems and Professional Perspectives to Protect Children from Harm

New Beginnings

Forty years ago, a small group of leading child protection professionals and academics came together to found BASPCAN, the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. Their aims were to provide education and professional development opportunities for those working in the child protection field, and to educate and inform the public about safeguarding. For most of this time, the official journal of BASPCAN, *Child Abuse Review*, has been central to achieving these aims.

Now, with this first issue of 2019, we are launching a new look for the Association (now the Association for Child Protection Professionals) and for the journal. In an accompanying news piece, Colean Camp and Wendy Thorogood (2019) explain a bit more about the changes for the Association and some of the exciting developments that we can look forward to.

From the perspective of the journal, we want to ensure that *Child Abuse Review* continues to contribute to those enduring aims of providing education and professional development for all those working in the child protection field, through publishing rigorous original research, comprehensive reviews of the scientific literature, book reviews and training updates, and commentaries on policy and practice.

With this first issue of 2019, we are also launching our brand new Continuing Professional Development (CPD) section. These papers are intended to distil the essentials of what practitioners/clinicians need to know about a particular area of practice. They should help practitioners review and reflect on what they have learnt and may be used to provide evidence for the purposes of professional revalidation or accreditation. Our first paper in this section (located towards the back of the issue, along with book reviews) is from Wendy Marsh and Jan Leamon (2019) and explores the issues faced by mothers who have their babies removed at birth. The authors take a sensitive and compassionate approach to exploring the complex grief experienced by mothers in this situation and some of the coping strategies that these mothers can resort to – not all of which will necessarily sit well with professionals whose primary aim is to safeguard the wellbeing of children. The dilemmas faced by professionals in these situations were eloquently picked up in a study

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Editorial

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of midwives working with vulnerable pregnant women in New South Wales published in *Child Abuse Review* (Everitt *et al.*, 2017). As professionals in the child protection field, we will continue to be faced with situations where the removal of a child is necessary. Nevertheless, Marsh and Leamon's paper provides compelling arguments for the importance of understanding what mothers in this situation are going through, and our moral and ethical responsibility to support mothers after the removal of a child. As the authors point out,

‘A woman's desire for a repeat pregnancy in order to replace her baby is common, as is attempting to evade detection from authorities and to keep her baby by not engaging with services’ (Marsh and Leamon, 2019, p. 84).

Marsh and Leamon end their CPD paper with a link to a powerful video of one mother's experience of having her child removed. I would encourage all our readers to read this paper and watch the video, and to take the opportunity to reflect and learn.

Faith, Beliefs, Religion and Culture

We start this issue with a review and two original research papers that tackle uncomfortable issues around faith and beliefs, and their potential for harm. Between them, they highlight again how, while keeping our focus on the wellbeing of the child, a deeper understanding of an individual's belief systems (even where these may differ considerably from our own) could help us in our efforts to protect children from harm.

In a deeply disturbing conceptual review, Julie Taylor and colleagues (2019) explore the vulnerability of children with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa. As well as their inherent vulnerability as children and the impairments caused by their albinism, the authors point out how these children

‘may face a society that demonises, marginalises, stigmatises and discriminates against [them], especially in rural areas where myths abound and traditional healers are very powerful’ (Taylor *et al.*, 2019, p. 14).

The very visible difference in appearance of these children may lead to them being rejected or ostracised as their albinism may be perceived by their family and society as somehow cursed. Even more disturbingly, though, are beliefs that their body parts may somehow bring good fortune, so they may be abused, mutilated and killed to obtain such ‘good luck’ charms. This presents a very complex and concerning situation which we in the West may find difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend – one in which deep-seated beliefs, differences in culture and society, and other socio-economic factors all interact to create situations of vulnerability and risk. Taylor and colleagues (2019) highlight the lack of research in this area, and that the voices of children with albinism are virtually unheard. They provide a useful framework of otherness, watchfulness and agency, which may help in gaining a deeper understanding of the vulnerability and needs of these children and their families, and of what they, their communities and others can do to respond to these abuses.

The beliefs and abuses documented in Taylor and colleagues' (2019) review may seem a world away from the contexts within which most of us are practising, although, even in the UK, children have been harmed and killed in situations in which beliefs in witchcraft or spirit possession have played a part (HM Government, 2007; Stobart, 2006). What may be far more common, though, even less well recognised, and potentially harder to address are less extreme situations of abuse and neglect linked to faith or belief. This forms the subject of an original research paper by Lisa Oakley and colleagues (2019) from the National Working Group on Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief and the Victoria Climbié Foundation. The authors report on an online survey completed by 1361 participants from a range of practitioner and community groups. Data from the Department for Education indicate that there were 1460 children who were identified as having experienced child abuse linked to faith or belief in 2016–17 (HM Government, 2017). As Oakley and colleagues point out, such cases are not limited to extreme beliefs in witchcraft or spirit possession, but include cases of medical neglect and excessive physical punishment. Within this context, the increased focus on safeguarding within faith communities is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, in their survey, the authors identified a lack of confidence among practitioners, community groups and faith groups in how to recognise and respond to cases of child abuse linked to faith or belief. Narrative responses to the survey identified significant challenges to multiagency working in this area. Respondents identified 'a perceived mistrust of statutory agencies by faith communities' and 'negative perceptions from frontline practitioners of any individual holding a faith or belief' (Oakley *et al.*, 2019, p. 33).

