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Anti-Oppression and Child Welfare: Laying the Foundations for Change

By Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable

An Excerpt from the discussion paper:

Anti-Oppression and Child Welfare

The child welfare system continues to be implicated in the oppression experienced by marginalized groups in society. Marginalized groups include those who are First Nations, Aboriginal, not white, single mothers, people living below the poverty line, people with disabilities, immigrants, people for whom English is a second language, people who do not identify as heterosexual, etc. Their experience is marginal in that it does not reflect the dominant or mainstream experience which is centred within the child welfare system and the larger social context.

Historically, we have the example of the Sixties Scoop which saw First Nations and Aboriginal children stolen from their families and cultures, with devastating impact, the extent of which most of us can never fully appreciate. Today, one of the most critical impacts and indicators of the oppressiveness of the child welfare system is the over-representation of marginalized groups within the system. For example, Aboriginal youth aged 0-19 represented less than 3 percent of the total child population in Ontario (Census 2006), but 14.4 percent of the numbers of children in care (OACAS, 2008). In an urban centre of Ontario, where the Black population totals 8 percent, Black youth represent 65 percent of the youth in group care.

Although the child welfare system is made up of individuals who want to make a positive impact, some theorists argue that the nature of child welfare practice is in itself oppressive. Through the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA), child welfare workers are entrusted by the state with the legal authority and mandate to protect children from maltreatment and abuse by their caregivers. With that authority, child welfare workers have the ability to apply sanctions on service users if they are not compliant with direction and orders. Further, child welfare agencies have the support of other state agencies such as the police and the court, all of which can be used to add further reinforcement to these sanctions.

In exercising their authority, child welfare workers, if not critically examining their own lens, can create a power-over relationship between themselves and the service user. The outcome, however unintended, can often be an oppressive experience.

Dumbrill (2003) observes that the practice of child welfare predominantly adopts a power over approach to practice, rather than a power with approach. The power over approach allows agencies and workers to use their social positions to control the power dynamics of relationships. Conversely, the power with approach relinquishes a certain amount of power and privilege so that more collaborative, open and empowering relationships can be constructed.

When the power-over approach to practice is exercised by an agency and its workers, it often forces the caregiver(s) to play the game with the child welfare system and its counterparts. In such a scenario, playing the game can include how the caregiver(s) provide workers with information and answers that they feel will help protect their children and themselves from the child welfare system, even if that involves lying or deception (Dumbrill, 2003). Turnell (1997) goes so far as to suggest that child welfares statutory capacity to initiate investigations, remove children, etc., actually precludes any ability to have a power-neutral relationship between an agency and the parent.

The power-over dynamic is further solidified by the ability of the child welfare system to draw upon the extensive network of resources at its disposal. A child welfare agency will have substantially greater resources or access to resources than will the children and families it is involved with. Additionally, workers have the ability to control what information can be made available to a child or caregiver(s). This often prevents children and families from challenging the child welfare agency or the legal system, while conversely reinforcing the power being exercised by the workers and the agency (Dumbrill, 2003).

Turnell (1997) observes that at the roots of child welfare is a history of paternalism, where the professional assesses the nature of the problem, the risk and harm to the child. The professional then formulates the solution required to resolve the problem. Through this process, and using the granted authority, the worker is seen as the expert. This approach to practice is often seen in the context of a service users access to information and when workers use their social position to take on the role of the expert as it relates to the life of a service user.

The System

The child welfare system is often criticized for using dominant or mainstream values which further institutionalize the othering of the marginalized groups. Some critics wonder if the system is even capable of doing what most assume it is doing: keeping children safe. Certainly, the literature would suggest that the system is not designed to keep children safe from the social and structural problems which pose a profoundly more universal risk to their health, well-being and, indeed, survival than that posed by those parents who are truly unable to safely parent their children. Yet, child welfare continues to intervene as experts only after there has been a perceived parental failure.

In the role of expert, the child welfare system and its representatives employ the values of the dominant group to evaluate and make judgments. Service users who do not share the same set of cultural values are defined as different and those differences are perceived as inferior within child welfare. The over-representation of marginalized people in the system is a direct result of the values placed on difference.

As a part of the process of defining service users, the system has relied upon binary language such as good/bad, fit/unfit, safe/dangerous, and normal/abnormal. Those defined as abnormal are a threat to the dominant social order. Karen Swift (1995) argues that the attempt of child welfare to help children has its origins in an effort to reduce threats to the existing social order. Dumbrell (2003) supports Swift in suggesting that the over-representation of marginalized children and families in child welfare is further proof of how difference is defined as inferior within child welfare.

The structure of child welfare practice also serves to reinforce oppression. Child welfare agencies, like other human service organizations, work and operate within a bureaucratic framework. Workers are subjected to the formal rules set by management or the government. Fleming et al (2003) call this corporate [agency] influence on workers a form of cultural engineering whereby organizations ultimately control workers, regardless of their personal values. Weinberg (2006) argues that those workers, for example, who would like to address systemic oppression and marginalization, are caught between an ethic that informs social work as a vehicle of social justice, and a bureaucratic regime in which workers are responsible for social regulation and the discipline of others.

Expanding upon Weinberg's idea, a similar argument could be made about the impact of the larger social service system on any attempts by individual workers or particular systems to address oppression or make change. The constraints of conformity prevent workers or individual systems from challenging the status quo which, in turn, reinforces oppression. The constraints usually manifest in the form of sanctions or discipline for disrupting the social order. Yet, when we consider the impact that each system has upon the other, it is clear that challenging the status quo will be necessary to change the outcomes of oppression.

It is difficult to talk about the need for an anti-oppression perspective in child welfare without addressing the same need in other systems.

Individually, systems such as child welfare, criminal justice and education, struggle with oppression. As a result of the relationship between these systems, they each impact the outcomes of the others. For example, the child welfare system receives a significant portion of its referrals from the education system. In both systems, racialized children are negatively perceived and thus negatively impacted. The bureaucratic culture in social services, which renders criticism and challenge between services unwelcomed and unsolicited, contributes to these oppressive outcomes. The result is that each system remains unchallenged about its oppressiveness and marginalized groups continue to experience oppression. The structural and institutional issues currently found in child welfare need to be addressed collectively and collaboratively in order for substantial change to occur.

Why Now?

There is no shortage of research that demonstrates how child welfare practice often contributes to oppressive outcomes. Through the adoption of an anti-oppression framework, the system can begin to recognize and address the negative impacts on marginalized groups. The legislative and policy framework created through the Child Welfare Transformation initiative provides an ideal context within which to integrate an anti-oppression framework. Such a framework will also compliment and enhance other provincial initiatives such as the continuing efforts to develop a Collaborative Model for Child Welfare Practice and the collective commitment to the promotion of evidence informed and strengths based practice.

The ultimate measure of Child Welfare

Transformation will be its ability to support a new kind of engagement with families and, through this, better outcomes for children and youth. We would suggest that better outcomes cannot and will not be achieved without the introduction of a new kind of practice: one whose purpose is to work in partnership with those who are marginalized and oppressed and one that recognizes and seeks to address the structural roots of that oppression. Without such a systemic shift, marginalized communities will continue to respond with discontent and distrust of the child welfare system and the child welfare system, in turn, will continue to contribute to the oppression of marginalized groups.

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