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‘Because I’m a kid ...’: The struggle for recognition of children and young people involved in child and family social work

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Abstract

Children's participation in decision-making remains a key focus of social work practice. Yet the protection and participation of children in our society remains a setting of tension for children, families and practitioners. Drawing on evidence from a retrospective qualitative study on Family Group Conferencing, this paper uses the lens of recognition theory to highlight the experiences of young people more broadly in the social work system. The study found social workers' attitudes affected children and young people's capacity to be ‘partners’ in decision-making. Feelings of misrecognition can create barriers for how children and young people perceive and interact with social work professionals. While small, this study sheds light on the experiences of young people's struggles for recognition when involved in the social work system. Further research is needed on this topic to fully understand the implications of (mis)recognition in social work practice.

KEYWORDS

children's participation, family group conferencing, (mis)recognition, partnership, social work practice

1 | INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging children as partners in social work decision-making processes is grounded in the recognition of a child being the bearer of legal rights (Husby et al., 2019). The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enshrines the child's right to express a view on all matters which affect the child in accordance with their age and maturity (Article 12). The child's participation rights include his/her/their being able to express their view, to be informed about the details and options within a decision. A child's views should be considered and given due weight (given their age and maturity) by adults who are making the decision (Alderson, 2000). As Alderson (2000) points out, Article 12 does not mean that the child has the right to enforce their views but rather the UNCRC grants to children a share in making decisions which affect them, which can at times be determinative to the decisions made. The UNCRC also enshrines the child's right to be

protected by having their best interests assessed and considered (Article 3). It should be noted however, that the best interests of the child should not be equated to protection alone, rather it is enshrined in all children's rights.

An intrinsic tension within children and families social work is that of care and control. Social workers must balance the need to work in partnership with families and, at the same time, recognize the needs of the child to be protected. A constant difficulty of working in partnership lies in the difficulty of achieving agreement over what is considered the shared goal of the work and family members (Pinkerton, 2001). Fox (2018, pp. 60–61) highlights the complexity of participation and empowerment for children in social work decisions making.

The paramouncy principle (in social work) acts to divide these two principles, establishing the best

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interests of the child is more important than participation due to the legal and moral obligation of keeping children safe from significant harm (*my parenthesis*).

Social workers are often tasked with determining what is in the child or young person's best interests, and as the best interest's test is discretionary, this can lead to adults silencing or side-lining children's and young people's views (Tisdall, 2015). In Scotland, seeking collaboration and partnership with those involved in social work services (including children) is considered best practice and is enshrined in child welfare legal and policy frameworks (Scottish Government, 2015, 2016b). This means that it is the child's right to be the main decider in matters which affect them—when the child can make an informed decision in their own best interests. Children's involvement in decision-making, however, remains a controversial area in child welfare and protection—research suggests children often struggle to be recognized in social work practice (Husby et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019); and the experience of misrecognition and disrespect can have implications for the child's sense of self and his/her/their longer-term outcomes (Häkli et al., 2018; Houston, 2015a; Turney, 2012; Vieluf & Sauerwein, 2018; Warming, 2014). Given the tensions between the principles of participation and best interests of the child, the level of agency a child has in terms of expressing their views and feelings in a decision-making forum in relation to child welfare is 'critical' (Fox, 2018). It is this later point, that of the child's experience of expressing their views to social work, that is the focus of this paper.

Drawing on evidence from a retrospective qualitative case study approach on Family Group Conferencing (FGC), this paper uses the lens of recognition theory to highlight the experiences of young people more generally in the social work system. Please note, while the focus of the research was Family Group Conferencing this paper is wider—exploring children and young people's experience of social work rather than discussing the FGC process itself. Findings from original study on outcomes for children at risk of being accommodated by the state and family members involved in Family Group Conferencing are published elsewhere (see Mitchell, 2019; Mitchell, 2021). Key concepts of partnership and recognition in social work practice are discussed before summarizing the research methodology and limitations.

