The conceptualization and measurement of need: a key to guiding policy and practice in children's services

Michael O'Brien

Director of Research and Quality Assurance, Family and Children's Services of Renfrew County, Eganville, ON, and Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada

Correspondence:
Michael O'Brien,
Family and Children's Services of
Renfrew County,
Box 693,
Eganville, ON K0J 1T0,
Canada
E-mail: mike.obrien@fcsrenfrew.on.ca

ABSTRACT

Effective services for children must be grounded in the sound conceptualization and measurement of need. The concept of need is often misunderstood because it is used in different ways. Defining need as both a requisite and a goal is desirable. The conceptualization ought to rest on an acceptance that not only are objective and universal needs to attain physical health and autonomy requirements for all human beings, but subjective needs may also sit alongside of universal needs. The ecological/developmental perspective is best suited as a framework for assessing the needs of children. One of its tenets, the importance of understanding the interaction of risk and protective factors, is highly relevant to assessing needs. An assessment of the interaction of risk and protective factors operating in a child's life reveals the requisites and goals necessary for child development. The proposed approaches to the conceptualization and measurement of need when combined will be conducive to better assessment and intervention by social workers with children.

INTRODUCTION

One of the principles of the social work profession is to help people meet their needs. Thus, improving and refining our understanding of the conceptualization and measurement of need are fundamental to addressing the issue of need through social work intervention. Various approaches are used in defining and measuring needs, both within the social work profession and, more broadly, within the social sciences. While convergence regarding both the conceptualization and measurement of need has been elusive, given the importance of need to social work assessment and intervention as well as the importance attached to social work's claiming a body of knowledge, theory and activity (Soydan 1999), seeking uniformity and consensus is a worthy endeavour. Of course, social work is not the only field to be concerned about

This work has not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere.

needs, but it is largely unique in its stated goal of helping people to meet their needs through intervention. It is therefore incumbent that social workers possess the theoretical and practical knowledge required to carry out the activities involved in addressing needs. Indeed, social workers should play a leading role in studying and refining how to best assess and address needs.

This paper is pertinent to all social welfare services. However, it will be tailored to deal more vigorously with the conceptualization and measurement of need in children's services, in part, because the vulnerability of children dictates that a society devotes special attention to the meeting of their needs. Also, the prevalence of social workers in the field of children's services has accorded them an influential role in the evolution of services to children in many Western countries. They have amassed a body of practical knowledge about needs, risks, protective factors and well-being pertaining to children. Thus, for the social work profession to continue to advance its acquisition

of knowledge about the conceptualization and measurement of need, the field of children's services is a logical locus for study of the topic. We ought to be concerned about the topic because failure to properly conceptualize needs leads to inadequate measurement; failure to effectively measure needs leads to not fully understanding them. The paper will demonstrate how these problems can occur and how the conceptualization and measurement that will be proposed can assist both social workers in their assessment of need and policy-makers in the guidance they provide to practitioners. The ideas that will be advanced culminate from a review of the needs literature, observations growing out of many years of social work practice in the child protection field in Canada, as well as my experience in implementing the approach that will be proposed.

The first and central issue I will explore about conceptualization concerns the variety of definitions of need. The definitional issue will be followed by a summary and commentary on the discourse about objective vs. subjective needs, an explanation of the relationship of the concept of well-being to need, and a summary of the key messages from research regarding use of the ecological/developmental perspectives as a foundation for conceptualizing and measuring the needs of children. From conceptual matters, I will go on to examine the measurement of need: this will include a discussion of some of the innovative work that analyses the interaction of risk and protective factors to evaluate the developmental needs of children, as well as an articulation of the importance and complementarity of linking the approaches to conceptualization and measurement that are to be proposed. By way of a clarification of terms, note that when speaking of the assessment of need, both conceptualization and measurement are included in that reference as assessment incorporates elements of both terms. The term *assess* will be used broadly to denote the act of gathering information about individuals (Dean & Poorvu 2008), while the term *measure* will be used more narrowly to refer to specific methods and techniques that are used to observe the construct of need empirically (Kreuger & Neuman 2006).

THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF NEED

The concept of need is misunderstood because it is used in different ways and can mean different things (Jackson *et al.* 2004). Gasper (2004) has found that, usually, need is employed in three different ways: (1)

need as a drive; (2) need as a requisite; and (3) need as both a requisite and a goal (A needs X to achieve Y). Labrecque (1999), having observed that the literature on needs assessment reveals that the concept of need is often not defined by those conducting such assessments, has suggested that researchers should allot more attention to issues surrounding the measurement and scope of the concept of need. Most needs assessments are based on Kaufman's *discrepancy model* (Labrecque 1999). The definition of need used by Kaufman (1972) stipulates that a need exists when there is a gap between the state desired by a person or group and the actual state. Scriven & Roth (1978) have criticized Kaufman's definition for failing to distinguish between needs and wants, and for not differentiating between future needs and basic needs. They have expanded upon the discrepancy model by proposing that a need occurs when the state desired by an individual represents a significant benefit for the person and when the inability to attain the desired state results in a state of dissatisfaction for the person. Gabor *et al.* (1998) have defined needs as the basic requirements necessary to sustain human life, positing that they are a right, and suggesting that social needs assessment is comprised of two components: the determination of the nature of a social problem and the identification of possible solutions. McKillip (1987) also has seen the defining of a problem and the identifying of solutions as important aspects of needs assessment. This idea that the assessment of need ought to lead to the identification of solutions supports the definition of need as a requiste/goal. If we return to the statement that A needs X in order to achieve Y, needs are being located within the realm of strategies and goals. If, for example, one states that a person needs warm clothes in order to survive in a cold climate, or that a child with musical ability needs to be able to take piano lessons in order to improve self-esteem, then the statement of the goal makes the need more comprehensible.

