

Exploring the theory–practice dimension of social work – perceptions of children in the field of child welfare

Jorunn Vindegg
Oslo Metropolitan University

Abstract

This article presents and discusses how theories inform social work practice and what impact this has on the professional-client relation, specifically how social work professionals perceive children and interpret their possibilities. Data for the analysis to come are drawn from a qualitative study of child welfare services in Norway. The aim of the article is to bring to light how theoretical knowledge as well as social workers' personal experiences influence the professional work, and consequently parents' and children's opportunities to participate. A main finding is that social workers' interpretations are informed by underlying theoretical frameworks that engender a narrative reasoning, that is, the plots of the parents' and the children's past histories, as well as the current situation, provide sense and coherence to professional work and understanding. The analysis focuses on how the social workers perceive the children they deal with, particularly how they acknowledge children's voices and participation in professional interaction. The empirical examples contribute to expand the horizon of professional practice, in terms of how theoretical perspectives influence and inform everyday practice with service users.

Keywords: Theory and practice, Child welfare practice, Professional knowledge, Narrative analyses, Children's voices.

Introduction

Several studies have discussed the relation between theory and practice in the social work profession and have concluded that a gap exists between theory/research-based knowledge and practice (Al-Ma'seb et al., 2015; Nygren & Soydan, 1997; Parton, 2000; Sheldon, 1978). This gap has been a subject of considerable debate over the years. Some scholars relate the gap to the difficulty in articulating and demarcating an exclusive knowledge base in social work (Eraut, 1994; Taylor & White, 2006; Trevithick, 2008) whereas others argue that rather than defining an exclusive knowledge base, social work should be more occupied with how knowledge is constructed and combined in practice (Goldstein, 1990; Nygren & Soydan, 1997). Moreover, the complexity of dealing with social situations and the emphasis on practical skills and ethical values, has led to less attention to theoretical reflection and development, placing practice at the heart of the profession and theory at the periphery (Kirk and Ried, 2002).

Discussions on how research and theory should inform practice is not unique to social work. It is widely recognised that the process from scientific knowledge/pure science to application in practice is complex and by no means straightforward (Stevens et al., 2007, Molander & Terum, 2008), but few studies are dedicated to the process of translation from one to the other. Moreover, when it comes to research-based knowledge the status of theory tends to be indistinct, which is particularly characteristic of evidence-based practice (EBP). From the early 1990s the movement of EBP has developed, and in line with Sackett et al. (2000), it is recognised that the best research-based knowledge should combine professional expertise and experience with users' values and circumstances. However, there is no consensus on how these forms of knowledge should be balanced (Gabbay & le May, 2016).

Munro (2011, 2019) has for example warned against the movement of exclusively relying on evidence-based knowledge for child welfare practice. Her concern is that

standardised practice based on manuals may disregard professional and ethical discretion, which is crucial for qualified decision making. The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs has claimed that social workers and social educators in the field of child welfare lack analytical competence and clinical skills (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2020), while other stakeholders and scholars have emphasised the importance of developmental psychology, especially attachment theory (NOU, 2012). Recently, researchers have warned against biases of class, gender and ethnicity in attachment theory and related theories (Ferguson, 2017; Hennem, 2012), while Taylor (2004) has contributed to a more nuanced use of child developmental theory in social work with children and families. Taylor claims that there seems to be a special affinity between attachment theory and social work because of the latter's preoccupation with complex and problematic family relationships as well as issues of separation and loss. A recent study from Denmark has examined how attachment has become an imperative psychological vocabulary in social work practice, showing that social workers have underdeveloped insights into attachment theory yet still use the concept to help comprehend difficult cases (Bjerre et al., 2021). In contrast, Warming et al. (2017) has contributed to a basic mindset for discovering strengths and resources in professional work with children at risk.

The complexity of professional practice presupposes critical and ethical reflection and should not be reduced to manual-based prescriptions. Although some recent studies address these central topics, the situation calls for more empirical studies on how knowledge is constructed and combined in practice. The aim of this article is thus to elaborate in more detail how social workers make sense of children and their position in the child welfare services. I draw on empirical data from a previous study (Vindegg, 2011), and the question to be addressed is how theoretical knowledge or perspectives inform social workers'

perceptions of children at risk and consequently, how social workers interpret children's possibilities to navigate and adjust to the living conditions they face.