2 | PARTNERSHIP IN SOCIAL WORK

There is a significant body of work which draws attention to child participation as a means of protection for children within childcare and protection processes in the United Kingdom, and internationally. The image of children as vulnerable, weak and in need of protection has been long challenged with the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). Children are now not only seen as needing protection but also as having the right to be participant in decisions which might impact them as active citizens—to be partners in

decision-making processes. 'Partnership' is a key concept in social work practice, yet it has multiple meanings and interpretation. Scheyett and Diehl (2004) propose a single definition of partnership in social work practice:

'Partnership' is conceptualised as a collaborative process whereby the social worker and client work as equals, each with areas of strength and expertise, each with the ability to exercise autonomy and choice. (Scheyett & Diehl, 2004, p. 436).

This definition assumes partners are equal, that they have an obligation and right to participate and presumably each partner may be affected equally by the benefits and challenges arising from the partnership (Dalrymple & Burke, 2008). This does not always happen in social work practice. Partners may differ in their commitment from one context to another while their values, level of power and resources will also vary (Carnwell & Larson, 2005). Pinkerton (2001, p. 249) argues that the imbalance of power fixed within the British social and political structures, based on 'inequalities of class, gender, age, race and the nature of the state' makes it particularly difficult within the context of child welfare to establishing partnerships between those who provide child welfare support and those who receive it (see also Dalrymple & Burke, 2008; Taylor & Le Riche, 2006).

Roose et al. (2013) suggest two different interpretations of 'partnership', drawing a distinction between 'reductionist' and 'democratic' partnerships with families, based on different conceptualizations of childhood, parenting and citizenship (Roose et al., 2013, p. 250). A 'reductionist' approach to partnership implies a conceptualization of 'the vulnerable poor child with parents who are not fully capable of raising their children' (p. 451). This approach in social work risks reducing partnership to 'governing families' and to restraining partnership within the boundaries of the goals set by social work. Thus, partnership with parents is framed around conditionality—parents need to behave, and we will give you your rights, let you keep your children (Roose et al., 2013, p. 451), while partnership with children becomes opaque because of their perceived vulnerability. A 'democratic' form of partnership, on the other hand, conceptualizes both the child and parent as capable actors, casting children as active, autonomous and competent individuals rather than passive objects and victims who are at risk and vulnerable. 'Citizenship' is conceptualized not as an idealized notion that is predefined but rather as something that is dynamic and emerges through participation and practice. Roose et al. (2013, p. 453) argue 'rights and responsibility are actualized through interaction, negotiation and consensus'. In this way, there is a shared responsibility between social work, children and parents to make sense of what is happening in a situation. Jointly searching for meaning and solutions, social workers (as well as family members) can use their power to contribute towards 'the identification and construction of problems' including those which are related to inequalities such as poverty and devise joint actions (Roose et al., 2013, p. 454). Thus, the focus moves from a process where

children and adult family members have to participate because conditions are attached, to a learning process for social worker, parent and child alike embedded by dialogical and relational interactions and concerns (Dalrymple & Burke, 2008; Douglas, 2009; Featherstone et al., 2014a; Roose et al., 2012).

Partnership within social work practice is centred around relationship-based interactions, where through the act of listening, giving voice to and exploring options, the personal dimensions of the child's or family member's experiences are recognized (Preston-Shoot, 2014). Thus, working in partnership in this manner turns knowledge of needs and risk into acknowledgement and, as such, the service user moves to the centre of decision-making. Working in partnership with children and adult family members is about social workers creating a climate of inclusion and collaboration, which acknowledges everyone's contribution to the process (Dalrymple & Burke, 2008, p. 133). Indeed, they contend, for social work to work in partnership with service users, the capacity of service users must be 'enhanced to consolidate and extend their ability to know themselves, make decisions and solve problems' (op.cit. p134). This conceptualization of partnership highlights an understanding of power imbalances between service users and social workers, where children and adult family members are included in a process which supports mutual recognition, understanding of a problem, and negotiation to find a possible solution. I would argue that these relational elements of partnership working link with the concept of recognition as an ethical feature of social work practice (Turney, 2012). These conditions are central to understanding the experiences of young people's interactions with social workers, discussed later in the paper.

