Welfare and Self Care: Institutionalized Visions for a Good Life in Danish Day-care Centres

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ABSTRACT: Using the case of early childcare institutions in contemporary Denmark, the aim of the article is to show that welfare entails visions of living that are made manifest through the requirements of everyday institutional practices. The main argument is that welfare institutions are designed not only to take care of people’s basic needs but also to enable them to fare well in accordance with the dominant norms of society. This is particularly evident in the case of children. Children are objects of intense normative attention and are invested in as no other social group in order to ensure their enculturation. Therefore, studying the collective investments in children, for example by paying attention to the institutional arrangements set up for them, offers insight into dominant cultural priorities and hoped-for outcomes.

KEYWORDS: children, day-care, integration, regimes of living, self-care, welfare

As described by several researchers, the idea of the welfare state has changed over the last decades (Rose 1996; Bloch et al. 2003; Christiansen and Markkola 2006; Wintersberger et al. 2007). From being a general protector of social security and equity, for example by granting social security benefit, the role of the welfare state is, these days, more often presented as an investor in ‘human capital’ (Olk 2009) and as a structure aimed at enabling people to overcome risks and challenges in order to fit the demands of society (Wintersberger et al. 2007: 12). This shift has also altered the idea of welfare. From a project concerned with providing basic needs for all citizens, welfare has become an ever more encompassing endeavour to identify and prevent social challenges and a means to enforce social norms and regulate ways of living.

In several countries, including Denmark, this turn has promoted the expansion of a public system of early childcare that manifested itself in a substantial increase in day-care enrolment over the last two decades, particularly of children below the age of three. From being a place where small children could stay while their parents were at work, early childcare institutions are now seen both as a societal investment in human resources and as a bulwark against inequality and social unrest. Positioned at the frontline of the welfare state, early childcare institutions and preschools are expected to identify and address risks and social problems in children and families as early as possible and to lead children and their parents to live in accordance with dominant norms.

In Denmark where state-involvement in the upbringing of preschool children is pronounced, this development is very explicit. The investment in public day-care institutions is much higher than most other countries in Europe (Bennett 2005), as is the percentage of small children enrolled in them. Consequently, public childcare has a high political priority.

Anthropology in Action, 18, 3 (2011): 21–32 © Berghahn Books and the Association for Anthropology in Action
and day-care institutions have become an integral part of Danish society. Public childcare also accounts for an increasing proportion of municipal budgets (Borchorst 2000: 56).

These changes in the early-childcare sector have been analysed and discussed from a variety of angles. However, so far interest has concentrated on political aims, structural conditions, processes of administration and social consequences. What has largely been missing is an investigation of the everyday practices within institutional settings. This ethnography of early-years Danish childcare institutions employs Collier and Lakoff’s concept of ‘a regime of living’ (2005) to emphasize that welfare as a vision of life is made manifest in everyday interactions in welfare institutions, such as kindergartens. As Russell and Edgar (1998: 6) have pointed out, ‘welfare’ is not an abstract concept, but translated and transformed by real actors in concrete situations. To fare well through life is connected to culturally specific interpretations of how to be and what to become. It also encompasses designs and prescriptions of how to fare well that not only address material concerns but equally include ideas and values, performative requirements and social judgements. In other words, welfare calls for behaviour that corresponds to the demands and expectations of a person’s social and cultural surroundings. Consequently, welfare institutions are designed not only to take care of people’s basic needs but also to enable them to fare well in accordance with the dominant norms of society. The role of early childcare institutions is particularly illuminating in this regard. Children are objects of intense normative attention and are invested in as no other social group in order to ensure their enculturation. Therefore, studying the collective investments in children, for example by paying attention to the institutional arrangements set up for them, offers insight into dominant cultural priorities and hoped-for outcomes.

