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Chapter

Parenting and the State: Constructing Parental Responsibility by Democratic Neoliberal States

Nicole Hennem and Hilde Aamodt

Abstract

Taking as a point of departure the changing meaning of responsibility, the article discusses what that change means for the relationship between parents, children, and the state. Parental responsibilities have come to the forefront in current neoliberal states as transforming children into productive citizens has emerged as an important objective. Consequently, early intervention and emphasis on parental duties have gained importance. In examining one mother's experiences with child welfare services, we will show that laws defining parental accountability are embedded in a culture of responsibility that transcends legislation. The question then becomes one focused on this culture and its carriers and their impact on parental responsibilities. The question then to be posed is how to develop the relationship between parents, children, and the state when democracies are changing: in more liberal ways or in even more regulating ways?

Keywords: parental responsibility, democratic neoliberal state, child welfare services, relations state-parents-children, moral field

1. Introduction

Concern for the welfare of children has been a constant factor throughout the building of European welfare states, though at different levels [1–3]. In one sense, the focus on children is not a new one, but it has today taken on a new content represented by what has been described as processes of intensification, scientization, and instrumentalization as Ramerkers and Suissa formulate [4]. From a critical point of view, the aim of these and other aspects of the professionalization of childrearing is not only to provide better life conditions for children but also “to produce happy, compliant and convenient children. This requires standardized and ‘scientific’ practice and is considered crucial to reproducing the nation and the citizens of tomorrow” ([5], p. 30).

In Europe, these processes have merged to create a dominant discourse on parenting. From once being perceived as belonging to the private sphere, parenting is now discussed, scrutinized, studied, and assessed by many governmental instances [4, 6–9].

A central concern is the potential for parents to harm and hinder their children from becoming problem-free and productive adults. This increasingly legitimizes state intervention in families and had led to policies becoming more prescriptive, instructive, and regulatory [10]. The question then to be posed is how these policies develop in a time when democracies are changing: in more liberal ways or in more regulating ways?

Nowadays, most democratic welfare states are described as neoliberal. They share characteristic ways of governance such as self-management, active citizenship, risk prevention, and accountability [11, 12]. Moreover, they share the idea that responsible, rational, self-governed, and self-disciplined subjects need to be shaped early in life. Therefore, it is of great importance for states to intervene early in the life of each child to hinder societal maladjustment and to reduce future state expenditures in adult life. Early intervention programs are recent measures used to discipline parents and to direct children in desired ways [13, 14]. One key expectation for these processes is the notion that everyone not only has the right to take responsibility for her/his own life but also the duty for doing so, regardless of circumstances [15]. Given the emphasis by contemporary neoliberal states on parental duties and rights and the consequences these policies have for the relationship between parents, children, and the state, there is a need to examine in detail the meaning of parental responsibility, and how it has changed in recent decades.

In so doing, one needs to understand the domain of parental responsibilities as double-edged: On the one side, parents' accountability is conceived of as total, while on the other side parents' juridical rights to practice responsible parenting have decreased as the state has become more involved in the upbringing of children through various institutions, the most powerful being the child protection services. By looking at a case from the workings of Norwegian child welfare services, we will see that a key consequence of these changes is that the main responsibility left to mothers and fathers is to parent the way the state defines as adequate and appropriate. In a very real sense, this has turned parenting into an instrument for political ideology defining children as subjects steering parents, and this leads indirectly to impacts on adult lives.

2. Being responsible in democratic neoliberal societies

Being responsible is at the core of the general individualization in society and in what increasingly is described as a new mode of governance in neoliberal societies [11]. Studying the negotiation of responsibilities around the daily welfare of children uncovers the asymmetrical power relations at stake between parents and various welfare agencies. Many researchers have examined what this means for the relations between the school and parents, showing how schools often set the premises for what parents are responsible for with their children [9, 16–18]. Studies of home-school collaboration in Norway show that schools often set the premises for what parents should do and for what parents and children together should do [19]. In Norwegian schools as in many other European countries, parents have been given greater responsibility for their child's intellectual development, such as in helping the child's reading. When parents are given training tasks for their children, these tasks are considered as part of parental responsibilities, and the parents who cannot meet these expectations for various reasons are described as irresponsible [20]. In situations where the school assumes care tasks for some pupils, these are attributed to parental deficits in the home.

