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## **PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN**

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DYNAMICS OF  
STRUCTURE, INTERVENTION AND THEIR  
INTERPLAY IN SWEDISH CHILD WELFARE AND  
CANADIAN CHILD PROTECTION

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*Picture on cover:* Drawn by Jessica Khoo, age 4, depicting a parent and child.

**Protecting our Children.** A comparative study of the dynamics of structure, intervention and their interplay in Swedish Child Welfare and Canadian Child Protection

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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a case study of how two agencies in Umeå, Sweden and Barrie, Canada protect children found in need of child welfare services. The project's purposes are to describe how children are protected from harm in these two contexts, to illuminate similarities and differences in child welfare systems reflected at the local level, and explicate the significance of uncovered similarities and differences.

The research project is grounded in three complementary theoretical approaches: i) social constructionism (an epistemological theory to frame how one may view social phenomena); ii) critical program evaluation theory (an evaluation theory to direct the focus to personal social services); and iii) institutional ethnography (as the overall methodological theory for carrying out the study and its analyses).

Using a model I developed to guide cross-national comparisons, the research project explores three dimensions in the organization and delivery of services: i) Structure (service contexts and features), ii) Intervention (intervention process, and documentation and gatekeeping as two central aspects of intervention), and iii) the interplay between structure and intervention.

The project combines methods including focus groups, qualitative application of the vignette technique, and analyses of assessment summaries extracted from case files at each agency. Findings from this investigation are reported in four papers enclosed herein.

We identified differences in gatekeeping, use of social work skills, identification of clients, decision-making, and use of compulsory measures and the availability of other measures for clients. The documentation study showed that, in Canada, documentation is increasingly structured whereas in Sweden documentation is systematically varied but with narrative forms dominating. The different documentation trajectories in these nations are coupled to the paths they have taken with regard to the care and protection of children. We then focus on the "best interests of the child" principle. In Canada, the best interests principle is paramount but intimately connected to "need of protection" and risk assessment. In Sweden, the best interests principle is contributory to the Social Services Act's emphasis on a solidaristic response to need.

When data from this study are taken in context with other research in the field, it appears to give meaning to description of two models of state service for children in need because of abuse or neglect. Umeå is representative of some of the key elements in Swedish child welfare whereas Barrie is representative of some of the key elements in Canadian child protection.

# DEDICATION

To My Father  
Robert Bruce Forrest

Soar

My Heart Soars  
Beyond the cloud tops  
Soars  
With my maker, the great creator  
I am free

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## LIST OF ORIGINAL PAPERS

- I. Khoo, Evelyn G., Hyvönen, Ulf and Nygren, Lennart (2002). Child Welfare or Child Protection. Uncovering Swedish and Canadian orientations to social intervention in child maltreatment. *Qualitative Social Work* 1(4): 451-471.
- II. Khoo, Evelyn G., Hyvönen, Ulf, and Nygren, Lennart (2003). Gatekeeping in Child Welfare. A comparative study of intake decision making by social workers in Canada and Sweden. *Child Welfare*, 82(3), 507-525.
- III. Khoo, Evelyn G., Nygren, Lennart and Hyvönen, Ulf (2003). Documenting Child Welfare Investigations. A comparative study of uniformity and variation in Canadian and Swedish assessment summaries. Submitted.
- IV. Khoo, Evelyn G., Nygren, Lennart and Hyvönen, Ulf (2003). Need, Risk and a Child's Best Interests. Explicating key principles in Swedish child welfare and Canadian child protection. Submitted.

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# 1. Introduction

This dissertation explores the ways in which different countries protect children who are found in need of child welfare services. In this study, I was interested in investigating how two countries, Sweden and Canada, organize and deliver services for children who have been abused, neglected or are considered at “risk”. I had a presumption of Sweden as the quintessential, cradle-to-grave welfare state that many people in my own country regard with considerable awe. Canada, on the other hand, I understood to be leaning toward “small c” conservatism, with universal health care as its “welfare” cornerstone but few other national aspirations to infuse principles of universality into its system of welfare. I wondered first whether my impressions of these welfare systems were accurate. Certainly, my ideas needed to be tested and I could not rely on the assumption that they were true. I also wondered whether these different welfare approaches would have any lingering implications as I began the task of developing a methodology for examining the child welfare systems in each nation.

The issue of terminology is challenging within the field of child welfare generally, and is heightened when different constructs are used internationally. It may be helpful at this point to clarify my definitions of two terms that used extensively in this dissertation.

**Child welfare**—within the context of this dissertation, I use the term “child welfare” in two ways. First, in a general sense, it encompasses the broad scope of involvement by the state and its authorized professionals in assisting children and their families, both in cases of abuse and neglect and when families and children are found to be in need of some kind of assistance. This reflects the principle that child welfare is a broader term than “child protection”. Second, child welfare will be used in reference to the specific system of support and care provided in the Swedish child welfare system.

**Child protection**—is a term used more often in the Canadian system. It refers to a specific type of service provided to investigate, assess risk and need for service based on clearly defined, legally based grounds for providing a narrower range of care. A source of confusion is that, historically the terms child welfare and child protection have often been used interchangeably in the Canadian system. Increasingly, however, the use of the term child protection is replacing child welfare, reflecting a focus on the protection functions of the system there.

Intuitively, I wanted to reach some kind of conclusion as to which child welfare system, Canada’s or Sweden’s, best protects children. My reasons for selecting Canada and Sweden as points of comparison were at first mundane. Having come from Canada, I had a certain pre-understanding of that context—politically, historically, and, of course personally. I thought that I knew the child welfare system’s positive and negative sides fairly thoroughly.

Having moved to Sweden, I was naturally interested in understanding how child welfare “worked” here—and thought that most of my lessons would be learned from an analysis of the system here.

Aside from the practical and pragmatic reasons for comparing Sweden and Canada, the two countries also reflect interesting contrasts in the “regime-debate” used in Esping-Andersen’s (1990) typology. Canada can be described as approximating a liberal, Anglo-American model with a relatively high proportion of non-governmental organizations and with a moderate level of ambition to intervene with redistributive measures in different “free” markets and in family life. In terms of the commodification of social welfare (Lightman and Riches, 2000) and its path in social development (Estes, 1998), Canada is closer to the American system than that of the UK. Sweden is the “crown jewel” of the social democratic, Scandinavian model with extensive and publicly funded and produced welfare systems. Its ambition to redistribute incomes and to intervene in labour market, housing market and social security has historically been among the highest in the world. According to the World Index of Social Progress (Estes, 1998), it stands in first place along side Denmark. Canada ranks in 26<sup>th</sup> position. Throughout this dissertation, I will reflect on these differences and their place in state intervention in the family sphere, reflected to some degree in family policy in general and in child abuse and neglect in particular.

Eventually, my desire to reach a firm and incontrovertible conclusion about the relative superiority of one approach over another was moderated by recognizing the complexities involved in making cross-national comparisons. Social workers in Canada and Sweden who, both at the outset and throughout the course of the study provided me with two very important analytical puzzles, actually furnished an example of this recognition:

- Is social work<sup>1</sup> in child welfare really so different “over there”?

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<sup>1</sup> A word on social work. The profession is often described as a problem-solving activity on individual, group or societal levels. However, problem-solving is assumed to be a rational act engaged in by disinterested social workers on behalf of clients; to plan, control and manipulate change. A preferred view is presented by Morén (1994). In this view, social work is partly an art of human assistance built upon the intangible but genuine value of human relationship wherein the social worker engages in the client’s life, offering options for “interpretation and acting, making visible the widening possible options in life”. The positioning of social work in this study is discussed later in the introduction.

- How can you talk about comparing the Canadian or Swedish child welfare systems when there are so many differences from one jurisdiction (province, region, municipality or other “catchment area”) to another in each nation?

The apparent contradiction presented by the juxtaposition of these two questions intrigued me. On the one hand, there appeared to be an underlying feeling on the part of social workers that the professional responsibilities of working in child welfare must somehow be quite similar. On the other, they had some sense that the organization of child welfare services varied in some ways and that this variation had some significance to them at some level. Was there a perception that systems and the organization of child welfare services may be different but that there may not be appreciable differences in the ways in which social workers do the day-to-day tasks of child welfare work? With these analytical puzzles in mind, I set in motion the task of delineating the purpose and research aims that would frame my project.

## **1.1. Purpose of the Study**

While a review of the literature will show that cross-national comparisons in child welfare have begun to take form, few studies have systematically compared the structural foundations of child welfare, the interventions of social workers and the relations between structure and intervention. This dissertation’s aim is to contribute to the developing knowledge base of comparative child welfare research. Using a model I developed to guide cross-national comparisons, the study explores:

- the structure of child welfare services at two agencies in Umeå, Sweden and Barrie, Canada, comparing and analyzing the contexts and service features of child welfare in each;
- intervention in the Swedish and Canadian contexts by examining the intervention process generally, and documentation and gatekeeping as two central aspects of intervention; and
- the interplay between structure and intervention in the Canadian and Swedish contexts.

Exploring the similarities and differences pointed out above, serves the first purpose of providing a description of how children are protected from harm in these two contexts. However, if I want to honour the interests of social workers in both, the study must also be able to answer whether “things” really are different “over there”. The second purpose of the study, therefore, is to analyze the differences, but also the similarities, between the contexts. By developing critical insights into the interplay between structural orientations to child welfare and child protection and interventions in each, the third purpose of this study is to explain the significance of similarities and differences found.

## **1.2. Significance of the Study**

The social work profession, frontline child welfare workers, and policy makers can benefit from a better understanding of how states currently attempt to protect children from harm. Armed with a better understanding of why social workers do what they do, it may be possible to make changes that are knowledge based and culturally relevant rather than the knee-jerk reactions that have sometimes produced significant (but not always better) changes in the ways that states protect children. Deciding on what can and should be changed is no easy matter. As I see it, substantive change may take place at the level of social policy or the organization of child welfare services but may also occur at the level of one social worker's interactions with a client. Moreover, the change process may need to occur at many fronts simultaneously. It has been argued that the welfare of children ought to be everybody's business (Leschied, Whitehead, Hurley, and Chiodo, 2003). By delineating the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian and Swedish approaches to the care and protection of children, this study can contribute to critical discussions of "where we go from here" considering that we have not yet solved the problem of child abuse and neglect.

## **1.3. Limited Focus of the Study**

This research project explores the personal social services in two child welfare systems. The objects of study are structure, intervention and the structure-intervention interplay, each of which is defined in some detail in the methodology section of the study. However, because I also refer to an interest in what social workers *do* in different contexts, it is important to set out early what this study hopes to be able to achieve and what it does not or cannot achieve in relation to the study objects.

In looking at the structure of child welfare services in different systems, this study does not compare many of the other services that may be linked directly or indirectly to those I have chosen to compare. I do not compare, for example, such services as special education programs or services for children or parents, treatment programs for family violence, victims of abuse, or for substance abusing adults or children. That is, I keep a narrow focus on two agencies that have a mandatory response to signals of children being in need of care or protection.

My approach to studying social work interventions is similarly restricted, focusing on what individuals in these contexts say that they do and what they appear to be able to do given the political, legal, and professional contexts in which they work. As such it resembles a snapshot of their accounts of what they do, captured verbally and in text.

I take the position espoused by Payne (1997)—in spite of the debatable nature of social work, a number of fundamental features define the profession. The social work profession operates in a society characterized by power

imbalances based on age, class, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, health, physical ability, race, sexual preference and income. As members of a transformative profession founded on principles of helping and responding to need, social workers practice, to varying degrees, with individuals, groups, and communities, in or against structures, with the ultimate aim of empowerment and bringing about changes at a societal or individual level. Having said that, there are also different contexts of practice that play a significant role in the construction of what Payne (ibid) calls “minor paradigms” as well as various professional sub-specialties, e.g. hospital social work or educational social work. Therefore, in examining the specific characteristics of different child welfare systems, we might expect that the professions working in them are “so much alike but different” (Kristinsdóttir, 1991 pp. 173 and 231).

#### **1.4. Background and Statement of the Problem**

The idea for the study was conceived in 1996 and rooted in my experiences in the early to mid 1990’s as a social worker in Canadian child welfare. As with much of child welfare research, my study was intimately connected to these experiences. Individual caseloads were rising and it seemed that we were seeing more and more sexual abuse cases; there were even reports and investigations of the “extreme” ritualistic and satanic abuse of children. The number of children placed in state care persistently increased at a rate higher than the rate of new and available foster homes or other institutional care. Moreover, this increasingly stressful nature of child welfare work appeared to lead to worker burnout and high worker turnover, meaning that fewer experienced workers were on the frontlines and children and their families experienced numerous changes of workers (Horwitz, 1998). Equipped with this personal knowledge, I had a latent belief that there must be better ways of serving children who are harmed or who are at risk of harm.

Most western industrialized nations have identified child abuse and neglect broadly as a social problem warranting state intervention. Although parents bear primary responsibility for raising children and insuring that their needs are met, the state may intervene in family life when harm occurs or risks are present. Yet, despite the best efforts of all involved, service provision has been open to criticism for either failing to protect children adequately or, alternatively, intruding too much into the private realm of the family. Moreover, even though child abuse is a recognized social problem, the best efforts of child welfare systems have not stopped children from being abused (physically, sexually), neglected, or placed in vulnerable and risk-filled circumstances.

The “problem” is, that even with massive amounts of information available in the public domain and to researchers (MacMillan, 2000), it is a huge undertaking to try to filter through this information and make it relevant

to the context in which it is being examined. This makes the task of learning “lessons from abroad” very difficult indeed. How then can one child welfare system learn from another? Further, what knowledge can be gained from these kinds of lessons? In the following paragraphs, I give a brief overview of some of the knowledge in circulation about the extent and causes of child abuse and neglect. The point of this is to show that knowledge is created. As social constructs, we have to consider who has the power to create knowledge and how this is accomplished. Since phenomena such as child abuse and neglect are socially constructed, making comparisons relevant in a cross-national perspective therefore is difficult to accomplish. These issues are taken up in more detail in section 3.

Many reports in the media and in research suggest that increasing numbers of children are being maltreated. Certainly, a significant number of youth and adults report that they were abused children (Meyerson, Long, Miranda, and Marx, 2002). Other studies suggest that more children are coming into the care of the state and that these children, more so than in recent decades, bear with them a legacy of greater deprivation, often symptomatic as more difficult behaviours (Mallucio and Fein, 1985). Given the sheer numbers of child victims and child welfare system apparent failures to protect them, some researchers have even suggested that the state should remove itself from the child welfare business (Epstein, 1997).

Looking for other, and presumably better, ways of protecting children, led me to try to make sense of the extent of the child abuse and neglect “problem”. A study by Finkelhor (1994) looked at prevalence rates in the international epidemiology of sexual abuse. It suggested that the prevalence of sexual abuse is two times greater in Canada than Sweden and that the proportion of interfamilial abuse was 18 percent among Swedish women who reported experiencing abuse as minors (under age 18) compared to 44 percent of Canadian women. That study however pointed out the methodological difficulties in comparing reported prevalence rates since Swedish and Canadian definitions of sexual abuse were not exactly the same. However, Finkelhor also suggested that increasing methodological sophistication reveals higher prevalence rates. Another more recent but not cross-national study of prevalence rates in Canada indexed the rate of sexual abuse at 12.8% of females and 4.3 % of males (MacMillan, 2000).

A study presented contemporaneously to Finkelhor’s suggested that the message of a high and increasing prevalence of child sexual abuse in Nordic countries was a misconception (Hellblom Sjögren, 1994). That author claimed to examine the evidence from prevalence and incidence studies arguing that the interpretation of statistics by others was mistaken or misleading. However, while damning the statistics, the author goes on to illustrate a “misunderstanding” from a child’s statement to police and, I would argue, damages any credibility that may have existed in her first argument. Based on a very weak analysis of a child’s statement, she argues the total material

showed that, “E. never said a word about any experienced abusive acts from her father”. Nevertheless, the publication of such studies insinuates that our knowledge of the prevalence of sexual abuse is flawed.

While the problem of child sexual abuse was very much on the child welfare and research agenda during the late 1980’s and into the 1990’s, particularly in North America and the UK, concerns about risk and children in need have assumed a dominant position in more recent times.

Comparing physical abuse statistics was even more challenging. Research suggests that there may be significant differences in the prevalence of physical abuse as well. For example, on a policy level, Sweden in 1994, banned corporal punishment and psychological offences against children (Durrant, 1999); whereas in Canada, legal challenges to that nation’s criminal code<sup>2</sup> exemption of corporal punishment, to-date, have been unsuccessful and widely unpopular amongst the public. To date, there is no clear finding of the incidence or prevalence of physical abuse in either country.

Changes in the rate of the public care of children (i.e. foster homes and institutional care) can be taken as proxy indicators of the extent of the child abuse problem (increasing numbers of children in care may indicate more children are being seriously harmed). Thus it would appear that both countries are “failing” to improve the situation for children since the numbers of children in state care in both Sweden and Canada has been increasing. In Canada, there are over 55 000 children in care at any one time (OACAS, 2001). In Sweden, the figure is approximately 14 000 (Socialstyrelsen, 2002). A closer look at the statistics reveals that between 7 and 8.5 children per 1000 children (ages 0-17) in each nation is in care at any one time (Statistics Canada, 2002; Statistics Sweden, 2002). While there has been a steady and seemingly rapid increase in the numbers of children in care in both countries, the numerical rate of change “looks” different (and more ominous) than the raw figure of how many children (per thousand children) are in care. It would appear that the overall numbers are rising but that in both countries, the number is still considerably less than 1 % of the child population. At the same time, the percentage of repeat placements—a sign of recidivism—has increased at a greater rate.

Making sense of child welfare statistics is enough to make one’s head spin. As the saying goes, “There are small lies, big lies, and then there are statistics”. How then can we make sense of these numbers or put them into

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<sup>2</sup> **Criminal Code of Canada Section 43. Protection of Persons in Authority Correction of child by force.** “Every schoolteacher, parent or person standing in the place of a parent is justified in using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child, as the case may be, who is under his care, if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances”.

context? I wanted to know the extent of the problem but was perplexed because it was clear to me that the interpretation of statistics was as much a political act as a mathematical analysis.

The numbers told me that Sweden and Canada did not seem so different from each other when considering thousands of children were placed in state care and that a significant proportion of the population had been abused. Numbers alone may be cold and disinterested, but views on the aetiology of child abuse and neglect are ideologically loaded and therefore difficult to reconcile.

Moving away from an attempt to get a sense of the exact extent of this problem, I considered theoretical explanations of child abuse and neglect. The point of presenting the following theoretical positions is not to provide an extensive review of theoretical approaches to understanding child abuse and neglect. Rather, it is to point out that it is not surprising that there is also a lack of agreement as to when the state intervene should in family matters.

From the recognition of the “battered baby syndrome” in 1962 (Kempe et al., Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller and Silver, 1962), explanatory models of child physical abuse, its causes and solutions have widely been medicalized. According to this view, there may be individual factors that lead to certain pathologies in parents, which in turn produce abusive behaviours. Certainly, mental illnesses (from depression to psychoses) have been mentioned as indicators of risk of abuse (Falconer and Swift, 1983). In one extreme, Jones (1987) hypothesizes that some families (or more correctly, the parents in them) are untreatable and that the early identification of these families may both prevent re-abuse of children and reduce burnout in social workers by directing resources at families more likely to benefit from interventions

However, other researchers have argued that there is empirical evidence to support individual (psychological) as well as other systemic (social psychological) causes of child abuse and neglect. Psychological theories include attachment theory, learning theory, cognitive approaches and psychodynamics (Corby, 2000). In looking at risk and prognosis in child welfare, Lagerberg and Sundelin (2000) describe an ecological model of child maltreatment: This theory looks at two key bases for child maltreatment: the micro system (individuals and the family, community) and the macro system (socioeconomic, ideological, and historical).

Others have looked at the social causes or child maltreatment and of the impact of social services, particularly foster care (Fanshell and Shinn, 1978). Holman (1993) argued that prolonged separations negatively affect child development, multiple placements are damaging, and child welfare services are stigmatizing. Parton (1998) meanwhile argued that we should tackle the broader roots of child physical abuse as they exist in poverty and inequality in social class structures rather than trying to find ways to predict risk. Stein and

Frost (1992) argued for many of the same solutions to child maltreatment using the theme of inequality in their analytical framework.

Other contemporary explanations have looked comparatively at socio-medical and socio-legal perspectives of child maltreatment. The socio-medical perspective strongly connected to medicalized explanations in that individual psychopathologies in parents are considered the roots of child maltreatment. The socio-legal perspective dominating in Anglo-American welfare systems still has explanatory ties to a medicalized view but places more emphasis on the procedurally correct protection of children, increasingly through the use of risk assessment tools designed to measure “harm” (Jack, 1997; McGee, Wolfe, Yuen, Wilson, and Carnochan, 1995).

In an attempt to move away from socio-medical viewpoints, the so-called Looking After Children framework has attracted international attention recently as a “new” and comprehensive approach in child welfare to guide assessments, as well as measure and follow-up interventions of individuals and organizations responsible for looking after children in contact with the child welfare system (Ward, 1995). It is a three-pronged framework that evaluates the welfare and safety of children by assessing their developmental needs, their parents’ capacity to meet these needs, and effects of the family and environment in which they live.

