

Child protection investigations in the Swedish social services – are they really children’s best interests?

Is a "hunting the monster theory" influencing social work and decisions?

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Abstract. Some questionable patterns of thinking in the child protection investigations, in compulsory placement of children, in Sweden, are critically discussed. It is also suggested that a kind of psychotic thinking (self-insight is weak) named "*hunting the monster theory*" lies behind many phenomena in the thinking of the investigators in the child protection investigations. Twelve hypotheses are formulated about this theory. It should be clear that this theory can be relevant to a subset of cases, not to all cases in compulsory placement and not to the many cases with voluntary placement.

Introduction

In the Swedish social welfare system social workers investigate reports from authorities and public about suspected child maltreatment. This welfare system in matters of child protection regulated by the Social Services Act (SoL) and by the Care of Young Persons Act (LVU) and by governmental regulations. The system is politically governed by the local governments in the 290 municipalities. An investigation of a case of suspected child maltreatment can result in, e. g. a judgment that the information reported is untrue, that no measures are judged necessary, in different kinds of social support measures in consensus with the parent/s, in a placement of a child in consensus with the parent/s or in a compulsory placement. Compulsory placements are made in a minority of the investigated cases and only after approval from a county administrative court. According to official statistics from the National Board of Health and Welfare (2008), at November 1, 2008, approximately 15 800 children (under 18 years of age) were placed outside their home. Of these 4 800 were in compulsory custody (LVU care). Approximately 200 children were this day in LVU immediate custody. Sweden’s population was about 9, 26 million people per December 31, 2008.

There has been during the years considerable attention in the Swedish newspapers and other media concerning compulsory placement of children in concrete cases. Authorities have sometimes assured that the often criticized investigations made by professional social workers are quite in order. The discourse about child protection investigations has been and still is heated partly because issues of child maltreatment arouse strong feelings. It seems that compulsory custody can be disputed seriously for lack of factual grounds in some cases. In the dominant political ideology there seems to be conceptions of "the good authorities" and of "the bad/evil parents". It should also be emphasized that on the local community level all political parties in Sweden have frequently participated in decisions concerning compulsory placement of children, so all can be criticized for politically accepting bad child protection investigations and making bad decisions.

Having educated social workers since 1976 and having researched investigative work in the Swedish social services since 1981, I was very astonished, when I saw the contents in the child protection investigations at the social welfare offices. I have also seen many child protection investigations given to me by clients, lawyers, courts and journalists. In the social workers' education and within the discipline of psychology at the University of Örebro we have done a number of small-scale studies of single cases and samples of cases (5-20 cases) focusing on the investigative methodology used in the field (e.g. Edvardsson, 1989, 1991, 1998b). I have also been involved in courts with written critical examinations of actual investigative reports and as an expert witness.

According to Swedish constitutional law, child protection investigations should be conducted in an objective, impartial and logical manner and with the children's best interest in mind. But when examining their contents one can wonder what the purpose of much of the contents really is.

The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize and summarize key points concerning child protection investigations, in cases where compulsory care has been proposed, that my students and I have found in our research reports so far. I will also suggest a theoretical point of view on child protection investigations in Sweden. References to much of what I say can be found in my book, Edvardsson (1996, rev. 2003).

Critical observations

According to my experience and our studies the following key criticisms are valid for at least many child protection investigations in Sweden involved in compulsory placement (of course I have only seen a little fraction (several hundred), but the investigations have been spread geographically and over many years). Although there exists some local variations in the contents of the child protection investigations the thought patterns and fundamental errors in investigative methodology seem to be the same in different municipalities. This type of investigations constitute a surprisingly homogenous group according to my experience, but can vary greatly in length (most of them are 2-20 pages in length, but there can in addition be appendices of different kinds, e.g. expert statements from child psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians; observation reports from day care, from investigative institutions, from treatment homes, letters etc).

1. Background information is thin and to a large extent vague, often without specification of sources, and not reliable. Critical thinking about information (criticism of sources) is weak or non-existing.
2. The perspectives of the investigator are not made explicit in the text, e. g. why so many small and trivial defects of the parents and the children are accumulated and not the strengths or why the knowledge of the clients is not worth taking into consideration. A negative and pessimistic view of humans is one of the foundations of the child protection investigations.
3. The question or questions of the investigation are not explicitly stated. These investigative questions should direct the investigative process. The implicit starting-point is that there is a firm conviction, in the cases that go to court, that the child (or several children) should be taken into compulsory placement. The investigative report is designed to give biased support to the conviction. The logic in the investigation is circular, i.e. the support for the conviction is accumulated and alternatives are ignored.