As Hennem and Aamodt [21] point out, child protection services represent a fruitful point of departure for researchers wishing to explore the complex relationship between the state and parenting. One reason is that these services are mandated to assess parenting and to force measures upon parents or, in worse-case scenarios, remove the child from the home if parenting is assessed as unacceptable. Before analyzing an interview with a mother who has been in contact with the child welfare services in Norway showing the fragility of parental responsibilities, attention needs to be directed to the changing meaning of responsibility and what this means when parents meet state services like child protection services.

There exists a massive literature on responsibility, clustered primarily around the concept of moral responsibility in philosophy. What is of interest to this paper is the historical change in the meaning of responsibility, as discussed by Kelty [22]. For Kelty, the philosophers McKeon and Ricoeur share a view of responsibility as involving the merging of two key components in the late eighteenth century: accountability (a question of guilt) and imputation (issues of causes and consequences). Framed in this way, responsibility then includes an idea of fault and an idea of punishment or compensation. McKeon's approach is political as he claims that responsibility represents an attempt to deal with social and political changes in institutions dealing with imputation and accountability [23]. He sees individual responsibility as dependent upon political institutions. This highlights the relationship between politics and the meaning given to responsibility through history. In this sense, one can assume that a change in the perception of the welfare state will imply a change of the meaning of responsibility. Applied to the issue of parental responsibilities, this explains the reorganization of the relationship between the state and the family European countries have witnessed since the 1970s [6]. Neoliberal states force many of the state's responsibilities upon individuals and this increasingly posits 'parenting deficit' or 'irresponsible parents' as the root of many social problems [24]. This opens for a legitimate need for educating parents and for increasing their surveillance [18, 25].

Ricoeur [26], on his side, is concerned with the shrinkage of the juridical field of responsibility as he claims that there has been an extension of the moral field of responsibility. This means that state legislation regulating responsibility between parents and children has become surrounded by a moral field that weighs more than the legal responsibility the parents have. Considering McKeon's discussion on responsibility, this suggests that the moral field is also a cultural and political one. Further, Ricoeur argues that there has been a shift of concern over time from the author of an act to the victim. This shift places the victim in a position of demanding compensation for the wrongs suffered. Ricoeur argues that this shift opens a situation where one may become responsible for something that might be happening in the future, not only for what has earlier taken place. This idea, he argues, gave birth to the idea of "responsibility without fault." This displacement has encouraged the extension of the sphere of risks. Kelty [22] concludes that reversal is at the heart of this transition of the meaning of responsibility: From responsibility for the causes and consequences of something that occurred in the past or the present to a perspective where responsibility designates responsibility for an unknown future. As such, this overlaps with the historical genealogies of risk society, insurance, and increasing concerns with preparedness and precaution. One may also conclude that responsibility is no longer something fixed and constant, but it has become slippery since no one knows what one can be made accountable for in the future or who might be considered a victim of irresponsible actions. This way of understanding responsibility focusing on moralities and the future is a central concern in many studies of neoliberal welfare states [27–29].

In governmentality literature, responsibility is discussed through the changing roles of citizens, clients, and providers of welfare. The emphasis is on personal choice and freedom, on active instead of dependent citizens, on risk management and on self-care [11]. In short, this helps form a discourse that tells citizens to take charge of their life where the subtext is one saying that the welfare state has supported citizens too much and made them dependent.

