

‘Dispositifs’ of parenting in child welfare work: a cross-cultural study of home-based interventions in child protective services in Norway and France.

Aurélie Picot

Department of Social Studies, Oslo and Akershus University College, Oslo, Norway

Postboks 4 St Olavs plass, 0130 Oslo, Norway.

Phone: 47 67 23 80 29

Email: aurelie.picot@hioa.no

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Abstract

Although a few cross-national comparative studies have shed light on variation in parenting support policies, none specifically concentrates on perceptions of parenting within child protective services. This article examines Norwegian and French child welfare workers' accounts of parenting in home-based interventions. The aims of the article are twofold: i) to compare child welfare workers' accounts of home-based interventions and ii) to learn about the underlying basis of cross-national differences in these accounts. The central issues explored in the article involve the similarities and cross-national differences in social workers' perceptions of parenting in home-based interventions. Drawing on 37 interviews with child welfare workers, the article sheds light on two distinct 'dispositifs' of parenting: the Norwegian emphasises changing the parent, whilst the French stresses giving support for parenting. The findings thus reflect two distinct ways of conceptualising and talking about child rearing and the parent-child relationship.

Key words: parenting cultures, child protection, parenting support, 'dispositif', comparative child welfare.

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, the social science literature has paid a great deal of attention to changes in ‘parenting cultures’ (Hays 1996; Ramaekers and Suissa 2011; Gillies 2012; Lee et al. 2014). The scholarship that has come to be known as ‘parenting culture studies’ builds on the work conducted by Hays (1996) and Furedi (2008). Hays’ study of American mothers (1996) identifies three main aspects of what she terms ‘intensive mothering’: i) the assumption that the child needs one primary caretaker; ii) the reliance on intensive methods of child rearing and iii) the perception of children as ‘sacred’. Furedi (2008) uses the notion of parental determinism to designate a ‘form of deterministic thinking that construes the everyday activities of parents as directly and causally associated with “failing” or harming children, and so the wider society’. (Lee 2014, 3; Furedi 2008).

More recently, Ramaekers and Suissa (2011) have shown how current languages of parenting – drawing on accounts of parenting provided by developmental psychology, behavioural psychology and neuropsychology – tend to focus on the parent-child dyad whilst ignoring how broader structural conditions affect parenting (see also e.g. Gillies [2012]; Lee et al. [2014]). Moreover, these predominant accounts of parenting convey a technical and instrumental approach to parenting, whilst neglecting the ontological dimension (see also Furedi [2008]; Lee [2014]; Macvarish [2014]).

The concept of parenting culture, here understood as the cognitive frames and taken-for-granted assumptions about how parents should behave in relation to their children, is critical to the field of child welfare. The main reason is that child welfare agencies intervene when parents do not conform to societal standards of parenting and strive to help parents raise their children in ways that conform. Whilst families from the lower classes are overrepresented amongst the clients of child protective services, child welfare workers tend to grant little attention to the influence of poverty, class and social inequalities on parenting (McConnell and Llewellyn 2005; Kojan, 2013). Furthermore, they are often not aware of the ways in which their conceptions and practices carry the imprint of middle-class normativity (Kojan, 2013). Consequently, raising social workers’ awareness of parenting cultures is valuable.

Although a few cross-national comparative studies have concentrated on parenting support policies (Joint-Lambert Milova and Sohre 2011; Boddy 2012; Daly 2013), these studies did not focus specifically on perceptions of parenting within child protective services. Thus cross-national variation in the perceptions of parenting in this specific area remains under-

researched. By comparing Norwegian and French child welfare workers' accounts of parenting in home-based interventions, this article aims at filling in this gap in the literature. The article contributes to enhancing cultural sensitivity and raising awareness of cultural assumptions about parenting, thus broadening possibilities for critical reflection and change in practice. As child welfare workers' perceptions of parenting are likely to influence their clients' life experiences, this examination of different understandings also has important implications for users (Kojan 2013).

