This writing has taken some initial steps in examining the child protection system from a position that is rarely discussed. Specifically, I have explored how Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power can be used to understand how power operates within the client/worker relationship that occurs within the child protection system. This relationship is shown to be quite complex, with power flowing bi-directionally rather than top-down. Instead of viewing power imbalances as a function of state control, I have come to see how the client/worker relationship is constituted by the worker, the client, and the social body. How clients and workers are defined comes from the process of subjectification in which we all engage in accepting or resisting. By calling myself a child protection worker, I clearly distinguish myself as different from a client. At the same time, by making the client the “Other” and portraying his/her life as problematic, I make myself invisible. The cost to this invisibility is that it obscures the privilege of power that has been assigned to professions, such as child protection work.

While the fields of medicine, psychiatry, and health visiting have used Foucault’s work to examine how the profession develops “regimes of truth” that privilege their knowledge, the child protection system has been slow to examine how the practices that they use (e.g., home visits and risk assessment) serve to constitute clients as “abnormal” or a “problem” and the child protection worker as the “expert”. With the shift toward postmodernism in social work (Hartman, 1991), I would assert that the child protection system is being provided a theoretical tool to challenge the accepted “truths” about how best to serve children and families. It is possible that by viewing clients’ worlds as consisting of a web of meanings, created and sustained by both the client and the worker, different approaches
to make intervention beneficial to all involved might become available.

A benefit of using Foucault’s work is that the child protection system is viewed within the context of the social body. We can see how child protection has become a privileged field, such that it has been given the authority and mandate to monitor, subject to intervention, label, and treat children and families. As a former worker in this system, it is important for me to place my frustrations with the system into this larger framework. Rather than personalizing my frustrations, such as “I never have enough time” or “I’m not cut out for this type of work,” I can see how the instruments and practices that I was required to use reproduced power. Stated differently, it was not that I lacked certain qualities in order to do the job effectively and in a manner that respected my clients, but that as a child protection worker, I was operating in an environment where certain techniques (e.g., supervision and documentation) were exercised that ensured that I maintained power over my clients.

It is important to acknowledge how complex the power relationship is between workers and clients and between the worker and the agency. Although there is a view that the worker has all the power, this auto-ethnography has shown that the power relationship is fluid and unstable. Both workers and clients are subject to disciplinary practices that define the boundaries of the relationship. For example, I have discussed how ingrained notions of limiting self-disclosure by the worker serve to keep up barriers between the worker and the client. However, within the power relationships between workers and clients and the worker and the system, there are also acts of resistance. Foucault points out that the very act of dominating another creates a space for resistance. This auto-ethnography showed that in the child protection system there are spaces of resistance that exist, and are often used, by both workers and youth. At the same time, I also introduced some possible ways that workers can resist some of the disciplinary practices within the child welfare system. For example, I discussed the possibility of incorporating clients’ voices into the documentation.