Based on several ethnographic periods of fieldwork1 in different childcare institutions in Denmark, I will show how welfare is closely associated with norms of conduct, in particular behavioural predictability, as they are defined by and practised in welfare institutions. I will mainly use examples from one of the fieldworks, conducted over seven months in two day-care institutions and their intake area in a small Danish city in 2002 and 2003. Daily participant observation, interviews (both formal and informal) with children, parents, preschool teachers as well as with local authorities, provided the data. The analysis is, however, based on the broader material leading me to conclude that welfare studies has to take heed of culture in order to understand what welfare means in a changing society and how the ideas and institutions that constitute it influence and frame everyday life.

**Childcare as a ‘Regime of Living’**

Gösta Esping-Andersen has identified and analysed different welfare-models in various societies ([1990] 2000). In an article specifically addressing the characteristics of Scandinavian welfare, he and Walter Korpi draw attention to three distinctive features. First, the provision of welfare is comprehensive. The scope of public intervention is simultaneously far-reaching and intensive and ‘[pushes] the principles of the welfare state further into civil society than is internationally common’ (Esping-Andersen and Korpi 1987: 42). Second, social entitlement is highly institutionalized, that is the Scandinavian welfare states have furnished citizens with basic rights of access to a wide range of standardized services. Third, universalism constitutes the core principle of Scandinavian welfare provision, meaning that resources are distributed across the whole of the population rather than being targeted at particular groups (ibid.: 42–43).

Though much has changed with regard to welfare in Scandinavia since the article was first published, these three features remain
relevant. In some ways they have become even more salient, because of the continued expansion of the welfare state as mentioned in the opening paragraph. For instance, in Denmark welfare in childcare policy is characterized by a solid confidence in institutional solutions to social problems, by universal programmes directed at all segments of society, and by a high degree of state intervention, particularly towards those groups whose ways of life appears at odds with institutional efforts. In this sense the welfare state has expanded not only in volume but also in the scope of tasks. This is also a point stressed by Lars Dencik when he states: ‘to the same extent that the individuation process transformed the citizens of the Scandinavian welfare states into socially free individuals, the state has stepped in as a non-personal “patron” of the welfare state citizens’ (Dencik 1998: 28).

During the last 30 years, political interest in early childcare has increased significantly and, consequently, the sector has moved from the margins of public administration and policy to the centre. This is illustrated by the many important roles and responsibilities that have been vested in early childcare institutions. They are charged with the prevention of social problems, the creation of human capital, and the facilitation of social uniformity. Thus, day-care facilities are regarded a necessary precondition for parents’ – and particular mothers’ – participation in the labour market, but they are also considered crucial to ensure that children are brought up ‘properly’ and are well prepared for school. Early childcare is conceptualized as an important site of integration for children of different ethnic backgrounds, and as a means to promote social coherence. While these developments apply to all Scandinavian countries they are particularly pronounced in Denmark where more than 87 per cent of children between one and three years of age and more than 95 per cent between the ages of three and six spend their days in early day-care institutions, although such enrolment is not mandatory (Statistical Yearbook 2007). By law every child is guaranteed access to a day-care programme, a right that is justified primarily with the needs of the child, rather than those of the parents. Early childcare has become the guarantor of children receiving a ‘proper’ upbringing from the very first year of life and considerable efforts are thus made to ensure that children enter the welfare system as early as possible.

Although the notion of ‘regimes of living’ is introduced by Collier and Lakoff in a global context in which ‘living’ has been rendered problematic, their focus on how moral reasoning ‘is invoked in problematic situations to provide a possible guide to action’ (Collier and Lakoff 2005: 22–23) makes the concept germane to discussions of welfare. ‘Regimes of living’, according to the authors represent, ‘[a] configuration of normative, technical and political elements that are brought into alignment in situations that present ethical problems’ (ibid.). Welfare in Scandinavia can be regarded as such a configuration that operates through discourses, programmes, decisions, actions and institutional arrangements aimed at ensuring that every single citizen fares well throughout life and whose ambition is universal, all-encompassing and interventional. Welfare covers a wide range of social institutions that serve whole segments of the population or individuals with specific wants, for example in terms of employment, or housing, or who are deemed in need of further enhancement through education, skills or knowledge. Approaching welfare as a regime of living is not dissimilar to the approach suggested by Didier Fassin. Re-interpreting Michel Foucault’s concept of bio-politics, he argues for a political and moral anthropology that pays proper attention to the notion of the political:

