

**How to explore and develop child welfare systems: the  
English experience.**

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## **How to explore and develop child welfare systems: the English experience**

The last twenty years have witnessed a growing and often 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 et al., 2008), 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 are being ignored. It has been argued that a major paradigm shift is required which takes these issues seriously (Lindsey and Shlonsky, 2008). As a result, a number of jurisdictions are introducing new systems which attempt a more differentiated and integrated approach (Waldfoegel, 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 growing significance of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in 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; but rarely have these developments been subject to critical appraisal.

A central part of my argument is that the nature of child welfare practice and the knowledge which both informs and characterises it is increasingly 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 in a context where professional decision-making is increasingly subject to close media and political scrutiny. While these issues are of particular significance in England, they are also of growing significance elsewhere.

### **Child Protection and Child Welfare**

I am taking as my starting point the discussions that have taken place over recent years arising from comparisons of different approaches to child welfare; particularly those which compare approaches which emphasise the importance of *child protection* and those which emphasise a *family support* model.

The tensions and challenges have 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-focused, forensically-driven and crisis-oriented 'child protection' system (Kamerman and Khan, 1990). As a

consequence the more general family support aspirations of child welfare services were not being prioritized, and the child protection system itself 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.

**[Figure 1 at the end of the paper to be inserted here]**

However, during the 1990s a major debate opened up in England, the USA and Australia 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 could 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 Figure 1, there should be a shift from a *child protection* model to a *family support* 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 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 greater significance rather than whether the 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.

### **The Historical Roots, Nature and Purposes of Child Welfare Social Work in England**

In England 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 workers was seen as a positive solution to a major social problem for the

liberal state; namely, how could the state sustain the healthy development of family members who were vulnerable and dependent, while promoting the family as the 'natural' sphere for caring for those individuals and without intervening in *all* families? (Hirst, 1980). It provided a compromise between the liberal vision of unhindered individual freedom and private philanthropy, and the socialist vision of a planned, collectivised society that would take responsibility for all citizens, such that children were regarded as 'children of the state'.

In England, in the context of the development of the liberal state since the late nineteenth century, social work has fulfilled an essentially mediating role between those who are excluded and the mainstream of society. Part of what social workers have traditionally sought to do was to strengthen the bonds of inclusive membership by trying to nurture reciprocity, sharing and small-scale redistribution between individuals, in households, groups, communities and so on. At the same time, social work was also concerned with the compulsory enforcement of social obligations, rules, laws and regulations. It is in this context that social work has always involved both *care* and *control* (Garland, 1985).

For, while social work has always been concerned to liberate and empower those with whom it works, it is also concerned with working on behalf of the state and the wider society to help maintain social order. We can therefore see that one of child welfare social work's enduring characteristics is its contested and ambiguous nature (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita, 1998). Most crucially, this ambiguity arises from its commitment to children and families and their needs on the one hand and its allegiances to its legal and statutory responsibilities on the other.

So, while social work has always aimed to present clients in objective terms there has always been a belief in the fundamental good in humanity. While social work regarded itself as a carrier of the human tradition of compassion, increasingly during the twentieth century it drew on the social sciences for its 'knowledge base'. For most of its history social work has been concerned with 'common human needs', with 'people not cases', and with 'a truly human response to suffering' (Philp, 1979). It has tried to produce a picture of the individual which is both *subjective* and *social* and where the use of the professional *relationship* provides the key mechanism to help individuals back into the mainstream of society. In presenting this somewhat ideal typical summary of the nature and purposes of social work it is also important not to romanticize or glorify the past. As Margolin (1997) and Chen (2005) have demonstrated, the picture of the 'subject' that was presented by the social worker could also be a derogatory and highly moralistic one.

