Local translations of a universal concept: ‘Child Perspective’ in Swedish social assistance

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Abstract
In recent years, scholars have called for studies exploring how key concepts originating from the children’s rights discourse are understood in local contexts. In Sweden, national policy advocates that a child perspective should guide social assistance (SA), a cash benefit constituting society’s last safety net. The study analyses the child perspective as an idea (i.e. an ambiguous principle), which is translated (i.e. reformulated and interpreted) at the local level. The findings indicate multiple and partly inconsistent translations of a child perspective. The study argues that it is unclear what adopting a child perspective implies for children in families receiving SA.

KEYWORDS
child perspective, poverty, social assistance

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, the global influence of the CRC (the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) has led to increased pressures on many national welfare services to develop policies for considering ‘the best interest of the child’ (Vandenhole, Desmet, Reynaert, & Lembrechts, 2015). In Sweden, an expression of this ambition is that national policy advocates that social services adopt the principle of a ‘child perspective’. The concept of the child perspective in its most elemental sense can be said to refer to considering the situation of children in conjunction with, for example, welfare provision (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010). A service where the concept has rhetorically gained a foothold is social assistance (SA) (IVO, 2015; NBHW, 2015), which is a cash benefit constituting society’s last safety net.
benefit representing the last economic safety net for households that are unable to support themselves. In 2018, 139,000 children—or approximately 6% of all children in Sweden—lived in households that had received SA on at least one occasion during the year (NBWH, 2019).

The concept of the child perspective has a strong intuitive appeal and national policy texts suggest that it could include analysing implications of decisions, conducting home visits and collecting information about children (e.g. using children as informants) (NBHW, 2015). Nevertheless, like many other principles related to children's rights (Vandenhole et al., 2015), the concept is vague and there is a lack of practical guidance on how it should be concretised. In contrast to many other countries, Swedish SA management is part of the professional field of social work (Stranz, Wiklund, & Karlsson, 2016). SA is managed in the municipalities by the personal social services (PSS), which are also, for example, responsible for child welfare assessments and services, and drug abuse treatment for adults (but usually the branches are organisationally separated) (ibid.). PSS are politically governed and board members are formally accountable and thus responsible for implementing the child perspective, but the execution is normally delegated to frontline social workers. How key actors (local board members, managers and social workers) responsible for SA interpret what it means to work with the child perspective is vital not only for gauging the concept's potential applicability for this specific service, but also adds knowledge to the wider field of childhood studies. In this respect, scholars have called for more studies with a bottom-up approach exploring how concepts and values originating from children's rights discourse are understood and realised in various welfare settings (Quennerstedt, 2013).

This article is part of a research project on how the concept of the child perspective is interpreted and applied in SA. The project consists of case studies in six municipalities and includes various empirical materials (guidelines, case files and interviews). In this article, we present findings from interviews with SA representatives. Theoretically, the concept of the child perspective is conceived as an ‘idea’ (Sahlin & Wedin, 2017), that is, a normatively appealing but ambiguous working principle. At the local level, such ideas undergo translation (reformulations and interpretations) and editing processes (transformation into concrete strategies and actions). The aim of the article is to explore the translations and editing of the child perspective in an SA context. The research questions are: What meanings do SA representatives assign to the concept of the child perspective? What is their view on the applicability of the child perspective in SA?

The article is organised as follows: First follows an outline of characteristics of the Swedish system of SA and a presentation of the known impact of SA recipiency on children. Thereafter, we review previous research relevant for understanding the adoption of the child perspective in welfare contexts and explicate the theoretical concepts used to analyse a child perspective in SA. After having described the study design, we present the findings that contain a taxonomy of translations of child perspectives in SA. We end the article by discussing the translations in terms of their implications for predicament of children and by relating the findings to childhood studies research.

