Femininity, Sexuality and Professionalism in the Children’s Departments

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The authors, who undertook this research together, all worked for parts of their careers in the children’s departments, Pam Carter Hood and Angela Everitt just prior to their becoming part of the social services departments; Dorothy Runnicles since 1948. They all subsequently moved into social work education which included, for them all, uneasy experiences as women managers. They are now retired. Angela Everitt runs a women’s studies bookshop ‘Reading Lasses’ in Wigtown, Scotland’s booktown. Pamela Carter Hood sadly died soon after completing this paper.

SUMMARY

Noting the significance of women in management in the local authority children’s departments (1948–72) and the preoccupation with women in management during the 1990s, the authors compare these two periods. In particular, they focus upon the discourses of femininity which shape the ways in which women as managers and as professionals are talked about, understood and analysed. The argument, presented from a feminist post-structuralist perspective, is based on an analysis of data generated through interviews with women who were significant in the children’s departments (as children’s officers or members of the children’s committees) between 1948 and 1972. The paper shows that the ways in which femininity is constructed, socially and through women’s subjectivities, act as powerful mechanisms through which women are controlled, but also present opportunities to women for resistance and change.

In 1991 the Social Services Inspectorate considered women a ‘neglected resource in social services’, arguing for organizational changes to enable women to make a greater contribution to management and policy making (Department of Health/Social Services Inspectorate, 1991). That such changes were seen as necessary is puzzling given that, even though men have never been absent from key positions, from its origins social work was seen as a woman’s profession (Walton, 1975; Dale and Foster, 1986; Parker, 1988). The period from 1948 to 1972 represented the peak of women’s influence in modern social work. The setting up of local authority children’s departments brought what would now be shunned as positive discrimination.

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in favour of women. The Curtis Committee (Curtis Report, 1946), whose 1946 report recommended the establishment of these new departments, had created the belief that children’s officers should be women when they noted that they used the ‘feminine pronoun not with any aim of excluding men from these posts but because we think it may be found that the majority of persons suitable for the work are women’ (Curtis Report, 1946, para 443). Nearly 50 years after Curtis we are still wondering whether women have something special to bring to social work and its management. In the 1990s, this debate is framed in the language of equal opportunities and of the need to create workplaces which minimize the impact of gender, whereas in the 1940s it was women’s supposed special qualities which were valued.

The Curtis Report identified those attributes which made women likely candidates for these key posts: ‘she should be genial and friendly in manner, able to set both children and adults at their ease’ (Curtis Report, 1946, para. 446). These characteristics, which might be seen as stereotypically feminine, were not enough on their own, however. In addition, the children’s officer should be ‘highly qualified academically, if possible a graduate who has also a social science diploma’ (ibid.). Women were to be recruited for their personal ‘womanly’ qualities but were to be in positions of considerable authority, to have ‘marked administrative capacity and be able to grasp local government procedure and to work easily with the local authority committee’ (ibid.). Her position within the local authority should also carry status and influence: she ‘should be an officer of high standing and qualifications’ (ibid. 442). In the 1940s, then, femininity, for a few women, could bring power and influence. By the 1990s, some of those things which might be viewed as making women different from men, experience of caring for others, for example, are much more likely to be seen as barriers to successful careers.

In this paper, we compare these two periods, particularly with regard to the discourses of femininity which shape the way women as managers and as professionals are talked about, understood and analysed. We regard femininity not as a fixed set of characteristics—as an essential core of women—but as a set of labels, expectations, symbols and beliefs which have some continuity across time and place, as well as across different classes and ‘races’, but which are also unfixed and changing. These discourses about femininity are written into various texts including government reports, books, films and other media. A range of institutional practices including meetings, interviews, and job selection systems, also deploy certain notions of femininity. Femininity is also produced by women themselves in the ways they talk to each other and to men, as well as in their forms of dress, presentation and conduct. This understanding of femininity draws on a feminist post-structuralist perspective (Weedon, 1987; Diamond and Quinby, 1988; Riley, 1988; Scott, 1988; Fuss, 1989; Hekman, 1990; Ramazanoglu, 1993). Femininity, seen in this way, is not only an oppressive ideology located outside of
women. All of our subjectivities, as both men and women, are shaped by a range of often contradictory and competing ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed. Women can sometimes use one dimension of femininity to resist oppressive features of another element. Contrasting two different periods, as we are doing here, enables us to see the range of ways in which women can live their lives and speak about their experiences. In particular, it prevents us from seeing contemporary practices as simply about 'progress'. We can see more clearly the ways in which current forms of thinking, even those deemed progressive, can be mechanisms of control, as well as offering opportunities for resistance and change.

A GOLDEN AGE?

