

Moral Language in Child Protection Research

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Abstract

This article is based on a philosophical analysis of moral language in academic journal articles that concern child death cases. The analysis shows that research of child protection is a value-committed practice, and the language use reflects this in various ways. Direct moral language is relatively rare, and moral values are often implicitly referred to. Values in social work research bear resemblance to moral philosophical stances.

Keywords: moral language, child protection research, child death cases, moral stances, moral philosophy

Introduction

Child protection constantly deals with difficult moral problems. This article explores how child protection research discusses these moral issues and the kind of moral stances it takes or whether it is “value neutral.” In recent years there have been child death cases related to child protection occurring in different countries. Indications are that such cases have increased in the United Kingdom and other European countries, but the true incidence of child abuse homicides is unknown. But in the United States, 11,000 children die every year at the hands of their custodians (Herman-Giddens et al., 1999).

The various child abuse death cases that have occurred in Europe, the United States, and the United Kingdom represent crises in the respective societies. Moral language and moral stances

in academic research concerning child abuse death cases is a pressing topic. This article concentrates on two cases in the United Kingdom that have received a great deal of attention. The data consist of academic journal articles on child protection research. A lot of research besides official inquiries has been published concerning the child death cases of Victoria Climbié in 2000 and Peter Connelly in 2007.

This article gives visibility to moral values and discussion in child protection research and uses a method of philosophical analysis to explain and recognize the moral stances found within that research. Moral philosophy aims at making moral stances and moral language clear, explicit, and well justified, and in the research of normative ethics, it also aims to find solutions for moral problems (Korsgaard et al., 1996). Both moral philosophy and social work research can benefit from being combined in multidisciplinary research. Moral philosophy has for centuries studied topics and questions that are crucial to child protection. Furthermore, academic child protection research can provide various understandings of practices instead of hypothetical cases for moral philosophical research (Haidt, 2001).

First, the key concepts and methods in the research used in this article will be presented, and then the results of an analysis of the research will be presented. Two themes in particular are discussed related to the results of an analysis. The first three sections of outcomes concern the moral values that are the most commonly present in the data. Two sections after that are about the consequences and ethics connected to moral language in the articles.

These normative moral philosophical stances match sequences of overt moral language, but it does not mean that they are the only options this moral language represents. The references are easily recognizable in texts because they are very influential and commonly applied in Western scientific discourses of ethics. Quotations are used from the articles that quite clearly provide moral standpoints.

Ethical Issues in Social Work and Child Protection Research

Victoria and Peter were victims of severe abuse before their deaths. Their lives ended violently, when they were killed by the adults who were responsible for them (Laming, 2003). Both were known to child protection social workers and other professionals. Identifications and interventions had been done, and the children had statuses as children who were potentially “at risk” of being possible victims of abuse. Victoria Climbié was sent from the Ivory Coast to England by her parents for a better education, and her great-aunt was supposed to take care of her (Rustin, 2005). Victoria was killed at the age of eight by her great-aunt and the great-aunt’s male friend. Professionals such as doctors, police officers, social workers, and nurses were in contact with Victoria and her great-aunt. Just like Victoria, Peter was at various times hospitalized, and his home was visited by the police and social workers. Peter was temporarily placed into foster care, but he was returned to his mother and her boyfriend. There, a lodger killed him at the age of 17 months. The evaluation has in various contexts been that the professionals did not take sufficient action based on the evidence of abuse (Laming, 2003).

Cases of deaths, such as the ones involving Victoria and Peter, have also caused wide academic discussion within social work. In child protection research, it is unavoidable for researchers to scrutinize moral problems. This article explores the influence this has on language used in research. Sometimes it is not helpful or possible for child protection research to remain neutral. It could even be regarded as unethical. Still, researchers don’t necessarily discuss moral values in research,

use moral concepts or take a position (Blackburn, 1998). Analysis of moral language reveals whether and how moral values and ethics are discussed when the topic of research is child death cases.