3 | RECOGNITION AND MISRECOGNITION IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Ideas of recognition have become a key concept in analysing struggles for social justice and inequalities (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) and in social work (Frost, 2016; Gupta & Blumhardt, 2018; Häkli et al., 2018; Houston, 2015b; Husby et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2020; Niemi, 2020; Warming, 2019). Recognition theory contends that social relations acknowledge and validate personal existence and are pivotal for identity formation; a just society is therefore one where everyone gets due recognition, an unjust society is influenced by the struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1996, 2004). Recognition is 'the act of acknowledging others and coming to be acknowledged by others' (Binham, 2001, cited in Powell et al., 2018). Thus, recognition occurs in relational spaces between individuals and groups/communities. The key concepts, primarily discussed in recognition theory in relation to social work, are the concepts: love, rights and solidarity. These are critically outlined more comprehensively elsewhere (Dotolo et al., 2018; Houston & Dolan, 2007; Mitchell, 2020) and refer to the different forms of (mis)recognition experienced between individuals and groups/communities. These core concepts refer to the values, behaviour and viewpoints that influence 'how we treat one another as human beings in everyday life' and are important 'from the

perspective of ethics, agency, identity formation and wellbeing' (Niemi, 2020, p. 2). Social workers need to be equipped with frameworks that facilitate both the recognition of injustice and the efforts to realize social justice within and through inter personal encounters (Dotolo et al., 2018). In short, recognition theory has value in helping us understand the impact of nuanced relational spaces in social work practice with children and young people.

Recognition scholars (Fraser, 2000, 2003; Honneth, 1996) do not mention children and young people in their discourse on recognition except in the context of primary relationships of care and love (Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2016; Warming, 2014). While Recognition Theory has not traditionally been used within the context of child welfare, this paper intends to do so by using recognition and partnership as a lens to shed light on young people's experiences of social work. Before this discussion, the next section considers the research project, its focus and methodology. Detail is provided in relation to the limitations of methodological decision-making regarding the interviewing of young people. That is, whether children were interviewed separately, together or with their parents, in an effort to promote children's agency and voice within the research process.

4 | METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on evidence provided by younger family members aged 12–19 years ($n = 10$), nine females ($n = 9$) and one male ($n = 1$), from a study that participants were involved in regarding Family Group Conferencing¹ outcomes. The original research was a collaborative PhD study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Children 1st, a national child welfare third sector organization in Scotland, conducted between 2013 and 2018. The study took a retrospective qualitative case study approach and involved 11 case studies or 'pods'² ($n = 11$) comprising of child and adult family members and the professionals (social work, health education and voluntary sector) involved in FGC. The unit of analysis for the study was the family's FGC experience, where the family had a child who was at risk of going into State care (see Mitchell, 2021). The field work took place in 2014–2015 across five local government authorities in Scotland. Given the topic of study and its sensitivity, a more intensive level 2 ethical review was required and approved by the University of Edinburgh. In total, 60 people—young people (10), adult family members (22) and professionals (28) (total = 60)—were interviewed in 44 discrete semi-structured interviews. The overarching research question for this study was: *What contribution does FGC make to longer term outcomes for children and families involved in social work services where a child in the family is at risk of being placed into state care?* Subquestions included—according to young people, family members and professionals: what was the experience of FGC? How does the process of FGC link to outcomes? And how do these individuals conceptualize outcomes? It was while interviewing young people for this research project that respondents also discussed their experiences of social work more generally, and it is this evidence that this paper explores. As such, while the research focused on FGC discussion in

this paper does not explicitly link or make conclusions about the FGC process for young people and adult family members—this is done elsewhere (see Mitchell, 2019, 2021).

