Moral consciousness and decision-making in child and family social work

Child and family social work is beset by value dilemmas. In this paper Stan Houston attempts to find a way out of these entanglements by delving into the moral philosophy of Jurgen Habermas. It is argued that Habermas’s ideas on moral discourse enable social workers and others involved in a child’s life to reach ethical decisions. Towards the end of the paper, the argument is grounded in two case examples centering on child placement decisions. At this juncture it is argued that Habermas’s position creates certain problems for ethical decision-making involving children, but that these problems can be assuaged by a range of compensatory actions including advocacy and critical reflection.

Introduction

Few can argue with the assertion that we live in a world where uncertainty prevails in social, technological and scientific domains of living (Delanty, 2000). Moreover, with the growth of cultural pluralism, moral certitude and censure have weakened in many spheres giving way to ethical scepticism.

If we want an example of moral indeterminacy at play, let us look no further than child and family social work:

In their daily practice, in whatever field and certainly in child care, social workers are constantly having to make choices in situations pervaded by conflict and uncertainty. (McLaughlin and Pinkerton, 1995, p 40)

It is important to look more closely at the nature and range of these conflicts. Firstly, social workers experience tension when faced with competing (and equally valid) ethical principles. Often the tension crystallises around an imperative to protect the child counterpoised against an ethic of family support and prevention. As Hetherington cogently argues (1998), such tensions have been exacerbated under the Children Act 1989 and similar statutes that attempt to harmonise radically different value positions (see also Freeman, 1992).

A second ethical quandary arises when decision-making involves choices between unsatisfactory alternatives. How might we respond, for example, when faced with a vulnerable 16-year-old in residential care who has recently confided that she is pregnant? Do we insist that she is re-located to a more appropriate placement pertaining to motherhood against her wishes or sustain her placement in a volatile and at times violent residential home? Thirdly, social workers face daily conflicts between their own personal values and those of the organisations for which they work. These conflicts are often manifest when person-centred, liberal values are pitted against bureaucratic directives:

...bureaucracies, by virtue of the kind of decision-making they promote, undermine our ordinary concepts of morality. In particular, human service organisations undermine our moral concepts because of their contradictory nature: their stated goal is to help clients, yet their actual operation serves the interest of preserving the bureaucracy. (Rhodes, 1986, p 134)

Lastly, social workers are caught between the imperative to act quickly (in the case of manifest risk to a vulnerable person) and the need to reflect on the best course of action. Schon’s (1983) idea that we should learn to reflect-in-action as a way of resolving this tension appears as somewhat utopian given the ‘cognitive overload’ endured by many social workers in their daily practice.

What is more, despite the fact that the profession has developed a well-articulated canon of social work values, it is arguable how helpful these generalised prescriptions are when applied to specific situations (Clark, 1999). No one would
disagree with the view that the child’s welfare is paramount and inviolable, but when social workers come to apply the principle in the messiness of day-to-day practice, they often come unstuck because different people hold radically disparate views about what is best for a child.

These dilemmas are revealed in many settings in which decisions concerning children’s welfare are made and involve all the members of the multi-disciplinary team. For example, child protection case conferences often have to consider the tension between, on the one hand, having to work in partnership with parents and, on the other, having to execute child protection functions. Review meetings for looked after children often have to resolve the issue of what kind of contact is in the child’s best interests. Adoption panels have to make very difficult decisions about what constitutes ‘good-enough’ parenting. The attempt to resolve the dilemmas arising in these different forums is not always ideal. Bureaucratic processes can alienate parents and children. Individual emotions can override attempts at rational problem-solving. Expert power can be used to inhibit the expression of alternative views as to the best course of action.