For example, post-positivist or moral antirealist stances which view morals as non-rational and emotion-based judgments influence scientific language and its neutrality (London, 2010). Scientific research has traditionally had a tense relationship with moral language. Positivist philosophies which were popular in the philosophy of science in the 19th century sought to eliminate opinionated language of any kind (Bird, 1998). Social work research does not have the commonly idealized “objectivity” in research. The orientation in social work research is to recognize social problems, keeping in mind that one of its missions is to avoid having a negative impact on the lives of people already in weaker positions (Engel & Schutt, 2016). However, the use of moral language and moral stances has been little researched previously. For this reason, articles in academic journals that especially adhere to social work and child protection were chosen for analysis.

The two cases in the United Kingdom are the focus of this analysis because child protection and social work researchers have shown significant interest in them. They serve as an example of how such incidents have been processed on many different levels in society. These cases have brought major reforms at all levels of social work in the United Kingdom. Besides the research, there have been ongoing debates in the media and in political discourse regarding the cases (Warner, 2014). The United Kingdom has had a culture of public inquiries into child death cases ever since 1973, when a girl named Maria Colwell was killed (Stevenson, 2013). Victoria’s case initiated the Lord Laming report (2003) and Professor Eileen Munro contributed the “Munro review of child protection” after Peter’s death (Munro, 2011; Laming, 2003).

Because the cases have received massive attention in the United Kingdom, it is the hypothesis of this article that it is likely that researchers in the United Kingdom will discuss moral aspects

adhering to the cases. This in turn makes it easier to analyze their moral stances. Since there are significant differences in child protection from country to country, and even from state to state in the U.S., moral problems in these extreme cases are not context-specific. The outcomes are not bound by the context of the United Kingdom, but as academic discussion of child death cases has been especially vivid in the United Kingdom, they reveal much about how moral problems are approached in academic research.

Data and Analysis

The data consists of 24 research articles in scientific journals that were published between the years 2000–2014. Articles concern either Victoria Climbié’s death in the year 2000 or Peter Connelly’s death in 2007. The data were collected from Pro Quest online database Social Services Abstracts by using the keywords: “child protection” and “Victoria Climbié”; “child protection” and “Peter Connelly”; and “child protection” and “Baby P.” Most of the articles are written by British social work researchers. All the articles focus on child death cases, but their exact topics differ. A clear majority of the articles are based on qualitative research, with only two of them being based on quantitative research. Many of the articles are based on literature reviews and many are commentaries on the inquiry report of Victoria Climbié’s death that was conducted by Lord Laming (2003). About half of the qualitative research articles are theoretical in nature.

Moral language and moral stances found expressed in the data are the key concepts in this article. Moral language means language use based on the deduction of moral concepts; such as what is permissible, good, bad, right, and wrong (Smith-Churchland, 2005). Moral stances can be understood as the totality of values and ideas people have about norms and what the moral concepts stand for. Moral stances resemble worldviews in that people have chosen them more or less consciously. They typically guide moral language use (Haidt, 2007). Moral stances do not only consist of value judgments of people but also of beliefs that could

be called metaethical. These stances depend on and intertwine with other beliefs people have concerning what exists and what is true or possible (Walker & Wallace, 1970). In moral philosophy, metaethics is research that aims to explain the system of morality. Metaethicists insist that moral claims must have coherence with well-justified general accounts of ontology and semantics (McPherson, 2008).

The metaethical stance on which this article is based is moral realism, which is critical and fallibilist. Moral realists believe that some things have moral properties independently of the stances of people (Heathwood, 2011). Fallibilism means that even basic assumptions can turn out wrong (Horgan & Timmons, 2005). Moral realism is the stance of this article because it has influenced the analysis and the language used; for example, it is postulated on the understanding that moral accounts adhere to the well-being of living species (see Bloomfield, 2013; Geach, 1967). Thus moral language is not mostly based on cultural norms or substantive taste and sentiments (Lee & Ungar, 1989).