The questions that can be posed when responsibility is “without fault” or not limited to an act in the present are: How long in time and space is an author responsible for an act? Who can judge or assess one’s responsibility in the future? What becomes the idea of reparation/indemnification when there might not exist a relation of reciprocity between the author and the victim? Are there limited and unlimited responsibilities? [26]. These questions are highly relevant in a hegemonic context, positing that the first three years in life shape the course of an individual’s life and that parents during this period may cause irreparable damage to their child’s life. This framing raises many questions: How long are parents to be responsible for the lives of their children, even grown-up children? Are parental responsibilities limited or unlimited? Who can assess parental responsibilities? These questions are central in two pieces of Norwegian legislation regulating the relationship between children and their parents and issues involving who is responsible for what in children’s lives.

3. Legal parental responsibilities

In order to examine the processes employed by neoliberal welfare states to define as well as to enforce parental responsibilities, we focus on two pieces of legislation enacted by the Norwegian parliament: the Children’s Act of 1981 and the Child Welfare Act of 2021.¹ Both laws define parental responsibilities either by saying what parents shall do or by limiting what parents can do. The Norwegian Children’s Act from 1981 is described in Chapter 5, Parental Responsibility, and represented a major change in the state’s understanding of proper behavior by mothers and fathers at that time. Prior to the Children’s Act, parental responsibility was defined in the law as parental authority or parental power ([30], p. 46). The Children’s Act changed the terminology and introduced the notion of parental responsibility aimed at making parents aware of a basic shift in their relations to their child, the emphasis being placed on mothers’ and fathers’ duties to their entitled children. In the preparatory work of the Children’s Act, the legislative committee made, however, clear that “it is difficult to say how the balancing between the interest of the child and the interest of the family should take place – most of all in a legal text” ([30], p. 46). Section 30 of the Act specified that those having parental responsibilities shall exercise these on the basis of the child’s interests and needs. This section stipulated that the child is entitled to care and consideration from those who have parental responsibilities. Furthermore, those with parental responsibilities are obliged to give the child a proper upbringing and financial support. They must ensure that the child receives education according to ability and opportunity. Section 30 also stipulated that children were not to be exposed to violence or to situations injurious or dangerous to their physical or mental health. The Act also affirmed and confirmed children’s independence from

¹ A new Children’s Welfare act has been voted in 2021 and implemented this year of 2023. The old act has been strengthened. The new act explicitly gives children rights to get help from child protection services and amplifies children’s rights of protection and care.

the parents. According to sections 31 to 33, children have the right to co-determine and the right to self-determination. These rules set limits on the rights of those having parental responsibilities. These rules require that parents must hear what their child has to say before deciding about their personal circumstances. In that sense, the rules promote democratic relations between parents and children and suggest democratic parenting as a model supported by the state.

The Children's Welfare Act aims specifically to ensure that children and youth living in conditions detrimental to their health and development receive timely necessary assistance and care. The Norwegian welfare state, with this act, makes explicit and sets limits on parental responsibilities by specifying what constitutes unacceptable parental care as well as what interventions in the lives of families could be made by child protection agencies. The Act also provided for the engagement of experts by the child welfare service. Furthermore, it spelled out a range of measures child welfare services could provide to children and parents. First, it offers assistance, advice, and guidance for children as well as families with children aimed at contributing to healthy living conditions and opportunities for development for the child. The main purpose of such assistance is to promote positive change regarding the child and/or the family. Second, the Act defines those situations where orders taking children into care could be issued. Central among these are situations where serious deficiencies exist in the daily care received by the child, or serious deficiencies in terms of the personal contacts and security needed by a child relative to her/his age and development. Care orders could be called for if the child is mistreated or subjected to other serious abuse at home, or in cases where it is highly probable that the child's health or development could be seriously harmed because the parents are unable to take adequate responsibility for the child.

The Children Act defines the responsibilities of *all* parents, while the Children's Welfare Act focuses especially on *some* parents, i.e., those failing in their practice of parental responsibilities. Both these sets of laws, however, are open to a range of interpretations and grant many opportunities for state agencies such as schools, health centers, and welfare services to govern the conduct of parents and to form the children for the future. To cite again Ricoeur [26], there is a shrinkage of the juridical field of responsibility and an extension of the moral field of responsibility. As we shall see in the following case, the welfare state equipped with these laws possesses great leeway to intervene and regulate parenting. This freedom owes much to the impossibility of defining by legislation exactly what constitutes parental responsibilities. This creates a morass of problems in the moral and cultural fields involving parents, their children, and the agents of the welfare state charged with regulating them.

