Social Work and Child Well-Being

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15.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss three different strategies to improve child well-being that are shaping current social work practice, incorporating yet going beyond traditional concern with deprivation and disadvantage. The three strategies discussed are child rights, social exclusion, and family policy. Breaking with past approaches, each of these strategies defines child well-being differently and has implications for social work practice. We will end with a brief discussion of how these strategies can enhance child well-being and change social work practice with children.

15.2 Context

The history of social work is deeply rooted in helping vulnerable populations improve their well-being, and children have been at the forefront of these efforts since the inception of profession. The early efforts of upper-class women and men in religious and secular charitable organizations and later in settlement houses whose work was the basis from which the social work profession were found. They sought to address the consequences of poverty, urbanization, and immigration in postindustrial societies. In both these traditions, the well-being of children was

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a priority. Views on how to best help children and their families have vacillated widely over time reflecting prevailing views of childhood, understanding of the causes of vulnerabilities, responsibility for resolution, and beliefs about the most effective strategies to help children and families. Today social work practice related to fostering the well-being of children and their families centers on providing such services as: family preservation and support, in and out-of-home care, family foster care, kinship care, residential group homes, adoption, independent living, child day care, adolescent pregnancy, and parenting services.

By nature, social work incorporates an interdisciplinary approach both in how it views social problems and in the strategies it promotes to respond to social issues. Child, youth, and family policies are implemented through public and private sectors: health and medical care, mental health and juvenile justice systems, youth services, family services, child welfare, education, and income support, throughout the world. The myriad of agencies involved further complicates service delivery resulting in fragmented initiatives, gaps in policies and programs, and supply and coverage, adding to the complexity of improving the well-being of children, youth, and their families.

Historically, the social work approach to social issues has been dominated by the traditional medical model – identifying a problem, assessing symptoms and syndromes, and developing a treatment and prognosis with and without treatment (Laing 1971). This is in contrast to a holistic model that argues for the whole of psychological, physical, and social experiences to be taken into account when addressing well-being and argues against the isolation of pathologies from the whole. Over time, social work has gradually embraced more of a holistic approach, which is better suited for work with the multidisciplinary and wide range of organizations often involved in social work practice.

There is a growing acknowledgment that many tragic and traumatic situations involving children can be anticipated and prevented by the implementation of effective public policies and social programs. This realization has shifted the focus away from policies and practices predicated on crises and pathology to those that embody normative well-being. We also understand that there is no single pathway that threatens the well-being of children and youth. Rather, it is more likely to be a number of traumas and adversities that jeopardize the well-being of children and youth. This has led to new approaches in social work to prevent risks to child well-being and to policies and practices that promote the well-being of children, youth, and their families through a variety of services and benefits. For example, the mission of child welfare has long been to protect and respond to the needs of children who have been abused or neglected through services and benefits offered in public and private child welfare agencies. More recently, social work is moving beyond child welfare agencies to engage communities in the prevention, protection, and nurturance of children (Pecora et al. 2009). Increasingly, efforts are focused on developing collaborative community strategies that respond to child maltreatment but emphasize preventative efforts (Pecora et al. 2009).

Child well-being and deprivation represent different sides of the same coin. Child poverty, meaning children living in families with very low income – and the

percentage of children living in such families – has received extensive attention in recent years, by both the European Union (EU) and the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries as well as UNICEF. Increasingly, the development of public policies in both developed and developing countries is framed in perspectives that go beyond the traditional focus on child protection and income poverty. In particular, where social work is concerned, child rights, social exclusion, and child and family policy perspectives are receiving more attention.

From a child rights perspective, well-being can be defined as the realization of children's rights and the fulfillment of the opportunity for every child to be all she or he can be. A rights perspective is consistent with the primary mission of social work that seeks to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, deprived, disadvantaged, and live in poverty (NASW Code of Ethics, Preamble 2008). Human rights in general and children's rights in particular are embedded in the core values of the social work profession, such as social justice, equality, and empowerment (Hare 2004). Today, both developing and developed countries increasingly consider the realization of children's rights when measuring the well-being of children. In contrast to the development of policies in industrialized countries that were family centered, child policy among developing countries has largely focused on children and is dominated by a child rights perspective (Gatenio Gabel 2009; Pemberton et al. 2005).