After a brief review of the concept of theory in social work, the narrative construction of knowledge is introduced. Following the section of method and analytical perspectives, the findings are presented and discussed in a narrative framework as well as in relation to implications for the theory-practice dimension of social work.

The concept of theory

In David Howe's classic text (2008 [1987], p.12), a theory is defined as a set of concepts and propositions that present an organised view of phenomena. Howe argues that every effort to dismiss or reduce theory's significance will lead to poor practice (introduction chapter), thus rejecting that practice works intuitively. Furthermore, ways of viewing the world and explaining how people and situations work is the territory of theory, and competing theories lead to contrasting explanations of the same phenomena.

According to Howe, theories enable professional social workers to do four important things; to describe, to explain, to predict and to control and bring about. He reminds practitioners that the understanding of a given problem is not self-evidently present in the problem itself. What is seen and done will depend on the explanatory framework held by each professional. Theories of social sciences, as theories of social work are thus not depictions of reality, they are socially constructed in interactions between clients and practitioners in their agencies and in wider political, cultural and social arenas.

I will take as a point of departure that the knowledge base of social work, as in most other professions, is heterogenous, i.e. that the individual professional will base her approach on a variety of knowledge perspectives and forms of knowledge depending on what problem is to be solved (Grimen, 2008). In the literature, distinctions between implicit and explicit use of theory have been set forward, as have different types of theory, spanning from scientific or

academic knowledge to experiential bases of social work (Payne 2016). It has been suggested to name the latter “practice theory” or “theory for practice”, although this is also warned against because it risks accepting ad hoc common sense as occupational theory (Howe 2008). Despite these debates, I argue that there is need for further research to explicate the influence of theory on practice work.

Nevertheless, the theory-practice division present in textbooks, teaching and field of practice, have questioned the nature of social work theory and placed practice at the heart of the profession. Moreover, social workers feel ambivalent towards discussing their work in theoretical terms, thus abstaining from incorporating theory into descriptions of their practice. Fook et al. (2000) report for example that both newly qualified and established professionals, in Australia, are more likely to use particular concepts such as empowerment, child development or attachment, rather than more comprehensible theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, concepts and propositions should be translated and customized to the context of social work, regardless of the different social theories used to describe and explain the social problems practitioners are facing. This is crucial in order to move from general perspectives to the complex wisdom of good practice. As such, applying theory to practice is an interpretive process and calls for what Bruner (1990) names “narrative reasoning”.

The concept of attachment may serve as an example of why meaning making in practice involves social processes and transactions. In a psychological frame, attachment theory in general, and the bond established between the primary caregiver and the baby in particular, is of crucial significance for the development and wellbeing of children as well as adults throughout their lives. In one research tradition the concept and phenomenon per se is considered as a natural fact, whereas a different mindset emphasises how attachment as a cultural construction may pathologize mothers and neglect social and material factors in assessing parents’ ability to take care of their children (Bjerre et al., 2021; Duschinsky et al.,

2015). In social work with children and families it is crucial to consider children and parents in their context. A narrow assessment of attachment patterns and ‘the internal working model’ of individuals may pathologize both mothers and children and do more harm than good, concealing the living conditions of children and families. The perspective of narrative reasoning, as outlined by Bruner (1990) and further elaborated by Polkinghorne (1995), may serve as an analytical framework for understanding theory in practice, as well as theory and practice.