Another approach that has been around since the 1960’s is the feminist discourse in child welfare. A feminist perspective of child abuse argues that the socio-medical, socio-legal and ecological/systems approaches to viewing child maltreatment all fail in that they do not contextualize the principal issue of power in all forms of child maltreatment, particularly in the sexual abuse of children and in the issue of neglect. Gender, rather than class, clearly is a dynamic in much of the physical and sexual violence that takes place in relationships, family representing one field of human relations. Additionally, child neglect is most often defined as a failure of individual mothers to carry out their mothering responsibilities (Swift, 1995b). This “manufacturing of bad mothers” (Swift, 1995a; see also Wilkinson, 1985) has paradoxically produced a situation where women serve women in the calculatedly male managed bureaucratic organization of child welfare (Campbell, 1992).

With so many theoretical positions, when should the state intervene to help children? Should it intervene where there is outright cruelty or neglect or when care is casual and thoughtless? When there is unacceptable violence or when there is excessive discipline? When harm has occurred or when it is likely to occur? For decades, interested parties from concerned citizens to policy makers to child welfare researchers have been looking for an explanatory framework for why we have child maltreatment and what should be done about it. How we should intervene is also not a simple question. As we struggle along the path of trying to help children who have been harmed or placed at risk, professionals also run the risk of doing more harm than good in the long-term (Steinhauser, undated).

Once again, it makes sense that preventing abuse before it occurs would be a better approach than intervening after the fact. However, if it were such a simple fact, one would also expect to see that most states would focus their efforts on prevention. This is not the case.

Primary prevention is targeted at the stress factors that have been shown to have the capacity to lead to abuse. Poverty, unemployment, single-parenthood, lack of social networks, and lack of access to health care all can contribute to the conditions in which abuse can develop (Corby, 2000). Therefore, social policy, health care policy, and family policies that address these strategies can be thought of as forms of primary prevention. The fact is, however, that most countries do not tie welfare policy explicitly to the prevention of abuse.

The aims of family policy are to enhance family stability and well-being by directing government actions in a way that helps families achieve their own goals. Family policy is designed to reduce stresses and strains in the family life cycle. In most countries, family policy is a mix of universal and means tested benefits though the blend of both varies (Pierson, 2001). Programs covered by family policy tend to be targeted to the young, old, transitional singles, and maternity benefits. Most take a minimalist view that the state should only provide a safety net in certain circumstances (Harris and McDonald, 2000). In fact, few countries have a unified family policy. Reflecting a legacy of state paternalism, regulation is favoured over family policy in the debate on the nature of family life emphasizing the moral malaise of the individual and not the state's responsibility for maintaining the family. State surveillance of families is partially haphazard where some groups are more likely to be "watched" and thereby lose autonomy (Rodger 1995).

Secondary prevention is targeted at "high risk" families or the risk factors that have a cumulative risk characteristic. Here we can think of programs for teen mothers, access to birth control, home visitors, parent relief, daycare or pre-school as secondary prevention measures. These measures enhance the chances for positive development in children and are not associated with the stigmatizing and labelling features often associated with child welfare services (Scottish Executive, 2002).

Tertiary prevention is action taken to help families after abuse happens (ibid.) Tertiary prevention may also include therapeutic intervention—sexual abuse treatment groups, non-offender treatment groups, groups for violent men, family therapy, intensive family preservation interventions. If we think of the administrative and legal processes (investigation, apprehension) associated with tertiary prevention, we can see that re-abuse rates are high, and neglect is associated with poorer outcomes than other reasons (Fallon, 1999). There is limited evidence to suggest that this aspect of tertiary prevention is effective. Few studies have systematically evaluated these interventions in a methodologically rigorous way. There is a lack of experimental designs, as well as problems related to small sample sizes, high

attrition rates and inadequate outcome indicators (Mallucio, Canali, and Vecchiato, 2002).

As each of us considers where we stand on the issue of child abuse and neglect—is it a problem and if so what is the nature of the problem and what should we do about it? It may be helpful to remember the wise words of a great British poet and thinker,

*“He who would do good to another must do it in minute particulars. General good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite and flatter”. (William Blake, 1784)*

## **1.5. Dissertation’s Layout**

The following pages in section 2 provide a review of other comparative and cross-national research, both in the broad area of social welfare and specifically in child welfare. This is followed by a presentation in section 3 of the three theoretical standpoints—social constructionism, critical program evaluation, and institutional ethnography—to which the dissertation is anchored. Section 4 presents the model developed for the cross-national comparison of personal social services in child welfare. The model suggests comparisons be made along a number of discrete variables, described in detail. Following a presentation of the model, a detailed description of data collection methods used in this study is presented. As the study involves a rather complicated model, the qualitative methodology is explicated first followed by a description of data collection methods and analyses. This is followed by a discussion of specific issues related to comparative research and to this study—its strengths and weaknesses, questions of validity and reliability, and how to make sense of data collected. Four empirical studies of: social intervention, gatekeeping, and documentation and the interplay between structure and intervention in determinations of a child’s best interests are summarized in section 5 and provided as full-texts at the end of the dissertation. Finally, in exploring services for children and families in two communities, one in Canada and one in Sweden, I provide an explanation in the discussion (section 6) of how services and the social work that goes on in these communities reflect different orientations of child welfare and child protection. The analytical portrait produced of these two orientations is complex. In addition, just as there is no magic pill to solve the “problem” of child abuse and neglect, there is also no simple solution to the question of how states can best protect children.

## 2. Literature Review

In this section, I present a brief overview of some theories of cross-national research as a means of situating this research project in the broad area of cross-national research. I then present some of the research in comparative social policy and social program studies. The list is by no means exhaustive but does show that studies do try to typify welfare types and have become increasingly interested in comparing specific areas of service provision such as care for the elderly. Finally, I pull together some of the most frequently cited pieces of comparative research in child welfare. Single nation studies sometimes bring in information from other countries to emphasize analytical points being made. Thus, the comparative approach certainly can be very wide. I therefore singled out research that had an explicit comparative purpose evident in the titles of the studies themselves.

Welfare systems can be defined by the standards or degree of “protection” of income, nutrition, health, safety, education and housing to which individuals have a certain right established by the state (CCSD, 1991). Western industrialized nations have initiated welfare systems providing a wide range of social programs designed to intervene into the lives of individuals, families and groups owing to their class position or simply to life situations. This is true, for example, when we consider interferences into family life such as income support, day-care subsidy, and remedial care for children. Individual social programs may be publicly or privately funded, operated, and regulated. They may take the form of monetary transfers (as in family benefits or child allowances), personal social services (as in the case of child welfare) or hybrid services, which combine monetary and personal services (Chambers, 1993). These social programs have been developed as a means of providing for the protection and support of citizens in different welfare systems. The blend of programs provided by state (statutory) agencies and by private (non-statutory) or non-profit-making organizations and also by profit-making organizations is often referred to as the “welfare mix” (Vogel, 1999). Given the potential for the existence of many different mixes or welfare regime types, academics and other researchers have turned to cross-national comparative studies to try to make sense of the similarities and differences in welfare systems.

Cross-national comparative research is a very broad term used to describe the process of comparing countries. In one sense, the idea of comparison is actually quite basic. In daily life, we routinely use comparison in making judgments of all kinds from deciding which restaurant to eat at to deciding what route to take home from work. Unlike these simpler forms of comparison, cross-national comparison requires sensitivity to historical and cultural contexts to live up to its touted methodological benefits of providing: (i) an import-mirror view—by analyzing other countries, we can reflect more

on our own practices, (ii) a difference view—clarifying why societies have developed in diverse ways, (iii) a development view—to understand the relationship between economics, social and political development, and (iv) a predictive view of program outcomes, enhanced through comparative work (May, 1995).

Cross-national comparisons are difficult because of different sectoral classification of services and different administrative responsibility for programs. For example, differences may be seen in how much one measure (foster care, home service etc.) is emphasized over another. Thus, since difficulties remain in defining comparable categories of service provision, common parameters on which to compare specific services, and the range of services to be compared (Wilensky et al., 1985), this area of research has often been eschewed. Furthermore, because of the complexity and variation in social programs, comparative research more often has explored the broad bases for political and historical development of and revisions in social transfers in nation-states (earlier examples: Rokkan, 1968; Mishra, 1977; and Rein, Esping-Anderson, and Rainwater, 1987).

## **2.1. Comparative Social Policy and Social Program Research**

In spite of the methodological and theoretical challenges, there is an upside to the cross-national comparative approach because of its enormous potential of broadening our knowledge of different state policy objectives, service styles and delivery systems (Jones, 1985). Comparative, cross-national research can: promote a better understanding of the home social policy environment; broaden ideas for responses to problems by bringing in lessons from abroad; and provide broad case material to further develop theoretical constructs about social policy formation and development not possible on the basis of home material alone. In addition to this type of learning from outside, cross-national comparative research can be instrumental as a means of critically evaluating in a two-way sense, allowing us to reflect also on what works or does not work elsewhere or what we would not want to see happening at home.

Giddens (1990) sees globalization as an “intensification of social relations which links distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away”. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century gets fully underway, it is obvious that cross-national transfer of information via various media from global broadcasting to the internet is taking place at a pace far exceeding anything seen in the past. In this context of light-speed information dispersal, cross-national comparative analysis is becoming an increasingly important focus of research in the area of social welfare. Governments are a part of this information explosion, sometimes releasing and sometimes withholding information, all the while trumpeting the need to balance citizens’

rights and the necessity of implementing cost-effective programs under the premises of economic rationalization and globalization (Mishra, 1999). Moreover, while globalization arguably has both positive and negative effects on national economies and on the security of welfare states, globalization also has the potential to increase opportunities for comparative research, as the world seems to get smaller.

Social policy initiatives derive, in part, from the outcomes of processes of imitation. That is, nations copy the efforts of welfare state pioneers such that innovations in social programs spread, along with ideas, techniques and interventions. In addition, states with higher socio-economic development are associated with a more advanced welfare state. Thus, continued economic development may make societies more alike in their social security institutions. The question is whether states will opt for the lowest common denominator or aim higher in setting common levels of interventive ambition in social welfare programs (Pierson, 2001).

To illustrate this point, the development of the European Union has also led to a push to harmonize social programs and social policies, and to recognize mutually social work professionals in member countries (Lorenz, 1994). This has necessitated new research into the means to compare social programs.

Recent cross-national studies have emphasized the comparison of social programs along a number of discrete dimensions. For example, Alber (1995) developed a framework for cross-national research of the *supply* of social programs, using regulatory structures, financing structures, delivery structures and consumer power as variables to be compared, with class relations, centre-periphery relations, and church-state relations serving as the foci of analysis. Another example is provided by the Nordic countries which recently collaborated in research on the social care services with an emphasis on determining similarities and differences between nations in social policy (Nordlund, 2002), in social assistance levels (Bradshaw and Terum, 1997), in actual services provided and in examining trends from an historical perspective (Sipilä, 1997). Approaches have also been developed to compare elderly care in western welfare states (Harris and McDonald, 2000). Blackman (2000), for example, compared family, institutional and community care, focusing on vulnerability, empowerment and the gatekeeping of resources and found wide variations in the provision of social care services for the elderly.

The point of bringing in the previous examples was to demonstrate just how difficult it is to agree on the typologies of welfare systems themselves and then on the parameters that are the most important to compare in cross-national research. Abrahamson (1997) discussed whether using typologies of welfare systems might actually “hide more than it reveals”. He argued that the social services must be a part of any comparison but that researchers could overcome the problem of endlessly establishing new welfare clusters (or alternatively using sub-sections of regime models in comparisons) by using

case studies as a methodology for the “understanding of welfare state origins”. That is, case studies can be tied back to an analysis of how much a case (country) conforms to or deviates from the typology to which one would expect it to be closely fitting.

Of course, an additional rationale for bringing in examples of comparative social welfare typologies is to reflect on the linkages between the problem of child abuse and neglect and child welfare systems. In this sense, child welfare systems are embedded within larger social welfare systems. Thus, the problem of child abuse and neglect receives its first construction as a social problem by the social welfare system, which then constructs some kind of child welfare apparatus to manage it.

## **2.2. Comparative Child Welfare Research**

When it comes to intervention into the private realm of families, there is less agreement as to the role of the state in this, though cross-national research is becoming more common. From Belgium (Marneffe, 1996) to North America (Oxman-Martinez, 1998) child welfare reviews have been ongoing with some nations including Scotland (Hill, Stafford, and Green Lister, 2002) and Sweden (Socialstyrelsen, 2000) recognizing the importance of cross-national comparisons in helping to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of existing programs or to develop alternatives in service provision. While these alternatives must be adapted to local conditions, Hill et al. (2002) argue that it is still possible to overcome cultural differences and cautiously transfer knowledge critically across national boundaries—with new directions in service provision being made possible.

Regarding child abuse and neglect, we can see that, in the past decade, research has looked beyond epidemiological, incidence, and evaluation studies. Several recent cross-national studies have begun to look at child welfare policy and relationships between policy and social programs or social work practice. In the following review, it is not possible to provide an in depth analysis of all cross-national child welfare research. Alternatively, each of the studies selected represents a case study approach to comparing child welfare in different countries. While countries form the units of comparison, each study uses different methods and has unique approaches to data collection. Rather than using welfare regime typologies as the starting point for their comparative research, the various authors instead focused on the development or presentation of child welfare typologies and related child welfare systems in each case to the broader welfare systems to which they may be considered a member.

For example, Barth (1992) provided a basis for comparing child welfare; highlighting differences in how the US and Sweden approach the issue of family preservation. He demonstrated how statutory frameworks and organizational structures reflect different assumptions about the role of birth

families, foster parents and adoptive parents and produce different outcomes for children from families where rehabilitation seems unlikely. In the US, permanency planning is a concept reflecting the notion that children need a sense of permanence to make sense of the world. Ideally, this means that children should remain with their birth parents wherever possible. Thus the US has widely adopted intensive family preservation services. However, if after between one and two years, it appears that reunification is unlikely, the child should be given permanence with relatives or an unrelated family as soon as possible thereafter. Barth contrasts this with the Swedish assumption that all parents can be rehabilitated. While there may be some disagreement to this, the assumption is captured in the spirit of the Social Services law. Barth shows that there are actually few alternatives and that measures wherein foster parents assume guardianship of children in their care are rarely used. Further, assessment homes for parents and children together are a reflection of the commitment by the state develop and promote the relationship between birth parents and their children. Barth recommends that the US adapt the Swedish contact family program and residential family care. He also recommends that Swedish social workers develop more family preservation programs and consider opening up the laws there to allow for termination of parental rights in more cases.

In a study by Soydan and Stål (1994), a methodological approach was presented for the comparative study of the content of child welfare investigation, decisions and measures in the UK and Sweden. The authors hypothesized that the most effective comparisons would be of possible differences between the ways social workers express notions of compulsion, voluntariness, care, demands, restrictions, reciprocity, and client choice. Using the vignette technique, the authors asked social workers to respond to vignettes of child welfare scenarios increasing in severity from stage one (watchful but dismissive), to stage two (escalating risk) and stage three (the extreme example of harm committed). Without presenting empirical data, the authors hypothesized that the vignette technique in cross-cultural research would be one way to avoid the shortcomings of other data collection methods.

Forslund, Jergeby, Soydan and Williams (2002) applied the previously described methodology to compare social workers reactions to vignettes in five countries (Denmark, Germany, Sweden, USA, and UK). Forslund et al. arguably represent a narrow field of researchers in Sweden who specifically address ethnicity in the context of child abuse. Their focus is on how the ethnicity of clients may influence case decisions. In this case, an additional variable of ethnicity was added to the vignettes to test whether social workers reacted differently to families with an ethnic minority background. The authors arrived at the surprising conclusion that ethnic background did not affect social workers' reactions to the vignettes. Most significantly, in the more severe vignettes, the Danish and Swedish social workers were less inclined to focus on the child's situation and more on the family than their UK

and American counterparts were. And, in the former two countries, social workers were more inclined to contact police and physicians when encountering the ethnic minority vignette. This, Forslund et al. hypothesize, could be because in that situation workers were less sure of themselves and wished to pass on decision making to other professionals. What this study does not do, and I suggest it may have been a fruitful line of questioning, was to investigate the socially constructed professional practices of social workers in these different contexts. This may have led to a conclusion that Danish and Swedish social worker's professional practice is constructed in a relatively homogeneous (white, female) working culture and along the lines of a child welfare policy that emphasizes family preservation. While my comments on this study can only be conjecture, it may turn out that the social worker's tendencies to act in certain ways are predictable to some extent from the professional cultures in which they work.

Weightman and Weightman (1995) discussed the bases for intervention in the family in Sweden and England, describing the strengths, weaknesses, and cultural dependency of child welfare programs in Sweden and England, using a methodology based on a comparison of "ideal types" of social work practice and socio-cultural systems. In both countries, social work intervention in family life is described as "essential"—to protect children from harm—and intolerable because of the possibility of unjustly violating the rights of parents and privacy of the family. In an ideal characterization of Swedish social work, the professionals there are described as knowing that they "are doing nothing wrong" and that the state and values embedded in policy marginalize criticism of their practice. In contrast, in England, social workers have a sense that they are "never right"; with repeated public inquiries showing that they either have failed to intervene when necessary or have been too intrusive. The authors however found strengths and pathologies in both systems. To focus on Sweden, the authors say that social work in Sweden is more effectively empowered because of its framing social services laws, strong preventive ideologies and the principle of working in solidarity with parents. Thus, the state may be involved in a broader range of negative childhood circumstances and may act preventively in more ways. On the other hand, Sweden's value commitment to solidarity with parents may mean that cases of abuse are missed or subsumed within general support work with children. The authors rightly point out that their methodology does not provide an empirical description or analysis of social work practice directly. Nevertheless, by accentuating the essential features of social work practice and cultural context, the authors have contributed to a more nuanced critique of practice in both countries.

In a study applied to comparisons of children residing in public care in Sweden and Japan, Hesse, Ioka and Yamano (1996) developed a comparative framework stressing the interdependence of family policy, child welfare (legislation, organization and professionalization) and culture-specific

discourses (sociocultural and demographic factors). They concluded that in Sweden child welfare was the dominant dimension but that it was strongly influenced by an institutional model of family policy. This produces a situation wherein the Swedish social workers are the primary source in answering questions regarding children at risk and to what extent they should be placed in public care. In Japan, attitudes are determined by the culture-specific discourse and thus, doctors, psychologists and child welfare officers decide together whether a child is at risk. Hessle et al.'s study informed my own study in the sense that it places professional practices in relationship to culture and policy. It highlights many of the difficulties in comparative research, particularly when comparing very dissimilar cultures.

In attempting to distil the essential features of child welfare in nine western countries, Gilbert (1997) used problem definition, reporting rules, the process of inquiry, and state responses to abuse post-substantiation as points of comparison. The authors derived three typologies from the countries compared: child protection, family service (mandatory reporting) and family service (non-mandatory reporting). The authors also found no link between child welfare typology and placement rates. The difficulty presented by setting out these typologies was that they seemed to be shifting where, for example, England seemed to be leaning slightly more than in previous times toward family service. The US seemed to be developing toward a family service (mandatory reporting) where it had been a protection approach whereas Canada seemed to be moving to an overriding focus on child protection.

One problem with trying to fit countries into typologies is that their policies are not fixed in stone. Some child welfare systems may be more adaptive to smooth transitions whereas others may lurch from one crisis-driven policy shift to another. The other difficulty with typologies, of course, concerns the question of whether the points of comparison used are correct or exhaustive. On the one hand, Gilbert et al., provide a wide, all encompassing study of questions of child abuse definition and a range of activities or parameters to be compared. However, attempts to show a correlation between placement rates and typology typically break down. This may be because there is actually a considerable overlap between child welfare typologies reflective of everything from the residual nature of all child welfare systems (Hessle and Vinnerljung, 1999) to the reification of developmentalist and psychological forms of thought that dominate practice and policy (White, 1998).

In another case study involving five European countries, Harder and others (1997) compared the historical, modern and future context of child protection. Describing England and Wales, Pringle said that those countries most distinguished themselves from the other countries by their total lack of social solidarity in the provision of child welfare. Child protection there is characterized by practice guided by massive amounts of official written material and lengthy procedural guidance used locally but tightly coordinated

and controlled by the central authority. The authors also argue that the massive organizational resources put to bear on protecting children has not necessarily led to better outcomes for children in England and Wales compared to elsewhere, particularly when considering sexual abuse. On the other hand, the Nordic countries (citing Finland and Denmark) have a generally undifferentiated approach to child abuse and one could therefore surmise that some cases of abuse may be overlooked either at the referral stage or during an inquiry if explicit efforts are not made to screen for it.

