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Title: Containment - exploring the concept of agency in children's statutory encounters with social workers

Keywords: Agency, Social Work, Sociology of Childhood, Ethnography, Containment

Abstract

This article examines children's agency in their interactions with social workers during statutory encounters in a child protection context. It draws from a UK wide ethnographic study. It finds that much of social workers' responses to children's agency in this context are best understood as a form of 'containment'. In doing so, it offers an original and significant contribution to the theoretical understanding of children's agency, as well as its application in social work practice.

Introduction

The focus on children's agency has been one of the most significant theoretical developments in the discipline of childhood studies (James, 2009; Esser et al, 2016). It challenged much of the psychological determinism that had previously dominated ways of thinking about children and led to new questions being asked about how adults consider children's competence, autonomy and capacity for influence and action. While the concept of children's agency is often celebrated in childhood studies, it is not one that is without contention. This is apparent in the now-familiar debate about how far children's rights to protection may be reconciled with their rights to participation (Marshall, 1997).

To date, there has been little examination of children's agency in relation to social work practice. The research that exists has tended to focus on children's participation in formal proceedings such as children's hearings or case conferences; in these studies, participation is presented, in essence, as a proxy for agency. But what does children's agency look like in the statutory encounters that they have with social workers? How do children exercise agency when their involvement with a social worker (and hence the state) is not of their choosing, and may have consequences far beyond their control? Is children's agency always positive, and therefore something to be encouraged? This article grapples with these difficult questions by drawing from data that were collected as part of an ESRC-funded, UK-wide study on social workers' communication with children.

The article begins by considering two bodies of literature. Firstly, we examine the existing evidence on the interactions and communication between children and social workers in child protection settings and introduce the concept of 'containment'. Secondly, we discuss recent theoretical work on children's agency that has emerged from the discipline of childhood studies

and consider its relevance for social work practice with children. We then introduce our research project and outline the method of analysis used in this article. Drawing from two cases, we explore the complex ways in which children's agency may be traced and observed through statutory encounters with social workers. We conclude that in this highly-constrained context social workers responses to children's agency is often akin to 'containment' and argue for a critical and reflexive conceptualisation of children's agency.

Research on interactions between children and social workers in a UK child protection context

Being able to engage and communicate with, relate to and make sense of children's experiences are fundamental to the role and task of child and family social work. However, a persistent finding from serious case reviews and inquiries into child protection is that, within a context of constrained resources and contested roles and function, social workers have not adequately engaged with children who have gone on to be harmed and, in some cases, killed (Munro, 2011). Communication with children is therefore of pressing concern to social work practice.

Findings from 'practice near' research on home-visiting shed light on what happens when social workers and children interact with one another, demonstrating the complexity of the encounters that take place between children and social workers. For example, Ruch (2014) suggests that social workers often feel 'uncomfortable' in their communication with children. Not only this, the personal and professional power they hold in specific situations may be limited, as Ruch explains:

‘This aspect of professional practice—the capacity to feel disempowered—when coupled with the unsettling feelings associated with the emotionally charged nature of the work [...] made practitioners feel extremely vulnerable and exposed’ (2014, p2153)

Ferguson (2017) picks up this theme in his own ‘practice-near’ research. In his investigation of child protection social work, he points out that the dynamics that occur between children, parents (and other adults) and social workers may be so intense that they disorientate social workers, leading to their disconnection and detachment from children and their parents. Our research has similarly drawn attention to the emotional labour that child protection demands from social workers, as well as from children and their families (Winter et al, 2017). Moreover, studies have consistently shown that large caseloads, prohibitive levels of bureaucracy, high levels of staff turnover and the demands of the child protection task are all factors that have a negative impact on the depth and quality of the relationships that social workers may develop with children (Munro, 2011; Winter et al, 2017) and the potential for relationship-based practice (Ruch, 2014).

Linked to ideas of relationship-based practice is the concept of containment. Deriving from psychoanalytic thinking (Bion, 1959), containment refers to the ability of an individual – the container – to emotionally manage - contain - difficult unbearable feelings in another person. Containing responses by social workers acknowledge the often overwhelming feelings that children find difficult to bear and that are frequently articulated non-verbally or indirectly. Containing responses seek to help the children to bear their feelings rather than deny or repress. Recent research has advocated for the provision of containing contexts for practitioners to enable them to sustain practice in emotionally charged professional contexts (Ruch, 2007,

2014). This research explores how containment is used by social workers in response to children's expression of agency in a child protection context.

