


Book Review: The Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection

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***The Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection** delves into the often warped relationship between social workers, media and politicians in the UK, writes **Michael Warren**. This book offers an insight into the challenges of 'emotional politics', and is 'brimming with insight and ideas' for any social policy specialist interested in how human emotion can affect all levels of society and human operations.*

The Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection. Joanne Warner. Policy Press. 2015.

Walking into a British shop and glancing at newspapers, a Brit will probably notice one unifying theme when glancing at the newspapers: bad news. No zone of news is more fertile for eye-catching pages than social work failures in the protection of children, which makes for arresting headlines like "BABY P: They're ALL guilty". Joanne Warner's *Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection* delves into the often warped relationship between social workers, media and politicians in the UK. At the heart of this dysfunctional linkage, Warner cites emotion as the fulcrum. Not merely placing emotion as a by-product of child protection scandals, Warner argues that it is the principal driving force in policy and perception of child protection crises. The book offers broad ideas for improvement of the social work profession's agonising role when placed next to media and political actors, but scant blueprints in how a change should be enacted.

Prior to becoming a university lecturer in social work, Warner was a social worker. Her previous occupation seeps through and gives her words a vivid identity as she strongly identifies with social workers – sometimes using 'we'. Accordingly, the reader can sense her well-founded distaste for the British media's scarring of the social work profession and vilification of its workers. Beyond the eloquent analysis of the media's propensity to use social work problems for simplistic headline fodder, Warner's analysis of the state of British social care issues hits an apogee when focusing on politicians.

Warner explains how politicians can act as 'envoys' of the community in the fight for justice of children who received inadequate protection by the state. This is typified by the MP Gillian Shephard's campaign on behalf of her Norfolk constituents for a public inquiry into the death of Lauren Wright in 2001. Shephard's stand against the 'rational-bureaucratic argument' of Whitehall was born out of emotion: "We are sick and tired of hearing about procedures, strategies, reports and restructuring. In the name of the name of thousands of vulnerable children at risk across Britain, the Minister should...". Shephard's fulmination is not an anomaly. Another MP (Geoffrey Robinson) spoke disdainfully of the perceived fatalism surrounding child protection failure in the Daniel Pelka case: "Some people say to me, 'It will always happen – don't worry about it. It's bound to happen and you can't stop it'. I find that repugnant. I cannot believe that Daniel Pelka,... needed to die". Robinson's words are emblematic of a prominent conundrum in Parliament discussed by Warner throughout *Emotional Politics*: how to come to terms with the fact that there can be no total elimination of risk and as a result 'some children will perish'.



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Warner is due kudos for her ability to contextualise social work amongst greater societal problems. This is notable in two circumstances: the first is when Warner notes 'social work operates in the context of a wider feeling of moral condemnation of people living in poverty rather than compassion'. The bleak analysis demonstrates to the reader that hefty societal changes will need to occur, and not simply large social work changes to improve the condition of those most in need of social care. The second observation Warner pinpoints beyond the scope of social work is the role of the state in people's lives (the more the state is able to intervene, the greater the responsibility of social workers), or as the sociologist Robert Dingwall more starkly spells out: "How many children should be allowed to perish in order to defend the autonomy of families and the basis of the liberal state?" Warner's acknowledgement and analysis of these conundrums serve to show her peripheral awareness of greater societal structure issues which need to be resolved in tandem with social work's dilemmas.

Warner concludes the book contemplating international comparisons to the British social work sector, scrutinising Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States (specifically New York). The international comparisons feed into a repository of recommendations – Sweden and New York particularly hold sway over Warner's vision for improved organisation of Britain's child welfare system. Sweden's politicians are more 'actively involved in decision-making' sitting on local committees – although one thinks, how amenable would the British populace be to greater involvement by politicians (distrusted and loathed across the country)? Thus, New York's model of a 'strong parent activist movement' might be more realistic for implementation. Parents in New York are more vocal, contributing personal stories in www.risemagazine.org, and building alliances with social work professionals and others to tailor a system which can focus its resources on those most in need via the optimum methods. Warner's proposals for an improved British child welfare system are brief but focus on a few notable progressive ideas: social workers need to communicate more openly about those who need their help, better engagement with marginalised families by policymakers, greater parental story-telling (as in Rise magazine) to combat any biased media narrative, and social workers need to build alliances with politicians locally and nationally.

Emotional Politics is a slim volume brimming with insight and ideas. Readers will find themselves considering a surfeit of ideas, ranging from what constitutes responsible journalism to the role of a 21st Century parent. Additionally, any social policy specialist wondering how a trait as congenitally human as emotion can affect all levels of society and human operations will find *Emotional Politics* is the go-to-guide. The book is a thorough and accessible examination of the current state of affairs in British social work, but fails to capitalise on that work to propose longer and more detailed ideas for change.

Michael Warren completed an MSc in Empires, Colonialism and Globalisation at the LSE in 2012, having graduated from the University of Sheffield (studying on exchange at the University of Waterloo, Ontario) with a BA in Modern History in 2011. He has researched as part of an open data project for Deloitte and the Open Data Institute, and worked for the All-Party Parliamentary Health Group. He is an Analyst at Accenture. Read more reviews by [Michael here](#).

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