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in the study using a predesigned interview schedule. The interview schedule was developed taking cognisance of the diverse membership and potential power differences in any one FGC pod. The author reflected on and piloted how to support individual stories to emerge. To begin, a variety of tested communication supports were used to assist interviewees to relax and feel able to talk about their experiences (Greene & Hogan, 2005). Secondly, it was intended that whether the interview was an individual, paired, or family interview it would follow generally the same structure, using the similar communication supports. The main difference between family and professional interviews was that family members were asked to describe the ‘family’ structure using wooden dolls and/or animals. The interviews generally took the following structure: warm up exercise to get to know each other; participatory exercise to describe their current family and social network using wooden dolls (a photograph was taken of the dolls); and then a discussion regarding the experience of FGC an associated outcomes for the family members. Interviews usually took between 60 and 90 min and were conducted in the young persons' home. Interviews took place retrospectively—up to 1 year or more after the child's FGC occurred. Table 1 lists young people interviewed in the study. It also provides information regarding the respondents age (at the time of the interview), the type of interview the young person chose to undertake and with whom, as well as the family pod each young person belonged to. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity of the people involved.

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher almost word for word; however, choices to exclude most non lexical verbalizations (...er, um, etc.) and pauses in the transcripts were made. Thus, the interactional nature of the interviews such as detailed recording of pauses and overlaps were not transcribed although long pauses, crying and laughter were noted. The interpretation and analysis of the findings were broadly interpretative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Data were coded and organized using NVivo

information management system. Building on knowledge gleaned from the data collection and transcribing, as well as my own professional experience and research skills, I developed an initial coding framework, identified some of the initial themes within the data corpus. Analysis began by looking at transcripts from one FGC pod-coding and recoding to develop key themes, which were important expressions of the data itself. In this way each interview was examined on its own merit and then combined the data for each FGC pod. This analysis was repeated for all 11 pods. Looking across pods, allowed themes common for different groups or respondents for example young people, adult family members professionals, to be identified. Further thematic analysis across pods allowed the identification of common themes based on anything other than pod membership, allowing for further refining and testing of coding choices. A strength of thematic analysis within this study was its flexibility in allowing the researcher to look across and within pods in a manner which provided a rich and detailed yet complex account of data. It is through this process of analysis that the data for this paper was identified.

4.1 | Limitations

A limitation of the study may be the concerned with interviewing children and parents together would highlight generational power relations which structure many children's lives (Harden et al., 2010). This thinking suggests that the parent or older siblings might dominate and speak for the child. It seemed relevant not to assume that the individual interviews were the best way to approach data collection but rather to consider that the child would have opinions about how comfortable, or not, she/he/they felt about meeting and undertaking an interview. Harden and colleagues (Harden et al., 2010) point out, one of the first questions asked by researchers when exploring different family members' perspectives is to consider whether the views of participants should be collected individually or as a group. The trend, they suggest, in sociological research is to conduct interviews separately. Thus, ensuring the views of the child, sibling or parent are heard,

TABLE 1 Young people interviewed

Type of interview	Who was in the interview with the young person	Young person	Family pod
Individual interview	Individual interview with young person	Jade (19) ^a	Pod 6
		Ashley (16) ^b	Pod 9
Paired interviews	Young people were interviewed with their sibling	Skye (12) and Zara (14)	Pod 9
		Shannon (16) and Blue (18)	Pod 1
	Young people were interviewed with a parent	Ashley (16) and Viv (mother)	Pod 6
		Dillon (17) and Jill (mother)	Pod 8
		Sylvie (19) and Carla (mother)	Pod 10
Family interview	Young people, who were siblings, interviewed with their parent as a ‘family’	Justine (17), Kate (15) and Carol (mother)	Pod 3

^aAge at time of interview.

