

*Soc. Sci.* **2014**, 3, 441–459; doi:10.3390/socsci3030441

OPEN ACCESS

*social sciences*

ISSN 2076-0760

[www.mdpi.com/journal/socsci](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/socsci)

Article

## Developing Child-Centered Social Policies: When Professionalism Takes Over

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*Received: 1 July 2014; in revised form: 3 August 2014 / Accepted: 11 August 2014 /*

*Published: 19 August 2014*

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**Abstract:** No nation today can be understood as being fully child-centered, but many are pursuing social policies heavily favoring children. The emphasis on individual rights and the growth of scientific knowledge underpinning many of these policies have led to the improvement of the lives of a great many children. Paradoxically, these same knowledge bases informing social policies often produce representations and images of children and their parents that are detrimental for both of these groups. Using Norwegian child welfare policies and practices as examples, I will examine some of the possible pitfalls of child-centered praxis. The key question here is one asking whether the scientific frame central to child welfare professionalism has positioned children and parents as objects rather than subjects in their own lives and, in so doing, required them to live up to standards of life defined for them by experts. A central question will involve exploring the extent to which scientific knowledge has erased political and ethical considerations from the field when assessing social problems.

**Keywords:** child protection; knowledge base; child-centrism; professionalism

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### 1. Introduction

The term “child-centered society” is a positively loaded one in the European setting. It refers to societies that not only perceive children as target groups for social measures as citizens of the future, as in social investment states [1,2], but also as social actors in their own right, especially with the right to make their presence known, voice their opinions and judgments and be heard and listened to. In other words, child-centered societies value children’s rights, needs and voice *in situ* ([3], p. 15), giving

children a claim on the state to protect their interest and to provide them with what is usually named “a good or decent childhood” or “well-being” [4]. Clearly, no nation today qualifies as a fully child-centered society, but many are pursuing social policies highly favorable for children. The emphasis on individual rights and the growth of scientific knowledge underpinning many of these policies undoubtedly have led to the improvement of the lives of a great many children.

However, policies ‘putting-children-first’ seem paradoxically to give mixed results, even though policy makers operate with the very best intentions in mind towards children [5]. As Gordon has shown, in a country like the United States “where the putting-children-first principle has been particularly strong as a mark of its modernism, driving economy, individualism and relative disrespect of tradition and the elderly”, children are “treated worse than other countries of comparable wealth..., with its wretched international records on basic child-welfare indices, such as infant mortality rates, educational attainment, teenage pregnancy incidence and poverty among children” ([5], pp. 332–33). Another country to look at is Norway. In comparative child protection studies, Norwegian society appears extremely child-centered with its generous child welfare system and its prioritization of children’s rights when compared to other welfare states [6,7]. Further, Norway internationally scores highest when it comes to child welfare indices. However, in the age group 16–29 years, there has been a tripling of annual new disability cases in the period from 1977 to 2006 [8,9]. An analysis of diagnoses underlining the statistics shows that most of this upsurge is attributable to an increase in the proportion of people with mental disorders. This is in line with recent statistics showing rising levels of young people receiving health-related public benefits with mental disorders as medical grounds [10]. Further, Norwegian statistics show “a high rate of children in care and poor outcomes later in adolescence and adult life” ([5], p. 8), with a relatively high rate of mortality among youth having experiences of been placed in care [11,12]. These two examples raise a key question about why child-centered societies do not deliver as expected. What are the factors at work in child-centered nations accounting for problems of this sort?

In the following, I will examine some of the downsides of child-centered praxis by concentrating attention on Norway as representative of a particularly child-friendly society. In recent decades, the concept of governmentality introduced by Michel Foucault has been much employed in analyses of welfare states to provide insights into how political ideologies and disciplines interplay in the creation of some kinds of subjects [13,14]. The key question addressed here is one examining how the knowledge bases for child-centered policies have created positions for “experts”, such as psychiatrics and psychologists, while parents and children are made to fit into these experts’ representational and normalizing discourses. These discursive formations reflect ideas about the welfare and best interests of all children and reinforce notions of Eurocentric middle class ideals that, in turn, negatively affect the lives of children and parents who do not fit these ideals. The resulting processes objectifying children and their parents largely explain, I will argue, the statistics about problems that children and young adults in child-centered societies are experiencing.