4. Disclosing the fragility of parental responsibilities

In the following, we will analyze the interview given by a mother subject to care orders for her two children as a case. This is an in-depth interview from an ongoing research project aimed at understanding care placements done by child protection services (CPS) from a parental perspective. The data of the project consists of nine in-depth interviews, all conducted during 2020 and 2021.

The interview can be seen as an example of a case study. According to Flyvbjerg [31], examples used in a case study can be chosen either because they appear typical or as exceptionally atypical cases or because they can be perceived as paradigmatic in the sense that they highlight some general aspects or characteristics of what is

being studied. Most examples can be seen as simultaneously exceptional, critical, and paradigmatic. The most important question one must therefore ask is, “What is this example of?”

The interview used here shares many features with the interviews in the study. It represents an example of how CPS imposes boundless responsibility on parents without giving space for parents to maneuver to exercise responsibility. Further, the example illustrates how the state steers relations between the parents and the children and defines the content of the relations. It is an example of how the space for negotiation between parents and the state is shrinking as the state is taking more place regulating parenting.

5. The case: a mother and her children

Interviewer: So, what was the rationale for you being deprived of custody of your daughter?

Mother: (...) it's a bit diffuse. I asked: What is the reason for it? And then they said it was part of a child welfare assessment. So, it was sort of very diffuse at first. But then I realized when I got to the county board and the district court what they put into the case.

Interviewer: Yes, and what was it about then?

Mother: Yes, the main concern was a lack of emotional care. They thought it was a lack of emotional care from my part. That I did not see the children's needs. That I kind of could not answer them in a right way and give them what they need emotionally. (...) I already had a case in CPS in relation to my son. He had challenges at school, he refuses to go to school and has anxiety. So, I kind of had a help measure in relation to him. (...) Also, they thought it was me who had caused him to feel that way. That it was an expression of poor emotional care, that I did not see his needs. To go to school and stuff like that. So, I felt like a lot of problems were my fault.... instead of hanging his problems to school. So, when my daughter was born, it went a little further. I felt like they were looking at her with those eyes. That I did not have emotional care. So, what they kind of saw, was that I had little eye contact with her and she little eye contact with me. They also thought that she used me little as a safe base, that she, sort of, yes that she was not well stimulated and meant that she was sitting the wrong way or not properly on my lap. That she was looking out instead of at me, and yes it was really a lot in that way that make them think that they could look at her that I did not give her the security that she needed.

Interviewer: Mm. So, the concern for your older son that, that gaze on him, it was kind of moved to her?

*M: mm (...). Eh, that's also kind of weird. They only observed me and her interacting once before they went to court. (...). So, there was very little observation that was made before the case was sent to court. So, they actually sent the case on the basis of the eldest. And it was after they sent the case to the county board that they initiated measures. That they would observe once a week and see and such and that's when they saw all these things. That there was poor eye contact and that was in a way what became the basis for the case in the tribunal. The observations they made **after** they sent the case. So, I was left with such a feeling that I did not quite understand — I did not see the problem. So, every time they came to visit, I felt like they were looking for mistakes. I kind of felt like now I have to perform. Now I have to get her to look at me. Now I kind of have to get the good contact that they are looking for. And that certainly made things get even worse. So, I did not feel like they were kind of there to help, that they were here to help us at all. I felt like they were just there to look for flaws. And sometimes I think I have evidence that they have misconstrued.*

Interviewer: Yes... In what way then?