The method of coding moral language developed by John Alan Lee and Sheldon Ungar (1989; see also Warner, 2013, 2014) has been used in this article. This method has coding levels for moral discourses that are voice, topic, stances, rhetoric, and moral keywords. Lee and Ungar state that moral talk takes “sides” in debates and has a rhetorical structure. It often uses metaphors and expressions with emotive meanings. Furthermore, it represents the “voice” of someone. According to Lee and Ungar, “topics” refer to what the moral discourse in question concerns, and “voice” addresses the person who is doing the moral talk. Moral “side” stands for the standpoint of the speaker. Examples of “moral keywords” are “hunt,” “kill,” and “barbarians,” words that have been used by protestors in the seal hunting debate. “Moral rhetoric” is persuasion by which a talker hopes to move listeners towards adoption of their view of reality (Lee & Ungar, 1989).

But the method developed by Lee and Ungar (1989) has been applied with some changes. This analysis is based on open coding, whereas Lee and

Ungar had certain pre-determined codes they used. The coded parts of moral language were named by the author, and they have usually been connected to moral stances in philosophy which are normative or metaethical, such as “moral absolutism,” “deontology,” and “moral consequentialism.”

Findings

Judgments about the wrongness of death cases and child abuse

In the data, there were surprisingly few direct judgments that child death cases and child abuse are wrong. However, this is clearly the “side” child protection research takes on the moral problems (Lee & Ungar, 1989). There were plenty of expressions that adhered to the conviction of the moral wrongness of the cases. The message that the death cases ought to have never happened is more often expressed indirectly in articles, instead of being directly judged morally wrong, evil, or bad. For example, the article by Masson and Balen (2007) aims at re-evaluating child protection. They describe Victoria’s case by using moral concepts:

The inquiry investigated the circumstances surrounding the tragic and horrific death of Victoria Climbié in February 2000 at the hands of her great-aunt, Marie-Therese Kouao and her boyfriend, Carl Manning, who were both found guilty of her murder. (Balen & Masson, 2007, p. 122.)

Expressing thick, or strongly-worded concepts of ethics, such as “horrible,” “coward,” or “cruelty” both describe and evaluate, whereas thin ones, the traditional moral concepts of “good,” “bad,” “right,” and “wrong” are more often understood by philosophers as not having metaphysical meanings (Korsgaard et al., 1996; Zangwill, 2013). Indirect moral language or expressions seem to judge the incidents as wrong and even moral stances are less explicit than in direct moral evaluations. “Ought to”—judgments and statements which are based on thin concepts of ethics (good, bad, right, or wrong)—represent moral evaluations that are the

easiest to recognize (Cooper, 1969, p. 97). But in everyday discussions moral language is rarely found in formally analyzable forms and indirect expressions are used at all times (Hare, 1981). Thick moral concepts such as “horrible” can be described as moral metaphors (Zangwill, 2013).

The principle that child abuse is wrong rarely causes disagreement in modern societies (Harris, 2010). Because of that, it can be controversial if the moral principle needs to be defended, justified, or formulated in academic discourse, at least in short texts. There are disagreements concerning many other matters that relate to the protection of children; for example, what justifications should lead to different interventions or what should be done when there is evidence of child abuse. But participants in debates over child protection can expect that others agree on the wrongness of abuse and death cases. Discussions of child deaths do not divide people into strongly polarized camps. Use of moral language is often more judgmental when people have a need for naming an enemy and distinguishing a position from an opposing side (Lee & Ungar, 1989; Lowe, 2002).

It has been suggested that child protection represents universalistic and absolutistic ethics because it leans on universal human rights (Hämäläinen, 2001; Woodhouse, 1996). Moral absolutism is a stance in which some ethical principles are facts which could not be otherwise (Heathwood, 2011). Wrongness related to these child death cases is one of the strongest candidates for such an absolute. The argumentation in these articles can be seen as sharing similar characteristics, for example, with the deontological ethics of Immanuel Kant or moral absolutism. Basically, all ethical theories agree that child death cases are wrong. In particular, as Kantian ethics highlights the intrinsic value of all people, it is comparable to convictions in the reviewer for this article (Kant, 2012).