In so doing, I will first contextualize the emergence of contemporary child centering and its sets of meanings. Secondly, I will describe some features in Norwegian society connected to the perception of Norway as a child-centered society and indicate, at the same time, some of the pitfalls that this kind of child centering entails. Child centering may be understood as an ideal resulting from politicized science, making children and their families responsible for structural and economical inequalities. In

concluding this examination, I will ask whether the scientific frame central to the professionalism of adults has positioned children and parents as objects rather than subjects in their own lives and, in so doing, required them to live up to impossible standards of life defined, however, for them as possible by the experts wielding an array of truth claims.

## 2. Child-Centered Societies

The scholarly literature gives a manifold and diverse picture of the emergence of child-centered societies. However, a Foucauldian history of the concept of child-centered societies would show that children as the focus of societies is not a new phenomenon, but that it today takes a special form and content characterized by its intensity and extent. Social policies directed towards children and youth have been part of the development of welfare states since the end of the seventeenth century until today [15–21]. Some laws and measures have been part of the state's family policies, but many specifically targeted children, such as school laws, child protection laws and public health measures. Some laws and measures were aimed to fight the consequences of poverty, such as malnutrition and poor health, but others were to control children and youth as potential offenders. Within child protection legislation, this double aim of help and control has been a guiding principle varying in intensity at different times. The main dilemma was, and still is, to protect children from any kind of harm while also ensuring that society is protected from the harm that children, mostly youth, could cause its members. It could be said, however, that children acquired another political relevance during the nineties, when the concept of child-centered society began to acquire its current meaning. According to Skivenes, a child-centric perspective includes three aspects: (1) children's legal rights and organizational procedures (allowing children to assume their rights); (2) adults' recognition of children as individuals with particular interests and needs in interactions with adults; and (3) the use of an individual child's viewpoint as a way of interpreting what the world means to children ([7], p. 171). Although focusing clearly on children, this definition is open to interpretations and discloses a subtly communicated issue, namely the mediation of the child. This focuses on the questions of how the child should be defined and represented, and by whom. This issue is exacerbated within child-centered societies by many diverse actors raising their voices in the name of the child and competing for positions.

Many factors contributed to the construction of the contemporary meaning of child-centered societies. Firstly, there was a range of new and rewritten child protection laws strengthening children's individual rights, at the international level with the United Nations' Convention on Children Rights in 1989 and on national levels with all manner of newer legislation. These represent today powerful tools in improving children's lives. Secondly, the last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a massive increase in scientific knowledge about children. Consequently, all academic disciplines currently possess their own specializations focused on children and childhood. They have produced an immense body of knowledge covering a wide variety of areas related to childhood. The vastness of this field makes it impossible to provide an adequate summary, but it is possible to identify some of the central themes in this body of knowledge. On the one hand, there are many studies considering children as universal beings, unaffected by time, place or other categories, and on the other hand, there are studies where children are perceived as situated in time and place—a relativistic perception of youngsters grounded in history and culture. Related to these studies, one also finds gender, age,

ethnicity and social class being used as analytical categories influencing perceptions of the category “child” and their activities [22–34]. Connected to politics, these different approaches result in different social policies and measures directed towards children. However, in present-day Europe, one of the central and prevailing representations in child welfare and child protection policies drawing from the literature promotes the universal individualized child combined with individualistic understandings of children’s lives. This is a view favored within medical and psychological studies [35–37]. As we shall see, the choices made by policy makers from an array of knowledge-based portrayals of child and childhood available to them have very real consequences for the children and parents whose lives are most likely exposed to governance by child protection policies and practitioners.

When exploring child-centered societies, it is necessary to mention briefly some of the reasons why children have taken on an iconic status in contemporary Western societies ([1], p. 437). The iconization of children is a key component of the complex of meanings defining child-centered societies. Demographically, the number of children has decreased in Western Europe for many decades. This decrease has tended to increase their value and worth [38–40]. Some researchers locate the reasons for child-centered policies in changes in family forms; especially in relation to the instability of today’s parental dyads, owing to divorce. In the first place, there is an assumption that children raised in unstable situations require more protection and more following. Moreover, children often assume roles as the most stable partners in relationships with their parents and, therefore, take on additional value [41,42]. Still, other researchers have attributed the reason for child-centeredness to a general state of fear pervading contemporary Western societies, triggering the need to exercise overt control of children symbolizing the future, and in so doing, control the future itself [43–47].<sup>1</sup> Another source of the great value attributed to children in Western societies can be found in the development of the welfare state. A move towards a social investment welfare state favors children as target groups [48]. For the state, it is profitable to invest in and expend resources on children who represent the human capital of the nation’s future. Advocates of these kinds of investment strategies frequently emphasize the importance of breaking intergenerational poverty in families, as well as promoting programs for the social inclusion of all members of society, especially those least privileged. Children are cornerstones in these policies, particularly those living in disadvantaged families [1,48–50].

