

Short Communication

Dilemmas of Professional Logics in the Response to Child Abuse

Lene Mosegaard Søjberg*

Head of research, VIA Society and Social Work, VIA University College, Denmark

*Corresponding author

Lene Mosegaard Søjberg, Head of research, VIA Society and Social Work, VIA University College, Ceresbyen 24, B3.05, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark, Tel: 45 87551751; Email: lmos@via.dk

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Abstract

The field of child abuse is characterized by involving a multitude of different professions. With multiple professions working together, a dilemma between different logics can arise. This communication includes data from a study among social workers dealing with child abuse in Denmark. The study suggests that the sharing of information between professionals is highly valuable and appreciated but at the same time, an emphasis on the police investigation in the beginning phases of a case presents a tension between a criminal-law oriented logic and a treatment-oriented logic.

Keywords

- Child sexual abuse
- Barnahus
- Crisis intervention
- Forensic interviews

INTRODUCTION

Barnahus is the terminology used for centrally organized approaches to the handling of child abuse in the Nordic countries. The Nordic barnahus is inspired by Children's Advocacy Centers (CAC) in the US [1]. Further reading on the Nordic barnahus see article by Johansson et al. [2].

This short commentary presents and discusses dilemmas of dealing with physical and sexual abuse of children. Forensic research and analysis is an important aspect of dealing with abused children, but child abuse does not fall within one discipline. Professionals approach the problem from various perspectives and disciplines such as psychology, criminology, law, social work and health [3,4]. The overall aim of all professionals dealing with child abuse is to help the child in question [5] but cross-professional cooperation sometimes entails dilemmas. The presence of multiple professions and somewhat opposing logics constitute a conundrum which needs to be acknowledged in order to provide the necessary help to abused children. The discussion is illustrated with data from a qualitative study among social workers dealing with children and sexual abuse in Denmark.

BACKGROUND

One way of working cross-professionally with child abuse is through models of cooperation such as Children's Advocacy Centers (CAC's) which were initiated in the United States in the 1980s [1]. In 1998, the first Children's House (Barnahus) outside the United States was established in Iceland and within the last decades, Barnahus have been established in the all Nordic countries [2]. The overall aim of the Barnahus is to provide integrated and child-centered services for children exposed to violence and sexual abuse. In the Barnahus, multiple professions work together to ensure that victimized children receives help

and treatment and that their legal rights are met. The two principal ambitions with the inter-agency collaboration within Barnahus are to improve the criminal investigations and make the judicial processes more efficient and at the same time to improve protection, support, and treatment of the child. These ambitions work towards a common goal of helping the child, but the professionals dealing with the child do not always see eye to eye on the prioritizing taking place between their disciplines. The presence of various perspectives or logics indicates that "collaboration in Barnahus implies a tension between a criminal law-oriented logic and a treatment-oriented welfare logic" [4].

THE BARNAHUS IN DENMARK

In Denmark, five centrally administered Barnahus were established in 2013 with the aim of coordinating and improving the assistance provided to abused children [6]. Within the Barnahus, police, health professionals, psychologists and social workers work together from their individual perspectives with the common aim of working in the best interest of a vulnerable child [7]. All municipalities in Denmark are linked to one particular Barnahus (based on geographical location) and they are by law obligated to contact the Barnahus when a suspicion of child abuse is disclosed and the Barnahus subsequently assumes the role of coordinator in the case.

An important task of the Barnahus is to arrange a forensic investigative interview undertaken by a police officer trained in forensic interviews with (abused) children. In order to ensure that the interview can be admitted as evidence in a court of law, it is important that the child has not been influenced before the interview takes place [8]. This means that the forensic investigative interview has to take place before other professionals (i.e. social welfare workers and psychologists) are

allowed to talk to the child.

METHOD

This communication is based on the findings of a qualitative study which analyzed how municipally employed social welfare workers view the establishment of Barnahus in Denmark. The results of the study point in various directions [7,9]. This communication focuses on the findings related to the dilemmas of prioritizing between multiple professional perspectives.

The qualitative study contains interviews with social workers in eight municipalities (five single and three group interviews). The social workers all had experience cooperating with the Barnahus and were interviewed about how the establishment of the Barnahus affected their capability to work with the abused children. The interviews were undertaken in Danish and transcribed verbatim. The quotes included in this communication have been translated by the author.

RESULTS

The main finding of the qualitative interviews is that the social workers are pleased about the establishment of Barnahus because they find the gathering of experts on child abuse constructive and valuable to their work. Dealing with child abuse is difficult, professionally and mentally, and the social workers are happy to have the opportunity to discuss and get advice on these difficult cases from professionals from several disciplines who have more knowledge and expertise than themselves.

However, some social workers also express a predicament in the cooperation, as they feel that there is a hierarchy between the social sector and the legal/forensic sector particularly in the beginning phases of a case. Since the establishment of Barnahus, all forensic interviews in cases of suspected child abuse have to take place at a Barnahus. The information from the interviews are often useful to both the criminal investigation and the child protection services [10], but some social workers are skeptical about the fact that investigative interviews have priority over social and psychological treatment. One social worker said that: *"My experience is that the Barnahus spends more energy facilitating interrogations of children, video interviews. ... I sometimes think that it seems like the police always comes first"*. This quote illustrates how the social workers sometimes feel inferior in the cooperation within the Barnahus. This understanding is further highlighted by a shortage of police staff trained and experienced in child interviews in some police districts. This means that waiting times and delays of up to 4-5 weeks can occur before the investigative police interviews take place [11]. During this delay, social workers are not allowed to initiate treatment or consultative conversations and in cases where the treat against the child is not acute, the child remains in his or her home environment. The delays are infrequent but these cases cause some social workers to feel that their professional perspective becomes second to the logic of the police and the investigative and forensic experts. Psychologists and social workers argue that when a child has admitted to being abused, especially if it involves a parent or immediate caretaker as it does in more than 75% of the cases in Denmark [12], letting the children wait a long time before they can talk to someone about what happened, can

be detrimental to the child's recovery [13]. Regardless of whether the perpetrator is convicted or not.

Furthermore, with only a limited the number of police officers being trained to interview children, the social workers often have to make room in their calendar with short notice to fit the calendar of the police. This interrupts other cases the social worker is working on and leads to a feeling of inferiority. In cases where it is not possible for the particular social worker who is handling the case to attend the interview, another social worker will attend and this can lead to confusion. *"Other people than the ones dealing with the case are often at the [forensic] interview. This is confusing for us [social workers] and for the child."*

DISCUSSION

The results presented above indicate, that a dilemma exists between a law-oriented logic and a treatment-oriented welfare. An important reservation is however, that the study only includes interviews with social workers. This does not devalue the immediate findings but it means that the study does not present the cooperation from the perspective of law-oriented professionals. The results nevertheless support the existence of a clash of logics, which must be taken into consideration when striving to provide the best assistance to abused children.

CONCLUSION

Dealing with cases of child abuse is difficult and demands cooperation between several sectors and professionals. Working multi-disciplinary is valuable as it gives the professionals an opportunity to retrieve knowledge [14] but it also often involves challenges and dilemmas and the field of child abuse is no different. While all professionals appreciate and acknowledge the importance of securing adequate investigative evidence that can lead to a fair trial, the importance placed on legal issues in the initial phases of a case may lead feelings of inferiority among some professionals. Furthermore, the social and psychological treatment of the child can be delayed.

The dilemma between the logics of a criminal law perspective and a welfare treatment perspective cannot easily be solved. What is possible is to continue working with the different professions in a multidisciplinary approach which allows the forensic evidence and the social treatment to work in common to the benefit of the child.

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