What politics does to life – and lives – is not just a question of discourses and technologies, of strategies and tactics. It is also a question of the concrete way in which individuals and groups are treated, under which principles and in the
The case for welfare as a ‘regime of living’ or a ‘politics of life’, as Fassin calls it, is especially strong in relation to children. Like no other age group childhood is freighted with moral judgements regarding the nature of the child, the circumstances under which he or she should grow up, and the competencies and abilities required to live a life considered satisfactory by society. These judgements are turned into an everyday incorporated reality, through a sequence of institutional settings – from early-years day-care centres to kindergartens and schools – that are deemed the official sites of bringing up children and which are charged with instilling in children the attitudes and skills necessary to live a life in accordance with societal norms of welfare and well-being.

Childcare Institutions as the Right Place to Be

In Denmark, the provision by the public sector of day care for children enjoys a high priority and benefits from considerable investment by local authorities. This became evident during seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in two day-care institutions in a small Danish city. In interviews, local authority representatives were asked to outline their political vision for the community’s day-care institutions. The head of the local authority’s children and family services recounted that they had enjoyed considerable success at enrolling nearly all children in the area in day-care institutions, or, as she put it, ‘i det officielle socialiseringsystem’, ‘in the official socializing system’. She particularly stressed the efforts to enrol tosprogede børn, ‘bi-lingual children’, and described how the local authority had established procedures to ensure that all families were aware of the benefit of sending their children to day-care institutions from an early age. For example, public health nurses, who visit every family with babies and toddlers on a regular basis, in addition to their normal duties, were asked to spell out to ‘bi-lingual’ families the benefits of day care for their child, such as being in daily contact with other children and learning to speak Danish properly. Local authority officials were also sent to individual families and the district’s day-care centres organized outreach activities in their communities. This education and enrolment drive resulted in 85 per cent of the district’s ethnic minority children attending public childcare institutions, and was a source of considerable pride for its organizers. When asked why it was so important for ‘bi-lingual’ children to be in day-care, the head of children and family services stressed their role at helping the children integrate into Danish society by developing their language skills and familiarizing them with dominant social norms. The aim of day-care, she stated, was to teach children to manage themselves, to be cooperative and considerate towards others, and to interact in non-violent ways. In other words, day-care institutions were sites of normative social training delivering an education in non-violent civil interaction.

The head of children and family services was not alone in this interpretation. Similar statements can be found in numerous political documents and local guidelines where the role of day-care institutions in teaching children behavioural norms and in transmitting national traditions that comprise and construct a collective system of values and reference points is openly acknowledged. These official accounts thus encapsulate the role of public day-care institutions as civilizing agents that assure standards of upbringing and social coherence in agreement with the welfare vision. This, in itself, is not remarkable, as socialization and citizen formation are inevitably part of any educational system. What is remarkable though is the extent to which in Denmark the responsibility for raising and educating children has been transferred to welfare institutions. Thus, children who are not part of the
‘official’ system are considered at risk of not learning socially sanctioned skills, in particular if their parents are immigrants or refugees, uneducated, unemployed, and do not speak Danish fluently (see Gullöv 2008 for further discussion).

This represents a shift in terms of the relationship between parents and the authorities or, as Olk puts it, the substitution of the traditional ‘family-responsibility-paradigm’ by a contemporary ‘investing-in-children paradigm’ (Olk 2009). The child has to some extent become a shared project between parents and the welfare state, where the role of the state includes the right to cultivate in accordance with a vision of the common good. This means that being a good parent is not solely a family affair. From an early age, the child is separated from the domestic sphere in order to be transformed into a civilized person able to participate in all aspects of civil society in a non-violent and otherwise socially acceptable way. Becoming and being a civilized person are matters of political concern that have been translated into institutional arrangements and are constantly interpreted as part of the daily practices of childcare professionals. In this way, what constitutes a ‘normal’ upbringing, itself considered every citizen’s ticket to the ‘good life’, becomes a matter of institutional inscription (cf. Kampmann 2004: 138).