Pringle (1998) analyzed child welfare in five European social welfare systems: the neo-liberal system of the UK, conservative corporatist states such as Germany, the Nordic countries, rudimentary systems in southern Europe and those of Eastern Europe. While challenging the aggregation of many countries (and also of the aggregation of different forms of abuse and neglect), he compares these five systems along a number of dimensions from family support structures, childcare services, access to parental leave, and social care services for children in need or at risk. Taking child sexual abuse as a case study, Pringle critiqued both child protection and family support models for failing children but in different ways. He provides evidence to support the contention that both fail to detect the full extent of sexual abuse. Further, the protection model fails to offer the therapeutic help that victims need. Family support structures that offer non-punitive service to offenders and therapeutic services to families may result in another form of victimization inflicted on children because these structures do not address or mitigate masculine power as a central causative factor in child sexual abuse.

Pringle and Harder (1999) went on to compare Danish social policy “through two pairs of eyes”. That is, English and Danish child welfare are presented individually and then examined through the view of the “other”. Topics compared were in the area of child welfare in its broadest definition. Comparisons were made of welfare provisions for families such as child benefits, day care services, and parental leave arrangements for parents. The focus then turned to the social care (care and protection) of children at risk or children who had been harmed. Preventive and therapeutic approaches to services were compared along with the placement of children outside of their homes. In the book, the authors discuss, among other things, the strengths and weaknesses of social-democratic child welfare in Denmark and neo-liberal child welfare in England. Paradoxically, the English system’s unexpectedly progressive features have the potential of being better able to respond to sexual abuse and to allow for anti-oppressive practice because it is more subject to paradigm shifts (swings) than the entrenched Danish bureaucracy.

Most recently, Hetherington (1998) and Hetherington and Piquart (2001) addressed child welfare work in several European countries from the perspectives of both the social worker and the client. In the first paper, the author wanted to describe and understand the lived experience of social workers in different countries—how they work and how families experience

this. Hetherington argued that comparative models must address: governing structures, service delivery and the law as all informing the relationship between worker and client. As a theoretical study, the author argued that the use of comparison assists in the critical examination of child welfare systems by drawing attention to similarities and differences existing in the underlying structures that guide the everyday work of social workers in different places. This study is methodologically informative because the author used a vignette during focused discussions with social workers in eight systems and used interviews with parents in three countries to reflect on decision making self and others in different contexts. The study also talks about the structure and function of child welfare and child protection in comparison. It does not provide a theoretical explanation of the interplay between lived experiences of social workers or clients and the structures that give rise to these experiences.

In the second paper, the authors compare parental strategies of participation in three European countries (England, France, and Germany) that may lead different child welfare systems to respond more effectively to some families than to others. The German system (collectivist, low participation) is said to be more responsive to proactive, assertive users seeking help. The French system is similar but supports more the passive user. The English system best supports parents who accept help in the form it is offered. But, being proactive suggests that a parent is able to manage alone and is less needy. In this paper, the authors use a biographical method based on accounts of child welfare clients to contribute to alternative ways of viewing and interpreting child welfare structures in different systems. The study represents a new way of developing insights into what the authors call three child welfare regimes. The authors make regime types relevant not just to professions working in different child welfare systems but to service users (mothers) as well.

In a study underscoring the practical application of cross-national comparative studies in child welfare, Gold et al. (2001) compared the use of risk assessment and recommended interventions in Israel and Canada. The study found significant differences between the two countries regarding workers' age and level of experience, with Canadians being older and more experienced than Israelis are. There were also significant differences in the assessments of the child and parents and of risk to the child, with Canadians rating risks at a higher level than Israelis do. In a comparison of social workers with three years or more of experience, the Canadians were more likely than Israelis to recommend removing the child from the home. But Israeli social workers were more influenced by the parents' cooperativeness than Canadians. The authors conclude that the differences found reflect the different social, cultural, and political contexts in which these professionals work.

Since policies and programs are relative to time and place, it makes sense to compare places. These comparisons must be made in a way that accounts

for the context in which policies and programs develop. The values of lessons learned depend on how carefully and sympathetically an issue has been identified, defined and analyzed. If different welfare systems are going to continue to play a role in the welfare of children, more needs to be learned about the substance of different child welfare orientations, the complex and varied service forms found in this branch of the personal social services, and their bearing on present trends in child welfare such as “best practice”, “evidence based social work”, and “best interests of the child”. It requires skill and a systematic approach to explain how and why something appears to work in one setting as a prelude to calculating in chances of succeeding somewhere else.

### 3. Theoretical Standpoints

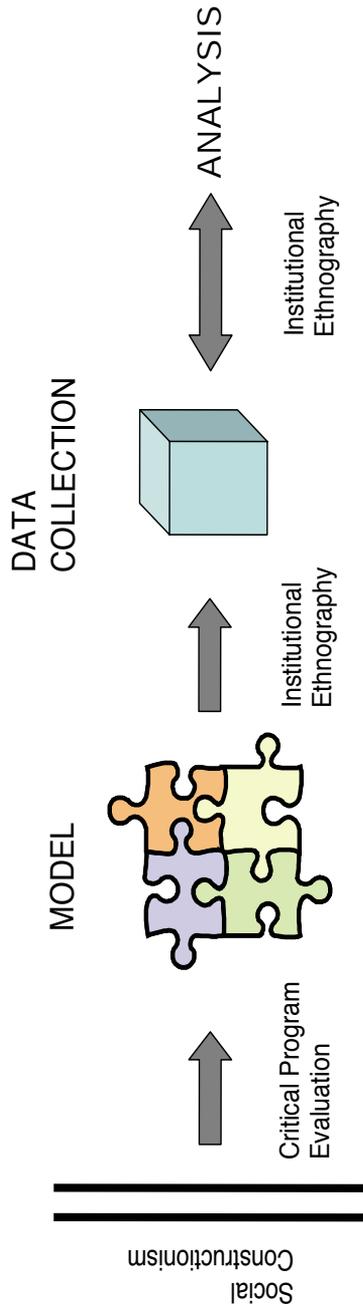
In this section, I put forward the proposition that cross-national child welfare research can be successfully carried out by grounding the research in three complementary theoretical approaches: i) social constructionism (an epistemological theory to frame how one may view social phenomena); ii) critical program evaluation theory (an evaluation theory to direct the focus to personal social services); and iii) institutional ethnography (as the overall methodological theory for carrying out the study and its analyses). Each of these theoretical approaches favours its own particular perspective on the nature of reality, the purpose of inquiry and the kinds of explanations that can be derived from the research process. Because these theories sometimes overlap but otherwise are positioned as distinct approaches, it is important that I clarify how I take up these perspectives and use theory in various ways in the research project (**Figure 1**). Since I take the position that the social world is replete with constructed phenomena, social constructionism is positioned at the starting point of this dissertation. Critical program evaluation has been used to develop the comparative model (shown in the figure as a puzzle). Institutional ethnography bridges both the data collection and analyses in this research.

Theory development ought to occur as part of any research design in case studies and should occur prior to data collection (Yin, 1994 pp. 28-32). However, rather than taking a rigidly deductivist position that Yin puts forward my approach is adductive in the sense that I pull together theory to explain the core comparisons being made. The centrality of theory development at the outset of this study is particularly relevant when we consider the difficulties involved in carrying out research across cultures and national boundaries.

Difficulties in cross-national child welfare research commence as soon as we begin to talk about the *problem* to be addressed by either government or non-governmental organizations. The use of incongruent terminology can lead to difficulties and misunderstandings at each step in the research process, from the construction of the research proposal to the coding and interpretation of data (Brink, 1991). This is not simply an issue of language. Cultural relativism—or different worldviews—plus linguistic barriers can make such research extremely challenging. Cross-cultural comparative research poses challenges in establishing equivalence (for example of terms such as physical or sexual abuse and neglect) and eliminating biases, including interpreter biases toward or against either individual utterances or whole systems (Van de Vijver and Leung, 1997). These problems are particularly challenging in child maltreatment research where countries have different definitions of and orientations to concepts such as child welfare, child protection, abuse and neglect (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, 1998).

Figure 1

# Theories Used in Stages of Research



Recognizing the cultural, political, and historical complexity in which child welfare is situated in Sweden and Canada, I had to devise a way of comparing social services in two communities that would allow me to hypothesize that local findings were characteristic of each nation as a whole.

I take the more liberal approach to positivist-interpretivist paradigms put forward by Rodwell (1998 pp. 13). The author argues that the paradigms cannot be entirely held apart but that social work research must bring to light those assumptions made about the nature of reality and of what perspectives the researcher uses in making methodological choices.

In this research project, I have tried to hold to the position that there is something that we may view as a structural reality in the physical world. That is, when an adult raises a belt and strikes a child, the belt is as real as the welts that rise on a child's body. Reality ends there though since multiple versions of reality may exist from the perspectives of the child, the parent, and a social worker who responds to hearing of or seeing the "harmed" child. To make my approach clear, I do not examine these various constructed realities. Rather, I inquire into realities produced by social workers in two contexts.

### **3.1. Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism is a sociological theory that embraces the viewpoint that our understanding of reality is not a one-for-one representation of what is "out there" but the result of both individual and social processes, mediated by way of language, which alter, select, and transform our experiences (Burr, 1995). Social constructionism views understanding as something that human beings are born into. From our earliest moments, our lives are inextricably bound to the social context, most especially by language, which serves as an a priori interpretative framework for experience. Thus, social life establishes not only what experience individuals will have, but also how that experience will be interpreted (Berger and Luckmann, 1991).

Processes of social construction are important in terms of how we see the world as researchers, as social workers and as individuals (adults and children). Social constructionism itself is a contested theory with many arguments about how far we can go in positioning that reality is unknowable. I take the position that it is possible and necessary to try to explain how social phenomena are constructed and in this sense develop an understanding of other people's realities or lived experiences.

In considering the state of child welfare in different countries, we really must remember that children live constructed lives. The idea that childhood is socially constructed is to say that it is a product of the *time* and *space* in which it is experienced. As stated by Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta and Wintersberger (1994), "childhood is the life-space which our culture limits it to be, i.e. its definitions through the courts, the school, the family, the economy, and also through philosophy and psychology". The authors go on to say that there is

not one childhood but many. I would go further to say that in child welfare there are 'normal' and 'abnormal' childhoods.

My particular understanding of the social constructionist approach (see also Gergen, 1985; James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998) allows the problem of child abuse and neglect to be examined for how child welfare structures and interventions are bound by the social context as a whole. As we begin to discuss social problems that supposedly occur in various cultures, we realize that the so-called problem is rooted in a particular "knowledge" of the subject. This knowledge of the problem is culturally and historically specific, is sustained by people and language, and is thus not a static, unchanging entity (Burr, 1995). For example, the problem of child neglect is embedded within a society's culture, history, and politics; whereas the discourse on child neglect is strongly tied to the social work profession, the particular bureaucracies of child welfare, and to matters of class, gender, race and, of course, age (Swift, 1995b).

In social work generally, the child is often the focus of intervention both as an individual and within the wider contexts of the family system and the community. While intervention draws upon an eclectic theoretical knowledge base, one prevailing, socially constructed view of childhood is embedded in all of these mainstream theories. Childhood is considered to be a relatively universal process and thus children are slotted *en masse* into one social category (James et al., 1998). Although it is acknowledged that children may be socialized into very different social and cultural milieus, much of child welfare training stresses the importance of child development.

The emphasis on childhood as a social and developmental category currently dominates the discourse in work carried out with abused or neglected children (Coohey and Braun, 1997; Corby, 2000; Daniel, 2000). What is often overlooked is the notion that childhood is essentially shaped by powerful adults but is lived by children. Furthermore, the meaning ascribed to childhood is not the same for all children. It means something very different to the relatively powerless children of the lower socio-economic classes who are the "meat and potatoes" of the child welfare system. Thus, social constructions of childhood are influential in determining the kinds of intervention carried out. Since the knowledge base underpinning social work is so tied to meanings of childhood, once childhood is defined one way, other definitions and other modes of intervention are discarded (Carstens, 2001).

The problem of child maltreatment is defined by the state and by the professional bureaucrats assigned to the task of intervening. In this sense, child maltreatment is a social phenomenon embedded within and evolving along side the particular historic, political and legal contexts in which it is identified. It takes form in the milieu of class, gender, race, and age.

Modernization and individualization are two key processes that have influenced our contemporary understanding of childhood and have impacted the lives of children by shifting norms away from traditionally shared beliefs,

attitudes and behaviours toward individualistic, autonomous and secular views of the self in society (Ester, Halman, and deMoor, 1994). Qvortrup et al. (1994) describe childhood as becoming feminized, institutionalized, pauperized, and marginalized. These processes have not necessarily had positive effects on children. O'Neill (1994) criticizes, amongst other things, individualism's effect of silencing the collective voice of children in society.

The silent social class of children is nevertheless economically significant because they create "childwork" or work organized and done by adults on or for children who are the objects of this work activity. This "childwork" can be most obviously seen within the context of day care settings, school systems (Oldman, 1994), and in child welfare (Campbell, 1992).

Child welfare work has been socially constructed within specific cultural, historical, political, organizational and professional contexts. Child welfare work has become a specialized form of "childwork" because the prevailing view is that children need protection as an "endangered species" in the face of societal problems, family breakdown, and moral decay. Framed by these contexts, the construction of child neglect underlines this social problem as being the result of a mother's personal deficiencies (Swift, 1995b).

What is not self-evident in this construction is the fact that social workers are often pulled into competing directions because of the ways in which intervention has been socially constructed and has interacted with social constructions of childhood. The space of intervention in child welfare is filled by dominant views of childhood. First, the social worker is faced with the possibility of using two kinds of authority (legal and professional) when intervening into the family on behalf of the state. Second, the worker is required to consider the issue of parental versus children's rights. Third, the social worker must weigh a child's best interests against risk avoidance. All of these concepts or principles in child welfare are socially constructed. A key role of social worker's in child welfare is to mediate between conflicting sets of beliefs and opposing sources of authority (Khoo, 1999; Trocmé, 1999).

The way service providers and the larger society construct the problem of child abuse and neglect leads to particular ways of constructing responses to the problem (Khoo, 1999). In spite of the historical and cultural relativity of social problems, lessons can be learned from cross-national studies and from a greater understanding of cultural contexts. Therefore, new responses to the problem of child abuse and neglect may be found by identifying other, extra-national ways of constructing the problem and its solutions.

### **3.2. Critical Program Evaluation**

In this dissertation, the proposed model for comparing patterns of social program provision is guided by evaluation theory (see Berk and Rossi, 1990; Rossi and Freeman, 1989) and particularly, the value-critical approach put forward by Chambers (1993). When programs are developed, designers begin

with formulating a hypothetical relationship between a program and its goals, stating the strategies for achieving the goals. This “causal hypothesis” states how a particular social problem will be treated. Berk and Rossi (1990) argue that program evaluation must begin with a clear understanding of the social problem because its articulation can result in markedly different kinds of intervention. The utility of the causal hypothesis is measured by its ability to be tested or measured. An evaluation of a program would be analytical-descriptive in method whereby a program’s operating characteristics (in the proposed model, the three dimensions) are simply described from an ideal position—describing how things work and making some kind of judgment on the successfulness of a program.

A value-critical analysis goes one step further in the evaluation of programs. A value-critical analysis seeks to expose the underlying value-based criteria upon which programs are built and implemented (Chambers, 1993). In this sense, frames of references used by legislators, program administrators, agency managers and the social workers in them are made explicit. However, this does not mean that the researcher is committed at the outset to one vision of how states, services or social workers should respond to a particular problem. In applying a value-critical analysis to the comparison of social services for maltreated children, the objective is to “tease out” value bases and frames of reference that lie behind this particular social problem and the program designs aimed at solving the problem.

The value-critical researcher does not apologize for coming to judgment about the goodness, rightness or appropriateness of policies or programs. In fact, judgments are understood to be always value-laden, thus making neutrality an impossibility. As an interpretivist approach, value-critical evaluation begins with parts of a social program and tries to understand and integrate how each service part constitutes the whole of the program, emphasizing a dependency of interventions on service structures. This contrasts with a realist focus on how and why client efforts, “arise from applied interventions in different organizational settings” (Kazi, Blom, Morén, Perdal, and Rostila, 2002).

I would further argue that this approach has additional appeal because it can be taken into the practice experience of frontline workers. When social workers confront social problems, it is considered a useful skill to be able to elucidate the competing values and frames of reference that come to bear. Social workers need to sort out their own values and beliefs against those of the organizations in which they work and those of the clients whom they are ultimately paid to serve. Values and frames of references often are competing since these groups come from different worlds. The same can be said when social workers engage with other professionals to help a client. Thus, the value critical approach can be a useful approach to use when carrying out evaluation research involving social workers who have to confront multiple views of reality in the world of organizations, laws and human expectations.

Experience tells me that social workers are very open to reflecting on the values and beliefs that they come up against in their daily working lives.

If we take the example of child physical abuse, personal, professional and organizational values may all influence in different ways one social worker's belief that a client's (parent's or child's) problem ought to be dealt with on the basis of solidarity with clients, rather than punitive legal action. Organizational values are crucial to the whether or not protection becomes the first priority of a social work. Training and indoctrination also influence whom a social worker identifies as a client and whether efforts will be directed at providing therapeutic and remedial help for parents or to the care and protection of children.

The value-critical approach is consistent with the social constructionist approach because it seeks to elucidate the values, ideology, and contexts that frame the design of personal social services. It has a good fit with social work's current professional preoccupation with multiple perspectives on the human condition. Below, in the section on the structure of personal social services, I will make specific reference to the specific program characteristics that ought to be critically analysed.

### **3.3. Institutional Ethnography**

In this dissertation, I am interested in understanding the particular conditions under which experiences of social workers are described in ways that delineate differences in the organization and delivery of child welfare services in Sweden and Canada. Institutional ethnography provides the theoretical and methodological means to do this.

Institutional ethnography is a contemporary, structural feminist variant of ethnography. The approach to empirical inquiry is associated with the prominent Canadian social theorist Dorothy E. Smith. Institutional ethnography combines theory and methodology in the emphasis of connections among the sites and situations of everyday life, professional practice, and policy making (Smith, 1987). Such connections are accomplished primarily through a form of social coordination that Smith has labelled "textually-mediated social organization". Smith developed the approach initially in a feminist context; however it has much wider application. As the development of the institutional ethnography methodology has developed, researchers have taken up a variety of substantive topics, including the organization of health (Campbell, 2001; Travers, 1996), education (Muller, 1988; Smith, 2001), and social work practice (deMontigny, 1995a), the regulation of sexuality, police and judicial processing of violence against women (Pence, 2001), and international development and migration (Sharma, 2001).

In a description of the practice of occupational therapy, Townsend (1996) showed how context shapes practice in that profession and demonstrated how

practice is ideologically organized, i.e. organized around particular ideas and knowledge. This does not have to mean a top-down theory of power per-se. Rather, social work practice is embedded in organizational processes that do not rely on overt forms of power (coercion, force or abuse). The power in ruling relations is in their ability to describe, categorize, define, direct, visually represent, or otherwise coordinate and control the everyday world (Smith, 2001). While other factors are important influences on the organization and practice of social work, institutional ethnography emphasizes documentary processes as maintaining certain knowledge as truer than others in shaping practice.

Knowledge is specific, being both culture-bound and time-bound. It is sustained by people, by language, and by their shared (ruled) knowledge, which is sustained by ruling relations. Knowledge is also active in the sense that it is changeable or impermanent but at the same time sustained as efforts are made by the powerful to include some forms of knowledge and exclude others. Therefore, researchers should examine documents and organizational processes (what we call structure) since they offer empirical evidence about the presence, absence, or use of knowledge in an institution. This knowledge is then taken up in the everyday practice of people working in particular organizations or institutions.

As the name implies, the methodology is ethnographic; studying groups of individuals, lifeways or patterns including beliefs and practices of a culture. Its focus is on revealing aspects of social patterns or observed conduct. Its approach is interpretive—searching for understanding within social norms and culturally patterned behaviour. Furthermore, as an ethnographic methodology, this approach aims to describe alternative realities; develop explications grounded in life experiences; better understand complex groupings of people; and better understand human activities.

Institutional ethnography's focus is to better-understand power relations that shape experiences for women (or other subordinated groups like members of ethnic minorities, lower classes, etc.). Institutional ethnography is similar to ethno-methodology in the sense that the subjects themselves are not the focus of the inquiry. The approach attaches the micro level of everyday personal experiences to the macro level of institutions. A way to distinguish this from the naturalistic ethnography mentioned above is to consider that the implications of an institutional ethnographic analysis are found at a macro level.

Institutional ethnography's chief concern is with political-economic contexts and bases of everyday working life and of ruling than most qualitative approaches; it is sensitive to textual and discursive dimensions of social life, but is grounded more firmly in the fieldwork study of texts-in-use than most forms of discourse analysis. Using institutional ethnography's advantage in looking at texts in action, we applied the approach to examine social interventions.

Institutional ethnography argues that texts (or documents in other forms) are essential to how organizations exist. The approach suggests that texts regulate and give authority to people's activities in a particular way—texts enter into people's local practices of writing, reading, liking, and doing, thereby coordinating people's activities locally and translocally. Texts for example make possible the appearance of the same set of words, to be taken up in multiple local sites, however differently they may be read and taken up. They still provide for a standardized recognizability of people's doing as organizational doing. Texts in this sense stabilize people's activities. They do this by producing a text-reader conversation in which one side is stubbornly fixed—the text remains the constant point of reference against which interpretations can be checked (Smith, 2001).