The article asks how Norwegian and French social workers perceive parenting in home-based interventions. To answer these questions, the article applies a cross-cultural comparative approach. Garland (2006) distinguishes between two overlapping usages of culture in the sociology of punishment. The first usage (*'the cultural'*) considers culture as an analytical dimension for analysing social relations. In this usage, culture constitutes an independent variable. The second usage (*'a culture'*) understands culture as a collective entity; the analytical focus is on how different cultures produce different patterns in a particular area of practice. Concentrating on how different parenting cultures shape social workers' perceptions of parenting, this article understands 'culture' accordingly to this second usage.

The article uses 37 interviews with Norwegian and French child welfare workers and presents these data as accounts. It contrasts two distinct 'dispositifs of parenting': 'change' (Norway) and 'support for parenting' (France). The phrase 'dispositif of parenting' is used for designating a 'regulatory ensemble' comprising 'norms, knowledge, power relations and practices' (Garland 2014, 378) through which parenting is constructed, structured and experienced.

Research on parenting support policies has identified cross-cultural differences in the meanings of parenting support. Daly (2013) finds two distinct meanings of parenting support. The first, 'support focused on parenting learning' (171), conceives of parenting as a set of practices and skills, and focuses on educating parents through behavioural training. The second, 'general parental support' (170), understands parenting in broader ways, supporting parents in the exercise of their duties and responsibilities. Daly (2013) has also suggested that a 'view of parenting support as learning' is less likely to prevail in continental European countries such as France, which has a more holistic view of family. Thus one can expect France to have a specific approach towards parenting in the area of child welfare as well. A comparison of France with a country such as Norway, with its more individual view of family

(Picot 2012), should yield valuable insights into cross-national differences in perceptions of parenting.

The next section describes the legal and institutional contexts, followed by a presentation of the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study and a brief description of the methodology. I then present the main findings. The final section concludes.

Legal and institutional contexts of child welfare workers' meaning making

The child protection systems of France and Norway are similar in that both are family service-oriented systems (Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes, 2011; Freymond and Cameron, 2006). The child protection laws of Norway and France organise various forms of preventive measures for children and their parents.

The 1992 Norwegian child welfare law (Lov 17. juli 1992 nr. 100 om barneverntjenester, §4-4), modified in 2013, provides for assistance measures for children. Typical assistance measures include advice and guidance, a contact person for the child, and a place in a kindergarten. Home-based interventions also use various forms of parenting programmes.

From the late 1990s, US evidence-based parenting programmes appeared suitable models for modernising home-based child welfare interventions in Norway, especially those targeting children and young people with behavioural problems. At a conference in September 1997, Norwegian and North American experts recommended testing in Norway the Incredible Years, Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) and Parent Management Training-Oregon (PMTO). In 1999 the Norwegian Child and Family Ministry expressed its commitment to evidence-based methods in the prevention and treatment of child behavioural problems (Christiansen 2005).

Christiansen (2005) has observed that evidence-based parenting programmes such as PMTO draw on educational principles broadly accepted in Norwegian society, such as praise, encouragement and positive discipline. The proximity of the Norwegian parenting culture and the Anglo-Saxon intensive parenting culture may help to explain the positive reception of US evidence-based parenting programmes in the Norwegian child protective services.

Starting in the 2000s, change has become a central concept in Norwegian child welfare (NOU 2000:10; NOU 2012:5). In 2000, the Befring committee, charged with assessing the functioning of child welfare services in Norway, pointed to the need for strengthening voluntary assistance measures, including parental guidance, and called for more research on

‘development oriented’ measures (NOU 2000: 12). In 2012 the Raundalen committee, which had been commissioned to assess the application of the biological principle in child protection, formalised the notion of ‘change measures’ in its report (NOU 2012:5). ‘Change measures’, according to this committee, aim at ‘shaping significant changes in the person’s functioning’ and ‘at improving parents’ caring competencies’ (60, my translation). Moreover, the committee drew a dividing line between compensatory and change measures, pointing out that compensatory measures did not result in any change. The statement that interventions in the home are intended ‘to contribute to a positive change in the child or in the family’ was therefore incorporated in section 4-4 of the Norwegian Child Welfare Act in 2014 (prop 606 L 2012-2013).