### **The Growing Centrality of Information, Procedures and Systems**

However, as I have argued previously (Parton, 1994), the apparent failures of child welfare social work in England, particularly in relation to a number of high profile child abuse scandals (Parton, 1985; 1991; 2006), from the mid 1970s onwards, suggested that both its key forms of knowledge and its key technologies of practice were in serious need of attention. As a result, its areas of discretionary decision making have been reduced and front line practitioners have had to follow increasingly detailed procedural guidance. At the same time, there has been a growing emphasis on the need for improved multi-agency and multidisciplinary

work and the role and practice of managers became crucial. By the early 1990s it was managers, as opposed to front line professionals, who were seen as the powerful actors in the new network. Managers became the new mediators between expert knowledge(s), individual and community needs and the allocation of scarce resources – in effect harmonising overall objectives and day-to-day practice. More specifically, notions of management began to frame and supplant the central activities and the forms of knowledge that social workers drew upon.

The idea of the care or case manager, coordinating and operationalising packages of care, where their knowledge of resources and networks was crucial and where notions of monitoring and review became key. The central activities were concerned with assessment, planning, care management, negotiating, coordinating, and operating the law and procedures.

The changes started long before the introduction of new ICT systems and, in England, were introduced primarily following child abuse public inquiries into the deaths of children known to social workers. A major response to the inquiries was an increased emphasis on the need to collect, share, classify and store *information*. As David Howe noted in 1992:

The analysis of past failings suggested that success in child abuse work would come by: (i) knowing what *information* to collect about parents in order to determine whether or not they might be a danger to their children; (ii) systematically collecting that *information* by thoroughly investigating cases; (iii) processing and analysing that *information* to decide whether or not

children were safe in the care of their parents; and (iv) closely monitoring and reassessing cases in which children were thought to be at risk (Howe, 1992, pp. 498-99, emphasis added).

Information took on a strategic significance for both protecting children and making professionals accountable. Information had become a key resource for identifying and managing 'high risk' situations (Parton, 1998). The result, Howe, argued, was that whereas the technical demands in the job increased, the role of professional judgment decreased (Howe, 1992, p. 492).

Howe (1996) developed this analysis a few years later when he suggested that child welfare social work had undergone a number of major changes in its character from the late 1970s onwards. In particular, he felt that the emphasis on 'performance' had become the dominant criterion for knowledge evaluation, both in relation to clients and of social workers themselves. No longer was the focus on trying to understand or explain behaviour for social workers were less concerned with *why* clients behaved as they did but with *what* they did. It was *behaviour* rather than *action* which was the focus. *Depth* explanations drawing on psychological and sociological theories were superseded by *surface* considerations for 'it is the visible surface of social behaviour which concerns practitioners and not the internal workings of psychological and sociological entities' (Howe, 1996, p. 88). Coherent causal accounts which attempted to provide a picture of the subject in their social context was of declining importance, for the key purpose of the social worker was to gather information in order to classify clients for the purpose of judging the nature and level of risk and for allocating resources. The emphasis on the relationship, once the central feature of social work

practice, was thereby stripped of its social, cultural and professional significance. Knowledge was only relevant in so far as it aided the gathering, assessing, monitoring and exchange of information – which became the central focus of the work.

By the mid 1990s it was clear that child welfare social work in England had become much more routinized and proceduralized and this was having a significant impact. In many respects practice had become more ‘formalised’ and subject to a whole series of different and detailed forms – literally. Forms came both to represent and constitute the nature and form of knowledge which lay at the centre of front line practice. This is not to say that the way forms are used and interpreted is not likely to vary widely, but it is to argue that forms, guidance and procedures took on a significance by the mid 1990s which had not been evident previously. Increasingly, the changing social, political and economic climate in which child welfare social work operated and the introduction of a variety of new technologies and devices had the effect of subjecting practitioners and the people with whom they work to a variety of ‘systems’ for providing safe, reliable, standardised services and predictable outcomes. As Carol Smith (2004) has argued, the situation is full of paradox, for while most agree that certainty in many areas of social work is not possible, the political and organisational climate demands it. Social workers have been found wanting and are no longer trusted. The result is that many of the changes introduced act to sidestep the paradox and substitute *confidence in systems* for *trust in individual professionals*.