M.: Yes, many really. I remember once... She had just started crawling. Also, I kind of wanted to show how good she was at crawling. So, I put her down on the floor and I put a book a little bit like that a few feet away... and then she was going to crawl and get that book. And I sat and showed her the book so that she would come at me. But then one of the social workers started tripping with her fingers on the table. And my daughter turned to it. And started crawling toward them instead. And then they sort of wrote in the report that mom put down a book but that the kid chose not to crawl to mom. So, like that. In a way like a proof that my daughter does not want to go to me.

And, when my daughter moved, CPS went to my son's father and said that either you take over the care of your son or we go for the care. So, they really pressured him to take care. Although he did not really want to. And the boy did not want to live there either.

Interviewer: But they based their concern on the fact that he did not go to school?

M: Yes, they did, the county board actually wrote in the decision that I had engaged in gross educational neglect. In relation to him. Because he had such a high school absence. So, they said I'd just kept him at home. And do not bother sending him to school. So, they have not seen that there's actually such a thing as school refusal and that it's a problem for him. Which does not necessarily have anything to do with me. Yes, it was documented that he was bullied. And he has such selective mutism that makes him unable to talk at school. I noticed that, because in the last year, one and a half, I had to accompany him to school for him to go there at all. So, I had to be there with him. And then I heard the other pupils when they were around. It was really like that, I got such a feeling that here there is no good, really no good environment for him. So, I would say that there are many reasons why people do not want to go to school. That did not hang with me. And I did everything I could. And I even gave up my own education to follow him to school. To sit there with him. So, when Anna was born, my daughter, I got asked myself. Should I stay home with her and take care for her, or should I be with him at school? So, it turned out that way, no matter what I did, it was wrong. So instead of putting in help and maybe helping me in that situation, they just used it against me. (...) I also had to take tests like that. The expert demanded that I take one – do not remember what it's called. These tests, which test vulnerability, mental illness and things like that. I took such a test. I was trying to be honest somehow. And when there are questions that have you felt gloomy for the past week or something, of course I answer yes. They had said they were going to take my children. And then it came out as a result that I'm vulnerable to depression. Then it's also kind of used against me then that I have mental health issues and Then, I was told to take another test. For there were to be two experts. So, I realize that now I have to try not to seem too depressed, so then, because it affects me. So, I try not to look like I am depressed when I met them. But that was also wrong. It was said that the mother does not see her own situation and does not understand the seriousness. So, no matter what I did, it was wrong.

6. Analyzing the case

In this case, caseworkers are concerned for two children: an 8-year-old boy and an infant girl. The boy does not want to go to school, and the mother reports that she has received help from the CPS for several years in the form of guidance and advice in order to overcome school refusal. She has also participated in collaborative meetings with the school, psychiatric services for children and adolescents, and CPS. The mother also describes the school environment as unsafe and reports that it is a known fact that her son is bullied. A bullied child shows the symptoms her son has:

anxiousness, selective mutism, and school refusal. Furthermore, she says that she decided to finish her education to follow and be with her son at school. Her actions do not present the mother as irresponsible. She understands her son's needs and acts responsibly, getting help from professionals and setting her son before her own needs of education. An objective observer might, in addition, believe that the responsibility for creating a safe school environment lies with the school, not with the mother. The CPS, however, placed the reason for school refusal on the mother, that it was her poor emotional care that led to school refusal and not the bullying at school. As in similar cases, the focus of the CPS was on two related issues: the emotional care of the child and its future. The key question was what could potentially happen in the future if the care was inadequate. In the Norwegian CPS system, a central task for caseworkers is to prevent what is called "skewed development" in children. In conducting this task, caseworkers must make risk assessments aimed at predicting what could happen to children in the future. Being responsible for her son's schooling, she is accused of "*gross educational neglect*." School refusal is a serious indication of maladjustment in society. Further, it can lead later in life to marginalization and unemployment, in other words, dependence on state support. The son might not become a neoliberal subject taking responsibility for his own life. The mother is perceived as accountable, and the sentence is moving the son to his father or a care order.