^bAshley was interviewed twice, once on her own and once with her mother.

without the concerns of one participant dominating the other. Yet in this study, young people often expressed the desire to be involved in the research but also sometimes their unease of meeting the researcher (a stranger) on their own. This situation seemed to strengthen the need to have a flexible rather than dogmatic approach to individual or group interviews. Given the research focused on the child and family members' experiences – it should be the child who, as much as possible, decides how and with whom they are interviewed (Williams & Rogers, 2014). Many young people in the study consequently chose to be interviewed with a parent or sibling. This might suggest the presence of other family members can be used by younger respondents as a form of support and comfort in an interview situation. Indeed, the difference between the individual and joint interview in this appeared to be the interaction between interviewees: their sharing and mutual reflections which came from shared experiences but also a pre-existing relationship.

It is acknowledged that the number of young people interviewed in the study is small ($n = 10$); however, young people's attitudes can be helpful to explore because they can provide indicative findings of a particular group of respondents.

5 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This paper will discuss several examples of young people's struggle to be recognized by his/her/their social workers. In short, where misrecognition occurs by the expression of exclusion, marginalization, oppressive norms within the micro interactions that predominate all levels of social work practice. While young people's opinions about how adults conceptualized them was not specifically a goal of the research, it became apparent from the data that many younger respondents considered that their interactions with adult professionals (particularly social work) were affected by those adults' attitude to them being 'a kid' (pod 1, 3, 6, 9, 10) and impacted on the young person's capacity to be partners in the decision-making.

5.1 | '... Because I'm a kid'

Jade retrospectively expresses her frustration at her social worker's attitude towards her being 'kid':

Yeah, because I am a kid they say, 'Oh she does not know, she does not understand', which I think is really unfair. (Jade: age 19 when interviewed - pod 9)

Jade's evidence expresses her dissatisfaction regarding her interactions with adults. She suggests the adult social worker did not listen to or believe her capable of understanding what was occurring in her life and consequently did not value her opinion. The undertones of her comments suggest she feels she is misrecognized by adults; they cannot see her capabilities as a person to be involved in social work

processes. She considered she should have had more say in decisions affecting her.

Young people's experiences of adults' dismissive attitudes towards them were common across the data set. Sylvie (pod 10) talks in her interview about how she perceived social workers saw her:

I think they just thought I was a crazy wee child.
(Sylvie: age 19 years when interview - pod 10)

This evidence suggests Sylvie's experience of how others conceptualized her is being 'crazy' and a 'wee child' as diminishing. As such, Sylvie recognizes that social workers (in this case) ignored or overlooked her views rather than understood and acknowledged her life experiences as important and of value. The statement hints at an underlying cultural assumption that 'wee kids' are all potentially the same, a homogenous group potentially unanchored in networks and community. Sylvie experienced feeling misrecognized, judged and potentially belittled by the interactions with her social worker which evoked a superficial understanding of her situation and attachments. Sylvie's reflection describes a reductionist form of partnership where a lack of engagement in children's identities means practice is unlikely to gain 'truthful' accounts from children about what is happening to them, potentially impacting on their safety (Featherstone et al., 2014b). Younger respondents' evidence across the pods shows this as a common experience.

5.2 | Expression of power in everyday exchanges

Evidence from this study supports the contention that social work and service user interactions inherently focus on the way continuous negotiations takes place, that is who they are and what might be possible for them, including what resources they may or may not be able to access. Zara describes her experiences negotiating with social work:

The social work try and dictate your life because they are adults and we don't have a say in it ... Kids don't have much say in what they can do these days in social work, unless you are going to go and you know, be like: I don't like this and you're going to have to change it; or I am going to be bad; or I am going to act out; or something like that. (Zara, 14 at time of interview: pod 9)