As well as avoiding the idea of the onward march of progress we must resist thinking of the earlier period as a lost better world. That the 1950s was a moment of glory for women social work managers has been noted by several writers (Packman, 1975; Walton, 1975; Howe, 1986; Hanmer and Statham, 1988; Taylor, 1994). The Social Services Inspectorate report of 1991 quantifies the decline in women’s influence following the Seebohm reorganization of 1971. In 1950, 72 per cent of chief officer posts were held by women while, by 1970, the equivalent figure was 60 per cent. In 1971, men were appointed to 158 out of 174 positions as directors of social services. It seems unlikely, however, that the change from women to men at the top happened suddenly. In fact, it has been argued that men continued to hold more managerial positions in the children’s departments than would be expected from their numbers (Walton, 1975).

Indeed, Hanmer and Statham (1988) see the children’s department period as a mere blip in the otherwise unbroken history of male dominance in social service management. Nevertheless, it is important to examine those moments when women have been in key positions in social welfare and public life (Jeffreys, 1985; Dale and Foster, 1986; Parker, 1988). Placing the children’s officers in the continuing story of women’s struggles to exercise and retain influence enables us to understand more fully both continuity and change in the construction and reconstruction of gender and sexuality in social welfare. In particular, the implications of the rather surprising fact that, in 1950, stereotypical femininity—'getting on with people'—was intended to result in power and influence in the public world rather than low paid labour, at least for some women, is worthy of exploration.

Three other aspects of this period are significant for our study. First, although criticisms of children’s departments were voiced at the time and in retrospect, in general this is looked upon as a positive period of social work
Parton makes explicit links between whatever opportunities for good practice exist currently and social work in the 1960s:

it may be possible to develop a form of policy and practice which is sympathetic towards a more obviously social democratic conception of the relationship between state and family and which would provide the space for social work to develop an approach to child care which aims to build on the good practices evident in the 1960s (Parton, 1991, p. 209).

In addition to what are still seen as innovatory forms of preventive work, high morale amongst children’s department staff has been commented on (Packman, 1975; Parton, 1994).

Second, although this positive period in child-care history occurred while women were influential, it was also a time when feminism was particularly weak (Dale and Foster, 1986; Lewis, 1992). In fact, social work as a profession has subsequently been viewed as central to welfare state ideology in the post-war period, in particular linking women firmly with home and family (Wilson, 1977). The very women whose lives we are setting out to study can be seen as part of the ideologies of femininity which Wilson and others argue are central to the welfare state and key to the oppression of women (Brook and Davis, 1985; Williams, 1989).

Third, in the last few years we have had to confront the abuse perpetrated by men in child-care work (Pringle, 1995). Government has now been forced to set up an enquiry into sexual abuse in children’s homes, some of it occurring during or shortly after the period we are researching. Most official debate omits the gendered character of this abuse: that it is overwhelmingly carried out by men. It has been demonstrated that sexual abuse of children has become a public issue when the feminist movement is strong and has disappeared when feminism is weak (Gordon, 1988). The 1950s and 1960s is a particularly interesting and contradictory period in this respect.

OUR APPROACH TO THE STUDY

Looked at from the 1990s, the period of 1950s and 1960s social work seems full of interesting contradictions. Who were the successful women? Did they correspond more to the ‘motherly’ women or to the capable and authoritative graduates envisaged by Curtis? Did they see themselves as women managers? Did they experience, as women, the kinds of harassment and hostility which now seem commonplace? What were their values and aspirations for this new service? Did they feel that they had power and influence? What was it like working in organizations where women rather than men were in charge? Was sexual abuse ‘overlooked’?

All three of the present authors have some personal experience of the
children's departments. Pamela Carter Hood was a trainee child-care officer seconded after one year's work to a social work training course to qualify at the point when children's departments became part of the new social services departments. Angela Everitt worked on a study of family advice centres set up under the 1963 Children and Young Persons Act. Following that, she joined a children's department as an in-house researcher and then became part of the research and development section of a social services department. Dorothy Runnicles joined the London County Council (LCC) Children's Department in 1950 as one of the first child-care officers. With the break-up of the LCC, she worked first in Hackney in an innovatory homeless families project, and then in Tower Hamlets. Her work in a community-based family advice centre subsequently brought her into community work. Although each author therefore had some experience in a children's department, it was Dorothy Runnicles' length of involvement, combined with her continuing contact with former colleagues and others, which enabled the study to start. The research was designed by Angela Everitt, and Pamela Carter Hood, the main author of this paper, brought a theoretical analysis to the data that enabled us to see more clearly the complexities of femininity and women in management.