The mother lived alone with the boy for a period before she got into a relationship again and gave birth to a daughter. During the daughter's infancy, CPS also expressed concerns for the daughter's welfare and began an investigation. In this case, CPS has concluded that the mother failed to provide adequate emotional care for her son, and on this basis, they assumed that the daughter's emotional needs would not be met properly by the mother. As the mother pointed out, CPS issued a care order after having conducted a single observation of her and her daughter. It was only after the case had been submitted to the county board that the CPS decided to consider the interaction between mother and daughter. In other words, CPS attributed the son's school problems as coming from a lack of emotional care from the mother and predicted that the mother would not be able to provide adequate care for her daughter. Again, the focus is on emotional care, mostly the lack of it. According to the caseworkers, the mother did not have the right kind of eye contact with the daughter, thus hindering proper emotional attachment. This may create future problems for the daughter.

Neither the school nor the CPS takes the materiality of the mother's life into account. The mother told as an example of how she was left in a squeeze between the needs of her son and her daughter. Having parental responsibility, the mother is designated as the person accountable, regardless of whether she is to blame for the problem or not. The next step is for her to accept the consequences of what the CPS defines as her lack of emotional care for the children, that is, to have her children placed out of home. Not only did CPS issue a care order for the daughter, but it also issued an order moving the son to his father. Neither the father, the mother, nor the son wanted this, but CPS declared that a care order would be issued to place the son in care if he did not move to his father's home.

In line with the guidelines of the Norwegian state [30], the caseworkers involved with this mother and children prioritize emotional care while neglecting and minimizing the materiality of life. They also direct little attention to how the stresses and fears generated by the material conditions of this mother's life impact on her relations to her children. This is in line with another study showing how caseworkers do not take into consideration the materiality of life or the stress an investigation creates in a mother's life [32]. In this case, even though the mother acknowledges her

own accountability in dealing with her son's challenges, her responsibility for the child is contested and threatened by the CPS. The most problematic in this case for the caseworkers is that the mother does not appear to see what kind of risks her life represents for her children. She even contests the solutions the services proposed, a contestation that serves to confirm for the caseworkers that she does not understand the risks her children are enduring. In contrast to the ways CPS defines the mother's irresponsibility and poor parenting skills, the CPS presents itself as the responsible actor most concerned with avoiding the risks and other factors potentially harmful to children. In so doing, caseworkers confirm their identities as child protectors, while deeply questioning the identity of the child's mother as a parent.

The power used by CPS leaves the mother powerless. She describes encounters with caseworkers' intent on searching for flaws in her parental behavior. This flaw-seeking on the part of CPS is best illustrated by the observation central to the assessment calling for placing her infant daughter in care. It appears that the caseworker "helped" to obtain evidence of problematic parenting by capturing the infant's attention by finger drumming on the floor, the child then diverting attention from her mother and crawling away. In the official report, however, the caseworker disappears, and the infant's movements are presented as evidence of the lack of attachment between mother and child. Attachment theories occupy a central place in the knowledge base of contemporary welfare states, and they play significant roles in the assessments of parenting skills [33]. For the neoliberal state, these and related theories and studies of parenting competences and practices serve as the foundation of what are represented as knowledge-based policies. For mothers and fathers whose ways of parenting differ from the one defined as the norm, and with child welfare systems wielding this scientific card, there is little chance of prevailing in cases involving issuance of care orders for their children. The caseworkers expect and require parenting competences and practices that are claimed to be knowledge-based, that is scientific grounded, as all modern state drives knowledge-based politics. Facing child welfare workers with this scientific card in hand, the parents' knowledge of raising a child has little merit.

Another example of flaw-seeking is the *catch 22* situation the mother experienced after being advised to take a personality test. After taking it, she was told that she was at risk of depression because she had ticked off the box "having felt depressed" on the test questionnaire. Being at risk of depression was then understood by the CPS as a risk factor influencing the care she could provide to her children. On a later test, the mother decided not to be open about how she felt. Using her decision to not report how she felt as evidence, CPS concluded that she did not seem to be aware of the serious situation she was in, and this, too, indicated that she did not understand the seriousness of her situation.