This paper seeks to explore the work of Jurgen Habermas (1987; 1990) and argues that his ideas on moral discourse provide a framework for making decisions in formal meetings more systematic and fair. Like many other philosophers (Toulmin, 1970; Lukses, 1975; Holiday, 1988), Habermas makes the important connection between language and morality. He argues that moral thoughts are presented to others through linguistic claims as to the best course of action. As Rehg (1994) puts it:

\[ \ldots \text{in assuming or raising such claims the speaker refers the hearer to a social world of shared expectations about how the members of that world ought to behave [my emphasis].} \] (p 25)

Stated in another way, Habermas argues that truth can be apprehended only through an analysis of how people communicate about truth. Harré’s (2000) adroit observation provides further support for this cardinal link between morality and language:

\[ \text{Take away the authority of the Church as the mundane expression of God’s moral authority, and the diversity of the moral orders we find at different times and different places, serving as the foundations of the normative systems of human forms of association, seems very striking. The problem for moral philosophy is to find a way of acknowledging this, yet resisting the slide into moral relativism. We need something that all societies must have in order to provide a source for some minimal moral practices which can serve as a standard for international action against the evils that seem to be ever ready to reappear. The role of language in forming and maintaining all human forms of life offers itself as the most plausible universal source of morality. (p 327)} \]

This insight has also been recognised by a number of social work scholars. For example, Banks (1995, p 143) states that ethical social work means ‘doing the practice, reflecting on it through dialogue and questioning, and changing the practice in the light of reflection’ (my emphasis). Similarly, Osmo and Landau (2001) make a case for explicit argumentation in ethical decision-making in social work while Rhodes (1986) opines that:

\[ \ldots \text{dialogue is central to ethics. Only through sustained and open dialogue can we develop informed ethical positions. Dialogue of this sort assumes (1) that we can communicate across different views; (2) that we can be open to each other; and (3) that we need other views in order to fully re-examine our own. (p 19)} \]

However, the literature on social work ethics has not pursued this insight in sufficient depth, nor has Habermas’s moral philosophy been examined in detail. To respond to this gap and raise a philosophical platform of this kind requires some supportive scaffolding. To this end, I will firstly present an overview
of Habermas's work on discourse ethics suggesting some additions to his procedural model. I will then argue that his ideas embrace key aspects of contemporary moral thinking while, at the same time, offer a critique of post-modern scepticism. The paper will then conclude with a critical review of these ideas and how they can assist social workers in child and family social work. It is in this concluding section that I argue that Habermas's position creates certain problems for ethical decision-making involving children, problems that can be overcome or at least mollified by a range of compensatory actions.

An overview of Habermas's ideas on ethical decision-making
A key feature of ethical decision-making, according to Habermas, is a form of language known as communicative action. This occurs when people make use of reason to construct a valid case typified by truth and sincerity so that mutual understanding and consensus emerge. For Habermas, communicative action is something to strive for in life. However, following Austin (1962), Habermas also draws our attention to a second, common form of communication termed strategic action. By way of contrast, strategic action involves a speaker attempting to maximise his or her own interests without concern for mutual understanding or consensus:

. . . in strategic action one actor seeks to influence the behaviour of another by means of the threat of sanctions or the prospect of gratification in order to cause the interaction to continue as the first actor desires. (Habermas, 1990, p 58)

Quintessentially, for Habermas, moral decisions should only proceed from the former type of communication as it is based on mutuality and respect for the other. It also seeks to avoid responding to people as mere means to vicarious ends and imposing a course of action through the use of power.

In his path-breaking work, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990), Habermas developed his procedure for moral decision-making with communicative action at its heart. For ease of presentation, I will divide this procedure into three main elements:

1. the conditions for moral discourse;
2. the principles of moral discourse;
3. the rules of moral discourse.

In reviewing these elements, I will address what I believe to be a necessary fourth element that is neglected by Habermas: that of a process for moral discourse.

The conditions of moral discourse
The conditions can be simply stated. They stipulate that the discussion of moral dilemmas should be conducted in conditions preserving the freedom and equality of all the participants. Participants must be allowed to accept proposed norms willingly rather than being coerced. Participants must be equal in the sense of having parity of 'air-time' to make their case. For example, in an important child welfare decision – such as whether to remove a young person into residential accommodation – we need to ensure that all the relevant information has been shared with the decision-takers and that no one had been forced into a decision or silenced or prevented from raising alternative courses of action.

The principles of moral discourse
There are two principles. The first states that:

Every valid norm has to fulfil the following condition. All affected can accept the consequences and side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone of everyone's interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation). (Habermas, 1990, p 65)

This is the universalisation principle and is denoted as (U) in the remaining text. To render the meaning slightly more accessible, I have paraphrased it in lay terms as follows: 'A valid moral decision is
reached when those affected by it endorse it as the preferred way forward. In reaching this agreement, participants must accept the consequences of the decision for all concerned and its impact on everyone’s interests.’

