

**Challenges to Practice and Knowledge in Child Welfare Social Work: From the  
'Social' to the 'Informational'?**

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## **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 more traditional and broader concern of ensuring the welfare of all 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 have been overshadowed by the 'informational'. In doing so it attempts to identify a number of key challenges which need to be considered in the future.

## **Challenges to Practice and Knowledge in Child Welfare Work: From the ‘Social’ to the ‘Informational’?**

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the form of knowledge in child welfare social work and, more particularly, how this might currently be subject to significant change. In doing so I am particularly cognisant of the growing importance of a whole variety of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their possible impact. A central part of my argument is that the nature of 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 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 (Parton, 2006; 2008).

## **Child Protection and Child Welfare**

In some respects this paper can be seen to take its starting point from last year's *Linda Haskell Memorial Master Class* by Silvia Fargion (Fargion, 2007), particularly where she discusses 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).

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-focused, forensically-driven and crisis-oriented 'child protection' system (Kamerman and 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 Figure 1, taken from Fargion (2007), there should be a shift from a child protection model to a child welfare model.

[Figure 1]

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 approach adopted has been more akin to integration. In the words of the Minister then centrally involved in the major changes currently taking place in England, the aim is usually 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**

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.

Social work occupied the space between the respectable and the dangerous classes (Pearson, 1975; Jones, 1983) and between those with access to political influence and voice and those who were excluded. Social work fulfilled an essentially

mediating role between those who were 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 wide 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.

In the twentieth century the more explicit moral analysis of relationships and behaviour was replaced by a psycho-social approach, where the inner world of the individual was given as much attention as the relationships between people.

'Casework' became the dominant form of social work in the USA and England. It was characterized by an optimistic view of human nature, which thought the best of people and saw social problems as examples of individual and interpersonal dysfunction, somewhat divorced from issues of social class, conflict, oppression, exploitation and discrimination (Mills, 1943; Pearson, 1973). Social work aimed to present clients in objective terms, but had a belief in the fundamental good in

humanity. While social work regarded itself as a carrier of the human tradition of compassion, it increasingly drew on the social sciences for its 'knowledge base'. As Philp (1979) has argued, social work was concerned with 'common human needs', with 'people not cases', and with 'a truly human response to suffering'. It tried to produce a picture of the individual which was both *subjective* and *social* and where the use of the professional *relationship* provided the key mechanism to help individuals back into the mainstream of society.

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

However, as I have argued previously (Parton, 1994), the apparent failures of child welfare social work, 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 were reduced and front line practitioners had to follow increasingly detailed procedural guidance. At the same time, there was a growing emphasis in England 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, operating the law and procedures.

The changes started long before the introduction of new IT systems and, in England, were introduced primarily following child abuse public inquiries. 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, my emphasis).

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 amount of 'technicality' in the job increased, the element of 'indeterminacy' decreased (Howe, 1992, p. 492).

Howe (1996) developed this analysis a few years later when he suggested that social work had undergone a number of major changes in its character from the late 1970s onwards. In particular, he felt that ‘performativity’ 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. Howe also argued that the growing emphasis on ‘information’ in the work was closely interrelated with the central role allocated to the ‘manager’ as opposed to the ‘practitioner’.

The rise of the manager in social work sees the introduction of a range of skills related largely to defining and measuring performance and outcome. Such an outlook seeks to establish routines, standardised practices and

predictable task environments. It is antithetical to depth explanations, professional discretion, creative practice, and tolerance of complexity and uncertainty (Howe, 1996, p. 92).

By the mid 1990s it is clear that social work had become much more routinized and proceduralized and this was having a significant impact on its 'form of knowledge'. In many respects the form of knowledge 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 (2001) 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* and fails to recognise the importance of 'moral competence' (Smith, 2004) in the work.

## **The Nature 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. 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, in child welfare social work in England, includes the Integrated Children's System (ICS) (Cleaver *et al.*, 2008), the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (White *et al.*, 2008) and ContactPoint – previously the Information Sharing Index (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 e-government more generally (Hudson, 2002; 2003). There is no doubt that such developments are hastening the changes already noted over the previous twenty-five years. 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 form of knowledge in social work. What are the possible impacts of the increasingly central role of ICTs and databases on the nature and form of social work knowledge? Is the form of knowledge in social work being transformed by these changes and, if so, in what ways?