Swedish social assistance from the international perspective

Social assistance is a means-tested cash benefit targeting an economically marginalised group of the Swedish population (lacking income through gainful employment or social insurance) (Stranz et al., 2016). It has a dual aim: to provide recipients with a(n economically) ‘reasonable standard of living’ and to assist them to become economically self-sufficient. The national framework law (the Social Services Act) gives municipalities discretion to interpret the goals of the legislation, but there is a national minimum standard rate (adjusted annually by the government) which municipalities
are formally not allowed to undercut. Researchers have estimated that Swedish SA amounts to approximately 20% of the national median income, which is below the relative poverty line (60% of the national median income) as defined by the EU (Johansson, 2019).

Research on children in families receiving SA is scarce. However, Swedish studies show that the SA administration is marked by adult centredness. This means that adults are regarded as the main recipients and they are thus the focal point of investigations and interventions (Heimer & Palme, 2015), and empirical studies show that investigations into the needs of children are rarely made visible (Bruno, 2018; Fernqvist, 2011). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that the increased emphasis on activation, in particular when applied as workfare (i.e. if approval is conditional on participation in activation programmes), contributes to making a child's right to welfare contingent on parental behaviour and the alleged deservingness of the parents (Fernqvist, 2011; O’Brien & Salonen, 2011).

During the last few decades, both in Sweden and in other western countries, knowledge about the possible negative impact of continuous SA dependency and similar conditions of relative deprivation, on children has increased (Mood & Jonsson, 2016). For instance, there is research demonstrating that economic hardship is a factor that contributes to elevating the risk of adverse outcomes in adult life (Cooper & Stewart, 2017; Mood & Jonsson, 2016; Weitoft, Hjern, Batljan, & Vinnerljung, 2008). Supplementing such studies, there is research using children as informants indicating that children tend to perceive economic hardship as negative, since it often constrains social relations and excludes them from items and activities that peers have access to, for example, leisure activities, certain clothes, entertainment, holidays, etc. (Odenbring, 2018; Redmond, 2008; Ridge, 2011).

**Previous research and theory**

An important theoretical impetus to the concept the child perspective has come from the sociology of childhood. Broadly speaking, the sociology of childhood is concerned with analysing socio-cultural images of children and how these structure children’s lives, but also the agency children exert (cf. Qvortrup, Corsaro, & Honig, 2009). Such theoretical focus has contributed to drawing attention to the position of children in society and in relation to societal institutions. In this respect, an analytical distinction has been drawn between the notion of children as ‘objects’ and ‘subjects’ (ibid.; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Children as objects refer to a view on childhood as a moratorium and children as appendages to their parents and in need of adult protection. The opposite of this, an approach often preferred by scholars of childhood, is the notion of children as subjects, which refer to a view on childhood as a life phase important in its own right and children as social actors who are competent to express their own needs.

As regards policy, the CRC constitutes the clearest example of the ambition of upgrading the status held by children in society. However, the articles of the Convention are ambiguous and the principles enacting a child's right to provision, protection and participation partly express disparate child images (Vandenhole et al., 2015). In this respect, there are potential inconsistencies between, for instance, a child's right to participation versus protection as well as between children's individual rights in relation to parental rights and responsibilities. This ambiguity also relates to the concept of the child perspective where researchers have differentiated between, on the one hand, the ‘child perspective’, and on the other, ‘children’s perspectives’ (Bergnehr, 2019; Sommer et al., 2010). The former represents an adult’s interpretation of children’s needs, while the latter represents the children’s own views about their needs (a distinction similar to children as objects/subjects).
Given the vagueness of the concept of the child perspective, it is a priori not evident how professionals should interpret it. Analytically, SA administrators can be identified as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). Characteristic for street-level bureaucrats is that they function as mediators between policy and practice, which in concrete terms means that they enjoy discretion in applying legislative principles to individual circumstances. Studies exploring SA as well as other domains of social work show that professionals may have subjective and differing ideas about what applying the child perspective or a child-centric approach actually entails (Jensen Bruheim, Studsrod, & Ellingsten, 2019; Kedell, 2017). The overall picture is that children are rarely treated as social actors and that professionals may have difficulties maintaining a child focus while simultaneously working with parents (Eriksson, 2012; Jensen Bruheim et al., 2019; Kaldal, Landberg, Eriksson, & Svedin, 2016; Kedell, 2017).