Most studies of child protection to date have focused, in the main, on the role and influence of the adults in the situation (social workers and parents) (see, for example, Forrester et al., 2008; Hall and Slembrouck, 2009), and on the organisation and structure of social work (see Broadhurst et al, 2010). What has been missing is an analysis of the role and influence that children themselves have on these encounters. This article aims to begin to address this gap through its use of children's agency as a lens to analyse these interactions.

Theorising and reconceptualising children's agency

As a theoretical construct, agency offers both a critique and a counter to the dominant paradigms about children that had originated from the fields of developmental psychology and family studies, paradigms that have influenced greatly, and continue to influence, social work practice (Winter, 2006; Holland et al, 2008). Most fundamentally, a focus on agency enabled a shift to take place in the way that children are perceived, so that they are no longer seen merely as dependents or passive. Instead, they are cast as social actors, involved in the construction of their own worlds and the worlds of others; indeed, children are now seen as 'rights holders' (James and Prout, 1990: 8).

In recent years, there has been considerable examination of the concept of children's agency. Tisdall and Punch warn against agency being 'taken-for-granted, unproblematised or assumed to be inherently positive...' (2012: 256) They suggest that just as children should be able to choose not to participate, so they should also be able to choose not to express or assert agency. This has major implications for social work practice with children. Are we to view children

who absent themselves from relationships with social workers as agentic? Conversely, are children who ‘comply’ and engage with social workers’ passive? Holloway et al. (2018) argue that a blurring has occurred between the *benefits of studying agency* and the *benefits of agency*. Across the ‘new’ literature on agency, we see recurring themes relevant to our study: the depth of effect of agency, the ‘perils’ of agency and the relationality of agency.

The depth or effect of agency

Debates about children’s agency have become subtler, they have shifted from seeking to establish that children have agency towards analysing the depth or effect of children’s agency. Buhler-Niederberger and Schwittek’s (2014) study with children attending kindergarten in Kyrgyzsta, explores the ways children know of and co-operate with the reproduction of normative ideas of relational ordering and how power is experienced by children in this. They report on how children make ‘modest’, yet effective attempts to disrupt and oppose aspects of this, highlighting ways in which young children exercise their own agency to resist and oppose structure. Klocker suggests agency is best conceptualised as a continuum. ‘Thick agency’ refers to ‘having the latitude to act within a broad range of options’, whereas ‘thin agency’ refers to ‘decisions and everyday actions that are carried out in highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives’ (2007: 85). Both thinners and thickeners of children’s agency may be found in structures, contexts and relationships.

Langevang and Gough (2009) bring another perspective to ideas about the ‘depth’ of children’s agency. In their research with young people in Ghana, they conceptualise agency as ‘tactic’ or ‘bounded’. Karlsson (2018) elaborates on these ideas that originate from De Certeau (1984) and the distinction made between those actors who enjoy and exert institutional power and those whose agency and power extends only accept or to resist this. In her study of children’s

play at an asylum centre, Karlsson discusses how in this context, play is a form of political resistance. She presents the concepts ‘tactical awareness’ and ‘tactical acts’ to illuminate the ways children exercise ‘tactical agency’, to navigate the structures and boundaries imposed and to seize opportunities to negotiate boundaries and avoid institutional control.

These theorisations of the depth or effect of agency seem relevant for understanding children’s agency in a social work context. Here a child may experience multiple adversities, relationships in families may be strained or even dangerous, and the power of the state looms large. Children and families may be compelled by the state to enter relationships with social workers. Rather than deep or thick agency, the potential for children’s agency in this context seems thin or shallow.