Given these concerns, I will discuss how a well-intentioned child welfare system providing universal services to all children, like the Norwegian one, produces biased results when putting child-centered policies into practice. In examining issues related to the choice and use of knowledge within the field of child protection, a central question will involve exploring the extent to which scientific knowledge has erased political and ethical considerations from the field when assessing social problems. The consequences for children of these policies can be crucial for their lives. Even though I employ here a critical perspective to view child protection services, this does not mean that I am not in favor of a child protection system in society and of state intervention in families. What I question, however, is the belief that child centering implies better child protection and participation. Moreover, I ask if this kind of child-centered focus prevents or greatly limits our reflexivity,

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<sup>1</sup> The sources of fear are many: the dissolution of the nuclear family ideal, the emphasis put on individual self-realization and attainment of success, high rates of criminality, global financial crises, war and terrorism, environmental pollution, and so on.

producing, as Bourdieu has argued, a failure to systematically explore the un-thought categories of thought that delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought [51]. This lack of reflexivity, I contend, produces three types of biases that can blur the knowledge base within child protection. These include: (1) the social origins and coordinates of the professionals involved in assessing children and families; (2) the position of professionals in the child protection field in relation to the possible intellectual frames offered to them at any given moment, and beyond, in the field of power; and (3) the intellectual bias that invites a conception of the world as a spectacle, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically ([52], p. 39). In the following, I focus especially on some “side effects” of child centering drawing from psychological and medical knowledge, including practices objectifying children, instrumentalizing parenting and using children in certain ways by professionals.

### **3. The Norwegian Case: Indeed, Nothing New under the Sun**

For many reasons, the Norwegian child welfare system is an interesting case when studying child-centered societies. Children have a special value in Norway, as they are a key component in national symbol-building and closely associated with the nation’s self-image, with the children’s parade in all cities and villages on the national day, May 17, as the most significant national ritual involving children [53]. Furthermore, the official Norway works to promote the country internationally as a pioneer and champion of children’s rights as part of nation branding (Norway Portal). Norwegian childhoods are part of a larger brand presenting Norway as an egalitarian, peaceful and democratic society where children are given priority and space [54]. Behind this representation of Norway as “the children’s country” (barnas land) is the belief that it not only is one of the best places in the world to grow up, but also that its lawmakers have pioneered in making the protection of children “the best of what exists in the world” (citation from the ombudsman ([55], p. 4)). There has long existed a series of welfare policies prioritizing children [56,57]. The Norwegian government officially boasts of having been the first nation in the world to have established in 1896 a municipal child protection system with the act on the treatment of neglected children [58]. The Castbergske Children Acts of 1915 upheld both mothers and fathers as responsible for their children’s education and their social and moral development. Further, authorities could require contributions from fathers of children born out of wedlock. These children acquired also the possibility to inherit their father and take their father’s surname [59]. These laws’ clarification of rights and obligations between family members, particularly between fathers and children, were seen as a central part of the state’s responsibilities for children and for their status within society [60,61]. Furthermore, the laws set a standard for the further development of the welfare state and contributed early to place Norway as a pioneering country when it comes to children’s welfare [62]. A new Children Act was passed in 1953, emphasizing child protection services, preventative duties and supporting measures for families [63]. The latest Children’s Act of 1992 strengthens children’s rights, highlighting their status as separate individuals (from their parents) and affirming the primacy of the best interests of the child in all decisions, strengthened by the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2003 [64,65]. It is, however, not only within child protection legislation that Norway stands as child-friendly and child-centered.

