The 'Care' of Children in Need in Contemporary Scotland The Role of Positivism and Performance Indicators in Official Imaginings of Childhood and Wellbeing

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Abstract

Improving the wellbeing of children is an ambition of governments worldwide. This has led to increased activity to measure the implementation of policies intended to achieve this. In this paper, we argue that this is currently limited through the reliance on statistically-driven methods and that there needs to be a fundamental change in how policies are assessed. We examine this within the current policy context for vulnerable children in Scotland.

Keywords: children's wellbeing, indicators, governance, vulnerable children

Humanism before statistical governance

Max Weber (1949) recognised that empirical indicators contain value judgements. O'Neil (2002) argued that a crisis of trust from those in power has a debilitating impact on society and democracy, and emphasised the need for greater transparency and accountability. But as we argue in this paper, certain forms of accountability may paradoxically operate to give a less than transparent treatment of how quality childhood is to be defined and meaningfully monitored.

Michel Foucault (1978) characterised the European Enlightenment pessimistically. Instead of representing progress through science and a departure from religious dogma, he argued it introduced oppressive systems of governance exploiting human science knowledge. Our argument is that proposals to evaluate outcomes for vulnerable children risk constructing childhood to suit an impersonal rationality. To develop our basic argument we examine the current methods used in recording outcomes for children in Scotland defined as 'Looked After Children'. We believe that the conventional paradigm using 'objective' statistical measurement reporting about their lives, including accomplishments, is stultifying and neglects the human vicissitudes of these children's lives. Bauman (2000) coins the term 'liquid modernity' to denote the fluidity and impermanent character of life in today's society. Neglect of these features of modern life by abstracted measurement systems risks creating a sealed policy bubble which says little about the actual lives of real children. To understand wellbeing and outcomes we need to appreciate how they connect with society today and the communities in which children live. By way of qualitative methodological contrast to positivism, the science of measurement, Becker (1930/1966) describes the virtues of life history, a humanistic research strategy aimed at tapping individual and personal aspects of life. He argues:

> This perspective differs from that of some other social scientists in assigning major importance to the interpretations people place on their experience as an

explanation for behaviour. To understand why someone behaves as he does you must understand how it looked to him…from the author's point of view.

We will argue that whilst quantitative data sets and statistical analyses can be key in identifying significant patterned information for use by policy makers for audit purposes, this is not sufficient in itself for providing a humanistic grasp of the difficult lives of many of society's marginalised children and young people. This paper will now outline the policies and frameworks behind current strategies of official data collection and argue how the positivist paradigm which they represent, whilst useful for serving bureaucratic needs critical to national governance and planning resource allocation, overlooks the children in their unique social settings.

Policy background: official profiling of growing up

The Scottish Government has set its ambition for 'Scotland to be the best place in the world for children to grow up in', and recognises that to do this 'we must nurture every element of their wellbeing'. To help achieve this ambition, legislation has been accepted that is intended to accelerate the rate of change (Scottish Government, 2012a). *The Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill*, places obligations on welfare and education services to support the 'whole wellbeing of a child or young person'. The Bill also requires that public bodies have to report on what they are doing to improve children's milestone auditable outcomes in relation to the delivery of their wellbeing and rights (Scottish Parliament, 2013a). This ideological thrust is in part a response to the report of the Christie Commission, which highlighted the importance of a personalised service delivery with a clear focus on the achievement of national outcomes (Scottish Government 2011a). It is also in recognition of the challenges faced by many of Scotland's children and the Government's wider agenda to improve their lives (Scottish Parliament 2013b), which can be afflicted by endemic poverty including poor housing (Barnes and Lord, 2012).
Such a focus on outcomes and using service or national data to support them is a common feature of governments around the world. In particular, there has been a growing trend on both sides of the Atlantic to evaluate service performance and monitor the outcomes of agency intervention (Scott et al., 2005). The Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill is unique though in the extent to which it proposes statutory responsibilities on national government and public bodies to demonstrate that they are improving outcomes for all children.

There is widespread support for the proposed definition of the wellbeing of a child to be based on the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators (Scottish Government, 2013a). However, there is currently no agreed approach on how these indicators are to be used to measure a child's wellbeing, and Scottish Ministers have made a commitment to issue guidance on this (Scottish Government, 2013a). That is not to say that no information exists. Instead, it has been argued that despite all sorts of welfare motivated activity being measured and data collected there is still no one agreed standardised national measure for a child's wellbeing (Deacon, 2011). Evans and Spicer (2008) argue a similar problem for the notion of 'prevention' as promoted by New Labour in the 1990s. For them the meaning and definition of the term 'prevention' was wide open to debate leading to a whole range of statutory, voluntary and community services developing under the one 'banner'. The situation in Scotland is compounded as there is also no single Scottish Government Directorate that has

overall policy responsibility for young people's health and wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2013b).

