



Child-centered social work practice – three unique meanings in the context of looking after children and the assessment framework in Australia, Canada and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores different orientations to child-centered social work as conveyed in the training materials and guidelines of Looking After Children and Assessment Framework in Australia, Canada and Sweden. 'Child centered' is shaped by contextual factors and influences social work practices. We found differences in these approaches as needs based and/or rights based and in relation to how each emphasizes the three P's – Provision, Protection and Participation. Substantial differences were identified both in how references to a child-centered approach appear in theoretical frameworks, values, motives and use of concepts in training materials and guidelines, and in the instructions given as to how to apply these approaches. It appears that Australia balances needs and rights, while Canada is more needs-oriented and Sweden more rights-oriented. Swedish materials show a more explicit emphasis on participation than Australian and Canadian materials. Differences between the three countries indicate the importance of structural, contextual factors shaping orientations to child-centered practice.

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1. Introduction

By the late 1980s and for the first time in history, the world's children, as citizens, were acknowledged their rights to provision, protection and participation in a UN Convention – the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The convention continues to have an important influence on politics, legislation and attitudes to children worldwide (Verhellen, 2000; John, 2003; Burr & Montgomery, 2003) with child welfare as one of the fields in which it has begun to influence attitudes to children and their rights. A manifest and evident example is found in the Looking After Children System (LAC), first developed in Great Britain. LAC, together with the Framework for Assessment for Children in Need and their Families (AF), are child-centered approaches which have had significant influence on assessment, planning, intervention and review in more than fifteen different countries on different continents. In keeping with the CRC, LAC, AF and the Integrated Children's Services (ICS), their successor in the UK, call upon child welfare services to be provided in a child-centered manner. This trend toward harmonization in child welfare services has led to the acceptance and implementation of child-centered approaches in many parts of the world, including Australia,

Canada, Sweden, Hungary, Denmark and Israel (Cleaver & Walker, 2004).

Although central to the various materials that comprise LAC, AF, and connected approaches, the 'child centered' concept is also positioned in relation to other kindred concepts, including children's participation, child perspective, children's needs in focus and partnership. While they all have positive connotations and emphasize an important paradigm shift in views upon children (James, Jonks, & Prout, 1998), their interpretation is complicated (Lansdown, 1995; Andersson, 2000; Rasmusson, Hyvönen, & Mellberg, 2004; Sinclair, 2004; Rasmusson, 2006), and likely to vary between different cultural contexts. Generally speaking, when 'child centered', as a concept, enters into policy and practice in different child welfare contexts, its meaning is heavily influenced by the climate of the times and is thus shaped by the historical, cultural and social contexts in which it is manifest. Further, as an ideological practice, how child centered is conceptualized will channel the helping efforts of organizations and the social workers in them in specific directions. And, ultimately, how it is conceptualized will also subordinate other perspectives.

The implementers of these child-centered approaches have recognized the importance of training as an important means by which the purposes, intents, outcomes and best practices associated with these approaches are transmitted. Therefore, an important issue of investigation is how the 'child centered' approaches of LAC and AF are defined and transmitted from research and child welfare

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authorities to practice. Another important issue, connected to the spread of LAC, AF and the ICS worldwide, is whether there are any differences in how the concepts are used and interpreted in different national, socio-political, and organizational contexts.

2. Purpose of the study

This paper explores different orientations to child-centered social work as conveyed in the training materials and guidance of LAC and AF in three different organizational and structural contexts. Comparisons are made between license-holding organizations in Australia, Canada and Sweden. They are: Barnardos Australia (New South Wales); Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (Ontario, Canada); Socialstyrelsen (National Board of Health and Welfare, Sweden). For simplicity's sake, in this paper we will frequently refer to Australia, Canada, and Sweden when referring to these organizations. Each of these organizations reflects a unique context for child welfare policy and practice. Together they represent different relationships between the state, welfare systems, and children and their families, making comparisons all the more interesting and motivated (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996; Khoo, Hyvönen & Nygren, 2007).

The following questions are addressed:

- How is the concept 'child centered' defined, explicitly or implicitly in LAC and AF training materials in Australia, Canada and Sweden?
- How do these approaches relate, explicitly or implicitly, to children's rights and needs?
- How do these approaches relate to (the) concepts of provision, protection and participation in the three contexts?
- What rationales, values and motives are revealed behind the concept 'child centered'?
- What do the training materials and guidance say about how to apply a child-centered approach in child welfare practice?