Zara's comment on 'the social work' determining her life reveal an intuitive knowledge about how power operates for her, particularly as a child in state care. Children and young people involved in social work services who are often socially marginalized, excluded and face adversity have restricted opportunities to develop skills and exercise agency—where 'exercising agency' means a 'capacity to undertake preferred action' (Munford & Sanders, 2015, p. 1569). Zara understands she has little power because social work 'dictates her life'

(as social work has a legal duty of care) but she also suggests her options for exercising agency are limited. Zara's evidence highlights her need to deal and negotiate (work in partnership) with social work and how these experiences impact on her identity as a 'good' or 'bad' child. She appears to suggest that to access resources, from a system that she believes often disregards what she needs because she is 'a kid', she will be required to exercise her agency in particular ways. She expresses her choices as confrontational or combative rather than collaborative. These options show a level of inequality in the relationship and interactions with her social worker. Research suggests that where young people have been engaged constructively in social work, this also supports their capacity to engage effectively in wider issues (Munford & Sanders, 2015): developing confidence and feelings of self-worth can enable them to deal with family and personal problems more constructively (Bell, 2011). What Zara is describing in her interactions with social work does not appear to be democratic partnership. Rather, social work is 'dictating' her agenda as she struggles to be heard and recognized and consequently is experiencing a reductionist form of partnership, due (in part) to the conceptualization of her by adult professionals.

5.3 | Misrecognition affects access to support and additional resources

Evidence describing young people's experiences of adults' attitudes towards them suggests these interactions were often changeable and impacted on young people's access to support and resources. Ashley (pod 6) describes her experiences of changing her social worker below:

I got a new social worker; it was just completely back to the whole social work thing - the social work: child kind of relationship ... She just got the wrong idea about me, and my family and I was like I don't want her to be my social worker' (Ashley; aged 16 at time of interview - pod 6)

Ashley's comment suggests her interactions with different social workers were inconsistent: as individual professionals changed so too did professionals' attitudes towards her and her family. How she perceived herself to be treated and respected (i.e., social worker's attitude towards her) impacted on Ashley's engagement with social work services and potentially her access to help and additional resources. Here she describes a positive, relationship-based engagement by social workers that opened opportunities for herself and her family.

She was like, didn't act like a social worker, all proper and judgey. She was properly like a friend to me when I was out with her. I understood she was a social worker, and she was kind of like had social work boundaries, but she was amazing. She was so kind; she

was just there and really supportive to the family (Ashley: young person, pod 5)

The social worker Ashley describes engaged with her in a manner that Ashley found helpful, supportive and caring, in contrast to her evidence earlier. 'Being there' suggests Ashley felt listened to and that her concerns and difficulties were acknowledged without her feeling judged—elements of a democratic form of partnership (Roose et al., 2013). The contrast between the two statements Ashley makes about social work suggests that social workers' approaches and attitudes to her and her family may have a significant impact on how effectively young people and their families, who need support, engage with services.

5.4 | Recognition experienced as respect, support and care

Friendship seems to be valued by Ashley as a quality in her social worker—this is not overly surprising given the difficult experiences she and her family were experiencing. Yet Ashley's evidence is that the social worker is 'like' a friend suggesting she is not quite a friend—Ashley acknowledged 'she understood' the professional relationship she has with her social worker. What appears important to Ashley, as the service user is: the informality of the relationships; the genuine regard and care the social worker offered Ashley and her family at a time when things were difficult; and time—being present with the family. These qualities of friendship provided the family with a level of recognition: care and support, respect in the relationship and acknowledgement of Ashley's strengths and contributions which she may not previously have experienced. This recognition appeared to strengthen rather than hinder the capacity of the child to work together with social work assisting a democratic form of partnership to emerge. A direct contrast to the evidence provided by Sylvie and Jade earlier. Featherstone and colleagues (2014a, pp. 11–12) argue that social work with children (and families) need to recognize the importance of 'democratic and humane practice which takes account of varying perspectives, acknowledges different viewpoints and makes careful judgements about them'. They argue to do this there is a need to 'reanimate' children and parents as people and this requires a different conceptualization of practice supporting different forms of partnership between the child, adult family members and professionals. This evidence gives substance to Preston-Shoot's (2014, p. 70) claim that partnership working with children and adults who are in need and at risk is a way of making their humanity visible.