Current approaches to measuring change over a child's life-course

The government in Scotland has encouraged a strong focus on outcomes since the Scottish National Party came into power in 2007. A key part of this for Community Planning Partnerships is to define what will be achieved locally, and provide a range of indicators that can measure change. It is hoped that improved outcomes at a local level will combine to produce a Scotland that is ultimately brighter and more successful (Scottish Government, 2013c). To update either local or national indicators, and in fact show what change has been achieved, an extensive amount of information needs to be collected. The Scottish Government (2013d) states that such information will be robust, and the discourse indicates that it will be objective and valid:

> The assessments of Scotland's progress are reliable and based on the best, most-up-to-date evidence and are accompanied by a note explaining how our analysts have made their assessment, using clear and objective data.

Therefore, the current approach to measuring change is to develop a type of statistical evidence that can be exploited to deliver objective accounts of the extent to which outcomes are reached. Local Authorities rely on a range of partner agencies to be able to do this and national government uses both public and private service data and a range of national surveys.

Ten of the 50 indicators within the National Performance Framework (NPF) are directly related to children. They focus on the improvement of pre-school, school and children's services as recorded by official inspections; educational attainment or involvement in learning, training or work and specific health measures; and baby and child weight, dental health and self-assessed health. There is one indicator for child deprivation. Significant volumes of information are collated through national surveys about each of these strands of wellbeing. The *Scottish Household Survey*, whilst focusing on social justice, transport and housing, feeds in to the NPF but not on those indicators related to children (Scottish Government, 2012b). Furthermore, whilst factors affecting children's lives are included in the survey itself (for example, satisfaction with a child's school or concerns about bullying) these are reported by the nominated adult taking part in the survey, and not by children or young people themselves. Reasons for excluding the child's voice from this important part of their lives involving school is not explained.

Therefore, when measuring change for children, the NPF is focused on a few core services, education and health. In Scotland, there is no national assessment of children's subjective wellbeing such as the index developed for England by the University of York and Children's Society (Rees et al., 2010) or that included as part of the *UK Household Longitudinal Study* (Beaumont, 2013). However, a range of children's outcomes are recorded at a national level in Scotland through other means, all of which can be reported on as single item issues. Three key surveys are the *Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey* (SALSUS), *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) and *Growing Up in Scotland* (GUS) (Bradshaw et al., 2013).

Looked After Children

Looked after children are those who are in the care of the state in terms of the *Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011* and the *Children (Scotland) Act 1995*. There are 16,248 looked after children in Scotland[1] (Scottish Government, 2013e). SALSUS, HBSC and GUS provide policy makers with evidence of the social life and outcomes of all children in Scotland but none of these large studies provide information on Looked After Children. Information on Looked After Children is available in Scotland but it is limited. Children Social Work Statistics (Scottish Government, 2013e) provide key data with regard to the number of looked after children, including the types of placements that children are living in and the proportion of children with care or pathway plans. It also shows core information around registrations on the Child Protection Register, the use of secure care and any additional support needs (such as social, emotional and behavioural or learning disabilities). *Educational Outcomes for Scotland's Looked After Children* provides data on attendance, exclusions, tariff scores and destinations of school leavers. Data is also broken down by placement type (Scottish Government, 2012c).

The Scottish Government intends to develop guidance for service providers on reporting on outcomes linked to the SOA process[2]. At a national level, the GIRFEC agenda has introduced a framework for services to work together to improve outcomes for children based on a common understanding of their wellbeing and rights (Scottish Government, 2008a, 2013f). Planning for individual children is based on the GIRFEC National Practice Model to deliver the desired SHANARRI outcomes. Historically, it has not always been clear how individual level data feeds into assessment of service delivery, or how individual level data informs the judgements made about quality of service delivery (Stradling and MacNeil, 2012). This is also case with GIRFEC, with no current system or approach to link outcomes for each child to an understanding of how policies are delivering on the Scottish Government's ambition for children. Every looked after child in Scotland (whether looked after at home or away from home) must have a plan in place that should address all their needs, including those related to their education (Scottish Executive, 2007a). This is a key part of GIRFEC and is a statutory requirement[3]. Every looked after child should therefore have a plan based on delivering the SHANARRI wellbeing outcomes, and evidence of how these are being achieved. What is not known are how policies and services are delivering these wellbeing outcomes for all looked after children at local and national level. That such a disconnect exists for looked after children whose wellbeing is routinely assessed and monitored, makes it even more unlikely that public bodies will be able to demonstrate what they are doing to improve all children's outcomes in relation to their wellbeing and rights.