Norway was the first country in the world to have its own ombudsman for children in 1981. The country was among the first to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, which was incorporated into Norwegian law in 2003. Being a social democratic welfare state, the Norwegian state provides services to all children through universal access to health care, education and other public services. The levels of these provided services are considered (and evaluated) as good. Healthcare is free for children under seven and school is free for children until eighteen. (There are very few private health clinics and schools, as there is a political will not to develop the private sector within schools and healthcare). Further, paid parental leave is generous compared to many countries. Fathers and mothers both have an equal quota of 14 weeks, and the rest of the time (18 weeks on full salary or 28 weeks on 80 percent salary) can be split by both parents as they choose. By the age of one, most children are secured a place in a kindergarten providing good care for them while facilitating the return to work of both parents. Participation by children and adolescents in a range of activities is also encouraged in many fields, as their participation is viewed as a manifestation of their rights as citizens. The Child Protection Act of 1992 states that children over the age of 12 should be heard in cases affecting them, and since 2003, children under 12 can be heard in special situations. In this context, Norway easily appears internationally as exceptional when it comes to children.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned earlier, in comparative child protection studies, Norway mostly stands as child-centered with its generous child welfare system and its prioritization of children's rights [6,7]. One can summarize the state of affairs by saying that there has been over decades a growing awareness of child exposure and vulnerability, quietly justifying increased control of adults generally. Politically, children's welfare is no longer only a matter of parental duties and responsibilities, but also a common responsibility in society. It is a political wish that any adult responds when children suffer or are subjected to injustice. Moreover, any adult dealing with children has an obligation to report any kind of harm (neglect and/or abuse) to the child protection services. Paradoxically, even though interventions in families are expected to take place and even are desirable, interventions are more or less feared. Citizens want child protection services to interfere when children are abused or neglected, but the threshold to report seems to be high among both lay people and professionals. A probable reason for this is that areas involving children welfare and child protection are heavy with moral and existential issues [35].

The main question to be addressed here focuses on the substantive character of the Norwegian child-centered protection system. Norway ranks among the richest countries in the world, a financial situation giving the country many possibilities to build a child protection system favoring children and promoting their subjectivity rather than reinforcing control and surveillance. Drawing on some studies of the Norwegian child protection system, I will look into the choices made and the paths taken when developing the system. Operating at the interface between government support and government control, the Norwegian child protection system establishes the norms for how society wants the circumstances of children's lives to be ([69], p. 542). As a legal system, it sets the standard for how

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of exceptionalism (first used by Tocqueville in 1840, [66]) is used to show how cultural, religious, historical, strategic or social reasons may work for a state or a nation that proves the difference that ultimately helps to create a kind of superiority *vis-à-vis* other states and nations [67,68]. The concept gets its meaning in comparative context and shows how a country initially perceives itself as unique and different in important ways from other countries.

children and childhood in Norway should be. It is the only state agency that can legally intervene in families without the parents' consent. Not only do these interventions take place when there is no doubt of the legitimacy of the intervention in cases of abuse and neglect, but also in cases where it has been determined that there is a risk for the "wrong" development for the child. Today, this is an increasing reason for interventions in Norway, and it is often stated in terms of the danger of emotionally faulty development. The child protection system "is meant to give children in need equal opportunities compared with other children in Norway" (*cf.* a speech given by the minister of children and equality on April 24, 2009). The statement is based upon the idea that the welfare state should operate to compensate for children's social background and provide all children with equal opportunities to choose a meaningful and healthy life for themselves ([3], p. 8). When the child is meeting the child protection services, the Norwegian welfare state declares that s/he should encounter "a modern child welfare service in which the rights of the child and strictly professional assessments are always given highest priority" ([70], p. 11).

Since the 1990s, Norwegian child protection services have undergone basic changes. There has been a political will to reduce the randomness of decisions and to raise the quality of the provided services. The picture now is one of child protection agencies on their way to be fully qualified as research- and evidence-based organs of the welfare system, with assessments and decisions based on rationality and accountability associated with science. In this respect, science is utilized as a legitimizing justification for the activities of child protection services. It is therefore highly appropriate to raise the question about which knowledge about children is used by the state, represented by the child protection agencies, to legitimize its intervention in families. According to Scott [71], understandings based on local and experience-based knowledge are problematic for modern state's working methods. The state cannot take into account local variations to design a policy in line with its goal, for example to provide every child in the country the best possible upbringing. Thus, it is important for a state to choose knowledge that is legitimizing and that does not hinder it in its duties. Universal and expert-based knowledge fill this role. It is a knowledge that is hard to dispute given the role assigned by welfare states to science in combating superstition, irrationality and ignorance.