## **The Nature and Impact of Information and Communication Technologies**

Such developments have become even more evident with the growing influence of ICTs and the requirement that practitioners input, manage and monitor a whole variety of information via the new electronic systems. In England, not only does this include the introduction of electronic records in all areas of social care (Information Polity Unit, 2003) but a variety of more specialist systems which include the *Integrated Children's System (ICS)* (Cleaver *et al.*, 2008), the *Common Assessment Framework (CAF)* (White *et al.*, 2008) and *ContactPoint* (Parton, 2008). All of these changes are taking place in a context where the 'modernization' of public services is seen as crucially dependent on the introduction of ICTs and *electronic-government* more generally (Hudson, 2002; 2003).

While it is clear that developments over the last 12 years, in England, have introduced a range of policies and services which aim to prioritise prevention and early intervention and which are clearly very sympathetic to trying to extend a *family support* approach and improving the well-being of all children, it is also clear that the changes have had the effect of further extending the emphasis on performance-management, audit and increased accountability. For example, in a survey of 2,200 social care professionals over half said they spent more than sixty per cent of their time on administrative work as opposed to direct client contact, while more than one-fifth spent over eighty per cent of their time on such tasks, and ninety-five per cent felt 'that social work had become more bureaucratic and less client-focussed over the previous five years' (Samuel, 2005, p. 8).

Beyond this, however, it is important to ask how these changes are impacting on the practice of social work. What are the possible impacts of the increasingly central role

of ICTs and use of databases on the nature and form of social work practice? Is the form of knowledge in social work being transformed by these changes and, if so, in what ways?

A number of consequences arise from the gradual encroachment of the database culture. First, and most obviously, information becomes more available and accessible and in the process the systems, the professionals and the decisions they take become, in theory, more transparent and accountable. In the process there is less discretion for the individual professional, for identifying what information is seen as relevant is determined by the requirements of the data base and the algorithm (Burton and van den Broek, 2008). At the same time knowledge which cannot be squeezed into the required format disappears or gets lost. This has particular implications for the way identities are constructed and the type of human experience which can be represented. Stories of violence, pain and social deprivation can only be told within the required parameters to the point they may not be stories at all. While, traditionally, social work has attempted to present a picture of their clients which is both subjective and social via a holistic biographical narrative, the increasing use of computer databases may not allow for the presentation of such identities.

Identities are constructed according to the fields that constitute the database, so that in striving for clear and objective representations and decision making the subjectivity and social context of the client can be deconstructed into a variety of lists and factors associated with, in particular, 'need' and 'risk'. Categorical thinking, based on the binary either/or logic, dominates which puts individuals into categories and in the process obscures any ambiguities. Rather than be concerned with

presenting a picture of the subject, as previously, social work increasingly acts to take subjects apart and then reassembles them according to the requirements of the database. Practitioners are required to produce dispersed and fragmented identities made up of a series of characteristics and pieces of information which are easy to input/output and compare. In the process the real person is in danger of disappearing and we are left with a variety of surface information which provides little basis for in depth explanation or understanding.

Databases, in effect, create 'virtual' realities, whereby information becomes more important than the real person (Hayes, 1999).

'Data doubles' – or electronic children (Peckover *et al.*, 2008) - become the key markers for access to resources, services and power which are likely to be unknown to the person themselves. Such developments beg the question as to how much direct contact and interaction needs to take place between the social worker and the client if the primary concern becomes gathering, inputting and analysing information. If clients are taking on the guise of information patterns the implication is that social workers are becoming, primarily, information processors.