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[1] At 31st July 2012.
[2] Answer to Scottish Parliamentary Question S4W-13963 Measuring Outcomes for Young People (29.04.13)

[3] *The Looked After Children (Scotland) (Regulations) 2009* require that an assessment is made when a child becomes or is about to become looked after, and that this assessment leads to a 'Child's Plan'.

The audit scientific paradigm

Measurement of human outcomes presupposes that lives can be judged as objects. That account creates a prescriptive and general knowledge of childhood and contentious indicators of personal wellbeing as common to all. Policy scholars in the sociology of education describe this mindset as a new public management where state regulation is conducted by statistical audit. Governance at this type of distance exemplifies neoliberalism (Ball, 2008; Ozga et al., 2011; Grek and Ozga, 2010). Such governance is historically linked to the rise of 'audit culture' which privileges quantitative accountability as a technology of control and surveillance (Power, 1997). Lingard et al. (2012) argue that 'data and numbers are central to this new mode of governance, as is the rise of the related demand for "evidence-based policy"'. The use of key performance indicators and cognate measurements of pre-determined outcomes exemplify this trend of governing through statistical systems; state bureaucracy relies on this mechanical ('positivist') expertise for monitoring and accountability (Desrosieres, 1998; Rose, 1999).

The term 'positivism' refers to the 'positivist philosophy' of the French enlightenment philosopher August Comte (1798-1857): genuine knowledge is based on sense experience and is advanced through structured observation and experiment. Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe positivism in terms of a gold standard of experimentation where hypothesis testing is the route to develop certain knowledge of cause and effect. The ontology of naïve realism is associated with positivism where it is assumed that research produces knowledge of an independently existing (objective) reality as opposed to mere social constructs held by individuals as products of their subjective and unique life-worlds, as we discuss more fully later. Constructivism's relativist ontology upon which qualitative research foundations are premised (Flick, 1998) characterises reality not as static and independently existing of our human concepts, but as relative to the cultural and historical context of the knower. This is the humanistic perspective mentioned earlier, from which it follows that a multiplicity of meaningful social worlds will exist in view of the different nature of children's lives and community contexts. Bryman (1992) comments that the focus is: 'on the subjective understanding of how people live, feel, think, and act...and so to understand the world from their perspectives.' It is that perspective which we argue is not recognised by an outcomes-based account of wellbeing.

A good example of this is the complex nature of belonging that looked after children experience. Wilson and Milne (2012) show how looked after children create belonging that does not fit in to conventionally associated ideas of family and home, and place much more significance on personal items. The centrality of material goods in giving meaning to everyday life and support for personal wellbeing has been captured in social anthropologies of urban households in London (Miller, 2008). Anecdotal evidence from colleagues working with the children of prisoners highlights how sons return to the sofa where they used to watch television with their fathers before they were incarcerated. In this sense home is constituted through the emotional resonance of particular objects where loved persons are still present.

However, surveys – attempts to understand lives at a distance - are particularly important in the state's repertoire for governance through numbers. Bryman (1992) remarks:

> 'The survey's capacity for generating quantifiable data on large numbers of people who are known to be representative of a wider population in order to test theories or hypotheses has been viewed by many practitioners as a means of capturing many of the ingredients of a science.'

Resonating the views of Appadurai (2006), other scholars emphasise connections between positivism and control: St Pierre's (2012) critique extends this critical analysis which he associates with decidedly ideological goals, namely: for,

> '...producing knowledge which is value-free, mathematized and scientific; and used in the service of free market values, economic rationalism, efficiency models...outsourcing, competitive individualism, entrepreneurship and privatization. In this ideology, everything must be scientized and reduced to the brute (value free) data of mathematics for the purposes of control.'

What he calls this ideology's 'cult of accountability' (St Pierre, 2012) means numerical data is assumed to provide objective criteria for deciding what sort of knowledge is necessary. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain:

> 'The aim of inquiry is to develop an idiographic body of knowledge. This knowledge is best encapsulated in a series of "working hypothesis" that describe the individual case. Generalisations are impossible since phenomena are neither time nor context-free.'

