

## CHILD PROTECTION AND PARENT SUPPORT: THE TWO DICHOTOMIES

UDC 364.4-05.5/7

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**Abstract.** *This paper examines the two basic models of the state authorities' intervention into family life aimed at protecting children. The first model focuses on child protection; the second one focuses on child welfare or family support. The author analyses the differences and tensions that arise between the proponents of these two concepts, resulting in different styles of conceiving professional social work. Further on, the author elaborates on two different approaches towards mistakes and risks accompanying social work, involving the concept of risk avoidance and the concept of risk taking. Finally, the author observes the interconnectivity between the analyzed concepts.*

**Key words:** *child protection, child welfare, social work, risk, mistakes.*

### CHILD PROTECTION VS. CHILD WELFARE

Child protection has been defined as an approach which put emphasis on protecting children against abuse. The objective is to prevent damage to children and to reduce the risks of harm. Thus, social work practice is defined mainly as an investigation conducted to detect the present or potential harm in family life. Considering that the focus is on the legal aspects of the dispute, the relations between social workers and parents are often adversarial. Social workers' main goal is, in fact, to determine whether the child has been abused or neglected, or whether there is a risk of this occurring. Therefore, the practitioners are likely to be perceived as enemies by parents. In effect, when a child protection concept is applied, the activities of social workers are viewed as an inquiry which follows procedural rules. Conclusions about significant harm being afflicted, or decisions about whether a child is in need of assistance, rely upon the assumption that the exact measures upon which the standards of parenting can be evaluated do exist (Hearn, Pösö, Smith, White, Korpinen, 2004, p. 34).

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Received July 6<sup>st</sup>, 2016 / Accepted August 3<sup>th</sup>, 2016

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The overall aim is to achieve the highest possible likelihood of what the child's situation actually is through the correct application of procedure; hence, risk assessment tools have the predominant role in the process. Notably, "institutions tend to interpret the standards strictly in terms of Enlightenment thinking, fearing any reliance on tacit or artistic endeavors. The result is that practitioners are constrained from intervening meaningfully in the lives of clients because they can only rely on measurable interventions and what can be measured does not always present the fullness of the picture in reality" (Martinez- Brawley and Zorita P.M-B, 2007, p. 7).

This, of course, largely restricts the discretionary powers of practitioners. Critics of the child protection orientation hold that the procedures are perceived by parents as intrusive sources of anxiety (Spratt, 2001). Moreover, risk assessment tools prevent social workers from seeing the full picture and from understanding specific circumstances and the meaning that people attribute to the situation. "With increasing use of risk assessment tools, ...social workers may thus become more distanced and more adversarial in their relationship with clients" (Krane and Davies, 2000, p. 41).

The surveillance role that social workers perform in the child protection model makes the partnership relation with parents impossible. Hence, they tend to concentrate on children. Their interventions are narrow in their focus, and do not take into account the parents' needs for support and advice. As a consequence, the interventions are seen as intruding in the private sphere and limiting families' liberty; therefore, the social workers tend to intervene only when strictly necessary (Khoo, Hyivonen and Nygren, 2002). On the other hand, this means that the interventions are mostly remedial and rarely preventive.

By contrast, child welfare is "marked by a tendency to understand acts, or circumstances, thought of as harmful to children, in the context of psychological or social difficulties experienced by families" (Spratt, 2001, p. 934). Rather than inquiries, therefore, social workers perform assessment in order to provide services (Brunnberg and Pećnik, 2007). What differentiates assessment here is that it searches for resources and strengths in the family, instead of merely focusing on difficulties and problems. While child protection concept restricts discretionary powers of social workers, the child welfare orientation emphasizes professional autonomy, which is considered to be the basis for the personalization of interventions since it requires that social workers invest more time and energy.

Khoo et al. (2002) have compared social work intervention in child maltreatment in Sweden and Canada. Their research shows that social workers in Sweden, where child welfare model is applied, are more likely to undertake early interventions, that they intervene on the basis of an individualized assessment and consider the child's best interest in broad terms, including the well-being of the family. Thus, social work is much broader in focus and is concerned with supporting families and preventing problems. Interventions are highly flexible and often involve the use of non-statutory resources. Prevention is considered an important feature of interventions in terms of child abuse. Whilst prevention in the child protection model means intervening at the first signs of risk, in the child welfare model it means providing services to address the needs of the family. However, it has to be understood that this concept involves "...a greater willingness of the state to intervene in the private realm of the family—providing supporting measures such as adequate housing, decent day care, medical and dental services for children, and economically viable parental leave from work" (Khoo et al., 2002).

All this implies that social workers in the child welfare model have a stronger position and higher professional status. The professional identity of Swedish social workers is

strong. They have comparatively more professional freedom, their status is high, and they do not face the same degree of public mistrust as child protection workers in Canada, whose decisions are frequently challenged (Khoo et al, 2002, p. 467). Unsurprisingly, studies show the clear preference for all the features that characterize a child welfare model (Gray, 2003; Dale, 2004; Leigh and Miller, 2004).

It is extremely important to examine whether social workers are attuned to a child welfare approach and equipped with cultural resources and frameworks enabling them to perform their task with such an orientation, or whether their views and frameworks resonate more closely with a child protection orientation.