Despite "the provision of generous universal and targeted services, together with a strong family preservation ideology and an increasingly strong child-centric orientation", Norwegian statistics show, however (as mentioned in the Introduction), "a high rate of children in care and poor outcomes later in adolescence and adult life" ([3], pp. 8, 11, 12). Further, most studies that examine children's participation when meeting child protection services show that children are little informed, heard or given full part status in cases that concern them [72–74]. Explanations as to why the child protection system does not meet its mandate consisting of better lives for children are many. Pösö, Skivenes and Hestbæk explain these as resulting from: (1) an all-embracing system, leading to in-home services early in children's lives and overshadowing the need of risk assessment; (2) the quality, timing and efficiency of in-home services, assuming that they do not meet children's complex needs; and (3) the quality and nature of out-of-home placement, not meeting the children's needs either, especially when looking at the occurrence of placement breakdowns [3]. They conclude that it is likely that the system is too parent-friendly and family-preserving as it tries keeping the child at home for too long. They conclude that a child-centric orientation will challenge the family preservation principle, meaning among other things that in-home measures must give way to early out-of-placements. Such placements

would give children security and continuity, values that are widely shared in the Norwegian cultural context. The conclusion is in line with the 2012 Norwegian Official Report recommending developmental and relational support (psychological parenting) rather than biological relations and early interventions in the form of out-of-home placements rather than in-home measures [75]. These suggestions are justified with references to psychological and medical/neurobiological studies, emphasizing the emotional harm and brain damage some children can be exposed to when living with parents who are not parenting according to normative standards set up by child professionals. Regarding children's right to be heard, Christiansen [74] explains the low participation of children in their cases with references to a number of factors. These include social workers' fear of incurring the child's burdens, social workers' lack of communicative competence with children, the lack of structures facilitating children's participation and the focus on parents' caring capacities within child protection. Others explain this lack of participation by referring to the little faith among social workers that children's participation will help in influencing the decision [76].

What is interesting in these studies and reports is that the knowledge base for the assessment of children's lives stays unquestioned. This applies particularly to the perception and understanding of child and childhood underlying these assessments, as well as the overall roles given to mothers and fathers in children's lives. The knowledge is treated as *doxa*, *i.e.*, it is obvious and stands uncontested as a premise. When the abovementioned researchers concluded that a child-centric orientation will challenge the family preservation principle, their conclusion relies upon ideas of childhood determinism (the idea that childhood experiences determine the direction of future developments) and parental determinism (the idea that parental behavior decides children's future fate) [77]. According to Furedi [77], these deterministic myths are captivating, as they appeal to a type of common sense or matter-of-factness: no one will deny the significance of parents in their children's lives. Focusing on a parental emotional deficit overlooks the influence of socio-economic and cultural factors on the well-being and life chances of children, covering up societal responsibilities, a lack of collective solutions and political unwillingness to change the structural conditions of childhood. For example, unstable housing is often a companion to low incomes, and this means that the child might have to move and change schools many times during its life. In a country where continuity and stability during childhood are highly valued, parents are required to "anchor" the child in a place. Not being able to do so and moving the child many times during childhood is mainly viewed as detrimental to a child's development. In a typical child protection service's assessment, many residential changes would weigh negatively, independently of the parents' possibilities to fulfill the norm of stable housing. Measures to "anchor" both parents and children over many years would be costly, so would measures aimed to give both parents and children proper housing. Taking the case to the extreme, one can say that it costs less to move the child out of a home than economically supporting a whole family for many years. The social worker will in this case argue for a placement by referring to the child's need of continuity and stability.