The ‘perils’ of agency

The utility of agency in advancing children’s interests, as well as how children’s agency is constructed by adults features across the literature. Pertinent questions about children’s vulnerability are raised when we focus and place so much value on agency by Bluebond-Langer and Korbin (2007). In her interrogation of vulnerability and its implications for children’s participation, Tisdall (2017) argues that while vulnerability offers promise, it does not adequately address adult power. This argument is even more urgent in a child protection context where children’s agency and their linked rights to participation risk being constrained under the veil of vulnerability. Another analytical frame that may be useful for child protection social work is Bordonaro and Payne’s (2012) term ‘ambiguous agency’. This relates to occasions where children’s agency is contested when it is seen to threaten or risk social and moral order. Hanson (2016, p. 471) develops this critique with his argument that children’s agency is evaluated against *‘a normative standpoint about what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ for*

children to do or not do’ rather than any ideas or evaluation of their capacity or autonomy. Thus, revealing a weakness with the concept and echoing the classic debate around reconciling children’s rights to participation and protection (e.g. Marshall, 1997 Collins, 2017).

When children act in ways that transgress normative ideas of what is ‘good’ for them, the pendulum shifts – children are not deemed competent, instead they are cast as vulnerable, emotional, and in need of protection. As a consequence, their agency may be perceived by adults, like social workers, as ambiguous and dangerous. Of interest, here is how children’s behaviours or actions are received by social workers. Are they seen as that which must be quelled or overcome or are they respected and encouraged? For agency is not simply a behaviour or holding a set of views, agency has a purpose – it effects change.

The relationality of agency

The final conceptualisation of agency that resonates with this study and its focus on the child-social worker interactions is the relationality of agency. Drawing from social network theory, Esser (2016) posits that agency is a product of relationships, so that agency is best understood as a product of interdependence, not independence. This theorisation encourages a shift from agency as an expression of autonomy. It connects with research from the Global South where the significance of interdependence resonates clearly, and relationships are seen as a central in any discussion of agency (e.g. Punch, 2002; Tuli and Chaudary, 2010) However, if agency is produced in relationships, then it is also risks being quashed in relationships. Key questions for us then are *how* do social workers respond to children’s attempts and expressions of agency and *why* do they respond in this way?

Data and analysis

The article draws on a large qualitative, UK-wide study on the communication that takes place between social workers and children in statutory encounters in a child protection context. The research was carried out from 2013-2016 and had three phases. Phase 1 (which this article relates to) used ethnographic methods. This involved three members of the research team being based in eight children and families' social work teams across the UK. In each nation, one of the researchers spent six to eight weeks in each social work team. The researchers carried out observations in the offices of each of social work teams and accompanied social workers to meetings that they had with children, here they observed what happens in these encounters. During the observations, the researchers made brief written notes about the encounters and the interactions that took place in them. These notes were written up fully once the researchers had returned to the social work office or to their own institution. Each observation provides a rich written account of the encounter. They detail language, tone, gestures and body language, the use of physical space, movement, touch, emotion as well as the researcher's own reflections of the encounter.

These meetings typically involved new relationships between children and social workers. In total, 82 meetings between social workers and children (from babies to 17year olds) were observed. This data was contextualised by interviews that were carried out with social workers before and after each of these encounters. These captured the purpose of the meetings, how social workers felt before the meetings and their reflections of the meeting after it had occurred.

The analytical strategy used for this phase of the study has been iterative. Following a period of data familiarisation, we developed a coding framework, which was applied to data using NVivo to help with data management. There was not a single code for 'agency' but rather a number of codes that alerted us to examples of children's agency in the dataset, for example

about behaviours, responses to others and body language. However, applying our coding framework to data felt, at times, as though the accounts of the interactions and, indeed, the context within which they took place, became fractured and decontextualized. Issues of power and agency lost their potency, it became difficult to grasp the relationality of agency, or indeed the responses, effects and consequences that children's actions had in their encounters with social workers. As a result, we re-examined the data as whole encounters, reviewing all the aspects (ethnographic and interview-based) as they affected each individual interaction. This combined approach has allowed us to both map and unpack how children's agency may be traced through their interactions with social workers.