From a close inspection of the wording in (U) a number of crucial, inter-related premises are revealed. First, the principle makes clear that universality, or what is best for all, cannot be reached by the lone individual reflecting on whether the norm under question is right for everyone else. Rather, the principle encourages putting ourselves in the position of others. It is from this vantage point that we learn to see ourselves as others might see us. Secondly, such reciprocity brings with it a moment of empathy for other positions that may not concur with our own. So, it is not simply a marriage of convenience but rather a genuine attempt to take the perspective of the other. Without this empathy, it is doubtful whether any moral development can occur. In its absence the xenophobe continues to oppress because the relational distance between him and the outsider is never breached. Thirdly, (U) enshrines the importance of impartiality in moral decision-making. For Habermas, what is important here is trying to balance the interests and needs of all the stakeholders without self-deception.

Finally, it can also be seen that (U) does not offer a pre-cast, substantive morality applying to all situations at all times. Instead, it presents a formal procedure for testing moral decisions in an uncertain social world where there are different mores and cultural practices.

From (U) a second principle, (D), is derived:

_Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse._ (Habermas, 1990, p 66)

Through (D) Habermas reiterates the point that communication and inter-subjective engagement are the only mediums by which actors should reach morally binding decisions. This emphasis on dialogue is in stark contrast to forms of moral philosophy which direct the neutral observer (acting alone) to apply abstract thought to resolve moral quanndaries. The notion of social justice propounded by Rawls (1971) is a primary example of this individualistic stance. In Rawls’s ‘original position’, a solitary enquirer thinks herself [sic] into a fictional scenario in which she knows nothing about her social position, class, material wealth, health, attributes or impairments. Out of this highly abstracted position, she makes an armchair reconstruction of her ideal society. For Rawls, the thought experiment should guarantee a society based on complete impartiality because the enquirer does not know in advance how she might be advantaged or disadvantaged.

In contrast to the abstract Rawlsian view, Habermas’s discourse ethics focus on the concrete interests, needs and consequences arising from a proposed norm. Simply put, discourse ethics relate to real situations. Moreover, the decision-making process should be based on dialogue between all the interested parties and should not be conducted alone by any one individual, no matter what credentials or aptitudes he or she may possess:

_The observer standpoint seems to guarantee an exceptional degree of objectivity of judgement because of its third-person perspective, but in fact it is unsuitable for judging the question of whether actions or norms are in the common interest or contribute to the common good. The ideal observer operates as an isolated subject, collecting and assessing his information in the light of his own individual understanding of the world and of himself... [This] privileged position, which initially appears to be advantageous because it promises to liberate the observer from perspectival interpretations of the disputing parties, has the disadvantage that it isolates him in a monological fashion from the interpretive horizons of the participants and denies him hermeneutic access to an intersubjectively shared moral world that reveals itself only from within._ (Habermas, 1993, pp 48–49)
The rules of moral discourse

With the conditions and principles of moral discourse in place, Habermas embraces Alexy’s (1978) rules for argumentation. These are listed below (Habermas, 1990, p 89):

(3.1) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.

(3.2a) Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.

(3.2b) Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

(3.2c) Everyone is allowed to express his [sic] attitudes, desires, and needs.

(3.3) No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his right as laid down in (3.1) and (3.2).

Habermas goes on to explain the meaning of these rules:

Rule (3.1) defines the set of potential participants. It includes all subjects without exception who have the capacity to take part in argumentation. Rule (3.2) guarantees all participants equal opportunity to contribute to the argumentation and to put forth their own arguments. Rule (3.3) sets down conditions under which the rights to universal access and to equal participation can be enjoyed equally by all, that is, without the possibility of repression, be it ever so subtle or covert. (Habermas, 1990, p 89)

Participants can use the rules in moral decision-making to plan how meetings will be chaired, to decide who will be invited to attend, to select the setting in which discussions will take place and to direct how the discussion should enfold. If we do not operate a policy of inclusive dialogue, there may be a danger of rubber-stamping pre-ordained views that may be contaminated by prejudice, cognitive distortion or psychological counter-transference. If the agenda is not open to modification or development, then the breadth of debate – so necessary for rounded dialogue – is potentially emasculated. If modes of engagement misuse power, perhaps through the use of professional jargon, then genuine role-taking is thwarted.