Denmark might be extraordinary in this regard, yet the challenges faced by Danish society will be familiar elsewhere with similar concerns being raised about the kinds of intervention necessary to ensure the formation of new citizens. While the challenges are similar the process and means to meet them are not, with a bewildering range of childcare arrangements in existence in modern welfare states. Nonetheless, a general trend towards greater professionalization of and state-intervention in childcare can be identified, though it seems that the Scandinavian model emphasizes institutional solutions more than most other countries (Korsvold 2008; Kjørholt, forthcoming).

Verbalizing Feeling

Almost all children are, thus, enrolled in early childcare institutions for a period of approximately five years. The system includes nuggestuer, nurseries that serve children from six months to age three, and børnehaver, kindergartens for children between the age of three and six or seven, the age when compulsory schooling begins. What visions and demands do the children encounter in these settings? Despite the efforts to have children enrolled in early childcare institutions there is no strict schedule or tight educational programme to which they have to conform. In general the curricula are play-based with a strong focus on child-centred, child-initiated learning. Voluntary group-oriented activities as well as fixed meal times make up the planned elements of the day. The rest of the day is loosely and flexibly structured according to the individual child’s desires. Programmes are characterized by an absence of teacher-directed learning but activities are supervised by professional staff, pædagoger and trained assistants, medhjælpere. Autonomy and independence are supported. For instance, four-year-olds are permitted to play alone in small groups with no adults present, both inside and outside, and cooperative play and socially inclusive group activities are emphasized. Equality and social inclusion are keywords of Danish early-years pedagogy, which also has a rather ambiguous attitude to the notion of teaching. For example, strong injunctions exist against introducing a formal curriculum or any other school-like organization of activities into childcare institutions (e.g. Gullöv, forthcoming).

However, such an apparent lack of structure should not be confused with a lack of purpose. Instead this form of pedagogy is directed towards developing the children’s social behaviour rather than merely preparing them for school. Children who are not acting in socially acceptable ways, that is who are inconsiderate, greedy, ruthless, selfish or violent are regarded
with concern and become the subject of adult intervention. Thus, the aim of institutional upbringing is directed at modifying social behaviour by teaching children how to collaborate with others and to be a member of a group rather than merely instructing them in specific school-related skills. In keeping with this ethos, childcare workers’ interventions are focused on creating a habitus of social interaction rather than on fostering individual achievement.

That social behaviour is an institutional priority can be seen in all kinds of activities during the day. Children are constantly asked to be considerate, to share objects, to include others, to collaborate, to find solutions and to negotiate. Staff talk of how important it is that children attend the institution on a regular basis, as it is through daily practice that social norms are incorporated and that the children experience what kinds of behaviour are socially acceptable. It is through daily practice that the children learn to fit in. This includes learning about the norms of social proximity and distance, and about how to align their own desires with the social norms and decisions of the group. Thus, it is considered important to teach children to behave and communicate in socially valued ways. Children are not allowed to hit, kick and push, throw things or destroy what belongs to others. They are encouraged to express negative emotions such as anger and rage, but only if they do so in a controlled and, preferably, in a verbal way. Being physically aggressive is frowned upon. Gaining the staff’s approval and respect necessitates communicating in socially sanctioned ways. In short, Danish early-childcare institutions are designed to ensure that systematic efforts can be made to familiarize their charges with dominant social norms that place a premium on self-control and verbal expression (Dencik 1989).