Pence (2001) provides an interesting example of how texts enter into organizational processes in the American legal system's response to battered women. She identifies the emergency phone number—911— (equivalent to 112 in most of Europe) as the first in a series of texts that produce a coordinated response to the battered woman. Pence then goes on to describe many of the other texts from computer generated responses used by emergency personnel, to court files and social agency case files as all having ideological work embedded in them. In all of the textually-mediated work processes, the voice and experience of women is erased and filled in with other agenda. These include police reports that focus on the alleged offender and that information needed to secure a conviction. Pence does not question whether each of these texts has equal status or importance. Each of the texts serves the purpose of showing a chain of relations between the simplest of texts—911—and the most complicated—the court transcript.

While texts have a key place in institutional ethnography, interviews do as well. Interviews are used in various ways in social research but we can say that in general they are used as sources for learning about individual experience or, as in the case of focus groups, group attitudes, feelings or opinions. This research project used an institutional ethnographic approach in the focus group study of investigation, documentation and other organizational processes of social intervention in child welfare. In this sense, the purpose was not to make generalizations about the group of people interviewed. Rather, I was looking for social processes that have a generalizing effect that could be revealed in the words of the members of the group. The entry point is what the social workers say in relation to their professional experience.

DeVault and McCoy (2002) say that frontline professionals such as social workers become important informants in institutional ethnographic research because they are in a position to make linkages between clients and ruling discourses, "working up" the messiness of an everyday circumstance so that it fits the categories and protocols of the particular professional regime. Interviewing frontline workers also has its challenges though. These workers

have been trained to use specific ways of thinking which the research is trying to “unpack”. They are accustomed to work from within a ruling discourse. To fill in gaps and to move beyond the frontline in order to make a fuller organizational analysis of macro-institutional policies and practice that organize local settings, I had to seek out texts that would tell me something about how local work is organized. Views from the front line and proclamations from authorities higher up in child welfare systems made it possible to see “how much of what they say is connected to institutional processes and how much is connected to the person” (ibid.)

A typical research question in an institutional ethnography would be, “How is it that these people are saying what they are saying?” Furthermore, rather than building theory, the researcher seeks to explicate how social theories and policies work, in concert with related institutional processes, to regulate activities in local sites. This approach has shaped my particular research interest and focus in understanding the interplay between structure and interventions in different child welfare systems.

## **Summary**

In summary, these three theoretical frames constitute a critical social research approach that aims at an analysis of social processes delving beneath ostensive and dominant conceptual frames, in order to reveal the underlying practices, their historical specificity and structural manifestations. The social structure is a particular historical manifestation and any analysis of it is located in the context of a wider historical analysis. Phenomena are therefore analyzed in terms of the way they relate to wider social structures and in terms of their historical manifestations (Harvey, 1990). Epistemologically, a critical approach to research takes the position that facts cannot exist independently of their theoretical context and thus methodologically, the researcher must go beyond taken-for-granted assumptions about abstract concepts such as child abuse and endeavour to extricate the concept from underlying relations of knowledge production. In this sense, this dissertation endeavours to unravel the differences between two child welfare systems by investigating and analyzing the production of these in fundamental and elemental terms. Each concept is in fact a relationship between structure and intervention. By grounding the study in the three theoretical approaches described above, the terms child welfare and child protection can be understood in terms of the relationship between structure and intervention.

## **4. Research Design and Methods**

This section presents a framework for making comparisons of personal social services, out of which a model was developed for use in this research project's cross-national comparisons of services in child welfare. The section begins with a brief description of my use of a qualitative approach in this research project. The purpose of this section is to make an epistemological link between theory (including methodological theory), the design of the comparative model and the data collection methods used. The three-dimensional model is presented; methods of data collection are preceded by a description of each dimension. Brief attention is given to the topic of triangulation in qualitative methods. This section is followed by a discussion of the overall procedure used to carry out the research cited in this dissertation's four separate studies. The section wraps up with an ethical discussion and the last word goes to discussing my own position as researcher in this study.

### **4.1. The qualitative approach in this study**

This dissertation uses a qualitative approach to research design, collection and analysis of data. Qualitative social work research is often centred around the everyday experiences of social workers even as this form of inquiry often aims to understand the broader contexts of social work and social policy (Shaw and Gould, 2001). The editors point out that we should not take for granted what is meant by the context of social work practice. Context has temporal and local aspects but also 'stands in immediate relation to the distribution of power' (Giddens, 1993, p. 120), which institutional ethnographers have argued arises through textually-mediated ruling relations (Campbell and Manicom, 1995). This approach is also interpretive, answering questions of "how" and "why". Furthermore, qualitative social work research does not set about the task of data collection in a linear fashion but rather can be seen as an analysis of the familiar, or even mundane, aspects of social work.

This study also can be regarded as a qualitative evaluation of two social programs in child welfare. Loske (1989) has argued that the field of evaluation research is highly in need of qualitative approaches to stand against the tide of quantitative research. When considering a field such as child abuse and neglect, it is very important to have a qualitative paradigm in which the process of service delivery can be understood from the point of view of, among other people, the social workers doing the work. Qualitative methods are a good approach to use when the evaluation is interested in exploring process from various perspectives.

It has been argued that the use of quantitative methods is a more precise, and (perhaps) more objective way of presenting analytical frameworks and

explanations (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Indicator-based research attempts to achieve objectivity and precision by answering specific questions about the causal relationship between variables (Neuman, 1999). However, in cross-national research, quantitative analysis is a risky business due to problems with defining analytical tools and measurements. Establishing reliability in a statistical sense becomes a major problem, as does the question of the validity of indicators selected as signs of what they are meant to represent. The simple act of having to select quantifiable indicators may distort later analyses. One reason however for not using quantitative measures in this study has to do with the fact that while research has had some limited effect in showing cause-effect relationships between program variables and outcomes (Hébert, Lavoie, Piché, and Poitras, 2001), these methods either do not explain how programs and interventions work or tend to provide oversimplified reasons for the successes or failures of programs (Morén and Blom, 2003 pp. 23; Trocmé, 1999).

Qualitative methods have the potential of allowing researchers to explore the complex relationships among program goals and methods used by human service workers. However, the method itself is not determinative of the kind of knowledge produced from any research. Once again, we are reminded of the importance of a logical connection between theory and method. Qualitative evaluations are founded on a meta-theoretical perspective that we can find out *how* things work (and find connections between structure and intervention) by allowing for the examination of practical conditions of service delivery and putting a human face to social intervention. This is very important because ignoring the practical realities of service conditions will mean that policies continue to be produced that are wonderful in theory but unworkable in practice.

In setting out the strengths of the qualitative program evaluation methodologies, Green (1994) points out that evaluators can rarely assume the role of disinterested and neutral researchers in the value-laden arena of program evaluation. Hence, knowledge claims made by researchers are interlocked with values and are bound by time and place, making them probabilistic and contestable. Kazi (in Morén and Blom, 2003 pp. 18) points out that these kinds of “interpretivist” approaches to evaluation are opposed to empirical practices and suspicious of outcome evaluations. In this sense, the emphasis of this research is not on developing generalizable knowledge in the statistical sense. Rather, a qualitative case study in evaluation, as is used in this research, has the function of lifting up the political value bases of different child welfare systems and contextualizing their explicit or implicit purposes.

The fact is that social programs are designed to do something about complex human problems. For this reason, it is very difficult to evaluate on the relative benefits of certain structures or interventions over others. But, qualitative methods may be better able to deal with this “messy reality”

because they delve deeper into investigations of structure, intervention and their interplay in the personal social services.

## **4.2. The Framework**

To compare the ways in which Sweden and Canada protect children, this dissertation focuses on the cross-national comparison of personal social services in child welfare. The personal social services may be defined as services directed toward social change or social control in individuals, families, and small groups of people. The salient feature of personal social services is that they are provided primarily through direct contact between social workers and clients (Berk and Rossi, 1990).

In spite of the increasing global acceptance of child abuse and neglect as social problems, attempts to make comparisons in this field of study clearly exemplify the difficulties caused by cultural variations in problem definition and concomitant services produced. From a social work perspective, child welfare services are an exemplary point of comparison because they are heavily dependent on human service and require workers to negotiate complicated norm conflicts such as balancing client rights with the exigency for social control based on prevailing societal norms (see for example: Hesse et al., 1996; Khoo, 1999; Payne, 1999). As evident from the definition above, the personal social services are ill-defined. Given considerable inter-nation variation, the various functions of programs, and the fact that personal social service is a disparate category of social welfare provisions with amorphous boundaries, the collection of complete and consistent data requires considerable creativity.

To begin the cross-national comparison of personal social services, we must ask whether child abuse and neglect, or indeed any other social condition, is visible as a social problem to which a government responds through the provision of personal social services rather than monetary or other social transfers. The concept of social services is not always clear and as we try to define the sector of personal social services, cross-national comparisons become more challenging. Nygren et al. (1997) apply such labels as “social care services” and the “fifth social services” while explaining changes to the service concept in Scandinavian social policy. Chambers (1993) notes that personal social services are “soft benefits” that bring clients in direct contact with service providers for the purpose of social control or the production of change. Their intents are to prevent social problems, and to produce or sustain change in individuals, families, or groups of people. Services are pre-determined to some extent by existing bureaucracies such as government agencies or private (and semi-private) organizations and may be offered on a voluntary or involuntary basis. Finally, these services are highly individualized by social workers who have certain discretionary powers and who understand the importance of constructive and empathic relationships

when serving clients in crisis but who also act according to context specific professional standards (Rossi and Freeman, 1989).

In a cross-national comparison of the personal social services in child welfare, the researcher must also ensure that, in the places compared, there exists a shared understanding of a social situation to which a personal social service is provided as a response. That is, that there is an agreement that a social problem “exists” but not necessarily an agreement as to how the problem can be solved. Underlying the personal social services is a definition of the causes of the social problem to which the services are supposed to provide a solution. Chambers (1993) refers to the causal aspect as *program theory* and the problem solution as *program design*. As Agathonos-Georgopoulou (1998) and others (SOU, 2000) have reported, there is disagreement or divergence of program theories forming state responses to child maltreatment. In England (in much the same way as Canada), where the response historically has been one of protection from abuse rather than the meeting of a broader spectrum of needs (Bini and Toselli, 1997), the personal social services continue to emphasize proceduralized responses (Wells, Fluke, and Hendricks Brown, 1995). In Sweden, where the program theory of the National Board of Health and Welfare describes targeted children and youth as sometimes being in “need” due to deficiencies in their environment or individual behaviours, the state does not single out physical, sexual or other abuse or neglect referrals as requiring a particular response (Socialstyrelsen, 1998). Nevertheless, we know that concerns about the abuse or maltreatment of children do fall within the mandates of the personal social services in both nations (F/P/T Working Group, 2002; SOU, 2000). Thus, in comparisons of Sweden and Canada, this study looked for definitions of the social problem and for variations in definitions. In the end, the intellectual puzzle was whether these two countries, both acknowledging the existence of child abuse and neglect, actually put forth differing personal social services for children and if these services do in fact differ, how they manifest themselves and why.

These questions drove this research project first toward an analytical-descriptive comparison of the services using the three-level model presented below. The goal of an analytic-descriptive approach is simply to generate a description of the service (Chambers, 1993). Comparatively, this approach can be used to determine variations in program design. Thus, a whole program is divided into a number of categories, wherein the challenge is to identify features that are (or are not) congruent or consistent with each other (Rein, 1983). However, according to Rein (ibid) policy or program analysis must also go beyond a description in order for the analysis to be complete; it should reach conclusions about the relative strengths or weaknesses of program features based on their connection to program goals and on the values underlying the programs.

As described earlier, a value-critical analysis compares personal social service in a way that produces value-laden interpretations about how well

personal social services respond to a social problem. In the case of child abuse and neglect, we would therefore want to develop an analysis of the consequences to families and children of being involved with one type of service compared to another. In practice, it is not a simple matter particularly in cross-national research. Child welfare outcome research has had enough difficulty trying to build evidence that certain structures or interventions produce better results for children than others (Centre for Child and Family Research, 2002; Corby, 2000). In this case, adding the dimension of comparing one country's personal social services with another makes the endeavour even more uncertain. Nevertheless, this study suggests that it is possible to make links between program theory/design, the ideal or intended forms of the personal social services, and what we actually see as services. One caveat is that any conclusions reached when making these comparisons must avoid charges of analytical reductionism, heuristic kite-flying, or leaping to morally imperialistic and ethnocentric judgments about the superiority of one social program over another.

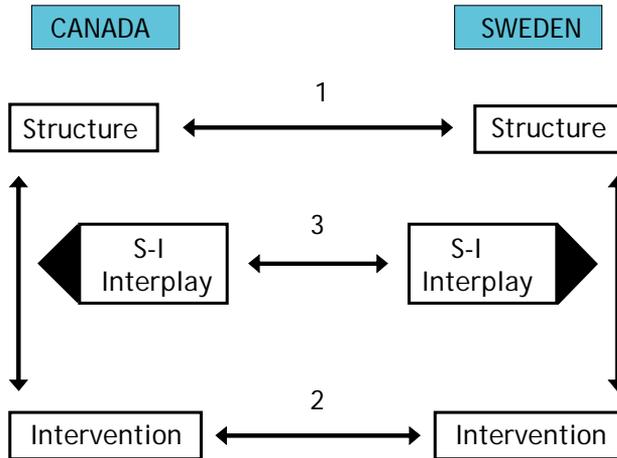
This research project took a narrow approach in the selection of those services to be compared. I chose to focus only on those agencies or programs that must initiate an investigative response to referrals regarding a child who has been harmed or may be at risk of being harmed. While other services may be provided collaterally to the child or family (e.g. anger management, children's mental health), this study addresses government directed agencies to which clients may be legally required to accept the service through direct contact with a social worker.

### **4.3. Model for the Cross-National Comparison of Personal Social Services**

In this sub-section, I present the model I developed and used to compare the two child welfare agencies in Sweden and Canada (see **Figure 2**). The idea here is not to compare the three dimensions sequentially but to disaggregate each dimension opening it up to comparison. The dimensions in this model are: i) Structure—including service context and service features; ii) Intervention—the activities and decision-making processes engaged in by the social work staff; and iii) Structure-Intervention Interplay—essentially the two-way relationship between structure and intervention. In cross-national research, the purpose is to uncover how structural conditions and intervention influence each other. Each of the parameters used in the model is deduced from previous research in evaluation and child welfare. The sources for the choices of these parameters are presented under each sub-heading describing the dimensions of the model. All aspects of the model will be thoroughly discussed below.

Figure 2

Three-dimensional Model for Cross National Comparison



#### 4.3.1. Structure of the Personal Social Services

In detailing the cornerstones of all social policies and programs, Chambers (1993) refers to operating characteristics and contexts whereas Rossi and Freeman (1989) refer to the program delivery system, and Berk and Rossi (1990) refer to policy space and program activities. In keeping with the fundamentals of these approaches, I compare personal social services in child welfare from a cross-national perspective in a way that covers the two essential features comprising the structure of services. These two features are:

- Service Context—policy context, legal context, and professional context.
- Service Features—including goals and objectives, service forms, entitlement or eligibility rules, and an administrative or organizational structure for service delivery.

##### a. Service Context

In the model, the contexts investigated were those directly tied to the service's assumptions regarding the aetiology of a given problem such as child abuse and neglect. These three contexts were: policy context, legal context,

and professional context. This study therefore explored the location of child welfare services within the service context. Thus, this examination investigated general and specific aspects of the social welfare environment as they pertained specifically to the identified problem of child abuse and neglect. Therefore, different approaches to typifying social welfare systems were reviewed. (Much of this is found in the literature review. See also: Mabbett and Bolderson, 1999; O'Connor, 1989)

Social policy may or may not be specifically directed at children's welfare or targeted toward prevention or intervention. Policies aimed at poverty reduction, employment, social citizenship and health care may have an impact on conditions leading to physical abuse and neglect. Policies may be more or less limited in scope and, in this sense, may only be directed at those families where risk of harm is considered significant. In most countries, social policies produce a mix of universal and means tested benefits though the blend of both (%-wise) varies (Vogel, 1999). The limited ambition of this study was to try to understand the scope of policy and its potential consequences for the organizations and social workers who must take stock of the scope of policy as a matter of daily practice. Social workers cannot be all things to all people all of the time.

To illustrate social policy's scope, it is generally described as family policy when the family is the deliberate target of specific actions, and measures initiated are designed to have an impact on family resources, and ultimately on family structure. Some countries such as the UK and Canada take a minimalist view that the state should only provide a safety net in certain, limited circumstances. Others, including France and Sweden, take on active family policies that encourage, for example, the establishment of larger families or that parents (mothers) stay at home with young children. The state is seen as having a key role in "caring" for people at many life stages from day care for young children to homes for the aged, though the extent of that role and its form varies from place to place.

The legislative context is also a key to understanding differences in child welfare systems. Child welfare and other social services are often framed or guided by legislation. Some parts of legislation may prohibit specific behaviour by adults toward children while other parts direct the state to intervene in such cases. Therefore, in making comparisons between different child welfare systems, the manifest and latent goals of legislation become important areas of examination, although these are undoubtedly specific to time and place (O'Halloran, 1999). For example, laws may or may not define child abuse and neglect, and I was of course interested in if and how this social problem was expressed in law and in the values and assumptions that may lay behind various definitions. Comparisons of the legal context were of particular importance when examining the authority of social workers and how much of their authority is tied to their ability to enforce the will of the child welfare system by calling upon legal (court-enforced) measures.

This study investigated the professional context to develop hypotheses as to whether certain child welfare bureaucracies are more or less regulated or controlled than others. Bureaucracy is a body of officials or an administrative group that is characterized by specializations of “functions”, adherence to fixed rules, and a hierarchy of authority (Mintzberg, 1993). It is marked by officialism and proliferation. Child welfare bureaucracies are operationalized by professions (most often but not exclusively by social workers). The bureaucracies may be tightly regulated resulting in less freedom in the intervention process. On the other hand, some bureaucracies are less tightly controlled, resulting in greater professional autonomy in this process.

Mintzberg (1993), Dawson (1996), and Campbell and Gregor (2002) all reflect on the importance of organizational and structural features in orchestrating the everyday activities of people working in human services. When I looked at the professional contexts in Sweden and Canada, I was interested in the following organizing elements: standardizing functions; specialization; work strategies; locus of control; and professional autonomy. The reasons for this interest are that child welfare work is complex and must be controlled by the standardization of either work processes or the professional skills of social workers. Further, the specialization of social workers varies as may the work strategies they use in different contexts. The issue of control is of great significance in such situations where there is a palpable power disparity between social workers and clients; and as much as social workers are able to wield this power, their authority in these different contexts may derive from different sources.

#### **b. Service Features**

The following description of services features is taken from Rossi and Freeman (1989). The organization of personal social services needs to have an administrative and functional structure as well as the personnel needed to produce services. This constitutes the organization of personal social services. But, because no service is free and not everyone can/should be serviced, the reach of a child welfare services is limited by rules and regulations allocating services, denying as well as qualifying clients.

Coverage is the extent to which a program is reaching its intended target population. Coverage efficiency is 100 % when all those targeted are served. Even if coverage is 100 %, not everyone is served. Eligibility or entitlement may be based on a variety of factors. In child welfare, administrative rules are supposed to clarify policy and legislation to make program delivery more fair and reliable. When workers are faced with a situation where they have to decide if an injured child is “abused”, neglected or at risk, professional discretion is called into play in the interpretation of law and policy. These may not reveal what rules a worker is to use to make interpretations. When there are no guidelines, professional discretion is called upon in rendering opinions

on situations and making decisions based on training and experience though by the law.

A program goal is a statement in general and abstract terms of the desired qualities to be achieved by the service. “What is the purpose of this program or policy?” In fact, all elements of a program can be evaluated on the basis of their contributions to program goals and objectives. Goals focus on outcomes. Thus, the goal of most child abuse programs is to protect from abuse children who are too young to protect themselves. When a program is not specifically targeted at eliminating child abuse, the analyst must look for latent goals that may be embedded in other goals. Goals are an expression of the desired end in targeting services at a specific social problem.

Objectives are specific, empirical, operational statements about the desired and observable outcome. Objectives are supposed to be measurable. Programs cannot be evaluated for effectiveness unless there is a measurable objective against which data from actual achievements can be cast. The importance of objectives is in their concreteness and observability and thus in their direct use in measuring and evaluating social programs.

Service features are operationalized in the establishment of an organization with specified coverage and reach, goals and objectives and a program of activities. The mandate of the organization may be legally binding with externally-based directives and/or may take the form of strategic planning goals and objectives. Finally, program activities form the core of any social program. In social programs for abused and neglected children, these activities may include activities involving parents and children, activities involving the placement of children outside of their biological parents’ home, preventive and treatment programs. Specific service forms in child welfare may include screening procedures, investigation, ongoing family service work, treatment and residential services.