4. The methods are not accounted for or related to investigative questions. The implicit methodology is to collect a mishmash of information that can possibly support the existing implicit conviction. The methodology can be characterized as a naive mishmash methodology, not a methodology governed by explicit investigative questions and implemented through relevant and reliable methods.
5. Much data in the investigations is trivial, peripheral, old or irrelevant and vague or rhetorical. A fundamental principle is to accumulate as much negative data as possible irrespective of their importance for the question at hand. Some statements are also repeated many times in the text.
6. The investigations are not holistic in their perspective as they are to a large extent preoccupied with negative data about the family.
7. Much data is not reliable and well known sources of errors and influencing factors are not mentioned. Criticism of sources seems to be an almost unknown activity.
8. Much data lack specification of sources (names of persons, documents, points of time, places/situations etc.)
9. Some data is of the same character as hearsay, gossip, rumors etc.
10. Some data for events, situations, time periods etc. lack elementary time information such as dates, and information about specific time of the day is very rare.
11. The data is often vague and decontextualized. This means that the reader easily interprets the data from the surrounding negative context in the text.
12. The data has often not been checked, e.g. clients have mostly not been given the opportunity to control that what they have said has been correctly written down or written down at all. Other sources have often not been given the opportunity to control what has been written down by the investigator. It has under all my years in contacts with clients been a dominant complaint that there are many errors in the investigation texts. The family members that are investigated are not given the opportunity to reply to what other sources have said about them BEFORE the investigator formulates analysis and judgments in the investigation. Without control from all source persons and without replying from the persons (including children old enough to be interviewed) the information is not reasonably certain to use.
13. Hypothesis work is not mastered in the investigations. The investigators work with fixed beliefs and bias in the selection and interpretation of data. One-sidedness and confirmation bias is a rule and falsification of the investigators' conviction is avoided.
14. It is standard procedure to consciously withhold important material of different kinds that is contrary to the implicit agenda, which is to prove that the child/children in the particular case need compulsory care. This has been admitted by many social workers. This means lying and committing perjury in the courts. Concealing information is of course incompatible with Swedish constitutional law, but is a rule in the child protection investigations.
15. Uncertainty is seldom expressed in the texts, e. g. words like "probable", "perhaps", "possibly" or longer statements of uncertainty are rare.

16. Certainty and strong intensity are often expressed in the texts, e.g. expressions like "very aggressive", "quite certain" etc. The expressed certainty promotes the underlying thesis of the need for compulsory placement.

17. The amount of data from the family members is mostly very little or non-existent. There is a conscious lack of interest in the client's perspective. Client's have much knowledge, criticism, ideas etc. that are withheld in the investigation texts.

18. The child's perspective is not seriously investigated and considered. In some cases the child has not been interviewed at all even if it is a school-age child. Many proposals of measures concerning children are made without speaking with and asking the child concerned. When children are allowed to speak in investigation texts it is often evident that what is cited is heavily delimited and influenced by the investigator.

19. International research in developmental psychology and concerning the effects of separations and children's need for contact with their parents seems to be unknown and is not considered.

20. There is an almost complete absence of comprehensive human resource analyses for family, children and informal social network in the child protection investigations. At most something positive about parents or children or other related persons can be mentioned in a few words, but I have never seen something near to a resource analysis in any child protection investigation sent to a court (except a few I myself have supervised).

21. The data is often changed, fabricated (e.g. by bolstering trivialities), fantasized (e.g. from preconceptions) or even created by gossip or lying. There even exists proved instances of forging of parts of documents in the social services.

22. Judgments and conclusions often do not follow logically from the data. Concluding statements are often made without support in the data. More probable, alternative interpretations of common phenomena are often ignored. Contradictory evidence is often hidden.

23. Emotionally loaded or even emotional rhetorical language is sometimes used in the child protection investigations. Social workers and others often say and write that they are "worried", but this an emotional phenomenon of the social workers and others, not something factual about the child.

24. It is sometimes evident in the text that the investigation is contaminated by the investigators and other source persons own preconceptions, beliefs and feelings, e.g. the statement that they are "worried" can be used as an argument. The investigators sometimes have problems to separate their own inner reality from that of the family, which is the relevant reality.

25. It is evident that the investigator's behavior sometimes influences the behavior of the client/s. Such influences are never discussed in the investigative reports - there seems to exist an implicit doctrine of non-influence. The client's counteractions to the investigator's actions are often used as arguments.