In this way, it has become a task of early childcare institutions – and by extension of society – to teach children from an ever-younger age how to behave. Thus, the importance attributed to having children in early childcare can be interpreted as a policy of living, a way to ensure that children are taught to conduct themselves in accordance with dominant norms of sociality.

Self-management as Expectation

Most children spend their preschool years in day-care institutions and, consequently, doing so has become the norm. Young children are more or less expected to come here on a daily basis to play with age-mates and learn how to behave in a group which is not part of their family. The socializing visions of early childcare are directed towards teaching children norms of civil society (how to communicate and deal with other people), though in practice the behavioural demands made on children are just as much defined by organizational considerations ensuring the institution’s functioning. I will illustrate this point using an example from one of the fieldwork institutions. This day-care centre was attended by about 80 children from a variety of social, ethnic and economic backgrounds who were divided into four groups, each with a pedagogue and two assistants instructing children in norms of behaviour and guiding them through the loose structure of the daily programme.

A group of children had just finished eating and the teacher asked them to tidy up their lunch-packets and bring any leftovers to the fridge. Most children were doing as they were told, but Ibrahim, aged 3½, just got up from the table leaving behind the sandwich paper, bits of foods and a heap of crumbs. When the pedagogue asked him to clean up this mess, Ibrahim replied that he did not know what to do. Patiently, the pedagogue explained to him what to do and he did so reluctantly. As he had been in day-care for eight months he was supposed to know what was expected, she told him.

A little later, all the children were putting on their snowsuits to go outside to the playground. Ibrahim was sitting in the doorway
calling for somebody to help him. Nobody re-
acted. All the staff were busy helping some of
the younger children with their suits, boots
and gloves. When all the other children had
left, Ibrahim was still calling for help while
fumbling with his snowsuit. Irritated, one of
the staff finally helped him and he ran off to
join the others in the playground.

Ten minutes later Ibrahim was back inside
again because he needed to go to the toilet.
When he asked for help to take off his snow-
suit the pedagogue was becoming rather exas-
errated. She assisted him but whispered to me
(the anthropologist):

‘He is a nice boy but he is simply not brought up
as he should. They [his parents] have not taught
him to do anything. When a child at his age is not
able to take a snowsuit on and off or to tidy up his
own lunch-packet, there is something to worry
about. In some ways, he is developmentally be-
hind. It is the parents fault. I regard it as lack of
care. It is as if they don’t bother or don’t under-
stand what it means to bring up a child these
days. There are simply things you need to master.’
Ibrahim calling from the loo interrupted her.

This pedagogue was not alone in her com-
plaints and other staff members, who were also
unhappy with some of the children’s ‘service
expectations’, echoed her views. Three mem-
ers of staff looking after 20 children – some of
them only toddlers – means a lot of work and
staff do not have any time to spare to provide
extra services to the older children, such as
Ibrahim. These children are expected to have
developed the ability to do certain basic mat-
ters such as eating, dressing, going to the toilet
without the help of an adult. Yet the neces-
sities and expectations of the early childcare
institution can be at odds with those of the
family, even if – or rather often because – both
have the welfare of the child in mind. In an
interview Ibrahim’s mother, a young Turkish
immigrant, stressed how important it was to
her to nurse and comfort her child. She empha-
sized that small children need to have bodily
contact and constantly feel how much they
are loved, especially if they were separated
from their parents many hours a day. These
are the reasons, she explained, why she would
sit her son on her lap as soon as he was back
from day-care, why she helped him with his
food, put on his clothes, and why she tried ‘to
meet whatever needs he has’. She also admit-
ted that she thought the day-care centre very
‘Danish’ in the way that the staff prioritized
the children’s independence. She expressed
admiration for the pedagogues’ ambition to
teach the children to look after themselves, but
felt that independence was promoted at the
expense of comfort and care. Both of Ibrahim’s
parents suspected there was not enough close
physical contact between staff and individual
children. So, at home they tried to compensate
for the daily deficit of contact ‘by nursing him
as much as [we] can’. They considered it more
important to comfort their son than to demand
of him to look after himself. Nonetheless, the
mother recounted, the teacher had asked them
to develop Ibrahim’s independence. ‘He is
only three’, she pleaded, ‘and there will be
plenty of time for him to learn. Now we enjoy
him as a small child.’