The child perspective—an idea undergoing translation

In this article, we analytically take into account the research presented above regarding the indistinctness of the concept by understanding the child perspective as an ‘idea’, which has to be ‘translated’ and ‘edited’ at the local level (Sahlin & Wedin, 2017). Theoretically, the concepts ideas, translation and editing are linked to neo-institutional theory (Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Meyer, 2017). According to neo-institutionalism, organisations, in order to maintain legitimacy, are assumed to align their work with dominant norms in their institutional surroundings. The concept of the child perspective displays clear traits of what in this theoretical school of thought has been labelled an ‘idea’, which can be defined as a value that has become fashionable and has positive connotations (Sahlin & Wedin, 2017). In the Swedish context, the idea of the child perspective is not only normatively sanctioned, it has attained some degree of institutionalisation given that it is advocated by domestic state authorities. However, a characteristic of ideas is that they are vague and can be interpreted in multiple ways. In this respect, the term ‘translation’ has been proposed to explain how interpretations of ideas change and are reformulated when they spread from one context to another. The term ‘editing’ is in this article used to distinguish the process whereby an idea is transformed into concrete strategies and actions, and adjusted to the existent practices and goals of an organisation. Here it should be acknowledged that human services are characterised as having multiple and partly conflicting goals and values, which may result in diverging work incentives and render the straight translation and editing of an idea a difficult task. In this article, the terms translation and editing are employed to analytically abstract the interpretations and strategies that SA representatives make about the child perspective and to help locate the tensions that may arise when the principle of the child perspective is applied in a practical setting.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on interviews with representatives from social services in six municipalities and the research project had been approved by a regional ethical board. In order to select the municipalities, we analysed national statistics produced by the NBHW (The National Board of Health and Welfare). Municipalities with ≥15,000 inhabitants were included in the sampling frame. Based on a regression model (OLS) with the analytical strategy of pursuing the highest possible goodness-of-fit, we identified municipalities that were outliers in terms of a high/low proportion of households with
children granted SA as well as high/low levels of grants in households with children respectively. Socioeconomic and demographic variables constituted independent variables. The assumption was that differences according to these parameters would help ensure a variety of municipal strategies towards families with children.

We contacted high-level and low-level municipalities by writing to each respective head of the PSS. The letter included information about the research and a notification that we would soon contact them. Shortly thereafter, we phoned the heads of PSS and explained the research project. In order to be prepared if the research project was approved, we asked for the contact details of the head of the board and the SA unit manager. Six municipalities (three high-level and three low-level) agreed to participate.

The interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2018 and spring of 2019 and involved visits to the municipalities. In each municipality, interviews were conducted with representatives at various organisational levels, (i) the head of the board, (ii) the head of the PSS, (iii) the unit manager heading the operational work and (iv) social workers processing SA applications. Interviews with categories i–iii were conducted individually (apart from in one municipality which had two unit managers), while interviews with category iv were group based (the number of participants ranging between 2 and 9). As mentioned above, the rationale behind interviewing representatives with different work functions was to obtain comprehensive data on the interpretation of the child perspective, which in turn may have an effect on its implementation. Twenty-four interviews (six for each above-mentioned category) were conducted with 57 respondents.

The interviews were semi-structured and based on an interview protocol (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The protocol covered questions exploring how respondents understood the child perspective in an SA context and their working procedures in relation to households with children. We did not present the respondents with pre-fixed definitions of what we believe the child perspective to be; instead, we wanted to explore their thoughts of the child perspective in an SA context. However, as an interview progressed and various themes emerged, we also raised more direct questions regarding work procedures and lines of reasoning. The interviews differed to a certain extent; interviews with management focused more on overarching policies, while interviews with unit managers and social workers were more concerned with considerations during investigations and decision-making. The interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hr and they were transcribed verbatim.