During the interview, the mother described how the child welfare service had specific ideas about how she should be toward her daughter. For example, the caseworkers emphasized how important it was that the daughter sat face-to-face with the mother, and not the way she did, looking out into the room. This situation was used as an example of lack of emotional care. She was also expected to accompany her son to school, while also attending to a baby's need for a circadian rhythm. This focus on what the mother should do for the child reflects the prevailing ideology of training the mother in intensive mothering that is expert-led, emotionally all-consuming, time-consuming, and labor-intensive [34, 35]. As these researchers have pointed out, women of limited means and having few privileges are seldom able to reach this ideal. As studies of the Norwegian child welfare system have shown, assessments of parental competence draw on attachment theory, emotional care, and risk perception [36, 37].

This mother's experience with the CPS shares features with cases raised in recent years against the Norwegian child welfare system at the European Human Rights Court (EHRC) in Strasbourg, France [38]. Many of these cases were presented in the media as illustrating bias by the powerful Norwegian state toward people with low incomes, single mothers, or immigrant families. All these cases have been raised on behalf of the parents contesting care orders and visiting arrangements. Not all the cases have been settled, but among the settled cases, many resulted in Norway being adjudged in violation of paragraph 8 of the Human Rights Convention stipulating the right to privacy and respect for private life and family life. The mother and children in this case share many characteristics with other families most often in contact with the Norwegian CPS: low income, low educational level, various health issues, weak connection to working life, and dependence on public benefits [39]. In December 2020, there were 36,848 children in contact with the child welfare services. Nearly one-quarter of these children had been placed in residential home or foster care. Most of their parents had been assessed by CPS as failing to live up to the moral and cultural standards for parental responsibilities.

Framed in another way, these parents were defined by the child welfare system as being unable to give their children the childhood the Norwegian society expects each child to have. The Children's Welfare Act opened for a myriad of interpretations such as how to provide a secure environment for a child as well as how to define serious deficiencies in the daily care of a child. Even though CPS is mandated to be knowledge-based, there is no consensus in the scientific community about the definition of good enough mothering or fathering [4, 40]. However, in Norwegian society, this seems not to be the case since there is an appearance of widespread agreement about how to bring up children [21]. Critics, however, have also shown that the idea of good mothering too often matches a middle-class way of living and parenting [24, 41, 42]. Such middle-class ideals of good mothering and fathering fail to fit with the experiences and living situations of the above-mentioned families. The parents in these low-income families then become designated as "deviants" in encounters with the child welfare service. According to some critics [15, 43], there is a connection between the economic regime in society and the production of definitions categorizing some individuals as "normal" and others as "deviant." In neoliberal societies, much work is done by child welfare systems to divide responsible parents from those defined as irresponsible. Central to this work are activities aimed at uncovering risky behavior and calculating future risks.

7. Constructing responsible parents: welfare institutions as managers of parental responsibilities

When describing western societies and parenthood, Goody [44] talked about "total parenthood." By this he meant to emphasize how parents in western societies are responsible for procreation, giving the child a place among the kin, providing for children (house, food, clothes), caring for children both physically and emotionally, providing an education, supervising, safeguarding, and disciplining the child. In Norway, the Children's Act of 1981 as well as the Child Welfare Act of 1992 (since 2023, the new Child Welfare Act), express the total responsibility parents have toward their children. This total responsibility is only limited by children's rights, and in Norway, this limitation is of great importance. Children's rights regimes in Norway and elsewhere have been implemented in all welfare institutions and have changed

established practices within these institutions. The concept of responsabilization has been proposed as one mode of describing the claimed direction of these changes. According to the researcher who proposed this notion, it can be understood as

the process whereby subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the duty of another – usually a state agency – or would not have been recognized as responsibility at all. ([45], pp. 277–279).