The narrative construction of knowledge

Similar to other human service professions, such as medicine and psychology, social work is inevitably a practice aiming at treating or relieving various kinds of illnesses, difficulties and problems or making appropriate changes (cf. Howe; 2008). A well-known and systematic approach to handling each case or situation is to diagnose, treat and infer, using the terminology of Abbott (1988, pp. 35-58). Although diagnosing or mapping, as well as treating and changing, may be perceived as mediating actions, mutually informing the process of professional work, these processes by others are viewed as constraining and instrumental, unable to grasp the individual stories of clients and users. For example, Hunter (1991) argues that medical practice is a narrative activity, focusing on physicians’ and medicine’s ways of knowing and its methods of transmitting that knowledge. She claims that “understanding medicine as a narrative activity enable[s] both physicians and patients to shift the focus of medicine to the care of what ails the patients and away from the relatively simpler matter of diagnosis of disease” (1991, p. xxi). Moreover, Polkinghorne (1988) is concerned his own and his colleagues’ research informs clinical practice to a very small degree only. He has tried to turn the question around, asking what he could learn from practice when conducting research, and he has realised that practitioners use narrative

knowledge, in terms of engaging with people's histories and basing their practice on narrative understanding and explanations.

Scholars have argued that the narrative methodology in social work has been disregarded in favour of evidence-based knowledge and practice (Hydén, 2008; Parton, 2000). Nevertheless, narrative perspectives have been dealt with, and narrative approaches have inspired scholars in social work in general and in social work with children and families in particular (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018; Bell & Hydén, 2017; Hall, 1997; Hall et al., 2003).

The research-based knowledge on narrative perspectives is diverse although based on a general agreement that human experiences are structured in narratives (Bruner, 1991; Giddens, 1994; Robertson, 2005). Bruner (1990, p. 33) claims that the central concept of human psychology is meaning, emphasising that meaning making involves social processes and transactions. As participants in such processes, individuals have the opportunity to shape and express their desires, intentions and experiences. Narratives are perceived as the most common form of dissemination of experiences and self-understanding. Making stories is thus a way to create meaning. Moreover, stories express a kind of knowledge, describing experiences where activities and events contribute to achieving goals, as well as meaningful purposes (Polkinghorne, 1995, pp. 8-9). Moreover, Bruner (1990) separates narrative knowledge from paradigmatic knowledge, describing the former as a legitimate kind of reasoning knowledge. Narrative reasoning is aligned with a temporal context, complex and followed by emotions, which may explain why a person acts in a certain way, thus making his/her actions understandable.

In professional work, narrative knowledge is developed through ongoing processes of categorisations, assessments and meaning making. When analysing professional stories, it is fruitful to distinguish between a chronological/linear understanding of time and an

experimental/narrative understanding in which a plot is crucial to grasp how events and actions are combined, selected and incorporated in various positions (Mishler, 2006; Ricoeur, 1980, 1984). Understanding of time is vital in theoretical perspectives of human development; thus, it is a question of how the past is relevant to professional work and how previous events predict behaviour and care in the future. In other words, an experimental/narrative understanding may allow a new level of relational significance, paying less attention to the past as a determining factor of the individual life course. The latter dominates theories of developmental psychology, which has influenced social work with children and families in particular (Bjerre et al., 2021; Howe et al., 1999; Taylor, 2004). Representing an alternative approach, Polkinghorne (1995, pp. 7-8), emphasises how the segment of time can range from the creation of the world, to certain periods of development, to lifetime biographies and everyday activities. In each situation, the temporal boundaries are framed within a plot, organising the beginning and the end of certain events and actions. Through a frame of narrative reasoning it is thus possible to analyse the underlying ideas and tacit dimensions of knowledge in practice, which is the aim of this article.

Method and analytical perspectives

I drew the data from qualitative interviews with social workers, parents and children collaborating in child welfare departments in various Norwegian municipalities (Vindegg, 2011). I chose a multi-informant design to strengthen the reliability of the data – that is, I conducted the interviews with parents and children to deepen the understanding of the professional construction of knowledge in practice. My other aim was to explore to what extent and how the knowledge of children and parents was weighed in the social workers' evaluations and approaches. I selected the sample strategically, according to the number of inhabitants in the municipalities, the ages of the children involved and the level of intervention from the child welfare services. Primarily, I chose three municipalities of

different sizes: a large city of 500,000 inhabitants, a city of 50,000 inhabitants and a small municipality of 5,000 inhabitants. Subsequently, I added two more municipalities to the sample in order to have access to the predetermined number of informants. One of the children in each chosen family should be between the ages of eight and 14. Families receiving supported services, as well as cases where the children were taken into care, were included in the sample. Following ethical research standards, I required the responsible social workers to ask the parents if they were willing to participate in the study.