To analyse the data, we read the transcriptions, in accordance with our analytical understanding, in order to identify translations/editing of the child perspective. The coding procedure used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which means that we coded the different meanings and sorted them into the inductively emerging categories. The thematic analysis resulted in a taxonomy of five discrete translations of the child perspective. Since we extracted difficulties concerning the editing of the translations from the data, the taxonomy also contained analytical arguments in favour of and against their adequacy in an SA context. In the article, we do not juxtapose low-level and high-level municipalities or compare views of respondents in various work functions, but instead focus on commonalities. Regarding the transportability of findings, our ambition is to attain what in a qualitative tradition is known as analytical generalisability (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In this study, this refers to whether the analysis applies to other contexts where the child perspective and similar working principles are required. Although certain translations and tensions may be specific to Swedish SA, there is cause to believe that the analysis is not extraneous to other contexts. For example, the concept of the child perspective (like other central concepts from the children's rights discourse) is inherently vague and likely to be subject to translation processes also elsewhere. However, ultimately, it is a matter of empirical testing whether the taxonomy is exhaustive or in need of adjustments.
Findings

The findings show that the child perspective can be translated in multiple ways. Table 1 outlines a taxonomy of translations of the child perspective in the SA context. Below, the translations and their potential editing will—under separate themes and subthemes—be elaborated on and exemplified. As will be made clear, each translation is analytically associated with arguments in favour and against applicability and adequacy in an SA context.
The child perspective as safeguarding basic necessities

Children should have food and accommodation...

A first translation of the child perspective is safeguarding basic necessities. This translation entails that the child perspective is restricted to ensuring that children have access to a fundamental level of welfare (usually equated with nourishment and shelter). In terms of editing, respondents explain that households with children are therefore sometimes assessed differently compared with others. This means that requirements normally placed on adult recipients may be overlooked. For instance, behaviour that might disqualify someone from a subsidy (e.g. if an adult is considered as not making enough of an effort to find work), may, in cases where a household includes children, lead to benefit being granted. Furthermore, the requirement to move to cheaper accommodation if you are expected to receive SA over a long period of time may be overlooked, since a child's right to a stable home is considered to come first. Below is a quote illustrating the translation:

IP6: Well, I often think that if a child… that considering the child perspective here [emphasis] is about a child not ending up on the streets and having enough food. Then we've considered the perspective of the child. If we have put a child onto the streets, then we haven't.

IP4: No, but we don't do that either. You always do something about that. We always try to help clients keep their rental contract. I mean so that no child ends up on the streets. (Social workers, Municipality 2).

But parents are responsible for their children's welfare

However, the editing of the translation of the child perspective as safeguarding basic necessities is also difficult to maintain categorically. Several respondents argue that there may be a tension between the values of SA stressing the responsibility of the recipients themselves on the one hand, and a child's right to financial security on the other. For instance, there are respondents who claim that parents may use the fact that they have children as an excuse for not searching for a job or cheaper accommodation, since they assume that the social services will come to their rescue. Some respondents emphasise the importance of not normalising such behaviour, since they argue that it may reduce the incentive for parents to resolve their financial predicament on their own. The view of parents as responsible for their children is exemplified in the following extract:

IP7: I feel that often when we have contact with clients, and when we perhaps haven't granted an application or provided help of some kind, it's as if the responsibility for the children is placed on our shoulders [emphasis] to a certain extent. “You're not helping my kids” or something like that. But the responsibility for the children, the main responsibility naturally lies with the parents. And this juggling, where they often place that responsibility on us, well it's a bit of a problem, trying to explain that well actually it's not us but you who are largely responsible, well mainly responsible at least.

Researcher: What are your thoughts about that?

IP5: I’ve experienced it, the “how am I going to be able to buy food for my kids when you take money away from me?” And then it's as if we’re responsible for ensuring that they
can buy food for their kids, but they... they have no responsibility in this at all. This is I think a recurring thing. (Social workers, Municipality 4)

The translation of the child perspective as safeguarding basic necessities equates it with welfare provision, but restricted to the provision of a minimum level of welfare. The rationale behind the translation is that children lack responsibility for their predicament and thus it prompts social workers to place more lenient requirements on households with children. However, at an analytical level, there are problems editing the translation entirely, since in certain situations it is at odds with other dominant values of SA, such as that subsidies tend to be conditional on quid pro quo and that parents are regarded as ultimately responsible for their children's welfare (cf. Fernqvist, 2011).