### **c. Data collection in the study of structure**

Identifying relevant services contexts and features can be a difficult task since these may not be found directly in a singular policy document. Sources to search may include: legislation, legislative history, studies or committee reports, and a variety of other official sources. Investigation of the structure of personal social services can employ the comparative method in data collection and analysis, with data collected from primary sources. Comparative researchers examine patterns of similarities and differences across cases and try to come to terms with their diversity (Neuman, 1997). I used the comparative method in collecting data on service structures. What this means is that when a relevant text was identified in either Canada or Sweden, I set about looking for examples of similar texts in the other country. If I did not find a matching text, I faced three questions: 1) Was there no equivalent text; 2) Was there some other dissimilar but appropriate text to pull into the

comparison?; and 3) If no matching text could be found, did this represent a significant comparative difference between structures? From a comparative researcher’s perspective, the first two of these questions were worrisome. Both questions could produce an irksome feeling that perhaps the comparative data were out there but could not be found because of a lack of knowledge or understanding of what to look for and where. This is often a risk when a researcher is a cultural or linguistic ‘outsider’, above all if one assumes to have a strong knowledge of the ‘insider’ culture.

Primary data sources (**Table 1**) are published or unpublished written documents in their original form—from the governments or agencies that have

TABLE 1: Data Sources

Sweden	Canada
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Services Law [Socialtjänstlagen or SoL]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child and Family Services Act and Revisions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reports from the National Board of Health and Welfare [Socialstyrelsen]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance from National Board of Health and Welfare [Socialstyrelsen]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compulsory Care of Young Persons Act [LVU]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ontario Risk Assessment Model: Eligibility Spectrum, Safety Assessment, Risk Assessment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents Act [FB]</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy Statements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local agency recording protocols</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational Charts produced by local agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational Charts produced by local agency</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statistics Sweden [Statistiska centralbyrån]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statistics Canada</li> </ul>

actually produced the material (e.g. legal texts, government standards and guidelines, agency manuals and protocols). These data can provide a rich source of information reflective of the structures and operating procedures of each social program (see: Holt and Turner, 1970 and Rokkan, 1968). It is important to recognize that the political structures in different nations vary

considerably and that these differences have consequences for the delivery of social services.

The above list is provided to demonstrate that data on the structure of personal social services can be obtained from many primary sources. It is not meant to be detailed or exhaustive. Use of these data sources can be found in various places in the articles included in this dissertation.

### **4.3.2. Intervention in the Personal Social Services**

To examine intervention in child welfare, this research project looked at three key areas: the intervention process as a whole, the narrower phenomenon of gatekeeping, and documentation as a salient feature (or product) of child welfare interventions. Each of the areas is developed below.

What will become clear in the text below is that I do not develop an investigation or analysis of the client's position in the intervention process. Morén and Blom (2003) may oppose this apparent reduction of intervention to standardized measures carried out by social workers in certain circumstances and for clients. It appears that they prefer to explore "generative mechanisms" (ibid) wherein change occurs through a special kind of cooperative relationship between worker and client wherein the client is not only a receiver but also giver of "efforts" (in Swedish, *insatser*). In this study, I do not challenge the notion that clients are actors in social interventions. However, one may question how much context predetermines whether and to what extent a client can be a giver of efforts given the heightened significance of the balance of power and use of authority in child welfare (Gelman, 1992; Healey, 1998). I have chosen to limit the focus of this research to actions taken by social workers in relation to the structural conditions in which they work.

#### **a. Intervention Process**

In child welfare and child protection, social intervention includes systematic, planned actions undertaken to direct or influence a client's actions or environment to prevent or remedy a condition that is harmful to a child (Schilling, 1997). Berk and Rossi (1990) have defined this direct contact between social workers and clients as the most conspicuous element in the helping effort. Indeed, in our field research, social worker informants in Sweden and Canada spoke at length, often using similar terms, about the kind of work that they did. They attend to referrals, investigate and assess, and decide on various measures as part of a fundamental intervention process (Soydan and Stål, 1994). Chronologically, intervention covers the social worker's: a) investigation or analysis of a situation and collection of information regarding the client's needs or demands; b) decisions whether or

not to take certain measures; c) actions - even if not opening a case; and d) termination with the recipients of the service.

Where and how then do differences appear? In a cross-cultural comparison, Soydan (1995) showed that these differences appear in the content of the steps taken by social workers in the intervention process described above. Therefore, if the metaphorical shoes shape the steps we take, it makes sense that where we end up (outcomes for both client and worker) will be strongly influenced by what we have on our feet.

Since intervention is the sum of all activities and decisions made by the social worker and in relationship with clients, this cross-national comparison understood intervention by social workers to be a product of the mandate of the agencies in which they work and as they experience it. Intervention exists at the level of the social worker whose responsibility it is to carry out intervention as she is called to do by her professional training and according to the requirements set forth by the service. An investigation of intervention therefore should reveal various aspects of social working in child welfare from the screening of referrals to the direct provision of care, remedial, or control services.

### **b. Gatekeeping**

Gatekeeping is an important area of intervention that this research project has put into focus. As a decision-making point, where social workers determine client eligibility or entitlement to services through screening processes (Swift, 1995a), it is also the point where potential clients first come into contact with child welfare authorities. From my perspective, it may be regarded as an intervention both from the perspective of a social worker carrying out an investigation and the maybe-client who is subject to an investigation or inquiry. Both parties enter into a process together regardless of whether or not this results in a “case” being opened. When we consider the particularly sensitive subject matter that underpins child abuse and neglect investigations, this gatekeeping point is crucial to ongoing interventions with families and children.

A composite from overwhelmingly Anglo-American research has shown that variations in screening policies and practices were mixed and evaluations were lacking (see DePanfilis and Scannapieco, 1994; Downing and Wells, 1990; Drury-Hudson, 1999; Karski, 1999; Pritchard, 1996). In a child protection system, when faced with a choice at the point of first referral, social workers more often label cases as child protection rather than as “inquiries” because the system of bureaucracy and accountability demands this (Spratt, 2000). Sexual abuse allegations are more likely to be investigated and referred for treatment services than physical abuse (Wells et al., 1995). Decision-making at intake is equally complex and lacking in agreement. Buckley (2000) found that social workers in England used considerable discretion in

decision-making but talked about being constrained. Jones (1996) however determined that social workers appropriately discriminated between child protection and childcare cases in a survey of 701 “filtering” decisions by workers at a local authority in England.

What these and other studies point to is that screening processes can not be easily rationalized because of failed assumptions underlying screening processes and failed efforts to connect screening to the need for an attractive and non-stigmatising helping service (Wattam, 1997). The previously mentioned research also informed the current study by highlighting the need for comparative research that can explore connections between different policy orientations, gatekeeping processes and the services that follow for children.

### **c. Documentation**

In child welfare, documentation is an integral part of intervention as social workers spend potentially half of their time writing down information to provide evidence of work (Doner Kagle, 1993). Documentation is a significant aspect of social work practice in child welfare as social workers go about identifying the needs of a child and influences of carer’s behaviour and contextual factors. (Horwath, 2002). The institutional purpose of documentation in child welfare is to produce a permanent record of casework that: assists in effective case management and guides clinical practice; facilitates program planning; and keeps agencies and social workers accountable through the production of a textual audit trail (Ames, 1999). Regardless of its central role however, documentation is still often characterized as a lowly-regarded task (Edwards and Reid, 1989) plagued with problems of poor quality (Trocmé, Mertins-Kirkwood, MacFadden, Alaggia, and Goodman, 1999b), inconsistency (Östberg, Wåhlander, and Milton, 2000), imbalance and error (Fincham, Beach, Moore, and Diener, 1994), bias (Streat, 1987), and failing to be child-centred (Socialstyrelsen, 2000).

Many factors, including organizational imperatives, have an influence on documentation. Given that documents are produced as part of social intervention, child welfare case files therefore provide a rich yet under-exploited source of information to investigate institutionalized responses to child maltreatment. To date, however, there has been little research into the relationship between different institutional responses to child maltreatment and how social workers write-up formal assessment summaries. Therefore, as part of this research project, assessment summaries were studied to see if a connection could be made between certain forms of documentation and different orientations to the care and protection of children.

#### **d. Data collection in the study of intervention**

In cross-national research, the collection of data on intervention must come from multiple sources. Data used to compare and analyze intervention can be collected from two main sources: written records and people (Rossi and Freeman, 1989). Each source provides specific information although there will likely be considerable overlap. Looking at agency records such as files and recordings gives us information about the coverage and content of services, the types of occurrences leading to intervention, and answers some of the questions about what services are provided. The people who can provide information regarding social work interventions can include clients, services providers and members of the community. It is not always feasible to include all three groups and thus the research design must determine which people will provide answers to the questions posed by the study. Thus, I examined documentation in the study of investigations and, together with my colleague, Ulf Hyvönen, PhD, carried out focus groups with frontline social workers (using vignettes) as methods of collecting data in the study of intervention.

#### **e. Intervention**

In this study, the comparison of the intervention level began with the selection and analysis of a cohort of case files each of which had, as its initial identified problem, some feature of child abuse or neglect. Analysis of case recordings is an important technique because it allows the researcher to see how some problems in child welfare (e.g. 'the smell of urine' in a home) can become re-defined and then subject to or excluded from decision making in social intervention (deMontigny, 1995b). The archival data preserved in case files and recordings can provide a glimpse of work carried out in a case, and can show how social workers are required to document intervention (Bernler and Johnsson, 1993). What people say they do is often very different from what people do. This is obvious. My objective was to look for textual links between social interventions and the context of social work practice.

To do this, agencies in Sweden and Canada were contacted in writing and were provided with the same written information about the kinds of case files I was interested in reviewing. Supervisors at each agency were given approximately two weeks to locate files that they considered as meeting the case classifications provided (see below). I examined the files at each agency and information that could identify individuals recorded in the files was removed or blacked out.

As I was interested in examining cases covering the spectrum in child welfare from abuse cases to neglect cases, I obtained one case file (or similar) in each of the following eight categories: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, inappropriate discipline, inadequate care, inadequate supervision, parent problem (e.g. due to alcohol or drug addiction, mental

illness or physical or intellectual inability-parental violence, verbal aggression), and child behaviour problem.

To narrow the study's focus to the formalized writing-up of child welfare investigation, I selected only written material corresponding to assessment summaries. These assessment summaries were first compared to each other within each country and then the assessment summaries were put into comparison cross-nationally. This strategy was intentional and developed from the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the research project. Subjecting each kind of case to a comparison with its trans-national counterpart was impossible and would not have met my aim of making analytical generalizations from the combined summaries and their connections to the child welfare systems.

#### **f. Focus Groups**

A variety of data sources should be used to achieve a greater depth of understanding of social intervention and its relationship to structures in child welfare (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000). To this end, we contacted social workers who could provide us with a degree of knowledge of intervention processes. This study applied both the vignette method and the focus group method. The vignette is an effective tool of presenting a concrete and detailed description of a social situation involving child abuse or neglect to which respondents can approximate their decision-making processes at various stages of intervention (Soydan and Stål, 1994). Focus groups can be a valuable means of generating impressions of how intervention occurs in two countries (Stewart and Shamdani, 1990) and of how social workers talk about child abuse and neglect (Dane, 2000).

Recognizing the problem of inconsistent reporting of process, Morgan (1996) devised a set of standards for the reporting of procedures used in focus group research. I have attempted to adhere to these recommendations in the following brief description of focus group procedures used in this study. In the study, a standardized set of questions and procedures was applied in each group in both countries. The overall frame of the groups used a so-called hourglass approach. That is, we began with a general discussion of intervention, presenting a model of intervention as a means of generating discussion. The focus group then moved into specific questions and were presented with vignettes (see below), and then to a broader discussion of intervention again. In terms of the focus group interview itself, the moderators maintained a semi-structured approach in following a set interview guide. We wanted to be sure that there was consistency in the ways in which the focus groups were held and in terms of the time allotted to each question and section. We held four focus group sessions, two at each agency, in Barrie, Canada and Umeå, Sweden. Each session was approximately two hours in duration with one week between the first and second sessions. In each nation,

we had two co-moderators. The lead moderator spoke the majority language. The second moderator acted as recording technician and “interested outsider”. The number of participants in the focus groups was in the acceptable range (Krueger, 1994) of seven to twelve participants, drawn from teams of social workers who worked in the broad area of child welfare at each agency. Focus groups were audio-taped.

#### **g. Content Analysis**

Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts (Weber, 1990). The presence of these can be quantified or analyzed qualitatively. Interpretation is central to qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2001). Inferences are then made about the significance of these words within the text or even the context (audience, time, place) in which they are part. Content analysis has a wide range of uses in fields as diverse as media studies, literature and rhetoric and political science. It has been used less often in social work. Content analysis can reveal international differences in communication content and identify trends in intentions, focus or means of communication by individuals, groups or institutions.

Conceptual analysis is one form of content analysis I used to a lesser extent in the analysis of focus group transcripts. In this analysis, the researcher begins with a research question. Categories are established a priori and the researcher focuses on and codes for words or patterns that are indicative of the research question. This does not look at the relationship between words or concepts. The researcher simply wants to examine presence, i.e. is there a stronger presence of certain words (e.g. positive or negative) used with respect to the research questions (Gwynne, 1999).

#### **h. Vignettes**

The vignette technique is an important tool in cross-national comparative research (Soydan and Stål, 1994). Studies two and three combined the use of vignettes (Jergerby, 1993) with a focus group approach (Morgan, 1997) as a means of getting respondents to approximate their decision-making processes in response to brief referral information (Soydan and Stål, 1994). Vignettes are short stories in which real-life, specific information is provided to informants. The vignette’s capacity to approximate real life situations is extensive. With the vignette information held constant and presented to a heterogeneous group of respondents (as in our focus groups), we were able to check within the groups for a shared understanding of the content of the vignettes. This reduced the chances for misunderstanding and thus increased the credibility of our interpretations of the respondents’ statements.

Child welfare researchers are using the vignette method as a technique for studying people’s judgments and responses to controlled descriptions of

people, situations or events (Chorn and Parekh, 1998; Drury-Hudson, 1999; Forslund et al., 2002; Holden, Miller, and Harris, 1999; Scott, 1998; Soydan, 1995; Wilson and While, 1998). Thus, the vignette data in this study were limited to what informants *said* in the context of focus groups and could not get closer to what they *do* as may be possible using methods of observation.

In applying the vignette technique, studies may use different numbers of vignettes, presenting one more vignettes to individuals or groups. We chose to use three vignettes with limited information provided in each. Applying the method set out by Soydan and Stål (1994), I devised three short vignettes intentionally giving the social workers both increasing amounts of information and information of escalating seriousness on one fictitious case. Applying my background in child welfare, I developed the vignettes based on knowledge of child welfare referrals and from a review of case files.

### **4.3.3. Structure-Intervention Interplay**

In the personal social services, there are both explicit and implicit links between the structure of services and the contextual interventions taking place. However, this relationship is not always clear. According to the open systems model (Harrison, 1994), organizations are influenced by external conditions, the organizational environment, and by those who work in the organization. Structures comprising the work environment also influence strongly the people working there. Consequently, intervention strategies used to confront a social problem relate to the program structures designed to respond to the problem (Chambers, 1993). The third purpose of our model therefore is to theorize about the relationship between program structures and intervention.

The relationship level can be investigated to determine: i) how key components of structure and intervention relate to the others. It has been argued, for example, that a well-functioning service or program depends on the establishment of a clear and consistent link between service structures and the implementation of specific services (Berk and Rossi, 1990); and ii) how structures and interventions, in their entirety, influence the other. Legal mandates and accountability mechanisms may direct intervention along a certain path but specific intervention may be open to interpretation. Similarly, the degree of bureaucratization within personal social services may also influence to what extent intervention is free of or constrained by structures. The eventual analysis must however involve a dynamic interpretation of the data focusing on the phenomena of relationships. Structures—from legal mandates to organizational features—were thus re-examined along with the case recordings and interviews first analyzed at the intervention level.

Since the investigation of the structure-intervention interplay built upon research carried out on the first two dimensions, methods of data collection and analysis were specific to the methods used to study the first two

dimensions. Nevertheless, an analysis of the structure-intervention interplay facilitates the discovery of what these relationships mean to the provision of personal social services.

Each of the articles included in this dissertation brings together structure and intervention in analyses of the interplay between dimensions.

#### **4.3.4. Sampling**

In this comparative research project, sampling occurred at a number of levels. I had to choose the following: countries, cities, agencies, social workers, and case files. Each choice was to some degree pragmatic in that I am a Canadian researcher living in Sweden with an obvious interest in comparing objects of study with which I had some familiarity. Canada and Sweden are interesting theoretical points of comparison because they represent divergent social welfare systems.

The choice to study Umeå, Sweden and Barrie, Canada were made initially based on convenience but has withstood the scrutiny of the sampling process in a number of ways. When I began to look into the composition of these two cities, it became clear that these cities were similar in many ways thus making their comparison appropriate. Umeå and Barrie each have a rapidly growing population (approximately 100 000 citizens in 2000), a strong service sector, regional hospitals and post-secondary education, and similar unemployment rates (5.5 to 6 %). While vibrant mid-sized communities, they present fewer complicating considerations than if I was to have chosen to study rural communities or urban centers such as Toronto or Stockholm.

Subsequently, a purposive sampling strategy was used to identify two local agencies wherein child welfare services were offered and that must respond to referrals concerning a child who has been harmed or may be at risk of being harmed. The agencies provided service to a semi-urban core and surrounding rural area. At the time of the study, each had 175 and 210 children in care at any one time—approximately 0.7 % of the child population of each community. From the two agencies, two sites were chosen: 1) Team A, Barrie Office of the Simcoe County Children's Aid Society and 2) The Central Children's Group, Individual and Family Care, Umeå Social Services. This study proposes that by focusing on these sites, the specific experiences of social workers and the sites in which they work would reflect something about the larger child welfare systems in which they work.

A purposive sampling strategy (Morse, 1991) was used to select participants for the focus group studies (Studies I, II). To get the perspective of social workers who worked directly in service provision for children and families referred to the child welfare agencies, the sample of social workers included intake workers (with gatekeeping as a primary duty), ongoing workers (providing longer term interventions in families), and team leaders. In

an effort to recruit focus group participants, we sent letters to team leaders at the agencies and requested that they and their social workers participate in two focus groups that would occupy a total (and maximum) of four hours over two days. We gave the team leaders a brief description of the purpose of the focus groups. Team leaders shared this information with members of the team. To encourage and facilitate participation, we suggested holding the focus groups during normally scheduled times for team meetings.

Participants in the focus groups were volunteers from each site. The Barrie participants included six females and six males. Six workers had less than two years experience in child welfare. Five had more than two years experience (two of these were supervisors who had more than five years experience). In Umeå, the participants included six females and one male. They had more professional experience with all but one of the participants (including one supervisor) having more than four years experience. Three (non-supervisory workers) had more than ten years of experience. All participants in Sweden and Canada reported having social work degrees, but the Canadians reported more professional education with three participants stating they had post-graduate degrees. This demographic information is important to reflect on because education, experience, and gender have consequences in how we interpret qualitative data.

Finally, as alluded to earlier, I chose a maximum variation sample in Study III. In a maximum variation sample, documents are chosen which represent diverse variations or common patterns; a sample of what we thought would cover the spectrum of child welfare interventions in response to physical and sexual abuse cases, emotional abuse, neglect, parental problems such as alcohol abuse, and finally behaviour problems in children or youth.

#### **4.3.5. Making the Case for Local Studies**

Making a case for studying child welfare services at two agencies means believing in the possibility of building theoretical generalizations about systems on the case study method. While making the case for this level of generalization, one would expect that social workers on the front lines of child welfare would see something of themselves or their experiences in the data and analyses presented. The case study method was an appropriate choice to make in the design of the comparative model because I was interested in the specific experiences of social workers in two settings and how their experiences reflect something about the larger orientations in which they practice social work. Examining two cases allowed me to look more closely at the complex relationship between doing social work and the structural contexts in which child welfare is organized. And, so while again I was not able to generalize in a statistical sense, case studies allowed me to add to

existing knowledge and to deepen existing knowledge of these orientations (Stake, 1998).

Had the means been available, it may have been preferable to include more sites in each country. This would have added a level of complexity to the analysis and might have added a degree of confidence to the study as well. Building confidence in the analyses in this study meant taking a closer look at the research of others as a way of validating the findings we made.

Beginning this study, I was faced with a situation where it appeared that there were wide local variations in service provision for children. Östberg et al. (2000) show that Sweden's highly decentralized organization of social services means huge local variation in provision of child welfare services from the ways they are organized to how models of investigation and assessment are applied by organizations and individuals in these. In Canada, the provision of child welfare services is a provincial responsibility with, for example, Ontario's 54 CASs holding strongly to their local autonomy as a means of ensuring services directed to the needs of communities. The degree of local variation in social care services seems not to be dependent on the welfare regimes in the countries and may say more about strength of local democracy (Kommittén Valfärdsbokslut, 2001; OACAS, 2001) rather than presenting a challenge to the believability of this study's findings.