In France, traditional home-based interventions, as defined in French law (code of social action and families, § L222-2 – L222-4), include the intervention of social educators and support workers in the home. The most recent reform of the French child welfare legislation, implemented by Act 2007–293 of March 5, 2007, emphasised prevention and introduced new assistance measures aimed at supporting parents, such as day care and part-time care.

First applied in the late 1970s to institutional treatment of infants living outside their biological families, the category of support for parenthood later became central to French thinking about home-based interventions as well. The category of support for parenthood first appeared in the context of the government initiative *pouponnieres*ⁱ, launched in 1977 to improve the quality of the care provided to infants through raising professionals’ awareness of affective deprivation (Pioli 2006; Fablet 2008; Neyrand 2011). From 1987, seminars were organised for making the knowledge gains from *pouponnieres* available to professionals; and in 1994, an interdisciplinary group of experts led by Professor Dider Houzel – a child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst – was charged with examining parenthood and the needs of children. The group delivered its report in 1999 (Pioli 2006). Rather than focusing on parenting skills, the model of parenthood presented in the Houzel report reflects a comprehensive approach to parenting, taking into account not only parenting skills but also the juridical and subjective dimensions of parenthood (Houzel 2007; Neyrand 2011).

In 1999, the same year that the Houzel report was published, the ‘parental consultation, care and social support network’ (Réseaux d’écoute, d’appui et d’accompagnement des parents, REAPP), aimed at enhancing and organising the development of initiatives supporting and complementing parental functions, was createdⁱⁱ (Neyrand 2011). Since then, home-based interventions have been increasingly defined as ‘support for parenthood’.

According to Fablet (2008), clinical psychologists and psychiatrists have had a key role in the 1970s emergence of initiatives of support for parenting. In 2006, French psychoanalysts manifested their disagreement with the medicalisation of children's behaviour. They did so by organising resistance against the expert report on behavioural problems written by the National Institute of Health and Medical Research. In a petition entitled 'no zero for conduct', both psychoanalysts and social workers opposed the medicalisation of social problems and the early detection of behavioural trouble (Bellas-Cabane et al. 2006).

A brief examination of recent trends in child welfare policies revealed the different categories through which interventions in child welfare are defined in the two countries: whilst Norwegian child welfare policies – and recently the law – have stressed 'change', French policies emphasise 'support for parenthood'. In addition, the different theoretical bases of child welfare work are also likely to influence Norwegian and French social workers in their practice. A developmental psychological model of understanding, which conceptualises children as individuals with universal needs that adults should satisfy, pervades child welfare work in Norway (Backe-Hansen 2004; Andenæs 2005; Sagatun 2011; Kojan 2013). In contrast, French child welfare workers draw on a combination of models from analytical psychology and 'common sense' categories (Giuliani 2009).

Conceptual and theoretical framework: 'Parenting Dispositif'

Comparing the 'dispositifs' of parenting in the Norwegian and French child protective services requires a brief outline of the main contours of the concept of 'dispositif' and its relevance for the study of parenting. Foucault has used 'dispositif' to designate an assemblage of heterogeneous elements, both discursive and non-discursive, and the interplay or network between them (Foucault 1976; Foucault 2004a, 2004b; Peeters and Charlier 1999; Raffnsøe and Gudmand-Høyer 2005; Born and Jensen 2010; Neyrand 2011). The concept of 'dispositif of parenting' allows me to analyse the current process of intensification, scientisation and instrumentalisation of parenting, as described by Ramaekers and Suissa (2011), in the specific context of home-based interventions in child welfare.

Foucauldian dispositifs are located at a 'transversal and fundamental level' that 'links' experiences, institutions and forms of knowledge (Raffnsøe and Gudmand-Høyer 2005, 165). Furthermore, the concept of 'dispositif' allows the identification of patterns that favour particular arguments and actions, i.e. that make them easier to articulate but do not determine

them (Born and Jensen 2010). Neyrand (2011) applies Foucault's concept of *dispositif* to the study of parenthood (*parentalité*) in French society. He uses the phrase 'parenthood *dispositif*' to designate an assemblage of various practices, regulations and changes in professions and interventions that frame parenthood.