In an analysis it is not possible to interpret whether indirect moral convictions refer to moral absolutes or, for example, to universal rules that certain things are never right or tolerable. Absolutistic expressions are quite rare in the data,

but the ethos that there is nothing good or tolerable about the cases is visible in the articles:

I want to explore what states of mind the Inquiry Report embodies, evokes, and encourages—in the professions, in civil society, in the political sphere. ... In particular, does the report help us, professionally and socially, with the very difficult but absolutely basic task of bearing to know about the terrible emotional realities of child torture and murder. (Cooper, 2005, p. 3.)

Child torture and murder become labeled as terrible incidents that absolutely require responses and actions from “us.” By “us,” Cooper (2005) is referring to practitioners in professional and social fields. He speaks for the moral duty or task of everyone who has the possibility to influence things. This seems to be in accordance with Kantian duty ethics, in which moral duties are both rational and compulsory for all rational agents (Kant, 2003).

The violent deaths are always tragic and unwanted, but authors are conscious that child protection is not an institution without its faults. It is realistic to expect that also in the future, horrific things might happen to children and cases will “get through the system” (Ferguson, 2004; Warner, 2014). For example, Munro (2005) mentions that judgments and decisions have to be made in the conditions of uncertainty; so some degree of error is inevitable (p. 242). These realistic expectations about the outcomes might influence language use. Authors view death cases as being wrong and intolerable, but unlike the media they do not judge the actions of social workers as evil or bad (Warner, 2013, p. 219). Milder concepts and moral language that do not accuse any particular person involved are favored (see also Lee & Ungar, 1989).

Duties of learning, listening, and preventing

The authors included in the data review discuss a lot about responsibilities and duties,

since the cases have been seen to bring awareness to certain things that have to be done. The talk of duties, prescriptive and instructive language, and expressions of how things “ought to be” have been coded because they often reveal moral stances and sides (Hare, 1961; Lee & Ungar, 1989). A code of “duty speech” for the data reviewed was formed, a code that is common and often overlaps with another one, that of deontology. Deontology refers to the moral theory of Immanuel Kant. Moral utilitarianism and professional ethics in some of their forms center on duties and rules (Banks, 2006, pp. 27–29). Duty utilitarianism, a form of consequence ethics, takes the position that the outcomes determine the moral duties (Lacey, 1982). Professional ethics has been a research area in social work since the 1990s and 2000s, and it is traditionally associated with codes of ethics and textbooks for professional education (Banks, 2003). The connections between this traditional professional ethics and Kantian ethics become visible in that both focus on principles, moral demands, rules, and responsibilities. Both have been viewed as procedural or formal ethics (Hugman, 2012).

In general, the philosophy regarding responsibilities is that if someone has a duty to act in some manner, there has to be a reason. The reason can be legal, moral, or professional, or it can come from an absolute source such as God or an authority, or it can be based on all of these at the same time (Pizarro et al., 2003). Changes for how child protection work is done are argued as compulsory in the data used, but it is often unclear whether these obligations are understood as moral duties inside the practice of child protection or as universal moral commands (MacIntyre, 1984).

Instructive statements seem to be the most often directed at social work professionals. Because the authors often comment on professional practices, the texts could be viewed as representing professional ethics. However, unlike the function of traditional formal ethics in deontology and social work ethics, it is not common for authors to refer to professional guidelines, formal convictions, laws, or ethical codes for social workers as justifiers of moral

opinions (Hodgson & Watts, 2016). Moral language could be described as being autonomous. Kantian deontology has received criticism that official codes, principles, and lists of principles represent “morality from distance” and that rationalized and technical moral approaches replace individual commitment (Herman, 1998; Gray, 2010).

Language use can be contextual in professional ethics. If only the forms of language are analyzed, it may appear that professional ethics discuss the best ethical approaches in practice but make no mention of what all people should do in moral dilemmas. Kantian moral universalism appears to have different language or rhetoric since, according to that universal approach, moral duties are the same under all circumstances and apply to everyone (Tilley, 1998). Moral contextualism means, for example, that the context in which an action is performed might determine whether the action is morally right or that the goodness of an action does not guarantee that it is morally good in all contexts (Björnsson & Finlay, 2010). Contextual moral language means situated expressions, for example, about the duties of certain professions.