The sample comprised 16 experienced social workers, 15 parents and 10 children. I conducted the interviews to access as ‘thick’ descriptions as possible concerning events, understandings and experiences of the different informants (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30; Ryle, 1971, pp. 480-496). I prepared thematic guides, not only to fit the different groups of informants, but also to ensure that the same themes were handled and reflected on by the professionals and the users. For example, I asked both the social workers and the parents to describe an ordinary day of the children in this study’s sample. Accordingly, I asked the children to describe an ordinary day from the wakeup call until they went to bed. The overall idea was to allow the informants to talk unrestrictedly about their experiences of everyday life and reflections on the relationship between parents and their children, parents and social workers, and children and social workers and the definite support offered and received.

I recorded and transcribed each interview. First, I subjected the data to thematic analysis, according to the general steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). I applied analytical questions to the data, for instance, how mothers and fathers and children were referred to, how the relationships between parents and children were described and perceived, and how the relationships between social workers and parents and between social workers and children were formulated.

After reading the transcripts numerous times, it became clear that, whether I examined subjects, concepts, understandings or discourses (see Taylor & White, 2000), the professionals constructed meaning through narratives, thus influencing the professional-client relation (Bell & Hydén, 2017; Bruner, 1991; Hunter, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1995; see also Riessman & Quinney, 2005). In the second stage of the analysis, I was thus inspired by a combination of “narrative analysis” and “analysis of narratives”, as specified by Polkinghorne (1995, pp. 12–21). This means that more specific questions were applied to the stories told by the three groups of informants. In the narrative analysis, I focused on language and how the professionals understood descriptions of events and actions as part of complex and interwoven stories. Furthermore, I examined how the past, the present and the future were connected and consequently, how the informants made sense of and meaningful connections among the experiences that they recounted. Accordingly, I searched for silent and invisible references, as well as for explicit and reflected ones in the stories of the professionals, the children and the parents (Bruner, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1995).

The open-ended method of investigation and the inherently subjective nature of the analytical and interpretive processes imply that the results should not be regarded as characteristic of social work practice in general. Other perspectives and theoretical frameworks would probably emphasise different aspects of the data. Nevertheless, the multi-informant design and the opportunity to compare the opinions of the social workers with the children’s own accounts provide both the field of practice and the research community with valuable knowledge on how theory influence professional field work.

Concern versus coping

A predominant finding in this study is that the plots of the parents’ and the children’s past histories, as well as the current situation, provide sense and coherence to the professional work and understanding. A plot refers to the sequence of events in a story that affects other

events through the principle of cause and effect, though in a way other than the chronological/linear understanding, in which the past is perceived as highly influencing and even determining the present and the future of events and actions. The narratives in the material show predominant propensities and indicate contradictions and various possible positions of the children. The reported findings focus on the phenomena that emerge from the social workers' stories about the children, in combination with the children's own accounts. I have chosen two narratives as examples to illuminate these findings.

Bob's story

The first narrative concerns 14-year-old Bob, who lives in a foster home with his two younger siblings. The three children were brought into care three years before the interview. The social worker states that there are no concerns about the boy, but a more careful reading of her utterance reveals an expected ambiguity concerning Bob's relationship with his father (who died one year earlier) and his subsequent missing attachment to his foster parents. Her concern centres on Bob's reserved personality and the fact that he is regarded as a precocious yet preoccupied child, paying too much attention to his biological mother and his dead father.

(...) There are no concerns about him, except for the fact that he is not a boy who opens up, and the foster parents have been concerned because he has not been attached to them. He has been like dad's boy (...). And he and dad were the kind of people who strolled together at night and talked since he was a little child. They would go out for a walk in the middle of the night. It is like – I think the father had treated him as a friend since he was quite young. He has shown no grief – no.

However, he says that after his dad passed away, he is more in touch with his mother.

