

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Trusted and doubted: Discourses of parenting training in two Swedish official inquiries, 1947 and 2008

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The aim of this study was to analyse discourses of parenting training in official inquiries in Sweden that explicitly deal with the bringing up of children and parental education and how the representations of the problems and their solutions affect parental subject positions in the early welfare state and at the onset of the 21st century. **Method:** We carried out a discourse analysis of two public inquiries of 1947 and 2008, drawing on theories about governmentality and power regimes. Tools from political discourse analysis were used to investigate the objectives of political discourse practices. **Results:** Both inquiries referred to a context of change and new life demands as a problem. Concerning suggestions for solutions, there were discrepancies in parents' estimated need of expert knowledge and in descriptions of parental capacity. In a discourse of trust and doubt, the parents in 1947 were positioned as trusted welfare partners and secure raisers of future generations, and in 2008, as doubted adults, feared to be faltering in their child-rearing tasks. **Conclusions:** The analysis revealed how governmental problem descriptions, reasoning about causes and suggestions of solutions influenced parents' subject positions in a discourse of trust and doubt, and made way for governmental interventions with universal parenting training in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Sweden, social welfare, public health, parental support, parenting training, family policy, child rearing, political discourse analysis (PDA)

### Introduction

#### *Parenting training in Swedish official inquiries*

As a part of its social welfare provision, Sweden has a long tradition of offering parents with infants advice and guidance during the period of infancy [1]. The state as a supreme all-knowing parent has prevailed as a concept over time, but political and ideological contexts have disrupted government power positions in parenting discourses. In the 1930s the concept of “The People’s Home” constructed the idea of the welfare state as a tool for creating a “good life” throughout the phases of life [2]. The government used an authoritative supportive rhetoric with the purpose of building a better life for everyone. As Sandin describes, a political urge for reforms focused

on parenthood and on children’s abilities and competences [3].

In 1947, the government inquiry SOU 1947:46 *Family life and domestic work* [4] was the first in a row of official inquiries that for decades covered a broad range of suggested family support, including society’s role in educating parents. During the 1970s and 1980s, inquiries dealing with parenting training turned to problem-orientated language, disputing state control and defying ambitions to impose a “right way to raise children” on parents. At this time, enhanced parental knowledge was discursively described as a uniting and mobilizing force: “The

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Date received 28 February 2017; reviewed 13 April 2017, 26 September 2017; accepted 16 November 2017

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DOI: 10.1177/1403494817747168

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overarching goals of democracy, equality, solidarity and security should be directive also in parenting education” [5].

*Towards parenting training as a public health issue in 2008*

For more than half a century educating parents has thus been of political concern in Swedish social welfare and public health policies. Parenting education has been forwarded as a means to gain governmental control over societal instability, such as parenting problems and child development disruptions. In 2004 “*New tools for parents*” [1], a report initiated by the government in 1999/2000, was presented by the National Institute of Public Health. The report underlined parental upbringing methods as strong determinants for children’s development. A need for parental support for families with young children had been mentioned the year before, in the national Swedish public health policy “Goals for Public Health” [6]. The national health policy was based on health determinants divided into 11 objective domains, one of them being “Safe and good conditions during growth”. In 2008, a new national public health strategy was adopted by the parliament: “A Renewed Public Health Policy” [7]. This policy reflected on interventions targeted at children and youth as investments that would reward people later in life, thus focusing on the health of children as future adults. The following year, the Swedish conservative government of the time presented the results of a public inquiry on parental support, SOU 2008:131 *National strategy for parenting support – A win for all* [8], suggesting that “preventive universal public health interventions with parenting training” should be offered to all parents with children 0–17 years old. This strategy was based on a preventive-promotive public health discourse, steering parenting support in a direction where parenting skills were launched as a risk-based solution for the prevention of mental problems and support of children’s healthy development.

In conclusion, a general reading of the two inquiries from 1947 and 2008 indicates a change from early welfare policies to a late modern welfare state. Moreover, European research on parenting policies accentuates how recent welfare discourses have influenced discourses about parenthood and parenting training [9]. According to Wall [10], policy declarations referring to costs and risks indicate a neoliberal discourse by which parents are encouraged to adapt to change, to engage in self-enhancing behaviour and to manage the risk they pose to themselves and thus “reduce their potential burden on society”. In a

parenting training context, children are turned into bearers of future social and moral risks [11,12]. Ryan [13] notes that a neoliberal social order contains a paradox of “regulated autonomy” by which individuals are governed through their freedom of choice.

