

Controlling life? Agamben and the political position of child welfare-involved mothers

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Background and purpose of the proposed presentation: This paper is based on an examination of one aspect of Giorgio Agamben's philosophical theory, namely the concept of 'bare life', or life as mere existence (1995) to discuss the position of child welfare-involved mothers. Agamben provides an analysis of the politically determined nature of life and the tendency for greater control of life in modern democratic western society. The intention is to use his ideas to examine critically the institutional power embedded in child protective services and the implications for relations between practitioners and women as mothers. A summary of the main points of the presentation: 1. To outline reasons for concentrating on child welfare-involved mothers 2. To contextualise this paper through a brief summary of an earlier body of work on child welfare-involved mothers 3. To set out Agamben's concept of 'bare life' or life as mere existence 4. To explore its application to child-welfare-involved mothers and child protective services

How the proposed presentation addresses one or more of the conference aims and themes: Conference Theme 3: Standing up to complexity – specific and universal issues in social work

The relations between women and child protective services are complex, whilst raising universal issues that concern the control of individual lives and the place of state intervention. The paper seeks to extend our understanding of child welfare-involved mothers who are seen as both part of the problem and part of the solution to child maltreatment and child safety. It seeks to contribute to a wider consideration of the position of women in relation to institutional intervention for humanitarian reasons by child protective services.

Conclusions from and implications of your presentation for practice, policy, or subsequent research: Agamben seeks to convince us that even humanitarian institutions in democratic societies in the exercise of control over life have the potential of reducing life and destroying experience. The position of child welfare-involved mothers alerts us to the complexity that lies behind child protective services for them and to the unintended possibility of their being treated as non-persons by child protective services whose intention is humanitarian. 1-4

keywords Agamben, child protective services, bare life, child-welfare involved mothers