Among industrialized countries especially in the European Union, the well-being of children is also increasingly seen as including the indicators of children's material situation. These may include the adequacy of housing, health, education, subjective well-being and children's relationships, civic participation, and risk and safety, often placed within a broad-based perspective termed "the construct of social exclusion" (Bradshaw 2006). Such a perspective involves a multidimensional concept that includes economic, social, political, cultural, and other aspects of disadvantage and deprivation and is often described as the process by which individuals and groups are wholly or partly closed out from participation in their societies because of low income and constricted access to employment, social benefits, and services, as well as other aspects of cultural and community life (Kahn and Kamerman 2002). Social exclusion is also consistent with social work's concern for social justice and commitment to improve people's lives by empowering people who are vulnerable, deprived, disadvantaged, and live in poverty (NASW Code of Ethics, Preamble 2008).

Child and family policies are another strategy for improving the well-being of children and affect the practice of social work by shaping how social issues are viewed and what are deemed as appropriate societal responses. The term is used to describe those public policies, such as laws, regulations, and administrative policies, that are designed to affect the situation of children, families with children, individuals in their family roles, and those that have clear albeit unintended consequences for such families.

15.3 Child Rights

The establishment of juvenile justice systems can be viewed as an early means of protecting and actualizing children's rights. By removing children from adult justice systems, young persons are afforded greater opportunities for reform and can avoid being branded as criminals. But as Platt has argued in *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* (1969), "the child savers should in no sense be considered libertarians or humanists," because the juvenile justice system these reformers, many of whom were social work pioneers, created in the United States purposefully blurred the distinction between delinquent and dependent young people. Platt's example also shows how social work practice can be challenged by a rights-based approach. The result of blurring the distinction between the two systems was that dependent children were labeled delinquents, and since they had committed no crime, they had not been tried in court. In effect, the juvenile justice system robbed these young persons of their rights to due process. The state and various religious organizations were given open reign to define delinquency as they saw fit. Children who failed to conform to normative roles were easy targets. For example, parents were allowed to voluntarily commit their children to the Illinois reform school with the consent of the school's board of directors, and any "responsible member of the community" could turn in young women who were viewed as immoral (Platt 1965). Ironically, children had no means of redress.

T.H. Marshall identified three kinds of *citizenship* rights: civil or legal rights, political or democratic rights, and social or welfare rights (Marshall 1950). The first two of the three citizenship rights were largely addressed in the formation of democracies in earlier centuries. Social or welfare rights largely originated in the twentieth century through the social policies of welfare states that followed the Second World War, by providing certain rights to social security, health care, education, housing, social protection, and, for example, legal aid for the poor (Dean 2007). Governments, as duty-bearers, have the role of ensuring that its citizenry is able to access and fulfill these rights. The vehicle for this is often social policy.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the last of the United Nations documents to articulate the rights of special groups. It has become an essential tool to improve the conditions of children around the world (Himes 1995). Many of the countries ratifying the CRC have incorporated its values in their national plans, programs, and legislation to secure the rights of children in a variety of areas, including education, justice, child protection, and health care. For example, the CRC has fueled the enactment of new justice codes for children in El Salvador, Peru, and Bolivia and in Mexico, Pakistan, and Tunisia. Laws were modified to afford greater protection to young offenders based on the CRC (Earls 2011). The CRC was the impetus for the establishment of separate children's rehabilitation centers for children in Rwanda and for the rights of children to express their views in court in France (Earls 2011).

The CRC seeks to protect children from exploitation and recognizes a comprehensive list of rights and corresponding state obligations (Gerschutz and Karns 2005). Whereas for most adults civil and political rights, what T.H. Marshall

labeled the *first* generation of rights, were generally not extended to children. Children were more likely to benefit from social, economic, and cultural rights in industrialized countries in particular, as social policies addressing rights to social security, education, health, protection, housing, and social supports were created with children as part of family units or in lieu of family when adult family members were unable or unavailable to care for children. Arguably, the right of children to participate in decisions affecting their well-being is one of the most far-reaching aspects of the CRC. These rights acknowledge the citizenship rights of children and represent a radical turn in our notion of children's interests and capacities and more generally in their status (Earls 2011). They articulate the legitimacy of children's engagement in civic and political societal responsibilities. Article 12 of the CRC recognizes the right of a child to express his or her views freely in matters affecting him or her and ensures that those views are given due weight in accordance with the child's maturity. Article 13, affirms the child's right to freedom of expression, to seek, receive, and impart information; Article 14, specifies the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; Article 15, recognizes the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly; and Article 17, which guarantees the child's access to information and material, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual, and moral well-being and physical and mental health.