Talking about discriminative practices raises the question about which families in society would be affected by a more early intervention in the meaning of risk assessment and the following out-of-home placement. Indeed, several studies show that children in contact with child protection services are mostly children from parents with low incomes and low status in society [78,79]. In this respect, rather than challenging the family principle, the child-centric orientation should challenge the structural and

institutional discrimination many families experience and encounter in their everyday lives making parenting difficult, *i.e.*, challenge society's discriminatory mechanisms rather than single mothers or poor parents with their educational tasks and family building projects. In a country where there is resistance to talk about social classes with one's own way of life and where the "sameness" ideology has a strong foothold [80,81], expectations for parenting according to one common standard are strong and stay mostly unquestioned [37]. That these standards reflect norms and ideals of middle class parenting is of little concern when it comes to what is the key ideal of Norwegian child protection services—the best interest of the child, as if the best interest of the child is unproblematic common knowledge. That the family, *i.e.*, the parents, are the ones challenged is in line with a knowledge base giving developmental psychology precedence over other forms of knowledge about children and with individualistic ideologies making parents solely responsible for the life of their children. Moreover, attachment theories have gained a hegemonic place in the Norwegian child protection context, and there are assessment programs based upon these theories under national implementation within every child protection service [82]. These theories on children are more suited to modern management than other approaches that introduce complexity. They fit well with the requirements of effectiveness and results, but it is at best unclear what place the child (or its parents) has as a participant and informant in these assessment templates, *i.e.*, as subjects in their own assessment. Assessments done according to these schemes are easy for social workers to use, and they "scientifically" provide a basis for decisions. Further, they help to point to solutions, as they categorize problems.

According to Cole [83], developmental psychology's search for universal and acontextual theories of child development culminated in a representation of children as human beings with needs. Moreover, the discipline has created "a uniform global child amenable to management and standardization" ([24], p. 80), *i.e.*, a universal child without gender, class or ethnicity [31,84,85]. This representation has tremendous consequences for parenting, transforming parents into adults who have to fill children's needs as defined by psychology and transforming children into objects rather than subjects in their lives. The critique of developmental psychology, particularly of the representation of children as "in need", is a massive one and well-grounded [34,86,87]. Despite these critiques, Norwegian political documents related to childhood promote this representation of children, advancing children's need for care, children's need for security, children's need for belonging, children's need for continuity, and so on [70,75,88–90]. Recently, this knowledge has been supplemented with neurological knowledge intensifying the danger of not fulfilling these needs. This gives priority to psychological parents rather than biological ones if the latter fail to parent according to the scientifically-defined criteria for parenting [75]. Risk assessment in this setting is of importance, employing well-trained psychologists to assess emotional relations between parents and their children, leaving aside the materiality of life. Further, developmental psychology, attachment theories in particular, supports the idea of psychological parenting, an idea advanced more and more within Norwegian child protection. However, advocates of these theories are mostly psychologists and psychiatrists, *i.e.*, professionals who are often in a hegemonic position and who assess children mainly coming from working classes, as shown in one recent study [79]. In so doing, they reproduce over and over again ancient knowledge about lower classes. Their actions ideally intended to help children often result in using these same children as subjects for reaffirming dominant norms and values in society, as well as confirming and reinforcing the existing social order [91].

There are some studies, however, questioning the knowledge base within child protection services [37,79]. One investigation draws from interview data from 715 parent interviews in a cross-sectional study of a project studying child protection's development in the last ten years (The New Child Protection System (Det Nye Barnevernet, DNBV)). This study also used registry data and focus interviews with child welfare workers. The results show first that there is an overrepresentation of working class families (class as defined by the European Socioeconomic Classification) and families with parents without any tie to the labor market. Statistics from Statistics Norway indicate that many of these families have backgrounds from Asia, Africa or the Middle East. Secondly, the various classes have different paths into child protection, the lower social classes being strongly overrepresented in early childhood. Problem formulation is the third feature differing according to class membership. While problems related to the child are the cause for contact between child protection agencies and families of the higher social classes, characteristics of the parents are the most common cause for contacts with families from the lower classes. Fourth, the choice of measures varies significantly between the classes. Care measures are most common in the lower classes, while voluntary placement outside the home is most common for children in families with high incomes. According to Kojan ([79], p. 71), it is in the assessments that class biases are most clear. She uncovers the middleclass bias within child protection and child welfare generally, especially the moralizing about working class lifestyles and the disfavoring of their parenting styles. Situational factors are underestimated, while personal factors are overestimated in decision making. Problems that are rooted in structural factors, such as unemployment for many adults from ethnic minorities, underpaid work or unusual work hours for many lone mothers, high housing costs, and so on, are understood within categories from what she calls the psychopathological paradigm that is widely shared within Norwegian child protection services, a characteristic already mentioned in the article. She concludes that child protection services are welfare agencies often reproducing oppressive social structures while believing that they are giving children the same opportunities as other children. In 2014, a number of documentaries in the Norwegian media had taken up complaints against child protection services from parents with various non-Western ethnic backgrounds and from young, uneducated mothers with a Norwegian ethnic background. Most of these parents have experienced their child placed out of the home, as they were assessed as emotionally not fit for their child, *i.e.*, being a risk for their child's development by not providing conditions for an "optimal development", as it is often mentioned in documents. Many of them are suing the child protection services in order to get their child back.