Children's agency in practice

Resisting social workers

Across the data, we observed numerous and creative ways in which children exercised their agency through and during their encounters with social workers. Children's agency was evident even in the most constrained of circumstances: during meetings at police stations before children gave evidence about sexual assault, and in bedrooms where social workers talked and played with children whilst inspecting to see whether there was adequate furniture or bedding for them. Some children set the parameters of the meetings they had with social workers. They challenged what social workers said, changed the direction of conversations, and in some cases, disrupted the encounters that took place. Children absented themselves from meetings that had been planned with their social worker. In one observation, a boy delayed his return home from school on the day of a planned visit from his social worker, arriving just as the social worker was leaving. This led to their interactions being so limited that they lasted only a few seconds and took place over a rolled-down car window. At times, children physically retreated from social workers, moving to another room, hiding their faces in their hands and hiding under

tables. These tactics seemed to be an attempt to avoid interacting with the presence and gaze of the social worker.

At other times, children evaded lines of conversation, instead having parallel conversations, answering the social worker's questions by talking about things that seemed unrelated. Some simply ignored or did not respond to questions posed by social workers, leaving uncomfortable lulls and gaps in conversations. Others replied with small yet powerful phrases like: "I don't know" or "I can't remember". We do not know why children acted in these ways, whether their actions were motivated by feelings of fear, distrust, disinterest or perhaps even futility about the involvement of social work in their life. However, we do know that children's actions were powerful - they had effect. They acted to avoid, disrupt and frustrate social workers' attempts to engage with them. In these sorts of interactions, children's agency may be constructed as examples of 'ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). Children's actions were barriers to social workers' gathering information or evidence. Children spurned social workers attempts to develop relationships with them, offering a further perspective as to why this area of practice is especially challenging.

Disentangling vulnerability and agency

There were times, when children's agency was constructed as an indicator of resistance that had to be overcome or a result of 'poor attachment'. In one instance, the familiarity and ease a young man had in dealing with professionals and child protection processes were deemed to be a mark of his institutionalisation, rather than an expression of his agency. His ability to participate within the social work structures and systems was in fact constructed as evidence of his vulnerability, not a welcomed expression of agency. It is of note that the young man in this case was living in secure accommodation, where he was not free to leave unless approved

by the staff working there. Despite these clear constraints, his ‘tactical knowledge’ of the social work institution and structures was met with adult disprovement. Hanson’s (2016) critique of agency, that it is dismissed when the behaviour or actions are perceived to go against normative ideas of ‘what is good for children’ resonates here. In this instance agency was seen as a proxy for vulnerability.

Power in structures and in relationships

We discuss elsewhere that social workers sometimes ‘missed’ children’s attempts to engage and connect with them (Winter et al, 2017). We observed incredibly complex and charged situations where children expressed clearly their views and wishes to social workers; they stated clearly what they wanted to happen in their lives and the actions that they wanted their social worker to take to achieve this. However, the task and role of social work and the limited resources available to social workers meant that a child’s actions or views did not always lead to the result the child desired, highlighting the enduring bond between structure and agency (Giddens, 1984). This, of course, had consequences, not least, for the child who may have risked sharing information with a social worker, but also for the social worker who was unable to act in the way they may have wished to. It invites us to consider what limits there may be for social workers’ agency, and what the relational consequences might be for the child’s future relationships with that social worker and with others.

Containing children’s agency

Social workers constructed children’s agency in different ways. We witnessed many examples where children’s resistance was constructed positively. In one observation, a girl, aged 14 years old, repeatedly challenged her social worker about the requirement that she attend a review meeting. She expressed her anger that intimate details of her life were being shared with

a panel of veritable strangers and that (unlike her mother) she was compelled to attend a meeting with these strangers. During an interview following the observation, the social worker said she welcomed the challenges made by the young woman, which she saw as positive and evidence of the girl's transition towards independence. The social worker also spoke about how she empathised with girl's feelings about the panel. Yet the girl's challenges did not lead to change, she was required to and did attend the review meeting. Here, we see that while there may have been space for agency to be expressed, for it to be understood, respected and treated with empathy, there was not adequate space within in a child protection context for agency to achieve change, rather agency was 'contained'. It also highlights the emotional dimension of agency that was palpable in many of the interactions between children and social workers and connects to ideas of emotional containment.