Building on an earlier National Action Plan (Department for Education, 2012), Oakley and colleagues (2019) identify a need for much more research in this area, along with greater dialogue between statutory and voluntary agencies and faith communities, increased faith literacy training for frontline practitioners and the adoption of a broader definition of child abuse linked to faith and belief.

Part of this broader definition could include the issues of clerical institutional child abuse and the interaction of belief systems, power and control within the church. The harm caused by such institutional abuse is now well recognised, although there is still a long way to go in terms of how the church and society respond to harms caused in the past and safeguard against similar abuse happening now (Harper and Perkins, 2018). In our next research paper, Jeff Moore and colleagues (2019) look at the experiences of 102 Irish survivors of clerical institutional child abuse and factors that have helped with their resilience. This expands and builds on some earlier work by the same group on resilience among emigrant survivors of institutional abuse (Moore *et al.*, 2017). Interestingly, Moore and colleagues (2019) identified an important resilience-enhancing effect of migration from Ireland to the UK, along with informal instrumental support, social inclusion and personal skills such as problem-focused coping, altruism and defiance as key factors in promoting mental wellbeing. The authors postulate that moving away from the country of their abuse enabled survivors 'to negotiate a social identity that was not defined solely by an abusive childhood' (Moore *et al.*, 2019, p. 63). There may be much wider lessons here for how we support young people who have experienced abuse of all kinds (and perhaps particularly those who

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have experienced abuse linked to faith or belief) in building resilience and coping with the trauma that they have experienced.

Domestic Violence and Substance Misuse: Working with Vulnerable Families

Our next two research papers address practitioner issues in working with two common situations of family vulnerability: domestic violence and substance misuse. Both, interestingly, address some of the underlying belief systems that we, as practitioners, may hold – in the words of Jessica Wagner and colleagues (2019):

‘Preconceived ideas can lead to prejudice and consequently to discrimination; practitioners' preconceived ideas may, even unconsciously, affect their thinking, their assessment and finally the service that they may ‘gate keep’ or offer.’ (p. 40)

Wagner and her colleagues report on a UK-based qualitative research study exploring the views and experiences of practitioners working with adult victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. In particular, they looked at practitioners' understanding of social learning theory and other issues that may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of violence. In keeping with current understanding and research, they found that their respondents did not accept simplistic theories that those exposed to domestic abuse in childhood will inevitably go on to experience violent relationships (either as victims or perpetrators) in adult life, but that the issues are far more nuanced and complex. While social learning theory may offer ‘a perspective informed by the normalisation of abusive behaviour and a distorted understanding of what is and is not abusive’ (Wagner *et al.*, 2019, p. 48), this is far from being a full explanation. While witnessing domestic violence undoubtedly affects children's confidence, self-esteem and attachments, each child is an individual, and we know that many will show incredible resilience, even in the face of quite extreme distorted relationships. Recognising the individuality of service users, their unique and complex life stories can help practitioners to respond in a more flexible and holistic way to meeting their needs.

A similar perspective was found in relation to families with parental substance misuse by Karen Hanson and colleagues (2019) from the State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families and the Yale Child Study Center. They report on the development and implementation of a novel treatment model: Family-Based Recovery. Fundamental to their approach is a shift from focusing exclusively on the physical safety of the child to also considering their psychological safety and wellbeing, and seeking positive family outcomes by addressing the intergenerational impact of trauma and substance use. They report on a promising approach that has enabled more children to be kept within their families with appropriate clinical support and by approaching recovery from a substance use disorder with the patience needed to treat a chronic health condition. This balance is not easy to achieve well given the safety and developmental needs of children, but the model from the Connecticut team seems promising and ties in with the perspectives explored in last year's special issue of *Child Abuse Review* (volume 27, issue

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4) on innovations in the assessment and treatment of families with parental substance misuse. As Dawe and McMahon (2018) pointed out in their editorial for that issue,

‘Sustained engagement in substance use treatment, particularly family-oriented substance use treatment, may decrease the probability of removal and increase the probability of reunification if children must be removed.’ (p. 261)

Both these papers challenge us to reflect on our own beliefs and perspectives as we work with vulnerable children and families. As with the earlier papers on faith and beliefs and our final CPD paper on mothers who have their children removed, they highlight that we all – practitioners, researchers and the families who we work with – hold belief systems and perspectives that can influence how we work together to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children.

We end this issue with two book reviews that tie in well with these themes. Catherine Ellis (2019) reviews *Effective Family Support: Responding to What Parents Tell Us* by Cheryl Burgess and colleagues. They highlight the insights into the experiences of parents and carers involved with statutory services. This book would be a great place to go in exploring further some of the issues identified in Marsh and Leamon's (2019) CPD paper. Finally, Pauline Galluccio (2019) reviews Elaine Storkey's *Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women*. The book presents real and often shocking stories from women across the world, setting these within a context of faith and beliefs, perspectives that may well resonate with those expressed by Taylor and Colleagues (2019) and Oakley and Colleagues (2019).

‘We all... hold belief systems and perspectives that can influence how we work together to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children’

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