The child perspective as promoting social inclusion

Children should not experience exclusion in relation to peers...

A second translation of the child perspective is that SA should promote social inclusion. The rationale is that children in families receiving SA should not suffer too much due to scarce family resources and thus a subsidy should enable them to economically and materially be more equal with peers. The editing of the translation includes extra grants such as fees for leisure activities, bicycles, internet costs, visits to amusement parks, extra money for festivities, etc. However, such concrete strategies appear, based on respondents’ statements, to be unusual and when they exist restricted to children in families who have received SA for a long time. The quote below illustrates the translation:

IP: We always grant activities for children... So that children aren't marginalised. I believe that that is the responsibility of the social services, to ensure that that is the case. Then there are limits of course. As I said earlier, what a low-income earner is normally able to do. So for kids that receive social assistance we would probably not let them join both a hockey and football team, go riding and go to dance classes. But we'd let them do one of those activities so that they don't feel left out in any way. (Unit manager, Municipality 6).

...But extra benefits are not a long-term solution

However, social inclusion seems to be a difficult translation to adhere to in practice. For instance, some respondents underline that as SA is tax based there are therefore arguments in favour of being conservative as regards additional benefits. Furthermore, there are those that claim that saving money is a part of parental responsibility and that in lieu of granting extra benefits, social workers can inform applicants about universal support that is provided by the municipalities and by charity organisations (e.g. for free activities, second-hand clothes and equipment). Moreover, several respondents argue that generous subsidies undermine the incentive for recipients to become self-sufficient. Also, there are doubts regarding whether extra benefits contribute to a lasting financial situation for children, which was brought up by a manager:

IP: Sometimes I sense that there's a feeling that if only you get a little more money everything will be fine... You get the feeling when you work with social assistance that other departments in the social services say “give them this and then all will be resolved.” I doubt whether that's the case, I think in fact that there are perhaps other things you have to work on. (Manager, municipality 4)
Consistent with the former translation, the child perspective as social inclusion refers to provision, but as the translation extends basic needs, the ambitions are higher. The translation responds more pronouncedly to children as subjects in that it highlights that children should enjoy an economic situation independently from their parents (cf. Qvortrup et al., 2009). Thereby, the translation evokes sharp tensions with and encroachments on the aforementioned adult centredness, which may render it difficult to edit.

The child perspective as identifying social problems

Social workers should be responsive to pinpointing the well-being of children...

A third translation of the child perspective is identifying social problems. The translation includes social workers managing SA being responsive to children's needs and problems since they are responsible for the welfare of children. This encompasses identifying whether children are subject to abuse or neglect or whether a child or its family have individual needs necessitating support. Potential editing consists of making child welfare referrals (e.g. because parents are homeless or if they suspect domestic violence) or initiating services for the family (e.g. budget and debt counselling) or the child (e.g. school support). It is claimed that it is important to deal with social problems in a family inter alia because they may hinder families from becoming economically self-sufficient. The translation of a child perspective as identifying social problems is exemplified in the following extract:

Researcher: What is the child perspective in your view?

IP1: I suppose it's when we check to see whether there are any problems, and if the parents have an extra need for assistance for their child or if the child has extra needs in its situation and that you have to take that into account and that you help them to navigate through the system if there are needs. Is there something that gives rise for concern? Is the case officer concerned that the parents are unable to handle the responsibility of the parental role? That we either help them by referring them to the Child Welfare Units or by reporting concern for a child's wellbeing to the Child Welfare Units so that they can make an assessment to decide whether to initiate an investigation or not. (Unit manager, Municipality 1)

...But focus of SA is the economic situation of adults

However, there are difficulties adopting the translation, given that social workers managing SA do not meet children and have few services targeting children. Also, many respondents regard investigating children's needs as ethically dubious. For instance, they say that recipients are not necessarily bad parents but in trouble only due to financial difficulties and that it might be stigmatising for the parents if administrators investigate children's needs in too much depth. Furthermore, SA is understood as mainly concerning the economic situation of adults and investigating children's needs is considered as falling outside their official mandate and belonging to child welfare units instead. Hence, they do not consider collecting information about children or providing services directly to them as being the core of their work, which the extract below illustrates:

IP1: It's the adults who are responsible for supporting their children and it's enabling the adults to achieve that that we need to work on.//…// it is actually a balancing act. When you read the handbooks from the NBHW and also in other contexts when there are courses and course material and such like, I sometimes feel that they go a little too far
as regards including the children. Because it says, there are recommendations that you should speak to the children, that you should make home visits and interview the children etc. and I would say that that's an intrusion [emphasis]. Because the law also states that we shouldn't investigate more than necessary. (Unit manager, Municipality 5).