Professional ethics is not committed to any particular metaethical stance, and it can be based on many different ethical approaches (Banks, 2008). In professional codes, the most important issue is not whether the codes are “true” but whether they are setting the demands for actions (Banks, 2003). The ideas of professional ethics concerning responsibilities are based on high ethical standards. Professionals become seen as being responsible for many directions—for the clients, the profession, the employer, and society at large (Haapakoski, 2015).

In the data review, certain duties seem to be especially important, such as that lessons must be learned from past failures (Duncan & Reder, 2004). Other tasks that are highlighted are to develop the profession, the practice, and the institution, to research the cases profoundly, and to make all necessary changes so that similar cases can be prevented (Parton, 2004, p. 82). Because learning from the cases is a primary mission,

research and official inquiries play a morally important role. Cooper (2005) considers that the inquiries have “significance as forms of public memorial.” His opinion is that Victoria’s case ought not to be forgotten, even though it would be a relief to consign it to the past. As Cooper (2005) states, the reality of the child has to be confronted and learned from:

Whether or not we learn from professional experience through these exercises in the way we tell ourselves we are supposed to do, the conduct of a public inquiry obliges us to go on thinking about the child, about how and why he or she died and as representatives charged with responsibility in the public sphere, about our part in their living and dying as well as our responsibilities in the lives and struggles of other people we work with (pp. 2–3).

One commonly mentioned task is that children have to be heard. In child death cases social workers may have struggled to make home visits and contact family members after they received reports of children at risk for abuse. Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly were never seen alone by social workers. A lot of important information about what these children experienced and how they lived was never gathered due to this lack of contact (Parton, 2004). When the authors discuss tasks related to listening and seeing the child, they do not highlight only concrete hearing such as interviewing or home visiting (for example Ferguson, 2009). Listening can be a partly metaphorical concept, which refers to respecting the children and adopting their perspectives. The task of listening to a child means paying close, detailed attention to everything that is going on in his or her life. The whole family needs to be at the center of the work and needs to be heard (Driscoll, 2009).

Cooper (2005, p.1) points out that workers avoid facing unwelcome knowledge or suspicion, which is understandable but not in accordance with ethical standards. The authors seem to commonly

agree that the emotionally demanding nature of the work can cause difficulty in attending adequately to the child (Parton, 2004). As Ferguson (2005) says:

The Laming report undoubtedly explains a lot as the source of the failures to protect Victoria are put down to a combination of events and ‘woefully incompetent practices’ There was poor or non-existent interagency communication and a consistent failure to engage with the child in any meaningful shape or form as a service user or to assess the child’s needs, coupled with a focus throughout on Kouao, Victoria’s carer, as the client in the case (Ferguson, 2005, p. 783).

The passage above highlights that Victoria ought to have been heard, but the workers kept their attention on her great-aunt. Here the researcher is using the “moral voice” of the Laming Report published in 2003. According to Lee and Ungar (1989), the voice in a moral sentence means the speaker whose opinion is presented.

Resisting moral blame

The inquiries and the general public have blamed social workers in the death cases. This is commonly criticized in the articles. The media especially has directed harsh moral criticism towards social workers, often naming the individuals involved in these cases (Warner, 2014). Social workers have been judged for lacking courage, common sense, care and empathy, or for not attempting to work for the benefit of the children.

They have been accused in similar terms as the actual murderers—convicted as evil persons, careless in regard to the children, or even guilty of the deaths (Warner, 2013). The authors notice that even though social workers failed in some of their basic tasks, the blame has often been overblown (Garrett, 2009; Warner, 2014; Munro, 2005). One of the moral stances in the articles is that blaming can have bad consequences. If accusations and blaming

are guiding the development of child protection, then the focus is on the wrong issues, and this might make the situations worse (Munro, 2005; Duncan & Reder, 2004). Reder and Duncan (2004) argue that people under threat of disciplinary measures cannot contribute to a learning process. They become defensive and guarded (Reder & Duncan, 2004). Balen and Masson (2008) have noticed, in a literature review based on comments about the Victoria Climbié Inquiry in academic child protection research, that there is concern that the public inquiries may actualize criticism that accuses the involved individuals: “Most commentators are heavily skeptical about their value. ... They are viewed as alienating and traumatic experiences for the individual professionals who are publicly ‘named and shamed’ ” (p. 123).