It quickly became evident that the networks of women who had worked in the children's services during this period—as children's officers, child-care officers, committee members and social work teachers—were still very much alive. Dorothy started by interviewing those women she already knew, who told her of others who would be interested in the study. Within a year, Dorothy had interviewed seventeen women and had made contact with another fifteen. At that stage, limitations of time and funding led us to send questionnaires to most of those we had not yet been able to interview. Nevertheless, we have not been able to resist interviewing five more women. Three were interviewed when one 75 year-old woman contacted us and offered to come to Newcastle from the South of England at her own expense, so interested was she in making a personal contribution to the study. In the end we visited her and she invited two of her former colleagues to join us. As well as interviews and questionnaires, we have also been given all kinds of material which the women collected from that period. Several searches of second-hand bookshops around the country have also generated a fascinating range of secondary material.

A FEMINIST PROJECT

Although feminist methodology has developed from a recognition that women's views of the world have often been subsumed within dominant male paradigms, the question of how to treat women's experiences and accounts of
their lives remains problematic; do we see them as 'truth' (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Maynard and Purvis, 1994)? This question has often been framed within discussions about the power of the researcher over the researched, arguing that feminist research must incorporate non-hierarchical relationships and stay true to women's accounts of their lives (Stanley and Wise, 1983). The assumption that researchers have power over the researched is partly the case in our project—we have claimed the power to tell others about these women's lives. But the women we write about could not be seen as powerless or oppressed in any straightforward sense. In fact, as we have already indicated, they might well be seen as having had very considerable power over the lives of other women. It was important for us, then, to adopt a feminist methodology which generated complex understandings of power.

Our feminist post-structuralist approach involves treating women's accounts as at least partially constructed within and around available discourses. In the field of welfare, an approach which explores the links between particular discourses and the effects of power yields productive questions. Welfare is a key field within which discourses concerning the family, sexuality, childhood and femininity have been constructed through policy and day-to-day practices (Weedon, 1987; Howe, 1994; Parton, 1994). It was clear that the lives of the women in this study could best be understood in relation to complex power relations. They might be both powerful and powerless; both subject to, and deploying, discursive practices. One of the most productive outcomes of the difficult relationship between Foucault and feminism (Ramazanoglu, 1993) is that ways of understanding differences as well as commonalities between women are generated. In particular, the category of women itself is subject to scrutiny rather than being viewed as an unproblematic natural category (Riley, 1988). Discourses of femininity often rely on creating and using difference through drawing attention to apparent oppositions: between good and bad mothers; between lesbians and heterosexuals; between professionals and clients; between working class and middle class women; between white women and black women. These processes construct and control the kind of women we are or ought to be. What kind of women reached key positions within child-care work in the 1950s and 1960s? How were their lives shaped by the discourses of femininity available to them at that time?

We begin our discussion by looking at how women in this study saw and experienced themselves as women within the children's departments. The fact that we were asking them for retrospective accounts means that current thinking about women in organizations could be used in our conversations. For example, the idea of sexual harassment has now become an important way of women conceptualizing their experiences in the workplace as in other areas of their lives (Cockburn, 1991; Curtis, 1993). Would the women in this
study take this concept and 'see' it in their lives in the children's departments?

Professional matters, as well as organizational and personal issues, also provided a marked contrast in what was 'seen' and 'not seen'. As we have noted, the contemporary social work agenda as regards child sexual abuse stands in marked contrast with the 1950s and 1960s which is seen as a period of silence, even complacency about this issue (Gordon, 1988; Smart, 1989). How do these highly professional and committed women, some of whom are still active in the social welfare field, account for these apparent gaps in their perception? Again, post-structuralism informed by feminism provides a useful way of understanding this puzzle. What is named and seen within welfare will never be simply what is. Instead, social problems will be defined in the available and dominant discourses of the period.

ARE WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT ALWAYS WOMEN?

Denise Riley has posed what, at first sight, seems a rather puzzling question: are we women all of the time or just some of the time (Riley, 1988, p. 6)? Reflection on this conundrum reveals that being a woman does not count either for ourselves or others at every second of the day or night. Not all women include themselves in the category very much at all. Some women are not treated by others as if they are 'proper women' (Hooks, 1981; Riley, 1988). Our entrance to this study had been marked by the importance Curtis had attached to children's officers being women and the significance subsequent writers have accorded the period. As soon as we were inside the study, however, 'being a woman' took on different meanings. Sometimes women were visible as women and sometimes not. Being a woman did not always matter in a straightforward way.

What was striking from our interviews was that few of the women we talked to saw being a woman in management, or being managed by a woman, as worthy of much comment in itself. Difficulties, strains and tensions, which in any case were always seen as minor compared with their sense of purpose and commitment, were associated with the work itself, not with being a woman in what was nevertheless seen as 'a man's world'. That women were in charge was simply taken for granted. As one woman, who remained in social work until quite recently, put it: 'When everybody started talking about this glass ceiling, I thought, "I was sitting on top of the glass ceiling looking down". It makes it all very weird.'