This section has highlighted the complexity of young people's interactions with social workers and the impact of being (mis)recognized has on her/his/their identities, access to recourses and participation in decisions making processes. The invisibility of children and their lack of participation of children in child welfare and protection processes continues to be an important area of tension in practice. This paper provides insight into how young people's experiences of (mis) recognition can impact their visibility in the social work system.

Children and young people are entitled to respect as morally responsible persons and the bearers of rights, additionally children deserve esteem as people with talents and capabilities, who contribute to society and culture in a variety of ways (Lundy, 2007; Thomas, 2012). A dilemma, which has been in social work practice are the attitudes of social workers to recognize these attributes and rights of children to help build effective working relationships with those involved in social work services (Morrison et al., 2019; Ruch et al., 2017; Winter, 2009, 2015). Further, young people who experience respect, care and support from their social worker often see themselves as being partners in decision-making. Evidence from this study suggests that by understanding the impact of (mis) recognition on young people, social workers can begin to build relationships which support and listen to children and young people in child welfare settings.

6 | CONCLUSION

Evidence from young people in this study support the contention that social work with children and young people must start with recognizing each as capable human beings; with views and opinions that need to be acknowledged in a manner that recognizes each party as having value. It seems vital to consider acts of recognition within these relational spaces—the way in which young people are acknowledgement in social work practice can impact a young person's sense of self-worth as well as the perception of the service they are receiving. Research indicates social workers can be the conduit for opening up resources and expanding horizons for those they are working with by working in partnership with children and young people (Juhila & Abrams, 2011). If children experience social workers as having a reductionist conceptualization of their capacities, it can limit young people's engagement in processes and their ability to speak up about their issues and problems. Consequently, misrecognizing children and young people may result in the social worker having a superficial understanding of a child's life. This can ultimately influence decisions being made about the protection of children and young people. In the longer-term, experiences of misrecognition may impact children and young people's safety and well-being.

This paper highlights the perceived attitudes social workers, as experienced by young people who were at risk of state care. The strong emotional responses by young people, often due to feelings of misrecognition, influence how they see and work with social work, often creating a barrier for social workers to work in partnership with service users. Implications to social work practice were highlighted, including the risk of evoking superficial understandings of young people's situations which impacted individual's sense agency and self-worth—ultimately effecting the child's right to participation and protection. This article has argued that children are not passive in their interactions with adults and that power is reflected in how interactions and relations play out in social work practice. As such, it is vital that professionals do not underestimate the impact of their own attitudes regarding childhood that may influence the nuanced interactions they may have with the children (and families) that they work

with. This article contributes to broader international debates on how the concepts of recognition and partnership can aid an exploration of these complex, iterative and interdependent relationships experienced in child welfare contexts. Research on the impact of (mis) recognition in child welfare contexts is required to shed more light on these initial findings.

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This research has been carried out in accordance with the University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Science's Ethics Framework and procedures.

ENDNOTES

¹ FGC (also known as Family Group Decision Making) is a family led decision-making approach where practical plans are made by family members to keep children safe and improve their quality of life. FGC has attracted world-wide interest in policy makers, researchers and practitioners for its potential to: involve families in decision-making process in child and family social work; keeping children safe within a culture of cooperation between the state and the families, while also upholding the child's rights to participate in decisions affecting them and be protected from harm.

² As pointed out in Mitchell (2019) each case of FGC studied involved professionals as well as the extended family, as such each is identified as an FGC 'pod' (Ney et al., 2013)

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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