In both countries, local variations in the provision of services for abused and neglected children may reflect the influence of local politics. Local programs are strong, enduring and resilient (Nordlund, 2002) where "path dependent processes" have limited change to fine-tuning rather than profound shifts (Pierson, 2001). Thus, the relatively enduring nature of social programs at the local level provided the basis for exploring how distinctive structural approaches to child maltreatment become visible in social workers' descriptions of social intervention.

This research project began just as local programs were coming under pressure from higher authorities pushing for uniformity and consistency in service provision. In Ontario, risk assessment has always been an integral part of child abuse investigations. However, following the deaths of a number of children under the care or supervision of CASs, in 1996 the provincial government came under pressure from several Coroner's Juries and the public to develop a common risk management system. The Ontario Risk Assessment Model—which incorporates a service eligibility tool, a safety assessment tool, and a risk assessment tool—was implemented province-wide in 1998 (Government of Ontario, 1997a). Further, Ontario along with six other Canadian provinces and 15 countries including Sweden, are in various stages of exploring the implementation of the UK developed Looking After Children system—an interesting fact given that planning for children in state care has often lacked uniformity or shared standards (OACAS, 2000b). Though tragedy-driven pushes for change have not had the same policy impact in Sweden (Andersson, Aronsson, Hessel, Hollander, and Lundström, 2001), a

strong interest in both economic rationalization and evidenced-based work have fuelled recent trends there where substantial re-organization of social services has occurred at many local agencies (SOU, 2001).

Returning to Yin (1994), theory has a role in analytical generalization—“where previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of a case study”. Thus, when we consider complexity of service delivery, the durability of local programs and the structural pressures these programs are under, it actually makes good sense to use the case study method as a means to test a comparative model, develop theory and produce analytical generalizations about the similarities and differences between child welfare systems.

#### **4.3.6. The Institutional Ethnographic Argument**

Institutional ethnography provides a further basis for arguing that case studies are an effective means of comparing child welfare systems. Institutional ethnography does not rely on producing statistically reliable comparisons as the basis for making analyses. Analysis in an institutional ethnography begins with the first bit of data collection in the field and continues throughout the process of writing up the analysis. Triangulation in institutional ethnography does not have the purpose of “testing the accuracy or quality” of what informants say against other data. Nor do researchers try to develop a grounded theory that explains participants’ experiences, as they themselves understand it (Strauss, 1987). Institutional ethnographers look for translocal and discursively organized relations that permeate informants talk about what they do, explanations of why they do what they do, and the activities they carry out in their professional roles (Campbell and Gregor, 2002). A key question in the analysis of data from an institutional ethnographic perspective is: What does this data tell me about how this setting or event happens as it does?

One aspect of the research process that goes into answering the question is knowing when to stop asking more questions. In testing for the adequacy of the analysis, a key question is whether the information obtained is relevant, complete and sufficient to produce saturation; not hearing anything new and becoming bored are simple indications that saturation achieved. In this study, I wanted to be certain that the explanation produced of differences between the two sites made sense when considering Swedish child welfare and Canadian child protection.

One way to build a coherent analysis in an institutional ethnography is through triangulation. Triangulation is the use of multiple data collection methods and procedures on the same research questions to achieve pragmatic validation (Brink, 1991). Triangulation can also involve using a variety of data sources to describe what we are seeing and support this with interviews or

observation (Knafl and Breitmayer, 1991). The strength in the approach used in this research project is that, by employing multiple data sources, a cross-national team approach to carrying out the research, and a social constructionist and critical evaluative approach, we can strengthen the validity of our findings and arrive at a shared understanding of the knowledge produced.

Analysis of case recordings is an important technique because it allows the researcher to see how certain aspects of intervention are preserved in the form of a historical archive. Case recordings are not, however, a complete picture of social work interventions. To increase the strength of a research construct, a variety of sources of data should be obtained (Corbin, 1986). To this end, vignettes and focus group were used.

Qualitative studies can get over the problem of “constant” error by improving single shot interviews and by interviewing the same people more than once, as we did with two focus groups. Within the context of each focus group session, responses were checked for confirmability by using identical as well as alternate form questions within the interview itself (a form of equivalence), and by transcribing notes or tape recording interviews. By recognizing or seeking “socially desirable” responses from subjects, and by asking “grand tour” questions beyond the specific purpose of the group, contrast and inclusive questions to avoid acquiescent response sets, we set about the task of checking and re-checking responses (Morgan, 1997).

Verification sessions can be used to clarify content of what was said previously, add verbatim terminology, expand on information by clarifying, filling in and over time. The procedure should be repeated with a number of informants until the material is stable. We identified the informants as knowledgeable by being familiar with the culture and its members thus verifying dependability of the choice of informants. Furthermore, the second focus group session acted as a way of testing the credibility of our preliminary analyses from the perspective of the participants in the groups.

Focus group interviews can be validated by triangulation with observation, written records, census statistics and the like. In this research project, two focus groups at each site were held in order to have the chance to check out preliminary analyses and to build the qualitative data pool. As mentioned, analysis of case records (documentation) was a second way of researching social intervention.

Just as multiple methods confirm one another, so do multiple investigators and multiple repetitions of measurements over time (Knafl and Breitmayer, 1991). This is one way of strengthening the dependability of our results—or having a degree of certainty about the analyses we made.

In the focus group studies, for example, we decided upon having two co-moderators. Evelyn Khoo acted as the principle moderator in the Canadian groups while Ulf Hyvönen acted as the principle moderator in the Swedish groups. Jentsch (1998) presented findings of cross-cultural research using the

interpreter (translator) as a contextual check for the non-native interviewer. Her argument for the value of having a skilled observer from the “outside” and an interviewer from the “inside” informed our decision to have two moderators in the focus groups and to have an insider-outsider approach. Checks on the data analysis were made throughout the study together with the project supervisors, Ulf Hyvönen, PhD, and Professor Lennart Nygren.

#### 4.4. Procedure

In this section I briefly set out the sequence of events in the research project to tie together the development of the research model and collection of data to the analysis and dissemination of results. The overall research plan was developed in 1997 with funding obtained in November 1997 to support the research project over the first two years. The granting agency was the Swedish Social Science Research Council (SFR)—Project No. F0104/1998. The project was in hiatus during all of 1998 and all of the year 2001 (parental leaves). Data collection took place in the year 2000 and analysis began then and continued into 2002 and 2003.

##### A Time Frame of the Research Project

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1999</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systematic literature review begins—ongoing throughout.</li> <li>• Fine-tuning of project design.</li> <li>• Gathering primary data for the comparison of structures.</li> <li>• Designing focus group guide.</li> </ul> | <p>2000</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• February: Focus groups in Canada.</li> <li>• May: Focus groups in Sweden.</li> <li>• Transcription of focus group tapes.</li> <li>• Preliminary data analysis.</li> </ul> |
| <p>2002</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of structure.</li> <li>• Analysis of focus group data.</li> <li>• Publication of Paper I</li> <li>• Abstract of Paper II accepted; undergoing peer review.</li> </ul>   | <p>2003</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publication of Paper II</li> <li>• Manuscript of Paper III submitted.</li> <li>• Manuscript of Paper IV submitted.</li> <li>• Dissertation framework written.</li> </ul>  |

As mentioned above, Ulf Hyvönen co-moderated the focus groups, acting as principal moderator in the Umeå groups. A collaboration in the analysis took place with Dr. Hyvönen and Professor Nygren. The contents of this dissertation framework are solely my responsibility.

#### **4.5. Ethical Considerations**

Researchers investigating the problem of child abuse and neglect must be aware of the impact of their studies. The topic is highly sensitive and involves the human element even if the subject is a comparison of social programs. I recognized that this project involves research tangentially connected with human subjects and access to sensitive, personal information. Therefore, the research was carried out without identifying participants or research subjects. Oaths of confidentiality were signed at each child welfare agency. At all times, I respect the welfare and right of confidentiality of the research participants. At no time were the names of focus group participants used. Their participation was voluntary and their consent was obtained to produce written material that could enter the public domain. In retrospect, one further safeguard may have been considered—not to identify the agency or teams involved in the project or to use a pseudo-name for each agency. Since this approach was not used, extra care had to be made to ensure that nothing that could be construed as harmful or embarrassing to anyone would enter into the public domain.

In addition, no identifying information from case files was revealed; in neither data collection, analysis nor the subsequent reporting on findings. Case recordings selected for the study and given a number not associated with the agency file number. Furthermore, to preserve the anonymity of the agency clients, information that could be linked to any one individual was intentionally changed or omitted from the study. Individuals represented in the case recordings were represented by false names and only non-identifying information was recorded for the purposes of this study.

#### **4.6. Researcher's Role**

In qualitative studies such as the one carried out here, the researcher is immersed in the collection of data, physically and emotionally close to the subject at hand, and is committed to long-term involvement with the topic. In the field, there is an expectation that a qualitative researcher will be empathetic, trusting, and intense rather than aloof, and coldly scientific in the collection of “data” (Campbell and Gregor, 2002). However, taking a caring attitude had to be balanced against becoming too personally involved with research participants, to the point of sharing perspectives and assuming a caring attitude. In the following section, I reflect on my experiences prior to

the study and how my presence in the study could influence the kinds of data I was interested in and how I analyzed them.

When I embarked on this research project, I realized that I brought to the role of researcher a particular understanding of child welfare that was grounded in the years I spent as a social worker in Canadian child protection. I had to consider my attitude about everything from the nature of child protection work, to feelings about children who have been harmed and the people who harm them, and expectations that Sweden's social welfare system would undoubtedly produce a better child welfare system. All of these elements could influence my interpretation of the wide-ranging possibilities of interpretation to be found in the study of both structures (as a relatively cold aspect) and interventions (lived in the real world and therefore potentially more feeling inducing).

Literature review can be seen as a way of bringing objectivity to the research process. Reading and interpreting texts on the structure of personal social services, I was able to distance myself from the intense emotion that comes with studying child abuse and neglect. However, in this case, it may actually be more difficult to remain aware of the personal prejudices that one takes into research. After all, one usually is not stirred up emotionally in the same way as when one is having a conversation with a real person. Therefore, an extra effort had to be made to reflect on the baggage that I may be bringing into the interpretation.

During one focus group, I was struck by the intensity of reaction to what I had imagined would be the least emotion-evoking aspect of my interview guide: the presentation of my model of social intervention. I was taken aback and even uncomfortable as one focus group participant in particular took strong objection to my presentation and interpreted the chart to mean that I thought that social work in Canada relied heavily on court proceedings and taking children into care. Suddenly it seemed that the chart I used to present social interventions was being criticized as playing into the public's fear that when the CAS gets involved in a situation, their first reaction is to "scoop your kid". After that initial reaction, I had to reflect on the original purpose of presenting the chart. It was not to be seen by me or anyone else as the one right way to understand social interventions. In fact, it was supposed to evoke a reaction and to get participants' to open up to a discussion about how they view social intervention. The purpose of bringing in this example and writing about my field experiences is to bring them to light to the reader and to demonstrate that the researcher is neither distant nor detached in any aspect of the research process. Certainly, the researcher's presence in the field can influence the interpretation and representation of knowledge produced from research. This highlights the need for self-reflection on one's intentions, engagement with research participants and on feelings that can get in the way of or enhance the interpretation of results.

Having several years of frontline experience working in the Canadian child welfare system, put me in a position of quickly being able to understand the dynamics at play in one context and put me in a position of being curious about the workings of the context I was least familiar with. The way I went about studying social intervention presupposed that an insider's perspective on social intervention in child welfare work would get me closer to what "really happens" in the daily life of social workers. It was not possible for me to follow the day-to-day work of social workers on an ongoing basis in both countries. But, I really wanted to get at how they talk about what they do. Hence, focus group discussions of social intervention were an effective way to get at how they represent to the world what they do. Recognizing too that what they say they do is not necessarily the same as what they actually do, studying social intervention at one level of abstraction away from the everyday level allowed me to keep a degree of professional distance from the subjects of study.

Although spending a short time "in the field" by ethnographic standards, my presence in the social worker's professional world made me a participant observer because I could not escape being a part of the social world in which they work. Thus, I had to reflect not only the pre-understanding that I took to the study but also on how my position may have effected the progression of the study. Reflecting on my autobiographical presence helped me to determine how my "self" might influence the interpretation and representation of child welfare in two countries.

In the end, however, my role as a research was to produce knowledge within the framework of comparative and critical epistemologies. Accordingly, my research goals were not necessarily the same as those of the participants in the study. (I did not just want to replay what they said but to interpret what they said within a certain epistemological frame) I had to interpret the data and prepare written reports in a way that reflected my own constructions, knowing that those who participated in the research and the readers of the reports would form their own constructions from the reported material.

#### **4.7. Issues Arising from the Research Design**

The problems with cross-national research are numerous and can strongly affect the legitimacy of comparisons. Practical difficulties arise because of the ubiquitous lack of agreement on terminology and because of the difficulty in reaching agreement on methods of gathering data and measuring similarity or difference.

Compounded to these practical problems is the fact that few people have the cultural sensitivity and comprehensive grasp of two (or more) countries or cultures necessary in making comparisons. Furthermore, no one knows just how long an individual researcher must be in the field to develop this

sensitivity to be able to evaluate critically findings from the field. Is it a matter of weeks or months or does the social researcher need to spend a considerably longer time learning about diverse cultures, organizations and individuals? One may presume that longer is better but even then cultural sensitivity cannot be assumed. Therefore, it becomes all the more important for the researcher who is implanted in the “other” culture to reflect critically on theoretical and personal suppositions made about its institutions or people.

A cross-national, comparative analysis of the personal social services must account for the time and place in which programs exist. Therefore, cross-national comparisons should take place at approximately the same calendar time. That is, collecting data in one nation should not be followed by a long lapse before then collecting data in the second nation since possible social and political changes in each community may affect the validity of the study. For example, in Canada, the province of Ontario had announced just prior to the beginning of this study that it intended to pass legislation that would significantly alter the way in which child protection work is carried out (Government of Ontario, 1997b). Therefore, research that would compare structures or interventions with those of another nation would have to factor in the impact of these changes.

Accounting for geographic and cultural contexts can be more challenging. Given the complications of language, the research plan had to insure that the same concepts were actually being compared in each nation and that context-specific variations in the definition of certain concepts were clarified. *Best interests of the child*, for example, corresponds most closely to the Swedish term, *barnets bästa*. However, researchers must be careful not to assume that these two terms are coterminous. As mentioned earlier, the processes of construct development and data collection are fraught with potential biases. Terms such as child welfare, child protection, child at risk, vulnerable children, and child abuse and neglect are used regularly in the social work field. Therefore, the researcher must assess cautiously whether these terms are used in an equivalent manner in different cultural settings.

Since we are all connected in some way to culture, terminological differences mean more than simple linguistic complications. They reflect different theories of knowledge. In this sense, before going out into the field, it was important to make clear the questions I was interested in exploring. Were they being asked from the point of view of my country of origin or would I attempt to ask “other people’s questions”? I was aware of the possibility that others may misrepresent both the question and the answers to them. Regardless of the methodological approach taken, the analyst must ponder these questions.

The use of profession-specific terminology for social problems and interventions is extensive in social work but is also specific to both national and organizational context. Different terminology reflects differences in perception about various matters from social policy to the welfare state to

child welfare. The task of the researcher is to be aware of the problem of incommensurability of terms in social work but to then go ahead and define what is to be compared and by what criteria it is to be compared. Making definitions in research involves fixing one's own set of definitions; knowing/hoping they echo one's background, or exploring different meanings and connotations attached to particular expressions. Both of these processes had a place in this dissertation.

One way of trying to make the analysis more credible is by having access to researchers on the different sites so that assumptions and findings can be checked and rechecked at every stage of the research. To minimize the interpreter effect due to cultural background and linguistic ability, we must ascertain that the researcher has knowledge of the language and culture of the nation in which the research is being conducted (Jentsch, 1998). Data collection and interviews with study participants took place in the language of the nation under investigation and in the language of the participants. Researchers must also clarify their own cultural biases and the cultural values that may underlie any research questions being asked (Nygren et al., 1998). However, we posit that these barriers are not impossible to overcome. All of these contextual issues must nevertheless be addressed and clearly explained in any study.

#### **4.7.1. Limitations to the Research Design**

The vignettes presented in the focus groups were very short and low on detail. This may have produced some confusion on the part of participants in terms of how they initially reacted to the information. However, as we know from the study, it is quite common for social workers to have bare-bones information at the time of a case referral. Moreover, it is the job of the investigating social workers to fill in missing pieces. If our focus had been on how they investigate rather than on what kinds of information they look for, we would have had to modify the vignettes and test them further before collecting the data.

This research project did not triangulate qualitative methods with quantitative methods. A quantitative approach may have taken the form of the use of a survey questionnaire to seek out responses to more detailed vignettes (Glinner, Haber, and Weise, 1999). This approach has been used in other child welfare research (Ashton, 1999 and 2001).

It would have been helpful to find precisely the same statistical information in the two different countries to contextualize and validate the findings but in Sweden official statistics (local and national) do not include numbers of referrals made to the Social Services regarding "at risk" children (Lundström, 2000). Nor are there identifiable databases registering the numbers of children where abuse was verified. It is therefore not possible to

draw comparative conclusions about the relative success of one personal social service over another at reducing the incidence of child abuse (reflected in the number of case openings designated as abuse cases) or in reducing recidivism (reflected in cases re-opened as abuse cases).

An effective cross-national approach to the comparison of the personal social services must establish its own effectiveness by being credible, logical and understandable in different contexts. A qualitative approach that assumes knowledge is socially constructed is still able to reveal its worth by demonstrating credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Trochim, 1999).

On the one extreme of the objectivist-subjectivist continuum there is the argument that we cannot get at “reality” from interviews. Objectivists argue, on the one hand, that there is a reality but that interviews must be excruciatingly succinct in their design in order to “mirror reality”. Subjectivists argue that there is no singular reality accessible from interviewing methods. I believe that the extremes of these positions are not particularly useful and would rather follow Miller and Glassner’s (1997) lead in suggesting that it is possible to learn about the social world through interviews. They argue that interviewees will, if given the chance, tell us which of our positions and formulations make sense and non-sense to them. The whole purpose of interviewing techniques is to understand how and under what context different interpretations of experiences are produced, “which sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use in theorizing about social life” (ibid.).

In the research design, a number of comparative but untested variables were presented at both the structural and intervention levels. It may have been possible to determine whether the variables selected had the strongest significance in how child welfare services are structured (Estes, and Morgan, 1976). For example, in the collection of data on program structures, I did not compare the funding of child welfare services in each place nor did I consider accountability mechanisms. It is possible that I have missed important explanatory factors by excluding these service features.

In the focus group studies, two “instruments” were used to test for differences in the ways that social workers talked about social intervention. The first was a flip-chart description of social intervention (my own definition). The second was the vignette as instrument to measure variations in the ways that social workers attended to referral information. It is important to take notice of the fact that the flip chart was used to provoke reaction and to produce a group definition of social intervention. Thus, the specificity of my own definition is not critical to the validity of the instrument. The vignette instrument is perhaps more liable to questions about validity since the instrument was more strongly based on my professional experiences in child protection. I could not say with the same certainty that the Swedish social

workers would share in my belief that the vignettes represented what typically happens in their child welfare system.

The overall issue, however, is the challengeable nature of *conclusions* reached by the inferential procedures used in qualitative analyses. Do the conclusions we draw follow from the data or can the data be explained in some other way? How can we get over a widely held perception that child abuse research has many of the characteristics of a pseudo-science? That is, some view it as a kind of “wish-fulfilment”, enabling people to discover what they would like to believe. It is possible for feminists to view child abuse as a reflection or expression of patriarchy. Socialists may see it as another perversion of capitalism. Conservatives may see child abuse as another symptom of moral decay requiring correction.

In addition to the fact that it is impossible to get away from the politicized nature of social research, the problem of erroneous inferences can increase the likelihood of social research not being treated as “real” research in the same vein as natural scientific research. Constructs in social research need to be rock solid and not based simply on pragmatics. The samples used must be explained so that we are not comparing apples and oranges. One must sure that the sample represents “something” even if it is not a randomized sample. Errors can occur in data collection because of researcher bias. Also, data collection may be flawed because of the sample size or type. Even if all is fine up to and including the data collection phase, error may occur in the analysis. Coding, ordering and categorizing are all subject to human error. In qualitative social work research, these issues are difficult but must be dealt with through a convergence of theory, method and epistemology. Multiple data collection methods (instruments, interviews, and observation), multiple data sources, and teamwork can all improve trustworthiness and strengthen conclusions reached.

#### **4.7.2. Issues in Data Analysis**

For a study to be verifiable the subject of study must be amenable to the testing of its truth, accuracy, or reality. For it to be logical, it holds that statements of analysis of meaning are either analytic or conclusively verifiable or at least confirmable by observation or testing. For an analysis to be understandable, the findings of a study must be understood but not necessarily agreed to by those who participated in the study or by those who engage in a “reading” of the results (Trochim, 1999).

Analysis involves making sense of qualitative data. How this is done depends on the particular methodology. In this study, with its three inter-related theoretical frames, the truth-value of the results must be weighed against the question of whether the account of the research has demonstrated that relevant procedures were used to arrive at analytical conclusions.