Or, as another commented, 'it was taken for granted. I'm sure about that. We didn't think about it because the whole of the scene was women and that was true'. She also told us that it simply did not occur to her to think about
it at the time, 'that seemed to be the natural order of things, my analysis of it wasn't something I did at the time. It is entirely hindsight.'

Another woman, who entered social work in 1946, similarly remembered the period in which women's prominence was fundamental but unremarkable. She also described the marginal position of men:

When I went into social work it was a woman's profession. All the senior managers were women and in some ways the men, and there were men around, were in the subordinate positions. Many of them had come in through other bits of the local authority setting and I would think, on the whole, they were the ones who were disadvantaged in the early days.

A number of women simply had not thought about the implications of women being in charge, and many found it much more difficult to answer questions relating to the position of women, or their treatment by men, than to talk about the work they did with children. The work, which was often seen as extremely demanding and requiring long hours, was much more central for many of the women we interviewed than organizational politics, particularly what has now been termed 'sexual politics'.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, in this atmosphere, when social workers really believed they could make a difference, interpersonal battles might be seen as trivial. Nevertheless, asking about how men responded in this climate revealed a somewhat different picture than the immediate responses suggested by the women. The picture we began to see from the stories we were told was a world where a whole variety of women were busily creating policies, developing new resources, and finding satisfying careers, and where men were for a moment barely in the frame. Women, actively creating a new profession, were centre stage, and most men were relegated to walk-on parts, usually cast in rather unexciting or grumbling roles. For example:

When I first became an area officer there were three men I was responsible for. They certainly never said it, but they displayed a problem and I just weathered it. There were incidents. I used to sign all the travel claims straight away because I thought that was right. One morning this man got at me because he had not had his travel money. He was obviously needing it, we were all poor. But I was firm and said 'The problem's along the road'. I knew he wanted to really crush me. Another chap, he knew I had the knowledge but he didn't like it. He'd start quoting the legislation but I could see it. Sometimes I'd feel under the weather but never desperate. I could see it as that. Also I felt confident, I knew my business.

She also knew that the woman children's officer had confidence in her, not because they were friends (they were not), or because they were both women; her support was simply for a respected professional colleague. Feeling valued, and having confidence in her own professional knowledge and abilities, meant that this woman did not see the world primarily through the prism of gender.
What was often commented on was that men were older than the women and were less likely to be trained (see Walton, 1975). They were the 'time-servers', at best local government stalwarts who sometimes had to be circumvented. At worst, they were seen as quite unsuitable to be working with children. So gender was only one of a number of characteristics and was not on its own seen as the most salient factor in this world where women were so confidently in charge. One woman described this very effectively:

The men had considerable resentment over the women in the department because they had no avenue to promotion whatsoever. They used to make occasional jibes about it, and it covered a lot of bitterness about their situations. They were definitely second-class citizens. They were not particularly well educated men. They were people who had gone into local authority work in the 1940s and they ended up in very respectable but not very high status jobs, and that's how we regarded them.

She described other men who came into children's departments through a slightly different route:

We began to get men who'd held senior positions in residential work—they'd got thrown out and ended up with us. It was a bit of a nightmare because they were so full of resentment about what had happened and, once again, I don't think any of them had any qualifications. They were 20 years on from any of the female social workers, and knowing they had no hope of any reward.

In fact, it was through training policies developed during this period that men began to 'catch up' with women. Eileen Younghusband's recommendations for training and for increasing the standing and status of the profession were geared to attracting men into the service (Younghusband, 1946; Brook and Davis, 1985). Through the provision of state grants for training and secondment policies from many local authorities, the numbers of men in managerial positions began to increase significantly. By the time of Seebohm the ground was prepared for men to step into many of the key jobs. Many women witnessed or experienced what would now be seen as sex discrimination, although such language was not used at the time and not all have subsequently perceived it in such terms. But many described the losses involved as their world gave way to the more managerial social services departments.

I can remember really exactly the occasion when I realised this world had gone. It had probably gone some time before but it was about 1974 when I realised it. It was an occasion when I was involved in a training programme for a local authority where the woman who had been a very powerful children's officer had just died. Many of the women who were on the course had been in the children's department and were very upset. But, as I looked around, I realised that, as well as them, there were all these men. They were young men, they had come from the welfare department, they didn't know what social work was about, they were young, they were thrusting. That was when I thought, 'This is the end of that world we'd cared about and that we'd been so familiar with' and, although there were plenty of these women left, the new
people were the young men. I wasn't really thinking about the men, it was really the loss of children's departments.

Some women saw men's motivation as entirely tied up with status and hierarchy:

There had begun to be an intake of young men training to be social workers before social services departments (SSDs). But, in SSDs, men came in in droves and these men had no ambition to work in social work, they wanted to go up the tree. They were the ones that streaked up the ladder. They probably saw careers opening up. This was the beginning of men coming into a segregated profession. It was rare to see men continuing as practitioners.

