



Towards Positive Systems of Child and Family Welfare: International Comparisons of Child Protection, Family Service, and Community Caring Systems, edited by Nancy Freymond and Gary Cameron, University of Toronto Press, 2006.

This is another important book in child welfare edited by Canadian scholars. Promoting resilience in child welfare, edited by Robert Flynn, Peter Dudding and James Barber, an outstanding collection of articles on permanent planning, foster care, placement instability, as well as resiliency, with contributions from British, Irish, Australian, Canadian (and one American) scholars was published in 2006. Nancy Freymond and Gary Cameron have made a major contribution to the international comparison of child welfare systems with this book which contains well written and discerning articles about child welfare systems in England, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, France, and the Netherlands, along with articles by Freymond and Cameron which articulate the book's conceptual framework and clarify important themes.

Freymond and Cameron categorize approaches to child welfare in English speaking countries and western Europe as falling into one of three categories: child protection, family service or community care. England, Canada and the United States are systems organized around legally authorized interventions in families alleged to have abused or neglected their children. Investigations, "findings" of these investigations, judicial processes and the authority of a stand alone agency responsible for child protection characterize these systems.

Family service systems of the type which exist in most of western Europe are systems in which "Providing support for parent - child relationships and the care of children are primary focuses." Governments in these countries make large investments in voluntary family support services frequently delivered by private agencies or by local public agencies. These systems provide services for a broad array of family problems; they do not have a narrow focus on child abuse and neglect as the primary reason for state intervention. There is an emphasis on working cooperatively with families and even out of home placement, when it occurs, is usually voluntary.

Community care systems are being developed in Aboriginal communities in various countries, for example Canada, New Zealand and Australia. "Ties to extended family, community, place, history and spirit are considered integral to healthy individual identities," the authors state. Systems of community care rely on consultations with parents, extended families, elders and other community members about the care and protection of children. Professionals play a reduced role in these systems which are described as based on values highly antithetical to the values of the child welfare systems which regulate and often fund them.

The strength of this book is the articulation of the cultural values and beliefs which underlie these different approaches to child welfare along with the understanding (as stated by Freymond and Cameron) "that every child and family configuration is created out of a need to balance a common set of system design requirements." All systems must come to terms with similar challenges and choices. It is the nature of the choices made, and the balance struck among competing priorities, that give each approach to child and family welfare its unique profile."

Freymond and Cameron assert that all three systems operate with a dual mandate to provide support and assistance to troubled families while exercising social control over their parenting behavior. However, these systems have different ways of understanding and resolving the tensions implicit in potentially conflicting marching orders. Child protection systems tend to view child protection and family support as a dichotomy that is doing more of one means doing less of the other. Family service systems are more likely to view child maltreatment as the consequence of family breakdown. "Within this frame of reference, the concern is with the health of families as basic units of socialization and child development, and with the help families need to function properly," the authors state. Proponents of community care systems view family breakdown and child maltreatment as rooted in oppression; and they favor collective and participatory responses which respect and empower families, tribes and communities, along with more generous support of poor families.

Freymond and Cameron are clearly dissatisfied with the child protection paradigm which they view as "in urgent need of new ideas and renewed hope for a better future. We became convinced that substantial progress could not be made if we restrict our thinking to protecting children from a narrow range of dangers within their homes." One of the purposes of this book is to free the imaginations of practitioners and policymakers in child protection systems to consider new possibilities and to rethink basic assumptions by encouraging reflection on the practical application of very different world views in other countries and practice settings. However, the articles on west European child welfare systems and the English system present these systems "warts and all" and may not leave readers convinced that these countries have found better ways to resolve common child welfare problems.

For example, the Netherlands has distinct publicly funded agencies which provide voluntary family services and (mostly) involuntary child protection. These systems are in frequent conflict and, according to A.W.M. Veldkamp, do a poor job of working together on behalf of families. Veldkamp describes multi-problem families "steeped in misery" and "in a state of social incapacitation" who have no confidence in society or social workers and who do not receive many family services because they do not seek help or willingly accept it. These families are served by child protection agencies which have little to offer families other than court intervention. "The families who need help the most are precisely the ones to be deprived of it, and their hopeless situation could, if it were possible, become more hopeless." Sound familiar?