The social worker links the boy's past, present and future situations, indirectly expressing concern about the consequences of the boy's close connection to his father and the father's deviant behaviour. According to common-sense notions, a loss of one of the parents

should be followed by a period of distress. Although not directly expressed, a vulnerable period of grief might open up and offer the foster parents the opportunity to become closer to the boy, his thoughts and feelings. As long as the boy prefers to keep his feelings to himself, the social worker, as well as the foster parents, may continue being implicitly concerned about his current situation and development. Bob has adjusted himself to the living conditions in the foster home, but this is insufficient to convince the care system of his well-being. He is expected to share more of his thoughts and feelings to show completely that he belongs to his new home.

My interview with Bob provides more details in terms of enhancing the professional interpretation of his position. He starts to talk about his relationship with his mother, emphasising what kinds of questions are shared.

B: Mom has also helped me a lot. M: With what? B: She has told me things that I am wondering about. M: Yes, exactly, so you are wondering a bit. B: Yes, obviously I am wondering about something; I feel that she gives me honest answers. M: You are wondering about her story and things like that. B: Yes, a bit. She is a Christian, so what God and such things mean to her. M: It is great that you can talk with her about such things. B: We sit talking; when I am at her home, we talk continuously for three hours. We have a lot to talk about, enough to go on about. M: So, you get along well. B: We do!

Bob's situation may be different from the life of an average 14-year-old Norwegian boy, but he turns out to be a competent boy, reflecting even on existential matters. His mother is an important person to him although he is aware that he is not going to live with her permanently. Nevertheless, he would like to spend more time with her. Perceived from his perspective, he seems to be a boy who is facing his complex situation. The preceding excerpt indicates that he positions himself between his biological mother and his foster parents. He is

unwilling to give up his mother, which is exactly what seems to bother both the foster mother and the social worker. He shares very few thoughts with his foster parents, as his thoughts are reserved for his mother.

In one sense, Bob tells a different story from that of the social worker. After emphasising that he would like to stay more frequently and longer with his mother than the visiting arrangement allowed him by the child welfare service, he tells me about the past.

M: There must have been a reason for bringing you and your siblings into care? B:

You are right; something just does not add up, and it could have been parental failure, in which they quite simply didn't succeed in taking care of us. M: Do you remember

anything from daily life at that time, how it was to stay at home? B: I feel that I felt well. I did not feel that Mom and Dad took drugs or something. M: And everyday life,

how was it? B: It was quite OK. I had friends in school (...), but sometimes, I did not show up in school because Dad overslept. That's what I mean by parental failure. Dad stayed up very long during the night (...). It was very hard when Dad died. It is the

heaviest blow in my life. I suppose he used drugs and drank a lot, and then his liver failed. M: So, nobody has tried to explain it in another way. B: No, no one did.

Moreover, I understood it by myself; I was old enough to understand (...). You know, he was my best friend, so to speak; we felt comfortable together (...). I could talk with him, and he understood me (...). It is a bit strange because the child welfare system says that there was a lot of noise and so at home, and I am not able to remember anything (...). I may have forgotten some incidents, but let's say [that if there] was violence at home, it is something that you don't easily forget (...) because it is something that sticks.

Following a narrative discourse, the boy assimilates input, in terms of his own memory, into an acquired, organised internal representation of narrative grammar

(Polkinghorne, 1988, p.109). He demonstrates his ability to construct a story, using the common narrative pattern to make sense of his own position. His father may be perceived as the hero from Bob's perspective, highlighting circumstances of well-being and rendering other events impossible. Both the social worker and the foster parents do not grasp the boy's causally well-formed story, as they are more concerned with his possible difficulties than his command and open reflections. They thus miss the opportunity to identify with his experiences and thereby be able to adjust their practice. Bob seems to be perceived as a vulnerable boy because of early neglect. The professional concern is reinforced due to the boy's restraint. My interpretation is not intended to claim that Bob's reflections are more trustworthy than the social worker's. Nevertheless, due to professional values and principles, a social worker is expected to pay careful attention to a child's voice and consider how he understands his relationships with his parents. My understanding is that the social worker refers to general knowledge on how children may be affected by their parents' deviant behaviour and health condition. Underpinning is an apparent preference to construct a child as an avoidable consequence of the parenting style he/she is facing and a preprogrammed development. This understanding is in accordance with traditional psychological developmental theory and a chronological/ linear understanding (Burman, 2017; Taylor, 2004). Moreover, as Bjerre et al. (2021) emphasise, a narrow psychological framework may perceive children as detached from their social and political surroundings, thus viewing them as victims of their own development.