Unpacking agency and containment

We now turn to our case analysis, using ethnographic fieldnotes to explore aspects of two encounters in more depth, and, in this way, illuminating some of the ways in which children's agency plays out and how containment is used to respond to children's agency when it was constructed as counter to children's interests. All names and locations have been changed to protect anonymity.

Rachel

Rachel was a 16-year old girl who been admitted to hospital following her attempted suicide. The observation took place on the fourth day after her admission; during this time, Rachel had no contact with her parents. Helen, the social worker, had never met Rachel before. The encounter took place in a room in the hospital.

Helen and the researcher arrived at the room and met Rachel. Helen began the meeting by saying, “Hello” and introducing the researcher and herself to Rachel. She then asked Rachel how she was feeling:

Rachel responds to Helen’s first question about how she is with “Feeling pretty low”. Rachel says she has spoken to her Child and Adolescent Mental Health Worker and told her that she doesn’t want to go home..

From the outset of this meeting, Rachel clearly articulated what she wanted or rather did not want to happen – she did not want to return home. Through this, Rachel had set the agenda and the tone for the meeting. As the meeting progressed, the discussion between Helen and Rachel was dominated by where Rachel was going to go. The hospital had made it clear that she was not able to stay there and as Rachel continuously told Helen, verbally and non-verbally, she did not want to return home.

Helen asks Rachel how she feels about going home. Rachel shakes her head

Helen asks Rachel what would need to change at home for it to be a place she could go back to. Rachel says “Everything”.

Helen outlines her worries about a foster placement and how to get Rachel back home eventually. Helen says that she wouldn’t want that to be the end. Rachel says that she wouldn’t want contact with her parents. Helen says, “okay that’s helpful, that’s helpful to know how you see this”.

From the first extract, we can see how Helen used an open question to explore or perhaps even try to shift Rachel's feelings about returning home. However, this line of conversation and inquiry was closed by Rachel's shaking of her head. Helen attempted to return to this, asking about what changes might need to happen to allow Rachel to feel able to return home. Again, Rachel acted to close the conversation using the single word, '*Everything*', making it clear that returning home was not an option that she would countenance. Later in conversation, Helen told Rachel that ultimately even if she could get a foster placement as an alternative to Rachel returning home, this would be a temporary measure. Rachel's position seemed to harden in response to this; not only would she not return home, but she also did not want any contact with her parents.

Helen's approach was to find an immediate solution to what was becoming an urgent situation. But Rachel did not give any ground. The implication of, '*It's helpful to know how you see this*', was that while not returning home was what Rachel *wanted* to happen, that might not translate with what *would* happen, here we see how Helen both contains and constrains Rachel's agency. Helen acknowledges Rachel's unbearable feelings and wishes but does not act on them. Rather, Helen reflects these back to Rachel. As the meeting continued, there were further (unsuccessful) examples of where Helen attempted to encourage or change Rachel's view about returning home:

[...] Helen asks Rachel what the best news could be. Rachel says, "That I wouldn't have to go home". Helen nods and pauses, and asks what would the worst news be? Rachel says, "That I'd have to go home".

Helen asks Rachel how going home would feel. Rachel pauses, looks down and says "Scared". Helen says "okay, well I wouldn't want you to feel scared". She asks her how she would feel if they went together, in her car, and she went in and she supported her by outlining what her wishes and feeling were, and they made an agreement about some changes that could be made. Rachel shakes her head and says that he'll see through it and will nod along but won't make any changes.

Helen asks Rachel "So am I right in thinking that you definitely don't want to go home?". Rachel nods and says "Definitely". Helen asks her what if this has been a bit of a wake-up call for mum and dad, and this could be the spring-board for things to be a bit different. Rachel shakes her head and says, "It's no good", and she doesn't want to go home.

In this encounter, there were twelve different occasions where Rachel articulated that she did not want to return home. Rachel is expressing her views in a clear way. However, the *depth* of Rachel's agency is questionable. Klocker's (2007) concept of 'thin and thick agency' is helpful here. This was a highly-constrained context, with few viable alternatives. Earlier Helen had explored whether other family members might take Rachel, but there were none. By talking about how they might together work to change the circumstances at home, Helen may have been attempting to 'thicken' Rachel's agency. But ultimately both Rachel and Helen's options were limited, hence agency here was undoubtedly 'thin' and the response was containment.