26. Ethically not acceptable statements sometimes occur, e. g. degrading statements.
27. The investigations often do not consider what the normal human variation is in personality or incidents, i.e. conformity to the investigator's own ideals is often implicitly required.
28. Sometimes an extreme control thinking concerning the parents and their relation to their children can be seen in the texts. Often the biological parents contact with their children is severely restricted or stopped.
29. In some cases, e.g. when the parents have a strong conflict, it is evident that the investigator establishes a coalition with one parent against the other parent instead of maintaining objectivity.
30. The texts are often highly repetitive both for some data and some words and phrases. This is a basic propaganda technique.
31. The data in the investigations come mostly from persons whose employment or economic wellbeing is dependent on the social service organization, e. g. day care personnel, home therapists, paid psychologists, and families who are paid to have children in their home as compulsory placements. This means that most of the information comes from challengeable witnesses. They have their own, economical, interests to deliver biased data, the kind of data that the social service organization wants.
32. It is evident that a lot of cognitive biases/errors are shown in the thinking of the investigators in the texts of the investigations, e.g. not considering alternative hypotheses/interpretations, confirmation bias, use of not reasonably reliable information, overconfidence, use of not ecologically representative information, avoiding relevant contradictory information, making judgments on too weak data, different kinds of biased reasoning, circular reasoning starting from a conviction and "confirming" it in an illogical way.
33. From the client's point of view and as seen by people outside the social services the child protection investigations involved in compulsory placements seem more or less persecutory and with a lot of persecutory strategies in use (see Edvardsson, 1989, 1991, 1998b).

For instance one-sidedness, evidence fabrication, not seeking or hiding human resources, use of faulty information, not correcting errors in the text, vague rhetorical statements, not giving family members the opportunity to control, correct and reply to information etc. seem persecutory.

The Swedish child protection investigations are constructed as persuasive documents and according to some of the principles in propaganda texts, e.g. ideological and conformity conceptions about humans and human relations, biased selection, repetition, evidence fabrication, emotive expressions etc. Several investigators have mentioned to me that the intention is to persuade the decision makers on the social service board and in the court to make a decision about compulsory care. The board and the court are manipulated by the investigator by these so called "investigation reports", but why is the investigator manipulating? What is the underlying process?

Why do investigators manipulate decisions in those cases where there exists weak basis or no factual basis at all for compulsory care, not more than there exists in most families? In other cases the facts can be persuasive without manipulation.

A tentative theoretical view: "hunting the monster theory"

As pointed out above the investigative documents in child protection investigations for compulsory care are highly irrational from a methodological point of view. Of course there are psychological and socio-psychological processes involved that are partly not visible in the documents. These processes must to a varying extent differ from case to case, but I will here hypothesize that there are general thought and emotional patterns in the underlying psychological processes as there are general patterns in the documents. These patterns are similar to psychotic delusions and are generated in a reinforcing organizational culture that often avoids reality and instead indulges in wrongful ideas and fallacies of thinking and with lack of insight. Edvardsson (1984) introduced the idea of organizational psychosis concerning the functioning of the Swedish social services in at least some cases. Within the organizational psychosis the social services develops a theory of mind and behavior, a theory of the parents' mind and behavior that can be called "*monster theory*", i.e. the parent is at least in some cases conceptualized as much worse than he/she is. This is of course not a phenomenon that characterizes all cases – sometimes it is possible to observe the opposite, where a bad parent is idealized. This phenomenon can also be conceived of as psychotic, i.e. meaning a deficient contact with reality. In the cases where a parent is conceived of as much worse than he/she is and this idea is influencing the decisions in the case, there is factual ground for talking about a "*hunting the monster theory*". The core ideas of this "theory" in field work can be formulated as a set of hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Parents are dangerous monsters

The central hypothesis of hunting the monster theory is that the investigators conceptualize one or both of the biological parents as dangerous monsters, who hurt their children and are capable of monstrous actions.

Hypothesis 2: Persecution is legitimate

If the investigator has the inner image of the biological parents as monsters it will be legitimate for her/him to attack, persecute, lie and make up stories or even psychically crush them in order to save the alleged victims, i.e. the children. Forged investigative documents seem acceptable.

Hypothesis 3: Informants that are loyal to the theory are used

To effectively persecute the monsters and save the children the investigator wants the help of informants dependent on his organization, loyal to hunting the monster theory or easy to persuade into its delusions.

Hypothesis 4: Contradictory informants and contradictory information are avoided

Informants and information that falsify the monster reality are avoided, e.g. opposing informants, the client's perspective and resource analysis are avoided. This avoidant pattern has been evident in all child protection investigations going to court that I have seen during 30 years.