Most parents would be inclined to think
that any professionals looking after their child
should pay more attention to him or her. Staff
themselves might be willing to do so, but
while it may be desirable, realizing such ar-
rangements remains a logical and practical
impossibility. Not only is it logically impos-
sible, because any service improvement also
raises expectations, but it is also practically
impossible because institutional staff have
many obligations to meet and tasks to accom-
plish. Therefore, with the present staff–child
ratio it is simply not possible for staff to meet
all demands and independent, self-managing
children are an institutional necessity. Thus,
staff count on and expect parental support in
this matter. Children need to do certain tasks
themselves; independence in matters such as
dressing and eating are essential skills in the
busy everyday life of a day-care centre.
It is, however, noteworthy that it is not these practical matters that the teachers raise as cause for annoyance. They do not complain of limited time and opportunities to work with individual children. Rather, they explain how some children’s relative lack of skills gives cause for concern for the sake of the child. In this way, it seems that their expectations of the children’s competences are so much part of the routines of the institution that they regard them as universal and reasonable expectations of children of this age. The institutional requirements have, thus, been transformed to a standard used to evaluate children’s developmental progress and in the daily life of day-care the self-managing child has turned into a sign of development. Every cultural notion of development has some markers signifying developmental progress. In contemporary day-care institutions in Denmark markers of a successful developmental progression are self-management, self-control and verbal expressions of intentions. These skills function at once as prerequisites for the social success of the individual child and as evidence of the efficiency of institutional routines. At the same time they link with broader cultural understandings about persons and agency. The emphasis on self-control, cooperation, self-management – and equality – is deeply entangled with the ideas and practical arrangements of the politics of living in the twentieth century. The valorization of such ideas lay behind the establishment of childcare as one of the foundational pillars of the post-war welfare state. It is this moral and cultural foundation that makes the ideal of the self-managing child so powerful, and that it is perceived as both a natural and an obvious requirement.

A Politics of Living

As welfare institutions, children’s day-care centres map onto a specific lifestyle. Most children in day care in contemporary Denmark are from families with two working parents. In such families, the general pattern will be that children are woken up early and have to dress themselves in order to fit into the tight morning schedule. In other words, home imposes similar requirements on them as the day-care institution. Therefore, the children tend to be familiar with the concept of self-management and have little difficulty in fulfilling the expectations and meeting the norms. The ideal of the self-managing child, who is able to negotiate and verbalize intentions and feelings applies to both the childcare institution and the home. At both sites, children are encouraged to express their views on a range of issues and expected to contribute to the planning of activities.

Thus, the culture of the day-care institutions dovetails with the culture of the dual-income family. The perception of the child, and of children’s abilities and development, mirror those of a certain kind of family where the child becomes skilled in particular practices and grows to embody a set of values that apply to both the family and the day-care institution. The ideal and the practices of these two social institutions – family and day-care centre – correlate with and reinforce each other, thereby turning culturally and class-specific norms and expectations of child development into benchmarks for the development of all children. Children from families with parents outside the labour market, or who have other ideas about care-giving and education, are not met with the same kind of demands at home and lack practice at complying with them. As these children struggle to do what they are expected to do by the day-care institution, they become the objects of professional concern.