According to Foucault, a *dispositif* has a strategic function, i.e. it responds to a problem or an urgency (Jäger and Maier 2001; Raffnsøe and Gudmand-Høyer 2005). Neyrand (2011) argues that the strategic function of the *dispositif* of parenthood is to promote the parent-child relationship. He notes that the emergence in French society of the 'parenthood *dispositif*' in the 1980s may be understood as answers to two sets of challenges: i) an epistemic constraint, i.e. conceptualising the parent-child relationship, and ii) a political and managerial constraint, i.e. taking into account and organising childcare. According to him, the splitting of parenthood into several distinct components (i.e. marriage, socialisation and affiliation) has constituted a central condition for the emergence of the parenthood *dispositif*, which strives to articulate anew these three components.

Neyrand's concept of the *dispositif* of parenthood is helpful for understanding the relation between family change and the transformations in welfare interventions. It provides a broad context for the present study. However, the meaning of the French term '*parentalité*', translated here as 'parenthood', is much broader than parenting, i.e. it includes psychological, practical and symbolic aspects (Houzel 2007; Neyrand 2011).

Bussolini (2010) notes that the French term '*dispositif*' has been translated in various ways – as deployment, apparatus and social apparatus. He argues that '*dispositif*' covers a wider spectrum of meanings than 'apparatus' and has neither state nor bureaucratic connotations. Furthermore, the power involved in '*dispositif*' is broader and more diffuse. Therefore, to preserve the specific meaning of the term, he recommends translating it as 'dispositive'. However, because the use of 'dispositive' is not well established in English, I follow Garland (2014) and use the original French term '*dispositif*'.

Given that this article focuses specifically on supportive interventions, regulations and practices targeted at parents and aimed at helping them perform their duties, the phrase '*dispositif* of parenting' constitutes the most suitable concept for this analysis. I apply this concept to conceptualise the links between child welfare workers' experiences, perceptions, practices and knowledge and broader legal and institutional contexts of home-based interventions.

Data, Method and Analysis

This article draws on a corpus of transcripts of tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with child welfare workers. In total, 43 semi-structured interviews were conducted with child welfare workers (20 in Norway and 23 in France). The analyses are based on a subset of interviews in which the interviewees account for their intervention practices relative to home-based interventions. This subset consisted of 37 interviews (18 in Norway and 19 in France).

The project was cleared by the Data Protection Official for Research, Norwegian Social Science Data Services, and by the French Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés, which are responsible for assessing privacy-related and ethical dimensions of research projects in their respective countries. The interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2013 in two Norwegian municipalities and two French 'départements' – a political-territorial level between that of the municipality and the region. All interviewees received written information about the research project and were promised confidentiality. They have all given informed consent for participation in the study. Each interview typically lasted one hour and a half.

The researcher, a French national who graduated in France before settling in Norway for her PhD studies, conducted the interviews. She opened each interview with a broad open question inviting the interviewee to describe and reflect upon his or her experiences of child welfare work: 'I would like you to tell me about your experience as a social worker working with families and children. Could you please tell me how you protect children, and what challenges you meet in your work?' Then she asked the interviewees about their legally mandated duties, the different steps in an intervention, the situations that justify child protective services' intervention, the problems experienced by children and families, and the ways in which they chose amongst various types of intervention.

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and in French, respectively, and were transcribed in their original languages. The quoted excerpts were then translated into English. As translation may result in 'knowledge transformation' and thus may lead to loss of meaning (Pöso, 2014; Hearn et al. 2004), differences in semantics and languages constitute a key methodological limitation of the study. The researcher's greater pre-existing knowledge of the French national, organisational and local contexts is likely to influence the interactions between the researcher and the interviewees. The outsider position is not necessarily a

disadvantage; it can also represent a resource for gaining access to cultural meanings (Merton 1972; Wærdhal 2001).

