# Challenges to practice and knowledge in child welfare social work: From the 'social' to the 'informational'?

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed the emergence of an important debate about whether and how far social work practice with children and families is being dominated by a relatively narrow and often legalistic focus on child protection, at the cost of the broader concern with ensuring the welfare of children. Family support is often the operative word used to address the child welfare focus but scholars in the field still wonder whether our new technologically based systems can accommodate broader concerns. Perhaps the centrality of procedures has overshadowed what social work practitioners used to value as good judgment, including a laborious weighing of facts and practice wisdom. This paper discusses the possible impact of new information and communication technology systems. It reflects on the shift from a narrative to a database way of thinking and operating and discusses how the 'social' may be being overshadowed by the 'informational.' In doing so it attempts to identify a number of key challenges for both practice and knowledge which need to be considered in the future.

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## 1. Introduction

The last 20 years have witnessed a growing cacophony of heated debate about the most appropriate policy paradigm for thinking about and delivering children's services. While this is a major focus of debate in the 'Anglophone' world of North America, the United Kingdom and Australasia (Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2009), it has also become an increasing issue in other parts of Western (Gilbert, 1997) and Eastern Europe (Lewis et al., 2004). In particular, it has been argued that the child protection paradigm which had become so dominant from the 1980s onwards is no longer adequate and that wider issues concerning children's welfare and well-being were being ignored. It has been argued that a major paradigm shift is required which takes these issues seriously (Lindsey & Shlonsky, 2008). As a result, a number of jurisdictions are introducing new systems which attempt a more differentiated and integrated approach (Waldfogel, 2008). While in considerable sympathy with these developments, I am also concerned that the energy and time these debates have taken up may have deflected us from engaging with another major issue of growing importance and centrality: the nature and impact of Information Communication Technology (ICT) on day-to-day policy and practice. In fact, it could be argued that the more wide-ranging, complex and integrated children's services have become the more reliance has been placed on new systems of ICT. Rarely have these developments been subject to critical appraisal. This is the purpose of this paper.

A central part of my argument is that the nature of practice and the knowledge which both informs and characterises it is less concerned with the relational and social dimensions of the work and more with the informational. Increasingly it seems that the key focus of activity of child welfare agencies is concerned with the gathering, sharing, and monitoring of information about the individuals with whom they come into direct and indirect contact, together with accounting for their own decisions and interventions, and those of the other professionals and agencies with whom they work. It is not my argument that these are new activities but that they have taken on a much greater significance in recent years because of the growing importance of ICTs and that the pace of change is dramatic. My purpose is to consider how this growing concern with information might be transforming the form of knowledge in social work and the nature of 'social' work itself. While my interest in these issues has been prompted by a series of important changes in child welfare policy and practice in England, similar changes are clearly taking place in other countries, including the USA.

## 2. Child protection and child welfare

I am taking as my starting point the *Linda Haskell Memorial Master Class* by Silvia Fargion (Fargion, 2007), particularly where she discussed some of the synergies and tensions between approaches based on a child protection approach to the work and those which she characterised in terms of child welfare. She then very interestingly related these approaches or models to different styles of thought in social work (Fargion, 2006).

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The tensions and challenges she identified had been evident for a number of years, for long-established state child welfare services had come under increasing pressure ever since the (re)discovery of child abuse in the 1960s and 1970s (Nelson, 1984; Parton, 1985). What was becoming increasingly obvious by the late 1980s, particularly in the US, UK, Canada and Australia, was that the allocation of scarce 'child welfare' resources was being dominated by a narrowly-focussed, forensically-driven and crisis-oriented 'child protection' system (Kamerman & Khan, 1990). Not only were the more general family support aspirations not being prioritized, but the child protection system was becoming overloaded and not coping with the increased demands made of it. There were concerns that far too many cases were being dragged inappropriately into the child protection 'net,' and that as a consequence those cases that might require such interventions were in danger of being missed.

However, during the 1990s a major debate opened up about how policies and practices in relation to child protection integrated with and were supported by policies and practices concerned with family support and child welfare more generally (Parton, 1997; Waldfogel, 1998). Rather than simply be concerned with a narrow, forensically-driven focus on child protection, there needed to be a 'rebalancing' or 'refocusing' of the work, such that the essential principles of a child welfare approach should dominate. Policy and practice should be driven by an emphasis on partnership, participation, prevention, family support and a positive rethink of the purposes and uses of foster and residential care. The priority should be on *helping* parents and children in the community in a supportive way and should keep notions of policing and coercive interventions to a minimum. Drawing on Fig. 1, taken from Fargion (2007), there should be a shift from a child protection model to a child welfare model.

In many respects this is very much what a number of jurisdictions have tried to do. However, rather than simply replace one with the other, the approaches adopted have been more akin to attempts at integration. In the words of the Minister then centrally involved in the major changes taking place in England, the aim is to bring about 'a shift to prevention whilst strengthening protection' (DfES, 2004, p.3). At one level such changes are very much to be applauded. However, what we can also note is that over the last 20 years the role of the practitioner and the nature of the work have begun to change in other significant ways and it is here that the growth of managerialist oversight, and the increased demands of audit and the gathering of information, are central—a process which has grown considerably with the growing use of ICT. In many respects these developments can be seen as of equal significance to whether orientation is primarily of a child protection or child welfare nature. It is this I want to consider in this paper—how it has come about and with what implications.

## 3. The historical roots, nature and purposes of child welfare social work

The emergence of child welfare social work was associated with the political and economic transformations that took place from the mid nineteenth century onwards, in response to a number of interrelated social changes and anxieties about the family and community (Parton, 1994). It developed as a hybrid in the space, 'the social' (Donzelot, 1980, 1988), between the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of the state. It operated in an intermediary zone, and was produced and reproduced in new relations between the law, social security, medicine, the school and the family. The emergence of 'the social' and the practices of social

| Child Protection Model | Child Welfare Model |
|---|---|
| Best interests of the child are narrowly focussed on protection | Best interests of the child are broadly defined to include the welfare of the family |
| Law-led rather than discretion led | Discretion-based |
| Assessment based on standardised tools | Assessment based on interaction between family and social workers |
| Aims at objectivity | Acknowledges different perspectives |
| Centred on difficulties and problems | Considers strengths and resources |
| Treats difficulties as signals of risk | Seeks to understand difficulties in order to find ways to provide support |
| Restricts professionals' discretionary powers | Enhances professional strength |
| Less readiness to intervene, but when it does uses the full authority of the law behind it | More readiness to intervene, but interventions seen in terms of benign 'helping' and support |
| Individual rather than community oriented | Community oriented |
| Remedial rather than preventive | Preventive rather than remedial |

Developed from: Fargion (2007)

Fig. 1. The Child Protection and Child Welfare models.