The analysis also required that we test for appropriateness of data collection methods. For example, were the case files we received appropriate for the investigation of documentation? Since the sample was non-random, this research project had to be sure to explain the value of looking at a strategic sample of case files (Paper III)- Were focus groups the best way to develop comparative insights of social intervention in different contexts?

The reliability of the research may have been improved if the resources had been available to add a purposive number of agencies in each nation to the data collection and analysis. Since this was a case study, the trade-off was that it allowed the method of study to be more in-depth. With a case study, more time and resources can be put to reflecting on the theoretical generalizability of findings.

Furthermore, the study was multi-faceted and was able to provide a certain depth of analysis of structure, intervention and the interplay between these in personal social services for maltreated children. Ideally, the goal in the research project was to produce an analysis of structure and intervention that would have meaning not only to the social workers at the two sites we studied but that social workers in other local sites should be able to see it as in some ways representative of their own experience. A final test of the believability or external validity of this research project would be to take the findings out into the field and to survey (qualitatively or quantitatively) the opinions of social workers in other agencies and places.

This comparative framework used to compare child welfare services may have broader applications in other personal social services, e.g. services for the elderly, handicapped, and migrants. It would appear to be a useful comparative model when the organization and administration of services vary but the problem to which services are addressed can be defined as equivalent.

## 5. The Studies (Papers I-IV)

### 5.1. Paper I: Child Welfare or Child Protection.

#### **Child Welfare or Child Protection. Uncovering Swedish and Canadian orientations to social intervention in child maltreatment.**

In study I, the general aim was to explore how social workers in Sweden and Canada describe social intervention processes in cases of child maltreatment. Our further objectives were: to determine the similarities and differences in how social workers in two focus groups describe social intervention in child maltreatment; to uncover how these localized descriptions of social intervention in child maltreatment connect to the policy and program orientations of Sweden and Canada, and to discuss the implications of these findings to social work.

The implications of a better understanding of social intervention are far-reaching as we are only beginning to grasp the significance of how different structural approaches (such as policy, judiciary, and administration) shape the interventions of front-line social workers.

This case study combined a focus group approach with the introduction of vignettes to: i) identify aspects of social intervention common to the two focus groups in Canada and Sweden and ii) understand the diversity between the groups.

Focus groups were held at two agencies, one in Umeå, Sweden and one in Barrie (Ontario, Canada). Participants were volunteers from the two sites above. The Barrie participants included six females and six males. Six workers had less than two years experience in child welfare. Five had more than two years experience (two of these were supervisors). In Umeå, the participants included six females and one male. All but one of the participants (including one supervisor) had more than four years experience. Participants in both Sweden and Canada reported having undergraduate or post-graduate social work degrees.

Four focus groups sessions were held, two at each agency, in Barrie, Canada and Umeå, Sweden. These sessions were held during spring 2000. Each session was approximately two hours in duration. In each nation, we had two co-moderators. I was the lead moderator of the groups in Barrie and Ulf Hyvönen was the lead moderator in Umeå. The second moderator acted as technician and “interested outsider”. The number of participants in the focus groups ranged from seven to twelve.

Results from this study showed differences in the content of responses by social worker participants in the focus groups in five major themes: gatekeeping, skills in context, client identity, decision points, compulsion, and measures. Our analysis of these themes produced a theoretical framework for understanding the orientations of Swedish child welfare and Canadian child protection (**Table 2**).

TABLE 2: Models of Child Welfare (Sweden) and Child Protection (Canada)

The Child Welfare Model	The Child Protection Model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A greater readiness to intervene.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less readiness to intervene and only the neediest are eligible.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child Welfare is assessment driven.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child Protection is structure driver</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Best interests” are broadly defined to include well-being with family preservation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Best interests” are narrowly focused on protection and permanency planning.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More resources are available to support families and prevent harm.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited resources are directed at reacting to the consequences of harm committed.</li> </ul>

## 5.2. Paper II: Gatekeeping in Child Welfare.

### **Gatekeeping in Child Welfare. A comparative study of intake decision making by social workers in Canada and Sweden.**

Paper II presents findings from focus groups with social workers in Sweden and Canada illuminating similarities and differences in the process of gatekeeping in child maltreatment. In this study, our interest was to compare how Canadian and Swedish social workers’ discussions of gatekeeping processes reflect different orientations of child welfare and child protection. In particular, how are gatekeeping decisions influenced by rules for defining core policy values of eligibility and entitlement—where entitlement can be viewed as a right to assistance specified by law but eligibility qualifies (through rules) a client’s ability to receive service?

For details of the methods of this study, see Paper I.

Study II showed that Swedish and Canadian social workers talk about attending to intake information and carrying out their everyday activities as gatekeepers in unique ways. Interpretation of these findings may be used to improve outcomes in a broad sense by highlighting the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different orientations.

In Canadian child protection, gatekeeping is a highly formalized, regulated, and textually-mediated practice carried out by social workers who are specialized as child protection workers primarily. Respondents in the Barrie group said that they used an eligibility tool to make gatekeeping decisions and that this tool brought consistency to the filtering of cases. Grounds for intervention were strongly tied to the child protection system's Ontario Risk Assessment Model. The forensic nature of their work stood out as they indicated they were required to substantiate concerns in order to provide child protection services. In the most severe vignette presented, the social workers role was identified as determining whether the child is in need of protection according to legislative guidelines. Risk assessment tools were identified by the Barrie team as helpful aids to clarify their roles and even to decide how services will be offered. In this system, control over work processes is maintained by generating strong linkages between child protection legislation, risk assessment tools and other standard operating procedures. Consequently, the principle gatekeeping task is to define the child protection features of a case. In this context, social workers have less professional autonomy than their Swedish counterparts do.

Swedish child welfare relies heavily on the professional skills of social workers whose job specialization is horizontal and thus may be engaged in other aspects of social service work. Control over everyday decision-making is highly decentralized and social workers rely on an investigatory process (enquiry) to produce cumulative information with which to assess a child's needs. A lack of proceduralization in Umeå, Sweden allows social workers to ask "how" a child is rather than if the child is in need of protection. The group responses indicate that interventions begin earlier and a wider variety of services are available to assist children, most notably by placing whole families "in care" together during the enquiry process. However, social workers may fail to identify some abuse cases since these are generally not classified or processed distinctly from family service cases. The social services do not keep comparable statistics on the incidence of abuse allegations or substantiated abuse. Nor do archives distinguish between different kinds of referrals to social services, their sources, or to how many referrals lead to investigations, though anecdotal evidence suggests that referrals there have also been on the rise in larger municipalities. We suggest that an ideal gatekeeping model would combine the best features of both child welfare and child protection orientations—responding to need and ensuring safety.

### **5.3. Paper III: Documenting Child Welfare Investigations.**

#### **Documenting Child Welfare Investigations. A comparative study of structured and narrative approaches to case recording in Canada and Sweden.**

Documentation is an integral part of social work practice in child welfare occupying much of a social worker's time. Its institutional purpose is to produce a permanent record of casework to improve case management and program planning, guide practice and ensure organizational and individual accountability. Many factors influence the documentation's quality. At a structural level, these factors include organization, bureaucratization and proceduralization, and historical trends toward more structured recording formats.

Paper III explored the relationship between orientations to child welfare and child protection and the production of assessment summaries following investigations.

We obtained a broad spectrum of case material and limited our review to assessment summaries in eight categories: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, inappropriate discipline, inadequate care, inadequate supervision, parent problem (e.g. due to alcohol or drug addiction, mental illness or physical or intellectual inability-parental violence, verbal aggression), and child behaviour problem. The sample of summaries spanned the years 1992 to 1999 in Barrie and 1994 to 1999 in Umeå.

Study III illustrated how Canadian child protection documentation has been drawn into a more and more structured process where documentation has been released from the temporal order, and that in Swedish child welfare, documentation has been and continues to be narrative. Documentation in Barrie changed over time—resulting in our categorizing three sub-types by the year represented by the document(s) examined. These three sub-types were early structured, structured, and the Ontario Risk Assessment Model. Documentation in Umeå varied by investigation purpose—resulting in our categorizing three sub-types there by the investigation purpose(s) they represented: standard, solution-focused, and legal documentation.

In Canadian child protection, services are built on the principle that only those children who are most at risk will be served. However, while the delivery of services is decentralized, the existence of strong, guiding legislation tied together with risk assessment tools, means that investigation should be less varied—and the documents produced from them should be based on a singular model. In child protection, the specifics of each investigation are rendered into a particular version of reality by invoking particular methods or systematic procedures for writing standardized text that emphasizes the protection aspects of a case. The slant of documentation in

child protection is therefore on substantiating child protection needs as defined in external sources—risk management tools and legislation. The cases examined reflect the Canadian child protection system’s trajectory toward increasingly proceduralized and standardized service.

In Swedish child welfare, service is built upon the principles of voluntary service and solidarity with clients. Equally strong is the importance of decentralization in social policy where local authorities are free to organize and deliver social services (and child welfare services) in the manner considered most fitting the community in which services are offered. Thus, many different organizational types, i.e. specialized child welfare services in one agency, integrated family services, and welfare benefits services in another, and non-standardized work practices, exist along side a tendency toward variation in documentation. We propose that Swedish child welfare has opted to systematize variation in service delivery and documentation.

#### **5.4. Paper IV: Need, Risk and a Child’s Best Interests.**

##### **Need, Risk and a Child’s Best Interests. Explicating the Relationships between Structure and Intervention in Swedish Child Welfare and Canadian Child Protection.**

The best interests of the child is quickly becoming a universal principle even though it may be open to different interpretations. Interestingly, the principle is being picked up more and more in the context of child welfare policy and legislation in most western nations. However, vague definitions leave open the possibility of wide variation in the application of the principle based on all kinds of value judgments rooted in culture, social policy, ideology and social constructions of the child. Less is known about how the principle has been adapted to different child welfare systems.

Paper IV explored: i) how the principle is adapted in the two child welfare system ii) how principles of need and risk relate to the best interests principle, and iii) what consequences the tensions between principles has.

Study IV made clear that tensions that arise between the principles of need, risk and a child’s best interests but that the tensions arise from different constructions of each principle and from the dissimilar relationships between these principles in each country.

In Canada, decisions about the best interests of children are only considered within the legal context of child welfare service. That is, a child must first be found to be in need of protection before best interests can be considered. Child protection legislation there is very specific about the criteria that are to be used to decide a child’s best interests. Thus need in the Canadian system is strongly attached to legal bases for protection. Best interests here are

further seen to be served through an elimination of risk, within a frame of permanency planning rather than family preservation. Thus, best interests derive only from a definition of need based on protection but decisions about a child's best interests are heavily weighted toward risk reduction.

The Swedish government has supposedly adopted a child centered strategy but continues to place best interests of the child in a contributory position to other aspects of the Social Services Act (SoL) (Norström and Thunved, 1996) and even the Care of Young People Act [Lagen med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga] (LVU). In the case of the SoL, the Act's portal paragraph emphasizes notions of democracy and solidarity in the provision of services. Best interests considerations are, in this context, supportive of these other notions. In Sweden, however, the benchmark for intervention is need in the broadest sense of the word and in this sense the best interests of the child are met by early interventions, preventive service (reducing risk) and attempts to de-stigmatize families in need. The best interests of children who have been harmed may however not be consistently served in a system with highly devolved organization, framing structures, and an emphasis on family preservation.

## 6. Discussion

The goal of this dissertation research was to look for and explain similarities and differences in how Sweden and Canada organize and deliver personal social services for abused, neglected or “at risk” children. In presenting a multi-faceted approach to guide cross-national research, I explored the structure of child welfare services in two communities in Sweden and Canada, comparing and analyzing the national and local contexts and service features of child welfare in each nation. Focus group interviews with frontline social workers were held and documentation of child welfare investigations was analyzed in order to gain insights into the social intervention process generally, and, more specifically, documentation and gatekeeping as two central aspects of intervention. These combined sources of information gave insights into the interplay between structures and intervention, which concomitantly provided a mechanism for understanding the specific and unique characteristics that define child welfare in Sweden and child protection in Canada.

How then can we explicate the differences between Swedish child welfare and Canadian child protection? Two local agencies, one in Umeå Sweden and one in Barrie Canada, provide the terrain through which I try to explore the social organization of different child welfare systems. Recalling the institutional ethnographic methodology, research begins locally and in people’s everyday lived experience. From this perspective, the aim of research is to explicate how “activities of knowing and doing” (Campbell and Manicom, 1995) are shaped extra-locally. My viewpoint is that the everyday experience of social workers in these two local agencies are given specific forms and purpose, produced in the interplay between structure and intervention. Finally, in making connections between structure and intervention, it is possible to reveal the characteristics of these two orientations to the delivery of personal social services for abused and neglected children—Swedish child welfare and Canadian child protection.

One way of considering the differences between these two orientations is to take apart the qualitative variables explored in the four papers and classify their characteristics in terms of whether they are strongly or weakly present in each context (**Table 3**). That is, each variable compared has features unique to the orientation in which it is constructed. Defining the specific features of each orientation takes place in an interpretive process.

TABLE 3: Strong and Weak Variables in Canadian Child Protection and Swedish Child Welfare

CANADA	VARIABLES	SWEDEN		
<b>STRUCTURE</b>				
<b>CONTEXT</b>				
-	Child Welfare Policy	POLICY	Social and Family Policy	+
+	Legal Specificity	LEGAL	Legal Specificity	-
-	Professional Status	PROFESSIONAL	Professional Differentiation	±
<b>FEATURES</b>				
+	Protection	GOALS & OBJECTIVES	Social Solidarity	±
+	Permanency Planning		Family Preservation	+
+	Eligibility Rules	ELIGIBILITY	Entitlement	+
+	Specialization	ORGANIZATION	Specialization (varied)	±
±	Tertiary Prevention	CONTENT	Primary Prevention	±
<b>INTERVENTION</b>				
+	Structure Driven	PROCESS	Assessment Driven	+
+	Abuse Specific	GATEKEEPING	Early Intervention	+
+	Proceduralized	DOCUMENTATION	Systematic Variation	±
<b>PRINCIPLES</b>				
±	In Protection Context	BEST INTERESTS	Broad but Undefined	±
-	Narrowly Defined	NEED	Need Fulfillment as Right	+
+	Risk Avoidance	RISK	Risk Denial	-

**Legend:** + Strong      - Weak      ± Moderate

## 6.1. Defining Features of Swedish Child Welfare and Canadian Child Protection

The findings of the studies indicate that in each context, certain characteristic features of structure, intervention and their interplay are emphasized over other features. Not entering into statistical measurement, this study is content to lay out the qualitative bases for arguing that there really is a difference between these two orientations of child welfare and child protection both in terms of the structure of the different systems and in terms of what social workers end up doing in everyday practice. On balance, Swedish child welfare is strong on certain welfare variables but moderate to weak on protection variables. As one would expect, protection variables weigh in strongly in Canadian child protection while other welfare variables are weak.

In **Table 3**, an overview of the similarities and differences in the two child welfare systems is presented. The center column presents the variables that were compared. Note, however, that the defining characteristics of each variable are usually unique to each country. Thus, if we look at the gatekeeping example, we see that the defining characteristics differ. In Canada, the threshold for intervention is strongly abuse specific whereas in Sweden the characteristic feature of gatekeeping is the stronger emphasis on early intervention. The emphasis each system places on each variable is presented in the table as strong (+), weak (−) and moderate (±).

### Structure

The first variables compared here are Structure variables. In general, terms, Swedish child welfare is distinguished by being set within a strong social and family policy context with broad social welfare framing laws and a moderate degree of differentiation in the social work profession. Canadian child protection is situated in a weak child welfare policy context where laws have a high degree of specificity but the professional status of child protection social workers is weak. In the following paragraphs, the defining features of the two service contexts are presented.

According to the three-dimensional model in this research, the first feature of the service structure is the policy context. We see that Sweden has a comparatively strong welfare state and unified social and family policies predicated on an ideology of social justice wherein all citizens are equal and entitled to decent living conditions and the chance to live a decent life regardless of age, sexual orientation, ability, or ethnic origin. Family policy has emphasized a woman's right to employment and children's rights to a secure upbringing and care. This form of redistributive welfare policy is supposed to balance wealth and make sure that all citizens have a decent standard of living. Child benefits are universal. Child care is almost fully subsidized. Moreover, allowances for parents to stay at home with their children during the early years are very generous. The hallmark of the Social

Services Act is its emphasis on client rights, solidarity and participation. All of these juxtaposed with the state's obligation to insure that children have "good enough" living conditions define what I would consider a broad notion of child welfare.

We might naturally assume that the problem of age and gender-based violence is on its way to being solved because Sweden puts gender equality at the forefront of its national political agenda. The picture that emerges is not as clear. As early as 1987, Zeigert proclaimed Sweden to be one of the world's least violent societies. Durrant (1999) showed that public attitudes about corporal punishment had changed along with legislative changes while Roberts argued (2000) that opposition to corporal punishment preceded legislative change. Lundgren, Heimer, Westerand, and Kalliokoski (2002) remind us however that "equal Sweden" is by no means a non-violent society. Although attitudes may be changing, Lundgren et al., using a detailed and transparent methodology, show that gender based violence is widespread. Although their study does not emphasize violence against children, it points out some disquieting figures showing that not all is well. They report that 31 % of respondents in the study reported having experienced some form of violence prior to their 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Of these, 20 % had experienced sexual violence and 18 % had experienced physical violence.

Canadian social policy was virtually non-existent until the 1970's and has remained weak ever since. Social and family policies have been residual and based on family pathology rather than family welfare (Lightman and Riches, 2000). In Canada, family allowances, and income maintenance services are income-tested. Government financed family welfare services (e.g. daycare) are an example of a discretionary welfare service (not benefit) that remain restricted to families in need.

Recently, some distinctions have developed between preventive welfare (child tax benefits) and remedial child protection services. In addition, if we consider child development assistance, child care and broader benefits for families with children as cornerstones of family policy, there are indications that changes in the Canadian system (federal/provincial/territorial) are occurring (Stewart, 2003). However, the country's policy agency continues to distinguish between the deserving (low-income working parents who require childcare) and undeserving (parents whose children are in care because of risk) and emphasizes protection rather than the broader welfare of children. Arguably, broader and preventive child welfare policies do not even register in the discourse of policy makers. This may explain why in Canada the child poverty rate is so high (Statistics Canada, 2001), that there are tens of thousands of children living in transition homes (for battered women and their children) (F/P/T Ministers, 2002), and child protection caseloads are ever growing (Leschied et al., 2003).

The second aspect of structure in our model is service features. When we consider the organizational features of the Swedish and Canadian agencies, a

point ought to be made about which service is authorized or mandated to intervene. Both countries have laws to protect and ensure the safety of children. A physical injury or the sexual exploitation of a child by a primary caretaker would undoubtedly lead to intervention by a social worker representing a government authority. In Sweden, each local authority's Social Services department provides the service but oversight is at the national level. In Canada, the provinces are responsible for overseeing child welfare services though these are also provided at a local level either by quasi-governmental agencies (Children's Aid Societies) or by divisions within local offices of the provincial ministries of social services. Thus, there is the potential for huge variations in the organization of services in both countries. Whether this potential for variation is realized depends on the extent to which each jurisdiction imposes measures (rules and tools) to limit it.

Social work gets its purpose, meaning and legitimation in and through the welfare and legal institution in which it is practiced (Hardiker, Exton, and Barker, 1991). Therefore, the structural context in which social work takes place legitimizes certain practices while discrediting others. As the following paragraphs show, the professional context of practice and service features in place to assist children are strongly tied to service structures.

In Swedish child welfare, professionalism has developed along the lines of a social developmental and pluralist model that is allied to social democratic principles and social justice. The state promotes conditions for a more just and equal society. As a social system, this model emphasizes both response to individual and collective needs and rights, and setting out empowerment as a policy objective. To give an example, this means that a mother with post partum depression is not simply diagnosed with a psychiatric ailment. Here conditions are related to the wider social context wherein structural conditions, leading to social isolation and unrealistic expectations of motherhood, have specific consequences and extra-individual solutions, principally through the social worker acting to build a network of support and mutual aid.

In contrast, the professional context of Canadian child protection is strongly tied to a framework of a residual welfare emphasizing individual self-determination and limited state intervention. Here, pathology lies in individual behaviour. Therefore, social work's role in residual welfare is to control that behaviour, often by calling on due process and the rule of law. The profession then supports values that contribute to the stability of the existing social order. Using the same example as the one above, the mother's diagnosis would be considered in terms of protection factors. Is she placing the child at risk? Little can be done if she is poor, lives in less than ideal housing conditions, and has no family supports. If the child is at risk, a protection intervention is legally required and research is beginning to show that removal of the child is an increasing response to risk (Anglin, 2002).

The family preservation principle framing Swedish child welfare stands in stark contrast to Canadian “permanency” principles, particularly when we consider the function of statutory care in Canada. What is the effect of these differences when we consider the mandates of the different services and the resources available to deal with the presenting problem? Studies I and II show that social workers in Umeå had greater freedom to explore alternatives to removal of children (contact family and family assessment homes) than their Barrie counterparts.