In contrast to the two former translations, the child perspective as identifying social problems focuses non-economic needs and problems. Resonating with the child perspective as documentation, there seem to be difficulties editing the translation and mostly it boils down to making child welfare referrals. The translation involves interference in children's lives, and the analysis shows that this does not seem not fall naturally within the mandate of SA units and is perceived as ethically dubious. In connection with this, the analysis indicates that Swedish SA is not organised based on investigating childrens’ needs.

The child perspective as the activation of parents

Making parents economically self-sufficient is essential for children...

The fourth translation of the child perspective is the activation of parents. The basic line of reasoning is that it lies in the best interests of the child that the family becomes economically self-sufficient. This is said to be important because parents are described as role models for their children and dependency on SA is considered as demoralising, but also because gainful employment contributes to improving the financial situation of the children. In terms of editing, several respondents argue that parents should be prioritised for certain job stimulating interventions. However, in most municipalities, social workers do not differentiate between households with or without children, and hence do not have measures to specifically improve the chances of parents being able to obtain gainful employment. The child perspective as activation is illustrated in the following interview extract:

IP1: But it's also about parents getting a job because it's a very important part of the child perspective. It's so important for children that their parents work and then they can buy things and not end up in this economically vulnerable situation.

Researcher: Do you all agree?

[The rest of the group agrees].

IP2: Yes, you look up to your parents to a certain extent, that there's an adult who can hold down a job and is in some way a role model.

IP1: Yes, and they probably feel so much better when they instead are a part of society and able to contribute. Because most of us want to do that. It's something that makes us feel good and it's obviously good for the children that their parents are doing ok. (Social workers, Municipality 2)

...But a child's welfare should not depend on parental behaviour

Although the child perspective as activation is in line with contemporary values of SA, it may in certain situations be a questionable strategy in relation to families with children, in particular if a condition of benefit approval is participation in activation programmes (so-called workfare). An argument against workfare discussed by researchers is that it may results in children's welfare increasingly
becoming dependent on the alleged deservingness of the parents for the subsidy (cf. O'Brien & Salonen, 2011). For instance, if sanctions such as reduced benefits are used when parents are considered to not be at the disposal of the labour market, children are in a sense punished for their parents’ behaviour. Such a conflict of values is discussed by the social workers below:

**IP2:** Then there's also a… the child perspective is difficult; I mean you have to consider it every month [in decisions of social assistance] and we do. But then there are families that, or some that… well don't follow their plan and then their application *has to be* [emphasis] rejected and then we end up in a “what to do” situation. Their application has to be rejected because they aren't sticking to their plan but we still have to ensure that the children are ok that month. And then we normally find a solution anyway. We give them a food card; I mean an ICA card (supermarket card) so that the children can be fed.

**IP2:** Yes, it's really difficult. (Social workers, municipality 5)

To sum up, the child perspective as activation of parents is a translation that strictly speaking is not about children but rather the adults are in focus. Since the translation aligns well with one of the main objectives of Swedish SA, that is, that clients obtain gainful employment (cf. Fernqvist, 2011), tensions are less salient. But the translation is partly in disaccord with certain values of the CRC, since it validates the economic dependence of children on their guardians (cf. O'Brien & Salonen, 2011) and, using the terminology of the sociology of childhood, underpins the view of children as objects who are subordinates of the adults (Qvortrup et al., 2009).