The process of moral discourse

By the process of moral discourse, I mean the formal-rational organisation of ethical decision-making or the steps that are to be taken by decision-makers to make their communication orderly and systematic. As indicated earlier, Habermas has not given this area much attention. Yet enacting the conditions, principles and rules of discourse without an explicit, ordered format of enquiry could handicap the quest for consensus, as discussion could lose focus.

A very simple process might adhere to the following stages of enquiry. First, participants might clarify and consider the nature of the problem decision: What exactly needs to be resolved and do each of the participants agree with the formulation? Second, they might then address the range of potential options available: for one, it might be to preserve the status quo while for another, it might revolve around the least detrimental alternative. With these items on the agenda successfully resolved, a third or final stage emerges: choosing the best option. Within the unfolding discussion, the consequences of each option could be reviewed before agreement emerges on the way forward.

The process just described must be underpinned by Habermasian conditions, principles and rules for moral communication. Hence, at each stage of the process, participants in the discussion must strive to attain mutual understanding and agreement. Moreover, they are required to be inclusive, hold power in check, and apply reason so that the only force used is the force of better argument. If these criteria fall short, then ethical decision-making is compromised.

To conclude this section, it is important to review briefly Habermas’s contribution to moral philosophy. This is an important undertaking because, if the social and medical professions are to draw on particular philosophical ideas to resolve fraught ethical dilemmas, they
need to know how these ideas fit within moral philosophy as a whole. Simply applying one set of ideas without considering the context within which they have arisen is problematic as many ideas in moral philosophy are inter-related and explicable only in terms of preceding developments in the subject.

In this regard, my contention is that Habermas synthesises key ideas within competing moral philosophies. For instance, Kant’s (1964) view that morality must spring from an intrinsic duty within the individual is echoed in Habermas’s insistence that there is an overriding imperative in social life to respect others, understand what they say and attempt to find consensus with them. Again, like Kant, he offers us a practical procedure for resolving moral dilemmas. For Kant this took the form of the ‘categorical imperative’: ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’ (Kant, 1964, p 421). As indicated earlier, similar universalist insights are co-opted into (U), but it must be said that Habermas departs from Kant’s monological stance by insisting that an ethical procedure must be grounded in dialogue.

There are also parallels between (U) and the ideas expounded by Utilitarian thinkers. For the latter (Hume, 1998; Mill, 1998) actions should be judged only by reference to their consequences rather than appealing to abstract, unilateral duties. This focus on consequences resonates with Habermas’s premise within (U) that decision-makers need to take account of everyone’s needs and interests when formulating the best decision. Moreover, they must focus on the discernable consequences of each proposed solution.

To extend the comparison even further, Habermas embraces core principles of communitarianism. Communitarians like MacIntyre (1985) and Etzioni (1993) argue that ethics should be derived from communal sources and social structure. Consequently they privilege collective rights over individualism. For Habermas, this insight is important. Thus, underpinning (U) is the injunction to all decision-makers to role-take to promote the common good and to effect solidarity because the individual’s interests must be superseded. Ethical debate, for Habermas, must attempt to ‘bring about an agreement that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another’ (Habermas, 1990, p 3).

Lastly, there is an ironic interface between discourse ethics and strands of post-modern moral philosophy. Despite much heated debate between Habermas and commentators like Foucault, when it comes to examining the work of certain affirmative post-modernists, there appears to be large tracts of similarity. For example, the post-modern philosopher Richard Rorty (1989, p 43) talks about the need for ‘toleration, free enquiry and the quest for undistorted communication’ despite his starting point in cultural relativism. Similarly, Bauman (1989) sees ‘relationship’ as the crucial fulcrum supporting ethical engagement, despite his overly harsh critique of rationality in the modern world.

These observations on moral philosophy are not to be regarded as an exercise in academic pedantry. Rather, those engaged in the applied frontiers of practice need to return to first order premises. Put more simply, they need to apply reason and argument in seeking truth. Moral philosophy acts as a beam of light in this otherwise darkened path.