## **Intervention**

The specific service structures in the two child welfare systems of Sweden and Canada also give rise to differences in the content and processes of intervention. For example, when we consider what drives the intervention process, and the actual investigatory process in particular, we can see that there are different forces at work in Swedish child welfare and Canadian child protection (Papers I, II and III). Interventions in Swedish child welfare are assessment driven and focus on trying to develop a holistic understanding of the problems of families (SoS-rapport, 1998). Without standardized tools but having a four month investigative time line, social workers have a moderate degree of professional space and authority to decide what information they need and from whom it will be obtained in order to ensure that the child has “good enough” living conditions (SOU, 2000).

In child protection, investigative concerns are primary and focused on ascertaining whether a child is in need of protection. A narrow service most concerned with defining the features of a case (Parton, 1988) must increasingly standardize work processes as we saw with the Barrie workers. However, highly proceduralized social intervention in child protection means that social workers are constrained by a more limited mandate and have less professional autonomy than their Swedish counterparts. Furthermore, the elements of investigation and measures take on greater statutory characteristics. That is, workers and agencies rely on the court system to provide the ultimate validation of their decisions about the needs of children.

How is it that a code such as “11A” is the standard by which Canadian social workers said they based their gatekeeping decisions whereas “values” and “workload” are explicit, though not necessarily determinative, in gatekeeping decisions of the Swedish participants in this research?

In Canadian child protection, deciding that a case is an “11A” is a gatekeeping decision connected intimately to local and extra-local rules, defining the core policy value that only a narrow spectrum of cases is eligible for service. Making this gatekeeping decision is a highly formalized, regulated, and textually-mediated process wed to the Ontario Risk Assessment Model.

In Swedish child welfare, a completely different process seems to take place. Decision-making is highly decentralized leaving social workers in

greater control over the investigatory process (Westlund and Isaksson, 2001). However, there appears to be a weakness associated with this decentralized system. When financial times are difficult or caseload pressures are high, the investigative process may not even begin (Paper I). This could potentially leave some children exposed to risk because of a fault in the child welfare system.

When we look at the kinds of documentation produced from child maltreatment investigations, the data showed that different orientations to child welfare and child protection influence the kinds of documents produced (Paper III). How is it that documentation in Canada has been drawn into an increasingly structured process and whereas in Swedish child welfare it is characterized by systematic variation? Study III points out the relationship between documentation and the different paths taken in each orientation with regard to the care and protection of children.

The slant of the Canadian assessment summaries analyzed is therefore on substantiating child protection needs as defined in external sources—risk management tools and legislation. In this sense, the Ontario Risk Assessment Model controls the structure of assessment records within a documentation system that favours or even demands the presentation of only one socio-legal version of reality.

In Swedish child welfare, multiple versions of events have at least the potential of being voiced. However, it also appeared that when social workers thought they would be going to court to seek the compulsory care of a child, a certain legalized form of documentation took over where there was only room for one version of reality to be presented. This aspect of documentation in Swedish child welfare demonstrates the power of the legal system in shaping aspects of social work.

Although this research project was not focused on the area of children in care, the placement of children outside of their families of origin is a significant part of the content of child welfare services. The question is: How is it that social workers use the placement “measure” with similar degrees of frequency, when other aspects of service structures seem quite different? The answer lies not in the frequency with which children are placed into state care but with the bases upon which care decisions are made.

A major implication may be reflected in the provision of compulsory care. In Sweden, for example, approximately 80% of children are placed in care voluntarily whereas only 20% are placed on a compulsory basis. In Canada, the use of voluntary care agreements takes place far less frequently (approximately 20 % of child placements are voluntary). A further 50 % of children and youth are in permanent care under crown wardship orders with most of the remaining 30 % of children in the temporary care of child protection authorities. While Canadian social workers expressed concern that a lack of permanency planning could lead to foster care “drift” (frequent

moves while in care), the long-term, non-adoptive care of children in Sweden apparently has not resulted in drift (Nordin, 2003).

The more frequent use of compulsory care in Canada may indicate that the grounds for care are more serious—and that Canadian society has “harder” cases; more serious resulting in the need for children to come into state care under court protection orders. On the other hand, it is unclear whether Swedish social workers place children on a “voluntary” basis where compulsion would be required in Canada. Do more Swedish children come into care under “looser” legal conditions than in Canada—meaning that the authority of Swedish social workers is somehow stronger? These questions cannot be answered from this research project but are important to future research. Certainly, the legal grounds for placing children in care have implications for how social workers engage with the legal mandates they have. There are also other implications for children.

Ultimately, in Canada, the legal means exist for a child placed in permanent care (crown wardship) to be eligible to be adopted. Unless the court orders access by the parent to the crown ward, the child is eligible for adoption upon being made a ward of the crown and placed on adoption probation.

In Sweden, the principle of temporary placement means that a child ought to be able to return to the care of his or her parents even if the individual circumstances make such an event seem unlikely, e.g. in the case of chronic and serious drug abuse. The court can rule that the parent cannot remove the child from care but rarely have foster parents obtained custody of children in care. When the court ordered non-removal, the actual contact between biological parents and children improved. This may indicate that the child needed a sign that the placement was secure and not in jeopardy because of ongoing contact with the biological parents (Nordin, 2003). It may well be that non-removal orders provide permanence for children as well as continuity by avoiding the problem of foster home breakdown.

Another way of looking at the placement of children in state care is simply this. Placement is a measure produced by and activated in both child welfare systems. Its existence as a measure (Swedish: *insats*) is shaped extra-locally but it also means that it will be used in the everyday work of child welfare and child protection. Whether some other imagined alternatives enter the domain of social intervention depends on the specific relations of ruling in the two orientations.

### **Principles and Their Interplay**

As with other parts of this research project, paper IV explores the relationship between structure and intervention in the two child welfare systems. By exploring the field of relations in which the principle of the child’s best interests are embedded, differences in the two child welfare systems are brought to light.

In Sweden, the best interests principle is contributory to the broader purpose of the social services. Where the benchmark for intervention is need but the service structure emphasizes solidarity and family preservation, social workers give priority to a principle of partnership with parents over a child best interests. Overall, best interests are seen as being served through primary prevention and by working in cooperation with parents.

In the specific example of Ontario child welfare (in the Canadian system), only those children identified by the legal system as “in need of protection” are afforded the right to have their best interests served. These constructions set out when and on what bases a child’s best interests will be given voice. Responding to risk dominates the Canadian approach of seeing to a child’s best interests.

## 6.2. A Theoretical Model of Two Child Welfare Systems

In the preceding text, I reflected on some of characteristics of Swedish child welfare and Canadian child protection, highlighting some of the characteristics that set apart each orientation to the care of children. The characteristics were presented in **Table 3** as strong, weak, or moderate in terms of how much they appeared to be emphasized in the analysis and interpretation of each study’s findings.

Since this has been a qualitative study, it is not possible to get a numerical fix on just how strong or weak each variable is. Quantitative researchers have developed methodologies designed to measure social phenomena including social values. Examples are the American World Index of Social Progress (WISP) (Estes, 1998; Estes and Morgan, 1976), Canada’s Environics social value methodology, and France’s 3SC (Système Cofremca de Suivi des Courants Socio-culturels). The latter two are referred to in Adams (2003). It may well be possible in future research to test correlations between structures and interventions using quantitative methods.

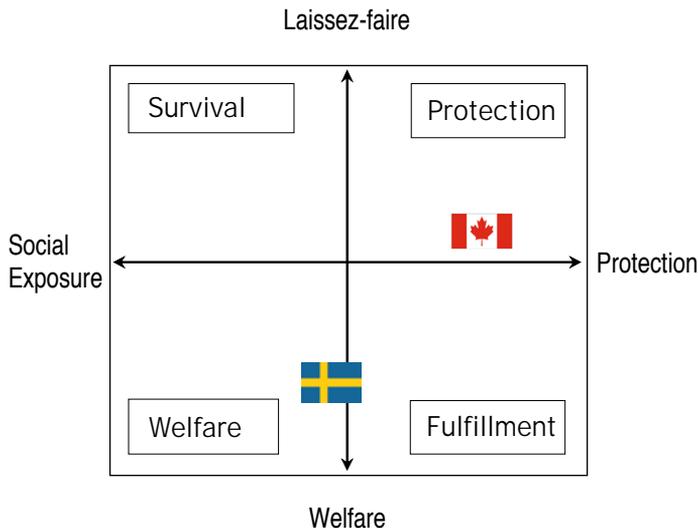
I now turn to the process of pulling together the various bits of information explored in the study of two child welfare agencies and suggest that the Swedish and Canadian orientations can be theoretically mapped as two models for caring for abused and neglected children (**Figure 3**). There are two axes dividing child welfare systems into four quadrants. The first axis is the Laissez-faire—Welfare axis with laissez-faire positioned at the top of the map at 12 o’clock and welfare at the bottom at 6 o’clock. This axis represents the extent to which child welfare systems intervene for the protection and care of children. The second axis, Social Exclusion—Protection represents the extent to which children are either socially exposed or protected by different child welfare systems.

In this theoretical map, Canadian child protection is located at the high end of the social exposure-protection axis and at the top to mid-line of the laissez-

faire welfare axis. This puts it solidly in the protection quadrant. Swedish child welfare is located at the bottom end of the laissez-faire welfare axis and on the mid-line of the social exposure-protection axis. This puts it in the

Figure 3

A Theoretical Mapping of Swedish Child Welfare and Canadian Child Protection



welfare quadrant but overlapping slightly into the fulfillment quadrant.

I do not mean to suggest that I have pinpointed their exact location within each quadrant. However, the analysis suggests some good grounds for their general positioning.

As we attempt to build a profile for these two orientations, it is important not to fall into categorizing them as having a binary relationship. That is, by adding together the two systems, we would not come up with the sum of all of the ways that states can intervene in the care of children. Nor is the relationship between child welfare and child protection necessarily a linear one with each standing at opposite ends of a continuum. The complexity of structures, interventions and the interplay between these cannot be so simply reduced. It is also worth emphasizing here that the findings of this research are not then meant to put together Swedish child welfare with other systems of child welfare such as those of other Scandinavian or Nordic countries. Nor am I saying that the Canadian child protection matches exactly the protection systems (historical or current) of the US or UK. A detailed comparison of

Sweden and Canada with other countries did not fall within the scope of this study.

What we can say is that the Swedish and Canadian systems represent unique ways of responding to the problem of child maltreatment. Reflecting on the similarities and differences between them may provide insightful not only to Swedes and Canadians but to others interested in understanding how states protect our children or fail in the trying.

What is the significance of a child protection orientation as opposed to a child welfare orientation? At this point, it is important to remember that it is not enough simply to assume that knowledge can be gained by experiencing or researching how social work is done in other countries. Askeland and Payne (2001) have argued that cross-national research has led to better understanding and exploration of social service systems but has not been as successful at broadening understanding of social work practice in different contexts. The ambition of this research project is to make comparisons relevant to social work practice: by critically analyzing the similarities and differences between the structures, interventions and their interplay; by seeking explanations for these similarities and differences; and by focusing on the implications of these to social work.

Returning to the profiling of two child welfare systems, the Canadian child protection orientation emphasizes the protection of children from harm post-occurrence and increasingly also from risk. When we consider the increasing emphasis on risk assessment, we see that standardized approaches to assessing risk are constructed within the frame of protection and not in terms of pre-emptive efforts to reduce risk. Detection of harm and risk may mean that certain categories of vulnerable children are identified. However, a protection orientation also means that the social work skills of empathy, engagement and empowerment have been 'pounded into oblivion' (Paper I) by standardized technical skills that are not dependent on the more humane aspects of social work.

A child welfare orientation emphasizes the prevention of harm by instituting a welfare system that can ensure that certain risks (mostly those associated with poverty) are avoided in the first place. Risk avoidance in child welfare does not imply dissociation from knowledge found in the use of risk assessment tools but it is not dependent on these tools to the same extent either. A child welfare orientation means that when a vulnerable child is identified, a broader range of measures is at a social worker's disposal.

In Swedish child welfare, where control over everyday decision-making is highly decentralized, social workers talked about relying on an investigatory process (enquiry) to produce cumulative information with which to assess a child's needs. The marked lack of proceduralization in Umeå was reflected in what the social workers identified as key assessment questions, "How is the child?" (Hur mår barnet?) and "Can the social services be of some help and can they expect to receive some measure from us?" In these senses, the

boundary between gatekeeping and ongoing service became blurred with social workers saying that they would prefer to intervene earlier than their Canadian counterparts and they would have a wider variety of services available to assist children, most notably by placing whole families “in care” together during the enquiry process.

In both Barrie and Umeå, social workers expressed frustration about structural limitations (particularly administrative tasks) to their doing “real” social work. Returning to the first of the two very important analytical puzzles presented at the beginning of this dissertation, it may be tempting to say that social work really is not any different on each side of the Atlantic. As mentioned earlier, professional social work has a number of defining qualities. It is concerned with processes of helping and change, seeking to correct social injustices, and empowerment through reflective processes. Therefore, one the surface, the helping efforts of Swedish and Canadian social workers have a lot in common. However, their helping efforts are channelled in specific directions according to the professional contexts in which they practice every day. And, as Payne (1997) points out in his social work “paradigm”, these qualities constitute what social work *is* but the balance between these qualities is what makes “minor paradigms” different.

Chambers (1993) argues that where there is a lack of specificity of legislation and organizational regulation, there exists a freedom to practice and remain faithful to social work values. When legislation is specific, there is less discretion and social work becomes a task of directly implementing automated decision-making. She further states that, although professional freedom in social work will be seriously restricted whenever that freedom conflicts with the specification of regulations, nonetheless most experienced professionals judge that,

*“there is almost always more freedom to practice at the limits of organizational rules and regulations than is ever used by most social work and human services practitioners. The point is, practitioners can protect themselves as well as maximize their freedom to practice simply by having a keen awareness of the relationship between their own values and frame of reference about a social problem and the programmatic features designed to cope with it”. (p.75)*

Having spent several years on the frontlines of Canadian child protection, I know from that professional experience the difficulties involved in working at or testing the limits of organizational rules and regulations. An extreme example of this was in working with a family whose identity had been altered by legal authorities and who lived a physically and psychologically guarded life under the Canadian witness protection program. While limited in some ways by not being able to do anything that would reveal family member’s identities, the child protection agency provided services at a level and in ways unheard of for most clients. The power to do this, however, did not originate within the agency but was negotiated in a delicate relationship with law

enforcement officials. Unfortunately, I have no such comparative example from Sweden.

Such an extreme example as the one above suggests that it is possible for social workers to push the limits of professional regulation. In fact, if social workers engage with families and with children as unique people, they realize that clients are not so easily slotted into eligibility or risk categories and are thus entitled to service and care based on their specific human needs. The point is that professionals can maximize their freedom by having a keen awareness of the relationship between their own values and frame of reference about the causes and solutions to social problems and the programmatic features designed to cope with it. An interesting question arises from this assumption that boundaries can be extended. To what extent is this possible? To think of this in physical terms, one might ask whether the limits are constructed of concrete or rubber. Are the limits solid or yielding?

Much remains to be done to establish “best practices” in work with children who have been abused or neglected. Before that can be done, we need to make sense of differences that exist between the orientations of child protection and child welfare. The scope of each orientation is important not just at a policy level but in practice also. If we think of the professional scope of practice, child welfare has a much broader scope than child protection.

Social workers working in the broad field of child welfare, as well as policy makers, can benefit from a better understanding of the different orientations to the protection of children from harm that Sweden and Canada currently represent.

This dissertation has attempted to bridge the gap between systems and social work practice by analyzing structures and interventions and by tying learning to understanding the significance of what social workers themselves have to say about social intervention in child welfare.

The model developed to build comparisons based on case studies of two agencies was useful in revealing connections between what social workers say they do in local contexts and the systems in which they practice. Many of the findings support the contention that the Swedish child welfare system is better-placed and ideologically inclined to intervene for the welfare of “ordinary” children. Social policies are targeted solidly at minimizing the gap between the rich and poor, underscoring individual rights to welfare and children’s right to a “good enough” life.

The most surprising aspect of this research was in how far apart the Swedish social workers seemed to be from the Canadian social workers in terms of professional identity. As social workers working for Umeå Social Services, the Swedish participants in the study seemed unlikely to take on a child protection mantle. As child welfare workers, they focused on the needs of children within the context of their families and on resources the agency had to help them. This identity did not however seem to equip them with specialized skills to investigate child abuse and neglect. This may leave

“extraordinary” children exposed to risk and harm because of the system’s inability to distinguish children in these circumstances. Another unexpected and contradictory aspect of Swedish child welfare was the residual aspect of placing children in care, often for long periods. It would be interesting to compare more systematically whether the grounds for placement are similar or unlike those of Canadian child protection.

As expected, the Barrie agency reflected much of what characterizes the child protection system in Canada. The strength of this system is in identifying risk and harm. Furthermore, the strength of the Canadian system may well be in helping children who have been abused by offering treatment groups for children, non-offending and offending parents. Unexpectedly, the Canadian participants appeared glad to have a risk assessment tool to use in their practice although this has driven practice further into protectionism. There is also limited but important data to suggest that the child protection system pushes to keep the continuing problem of child abuse and neglect on the social agenda. Yet, the modest aims of social policy continue to fail to appreciate the extent to which poverty plays a significant part in the abuse (both physical and sexual) and neglect of children.

In conclusion, although this dissertation is, in effect, a case study of two child welfare agencies, one in Canada and one in Sweden, it is possible to make some cautious generalizing statements to the effect that Umeå is representative of some of the key elements of Swedish child welfare while Barrie is representative of some of the key elements of Canadian child protection. When data from this study are seen in context with other research in the field, it appears to give meaning to talk about two models of state service for children in need because of abuse or neglect—Swedish child welfare and Canadian child protection.

## 7. References

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## **Appendix One: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE**

### Group One

#### A. Introduction (9.15- 9.30 )

Hello and Welcome

Introduction Topic: Who we are and Why we are here.

1. Purpose of Focus Group
2. Expectations for the Focus Group: setting the stage, setting some group rules
3. Role of Moderators
4. How we plan to use the time

Opening Question: Introduction of Participants

To establish group composition

Now that you know something about the purpose of the group, we would like to know a bit about yourselves. Could you tell us briefly, how long have you worked at the agency, what you did before you came to work here, and maybe something about what you like to do when you are not working at the Children's Aid Society/Umeå Socialtjänst.

#### B. Social Intervention (9.30 - 10.10 )

Introductory Question:

What is it that you have to be good at in your positions here? (5 minutes)

Present Model: See Appendix 2

- **Transitional Question:** What happens once a referral is received?
- **Key Question(s):** What happens then?
- Follow-up Questions
- What is your part in this?
- Can you explain this in more detail?
- Can you explain what you mean?

Summary and Questions from Ulf (10.10 -10.15 )

“Coffee Break” ( 10.15 -10.30 )

Vignettes (10.30 - 11.30 )

Vignette 1 ( 10.30 - 10.40 )

- Transitional Question: You have a piece of information. What do you do with the information you got?
- Key Question(s): What happens next?
- Follow-up Questions: What kind of information do you need? How do you get this information?

What does this information from the vignette say to you? How do you react to it?

What do you see as your own role in this?

When does your role end?

Vignette 2 ( 10.40 - 11.00 )

- Transitional Question: You have a new piece of information. What do you do with the information you got?
- Key Question(s): What happens next?
- Follow-up Questions: What kind of information do you need? How do you get this information?

What does this information from the vignette say to you? How do you react to it?

What do you see as your own role in this?

When does your role end?

Vignette 3 ( 11.00 - 11.20 )

- Transitional Question: You have a piece of information. What do you do with the information you got?
- Key Question(s): What happens next?
- Follow-up Questions: What kind of information do you need? How do you get this information?

What does this information from the vignette say to you? How do you react to it?

What do you see as your own role in this?

When does your role end?

Summary and Conclusion (11.20 - 11.30)

Key Questions:

Is there anything that we should have talked about but didn't?

Before we come back to you next time, is there anything you can think of that we might want to dig into further, or can you think of something that you might like to see done differently?

Focus Group 2

Summary of Session One

Impressions from participants about session one

Reflection on nature of intervention in each place

Themes that came out from session one

Barrie: status of social work, tools, court, placement, child as client, best interests of child, permanency planning, men in child welfare

## **Appendix Two: Focus Group Vignettes**

- Vignette 1:** Early in the school year, a teacher calls the social service agency about John, a 7-year-old boy. John had been coming to school complaining of being tired and hungry. He reported that his mother did not have breakfast for him. When questioned, he added that his mother was asleep on the sofa; he dressed himself and walked to school.
- Vignette 2:** Some months later, the agency gets another call about the same family. A neighbour reported hearing screaming coming from the home. She witnessed the child leave the home, a male yelling obscenities at the child, and holding the child tightly. Beer bottles were lying outside the front door. The mother was present and passively observing what was going on.
- Vignette 3:** Two months later, the schoolteacher telephoned the social service agency again to report first that the child had discomfort sitting down. The child raised his shirt and revealed multiple bruise marks on his back in the shape of a strap. The child appeared afraid and stated that he would be in trouble for showing his teacher.

**Appendix Three: Flowchart for Focus Group Participants**