### **Aim**

The aim of this study was to analyse the discourses of parenting training in official inquiries that explicitly deal with the bringing up of children and with the role as a parent. As governmental inquiries are embedded in contemporary norms and policies and thus reflect the rationality of how social and health problems are understood, it was of interest to investigate how parenting was expressed in governmental texts during different periods in Sweden. How was parenting problematized in the early welfare state and at the onset of the 21st century? What were the causes of the problems? Which solutions were suggested? How did the construction of problems and their solutions affect parental subject positions during the two periods?

### **Method**

#### *Data material*

The objects chosen for the study were two Swedish government official inquiries that specifically covered parent education: SOU 1947:46 *Family life and domestic work* [4] from 1947, and SOU 2008: 131 *National strategy for parenting support – A win for all* [8] from 2008. The two official inquiries represent different political contexts and were chosen as they both dealt with parental training. Both texts argued that societal instability was a problematic circumstance for parents and children. These contextual differences and similarities made the texts useful for the analysis of how welfare reforms that were constructed in the 20th century had been confronted by a new public health paradigm in the 21st century. The 1947 inquiry SOU 1947:46 *Family life and domestic work* [4] was an interim report forming part of a larger inquiry, *Home and family matters*, appointed by the social democratic government of the time and progressed slowly during the 1940s and 1950s. The scope of the 300-page inquiry was broad, including various socioeconomic inquiries. It was the first Swedish inquiry that from an overarching perspective dealt with parental education, and as such was a starting point for decades of discussions. The inquiry focused on younger children, although the need for parental guidance for parents (mainly mothers) of older children was mentioned. A total of 71 pages

were selected, including “Introduction” (with a declaration of purpose of the inquiry) and chapters dealing with child rearing and parenting support under the following headings: “The function of the family”, “Research in the areas of family life and housework” and “Education, instructions and propaganda” [4, pp.5–9, 11–22, 229–53, 255–87].

The 2008 inquiry, SOU 2008:131 *National strategy for parenting support – A win for all* [8], was produced by a single special inquirer appointed from one of the coalition parties in the conservative government of the time. The directives described parenting support as a public health intervention involving other sectors of society. The inquiry consisted of 190 pages dedicated solely to parental support issues, rapidly produced in 2008 and thus presented to the parliament in 2009. A total of 79 pages were selected, including “Introduction” (with a declaration of purpose of the inquiry) and chapters dealing with parenting training under the following headings: “The report’s definition of parental support”, “Children’s perspective and needs”, “A public health perspective on parental support interventions”, “What kind of support are parents asking for?”, “Collaboration”, “Evidence based parenting training programmes”, “Proposals for interim targets” and “Steering documents for parental support” [8, pp.5–6, 13–15, 23–66, 89–107, 130–3, 143–51, 155–7].

*Data analysis*

The study draws on Foucault’s reasoning [14] about how governmental power regimes work towards the welfare and productivity of the population [15]. Foucault stated that power traverses and produces knowledge that, in turn, produces discourses as productive networks in society. Analytical tools from Fairclough’s model of political discourse analysis (PDA) are applied [16], which provide a theoretical set to examine political texts on parental education in Sweden. Fairclough and Fairclough describe governing as a basic force in politics, used to transmit political inquiries [16]. In PDA, presumption, deliberation, action and decision-making are the main objectives of political discourse practices. Bacchi’s (1999, 2009) theoretical and methodological standpoint, that problem representations of policy issues shape discourses with implications for possible policy solutions, is also an inspiration for the forthcoming analysis [17,18].

The analysis of the governance discourses in the texts were undertaken by an exploration of how power relations between society, parents and children were textually constructed through the problematizing of parenting and by arguments about parenting training

CIRCUMSTANCES	What is the problem?	What are the consequences?
Society		
Adults		
Children		
REASONING	What is the cause of the problem?	What does this lead to?
Society		
Adults		
Children		
CLAIMS FOR ACTION	What are the suggested solutions?	What is the aim?
Society		
Adults		
Children		

Figure 1. PDA template for the analysis of parenting training in the selected official inquiries. The template displays governing in a three-step model of circumstances, reasoning and claims for action.