**The child perspective as documentation about children**

Documenting the predicament of children is essential…

A final translation of the child perspective identified is *documentation about children.* With regard to documentation, it must first be stated that accurate documentation is a general strategy to make actions transparent to outsiders and managers in particular emphasise that documenting their reasoning is a central organisational goal supposed to satisfy potential accountability demands. Thus, the strategy documentation can be used in relation to all translations. However, the analysis also establishes the presence of a distinct translation focusing documentation about children. At the core of the translation is that central to maintaining the child perspective is possessing documented information about children. This is described as important in order to make well-founded decisions and to demonstrate for external parties how a SA decision affects a child's life situation. Information on a child that respondents claim is relevant to collect and consider in the decision-making includes the child's health, schooling, leisure activities and contact with child welfare units. However, no municipality collects information systematically and only incidentally encounters children or makes home visits with the purpose of collecting information about a child. Thus, the editing of the translation of the child perspective as documentation, tends to be limited according to the respondents.

**IP:** I think that we can become better at, well, at asking questions [to parents about children]. That we'll start working with an implementation plan and it's also so that we can get hold of information. And that's where the child perspective comes in. How can we ensure that the child perspective is taken into account so that we can actually put what we do into words (Head of PSS, Municipality 6)
...but it is difficult to know what documentation is with regard to children

However, even though documentation about children is considered important, several respondents are wary of collecting information about children. For instance, there is the view that children should not be involved in SA, since financial issues are considered a parental responsibility. Also, there is the view that it would be unethical to overly investigate and record the situation of children, since SA essentially only targets adults. Moreover, as a matter of principle it is not certain that accurate documentation necessarily makes any difference concerning the actual work of the agency or the predicament of children, which is discussed in the following extract:

Researcher: Are there areas where there's room for improvement?

IP: Yes, I think to a certain extent there's the issue of documenting and recording what I say that we do. But we get this the whole time. You feel that you record things until you drop but then you get one of those spot-on questions and you realise that no actually what I’m saying here now, is nothing that anyone else can glean, that we actually work in this way.

Researcher: Do you think that the child perspective would be enhanced if you recorded things better?

IP: No, I don't think so.//…// In my view, our decisions wouldn't be any different. (Unit manager, municipality 4)

To sum up, the translation of the child perspective as documentation shows that for SA units it appears important to demonstrate in their documentation that they observe a child's needs. This may of course be regarded as a way of ensuring that they are not oblivious of a child's life conditions. However, accurate documentation is depending on possessing information about children and, in practice, such information are scarce based on hesitation regarding whether there are grounds to survey children's needs as a part of SA decision-making. In addition, it is ultimately unclear what the mere presence of documentation actually means for a child's life situation. For organisations, a driving force behind documenting may—since it satisfies anticipated demands on accountability—also be about gaining legitimacy (cf. Greenwood et al., 2017).

Summary and concluding discussion

Over the last few decades, the CRC (the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) has prompted many national welfare services to develop policies for considering ‘the best interest of the child’ relative to public decision-making (Vandenhole et al., 2015). In Sweden, an expression of this ambition is that national policy advocates that a ‘child perspective’ should guide SA, a cash benefit constituting society's last safety net. The concept in its most basic sense can be said to entail taking the situation of children into account when it comes to the provision of welfare services. However, what acknowledging a child perspective in an SA context actually entails is in essence vague. Departing from neo-institutional theory, this article has set out to analyse the principle of the child perspective as an ‘idea’ undergoing ‘translations’ (reformulations and interpretations) and with ‘editing’ (transformation into concrete strategies and actions) at the local level (cf. Sahlin
& Wedin, 2017). The aim has been to explore the translations and editing of the child perspective in an SA context, and data have come from interviews with SA representatives in six local social services. To reiterate the main results, translations of the child perspective identified are (a) safeguarding access to basic necessities, (b) promoting social inclusion, (c) identifying social problems, (d) focusing on the activation of parents and (e) documenting the situation of children. Moreover, the translations tend to be edited to a limited extent and each translation is associated with arguments in favour and against applicability in an SA context. Below we will discuss the translations in terms of their implications for the situation of children in families receiving SA and by relating the findings to childhood studies research.