At one point in the meeting, Helen introduced the possibility of supported accommodation as an alternative to Rachel returning home. She asked Rachel if she wanted "*someone to look*

after her, or [to] live alone". Rachel responded she wanted to be looked after. This makes connections with the notion that vulnerability and agency co-exist (Bluebond-Langer and Korbin, 2007). Rachel's story reminds us that vulnerability and agency are deeply entwined and the tensions that may exist are thrown into stark relief in the encounters that children and social workers have with one another. Social workers' task is perhaps not only to attempt to thicken children's agency, but also to help them understand the constraints in which they live. Rather than supporting children's emancipation, the social work role in this situation seems to be about helping children navigate the power and powerlessness that they inevitably experience rather than to reverse it.

Joe and Paula

Our second case involves Joe aged 10 and Paula aged 7. The social worker, Anna, collected the children from home after school and takes them by car to a café in a nearby supermarket. The meeting was instigated by Anna, who wanted to speak with the children about a formal meeting planned for the coming week. The meeting would review the support that the children received from social work and other agencies. It would also determine whether concerns about the children's welfare were so serious that the children would be removed from living with their mother and instead be placed in foster-care. Anna and the children had spent the car journey to the supermarket catching up with one another about school trips and other things that the children had done since they had last met. We now turn to the conversations in the café; this was a public space although not very busy, and no one was sitting close by.

Anna asks the children 'How's it going?' Joe looks out the window. Anna asks Joe what he is looking at. Joe says he is looking outside. Anna asks the children if they remember the last meeting [referring to the last formal meeting]. Joe says, 'No'. Anna says, 'Do you remember the meeting with

your mum and the teachers?’ Joe says, ‘Yes’. Anna says, ‘Yes’. Joe moves from the sofa to sit on the floor. Anna says, ‘What we are going to do is talk about ...’. Joe starts to make faces. Paula starts to laugh.

In this extract, we see how Joe and Paula respond to Anna’s efforts to discuss the upcoming meeting. Until this point the children had appeared happy to be spending time with Anna. They were happy to leave their home and laughed and joked in the car. Joe had been physically demonstrative towards Anna, cuddling her and holding her hand. However, once the children and Anna sat in the café, the tone of the meeting changed: it became serious. Anna’s, “How’s it going?” seemed to mark that the serious and difficult part of their meetings was beginning. The children, especially Joe, responded to this by retreating and withdrawing from the interactions. By looking away from Anna and sitting on the floor, he seemed to be attempting to divert or close the conversation and, importantly, protect himself from what might be difficult and distressing conversation. Together, Joe and Paula appeared to use humour strategically or as a form of ‘tactical agency’ to lighten or shift the direction of the conversation.

Anna continued to talk to Joe and Paula about the meeting, advising them that she would be recommending the support they had been receiving continues and that they should continue to live with their mother. During this, Anna tried to check that the children understood what she was saying and invited them to say what they thought about it. But the children did not respond to her invitations. Anna offered to explain the process again to the children, and what might happen if the meeting decided that they should not continue to live with their mother:

Anna says, “Will I explain it again?” She explains what she is recommending in the meeting – she says, “They are not going to send you to a complete

stranger.” Paula says in a funny voice, “A stranger – here you go!” Anna repeats that the children will not be going to live with a stranger. Paula takes her scarf off. Anna says, “Does that make sense? It’s pretty big stuff.” Joe says, “I think there are big boys outside.” He keeps looking out the window. Paula sits on the floor.

The magnitude of what Anna was saying was not lost on the children, although their responses to it differ. Paula appeared to mock the idea that children are ‘taken’ from a family and ‘given’ to another, whereas Joe continued to withdraw from the conversation, seeking to deflect attempts made by Anna to involve him in it. A key question here is, ‘Are these examples of agency?’ The children’s behaviour and actions would not delay or prevent the meeting’s decision about where they were to live, but it affects the interactions that are occurring at that time. Perhaps they will also influence Anna and any subsequent representations she might make at the formal meeting. Esser’s argument that agency is relational is particularly important here. Any effect of Joe and Paula’s behaviours and actions is dependent on how it was seen, interpreted and then used by Anna. While there may be scope for Anna to support and ‘thicken’ the children’s agency this cannot be assumed. De Certeau’s (1984) ideas of acceptance and resistance seem more akin to children’s agency in this case. The children are dependent on adults (including Anna) to make decisions about where they live and the relationship that they have with their mother, their agency in this context is thin and any resistance here is within a context of relative powerlessness.