The CRC includes provisions for the monitoring and enforcement of the CRC standards which have proven to be a formidable task. Periodic reports on the status of the Convention's implementation are required and to be reviewed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. However, inadequate resources have hampered the Committee's ability to enforce timeliness and to sanction governments thus compromising the effectiveness of the CRC (Gerschutz and Karns 2005).

The adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 has been a critical force in the development of explicit and implicit child and family policies in developing as well as industrialized countries and placed children at the center of many public policies (Gatenio Gabel 2009). The CRC represents a major ideological shift in the way all signatory states formally regard the status and welfare of children and youth and obliges these states to take all possible steps to legislate what are deemed to be the inalienable social and legal rights of all children under their jurisdiction. Countries that have ratified the CRC are thus duty bound to develop laws, policies, and programs to protect children's rights as a priority of governance. Despite these laudable sentiments, the presence and efficacy of child policies across countries is uneven and implementation has proven to be a formidable task, especially in poor countries where the institutions of governance are often weak and under-resourced. As a result, the well-being of children has been compromised.

In embracing a rights-based approach, defining the well-being of children has moved away from poverty measures of income and consumption (absolute and relative poverty; cash and in-kind benefits) toward multidimensional measurements of child well-being. In the developing world, one of the ways child well-being is measured is by children's access to basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information (Gordon et al. 2003).

In many countries today especially in the developing world, the CRC is the standard for interventions undertaken by social workers who seek to mitigate social, economic, and other inequities but can also be interpreted as a challenge to existing authority structures and normative standards (Roose and De Bie 2008).

A rights-based approach poses a challenge to the way that social workers practice because it calls upon social workers to go beyond being instruments of the state to implement public policies affecting the care of children. Using a rights-based approach in social work summons social workers to be critical of existing practices and processes designed to enhance child well-being with an eye toward whether the process and the goals lead to the realization of children's rights. For example, accepting and incorporating the citizenry rights of children goes beyond most child and family policies in both industrialized and developing countries today and is not fully incorporated in social work practice.

15.4 Social Exclusion

As indicated earlier, a social exclusion perspective involves a multidimensional concept that includes economic, social, political, cultural, and other aspects of disadvantage and deprivation and is often described as the process by which individuals and groups are wholly or partly closed out from participation in their societies because of low income and constricted access to employment, social benefits and services, as well as other aspects of cultural and community life (Kamerman and Kahn 2001).

A key component is the framing of an issue as social and community exclusion rather than individual and personal culpability. (Kahn and Kamerman 2002). Atkinson (1998) and Phipps and Curtis (2001) point out that social exclusion is "something that happens to an individual rather than something that he or she chooses."

Social exclusion is also viewed by some as reflecting a concern with racism and discrimination as possible causes as well as a concern that socially excluded children may pose a threat to the future well-being of society if they grow up with little stake in the existing order. While some policy scholars use the term interchangeably with income poverty – or income poverty and unemployment – it is increasingly distinguished from financial poverty and focused instead on the idea of restricted access to civil, political, and social rights, and opportunities.

Social exclusion is particularly devastating for children, because if they encounter it when very young, it deprives them of essential experiences – including access to health care and preschool education – that they need for a good start in life (Bradbury and Markus 1999). Since first developed in France in the mid-1970s, the concept of social exclusion has been increasingly used by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Center in Italy, reports of the EU (Commission of the European Communities 1997; Eurostat 2000), and more recently in the work of the OECD. Applying the concept can reframe the discussion of child and family well-being

from a primary emphasis on the individual or the personal responsibility of a parent to that of societal or social and community responsibility.