Leve Manovich (2001) has argued that the database, although originally a computer's method of organising and accessing data, has become the privileged form of cultural expression. As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a collection of items upon which a user can perform a variety of operations. The collection of items are not governed by a cause and effect logic and does not tell a story which has a beginning, a middle and an end or any coherent theme at all. In this respect, Manovich argues, the database mentality is in sharp contrast to the narrative which, until now, has been the dominant form of cultural expression. While Manovich does not equate databases and narratives with specific types of technologies, he argues that the database has become the cultural form most characteristic of the computer. Whereas previously social work was primarily an oral and written set of practices which relied on the construction of narratives, increasingly this is not the case. The logic of the computer is based on the interdependent process of the algorithm and the dataset. Algorithms provide a sequence of operations so that a computer can accomplish a given task: while any object of the world – to promote and safeguard the welfare of children for example – can be modelled as a data structure so that the data can be organised in a particular way to allow for efficient search and retrieval operations. In the process varied systems for assessment, monitoring and planning in social work both for a particular 'case' or for generating a range of management information are becoming dependent upon the computer for their operation. This is not to say that the use of narratives is disappearing but that they are increasingly framed by the logic of the database. As a result, it seems that, in social work, what is referred to as 'knowledge' is primarily related to the way we gather, share, store, manipulate and use 'information'

(Gatehouse, Statham and Ward, 2004). However, *knowledge* and *information* are quite different phenomena.

Whereas *knowledge* is mental, not yet objectified and very much associated with ideas and requires a degree of commitment and understanding, *information* is much more disembodied, decontextualized and objectified. While knowledge usually involves a knower, information is usually treated as an independent and self-sufficient entity which is much more transportable and useable in different ways (Brown and Duguid, 2000). Clearly social work has always used objectified and stored information in the form of case records and other forms of recording, however, a large amount of knowledge was undocumented and existed primarily in people's heads. With the introduction of ICT there is an expectation that such internalised knowledge should be reduced. The tendency has been very much to create decision-making processes and systems that operate with as much explicated information as possible, without having to deal with unformatted and unpredictable input. In the process, it is anticipated that decision-making will become more predictable and accountable. Such changes are closely interrelated with the rise of managerialism and an audit culture whereby an attempt is made to formalise and regularise organizational decision-making and which Stephen Webb (2006, chapter 5) has recently discussed in terms of the emergence of 'technologies of care'. Information becomes a self-contained substance which can be shared, quantified, accumulated, compared and stored on a data base.

A number of consequences can be seen to 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. With the database:

identity is not marked by its unique biography and a certain internal development, but is rather adjusted to the 'computer's ontology': composed of items of information that like Lego bricks can be taken apart and clearly understood as well as fit with other items of information in new configurations. To achieve this compatibility, the meaning of words used to describe identity needs to be standardised and de-contextualised in order to fit into the parameters presented by the database' (Aas, 2004, p. 386).

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 embodied subject 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 materiality and embodiment (Hayes, 1999). Increasingly, it seems that the body can be dematerialised into a series of information patterns, so that the disembodied and decontextualised symbols become the primary point of reference for the systems which social workers are a part of. Haggerty and Ericson have argued that what we are witnessing is the creation of the 'data double', for:

The observed body is of a distinctively hybrid composition. First it is broken down by being abstracted from its territorial setting. It is then reassembled in different settings through a series of data flows. The result is a decorporealized body, a 'data double' of pure virtuality (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000, p. 611).



'Data doubles' – or electronic children (Peckover *et al.*, 2008) - circulate in a variety of different centres of calculation and assessment and serve as the key markers for access to resources, services and power which are likely to be unknown to their original referent. While such doubles ostensibly refer back to a particular individual, they always have the potential to transcend a pure representational form and take on a reality of their own. Such a development begs 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 can 'the subject' of social work knowledge be seen as being in the process of transformation into a series of discreet categories but also the 'social' nature of the work is in danger of disappearing.

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, particularly where such systems are used to enhance strategies to enhance early intervention and prevention (Parton, 2006; 2008). However, rather than seeing this growth in computerised surveillance as simply an instrument of oppression, we should see it, and thereby social work, as crucially involved in the production and distribution of information about diverse populations, for the purpose of managing their behaviour and development 'at a distance'. In the context of the development of practices

which aim to improve early intervention and prevention, computerised surveillance is promoted as a key component of positive population strategies.

## **Conclusion**

However, the situation is full of major paradox.; for how is it that information systems which are set up to enhance highly rationalised forms of decision making and service delivery

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).

Much of the social science research carried out on the impact of new technology has acted to dispel notions of technological determinism – that certain technologies proscribe and determine the nature of social change along certain trajectories. There is a series of highly context-specific studies which demonstrate that technologies incorporate values, that innovation is a highly negotiated affair, and that the presupposition of technology's privileged role in bringing about specific social change is misplaced. There are numerous contingencies and uncertainties at play (Dutton, 1996; 1999). In recognising the socially constructed nature of technology and the importance of 'tacit knowledge', the space for alternative visions and practices is thereby opened up.

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. 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. 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 (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 Child Welfare Models**

<b>Child Protection Model</b>	<b>Child Welfare 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

Source: Fargion (2007)