[17,18]. The analysis focused on how arguments were forwarded in the inquiries, how circumstances were depicted, how problems were described and what claims for action motivated governmental interventions in parenting education and training. Moreover, as Bacchi has shown, official documents not only present but also create problems to be solved.

According to PDA, as illustrated in Figure 1, governing needs goals to be set up through practical reasoning founded on both circumstantial premises (specifying problems) and normative premises: what is desirable, what is good, what is morally required, what the law requires, what other people require and claims for action [16]. Discourse analytical tools were applied, including levels of modality expressed through statements connected to how parents were positioned.

**Results**

*Circumstances: what is the problem with parenting in 1947 and 2008?*

In the text of the 1947 inquiry, the problem was represented as connected to industrialization, with increased personal mobility and changing life conditions.

A rapid development through industrialization of the Western world has profoundly changed the conditions of people’s daily life ... Changes in society have been so extensive that the duties of the family grow at an increased pace. [4, p.10]

New lifestyle patterns were described as problems that contributed to complicated expectations of families.

The distinguishing features of the urbanized modern society are diversity and changeability. Even in areas

where work systems and views of older times seem deeply rooted, young people break free. [4, p.10]

Likewise, in 2008 the inquiry's problematization of the parenting context referred to societal complexity and new ways of living. Rapid change, mobility, breaking up of social networks and changing life conditions were problems that challenged parents in their child-rearing tasks.

Our society is so complicated ... For single parents, life is overwhelming.

To be a parent in today's society is not easy ... The demands on parents are more contradictory now than before. [8, p.13]

Many parents find themselves outside their original networks of relatives and friends. ... Others are or become lone parents and yet others, while experiencing this new happiness (childbirth) fight through crisis and sorrows. [8, p.17]

Both inquiries outlined a societal problem of rapid change and complex demands on parents as contexts for reasoning about parenting training, but with differences in representation. The parenting situation in 1947 was represented as "changes in society have been so extensive" and "young people break free", in contrast to a more sombre description in 2008: "demands on parents are more contradictory now than before" and "fight through crisis and sorrows".

#### *Reasoning about causes and consequences in 1947 and 2008*

The causal reasoning in 1947 was closely adhered to circumstantial worries connected to the life of children in a changing society. The consequences of rapid change were problematized as making it hard for parents to keep up with new scientific knowledge about children's needs in the welfare society.

A strong feeling of confusion regarding child-rearing problems is apparent in different situations ... Education should clarify the basic outlines of child and youth development and deal with common problems with upbringing. [4, p.21]

Still, changes in society offered possibilities for new ways of living, with implications for child rearing and forthcoming governmental actions:

In the long run new forms of rearing might be in use, offering the individuals freer possibilities for development than now, more spontaneity and confidence, and greater

versatility, making the human co-existence richer. [4, p.16]

In 2008, the reasoning about causes and consequences referenced complex social demands. A disbelief in parental commitment to making sacrifices for their children was expressed in the preface to the inquiry:

Everybody is expected to work full time, have a rich social life, have time to develop themselves, have a nicely designed home and at the same time be perfect partners and parents. ... This is an impossible equation. ... To let other demands be put on hold during some periods in life is no catastrophe. [8, p.13]

In both inquiries, causes behind the problem were represented as dependent on parents' ability to tackle their life situation. In 1947, "a strong feeling of confusion" was combined with an image of the future as "making the human co-existence richer". In 2008 the causes behind the problem were described as circumstances that could pose an "impossible equation". Parents might lack the ability to deal with demands and challenges of modern life.

#### *Suggested solutions and claims for action in 1947 and 2008*

In 1947, the inquiry suggested that parents should be supported by society with knowledge about how to foster a "child-friendly environment" where children could develop safely in relation to family, friends and society.

A child's environment should be calm, simple and easy, but at the same time provide stimulation for the child's own activity and world of fantasy. [4, p.18]

Inner confidence and sense of affinity, not outer claims of power, must form the foundation for relations to authorities. [4, p.18]

Situated in a Nordic tradition of non-formal education, the inquiry suggested that parents, if presented with modern knowledge, would continue being reliable parents.