In short, this means emphasizing to individuals or groups of people that they have responsibilities and making efforts to get them act according to these responsibilities. Since the 1990s, this process has been involved in the transformation of the welfare state into a neoliberal welfare state. This new form of the welfare state is one emphasizing sanctions total parenting, and continually reminding parents of their responsibilities and their children's rights through all the state institutions parents meet during their children's lives. These include maternal and child health centers, nurseries, kindergartens, and schools. Child welfare workers are required to take responsibility for a range of professional practices aimed at producing responsible parents and entitled children. Caseworkers are mandated by the state to tell parents how to parent and how to exercise their responsibilities. The case we have examined illustrates how this was done with one mother. As we have seen, this woman possessed no or greatly limited voice or possibilities to contradict these assessing agencies. This case brings to light the paradox embedded in parental responsibilities. On the one side, parents are enjoined by law to have total responsibility for their children. On the other hand, they have no responsibilities since the power to define these accountabilities draws from the surveillance of parents, which is well established in all the welfare institutions the children encounter during their childhood and youth. These organizations are the doers of state policies and are de facto the ones managing parental responsibilities. They base their authority upon professional jurisdiction and claims of possessing scientific knowledge. This serves as the base of the state mandate, making them accountable for the future of children.

These developments in the recent history of the neoliberal welfare state tie into the concerns raised by Ricoeur [26]. He was concerned with how the shrinkage of the juridical field of responsibility led to an extension of the moral field of responsibility and a shift of concern from the author of an act (in the paper, a parent, as we have seen) to the victim (the children). Moreover, this shift opens up the individual to be accountable for actions judged as irresponsible in the future. To become responsible or to show that one is responsible in a neoliberal society requires a set of special skills. Central among these are the abilities of being able to notice, calculate, and reflect on future risks. The neoliberal subject must gain expert knowledge and use acquired skills to make reasonable life choices [11]. Not being able to meet these expectations is the same as showing irresponsibility. A sign of responsibility is shown by parents demonstrating that they calculate and reflect on future risks for their children. Similarly, they show responsibility by assessing how the care they provide their children will influence their futures [46]. Perhaps the most difficult question for today's parents to answer involves calculating risks for their actions in the future. Since the 1980s, we have witnessed an explosion of claims of scientific knowledge about children and how to raise them so that they become healthy and social adults. This explosion is ongoing and riddled with uncertainties. Something adjudged as a good upbringing today might be obsolete and without any worth in the coming years. In an age of uncertainty, raising children has become "a risky business." Welfare agencies in

the neoliberal state are increasingly required to deal with these risks and uncertainties by collecting, classifying, and managing up-to-date knowledge about what is best for children. These agencies, too, are required to provide proper conditions for helping parents to become willing to adjust to new knowledge.

8. A challenge: developing democracy for the marginalized

In the paper, we frame the domain of parental responsibilities as double-edged: On the one side, the responsibilities of parents are conceived of as total, while on the other side, their juridical rights to practice responsible parenting are shrinking as the state has become ever more involved in the upbringing of children through various institutions, where the most powerful is represented by child welfare services. We contend that a key consequence of these changes is that the main responsibility left to the parents is to parent the way the neoliberal state, through experts and institutions, finds adequate and appropriate.


Beyond the increasing regulation of parenting, democracies appear based on anxiety rather than trust, leading to overregulated democracy. The state does not trust that parents are able to bring up children so that they become self-managed citizens; all the counseling and surveillance. Most neoliberal democracies vote policies based upon scientific knowledge. Today, there exists massive research literature providing a diversity of interpretations of how to assess parenting. In recent decades, attachment theory has gained prominence and universality in understanding these topics. Critical perspectives contend that understandings based on attachment provide narrow and one-sided interpretations of parents' lives and parent-child relations, easily leading to parents' blaming. As poverty is increasing in the world, democratic states will have to challenge the consequences of assessment based on "psychology without context" in order to avoid marginalizing marginalized parents and individualizing their problems.

Author details

Nicole Hennem* and Hilde Aamodt
Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Social Work and Social Policy, Oslo
Metropolitan University – OsloMet, Oslo, Norway

*Address all correspondence to: nicohe@oslomet.no

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