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Participation and Child Protection: The Importance of Context

KAREN HEALY ✉

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Abstract

SUMMARY

This paper examines the effects of discourses about participation on child

protection practice. The paper critiques the prevalent conceptualizations of participation on the grounds that, often, these ideals have been imported from other disciplines without due regard for the specificities of child protection practice. Initially, the critique is focused on how participatory discourses have resisted adaption to the child protection field. For example, participation and paternalism are often paired dualistically, with the consequence that participation is seen as an unquestionable good, whilst practices that do not conform to this ideal are associated with paternalism and considered to be antithetical to just child protection practice. By examining some of the typical responses, within the child protection literature and amongst child protection professionals, to the prevalent discourses about participation it is argued that these discourses have actually thwarted the development of participatory processes in child protection work. This is because these discourses do not engage with the expectations associated with child protection work, particularly the use of statutory power that such practice demands. The final part of the paper identifies how post-structural theory, particularly the work of Foucault, can highlight and dismantle some of the assumptions about power on which participatory models have rested and allow for the development of a participatory ethos which is receptive to the specificities of child protection work.

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