Parton (2004) compares the Lord Laming Victoria Climbié inquiry report (2003) with the Marie Colwell Inquiry report (1974) and notices that both identify numerous opportunities when the professionals failed to intervene. But both are of the view that “... failures were not simply a consequence of individual incompetence but a reflection of fundamental inadequacies in their respective systems” (Parton, 2004, p. 81).

Inquiries have not blamed individual workers, but the tendency in them has been to place greater accountability on the managers. Researchers view that blaming is not reasonable and necessary, but this does not mean that they would not be critical towards social work and child protection or that they were compliant with the “no blame” culture (Munro, 2009). In the data reviewed, the researchers are against blaming individuals, but they use similar terms as these inquiries. For example, they speak of failures as follows:

Mindlessness is a defensive solution which unfortunately fits all too well with complex bureaucratic systems. In an individual person, the failure to keep things in mind, to make connections and to have a perspective that connects past and present is readily seen to lead to

a fragmented sense of self and to disrupted relationships. Some of the individual workers who gave evidence sadly seem in their practice to have been functioning in this way (Rustin, 2005, pp. 18–19).

Failure is a concept which may stand for more technical than moral malfunctions. Failure always refers to something negative, but it can be in the form of non-moral, organizational, or technical failures. Moral failure can stand for failure of moral virtues, for example in truthfulness, trust, and social responsibility (Kung, 2014, p. 36). In professional ethics, bad quality of practices can be seen as being always unethical, regardless of the motives of people.

Consequence ethics and moral evaluation of outcomes

Munro (2005) approaches the case of Victoria Climbié by asking why, despite all the efforts made in the systematic inquiry, it has not been possible to prevent child death cases and why similar ones are still occurring. According to her, constant changes have been made to the system after each child death case. So far, the recommendations for preventing further tragedies could not be evaluated as having had a lot of success. Munro's evaluation focuses on the results or consequences, and she criticizes both the quality of child protection and the inquiries of child death cases. Munro's article "A systems approach to investigating child abuse deaths" (2005) is an example of consequence-centered ethical argumentation.

The problem Munro (2005) identifies is not that inquiries and professionals would not have desired to improve child protection but instead the consequences of that protection. If the word "moral" is understood as moral thinking or intentions, the problem here could be seen as having a more technical than moral nature. But consequence ethics always makes moral evaluations upon the consequences. A well-known form of consequence ethics is utilitarianism, which has been developed by various thinkers, the most famous of them being Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill (Lacey,

1982). Utilitarianism is a stance that may state, for example, that happiness, pleasure, or justice always is and has to be the aim of actions. The goal is to produce good for as many people as possible (Hugman, 2013, p. 122).

Consequence ethics has similarities with the standpoints in Munro's article (2005) about a systems approach and is a technique developed to be applied in child protection. The systems-centered approach looks for causal explanations of error in all parts of the system and has a complicated picture of causality in which the human operator is only one factor, and the final outcome is a product of the interaction of the individual with the rest of the system. Part of Munro's arguments emphasize the worth of evaluating matters on the basis of the consequences these have or may have. She argues that the good intentions of professionals do not guarantee good outcomes for clients (p. 539). Munro is also aware that the inquiries into several of the child death cases have aimed at doing good. But even with high intentions, these do not necessarily result in the desired improvements in outcomes. As Munro states, "The long series of public inquiries have been expensive and stressful. They have been intelligently conducted; their analyses of practice look accurate; and their recommendations seem very sensible" (p. 532).