2.1. From needs to rights in child-centered social work

Child-centered practice includes work *for* as well as *together with* children and, in this sense, is associated with similar and kindred concepts. One way of putting these concepts in context is to use the three P's – *Provision, Protection and Participation* – as a frame of reference. Provision and protection imply working for children whereas participation implies including and working with children. These concepts are often used to describe and summarize the content of the CRC as a whole and emphasize children as actors and individuals in their own right (Qvortrup, 1994; Verhellen, 2000).

Giving children a voice and an opportunity to have a say on issues concerning themselves, however, is still a rather novel and value-laden idea with significant consequences for practice. When it was first introduced, the consequences of children's right to participation aroused both hope for the future and anxiety about what could happen if power were given to unwitting children who did not have ability to make well-considered judgments. There continues to be, however, a wide gap between rhetoric and practice with much left to be done to realize children's right to participation (Stern, 2006).

Another aspect of special interest is the relation between needs and rights. The seven dimensions of children's needs (health, education, emotional and behavioral development, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation and self care skills) are at the very core of LAC and AF (Parker, Ward, Jackson, Aldgate, & Wedge, 1989). But what about rights? Could needs-based and rights-based approaches be combined? Ife (2000), Australian professor of social work, argues for seeing social work as defining, realizing and guaranteeing human rights instead of seeing it as assessing and meeting human needs.

One of the main reasons is that a human rights perspective allows the possibility for the client to be an active participant in the decision-making process. There is therefore a different construc-

tion of practice inherent in each discourse. In a discourse of rights there is a stronger capacity for empowerment based practice; the emphasis is on realizing and protecting rights of the client, rather than facilitating the professional decision-making of a social worker (Ife, 2000 p. 105).

It is, against this background, of special interest to elucidate how children's needs and rights in these respects are interpreted in comparisons between different child welfare contexts. LAC and AF thus offer interesting objects of study since they represent relatively stable approaches that encounter different political and organizational structures and that these differences have an impact on how fundamental values (i.e. needs and rights) are recognized and given priority.

3. The data: LAC and AF training materials and guidance

LAC and AF supply practitioners with integrated documentation systems (forms) for assessment, planning, intervention and review. The original British LAC-system for 'looked-after' children consists of Essential Information Form, Care Plan, Placement Plan, Consultation Papers, Review Form and Assessment and Action Records (AAR) (Department of Health, 1995). The Assessment Framework consists of forms for initial and core assessments, questionnaires and scales (Department of Health, 2000a,b). However, LAC and AF are more than just forms. Included in the systems are also a care philosophy and theoretical anchoring (Parker et al., 1989; Ward, 1995; Department of Health, 1997, 2000a; Seden, 2001; Horvath et al., 2001; Shemmings, 1999a,b). The LAC and AF approaches were products licensed by the UK government which controlled the degree to which these could be changed in order to fit into different national and local contexts (Department of Health, 1997; Wise, 1999; Socialstyrelsen, 2008). This has eased the comparability of these approaches.

To investigate LAC and AF as child-centered approaches, we examined comparable guidelines and training materials used after the year 2000 in Australia, Canada and Sweden. The materials were, in all three countries, produced by authorities and associations in cooperation with researchers. The target groups are the same, namely social workers and managers within the child welfare system. The study is limited in Australia to the LAC introduced in New South Wales (AUS-LAC) in cooperation between Barnardos and University of New South Wales. In Canada, we examined Ontario LAC (OnLAC) materials produced in Ontario in cooperation between Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) and the University of Ottawa. The Swedish materials – Children's Needs in the Centre (known there as BBIC) – are national and developed by the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW).

As shown in Table 1, we have had access to the relevant materials, including forms used in practice, from the three countries. Australia has imported all the LAC forms for planning and review from the UK originals. Canada imported only the AAR forms and transformed them to the local context (producing the AAR-C2), while already existing Canadian care planning and follow-up materials were modified to reflect the values of LAC. Sweden developed, after importing both LAC and AF systems, an integrated system of its own – BBIC – and adjusted it to Swedish conditions. Some of the LAC forms were eliminated or given new terms. Of particular interest for this study are the instructions for how to use the forms (more than the forms as such).

3.1. Analytical procedure

The specific texts that are the objects of our analysis can be described as professional communications aimed at persuading and instructing the receivers of this communication. As persuasive texts, they aim to convince receivers of the desirability of a particular position. As instructional texts, they teach and facilitate use of the approaches in specific situations. Our point of departure is that these

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