Sixteen of the 18 Norwegian interviewees and 12 of the 19 French interviewees are women. All 37 had completed at least three years of vocational training at university colleges (Norway) or social service schools (France). In both countries, child welfare work involves members of two social work professions, one general and the other specialised: general social workers and child welfare pedagogues (social workers trained to work in all areas of child protection) for Norway, and general social workers and specialised educators (social workers trained to work not only with children and young people but also with adults facing various challenges) for France. Thirteen of the 18 Norwegian interviewees are child welfare pedagogues, and five are general social workers. Twelve of the 19 French interviewees are general social workers, and seven are specialised educators. Twelve of the 18 Norwegian, and 13 of the 19 French, have more than ten years of experience in social work with children and families. Whilst the interviewees' gender and educational and professional background may influence their perceptions, the analysis did not find any significant differences in the interviewees' perceptions of parenting related to these criteria. Instead, the differences between the two national groups of interviewees appeared much more important.

According to Jäger and Maier (2001), no recipe or explicit method exists for analysing a 'dispositif': rather, the central goal for the analysis of dispositifs is to reconstruct the knowledge underpinning the action, including both scientific and everyday knowledge. Jäger and Maier (2001) suggest that one way of reconstructing the knowledge underpinning individuals' actions is to ask people what they do and why, a suggestion that this article follows. Interview accounts give insight into the 'ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others and of their social world' (Orbuch 1997, 455). The analysis uses inductive coding (Charmaz 2006). First, the material was hand-coded, i.e. I closely examined fragments of data in order to codify and label them (Charmaz 2006). Second, I searched for common themes or patterns in the interviews. Third, to identify distinctive cultural categories, I systematically compared the codes between the two national groups of interviewees.

To classify the data, I applied three analytical dimensions derived inductively from my data: i) the intervention goals (why one intervenes), ii) the perceptions of parenting (the way one thinks about parenting) and iii) the modalities (how one intervenes). One can view these three dimensions as the main constituent parts of the current dispositif of parenting. The analyses of the Norwegian data were checked with Norwegian colleagues whose background is very

similar to that of the interviewees, as they are educated as social workers or child welfare pedagogues, and some have extensive experience of working at a child welfare agency.

The analyses reported in this article emphasise contrasts in the use of cultural categories between two national groups. However, when picturing differences amongst national cultures, one has to be mindful that national cultures also share many characteristics. Indeed, cross-national dissimilarities between European societies such as Norway and France are often more ‘a matter of degree and emphasis rather than mutually exclusive difference’ (Garland 2014, 430). Thus, difference may be more ‘a difference of mix rather than difference of type’ (Garland, 2014, 430). In this connection, the phrase ‘difference of mix’ refers to the fact that the specific blend of cultural qualities is what confers to each culture ‘some degree of specificity and distinctiveness’ (Garland, 2014, 430).

The following two sections, one for each country, present the main findings of the study. The findings presentation will proceed in three steps: I will first discuss the intervention goals, then the perceptions of parenting and finally the modalities.

The Norwegian Dispositif of Change

Changing parents

The category of change is central to the Norwegian interviewees’ conceptualisation of interventions goals. When describing their interventions goals, the Norwegian social workers put the main emphasis on changing parental behaviours and practices. They categorised the intervention measures in two main groups: ‘change and development measures’ and ‘compensatory measures’.

The following statement illustrates and summarises these social workers’ focus on changing parents: ‘One seeks change and development of the carer so that the child will have a better care situation’ (N12). According to the interviewees, compensatory measures such as kindergarten, economic assistance, a contact person for the child, or a weekend at another home compensate for parental shortcomings. In contrast, change and development measures aim at implementing a positive change in either the child, the parents or the interaction between them, most often by increasing parental knowledge and competence.

Whilst several interviewees criticised compensatory measures for not dealing with the central issues of parental shortcomings, overall the Norwegian social workers did not unanimously reject the use of such compensatory measures. Rather, many considered compensatory

measures suitable when used in combination with change and development measures, depending on the grounds for intervention. For example, one pointed out that whereas having a contact person was not a good measure for improving child-mother interactions if the mother lacked sensitivity, it could be a good measure for a lone mother with many children and a physical illness, because it gave her a chance to rest. Finally, a few interviewees argued that the shortage of municipal resources explained the decrease in the use of compensatory measures and the increase in the share of change and development measures, which are subsidised by the state.