Munro's article (2005) is also an example of research which does not take a strong moral stance on the Victoria Climbié case. She writes of the system, not of ethics. It looks to be a text that is neutral or technical in its language, arguments, and justifications. This is not because child protection cannot be understood as a moral issue, but the explanation is rather that the topic is to introduce the systems approach, a technique that is used in everything from engineering to child protection. Munro is especially critical towards the practices of protection in the Victoria Climbié case and says that child protection has not developed in recent years: "The level of practice the inquiry describes is breathtakingly worse than in any of its forerunners." (p. 532).

The previous statement is an evaluation that does not make reference to a moral aim or standard. It is possible that it is not intended as a

moral evaluation. This cannot be known, unless the background and justifications for the statement are visible; for example, why the author views the practice as bad or worse, what it is worse in relation to, and how and especially why it should be different. The expression “breathtakingly” could be seen as referring to a moral sentiment. But even “good” and “bad” are not automatically moral concepts (Anscombe, 1975). According to the pluralist interpretation of moral concepts by philosopher G. H. Von Wright (1963), “good and bad” have various uses. Evaluations can always be made in relation to other standards but moral ones; “Good” can mean “technical good” (Wright, 1963).

Even not all judgments of good and bad are able to make the moral opinions of the speaker visible. It is questionable as to whether the reasoning around child protection could ever be purely technical. The consequences of bad technical quality can be the death and suffering of children, and as such discussions involving the child death cases could possibly never focus on non-moral evaluations. Munro’s article (2005) does not include only implicit discussion of what is moral. Munro considers that there is both a moral and legal need to judge professional practice, which is a sign that she is offering a moral approach. She identifies “a steep drop in staff morale and an accompanying rise in problems in recruiting and keeping experienced workers” (p. 532).

It could be interpreted that Munro’s article (2005) is giving normative moral arguments especially adhering to two things: that blaming and judging individuals is not a solution or a right way to approach the problem, and that child protection absolutely needs to be changed. Moral language perhaps proposes that outcomes are more relevant for a moral evaluation than motives. At least these cannot be passed over or forgotten in the evaluation of what needs to be done.

The dimensions of moral language and care ethics

Many characteristics of the moral language in the articles resemble the moral philosophical

stance of care ethics (Van Manen, 2015). The authors for example argue for evaluating the caring skills of the workers and the direct involvement of the child and family (Driscoll, 2009). Part of the research into child protection highlights the emotional aspects of work (for example Ferguson, 2009). This research seems to be sensitive and takes individual people and their emotions and thinking into account. It supports the values on which care ethics is based (e.g., Broughton, 1993).

It has been argued in this data analysis that inquiries into child abuse cases typically narrow down their focus to structures, policies, and procedures for managing practice (e.g., Balen & Masson, 2008, p. 125). Care ethics is sensitive to understanding individuals and often against proceduralism in ethics (Friedman, 1993). It avoids absolutism and judgments from a distance and from outside of the actual situations. It values, for example, spontaneous moral decisions or the capacity of making moral judgments in situations that are less stagnant. Characteristically, language in care ethics keeps the focus on current, real-life incidents and relationships (Welbourne, 2012).

In this research, language has been coded that favors caring, human-centered ethics as well as focus on the needs and nature of people as the stance of “care ethics.” It is not that other moral philosophical stances would not highlight these issues, but care ethics can be related especially with the research that criticizes proceduralism and the rationalistic look into child protection (Held, 1993). Authors in this research often oppose focus on systems, accountability, and bureaucracy in child protection which has increased in the 21st century (Munro, 2005). Care ethics is also connected to accounts that take an in-depth look at the personal lives and psychological factors of people in an effort to understand individuals (for example Rustin, 2005). According to Duncan and Reder (2003), inquiries into Victoria Climbié’s death referred to communication failures in professional practices. They emphasize that communication is a person-to-person activity, a process in which a number of the domains of human psychology have an impact

(Duncan & Reder, 2003, p. 85). Communication is a complex matter and becomes simplified if it is understood as a technical transformation of information that the professionals have been failing to do. As Duncan and Reder (2004) state:

In human communication, the myriad of feelings, attitudes and desires that add up to interpersonal relationships also amount to 'information'. In everyday life, communication is the means through which people relate to each other and give and receive moment-to-moment signals about themselves, the other person and the relationship between them (p. 85).