John's story

The second case emphasises the interpretation of concern and risk more precisely. John, a 10-year-old boy who lives with his mother and his younger sister, is considered at risk. In the interview, his mother discloses that in the past, she had problems in her relationship with the boy's father and that she escaped – from a situation of threat and

violence – to the village, where she had settled with her two children. What really upsets the mother is a notification from the boy's physician to the child welfare services because she forgot to bring her son to the clinic for a recommended blood test. The mother has the feeling of being run over because the social workers do not recognise her initiative and struggle to change her own and her children's living conditions. Her narrative is confirmed in my interview with the social worker, as illustrated in the latter's presentation about John:

John seems like a very prudent guy, and his sister is rather demanding, I think (...).

The last weekend parents of the two children, they mentioned that the children should stay with two different weekend parents because John assumed full responsibility for his sister (...). The report from the school was initially excellent; he is doing well in school. [His] homework is not first rate, but he is clever and conscientious (...). The school report is not particularly worrying, but after all, I don't think too much emphasis should be put on it (...).

The social worker seems to maintain her predefined understanding of a boy at risk despite satisfactory references from the school. Moreover, the boy's involvement in his sister's welfare is perceived as worrisome for his own development, rather than an appreciated social competence. When the professional gaze is characterised by concern and risk rather than possibilities and qualifications, the boy's competence and abilities are disregarded. No attention is paid to his inherent potential ability to reflect on his own circumstances and adjust to his current position as an active agent despite previous turbulent experiences.

My interview with John reveals interesting reflections on how professionals in practice perceive children and their ability to adjust to their life situations. After his mother tells me that John is a prudent boy who does not talk too much, I meet an enthusiastic boy who has just arrived from a summer camp abroad in the company of three friends from

school. He tells me cheerfully about the trip, the activities and his relationships with the other children. The boy's narrative turns out to be quite different from what I have been expecting.

J: Great fun! M: Did you travel together with somebody? J: I was together with Ted, Michael and Oliver. M: Who was the organiser? J: Ted and Oliver are in the same camp club, and in school, I heard them talking about it, and I wanted to go, and then I asked if I could go with them – and they answered that I could call Ted's father (...).

Quite unexpectedly, I meet an excited boy full of adventure. He also tells me a long history of what he did in school, what he had learned, as well as his classmates. I would like to know how an ordinary day is organised from John's perspective, and he tells me:

J: Mom wakes up like – just before we are leaving, but it is OK (...). When she goes to bed in the evening, she sleeps until I am leaving or am about to leave, and she also takes a nap during the day when I arrive home from school. M: Oh, yes. J: But it doesn't matter (...).

My interpretation is that John knows very well that his everyday life differs from those of his classmates, and he is eager to emphasise that the way his mother organises their daily lives is quite all right. The social worker herself has not met John. To form her opinions, she relies on information from a colleague in another municipality, as well as a current colleague and a notification of concern from the family's general practitioner. Similar to the former case, the social worker's preoccupation with concern and protection excludes how John positions himself and is able to navigate in a situation of tension between the actors regarding care and concern.

John's mother previously told me that John was afraid of the child welfare system, and I was curious why he had drawn that conclusion. Therefore, when interviewing John, I ask him directly about the issue.

M: What are you afraid of? J: That they will take me away from home. M: Oh, yes, do you have a reason to think this will happen? J: They have tried earlier. M: Have they...? Could you tell me about it? J: No, you must ask Mom about it... because I can't remember. I was very young when it happened (...). I have only talked with NN from the child welfare office (...). M: Could you ask her about her opinion? J: No. M: You did not dare. J: No, I didn't bother, either; she was the one who was asking questions (...). M: Did Mom tell you about the episode where the child welfare office tried to take you [away] from home? J: Naa, I can remember it.... M: You can remember it – ye – that they arrived. J: Yes. M: But what had happened at that time? J: No, Mom must explain it to you (...).