At the end of the visit, before Joe and Paula return home, Anna suggested that they go to a playpark next to where the children live. After spending an unsuccessful ten minutes trying to find the playpark, Anna told the children it was now too late and that they must now return home as their mother would be expecting them. Paula responded as follows:

Paula starts to cry and shout. It seems really out of the blue. She is shouting that she doesn't want to go home, and Anna had said they were going to the park. Anna encourages her to come over to a bench and sits Anna on her knee. Anna hugs Paula. Paula is shouting "I don't like my brother". She is also saying that they have 5 minutes until they must go home not 1 minute.

We walk back to the children's flat. Paula keeps trying to stop and makes sort of half-hearted attempts to run away. Anna holds Paula's hand and encourages her to keep going. When we get to the stairs for the flats, Paula walks up the first flight then tries to go back down them. Anna physically blocks the stairs so that Paula can't get down. Anna holds Paula and lifts her up the stairs – in a way that make it look like Paula is jumping up each step. Anna says, "Come on missy, let's get up the stairs." She counts the stairs as she gets Paula to jump up them.

Paula's response to the ending of the meeting might be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps she was frustrated that they were not going to the playpark as was promised. Or perhaps emotions evoked by the earlier conversation had resurfaced and this was an expression of those, and indeed of her feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Leaving the 'why' to one side and instead focusing on Anna's response to Paula's actions, we can make connections between Paula's actions and Bordonaro's (2012) notion of 'ambiguous agency'. Paula's behaviour risked her relationship with Joe. Indeed, if Paula had been successful in running away there might have been consequences for her safety. While Anna's physical containment of Paula may well have acted to restrict her agency, it also acted to protect Paula, thus providing a vivid example of how both agency and vulnerability again co-exist, the tensions and dilemmas that this throws up and how this is addressed in practice through containment.

Discussion and conclusion

Child protection social work throws into sharp relief some of the challenges that arise when applying the concept of agency in practice. It brings to the fore the idea that children may be both vulnerable and agentic and the collision between the discourses of children's rights to protection and participation. In this article, we demonstrate how children may be powerful in their interactions with social workers, yet relatively powerless in their lives. We argue that while children express views, set the tone, resist and challenge social workers this does not always equate with change to children's lives. Through our analysis, we offer 'containment' as a new way to consider the ways in which social workers respond to children's agency, when it conflicts with what they and other adults consider to be in children's interests. Containment allows space for children's agency to be expressed, for it to be understood and even treated sympathetically, however, with containment there is not sufficient latitude for children's actions to achieve significant change.

By its very nature child protection social work positions children as vulnerable and in need of protection. This sets the context for the nature, type and form of agency that is expected, and indeed permitted. Across our study children's agency rarely had depth, it was 'thin' rather than 'thick' agency (Klocker, 2007). These tensions are held in practice and are ones that social workers must navigate with children daily. It underlines the importance of social workers, working creatively to provide 'thickeners' for children's agency. Whether that be offering small choices in what are highly restrictive settings or by being seen by children as acting for and with them. The relational aspect of agency was apparent across the research. Social workers amplified children's views and make meaning out of actions in ways that gave credence and facilitated change. While this may be positive in some cases, it also uncovers

how agency is contingent and dependent on how social workers understanding and interpretation of it. Less clear is how this tension may be held - how do we ensure that children's agency is not arbitrarily quelled or constructed as a form 'ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012), or indeed as evidence of their vulnerability? Going forward we argue for a more nuanced understanding of children's agency in social work practice. One that embraces the possibilities of children's agency and acknowledges and respects children's exercise of it. However, this must also allow for and makes explicit the messy interaction that takes place between children's agency and vulnerability, concepts that we found to persistently co-exist and frame the interactions between children and social workers.

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