A major issue in the London boroughs concerned the domination of children's services by male medical officers of health (MoH). One woman described her personal experience of this:

The committee decided that the MoH would be kingpin and other departments would work under him. This became a big issue. I put forward all my objections from the word go, but the committee wanted him to take the final decisions. The MoH began accusing me of undermining him. There were always feelings of suspicion. The same story happened elsewhere in London. It was all part of the muddle with the demise of the LCC. It was an unhappy period. The doctors held higher status and the borough committees did not have a clue about children's services.

Social work's attempts to create itself as a profession had often involved resisting medical control. But senior women in social work were less aware of the likely impact of the influx of men into social work itself. It was only when the numbers of men appointed to positions as directors of social services became known that anxiety was expressed (Walton, 1975). Women did see the individual scenarios of course:

Miss B, she really ran the show, she was deputy and whatever-his-name, who was children's officer, he did the presentation and everyone thought, 'Southtown's good because there's Mr Whatnot there' but, the more you saw, the more you realised it was the woman doing it. In the change, women didn't get directorships, largely we felt because they weren't on the salaries that men were. The welfare officers, men, were on a higher salary and I think they made the assumption that if the women aren't earning as much they aren't up to it. We knew that. Back to Southtown. This man became director of Bigtown but he hadn't got Miss B behind him and he collapsed.

Another woman described her own experience of failing to become a director of social services, a story which must have been a fairly common one:

I applied for the director of social services post but did not get it. A man (ex-welfare officer) was appointed. The chair of the children's committee was on the interviewing panel. I think they knew me too well—I liked my own way.

The gendered specifications of Curtis, in the context of post-war reconstruction, had, it seems, created complexity with regard to women's experiences
as women within the social work world. Many were skilled and confident and lived and worked within a professional culture dominated by women. They did not, for the most part, perceive themselves as disadvantaged because they were women. In some ways, this absence of a consciousness of discrimination both arose from, and contributed to, their confidence. The absence of feminist discourses can, in this respect and in others which we will explore below, be seen as problematic in that there was no language within which to name sexism or resist its impact. In other ways, the irony of being appointed as women but not seeing themselves as categorized as such within their day-to-day lives, allowed them to transcend some of the limitations imposed by being seen as 'woman' within certain discourses. One contrast with the present day is that women managers now are seen by themselves and others as women. There is a discourse of the woman manager, only very partially a feminist one, expressed in books, training courses, policy statements and elsewhere (Eley, 1989; Department of Health/Social Services Inspectorate, 1991; Phillipson, 1992; Grimwood and Popplestone, 1993). The absence of such a discourse in our earlier period meant that women were talked about in ways which would not easily fit with current views of women managers (see Everitt, 1990).

Contemporary discourses of women in management tend to depict them as possessing interpersonal skills which, it is argued, should be highly valued by employees and employers alike. For example:

Good staff care is not only about putting formal systems and practices in place. It is also about paying careful attention to so-called little things, which are often neglected. For example, remembering that a member of staff needs to leave work on time to collect children, enquiring about the progress of a problem, either work-related or domestic, remembering important anniversaries (for example, of bereavement) actively facilitating those issues which are affecting staff and need to be pursued at higher levels in the organisation, being liberal in encouragement and praise when a job, however small, has been well done. It is usually women who take the trouble to remember such details, which can make an enormous difference to the way people feel about their work (Grimwood and Popplestone, 1993, p. 53).

and

From their life experience women develop skills of enabling rather than controlling and of balancing multiple roles. They bring to management qualities such as cooperation, effective team working and interpersonal skills. Their different emphasis may be interpreted as women lacking appropriate leadership qualities. Women's particular skills are most likely to be recognised in situations where a range of qualities such as awareness, interpersonal skills, team working, problem solving, leadership and professional entrepreneurial skills are all seen as necessary for effective management (Department of Health/Social Services Inspectorate, 1991, pp. 26-7).

Our concern here is less with weighing the extent to which these statements
may be 'true'—almost certainly a false trail—than with thinking about the
ways in which they operate as a discourse. In making claims to truth, dis-
courses shape what we see and do not see and, to some extent, what we
expect ourselves and others to be.

Perhaps one way in which our attention was drawn to recognizing the
discursive character of these and similar descriptions of women managers
was through the sharp contrast between them and the descriptions of women
children’s officers we were offered in our study. The most commonly used
word was ‘formidable’, a term which would be out of place in these contem-
porary accounts. One woman was described as ‘powerful, energetic, had good
vision’; many were spoken of as ‘strong’. Children’s officers were talked
about by one of the women we interviewed like this:

They were a very remarkable set of women, on the whole. Extremely able, powerful,
compassionate, bloody-minded, difficult to get on with—all these things, but very,
very influential and the one thing that they all had in common was their passionate
determination that children should have a better deal.