Applying discourse ethics to practice
Because the account so far has been pitched in abstract terms, it is now important to consider the domain of applied ethics. So, let us consider two brief case examples and explore how key facets of Habermas’s framework apply. The first example was introduced earlier. It concerns a vulnerable 16-year-old in residential care who has confided to staff that she is pregnant. To reiterate the problem, the professionals must decide in a review meeting what is the most appropriate placement to meet her needs, the needs of the child (when it is born) and the needs of other residents in the residential home.

Let us explore first how the conditions for moral discourse might apply in the
situation. These conditions indicate that any decision must be arrived at willingly by all the participants. Moreover, everyone concerned must be allowed to make their case without interruption or intimidation. Given the inherent power differentials between the professionals and the girl, there is an onus on the former to consciously reflect on how they communicate with her. What type of communication is used? Is any subtle para-language adopted to influence her? Does the communication take place in an environment in which the young person is comfortable? And what about the power differentials between the professionals themselves? In effect, how can position and status be held in check?

Such questions necessitate a radical rethink of how equality and freedom can be preserved within organisational cultures based on hierarchical systems. The challenge might be to create spaces where communicative action is encouraged and institutionalised. Pertinent here is Habermas's idea that we need to consciously erect restraining barriers to protect unconstrained dialogue in social life. Even within trenchant bureaucracies such spaces exist and arguably can either be expanded or augmented. For example, the child protection system has, in a number of countries, embraced family group conferences allowing members of the family a space to pursue unconstrained dialogue. Could a similar model be applied in the case example? The young person's family network might be gainfully employed in the decision-making prior to meeting with the professionals. A contract could be drawn up at the outset outlining the values inherent within Habermas's principles and rules of moral discourse and the final meeting between parents and family might adhere to the process of moral discourse outlined above.

By way of contrast let us examine a second, more complex case. A child of four years of age has been placed in short-term foster care. Her mother, a single parent, has a known and apparently intractable history of alcohol misuse but interspersed with some periods of sobriety and stability. The identity of the child's father is unknown and there is no extended family on the scene. Despite the mother's parenting difficulties, social workers have noted a warm bond between mother and daughter. This strength, however, is in stark contrast to the weaknesses exposed in recent risk assessments. Aside from the mother's abuse of alcohol, there are concerns about her suspected association with a violent man. What is more, there have been confirmed reports of past neglect of the child when left alone on contact visits. On one of these visits, the child was badly burnt. In the light of these facts, the social workers supervising the case face a moral quandary: whether to pursue a permanent placement via adoption against the mother's wishes (given the child's age and the dismal prognosis for future rehabilitation), or to continue with a foster-care placement – most likely one affording more permanency than the present short-term arrangement.

If, to continue this fictional account, the social workers were convinced of the value of Habermas's discourse ethics and sought to apply them (along with significant others) to the case in question, then they would need to proceed from a platform of inclusivity, open communication, empathy, impartiality and competent decision-making processes. Stated so blandly, the actions of the social workers appear noble and uncomplicated. But there is a fundamental problem in all of this, which Habermas, unfortunately, has only briefly addressed in his writings: the child has not attained the required level of communicative competence to include her in decision-making. After all, she is only four years old. Immediately it becomes clear that rule 3.1 (above) cannot be fulfilled. Accordingly, the strict conditions for discourse ethics cannot be met. For the social workers concerned this lack of applicability is disarming. The question now remains whether Habermas's discourse ethics can be sufficiently redeemed to permit the social workers to continue with their discursive enquiries. Essentially, can they find alternative ways of hearing the child's voice?

Although some critics (eg Meriwether, 2001) believe that an intractable impasse...
has been reached in an example of this kind, I contend that social workers can instigate compensatory measures and, in so doing, retain the broad thrust of Habermas’s intent. At the outset, they can attempt to discern the child’s view by proxy. Making use of observational techniques is an obvious way to proceed. Such techniques assist social workers in formulating impressions of who children are close to, what might be of concern to them and their day-to-day-interests. If the child was somewhat older, alternative mediums of communication – such as the use of art and drama – might be employed to gain her view on the matters at hand.