Good parenting

The Norwegian social workers had a well-defined idea of the ‘good life’ and of how parents should behave. They took for granted the existence of universal standards of ‘good care’ and good parenting, viewing ‘good enough care’ and a ‘good childhood’ as central conditions for ‘normal’ development and for offering children the possibility of having ‘a good life’ as adults. One interviewee said that the social workers have ‘a picture of what a good childhood is, which includes leisure activities, that you can go to birthday parties, that you have the same clothes and shoes as all the others [...] it is all about being included, doing the same things that your classmates do’ (N15).

The Norwegian interviewees also emphasised the importance of putting the child’s needs before the adults’, and reported parents’ lack of competency in this domain. When discussing this issue, they resorted to a deterministic language characteristic of psychological developmental accounts. For example, one explained that ‘for the parents, it is all about seeing how I influence my child, what consequences my actions have on the child, and taking those details and setting them in relation to a bigger perspective. This is all about your child’s development’ (N4).

The normative expectations towards parents came to the fore when social workers described the shortcomings of immigrant parents who lack knowledge of what the Norwegian society expects from parents relative to enforcing curfews, helping children with homework or monitoring their leisure activities. Additionally, to exemplify bad parenting practices, several social workers referred to what they called ‘chaotic families’. For example, as a social worker reported, ‘Maybe there are three children, the mother and the father. The children manage themselves, the mother may be a bit anxious, a bit neurotic, the father may drink a bit, the children go to school [by themselves], prepare their lunch boxes on their own, come home when they want, there is no dinner’ (N7). This description of ‘chaotic families’ tells us much

about social workers' expectations in terms of structure, follow-up, and parents' mental health.

Parenthood as skills

The interviewees reported resorting to parental guidance and to structured parenting programmes, i.e. parenting programmes that focus on defined topics in a predetermined order. Making extensive use of developmental psychological jargon, they explained that they strove to teach parents how to 'see their child', 'interpret the signals' the child sends, 'praise the child', 'set time to stimulate their child', 'set limits' and interact with their child 'in positive ways', 'being sensitive', 'playing with the child' and 'doing nice things together'.

Norwegian interviewees mentioned various parenting programmes and models such as Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, Parent Management Training-Oregon, the International Child Development Programme, Functional Family Therapy, Multi-Systemic Therapy, Webster-Stratton's 'The Incredible Years', the Secure Base, and Marte Meo. Because only a few social workers within the municipal child welfare agencies are trained in these methods, the municipal child protective services ordered services from either the state child protective services or private actors. One agency at which the interviews took place had established a 'measure department', employing its own therapists.

Although the target and focus of these programmes vary, their goals are very similar, primarily entailing training parents in parenting skills – notably communication and interaction skills – and changing parents' behaviours to improve the child's situation. The Norwegian social workers tended to view parenting as a set of skills and competencies in which parents can be trained: 'they [some parents] do not know what good care is; therefore, when we teach them, they can exert it' (N15). Furthermore, they believed that expert advice would visibly affect the child's behaviour and development. For example, one said that 'it is clear that if the parents have bad caring competencies, they should receive guidance in relation to it and if it increases their competencies, one sees it in the child's development' (N17).

The French Dispositif of Support for Parenting

Supporting parenting

The French child welfare workers described intervention goals in terms of ‘support’, ‘accompaniment to parental functions’ and ‘shoring up’ (étayage). They emphasised the importance of highlighting parental competencies and reinforcing parents’ self-esteem and self-confidence. Moreover, they were concerned about raising parental reflection about what being a parent means and about their child-rearing methods and exercise of the parental role.

Whilst several interviewees pointed out that interventions should enable parents to perform their roles in better ways, rather than merely taking care of the child in the parents’ stead, the French social workers did not draw a strong line between change and compensation. Rather than ‘compensation’, the social workers used the term ‘shoring up’. ‘Shoring up’ may entail, for example, the intervention of a support worker in the home, referral of the child to a mental health clinic, or the enrolment of the child in leisure activities and holiday camps in collaboration with the parents.