Such statements make current, supposedly positive descriptions of women
managers sound mealy-mouthed by comparison! It was their commitment to
children, rather than their care for staff, which was noted over and over again.
Some, in fact, were regarded as almost bullies as far as staff were concerned.

It could be argued, of course, that it is possible for women to be strong
and powerful as well as being co-operative and having team-working skills.
Our argument, however, relates to the specific language which is deployed
about women in these two periods. These words, we believe, are not acci-
dental. They arise from specific discourses of femininity and can serve to
reinforce judgements made about what kind of behaviour and what kind of
woman is appropriate as a ‘manager’. Would some of the women described
above be regarded today as ‘proper’ managers! Even the term manager is not
one that the women in our study felt comfortable in using about this period
of social welfare history. For example:

When I look back to the children’s department they didn’t talk about managing, even
supervision was a doubtful word to use. It was much more about things that had to
be done, you needed a bit of a hierarchy to sign the forms if children came into care
or if you needed to spend money on a family. The other side of it was you needed to
draw on other people’s experience; it was highly practical about where you could put
a child, you wanted to know what is this home like or did the LCC use this place
you’d heard about. You had to make sure everything was absolutely right and they
knew everything. They really knew what was happening. There must have been some
men but I have no recollection of them. I’d love to see them all again.

This statement reminds us that the contemporary discourse of woman man-
ager is predicated upon the stunning rise in the importance attached to the
manager and management per se (Taylor-Gooby and Lawson, 1993). Some
women in our study did believe that women brought different values to their work than did men. But it was the absence of hierarchy and the lack of a clear separation between managers and practitioners which gave children's departments their particular, child-centred ethos.

Although recruited for their femaleness, then, it appears that these women were, for a relatively short time, able to resist at least some of the day-to-day controls over their behaviour which being a woman at work now frequently entails. The absence of a feminist language, however, prevented any collective resistance to widespread discrimination at the end of the children's departments, and may well have obscured their vision of other aspects of sexism within welfare services of the time. One particular lacuna within the language available to women welfare professionals at that period concerned various aspects of sexuality. We move on to consider certain implications of this in the next section.

DISCOURSES OF SEXUALITY: THEN AND NOW

It was not, of course, the absence of talk about sex and sexuality that helped to shape the professional culture of the 1950s and 1960s. Foucault has argued to great effect that, rather than a supposed 'Victorian' silence concerning sex, there has been an explosion in sexual talk:

What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadowy existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret (Foucault, 1981, p. 35).

The idea has been offered to us, and it is on the face of it a persuasive one, that this was a period before the development of the so-called permissive society and that sex was not talked about. We argue that differences between that period and our own hinge on which specific discourses are available. It is probably the case that sexuality is talked about currently in more direct ways than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. But Foucault’s work amongst others has documented the myriad of ways in which discourses about sexuality have been woven into institutions, policies and professional practices, sometimes overtly but often obliquely. One key difference between the two periods concerns the development of feminist discourses about sexuality over the past 25 years.

We explore here two issues which feminists have connected with each other but which have different discursive histories. These are sexual harassment and child sexual abuse. Feminists have made conceptual links between different forms of abuse, particularly Liz Kelly in her work on sexual violence (Kelly, 1988). She argues that a range of male behaviour—including rape, sexual assault and harassment, coercive sex, flashing, and obscene
phone calls—is experienced by women as having a similar effect, creating fear and intimidation. Kelly's work uses the notion of a continuum of sexual violence to describe the connectedness, in terms of their effect on women, of these apparently distinct forms of behaviour. For her,

The basic common character underlying the many different forms of violence is the abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat and force men use to control women (Kelly, 1988, p. 76, emphasis in original).

The very term 'sexual harassment' is a relatively recent one, having developed initially from the work of Catherine Mackinnon in the 1970s. By the 1990s, it is a relatively well-known term referring to experiences which most women understand and can relate to. It has some legal remedies and a considerable number of organizations are now developing policies regarding sexual harassment. The successors to the women we have interviewed will therefore have a language for some of the forms of sexism which they experience in the workplace and they will have available some means of tackling the problems which arise from it, albeit that these are not yet anywhere near as effective as they might be (Collier, 1995).

Feminists recognize that there are differences between the abuse of women and the abuse of children, but feminist theoretical perspectives, and feminist practice in relation to sexual abuse and violence, have been extremely important in relation to our recognition of the abuse of children (MacLeod and Saraga, 1988; Smart, 1989; Bell, 1993).