Drawing on class studies and postcolonial studies inspired by Foucault, Hennem [37,69,91] discusses the use of children in the control and disciplining of parents when parents are in contact with Norwegian child protection services. She describes how the child protection services emphasize children's legal rights and use scientifically-based knowledge about children to deal with a number of dilemmas created by the dynamics of a pluralistic society. The combination of rights and developmental psychology is a powerful tool, and she concludes that the use of this combination within dialogues is used more to confirm the cultural, moral, political and theoretical viewpoints of the participating professionals rather than to assist the parents in their struggle to create a life of dignity for themselves and their child [69]. The social workers in these dialogical exchanges discipline the parents with a strong moral stance, constantly illustrating what they (and Norwegian society by extension) regard as acceptable parenting by focusing on the child as an emotional individual with rights. She concludes

that social workers use children as tools to disallow the recognition of differences; in other words, to prevent too great a pluralization of society. Further, by studying the body of public documents produced in child protection cases, she questions the individuality of the work done, as documents show a remarkable similarity, despite the fact that they dealt with different girls and boys in a diversity of situations. The unique child as a subject of protection seemed to vanish in these documents to be replaced by a kind of familiar and uniform mass-produced object, whose life is structured to fit into standardized stories of deviant childhoods [91].

What is important for the arguments central to this paper? The Norwegian child protection system is on its way to be an all-inclusive child-centric system as part of a developing child-centric society and social investment welfare state. Professionals, such as psychologists, psychiatrists and lawyers, support this move, and politically, it is supported by a will to create space where children and young people can assert their rights as citizens, by a professional improvement of services. What, however, receives little attention is the consequences for children, parents and professionals of the knowledge bases chosen. The knowledge base used by the child protection system leads the professional gaze towards some observations, leaving some others aside. In the Norwegian case, this selective perception focuses attention mainly on attachment and emotional ties and leads to the construction of a hierarchy of knowledge privileging professional knowledge above parental ethno-theories and everyday life struggles. Between parents and professionals stand the children in an uneasy place. Their utterances weigh much in a system based upon the children's rights to utter an opinion or comment on one's own case. However, these utterances have to be constructed and interpreted by professionals, and in this way, the child becomes and remains a mediated child.

Children's statements emerge in a context where professionals control conversations made with children and young people, and in so doing, the child welfare workers control and manage the production of knowledge about the children. Within the child protection services, it is unrealistic to speak of free speech (if it ever exists). Instead, there has emerged a professionalized speech community where adult child protection workers have created a framework for the stories that children and young people are allowed to generate and present in this context [69]. By steering the conversation, these practitioners produce knowledge about children's lives, dovetailing with what is perceived as acceptable in society or with what is appropriate and relevant in child protection cases. In the study of documents in child welfare service mentioned earlier, Hennem found that tales of normality became threatening when decisions about measures had to be taken [91]. Consequently, these tales tended to be omitted in the documents where the implicit rule seemed to be: the less normality in a document, the better. The main emphasis for professionals was with stories of deviance that made decisions possible. In the current societal perception, the talking child is "the right kind of child". An unquestioned assumption is that speaking children also are disclosing children and that there are certain groups of children in society who are asked to be revealing informants. These children often end up having confessional conversations about their parents with welfare professionals. Further, empowering children makes them also assessing subjects and charges them with a normative social responsibility in relation to adults. In conversation with professionals, children increasingly are encouraged to create stories, both about their own and their parents' deviances from normality.

