



Cumulative jeopardy? A response to Brown and Ward

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the political context of children's social care in England has shifted from doubts about the efficacy of out-of-home care to the view that more children should be separated from their birth parents, earlier and more speedily. Brown and Ward's (2014) article 'Cumulative jeopardy' reflects this transition, making the case that there is a 'gross mismatch between timeframes for early childhood development and professional responses to evidence of abuse and neglect in the early years' (p. 6). This analysis of the research on which their argument is based, 'Infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm', raises questions about whether the evidence presented adequately supports the conclusions drawn. Four aspects of the study are addressed: methodological, empirical, conceptual and ethical. It is argued that it is premature to reach a judgement about the balance of evidence for more widespread and early separation of infants from birth parents on the basis of the study.

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1. Introduction

In recent years a succession of publications and speeches from both academics and politicians in England have made the argument that 'we should be looking to provide public care for more children rather than fewer ... by providing care at an earlier stage for many' (Forrester, Goodman, Cocker, Binnie, & Jensch, 2009, p. 452). Forrester et al.'s article was a direct attempt to rebut what they perceived as the dominant political assumption of the time, expressed by the then Secretary of State for Education, Alan Johnson, that 'it is inexcusable and shameful that the care system seems all too often to reinforce ... early disadvantage, rather than helping children to successfully overcome it' (Forrester, Goodman, Cocker, Binnie, & Jensch, 2009, p. 440). The claim made was that the care system, although not the experience of children on leaving care, was broadly positive for many children and the apparent failings of out-of-home care were more likely the result of delayed decisions to intervene and remove children, than quality of care offered to children once separated from their parents.

This prescription – more children to be separated from birth parents, removed earlier and more speedily – has now become the dominant policy imperative in England, with Johnson's successor, Michael Gove (2012) claiming that 'our society has put the interests of adults before the needs of children Too many children are left for far too long in homes where they are exposed to appalling neglect and criminal mistreatment.' The 2013 Review of Social Work Education in England which Gove commissioned from Martin Narey, previously Chief Executive of the children's charity Barnardo's, broadened out the argument to a general attack on the definition of social work internationally and on

what he perceived to be the political bias of educators. '(W)e need a definition that concentrates on that work, generally carried out in the statutory sector, which is about protecting children' (Narey, 2014, p. 13). Narey asserted that social workers were being taught to ignore the needs of children while seeing parents only as victims of social inequality. Educators were accused of 'seek(ing) to persuade students that poor parenting or neglect are necessary consequences of disadvantage. There may be a partial correlation between disadvantage and poor parenting but there is not a causal link' (p. 11).

Further support for the case for removing more children and more speedily is provided in Brown and Ward's (2014) latest publication on their study 'Infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm'. This is a longitudinal study of babies who were the subject of a formal child protection enquiry, that is to say a core assessment or a Section 47 assessment, before their first birthday (see also Ward, Brown, & Westlake, 2012b; Ward, Brown, & Maskell-Graham, 2012a). The authors make serious charges about the quality of decision making by children's services staff and their agencies. The central allegation is expressed in this paragraph:

There is little doubt that there is a gross mismatch between timeframes for early childhood development and professional responses to evidence of abuse and neglect in the early years. Delays in taking appropriate and effective action mean that many children are left in very damaging home circumstances or placed in limbo for lengthy periods. Such experiences can have a negative impact on the ways in which they negotiate key developmental tasks and compromise their future life chances across the whole spectrum of development (Brown & Ward, 2014, p. 6).

The authors, like Gove and Narey, argue that too little attention is paid by social workers to the needs of children and too much to the rights of parents, with social work education being identified as a key

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problem. But are these claims and the underlying case for speedier and more widespread separation of children from birth parents supported by the evidence offered? There are four significant reasons for doubt: methodological, empirical, conceptual and ethical.

None of the following is intended to imply that some children are not in need of protection, that decisions are always made in a timely fashion or that resolving any of the issues involved, including those of research methodology, is straightforward. It is intended to suggest that a rush to judgement on the basis of the evidence to date is, at best, premature. This review is based on the two accounts of the research given in Brown and Ward (2014) and Ward et al. (2012b).

2. Methodology

In Brown and Ward's (2013, p. 12) influential review of research, the authors, discussing the difficulties faced by researchers wishing to access 'vulnerable subjects', state that 'sample sizes are often small, and sometimes skewed' and reference the 2012 account of their research (Ward et al., 2012b). However, readers of the 2014 article alone may not be aware of some of the difficulties experienced by the research team in securing the sample of children on whom their study is based. In the 2012 account, these difficulties are discussed in greater detail. Families were recruited through 10 large local authorities (LAs) in England, not including any in inner or outer London, with over a half of all cases coming from two metropolitan LAs and one county. The research team used an opt-in approach to securing parental consent to participating in the study requiring that parents return a written reply slip indicating their interest. Eighty four families returned reply slips and that this was 'around 4%' of all eligible families in the 10 participating LAs (Ward et al., 2012b, p. 215), suggesting that about 2100 families were eligible for inclusion. Of these 84 families, around two thirds were eventually enrolled in the study, although it is unclear how many the full data set of interviews and case records was eventually completed. Therefore, the 57 families (it is unclear at times whether the 57 refer to 'families', 'cases', or 'children') who were involved at the outset of the study would constitute about 2.7% of all eligible children. By the children's second birthday researchers were in contact with primary carers of only 35 children, just 1.67% of the eligible population. How many of the 10 LAs were still participating in the reduced sample is not reported.