Child sexual abuse will certainly be at the forefront of the minds of the present generation of social workers. Where sexual harassment is an entirely new discourse, although of course not a new experience, child sexual abuse has a social work history. Despite different terms being used at different periods, the sexual abuse of children has gone through periods of discovery and rediscovery (Gordon, 1988; Bell, 1993; Pringle, 1995). Hence, we would expect different responses from the women in our study to discussion of these two issues. In relation to sexual harassment, we were exploring the extent to which women could recognize in retrospect that this applied to some aspects of their experience, whereas we would anticipate perhaps that sexual abuse was an issue that they could have had some knowledge about at the time.

How women respond to these discussions also casts light on how we might understand the relationship between discourse and experience. Cain argues that we need to recognize the possibility of 'unthought relationships' which exist outside of, or prior to, discourse (Cain, 1993, p. 74). These extradiscursive experiences, she argues, are important to hold on to as a possibility—as previously repressed knowledges. She explores Kelly's work on sexual violence as an example of the feminist naming of previously unthought experience.
We have argued above that the absence of a feminist discourse within the children's departments prevented women from naming some of their experiences as discrimination or developing strategies for dealing with them. Nevertheless, the women's legitimacy as figures of authority allowed them to be confident and active in developing what is seen today as progressive practice with children. Can they now apply the label sexual harassment to some of their experiences in the workplaces of that time?

All of the women found it difficult to talk openly about such matters. This was the point in interviews when we had to redouble our assurances that we would disguise the source of our information. Like many women, they sought to play down the significance of these events and had developed strategies for resistance to being undermined and victimized by male behaviour. One of the main modes of resistance was to name such behaviour as a symptom of profound stupidity on the part of men.

This man was well known as a joke, he was a joke really, and he could be very distressing to people because you literally never knew when you went in the office ... there was a narrow staircase and the one thing you wanted to do was to make sure you never met him on the stairs. But he was such a fool in every aspect of his life that no one ever felt he had any power over them and I don't think I ever thought, 'I must not say anything because it will destroy my chances of promotion'. He was just an idiot.

The view was not that these were powerful men but that they were objectionable and boring and you had to slap them down.

This woman recognized the limitations of this as a survival strategy:

But thinking of sexual harassment now, thinking you had some right to object, or that there was some process you could go through. You either suffered it and shut up, or you made it obvious that the person wasn’t going to do it again.

It was, then, a fairly individual form of resistance, although the shared joking suggests a more collective element. Other women drew out the control element within sexual harassment: ‘We were more worried by the hostility—the possible sexual innuendoes of a friendly embrace caused less concern.’

Men did use aggression wrongly:

We knew who were the ‘bottom pinchers’ around the office. I don't recall offensive verbal comments from men colleagues—just a little patronising on the ‘you'll get over all that nonsense when you've worked here a while’ lines.

A good many of us had come straight out of the Services where we had to take a pretty hard battering from the men in some respects and we had learned to work
beside them in a way that probably wouldn't happen nowadays. I can only say that I don't think I was ever subject to sexual harassment—occasionally, when I was working in hospitals, I was subject to a certain amount of disparagement from the consultants who regarded me as a 'little woman', but it was not necessarily very powerful.

One story of a senior man who 'had his little fancies' and was forced to resign was told rather guiltily to us; women still felt that they ought not to speak about this. Women's survival strategies were what they have probably always been, laughing at the man who does not have the power to intimidate but, in general, being forced to live with, or circumvent, male power. As we might expect, then, sexual harassment is one way of describing behaviour which women do recognize, even though their survival mechanisms sometimes involve minimizing the impact of it. By definition, the women we talked to were those who survived and whose confidence and optimism at that period probably outweighed any discomforts. One feeling from talking to women and from reading about the period (for example Walton, 1975) is that there was a sense of surprise about just how important women became. Of course, at the beginning of the period, social work was, in any case, barely seen as a suitable occupation for men and we are aware that sexual harassment is often more widespread in male-dominated workplaces. As one woman said: 'The climate was so different and the influence of women in the early days was so strong, that the boot was certainly on the other foot'.

SEXUAL ABUSE: THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

It is important to place the work of these women in a context where the wish to end the Poor Law in all its forms was a driving force. Lorraine Fox Harding (1991) describes the transition from state paternalism to what she calls the defence of the birth family which took place in the post-war period. For the women in this study, the process was shaped by their revulsion against institutional care. For example:

One I remember was ghastly with large buildings, miles of long corridors, food in drums, 400 children in dormitories, including 38 little ones in one dormitory. You could not linger with any one of them.

There were the Public Assistance children's homes for destitute children. Their parents were 'lost' and their records were minimal—name, when admitted, parent's contribution, no reason given for admission. When parents failed to pay contributions they were not chased and often were not allowed to visit, they were regarded as a bad influence. We were rescuing them into clean institutions. The dormitories were packed—no room for a chair between the beds and they had no personal possessions.