Not only does the use of computerised information systems mean that the traditional boundaries between the 'public' and 'private' – the key space in which social work operated – become blurred, but social work becomes even more implicated than ever in wide-ranging, complex and unstable systems of surveillance (Parton, 2006; 2008). In England the extension and intensification of ICT systems has been premised on the assumption that their introduction is important to in order to introduce policies

and practices which aim to improve prevention and early intervention and which appear central to advancing a *family support* approach. To do so, it is argued, requires the ability to be able to share information amongst a variety of professionals and that, for example, if a teacher or health worker identifies a problem which might deteriorate they should bring it to the attention of more specialist services, including child welfare. While such problems might include the early signs of some form of child abuse, they are not restricted to it. In fact the overall aim is to maximise the well-being of all children. Anything which might interfere with this should be considered for some form of specialist intervention (Parton, 2008; Frost and Parton, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

However, the situation is full of major paradox; for even though the systems are set up to enhance highly rationalised forms of decision making and service delivery they:

result in the incredible *irrationality* of information overloads, misinformation, disinformation and out-of-control information. At stake is a *disinformed* information society (Lash, 2002, p. 2, original emphasis).

There is considerable evidence that the new systems do not do the tasks they are supposed to and are very time-consuming to operate (Bell and Shaw, 2008; Cleaver et al., 2008; Shaw and Clayden, forthcoming). It is one of the great ironies of the last 30 years of child welfare policy in England that whenever problems with systems

have been identified, new and even more complex systems have been introduced in order to repair them. Yet, it is one of the iron rules of life that the more rules and procedures that are introduced the more likelihood it is that, by definition, the rules will be broken even more in the future.

Clearly the use of ICT in social work practice is highly contingent upon local policy implementation, the local arrangements of services, and the everyday practices of busy and sceptical practitioners and that the role of critical and creative thinking and practice may still have a role (White *et al.*, 2006). Even so, it seems that the introduction and application of ICT in child welfare has been driven by attempts to improve management information systems and to increase the accountability and surveillance of both practitioners and the children, young people and families with whom they work. There has been a particular emphasis placed on the meshing of ICT and a number of guided practice systems, particularly in relation to case assessment, planning and monitoring. Professional and client discourses appear to have had only limited influence.

In many ways the current use of ICT in child welfare is in sharp contrast to the rapid and creative use of ICT more generally, where increasingly people seem to find it more satisfying and preferable to discuss some of the most difficult and intimate part of their lives via computer-mediated communications, rather than through face-to-face discussion (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). ICT offers the opportunity to change communication in ways which have direct and very positive possibilities for child welfare and, potentially, might inform the development of a *family support* approach which is also serious about becoming more *child-centric*.

Many people – particularly children and young people – find using the internet useful and helpful in a whole variety of ways, particularly its potential interactivity, egalitarianism and ‘fun’. Not only does it appear to increase the communicative possibilities for those who are anxious, it offers advantages to those dealing with difficult subjects, particularly where self-disclosure might be involved. The combination of greater anonymity and the ability to have a greater control of the interaction seems particularly attractive to those who are vulnerable. ICT has proved particularly attractive to children and young people (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 2001) and there are a growing number of telephone and interactive web sites offering help and advice to children, young people and adults. What seems particularly attractive is that such services offer the possibility for a greater degree of confidentiality – something which is very important if children and young people are going to access services themselves (Wattam, 1999; Hallett *et al.*, 2003).

Clearly there are a range of challenges and risks involved in trying to adapt and use these new technologies (Tregeagle and Darcy, 2007; Livingstone and Haddon, 2008). My purpose in concluding on these developments is simply to draw attention to the range of positive and creative ways ICT can/could be used. In many ways the challenges to practice and knowledge of the introduction of ICT into child welfare are not so much to do with issues arising from the nature and characteristics of ICT, but are much more to do with the nature and characteristics of the organizational culture of child welfare itself. Thus far, the introduction of ICT has acted primarily to institutionalize even further the highly managerialist and proceduralist culture that has come to dominate child welfare agencies. There is no reason why ICT could not

also act to unsettle that culture in a way which is far more sympathetic and empowering to the wishes and interests of front-line practitioners and the people with whom they work. These are major challenges with wide-scale implications.

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**Figure 1 The Child Protection and Family Support Models**

<b>Child Protection Model</b>	<b>Family Support Model</b>
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 difficulties 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	More readiness to intervene
Individual rather than community oriented	Community oriented
Remedial rather than preventive	Preventive rather than remedial