Overall, the interviewees had modest goals relative to changing parents. One interviewee said that ‘[they] know very well that [they] will not be able to help all the kids’ (F18). She explained that radically changing the children’s lives when working with home-based interventions is impossible. The French social workers viewed compensating for parental shortcomings as positive as long as so doing allows the child to live at home without ‘danger’. Several interviewees mentioned that traditional intervention tools such as having an educator, a support worker or both in the home are not enough for supporting certain types of families, especially what they call ‘very deprived families’. Their answer to this challenge was ‘a stronger shoring up’. As one put it, ‘They should have people at home from the morning to the evening, to show them, to accompany them’ (F21).

No such thing as a good parent

The French social workers held non-judgment as an ideal: they made clear their tolerance towards a diversity of child-rearing practices and often adopted a relativist stance. Moreover, they were cautious about imposing their own norms on families. According to several interviewees, anyone – even they – could develop troubles and become a client of the child protective services. One social worker explained that since she became a mother, she was even more convinced that there was ‘no such thing as a good parent’. Several interviewees mentioned that they were cautious about imposing their own norms, which, according to one, are ‘not necessarily the best ones’. One argued that social workers should also ‘take into consideration the cultural dimension’. She added that ‘what can seem to us a bit disorganised, in relation to our models, works very well, and does not pose any problem within the

family.... One should be mindful of the fact that one should not disrupt everything [...] I think it is important not to come with some things, some norms, some prerequisites, and some very rigid things [...] Because it does not work' (F6).

Despite their overt relativism, all social workers mentioned different situations in which parents' child-rearing practices deviated from what they considered legitimate child-rearing practices. For example, they reported that some parents did not fulfil children's basic needs such as educational structure, health and dental care, and clean clothes. Moreover, they all agreed that the child needs a 'certain educational baseline' and that the parents should acknowledge the child as a person.

The French social workers viewed parents not as culpable but rather as victims of structural inequalities. In so doing, they apply a sociological vocabulary, using terms such as 'precariousness', 'capital', 'social misery', 'fourth world', 'reproduction of social distresses' and 'disqualification'. According to them, the social environment made it more difficult for the parents to be attentive to the child's needs. As one interviewee said, 'Most parents do not have the tools to raise their children in good conditions. They are drowning in their material, psychological, relational problems. They have very little cultural capital in terms of initial school capital, vocabulary, knowledge of school and general cultural capital. Often they do not have very good health capital' (F16). She reported that social work with groups allowed parents to share their child-rearing difficulties and solutions, to find their own ways of acting without harming the child – ways that are in line with their own class values. She believed that working-class families have their own ways of raising children, ways that are as valid as the ones that prevail amongst the middle classes.

No parenting manual

The French social workers' intervention tools for supporting parents consisted mainly of individual or family consultations, with occasional educational trips with families, and group work. They reported that they very often conducted the consultations at the families' homes, not only because doing so allowed greater proximity to, and empathy with, the families, but also because it allowed them to observe families in an everyday setting and work on practical issues. According to one interviewee, 'One does not work on educational principles with the parents; one really concentrates on the practical aspects' (F3). They reported that they observed parents' actions and reactions in situ, and showed parents in the very situation how to act, inviting them to emulate their example. They provided advice on topics such as setting

limits, organising meals, choosing TV programmes, and monitoring sleeping hours, schoolwork and hygiene.

However, many French social workers stressed that the support they provided parents was not reducible to the practical dimension. Rather, they had to go beyond such issues to understand the more fundamental reasons for the family's problems. This process is what an interviewee called 'the question of sense', which in her view constituted 'the primary question': 'it is not simply about recording [...] what is done, or not done, or badly done. It is finding out why it is done this way. I think we should search the *why*, not act on what one observes and modify what one observes, there is no point in that' (F6). This social worker, along with many others, rejected the existence of a pre-defined child-rearing model that could be taught to parents: 'We are just here to make solutions emerge... give a few keys, guide, but in no case do we have the ready-made solution [...] the manual of [...] (laughter)' (F6).