Many of the women spoke of this period as 'years of hope' where they were
'building a Jerusalem'. Increasingly, this took the form of emphasizing the superiority of family over institution. For example:

I soon became attracted to the views of those who wanted to keep families together and who pushed for more resources for this. I felt strongly the importance to a child of knowing his parents and other relatives, even if the child can't live with them all the time.

I think all the people I worked with shared a feeling that what we really wanted was to get the children back home. There were a lot of children who shouldn't have been in care, that certainly for me became the most important thing, to try and stop children from having to leave home, and then, if you could, get them back home. I hated placing children in institutions and I thought most foster parents were pretty misguided.

Hearing these women speak passionately about this period it is not difficult to understand the way in which 'family' came to be seen as a better place for children to be. We now recognize that children may be between the devil and the deep blue sea in relation to family and state care, as far as the likelihood of abuse is concerned. We have also noted above that the emphasis on family at this period was predicated on a stereotyped view of women as housewives and mothers, an ideology which served to reinforce their dependence on men. We are still struggling with these same dilemmas in the absence of any real notion of children's rights.

Women in this study, like other social workers of the time, saw institutional care as inherently abusive. Although this was rarely named as sexual abuse at the time, some accounts clearly carry a sense that this was part of what they rebelled against. For example: 'I remember a whip on the wall and the "master" said he always took a tot of whisky before he beat the children; he enjoyed it more'. Interestingly this man resigned when a woman children's officer was appointed: 'He said he wasn't going to be bossed around by a woman'. Many of the women specified corporal punishment as their real concern, but the example above indicates what we are now clearer about, which is that physical and sexual abuse are often linked.

Women talked about their feelings of deep unease about things that happened in residential settings: 'We knew sordid things went on in approved schools'. The cultures of these institutions which are now being exposed through the testimonies of those who were abused did concern women in this study. But their fears were expressed in the discourse of the time: 'ill treatment', for example, which obscured the very specific pain produced by sexual abuse. In retrospect, women can make sense of what their uneasiness signalled to them:

The place was terribly male-dominated but what I was really concerned about was that the entrance hall was full of photographs of their annual drama production. When
I looked at these photographs, every one had the boys half naked. There was something a bit weird about that.

What a lot of suffering there must have been going on which you could sort of intuitively feel was going on. There was suffering but if you could take our culture now back to then . . . in those days a lot of people went to boarding school and a lot would carry their boarding school experiences into the work. Stiff upper lip and don’t say anything.

For this woman, her resolve to keep children out of care was strengthened: ‘I always thought the family has a vestige of something there’.

Looking back, some of the women can see that sexual abuse in families must also have been missed. For example: ‘Of course families hid these things. Perhaps we were blinded; perhaps they told us so much we thought they told us everything’. One woman said that ‘Since the Cleveland enquiry, many men and women told me (particularly those who had been in care) that they thought that the sexual activities with their father was part of family life and that one never talked about it’.

Sexual abuse in this period was often described as incest and seen as common, almost ‘normal’ in rural communities, as a number of women noted. Unless this was linked to violence, such familial abuse was not always, even in retrospect, seen as wholly bad, given the emphasis on family life. Other forms of abuse were discursively linked to the problems of ‘teenage girls’. One woman told us that she had the theory presented to her in the 1950s that much of the delinquency of teenage girls was caused by earlier sexual abuse. Others were concerned about young women being sexually exploited by older men. These concerns eventually became embedded into the notion of ‘moral danger’ which served to criminalize young women rather than respond to their needs (Hudson, 1989).

Our current knowledge about sexual abuse has been a direct product of feminism. The absence of a strong feminist presence in the 1950s and 1960s did not allow women child-care workers to translate their ‘uneasy feelings’ into a developed understanding. This is not, of course, a criticism of them or of their practice. Indeed, it is important to recognize that certain features of the period did provide opportunities for women to develop forms of practice with the potential for child-centred approaches to which many in the profession are still aspiring.

CONCLUSION

What we have shown by examining this period of child-care history is that the then available discourses of femininity and sexuality allowed a brief
moment when women could use opportunities to make enormous changes in work with children. They were also in the process of building an organizational culture which was not male-dominated and which therefore allowed women to express all sorts of different styles and ways of being. The absence of feminism meant, however, that they lacked ways in which they might have resisted much of this progress being swept aside by new forms of managerialism within social work organizations. In particular, the lack of awareness of sexual abuse in a context where ‘family’ was discursively opposed to ‘institution’ and seen as a safer place for children, limited the extent to which children’s own needs and rights might be considered. It is hard not to speculate on what might have happened if we now had both a service run by women, and a feminist movement alongside it. Might we have avoided the child-care ‘scandals’ in residential settings that we are currently confronting? One way of putting these various elements to the test in the future would be to ensure that all inspections of children’s facilities were undertaken by women and that these women were informed by feminist work on sexual violence and abuse.

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REFERENCES