Nevertheless, the strength of this book is the message that current unsatisfactory approaches to child welfare in English speaking countries are not inevitable and that child welfare systems are far more deeply rooted in conscious and unconscious cultural values and beliefs - and in a country's history - than in knowledge or science. Various chapters also offer a fascinating glance into quite different service delivery systems. In Sweden, for example, what English and American practitioners describe as respite care for foster parents is the most common support service for birth families. The families who provide this service are called "contact persons/ families"; these families have children from referred families stay with them overnight on a regular basis. These families often provide an invaluable support service to difficult adolescents and their parents. Gunvor Andersson comments that in Sweden, "We have mandatory reporting of children who fare badly or are suspected of faring badly." Western European countries have a heightened awareness that troubled children will grow up to be citizens of the state; and that it is highly dangerous for a society to permit anti - social trajectories to take hold in childhood and adolescence.

Few of these chapters have much to say about out of home care (this is a weakness of the book) but what they do say is of great interest. One might imagine that western European countries with more developed social welfare systems would have much lower rates of out of home care, but this is not always the case. Andersson states that Sweden's rate of out of home care is 8 in 1000 children per year, only slightly below the U.S. rate of about 10 in 1000. However, according to this author, 75% of these placements are voluntary. June Thoburn, an English expert on out of home care, has also written about the different ages of children in care in English speaking countries and in Sweden, that is far more infants and other very young children are in foster care in countries with high child poverty rates and inadequate social welfare systems.

Marilyn Bennett and Cindy Blackstock assert in their article, "First Nations Child and Family Services and Indigenous Knowledge as a Framework for Research, Policy and Practice" that "There are more (First Nations) children in the care of the child welfare system today than were in state care at the time the residential schools were in full operation." In Manitoba, almost 80% of children in care are Native children, according to Mandell, Blackstock, Carlson and Fine. The articles on child welfare systems for First Nations children in Canada and Aboriginal children in New Zealand are notable for their insistence that " child welfare is inseparable from family and community welfare" and with principles of "holism, reclaimed traditions, self determination, empowerment and community building." These articles verge on total rejection of every aspect of Canadian and New Zealand child welfare practice with indigenous peoples, including programs of cultural sensitivity and academic research because the authors perceive such a divide between the cultural values of Native peoples and the dominant society. They also do not believe that these societies will actually turn over power to tribes or other indigenous groups.

It is an important message that "in many settings, enhancing child and family well being is the dominant emphasis philosophically, as evidenced by high investments of resources in supportive rather than justice - driven interventions." Furthermore, these

systems have highly plausible accounts of how family breakdown leads to child maltreatment, especially neglect and family violence. The Swedish perspective that "There is an element of protection in support and an element of support in protection" would be a good topic of dialogue in child protection oriented systems. Protection does not always need to be "a dramatic coercive act", as Gary Melton has stated so well.

Some of the themes touched on by Freymond and Cameron deserve to be developed in- depth, especially the relationship between the supports and services available to low income families in countries' social welfare systems and the defining characteristics of child welfare interventions. One cogent perspective articulated by Jane Waldfogel and Isabel Wolock maintains that the profile of reported maltreatment in English speaking countries is directly related to a country's child poverty rate and the services provided by its social welfare system. The brief version of this position is that the higher the rate of child poverty the greater the percentage of neglect cases in the country's child welfare system. "A reality shared by all of the child protection, family service and community caring exemplars... is that the majority of the children, parents, families and communities that come to their attention are relatively impoverished, and characterized by high levels of ongoing adversity," Freymond and Cameron write. Child protection systems must deal with larger numbers of these families with far less adequate resources at their disposal, these authors maintain.

Freymond and Cameron do an excellent job of summarizing major themes in their final chapter. Their view that "In sharp contrast (to family service systems), child protection systems have increasingly become legal investigation and enforcement systems, with their already modest concerns with care provisions of earlier eras greatly reduced, if not eliminated," begins to address the dilemma of child welfare reform in countries with child protection paradigms; that is without greatly increased family support services, it's hard to imagine how these countries can evolve towards less narrow and less coercive child welfare systems.