The French social workers tended to understand child-rearing problems as symptomatic of other difficulties, either in the individual's history or in the couple's relationship. For example, one interviewee explained that a child might manifest symptoms 'linked to other difficulties, but often in connection with the parents' own family history'. According to her, 'One does not learn to be a parent. We all come from a particular history, sometimes singular, and one has constructed one's representations of parent from the meetings one has had and from what one has lived in one's own family' (F22). The social workers spoke extensively of the parents' own family histories and 'chaotic childhood', and gave central importance to the family history in their understanding of current issues. Several French social workers used concepts from Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytic traditions, such as the subject, desire, and the knotⁱⁱⁱ.

Concluding Discussion

Beyond some basic similarities – all interviewees, both Norwegian and French, wish to improve the parent-child relationship – the language used by the interviewees in the two national groups reflects important differences. Whilst the Norwegian social workers viewed changing parental behaviour as a central intervention goal, the French social workers emphasised supporting the parents and the parent-child relationship. Furthermore, the Norwegian social workers tended to conceptualise parenting in terms of skills. In contrast, the French social workers viewed parenting not only as a set of practical skills but also as an

irreducible relationship. In addition, the child welfare workers in the two countries used distinctly different methods: the Norwegian social workers used advice and guidance inspired by structured parenting programmes to modify parents' behaviour, whereas their French counterparts reported predominantly using individual and family consultations.

Whilst the Norwegian child welfare workers' in this study tend to reduce parenting to function and skills, the French social workers' framing of parenting also takes into account broader aspects of parenting, including ontological issues and the social environments of parenting. These differences in social workers' accounts strikingly mirror the differences in the institutional contexts. The categories of change (Norway) and support for parenthood (France) pervade both professional talk and public policy. As previously mentioned, Norwegian child welfare policies have emphasised change and encouraged the use of standardised parenting programmes drawing on behaviour analysis and developmental psychology (Schjelderup, More, and Marthinsen 2005), whereas French policies have promoted initiatives supporting and complementing parental functions.

This article has shown that whilst the normativity of parenting pervades child protective services, it comes in different forms in the Norwegian professional culture, where developmental psychological languages prevail, and in the French professional culture, where the psychoanalytical orientation is in use. In the Norwegian child protective services normativity is broadly accepted and open. In contrast, in the French child protective services the social workers strive to avoid normativity but normativity becomes covertly expressed.

One should be cautious about taking the French social workers' claims of non-normativity at face value. Indeed, as Giuliani (2009) observed, in the French child protective services, 'the institutional constraint operates not so much through the imposition of a educational style, at the expense of other styles, but rather operates through a conception of parent roles as falling under self-technologies' (87, my translation). The emphasis on non-judging, non-blaming and avoiding prescribing formulas indeed constitutes a double discourse in which the non-prescriptive rhetoric serves to euphemise the inherently prescriptive dimension of parenting guidance (Furedi 2008; Garcia 2011).

In addition to identifying cross-national differences in social workers' perceptions of parenting, this article provides some understanding of the underlying basis of these differences. In a previous article, I underlined the role of sociological knowledge, as opposed to psychological knowledge, in explaining differences in the notion of family implicit in the

Norwegian and French child welfare laws (Picot 2012). However, when examining the developments of child welfare work in Norway and France, one should not underestimate the place of psychological knowledge, especially psychoanalysis. Indeed, given that French psychoanalysts have opposed behaviourist approaches, the stronger position of psychoanalysis in the field of child welfare work has conceivably contributed to the lack of acceptability of standardised parenting programmes amongst French social workers. Conversely, the strong position of developmental psychology and attachment theories in Norway helps to explain the broader acceptance of evidence-based programmes in the Norwegian child protective services.

This article contributes to the identification of differences in the use of standardised parenting programmes. Further research could achieve a fuller understanding of cross-cultural differences in the use of these programmes in child protective services through a deeper examination of how these programmes are used in the child protective services of other nations.

ⁱ The French term *pouponnière* refers to an institution in charge of caring round-the-clock for those children under age 3 living outside their biological families and who cannot stay in a foster home (Pioli 2006).

ⁱⁱ I use the translation of Réseaux d'écoute, d'appui et d'accompagnement des parents provided by Joint-Lambert Milova & Sohre (2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ A comprehensive analysis of these terms is beyond the scope of this paper.

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