First, the study illuminates that from a bottom-up perspective, central concepts in children's rights studies may lack universal meaning and be interpreted in different ways (cf. Vandenhole et al., 2015). This is both a result of the ambiguity of concepts such as the child perspective, but also of the fact that welfare professionals can be analytically determined as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) whose task it is to translate policy principles and apply them to concrete circumstances. In this process, there is room for varying views and the translations identified in this study carry child images and work rationales with different implications concerning how children are considered in an SA context (cf. Jensen Bruheim et al., 2019). Hence, the vagueness of the concept of the child perspective means that it can be used to give support to disparate and partly inconsistent ways of organising SA administration. For instance, the level of ambition varies considerably between the child perspective as safeguarding necessities on the one hand and the child perspective as promoting social inclusion on the other. Moreover, a translation of the child perspective as identifying and responding to social problems highlights children's general well-being, but may at the same time downplay the adverse impact a restrained economy per se may have on the well-being of children according to research. Furthermore, a translation focusing on documentation illustrates the importance for social services to bureaucratically demonstrate that attention is paid to the child perspective, but what this actually implies for the well-being of children is unclear. In other words, when local social services claim that they acknowledge the child perspective, it is in effect unclear what that implies in concrete terms and by extension for the predicament of children.

Second, the findings show that not only do different translations of the child perspective differ in relation to each other—each translation also provokes tensions when they are to be performed and there may be analytical arguments for and against their applicability in specific welfare contexts. Based on neo-institutional theory, the tensions may be understood in the light of the fact that human services are guided by multiple goals and values that need to be harmonised (cf. Greenwood et al., 2017). As regards SA administration, the tensions lay bare the difficulties that exist when it comes to resolving the conflict of values that the increased focus on the child perspective brings to the fore. Especially translations that place children at the centre openly challenge certain traditional goals and are hence difficult to edit in an SA context. For instance, the child perspective as identifying social problems appears difficult to align with the adult focus of SA and the current organisation where it is the specific task of child welfare units to investigate the needs of children. Furthermore, the child perspective as safeguarding basic necessities and promoting social inclusion to some extent confronts the prevailing ideology of SA as targeting the deservingness of adults for the subsidy (cf. O'Brien and Salonen, 2011). These conflicts of values arguably contribute to explaining the difficulty of transforming different child perspective translations into concrete strategies and measures. A general impression is that translations that harmonise with prevailing ideology, such as the adult centredness and the pressure to be conservative as regards additional benefits, tend to more easily be promoted and adopted.
Third, the study shows that the child perspective as involving the participation of children is absent from the translations identified. Based on reasoning from the sociology of childhood, this means that children in Swedish SA administration may be regarded as objects who are treated as appendages to their parents and not subjects who are social actors and whose experiences should be given due weight (cf. Qvortrup et al., 2009). Analogously, the translations do not apply a ‘children’s perspective’ (children’s own views about their needs), instead all are based on the ‘child perspective’ (adults’ interpretations of children’s needs) (Bergnehr, 2019). This can be regarded as noteworthy, since participation is stressed by both the CRC and in national policy texts as being of central importance in order to realise the child perspective (IVO, 2015; NBHW, 2015). The absence of participation can be understood due to the strong adult-centredness that permeates practical work implying that child interviews appear out of place, but also the values of social workers reflecting that families and children should be protected from uncalled-for interference in family life (Pålsson & Wiklund, unpublished data). Consequently, there are no first-hand accounts from children about how the restrained household economy affects their everyday lives. This should also be viewed in the light of research demonstrating that economic hardship affects children’s lives negatively and constitutes a risk factor for children regarding both social exclusion during childhood (Ridge, 2011) and adverse outcomes in adulthood (Cooper & Stewart, 2017).

In the present article, we have, from a bottom-up perspective, analysed the meanings that is attributed to the concept the child perspective in a specific welfare setting, namely SA decision-making. The study elucidates how a seemingly universal policy concept gives rise to multiple and partly inconsistent local translations and contextualises how translations are conditioned by prevailing principles structuring specific services. In a separate article, we will give a more detailed analysis regarding the issue of the (lack of) child participation in SA.

Data Sharing Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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