Adults should get education on child-rearing questions through lectures, courses and study circles for parents ... considerable results in the field of child rearing could be gained if parents get better knowledge. [4, p.9]

Theoretical uncertainty was tackled from a democratic standpoint, defying expert knowledge to rule over lay knowledge.

Specialists are often reluctant to disseminate the theoretical background of their results, preferring to present them as final products or categorical principles of life. [4, p.255]

It is self-evident that the task of forming the future civil environment cannot be handed over to a group of specialists. Ideas like this do not fit well with a democratic view of life. [4, p.256]

Further, parental need for knowledge was downplayed as a general problem:

Within a normal family daily life runs along more or less steady lines, parents are not by nature completely adequate child raisers, but neither are they so disharmonious that they necessarily would distort the children's development. [4, p.21]

In 2008, claims for action in support of parenting training relied on scientific evidence connecting parenting skills to child development.

There is a comprehensive scientific foundation showing that parental support is a benefactor of child development and decreases mental illness and other health problems. [8, p.23]

Early and broad universal parental support can prevent future problems, both health-related and social. [8, p.144]

To support parenthood is especially important from a public health perspective; and a united theoretical standpoint is needed about risk- and protective factors and which interventions are effective. [8, p.51]

Deficiencies in parent-child relations were described as problematic, leaving all children potentially at risk and all parents in need of training.

Through delivering universal and preventive interventions, we can decrease the proportion of the population who might develop problems later in life due to the absence of early interventions. [8, p.54]

The inquiry claimed that evidence-based parenting training, offered to all parents with children aged 0-17, was the preferable mode of action.

If one disregards working with universally preventive interventions one loses many children who later in life will develop poor health in different forms. [8, p.53]

In both inquiries, claims for action depicted a difference in suggested solutions and textual modality in reference to expert knowledge. In 1947, claims for

action were raised with a low level of modality, adhered to an expressed uncertainty about scientific findings. The suggested solutions revolved around generally enhanced parental knowledge, informal study circles and consultations. The text reflected trust in safe "environments" and secure social family connections. In 2008, a stronger modality based on claims for scientific evidence was expressed. Interventions with expert knowledge were called for, and parenting training was universally targeted at parents as individuals in great need of support. A more severe picture of parents' and children's lives was presented.

#### *Discourses of trust and doubt*

Problem descriptions in public inquiry generally entail balancing between issues of trust and doubt. The subjects involved, in this case the parents, their capacities and living conditions, are problematized to reinforce claims for action. Thus, both inquiries problematized parents' positions in order to deal with changes in society. Arguments from the analysis are referred in the following to highlight parents' positions as trustworthy and as doubted. In the problem description, the early welfare state of 1947 implied positive social change and more personal freedom.

The distinguishing features of the urbanized modern society are diversity and changeability. Even in areas where work systems and views of older times seem deeply rooted young people break free. [4, p.11]

In the reasoning about parental ability, the inquiry argued that parents were probably good enough parents, though the times were challenging:

Within a normal family daily life runs along more or less steady lines, parents are not by nature completely adequate child raisers, but neither are they so disharmonious that they necessarily would distort the children's development. [4, p.21]

In accordance with claims for action, the inquiry suggested enhanced knowledge to put parents on track with modern child rearing. Upcoming changes in adult life patterns appeared as desirable in the early welfare society:

The inquiry wishes to underline that considerable results in child rearing could be obtained if parents get better knowledge. [4, p.21]

In the long run new forms of rearing might be in use offering the individuals freer possibilities for development

than now, more spontaneity and confidence, greater versatility, making the human co-existence richer. [4, p.16]

In 2008, changes in society were problematized as alienating and even a cause for personal crisis.

Many parents find themselves outside their original networks of relatives and friends. ... Others are or become lone parents and yet others, while experiencing this new happiness (child birth) fight through crisis and sorrows. [8, p.17]

In reasoning around child-rearing methods in 2008, a strong focus was put on the protective factors of the parent–child relationship.

