



Social disorganization and the profile of child welfare: Explaining child welfare activity by the community-level factors[☆]



Timo Harrikari

Department of Social Research, Snellmaninkatu 10/Box 16, FIN-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 March 2014

Received in revised form 27 June 2014

Accepted 8 July 2014

Available online 28 July 2014

Keywords:

Child protection

Child welfare

Community

Social disorganization theory

Multinomial regression analysis

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question of the structure of local child welfare activities in light of community-level factors. It poses the following research questions: how are different community-level factors related to child welfare client structures in communities and what is the extent to which these factors explain structural differences? The applied theoretical framework is based on social disorganization and strain theories as well as human developmental approach. The data has been collected from two Finnish national databases and it consists of variables containing 257 Finnish municipalities. The method of analysis is multinomial logistic regression. The results suggest that the local child welfare structures are tied to social disorganization, policing and culture as well as to the intensity of control in the communities. In general, the more fragile the communal structures, the more last-resort child welfare there is in the community. Combining fragile communal structures with weak dependency ratio and high proportion of social workers, the more intense the level of child welfare statistics indicated. The results indicate that the theoretical framework for the application of child welfare activity analysis is justified, but they also suggest that it requires further development through both context-bound reflection and application.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Child maltreatment and welfare have become prime research subjects (Gilbert et al., 2012; Hart, Lee, & Wernham, 2011; Parton, 2006). Studies have increasingly been interested, for instance, in the causes of formal welfare measures (Ejrnaes, Ejrnaes, & Fredriksen, 2011) and the different thresholds for (Fallon, Trocmé, & MacLaurin, 2011; Sheppard, 2008), forms of (Houston & Griffiths, 2000), and the effects of intervention (Doyle, 2007; Geeraert, Van den Noortgate, Grietens, & Onghena, 2004). Because the different national definitions of child maltreatment, abuse, welfare, and protection and varying study designs, these studies have produced mixed results. However, from a supranational point of view, the results clearly suggest cumulative knowledge regarding the causes of child welfare measures (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2012).

This article investigates the profile of local child welfare activities in light of community-level factors. It poses the following research questions: How are different community-level factors related to child welfare client structures in communities, and to what extent do these factors explain differences? These questions arise in Finland – the context of this article – because the increasing number of children in child welfare services has recently provoked significant concern (Lastensuojelu, 2011). The main focus in explaining Finnish child welfare problems has been on the psychosocial dimension and the problems of the

[☆] Writing this article is supported by Academy of Finland, Academy Research Fellow Grant 136508/2010.

clients on an individual level (Heino, 2007; Kestilä et al., 2012). The causes of the problems have been addressed, including mental health problems, uncontrolled drug abuse, unlawful acts, and a lack of parenting skills (e.g., Hiilamo & Kangas, 2010; Kataja, 2012).

However, the Finnish child welfare debate has rarely considered how various ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Garbarino, 1977; i.e., demographic [Coulton, Korbin, Su, & Chow, 1995; Ernst, 2000; Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006], socio-economic [Andersen & Fallesen, 2009], political [Andersen, 2010], and straining factors [Freisthler, 2004]) and factors of community tolerance (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007) affect the quantity and quality of clients, client structures, and local child welfare profiles. Even fewer of these connections and impacts have been tested empirically (see, however, Sipilä, 1982), although they have been intensively examined in international studies. In Finland, modeling the effects of community-level factors related to the number of children “in care” or “out-of-home” has recently been the target of various research attempts (Hiilamo, 2009; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2010; Kestilä et al., 2012). However, these efforts have focused on statistical analysis and lack an explicit theoretical frame (cf. Coulton et al., 2007) which would allow the confirmation of the statistical analysis. My theoretical framework is primarily based on social disorganization theory (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Shaw & McKay, 1942) but also on the ecological developmental approach (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Garbarino, 1977; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992). Whereas social disorganization theory draws attention to factors facilitating and debilitating community cohesion and formal and informal social control in communities, the ecological developmental approach examines how child development and parenting are influenced by the environment (Coulton et al., 2007).

This article is structured as follows. First, I will present an outline of the theoretical framework and reflect on some previous empirical findings. Second, I will contextualize my empirical data and their collection. The data have been collected from 1998 to 2007 and are accompanied by a total of 257 Finnish municipalities. Third, I will represent the variables used, the research method, and the actual results. The data were obtained primarily from two statistical databases, and the applied method of analysis was multinomial logistic regression, in which based on the theoretical framework, the statistical model explaining the similarities and differences in child welfare profiles is constructed. Finally, the results are discussed briefly.

Social Disorganization, Strain, and Control

Social disorganization theory is one of the best-known criminological theories. Indeed, the links between crime and social organization have been well-established (e.g., Winfree & Abadinsky, 2010, pp. 157–166). The basic claim of the theory is that crime rates and the forms of crime in communities are connected with the level of social organization, community cohesion, and social control in the relevant communities and neighborhoods (Kubrin, 2009). Shaw and McKay (1942) suggested that three structural factors, namely low socioeconomic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and regional mobility, lead to the breakup and disorganization of communities, which in turn explains the variation in the level of crime. In general, the factors are proposed to weaken the strength of natural communities, reducing interaction, degrading social networks, impairing people's ability to achieve consensus on common issues, and decreasing social control.

Classical social disorganization theory has had a number of further developments. In their analysis aimed at renewing the theory, Sampson and Groves (1989) interlink three of the above-mentioned factors in the classical theory with *marriage break-up* and general *urbanization* variables and call this group of factors the structural, or *exogenous*, variables of social disorganization. The internal regulation dimension, in turn, highlights the factors that form the ecological and social fabric of a human community, such as *the ability of a community to monitor and control youth peer groups*, *the density of informal local friendship networks*, and *the degree of local participation* in the activities of informal and voluntary organizations, which reflects the structural manifestation of communal solidarity (Ceccato & Haining, 2005; Oberwittler, 2004; Steenbeek & Hipp, 2011).

Since Sampson and Groves's analysis in the late 1980s, many efforts to develop social disorganization theory have taken place. As statistical methods and instruments have developed, the same data and hypotheses have been re-tested, and the results have been revised (Veysey & Messner, 1999). The latest developments of social disorganization theory apply not only to the social and cultural capital approach (Coleman, 1988; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002) but also to the so-called General Strain Theory (GST), as well as drawing attention to the impacts of the prevailing political tastes and cultural conflicts on the selectivity and structure of control (e.g., Agnew, 2006; Rose & Clear, 1998; Warner, 2003).

Social Disorganization and Child Welfare?

Even if the connections between child welfare problems and environmental factors are known at the level of practical knowledge, scientific studies have usually concentrated on analyzing micro-level causes and practices, such as parent–child interaction (Wissow, 2001), parenting styles and attitudes (Barber & Delfabbro, 2000), family structure (Heck & Walsh, 2000), and the consequences of child maltreatment (Geeraert et al., 2004; Gover & MacKenzie, 2003). In recent years, however, studies have been extended to an ecological scope in an attempt to explain child maltreatment and welfare incidences. Since the 1970s, the ecological human development approach has been a significant approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Garbarino, 1977) in explaining incidences via various community-level, or in Bronfenbrenner's terms, *meso-* and especially *exo-systemic* factors, but the social disorganization theory has only been applied quite recently. The ecological human development approach studies of child maltreatment, abuse, and welfare have findings complementary to those of

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10310765>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10310765>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)