In the case of Ibrahim, his parents were asked to train him in practical matters such as dressing, eating and going to the toilet so that he would stop being so dependent on others. Staff also suggested that they drop Ibrahim
off early in the morning, so that he would be able to play with the other kids right from the beginning of the day, rather than having to join them later on when the other children were already absorbed in play. In this way, this family, having no need to rush in the morning, because both parents were looking for employment, were asked to wake up early, and adapt to the lifestyle of the dual-parent working family. By enforcing these dominant cultural values as part of Ibrahim’s education, not only was the child disciplined (in the sense of Foucault) but so were his parents. In other words, the view on the development of the child refers to a child in specific circumstances with working parents, a busy family life, and parents in need of competent children. This mainstream lifestyle applies to the majority of Danish children. Children whose parents are outside the labour market, lead divergent lifestyles or prefer alternative ways of bringing up and relating to their offspring, risk becoming the subject of concern, observation and regulation, as do their parents. In this way, the family has become an extension of the welfare institution. The family is to some extent at the service of the welfare institution, rather than the other way round.

The case of Ibrahim shows how childcare institutions are entitled to dispense guidance on how to live, and that this privilege includes the right to intervene in families that do not bring up their children in accordance with dominant norms. Though not setting up unequivocal norms, day-care institutions present parents and children with norms of behaviour and ways to live, a kind of moral regulation through practical arrangements. The purpose of childcare institutions is to transform children into civil persons, which not only means to regulate their behaviours but also to ensure that they adapt a lifestyle commonly regarded as proper. Welfare institutions in this sense express dominant visions of the good life. They are authorized to instil a way of living in the children, but also ensure social cohesion and integration, which are seen as a precondition for this kind of welfare society to function.

Welfare as a Cultural Interpretation

Welfare politics and the everyday practices of welfare institutions present a frame for living or a regime of living. They are expressions of a certain vision of life as they implicitly but also explicitly guide people in how life should be organized, scheduled, evaluated and directed. ‘Welfare’ is the expression of an interpretation of a way to fare well, a means of order in and ordering of life. In the case of childcare institutions in Denmark, the present interpretation partly reflects ideological visions and moral orientations, partly everyday necessities in the institutional organization. Day-care institutions are empowered to make a difference in peoples’ everyday life. They influence the form and organization of daily tasks in concrete ways and prepare the moral conditions for how life should be lived (Collier and Lakoff 2005). Imbued with the right to intervene whenever any perceived signs of risks are identified, childcare institutions are simultaneously agents of control, which aim to ensure stability and social homogeneity, and agents of guidance in order to achieve a sound upbringing. In this sense political, technical and moral forces converge in welfare institutions.

This focus on control and guidance is not new but it has changed in form and scope over the last 60 years. From a political vision striving to fulfil basic human needs by redistributing resources, the quest for welfare in Denmark has come to include ever more minute aspects of life. Having largely overcome the traditional concerns of the welfare state such as poverty, infant mortality, poor housing or unhealthy sanitation, welfare has been redefined and reassessed to spot and to fix potential risks and possible signs of deviance before they develop.
into social problems. Translating this approach into everyday requirements of welfare institutions has resulted in a preoccupation with moulding and evaluating sociality itself. Seen in a historical perspective, it appears that since the Second World War, this process of creating social predictability and stability by reducing risk has become the core of Scandinavian welfare practice.

This change in welfare focus is related to wider historical changes. Originally, the Scandinavian post-war welfare state was concerned with ensuring that everyone was able to participate on equal terms in an open and diverse democracy. Modelling itself in opposition to both 1930s totalitarianism and fascism and to the communist states of Eastern Europe during the Cold War era, Scandinavian welfare politics placed a strong cultural emphasis on freedom of opinion and expression. Diversity of expression was considered the hallmark of free democracies as manifested in avant-garde art, a lively civil sphere with a flourishing scene of political groupings and parties, and a strong educational emphasis on personal style and expression and the ability to think critically. The school – and more recently the day-care institution – were regarded as foundational for the creation and perpetuation of a democratic society and an initially strongly anti-authoritarian pedagogy gradually became institutionalized (Øland 2010).

However, this cultural orientation has changed over the last 20 years. From a focus on welfare as a bulwark against totalitarianism and the limitations of self-expression, the role of welfare institutions has gradually shifted in favour of a need to reduce threats and instability within society and to use education as a means to enhance Denmark's ability to compete on the global market. What constitutes welfare is always a reflection of specific circumstances and cultural values. Hence the above shift has also altered the role of welfare from being the guarantor of a democratic society to ensuring stability, social order and the creation of educated, self-managing citizens able to compete in a globalized economy.