Hypothesis 5: Investigative reports should be persuasive and not objective

The board of the social service organization and the court have the power to decide about moving the children from the risk field around the monsters. Therefore the investigator, convinced that the parents are monsters, designs the investigation and the written report in such a way that the board and the court are persuaded into taking the intended decision.

Hypothesis 6: In a child protection case hunting the monster theory should be diffused in order to increase the hunting

If the investigator disseminates hunting the monster theory to other involved authorities and to the personnel in dependency it will gain acceptance and a "monster reality" is established.

Hypothesis 7: The existence of the theory will produce support for it

Data that seem to support the monster hypothesis will be generated and reported to the social service organization by the believers in the monster theory. Leading and repeated questioning of the children can also lead to answers that are interpreted as support.

Hypothesis 8: Persuasive strategies are thought out and used

In order to persuade decision makers that the conceptualized monsters are real monsters the investigator uses a number of persuasive strategies, e. g. bolstering the monsters to seem really dangerous through biased selection, biased interpretations of phenomena, avoiding contradictory information, evidence fabrication, lying etc.

Hypothesis 9: Dangerous parent monsters should be hunted after placement of the children

To the social service organization it seems legitimate to use persecutory strategies to hunt the dangerous monsters even after the children have been saved into compulsory care. This will also help in maintaining the monster delusions.

Hypothesis 10: Avoid and combat demands for objectivity, critical thinking and critical research

Objectivity and critical-scientific research seriously threaten hunting the monster theory and are therefore often avoided, sabotaged and ridiculed. For instance, it is necessary to throw suspicions on and combat critical social workers, critical citizens, critical lawyers, critical researchers (like me) and critical journalists.

Hypothesis 11: A monster cannot obtain redress

The social services seldom or never acknowledge errors in the social work. It seems to be next to psychologically impossible for the social services to admit deficiencies.

Hypothesis 12: Hunting the monster theory survives organizational changes

Hunting the monster theory is a paranoid, psychotic way of thinking and feeling that lies deeply in the organizational cultures and is not easily changed by change of organization or change of investigative forms or through education.

A counter-hypothesis can be formulated for each of these twelve hypotheses.

I want to remind the reader that different degrees and kinds of monster delusions in different cases must be assumed. There exist cases that are free from monster delusions in the social work ecology and there exist cases with an opposite delusion that maybe can be called "trusting a good parent theory", a parent that should in some cases not be allowed to take

care of her/his own child/children – unfortunately such bad parents exist but seem to be few. One of the well documented cases is the "Louise case" in Sweden, critically commented by both the regional authority and by Edvardsson (2009).

Discussion

Returning to the question in the title: *Are child protection investigations of the kind described here in the children's best interest?*

Those who believe in the hypothesis that biological parents in conflict with the social service organization are monsters would probably say yes. For them it probably seems rational and necessary to hunt monsters, act unlawfully, and restrain visits in order to save children from suffering.

The fundamental hypothesis that biological parents in conflict with the social service organization are monsters is according to my judgment without proof and false - it seems essentially to be a thinking fallacy based on ideology, fantasies and fears - not on facts. It will never be acceptable for any case according to the requirement for objectivity in the Swedish constitutional law to use the investigative practices here described. Children will be hurt and the parents and even society will be hurt when investigative practices based on "hunting the monster theory" are used. Sometimes the social services act as a monster themselves and hurt children seriously and hurt them worse than their parents have.

Of course, several other theoretical views can be formulated concerning the investigative practices described in this summarizing paper. For example, an interesting question is why "hunting the monster theory" is allowed and defended by the establishment in the Swedish society. One hypothesis is that the frequent and repeated construction and "hunting of monsters" has societal functions, e. g. it increases control over citizens in the Swedish control society - well known for its effective control bureaucracy. It also attributes errors to the parents, and thereby avoids scrutiny of societal conditions. It may even make us feel better as parents when we compare ourselves with the alleged "monster" parents. It is also evident that "hunting the monster theory" contributes to the employment of social workers and personnel in child psychiatry. The social services also in some cases pay private so called investigative or treatment institutions and private psychologists to produce extremely substandard investigations or next to nonsense papers to use as arguments. Psychologists seriously misuse psychology and alleged psychological methods to meet the demands from the social services in hunting the monsters. Many foster homes also have an economic interest in the maintenance of this theory. There are large sums of money and much greed and pathological prestige thinking and use of much human energy in upholding the monster theory and the hunting of human monsters. This energy could be used better.

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Note. There are many other cases examined in expert reports by me (placed in the scientific archive DiVA) that support "hunting the monster theory". Publications in DiVA can also be reached by "Scientificcommons".