Like poverty, social exclusion does not arise from any single cause but rather from several restrictions of civil, political, and social rights and severe disadvantage. Although income and financial assets are still considered key elements in achieving positive outcomes for children, the concept of social exclusion is not primarily concerned with those elements (nor even with disability) but with the broader range of capabilities people enjoy or fail to enjoy.

European scholars and policy makers have adopted the concept as a device that goes beyond income poverty or to incorporate "poverty" approaches such as that of Peter Townsend (1962) who saw poverty not only as the lack of resources but also an inability, because of the lack, to participate in one's own society. Some have also linked it with the broader range of the capabilities approach developed by the economist Amartya Sen (1993), which calls for efforts to ensure that people have equal access to basic capacities, including integration into the community and public life, self-respect, and human rights. In addition to the capacity to lead a long and healthy life, people should be educated and have the resources needed for a decent standard of living.

Most of the social work/social policy literature on social exclusion has been addressed by policy scholars including Peter Townsend, David Gordon, and David Piachaud. Nonetheless, there has been some work that focuses on social work practice, often linked with the poverty and disadvantage literature. Michael Sheppard, a British professor of social work, argued in his book that "social exclusion is a subject of major emphasis in contemporary social work and has become a core feature of social policy development in IHE-UK" and, furthermore, that the issue is "at the heart of social work theory and practice." (Sheppard 2006).

Ultimately, our concern is with the conditions under which children flourish and what it takes to achieve these conditions. Just as with regard to the concept of child rights, what does the concept of social exclusion add to the discussion of and public debate about child well-being? How does it help achieve the desired goals?

15.5 Child and Family Policy

A third strategy for strengthening social work's role in enhancing child well-being is applying the concept of family policy to policy, program and practice research, and debate.

Family policy is a holistic approach to evaluating social policies affecting children and their families. The term "family policy" was used first in European social policy discussions to describe what government does to and for children and their families. The term was used, in particular, to describe those public policies such as laws, regulations, and administrative policies that are designed to affect the situation of families with children or individuals in their family roles, and those that have clear, though possibly unintended, consequences for such families. The characteristics of family policy internationally are the following: first, that concern is for all children

and their families, not just poor families or families with problems, although these and other family types may receive special attention and, second, an acknowledgment that doing better by children requires help for parents and the family unit.

The increased attention to family policy in the social policy and social work literature began largely in the 1960s and early 1970s and derives from the developments that either threatened the traditional family or were believed to do so (Schorr 1968; Moynihan 1968; Kamerman and Kahn 1976).

As has been noted elsewhere, family policies may be explicit or implicit (Kamerman and Kahn 1976; Kamerman 2009). Explicit family policy includes those policies and programs deliberately designed to achieve specific objectives regarding children, individuals in their family roles, or the family unit as a whole. This does not necessarily mean general agreement as to the objective, but only that the actions are directed toward the family. Nor does it require agreement on the definition of *family*. There may be many different definitions.

Explicit family policies may include population policies (pre- or antenatal), income security policies designed to assure families with children a certain standard of living (cash or tax benefits), employment-related benefits for working parents, maternal and parental leave policies, maternal and child health policies, child care policies, and so forth. Implicit family policy includes actions taken in other policy domains for nonfamily-related reasons which have important consequences for children and their families as well, such as immigration policies or transportation.

Family policy is a subcategory of social policy and as such can be viewed as a policy field, a policy instrument, or a criterion by which all social policies can be assessed so as to their consequences for child and family well-being.

Family policy as a field includes those laws that are clearly directed at families, such as family allowances, parental leaves, early childhood education and care, and foster care and adoption policies. Family policy as an instrument may be used to achieve objectives in other policy domains such as labor market or population policy goals. Family policy as a perspective assumes that sensitivity to effects and consequences for families informs the public debate about all social policies, for example, income transfer policies (cash and tax benefits), parental leave policies following childbirth, early childhood care and education, family law, family planning, personal social service programs, maternal and child health, and housing subsidies/allowances. Critical to social work practice are policies that facilitate normative living arrangements for children and the alternatives. Such policies seek to protect children from harmful or exploitive situations but also prescribe parental responsibilities and societal expectations of parenting.