The Norwegian welfare state uses knowledge regimes that are oppressive to some groups in society, since the ideal adult required by these knowledge regimes about children does not conform to the

ideals, living conditions and practices for adults of all social groups. The narrow choice of theory within the child protection system creates a hierarchy, positioning some adults over others as addressees for state regulation. Prominent among those at the lower end of this hierarchy are single mothers, families with adults with low education and low income, families with adults with different ethnic backgrounds than the majority; in other words, families with adults who initially are perceived as socially marginalized compared to other adults. It could in fact be argued that there is nothing new under the Sun. As Gordon puts it: “There is a long history of race and class elites feeling entitled to take children away from the poor and those they consider inferior” ([5], p. 335). These groups have been under state control since the beginning of the welfare state. In a society where psychological parenting is on its way toward replacing biological parenting as a principle in child protection, these groups are on their way to experience their children to be placed out-of-home early on the basis of not being able to give them ‘developmental supportive attachment’ as understood by psychologists and psychiatrics, who of course live under other conditions with much greater economic, social and cultural capital. It might be timely to ask about those children in society who can have their parents and those who do not.

Control and management of parents are activities done subtly in various ways as the professionals convey ideas of children and childhood gaining legitimacy by being scientifically based. Individualization of social and ethnic backgrounds allows for the individual accountability of parents rather than encouraging collective change of structural conditions. Professionals are programmed by laws, knowledge and agency norms to support parents by make them understand that it is best for their child to be middle-class children and to realize the government’s desire for them. They get parents to want for their children the same as the state will for them by the power of the dialogue about the child’s best interests. In a classical Marxist perspective, parents are asked to voluntarily participate in their own oppression or, in Foucault's words, in their normalization. In this situation, a key question to be addressed is whether Norwegian society in its child centrism is in the process of developing standardized children and standardized adults on the basis of scientific studies on middle-class children and adults [37]. In so doing, parent-child relationships are being instrumentalized and devoid or emptied of intimacy and ontology [35,37], while outside professionals are empowered both to represent the interests of the child and to give parents the injunction to change. The compensating state might be on its way to be replaced by a more injuncting state.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This paper opened by asking about possible difficulties or dangers of child-centered societies. In discussing the Norwegian child protection system as a case of a child-centric system, I showed some of the pitfalls, among others: (1) the instrumentalization of parents who are to fulfill their children’s needs and raise them correctly, as defined by instruction given by professionals; (2) the use of children by professionals both in their careers (Norwegian psychologists, for example, have replaced social workers in making many of the assessments of children that social workers once monopolized), as well as producing certain kinds of knowledge of both children’s stories and knowledge about children; (3) the reduction and narrowing of reality when using one knowledge base while excluding others in assessing and understanding children; and (4) the children’s responsibility in their own case as

producers of knowledge about themselves and their parents and therefore, having to bear the “moral burden of moral communication” in society ([92], p. 108). These are, as mentioned above, central to many of the critiques raised by researchers studying the development of parenting in European countries [35,93–96].

At the source of these pitfalls, I have identified certain knowledge bases informing child-centered societies’ welfare policies. The most powerful impact of these knowledge regimes stems from the images of children they produce. Many of them have been described as “perpetuating the social, legal, and political marginalization of children” [97]. The child in need, the innocent child, the child victim, the vulnerable child and the child at risk are all images having great political and emotional appeal and “are constructed and adopted for particular social, political and psychological purposes” ([97], p. 426). Many of these images have been constructed at the expense of children’s parents or their guardians and have involved processes pathologizing adulthood and separating children’s interests from the rest of the population [98]. However, as Gordon points out, history has shown that the combination of children’s rights and innocent child rhetoric has not historically been constructive; nor have processes enacted for defining children’s interest separately from those of their parents ([5], p. 347). There clearly exists a need to critically interrogate prominent images informing social policies for children.

The idea of a child-centric society is a seductive one, maintained and reinforced by some regimes of truth converging towards “creating scientifically optimal children” ([38], p. 162). The idea fits well with fearful societies having heightened risk consciousness related to unwanted or dangerous outcomes and with a dominant ideology defining parenting as the cause of, and solution to, social problems [99]. In this context, it is often difficult to talk about children as subjects. They appear more and more as objects of development for professionals and when assessed as objects of more or less successful parenting. In light of these developments, it seems reasonable to ask if the main danger of child-centric societies might be one involving the formation and acceptance of an authoritarian and moralizing state, even a soft totalitarianism, as suggested by Smeyers [100], all done in the name of children. Our individualized and risk-obsessed societies today seem to foster this development by providing little or no space and time to politicize the moral discourse of the child-centric society often disguised in legal and scientific terms.

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank Michael Seltzer for his inspiring comments and his inestimable helpfulness while editing this paper.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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