Conclusion

Welfare has mainly been analysed and discussed by sociologists and political scientists as matters concerning economy, distribution of resources and policy. Anthropology can, however, contribute to these explorations, as institutional arrangements, social obligations, reciprocity and ways of spending and distributing resources are classical anthropological themes. Analysis of social coherence, organization and norms of welfare and well-being are issues of high relevance for the understanding of notions of welfare and implications of provision. Welfare is more than a political slogan and a means of distribution of resources – it is a cultural notion of being and behaving well within specific structures of organizations.

In this article, my intention has been to cast such a cultural perspective on welfare. Taking the case of a particular form of welfare institution – children’s day-care centres – it has been my aim to show that welfare entails visions of living that are made manifest through the requirements of everyday institutional practices. This is particular so in a Scandinavian context where the provision of welfare is neither self-funded nor voluntary. Rather it has integration as a core principle; at once ensuring basic needs and social coherence. Such a model relies, however, on a universal backing in the population. It presupposes that people structure their lives and ascribe to the morals of interpersonal conduct built into this vision of welfare. In order to ensure behaviour that corresponds with dominant social norms, the implementation of welfare provision becomes rather interventional particularly when it comes to the upbringing of new generations of citizens or people whose ways of living appear at odds with dominant norms and institutional efforts. Thus welfare is linked to ideas of how
to be and behave in order to fare well. In the case of Danish childcare institutions this aspect is quite explicit with a notable emphasis on social form and predictability as prerequisites not only for individual well-being but also for societal progress and stability.


Notes

1. Four periods of ethnographic fieldwork in four different day-care institutions form the basis of this argument: the first from August 1995 to January 1996 in an inner-city day-care institution in Copenhagen, the second from August 2002 to February 2003 in two day-care institutions and their intake area in a small Danish city, and the third and fourth period conducted in another Copenhagen inner-city day-care institution in August and September 2007 and again in August 2008. The two fieldwork periods outside Copenhagen were conducted together with Helle Bundgaard, Associate Professor at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen.

2. Municipalities regulate and fund institutions, most of which are public. Private non-profit institutions (run by churches or charity organizations) do exist, but they are not private in the market sense and, as long as they comply with regulations and standards set by local authorities, receive the same amount of public funding (local taxes and central governmental grants) (OECD 2001: 161). Such funding covers approximately 75 per cent of the expenses, while parental fees cover the rest. Each municipality decides the exact fees and ratios within the broad mandates of the Danish government, to which it is accountable for providing care for all children irrespective of their families’ economic and social status. Free access is given to children of low-income groups in order to ensure their enrolment.

3. ‘Bi-lingual’ is the most commonly used term for someone with another ethnic background than Danish.

4. Compared to other countries with a long history of immigration or ethnically diverse populations, Denmark is a relatively homogeneous society with a history of immigration dating back only to the beginning of 1970s. In recent years vast public attention has been concerned with matters of integration leading to a range of political initiatives towards ethnic minorities not least from local authorities.

5. For example, Socialministeriet Departementet (2001); Socialministeriet (2001).

6. See, for instance, the discussion in Dencik (1989) of the role of the family in contemporary Scandinavian welfare societies.

7. Almost all children are enrolled full-time although in practice, attendance varies between five and eleven hours a day.

References

Bennett, J. (2005), ‘Where Does Denmark Stand? The Organisation and Quality of Early Childhood Services in Denmark, with Special Note on Curriculum’ (Paris: OECD/BUPL).


Socialministeriet Departementet (2001), Integration af tosprogede småbørn i daytilbud, vejen til integration i det danske samfund [Integration of Bilingual Young Children in Day-care, the Way to Integration in Danish Society] (Copenhagen: Socialministeriet).