The importance of having knowledge of human psychology in order to understand practices is often emphasized in the data. Such an approach is not only a moral stance but also reveals what is found as relevant in an epistemological sense. Psychology has traditionally been free of moral evaluations. It has focused on different explanations of reality when compared to normative ethics, and it does not include a stance of moral ontology (Hugaas, 2010, p. 25). But the authors reviewed often discuss psychological findings to justify moral attitudes that are caring. The worth of psychological knowledge is in getting an understanding of people whose subjectivity has to be respected. Furthermore, psychological findings are used to defend the social workers too (Ferguson, 2009). Ferguson (2005), for example, argues that the psychological and emotional aspects of performing child protection have rarely been regarded as central when evaluating and researching practice (Ferguson, 2005). A psychological perspective may produce a realistic understanding of what people are capable of and what kind of reactions and moral behavior can be expected from them. Its ethical value lies in the evaluation; it allows a deeper understanding of people and may result in avoiding moral blaming and accusing. After all, the psychological and emotional aspects explain a lot about the "failures" or mistakes professionals make. Generally, these

are normal human errors and are not the intentional ignoring of children by monstrous evil persons (Munro, 2005).

A common opinion in the data is that practices in child protection ought not to be rationalized too much. There is uncertainty about whether social work and child protection needs more procedures and accountability as it changes (Ferguson, 2005). Sometimes the researchers indicate that to avoid tragedies and to function in ethically sustainable ways, child protection needs to be developed into becoming a more humanistic practice rather than something distant and procedural. For example, the education of social workers is more important than putting pressure on them and more likely to bring about better outcomes (Balén & Masson, 2008).

Conclusions

This article presents a philosophical analysis of moral language in academic social work research, showing its diversity and analyzing its value base. Analysis is based on the idea that moral stances can be read from lingual expressions. But this requires that language is not wholly neutral and that there is at least some discussion of morality. The articles reviewed for the data most often include such discussion. But moral language is often implicit and it does not indicate much theoretical moral philosophy in which moral concepts and moral stances are discussed, explained and justified, and even defended in case the research is normative.

The shocking cases of child deaths bring about responses from people and always reveal our moral stances. The emotions we show, the language we use, and the actions we take signal moral motivation and what we believe is right and wrong (Wallace, 2006). But in scientific research it is possible that researchers don't use moral language and choose not to discuss their values. Moral judgments are rare in the data derived from the articles reviewed, but less explicit moral language can be found more often.

Indirect moral language has implicit moral stances. It is postulated that ethics and moral philosophy should be discussed more explicitly in child protection research. It is understandable that some

articles favor neutral language or avoid judgments and taking a stand, but it is possible only within certain limits. As child abuse and child protection are related to moral opinions, and those opinions influence its reasoning and language use, it is good to explain these. It is not a necessity that all research has to include profound analysis of their moral understandings or metaethical stances. However, explicitness in philosophical moral stances deepens the perspective research takes to ethics.

Moral language cannot become developed to meet needs in social work practice and research unless it is explicit and put under theoretical scrutiny and awareness. The implicitness of moral stances and language in social work research indirectly complicates the work of social workers in practice. They need moral concepts and theories for understanding, and in the best case solving, various dilemma-like moral problems. Especially when opinions and evaluations adhere to power over others, or are for example reasons for interventions, they need to be made visible. It protects the rights of the clients that workers have the skills and tools to be explicit in how morality influences their work, formulates their moral principles and distinguishes moral and other values.

Moral theories provide tools and methods to analyze and understand practices in child protection. They do not solve the moral problems alone but they can be one of the ways of developing even more ambitious practices. More research should be undertaken of the use of moral language and its limits and resources when researching and practicing child protection. There should also be further analysis of moral language in the research of child death cases in other countries besides the United Kingdom.

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