Research on a number of issues related to looked after children in the last 10 years itself has been limited and sometimes piecemeal (Hill, 2011). Although qualitative research is able to show the depth and understanding of issues in relation to children and young people's lives, by its nature it tends to be focused on one particular issue at a time and in context. For example, in understanding children's placements, studies might focus on kinship care (Aldgate, 2009), or residential care (Elsley, 2009) or foster care (Hoggan, 2008). Also, the reasons for undertaking such research can vary and therefore the findings are not always comparable, even within a small country like Scotland. This is not to say, though, that similar findings or comparable issues are not evident when compared over time. For example, in a review of children and young people's views it was found that the same issues have occurred across different studies, such as children and young people not feeling listened to and the importance of being able to trust key workers in their lives (Montgomery, 2012). Furthermore, it is also possible to design qualitative research that can be broad in its approach. Systematic reviews of quantitative and qualitative research have become increasingly popular for harnessing insight and build cumulative evidence bases, though they may also lack the provision of humanistic understanding. Life course criminology based around renowned longitudinal data sets like the *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* (Piquero and Farrington, 2007) contributes to the widespread fallacy of taking notional concepts of 'family effects' as denoting actual families. For example, a son's criminality may arise from his devotion to delinquent friends rather than a statistical association with a criminal father. In this way measurement science skews our knowledge of reality.

A singular, quantitative, approach to outcomes for children and young people in Scotland also runs the risk of placing responsibility for change onto children and young people themselves, or their families or individual services in their lives. As Jardine (2013) argues, the 'risk factor paradigm' developed through large-scale quantitative studies on crime places responsibility for desistance on the individual themselves and ignores the wider structural context which has played a critical role in setting the conditions for offending.

The difference between scientific generalisation and social reality can be illustrated simply by taking data from the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration's study on children on Supervision Requirements (Henderson and Hanson, 2012). The traditional reporting of the life of a child (here called Paul), under the Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland, would be found in separate years' statistical reporting whereby in different years he would be captured as a child living at home or living with foster carers or prospective adopters. Also in different years the aggregate data would capture him having moved once. Finally, when his Supervision Requirement was terminated it would also show his placement type. The placement history and related outcomes of this boy, however, can be described in a case study where its meanings are contextualized, as such:

> Paul is four years old when social services decide that he needs to be moved from home due to concerns about his safety in relation to his father. Five days later he goes home again as his father is in custody. Less than two years later, Paul's own behaviour is becoming a concern and his mother agrees to him moving to foster care. After a three year stable placement, his carer has ill health and Paul needs to move to new foster carers. Despite a positive start, after just five months his new carers are unable to cope with his behaviour and he moves to his fourth foster placement. Paul is now 10 years old. He quickly feels part of a new family and this remains his permanent home. In his words 'things are great'.

The official statistics, therefore, do not and cannot capture and reflect the complexity of Paul's life as a looked after child characterized by multiple moves and placements, nor that despite this he eventually found stability and happiness.

Conclusion

Ben-Arieh and Frønes (2011) argue that the current climate of collecting children's wellbeing indicators needs a common framework of understanding. For them the complexity of children's lives interacts with the complex wider environment and structural factors, including the 'constituency', that is, the audience and target population who will use the defined indicators. Whilst a common framework for wellbeing indicators does make sense, we believe that the response to the Scottish Government and the need to show outcomes for looked after children calls for action beyond collecting indicator data. A common language and paradigm like that discussed by Ben-Arieh and Frønes (2011) would be helpful, and to some extent pathways have been made with the SHANARRI domains. However, we argue that there needs to be fundamental change in how policies and services are assessed to show how they are contributing to meeting the ambition for 'Scotland to be the best place in the world for children to grow up in'. If the Scottish Government requires a change in children's lives that is meaningful, then the information collected around their

'outcomes' needs also to be based on meaning to children and young people themselves. Although children's rights are highlighted in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill*, their involvement in the development and use of outcomes is muted. We need to draw upon looked after children's unique insights as 'users' of the outcomes by, for example, identifying a role for them as co-researchers working with professional researchers, and their ownership of the audits done to allegedly enhance their quality of life, or future opportunities will not arise.

Finally, absent from the official documents examined is an acknowledgement of the neo-liberal political context from which these audit technologies emerge and must be understood. That pervasive political framing of the conduct of human exchange masks human relationships and is a contributory factor, we believe, to the ongoing erosion of the period of childhood in modernity. Instead, a quasi-legal discourse of childhood is used to represent governments' models of ambition. Our paper highlights the scientism of the preferred methodology and its elision of the distinction between facts and values, meaning the construction of childhood implied is unable to characterise wellbeing as children and their local communities might. Instead of being a discourse on welfare we find neoliberal ascendency colonizing, but unlikely to materially enhance the lives of the socially excluded children in society.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any agency.

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