Second, a child advocate or representative might be introduced into the proceedings. However, we should not automatically assume that all advocates are competent, ethical or beneficent. As Young (1997) observes:

*When members of privileged groups imaginatively try to represent to themselves the perspective of members of oppressed groups, too often those representatives carry projections and fantasies through which the privileged reinforce a complementary image of themselves.*

(p 48)

Consequently, the way advocates are selected, trained and monitored becomes a central issue for all concerned.

More specifically, child advocates must show competence in interpreting (and communicating) needs and interests if they are to fulfil the exacting Habermasian requirements set out under (U). Hence, they need to possess a thorough understanding of child development and must be sensitive to gender (Fraser, 1989), race, disability, culture and class. Sensitivity in approaching these domains might be heightened through four stages of critical reflection, preferably carried out in a supportive supervisory or training context since critical enquiry, for Habermas, can only take place through relationships grounded in open communication.

In the first stage, the advocate begins to appreciate, at a conceptual level, the interconnection between narrative (one’s life story), its influence on identity (one’s sense of self) and its shaping of personal needs and interests (White and Epston, 1990). Thus, the task is to understand how the events that happen to us in our lives and the meaning we attribute to them, exercise a formative bearing on how we describe ourselves and present our needs to others.

In the second stage, the advocate reflects on how these inter-related constructs have shaped her or his own world view on a range of social and psychological areas such as vulnerability, loss, change and risk. In particular, she/he needs to consider whether this world view has been tainted by projection, bias or oppressive social structure. This is an unsettling (but necessary) task because it dislodges taken-for-granted assumptions and cherished beliefs. It is only then that the advocate is in a position to put themselves into the child’s shoes in an objective but caring way. In this third stage, the focus is on empathising with the child’s narrative, their sense of identity and their needs and interests. Only after this is accomplished can the advocate proceed to the fourth and final stage: the attempt to assess what is best for the child and to represent their needs and interests to others in a communicatively competent manner.

Of course, all that has been said regarding child advocates also applies to the social workers and others involved in the child’s life. They too are morally obliged to engage in critical reflection for:

* . . . this enables the practitioner to transform discovered anomalies into contradictions, making it possible to perceive oppressive features beyond ideologies and reconceptualising, which is integral to continuing critical action.*

(Adams et al, 2002, p 309)

In turn, critical reflection should find a natural outlet in self-criticism. That is, where advocates and social workers fall short of Habermas’s discourse ethics, they should examine the resulting breach. Just exactly why was the child excluded from the discussion? In what ways was role-
taking less than satisfactory? Why were some participants prevented from speaking? How did it happen that there was game-playing behind the scenes rather than genuine attempts to reach understanding and consensus? Why did front-stage behaviour take over when truthfulness and sincerity were initially contracted into the discussion? In reflecting on these questions, self-criticism becomes the spur for changed practice. For example, the discussion may need to be re-convened. Alternatively, the room in which such sensitive discussions take place may need to be changed to make the ambience more client-centred, and so on.

Finally, when children are excluded from decision-making for valid reasons, advocates and social workers are, in addition to the measures prescribed above, compelled to consult with the literature on children’s needs and wishes. They might turn, for instance, to Thomas and O’Kane’s (1998) research. Their findings revealed that children are concerned about the day-to-day decisions affecting their lives: when they will see their families, where they are going to live and what type of activities they will be allowed to participate in. Interestingly, their ideal social worker was described as possessing good communication skills, showing understanding, having a caring disposition and being willing to speak on their behalf.

Conclusion
It can be seen that Habermas’s discourse ethics do not tell us what decision to make when facing fraught ethical quandaries; rather, they offer us a procedure for finding our own resolutions. In applying these ethics, social workers might make a decision that, with hindsight, turns out to be less than desirable for the child. However, in my estimation, they are not morally culpable because they resorted in good faith to a decision-making procedure rooted in moral philosophy. This procedure can be defended on the grounds that it embraces communicative reason, impartiality and respect for others. Moreover, if we are to take it seriously, it must be institutionalised within childcare agencies, becoming the governing rubric in case planning forums, child protection case conferences and child placement reviews. Meetings then turn into ethical exchanges between all the parties concerned. The end result is that parents and children come to feel that their views are taken seriously and social workers finish the working day knowing that they have acted out of full moral consciousness.

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