Quite properly, the authors draw attention to this potential for bias in their own sample in both Ward et al. (2012b) and Brown and Ward (2014), making it clear that the children they studied were not representative of the eligible population in several significant respects. They make this judgement on the basis of comparisons with official data collected on all eligible children in 4 of the 10 LAs, some 693 children. Even though the sample size is small (and the original intention was to include 100 children), the sample children were statistically significantly more likely to have been referred before birth and to have had a period in out-of-home care before the age of 1. Very few 'no further action' decisions were made on the sample children — just 3 cases (5.3%) compared to 54% of eligible children. The cases where parents did agree to participate were those who 'the interview data suggests ... were more likely to be parents with very positive or very negative perceptions of children's social care' (Ward et al., 2012b, p. 220). One reason for this might be that 'at least 20 mothers and an unknown number of fathers had already experienced the permanent removal of older children' (p. 60), which must be another factor distinguishing this sample from the eligible population. And as the authors comment, 'losing a child to adoption or special guardianship also had a major, ongoing impact on parents' subsequent functioning, for it had left them with an enduring sense of shame and loss' (p. 60). It is interesting that Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) in 'The Spirit Level: Why unequal societies always do better' identify shame as a manifestation of how inequality within a society gets under the skin of individuals, part of the social

and emotional accompaniments of relative material disadvantage (Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014).

What is not included, presumably because the official data set used for comparison does not collect the information, are details about the nature and circumstances of the families involved. The comparator data does not include family size, parental age, the presence or absence of two parents, parental employment and financial circumstances, their accommodation or the environments in which they lived. As the authors say, 'The study sample is therefore skewed towards infants who are at a higher risk of experiencing abuse and neglect than the eligible population' (p. 2), but it is also skewed towards families who have had negative prior experiences of children's services' interventions and may, or may not, be skewed towards parents who are living in particularly difficult circumstances.

The point of this critique is not to denigrate the research team's efforts. It is clear that they adopted a careful and ethical approach to a difficult task. The point is rather to ask how readers should assess the results and take these limitations into account in judging the conclusions drawn. Of course, this is difficult because we do not fully know how the families compare with the whole eligible population. Not only does this study not provide that data comprehensively but no other systematic, representative study of the circumstances of children on child protection measures has ever been undertaken in England which we could adopt as background, and the last such study of looked after children (in out-of-home care) was published in 1989 (Bebbington and Miles). This should make the authors cautious about drawing general conclusions from a small and unrepresentative sample. Indeed in Ward et al. (2012b, p. 203), they describe the findings as 'exploratory'. Instead we are told three times that there is '*little doubt*' not only that there is a '*gross*' problem in the timeliness of decision making but that this results in '*many children (being) left in very damaging home circumstances*' (my italics). It is not clear how the conclusions are tempered by the sampling problems identified. Of course, one child left in avoidably damaging circumstances where there are good available alternatives is one too many, but that is not what is being argued.

3. Empirical

A second concern about the study reported by Brown and Ward, involves their analysis of risk factors. Much attention has been paid in recent years to the role of three key factors which correlate with raised rates of child maltreatment: parental substance misuse, mental ill-health and intimate partner violence, although I and others have argued that these are too often treated simplistically (Bywaters, 2013; Featherstone et al., 2014). These factors are the focus of close attention over five and a half pages in the extended account of the research, with further pages describing some parents' learning difficulties and the previous removal of other children (Ward et al., 2012b). (Nothing is reported about the parents' physical health or impairments.) These factors also feature in the list in the 'Cumulative Jeopardy' article, on the basis of which families in the study were sorted into four risk categories. The full list of factors, drawn from Hindley, Ramchandani, and Jones (2006), is 'parental substance misuse, paranoid psychosis or personality disorder, inter-parental conflict and violence, parental abuse in childhood and denial of problems'. The Hindley study was unusual in not identifying relative poverty or other measures of material disadvantage or inequality as a key risk factor for maltreatment (Bebbington & Miles, 1989; Oliver et al., 2001; Dickens, Howell, Thoburn, & Schofield, 2005; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006; Slack et al., 2011; Thoburn, Cooper, Brandon, & Connolly, 2013; Wulczyn, Gibbons, Snowden, & Lery, 2013; Eckenrode, Smith, McCarthy, & Dineen, 2014; Bywaters et al., 2014) but did caution (p. 751) against applying 'the findings directly to the United Kingdom and other jurisdictions where different services and definitions may prevail. Large differences in demographic factors such as levels of poverty are also important to consider when extrapolating the findings to other settings.'

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