Although initially developed as a European policy, family policy today is a global concept, used in both the developed and developing countries, increasing over time from a UN expert group in the 1980s, a European Union Observatory on Family Policies in the 1990s to a conference in Hong Kong in 2008, a UN expert meeting in Doha, Qatar, in 2009, and another meeting in 2010. The key criterion is the presence of a child and the will and capacity of a society to invest in children.

Family policies have played a significant role in achieving countries' desired objectives, whether fertility related, employment related, helping to reconcile work

and family life, facilitating poverty reduction and the alleviation of social exclusion, or linked to enhancing child well-being. For families to carry out their traditional roles as well as new ones, they require help and support from government as well as the various nongovernment organizations.

Because family policies are based in the particular social and cultural context of a country, social work practice is more likely to reflect the culture, values, and expectations of a particular culture rather than as a universal standard. Child welfare policies are a good example of this. In most OECD countries, children are removed from homes where parents have demonstrated an inability to protect and nurture them and placed in foster homes, freed for adoption, or if indicated, placed in nonfamily residential alternatives as a last resort. In many other countries, it is parents who, due to income constraints or inability to care for children with special needs, turn children over to the state. Foster placements or freeing children for adoption is not socially acceptable, and so far too many children are raised in institutional settings. Social work is the dominant profession in countries that favor homelike placements and in those that practice institutionalization. Likewise in other countries, policies to protect children may not address child trafficking, female genital mutilation, early marriage, child labor, and abuse – and social workers would work within the constraints of these country-specific policies and the services available to protect children.

15.6 Conclusions

Child well-being is defined differently by each of the three strategies discussed in this chapter to affect child well-being. Each of the perspectives modifies the role of social workers and their efforts to enhance child well-being.

The CRC does not only set a normative standard across the globe but has resulted in a change in how policymaking is made within many countries. Child well-being is a right and reaches far beyond notions of consumption needs. A rights perspective views child well-being holistically and children as rights bearers. It imposes upon governments the responsibilities of ensuring access and availability of resources essential to the holistic development of children such as health care, income, education, clean water and sanitation, protection from exploitation, and information about one's self and environment. The rights-based approach as articulated in the CRC goes further and includes the right of children to express their opinions about what is in their best interest. A rights-based approach challenges social workers to leave behind needs-based approaches to child well-being and to advocate for not only services and transfers that facilitate children's development but also for the voice of children in determining the goals of and resources needed for achieving the well-being of children.

Social exclusion has become a paradigm for focusing on dysfunction. It is seen as an improvement over "underclass" or "marginalized" or income poverty alone. European scholars and policymakers including social workers have adopted it as a policy strategy that goes beyond income "poverty" or incorporating alternative

poverty measures. This perspective advocates that the needs of all children be addressed by policies developed to promote child well-being and that special efforts be made to correct policies that do otherwise. It prioritizes the importance that the well-being of all children be treated equitably and be represented in established programs and services. Unlike the rights-based approach, it does not mandate that children participate in the process, rather it emphasizes the best interests of all children be represented. It falls to social workers to often evaluate the equitable allocation of resources and speak on behalf of children who are marginalized or neglected or severely disadvantaged.

Family policy is a holistic approach to evaluating social policies affecting children and their families. In recent years many countries have explored specialized and innovative benefits and services designed to strengthen families, especially those with children. There is considerable variation across countries and over time with regard to public policies that respond to new risks and continuing problems, for all children as well as those especially disadvantaged. Social workers practice within the context of the policies of the country. Unlike a rights-based approach, social work practice from a family policy perspective is more grounded in the cultural context of a country's national social policies.

Family policy provides a framework for broadening the debate about child well-being beyond protection and the reduction of income poverty to include children's rights and social exclusion.

In all three of these approaches, the challenge for social work is to go beyond responding to narrowly defined social problems. Social workers often understand the multidimensionality of social problems best because of their direct practice with children and their families. Social work should be at the forefront of planning and redeveloping benefits and services targeted on children and their families because of their knowledge of the multidisciplinary, multiagency approaches across different systems, and their understanding of the multifaceted causes of disadvantage and deprivation among children.

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