John brings his previous experiences into his present reflections, constructing a narrative combining the past, the present and the future, though he defines his own limits concerning what he is willing to share. Issues of conflicts are handed over to his mother. His reservation in answering my questions indicates his awareness of how vulnerable their previous lives were to the child welfare system. From his narrative, the responsible social worker had no focus on forming a working alliance with the boy to unburden him of his previous experiences. John regards the child welfare system and the social worker more as alien than trustworthy, trying to invade his thoughts and perceptions. John's story illuminates how theoretical perceptions influence the professional-client relationship, calling for more awareness of which theories characterise the field of practice and how they do so.

Acknowledging children's knowledge

In this study, I aim to analyse the kind of knowledge that the social workers in child welfare practice employ in their daily work with parents and children. I focus on how the social workers perceive the children they are dealing with. The findings show that

professional meaning is constructed through narratives, focusing on sequences and consequences of children’s life stories in the past, present and future. The underlying theoretical perspectives are implicit but made visible in the process of analysing the interviews with both social workers and children. The social workers’ strategies and actions are not confirmed by referring to research or prescribed procedures and standards. Rather, the social workers combine sequences and consequences with significant connections when telling about and reflecting on the parents’ backgrounds and the children’s histories of development. According to my interpretation, their narrative reasoning is informed by theories of child development and parent–children relationships, risking the disregarding of the children’s own experiences and competencies. This finding is in accordance with Taylor’s (2004) and Howe et al. (1999).

As indicated in the Concern versus Coping section, in the two narrative examples, the boys present themselves as coping and active participants though both realise that some former experiences influence their present situations. My interpretation is that the social workers’ orientations seem to be blended with deterministic perspectives, positioning the boys as wards to be worried about, thus overlooking their coping strategies.

The boys in focus are perceived as potential victims of abuse and neglect, contributing to narrative constructions deviating from prevailing norms of a normal childhood. Thus, the social workers seem to be preoccupied with a discourse of protection and concern, combining information about the past with generalised knowledge and normative opinions on how parents should organise their daily lives and care for their children. (Taylor & White, 2000; 2006). The empirical examples illuminate how certain theoretical orientations may narrow rather than widen the professional gaze and thus, miss the children’s own perceptions of their lives (Ferguson, 2017; Hennem, 2012). Paradoxically, when enveloped in a pathological

discourse, the social workers risk paying insufficient attention to the conditions that the children might find difficult.

The two boys in focus are cautious and may be regarded as self-regulated, though in a different way than the professional social workers appreciate. The boys are assessed in relation to their needs, which are defined professionally; thus, the focus remains on the parents' inadequate capacity to meet those needs – a position that Taylor (2004) warns against. Due to the social workers' professional concern and thus, lack of alternative information, the boys' own positioning is devaluated.

A complementary approach characterised by an inquisitive and open attitude to the children's different experiences would provide access to concealed abilities and possibilities and would thus allow treating children as competent participants rather than merely victims of difficult circumstances (Prout & James, 1997; Taylor, 2004; Woodhead, 1997).

The two narrative examples reveal that a deterministic view – paying too much attention to the past and assessing children and even adolescents as merely victims of their own stories – disregards their ability to adjust to the living conditions in which they are embedded, as also reported by Hennem (2012). The concern about the boys fits in with implicit apprehensions about neglected children, supported by the underlying developmental theory, emphasising different stages and prescribed categories of interpretation (Taylor, 2004). On the contrary, focusing on the children's own narrative construction of meaning may deepen the professional knowledge and consequently contribute to more supportive and sensitive practices.