#### APPROACHES TO MISTAKES AND RISKS

The way the mistakes and risks are perceived is crucial in examining the concepts of child protection. They have been the subject of endless discussion: on the one hand, social workers have been accused of committing numerous mistakes; yet on the other hand, such mistakes are apparently inevitable. Authors such as Munro (1996) have maintained that accepting mistakes, being ready to acknowledge them, and being flexible in terms of changing view and line of intervention are essential for good practice in child and family social work. The concept of risk is closely connected with that of mistake, and it has become crucial in social work. When analyzing the concept of risk, Stalker (2003) has identified two main approaches in social work, which she named "risk avoidance" and "risk taking". The former regards risk as danger and tends to take measures to minimize it. The risk-taking position has a broader view of risk and identifies it with the inevitable uncertainties of life, subscribing even some development potentials thereto.

Those who pursue the risk avoidance approach describe the work process in terms of strategies to avoid or limit mistakes. The intervention is thought through and carefully planned to avoid mistakes, false steps, and all possible disturbances or interferences. Mistakes are seen as arising particularly in assessment, and they are interpreted as signs of superficial evaluation or sloppy work. The fear of making mistakes is reflected through the negative attitude toward risk. Risk avoidance is regarded as a crucial part of the work. Of course, this view goes together with the negative perception of uncertainty in social work: uncertainty has to be reduced as much as possible. Risks are viewed as future problems, as problems waiting to happen and deriving from some already present inadequacy of the family, and the interventions need to be focused on reducing these risks. Therefore, this kind of approach is aimed at reducing risks and attaining pre-determined objectives.

By contrast, the second approach, which is prone to taking risks, involves a much more relaxed attitude toward mistakes, risk and uncertainty. Here, in many cases, the activities of social workers could be understood as a 'trial and error' process. Mistakes are often considered to be an essential part of the process of reaching the right decision. Work proceeds through a series of attempts. As a practitioner puts it, "At the beginning, one has too little information to make a proper evaluation, so any decision one takes requires daring" (Fargion, 2007). A project that does not work, therefore, is usually just treated as the basis for a new development. Undertaking risks and tolerating the consequent anxiety seemed to be considered an inevitable price worth paying in order to work in a meaningful way.

Reaching sustainable results often entails taking unusual paths so that social workers, at times, have to accept not being in control of the situation. Taking risks is understood as a sort of gamble that social workers feel worth taking. Working on such basis was, therefore,

associated with an increase of anxiety and concerns, but usually results in desirable consequences.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The insight into these two dichotomies shows the existence of two different professional worlds. The analysis has identified as intrinsically valid two ways of thinking which have arisen from professional practice as a collective experience. The first concept represents probably the most legitimate and accepted model of professional practice. Its basic features are that it represents the work process as rational and systematic, as focused on keeping the situation under control; it makes the assessments in terms of applying determined categories and standards, and it portrays the relationship between users of social services and practitioners as asymmetrical. This representation goes very well with the legitimized view of professional practice and, at the same time, it is in many respects coherent with a child protection approach. It has a negative view of risks and uncertainties, and more profoundly, it considers real-life circumstances in terms of deficiencies that must be corrected.

The other style of thought is closer to the standpoints of the academic community. At first sight, it evokes the image of a social worker operating on the basis of incoherent assumptions, based on common sense (Howe, 1986; Milana, 1992; etc.) in a basically anarchistic and individualistic way (Ferrario, 1996). This sort of practitioner is an advocate of 'heart' rather than 'head' (Smith, 1971), whose practice is a-scientific and a-systematic (Sheldon, 1978). However, deeper exploration of this style of thought reveals its strengths: it makes the most of the often contradictory information available to social workers; it accepts the unpredictable elements in the evolution of a case and the resulting uncertainty, while still acknowledging the social workers' influence on the process from the outset; it is continuously engaged in identification of the feasible options. It is a style of thought which confronts the uncertain and dynamic nature of human life and reflects on the dynamic character of social work knowledge. "Social work knowledge is an unfolding essay. Social work knowing almost always implies interpretation. Inclusionary searching and re-searching requires even more interpretation, and place the finding of the work often in tentative, incomplete mode" (Martinez-Brawley, 283).

At the end, what emerges here is a strong connection between child protection and child welfare orientations, on one side, and the risk avoidance and risk taking style on the other. The first style appears to have many traits in common with a child protection orientation (its stress on assessment as a key feature, its rule-oriented attitude and its adversity toward taking risks). On the contrary, the second style, with its broader views of the complexities of family lives, its flexibility, its positive attitude toward partnership and risk taking, goes along the same lines with the child welfare approach. While social policy increasingly shifts its focus towards the child welfare orientation, the flexible approach to social work is far from being accepted as fully legitimate.

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## **SOCIJALNA ZAŠTITA DECE I PODRŠKA RODITELJIMA: DVE DIHOTOMIJE**

*U ovom radu se ispituju dva osnovna modela intervencije državnih organa u porodični život u cilju zaštite dece. Prvi model je usmeren na zaštitu dece dok je drugi usmeren na socijalno staranje o detetu ili podršku porodici. Autor analizira razlike između ova dva koncepta i nesuglasice koje se javljaju između njihovih zagovornika, što dovodi do različitih stilova u shvatanju profesionalnog socijalnog rada. U drugom delu rada se ukazuje na dva različita pristupa greškama i rizicima koji prate socijalni rad: koncept izbegavanja rizika i koncept preuzimanja rizika. Na kraju, autor razmatra međusobnu povezanost konceptata koji su predmet ove analize.*

**Ključne reči:** zaštita dece, socijalno staranje o deci, socijalni rad, rizik, grešaka.