The family is probably the most important risk- and protective factor. ... A close and trustful relation balanced by clear limits and love/warmth is an important protective factor. Clear norms and expectations, good connection and attention to positive actions are examples of protective factors. [8, p.52]

In reasoning about the causes of the problem, it was doubted that parents would make the best life choices, thereby possibly hindering good parenting:

Everybody is expected to work full time, have a rich social life, have time to develop themselves, have a nicely designed home and at the same time be perfect partners and parents. ... This is an impossible equation. [8, p.13]

Regarding those problems and their consequences, the claims for actions forwarded expert knowledge:

There is a comprehensive scientific foundation showing that parental support is a benefactor of child development and decreases mental illness and other health problems. [8, p.23]

Conclusively, by balancing trust and doubt, the parents in the text of 1947 seemed to be more reliable: “daily life runs along more or less steady lines”. In concordance with a positive view of the future, “new forms of rearing might be in use offering the individuals freer possibilities for development than now” and “considerable results in child rearing could be obtained if parents get better knowledge”. In 2008, the life situation of parents was described as “an impossible equation” and the strong arguments for expert knowledge through parental education relied on a description of parental challenges that could be impossible to handle without education. Modality in governmental claims in the trust and doubt discourses were visibly stronger in 2008 than in 1947. In 2008, expert guidance was called for, not merely

dissemination of knowledge as in 1947. Adults in 2008 were offered a less stable position of trust, and children a position as dependent on adults in a context of risk. Thus, governmental action for universal parental training could be strongly claimed in 2008.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how interventions with parenting training were motivated in public inquiries in 1947 and 2008. Focus was put on how the inquiries produced parenting as a problem of governance with political implications and how parents were positioned in a pedagogical context for societal stability. As Bacchi argues, problematization involves positioning parental standing in society [17]. From this starting point, the analysis displayed how the concept of parenting was problematized in two given contexts of societal change and complexity. The analysis showed that in 1947 political governance was executed as a relationship between the state and its citizens, embedded in a welfare ethos of trust. Parental learning models were deliberated as a social welfare issue and a matter of enlightenment. Access to scientific knowledge was forwarded as desirable but not yet fully accomplished, which seemed to temper governmental modality. Society’s claims for action were broadly inclined towards democratic values, and intrinsically reliant on adult capability and reason. This is in accordance with Brunnberg and Cedersund [2], in that building a good life was a driving force in the 1940s, involving all people, including parents with children.

Further, the analysis displayed a shift towards stronger governing modality in the inquiry of 2008. At the time parenting had, with health determinants, become a public health issue [6,7]. An expert-driven pedagogical model offered new solutions to the problem of parenting, putting parents in the learner’s seat. Ryan [13] has described how a state–citizen partnership can be deployed as a technology of conduct to constitute social orders. Ryan refers to policy technologies, not in a mid-20th-century framework, but in the more recent neoliberal context of the early 21st century. In neoliberal social rationalities of governance, collective security is maintained by an alliance between the state and its citizens [19]. Such an alliance declares itself through stronger steering of its partners in what Foucault calls a “game between inequalities” [20]. In both inquiries a discourse of trust and doubt imprinted the texts and positioned parents on one hand as merely trusted welfare partners in 1947 and secure raisers of future generations, and on the other hand, in 2008, as more doubted than trusted adults, feared

to be faltering in their child-rearing tasks. The change towards stronger governmentality in 2008 was expressed as exposing parents to normative expert technologies in an ongoing adult partnership to safeguard the social order. Vandenbroeck et al. [21] reason that radical paradigm shifts between the state and parents have displayed new layers of history rather than the turning of pages. The findings of this study suggest that a shift from social welfare towards public health policies based on determinants contributed to the political achievement of launching a parenting support strategy in 2008. In 1947, governmental reasoning had been closely adhered to building the social welfare state and for fulfilment of a good life for adults and children. In 2008, discursive policy changes had occurred, adhered to a scientifically founded neoliberal public health paradigm of risk and prevention. Suggested solutions to parenting problems were adhered to a public health policy that was guided by the “prevention paradox”, postulating that universal interventions targeting all parents are most effective, as they also include children “at risk” [22]. As Ryan [13] reasons, parenting could now be problematized, from a risk-prevention approach, as a performative skill for future gain. The state also represents norms and control functions with both regulatory and liberatory implications in a Swedish context.

## Conclusion

Power relations between the state, parents and children are indicators of structural and ideological changes in society. This study reveals, from a power perspective, how governmental reasoning influenced parents’ subject positions in discourses of trust and doubt in 1947 and 2008 and made way for governmental interventions with universal parenting training in the 21st century.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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