This study indicates that ongoing reflections and discussions on the meaning of child protection are essential. Following a chronological/linear understanding of time, children are assessed and understood in relation to their needs, and both biological and foster parents are evaluated in terms of their capacity to meet those needs. Consequently, professionals may fail

to address children’s capacity to adjust to their environments and the current conditions that they experience. Children under care, as well as those at home with turbulent memories and anomalous living conditions, know their histories. If children are encouraged to express their attachment to and love for their parents, despite the latter’s inadequacy in providing parental care, they will more likely construct narratives of experienced sequences of their everyday life, consequently sharing what they find complicated and challenging in their relationships, as emphasised by Warming et al. (2017). Furthermore, Bob’s case indicates that a position between two sets of parents (biological and foster) seems to be unfamiliar and undesirable to the social worker, even though she tries to understand the boy’s position. Although the social worker looks after the child’s best interest, the latter’s own attempts to cope might be (mis)interpreted as forming an evasive or ambivalent attachment pattern. In the discourse on protection and concern, the bond and the relationship with a mother or a father may threaten the narrative of a ‘new happy (foster) family’ and the expectations of a child who is released from a previous attachment. Engaging children and families based on a broader theoretical perspective will allow for alternative constructions of the past, emphasising children’s own experiences as valuable.

Perceiving children as competent actors with an ability to engage in more and different intimate relationships allows other perspectives and interpretations to emerge. Instead of talking about one relationship or the relationship between adult and child, the relationship may be understood as consisting of two relations – the child’s relationship with the caregiver and vice versa (Levin, 2004, pp. 86-91). An interactional perspective, focusing on narratives of the present rather than the past, may broaden the professional views and opportunities for action. Instead of worrying about a child because of his/her circumstances or divergence from the norm, the individual’s ability to adjust to a situation and position oneself as a self-contained person will be in focus. Nevertheless, an alternative professional

position should be regarded as neither a way of ignoring the child nor a stance that places too much responsibility on the vulnerable child. If anything, it is a position that takes everyone seriously, keenly interested in the narratives of perceptions and the unique experiences of each person.

Conclusion: Theory in practice

Drawing on analysis of data from qualitative interviews with social workers and children at risk, my aim was to explore how theory inform professional practice and how children's voices are considered in the meaning-making. My analysis indicates that social workers' understanding is created by narrative reasoning. That is, the plots of the parents' and the children's past histories, as well as the current situation, provide sense and coherence to the social worker's interpretations. Underlying theoretical perceptions were revealed during the analysis, of which developmental theory, pathological perspectives and child-parent relationships were particularly prominent. The narrative reasoning of the social workers, brings forward perceptions of concern and deficiency, concealing current coping strategies of the children. An underlying chronological or linear understanding of time tends to amplify a deterministic view of children and their opportunities.

Consequently, although stories express a kind of knowledge, describing experiences where activities and events contribute to achieving goals, as well as meaningful purposes, the process of narrative reasoning should include reflections on how concepts and their underlying premises inform practice and the professional storytelling. Furthermore, to be applicable in daily practice, theoretical concepts and propositions should be translated and customized to the context of social work as well as to the current context, emphasising that tacit concepts and perspectives should be articulated and reflected upon. As is highlighted by Howe (2008[1987]) every effort to reduce theory's significance will lead to poor practice. Narrative reasoning should thus not be perceived as a process of bringing forth that practice

work intuitively and as such, the results draw attention to the relation between paradigmatic knowledge (i.e., theoretical knowledge) and narrative reflective knowledge (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995).

This study illuminates the complex process of translating theory into practice, revealing the need for more articulation and contextualisation of theory in practice. The interconnection and tensions between professional knowledge and user involvement in practice is accentuated. Children have the rights to both protection and participation. How these rights are weighed and understood depends on the social workers' theoretical orientation, as well as former experiences and general contextual discourses on the well-being of children. As conducted in this study, narrative analysis is crucial in order to grasp how underlying theoretical perspectives influence daily professional practices. Further studies on how knowledge is constructed and combined in practice are needed to develop the social work profession and to ensure the best services to children and families.

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About the authors

Jorunn Vindegg is an Associate Professor at OsloMet - Oslo Metropolitan University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy. Her research interests include professional learning in education and work, knowledge for practice - the knowledge foundation for social work and child welfare as well as practice-based research and research-based practice within social work and child welfare.