At the level of the social work practitioner, more practical guidance is required to effectively assess needs. Not many studies have been conducted on the identification of need in the provision of social services to children (Sheppard & Woodcock 1999). Some of those studies have noted the concern of a large gap between more abstract conceptual considerations about need and policy statements about need, leaving social workers without helpful practical guidance (Aldgate & Tunstill 1995; Colton *et al.* 1995; Dartington Social Research Unit 1995b). A policy statement that a child is in need if his/her

health and development are impaired or likely to become impaired without intervention is helpful but does not appear to provide the social worker with sufficient clarity to operationalize the policy. In such circumstances, social workers have been found to widely vary in how they understand and interpret needs (Colton *et al.* 1995). Sheppard and Woodcock (1999) argue that distinguishing between deficit and differentiated concepts of need will enable social workers to complete assessments more effectively. The deficit concept defines need as a state in which a person falls below an unacceptable standard so that some harm has occurred or will likely occur in the future, whereas the differentiated concept viewing need as an operating concept employs the structure A needs X in order to achieve Y. Sheppard and Woodcock, who propose that need in its application by social workers should be seen as a concept encapsulating the subconcepts of problems, supports and resources, posit that, in doing so, social workers will be led to define and identify the needs of children through a conceptual framework that examines what supports and resources a child requires to overcome a problem. In effect, Sheppard and Woodcock's definition fits broadly within the definition of need as a requisite/goal. When this conceptualization is applied to the measurement of need later in the paper, it will be seen that practical guidance for the social worker does emerge.

A conceptual discussion of need is not complete without some commentary on the controversial issue of values (Guba & Lincoln 1982). The political and social values of individuals will influence how they define and measure needs. In the social work field, the major social science paradigms of positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, postmodernism and feminism influence social workers, be they working at a policy, research or practice level. These paradigms are each rooted in their own set of values; the paradigm(s) favoured by social workers will affect how they think about and deal with need. The notion that it can be objectively defined using scientific methodology has been at the centre of the controversy. It is now common to recognize that not only values play a pivotal role in needs assessment, but also that concrete measures must be used in measuring needs and their attainment. One must be aware that although needs are requirements, it is not possible to objectively assess what a person requires in every situation, largely because the values and judgements of both professionals and service users will influence how they define and assess needs.

Based upon my review of the literature, further discussions of need in this paper will adhere to the following premises:
- Needs are requirements necessary for human well-being
- To a significant degree, needs can be objectively evaluated
- The assessment of need is influenced by values
- The perceptions of individuals in defining their needs are important
- Determining needs involves both defining problems and goals, and identifying possible solutions

These premises, although not categorically accepted by all writers on need, are well supported in the literature.

The relationship of need to well-being

As the fulfilment of needs is required to achieve well-being, conceptual considerations about need can be situated within the context of its relationship to the study of well-being, the exploration of the quality of people's lives. The earliest work on well-being by economists used happiness and desire fulfilment to measure well-being and assumed that increased resources led to increased happiness. Sen (1984, 1985, 1987) has argued that economic theory is insufficient for the study of well-being. Sen and Nussbaum advanced the conceptualization and measurement of well-being in spearheading the capabilities/functioning approach which articulates that a person must have access to the necessary resources and opportunities in order to have the capability to attain a desirable level of functioning (Sen 1984, 1985, 1987; Nussbaum & Sen 1993; Nussbaum & Glover 1995) Their approach gives consideration to both objective and subjective measures of well-being in evaluating a person's capabilities and functioning. The study of children's quality of life is also shaping our understanding of subjective well-being in children (Jirojanakul & Skevington 2000), as is the literature that addresses the relational aspects of well-being (Jordan 2006). Similar to the study of need, this brief explanation of developments in the study of well-being illustrates that conceptualization and measurement are not agreed upon in that field either. It does seem reasonable to propose that capabilities/functioning, quality of life research and needs are, in the end, complementary, and at times, overlapping concepts that each offers the promise of expanding our knowledge about well-being. It follows that for those interested in the study of need, it is essential to

be conversant with the literature on well-being. Indeed, because well-being is a broader concept than is need, a familiarity with well-being may help social workers, researchers and policy-makers to situate their thinking about how to best meet the needs of vulnerable children within an informative and stimulating context.

The issue of objective and universal needs

Questions about the objectivity and universality of human needs vs. needs being relative and culturally specific have provoked considerable debate. A number of writers in both philosophy and ethics have concurred that objective verification of need can be determined where serious harm will occur to a person unless action is taken to rectify the situation (Gewirth 1978; Plant *et al.* 1980; Wiggens 1985; Braybrooke 1987; Thompson 1987). Doyal & Gough (1991), who are among the theorists that believe objective and universal needs are associated with the avoidance of harm to individuals, have proposed that physical health and autonomy are basic needs which should be seen as a right for all individuals in a society. Autonomy is disaggregated into the components of *autonomy of agency*, which deals with the freedom to act, and *critical autonomy*, which concerns having the emotional and intellectual ability to think and make choices. Doyal and Gough's list of needs they deem to be universally applicable consists of the need for: (1) nutritional food and clean water; (2) protective housing; (3) a non-hazardous work environment; (4) a non-hazardous physical environment; (5) appropriate health care; (6) security in childhood; (7) significant primary relationships; (8) physical security; (9) economic security; (10) appropriate education; and (11) safe birth control and childbearing. It is possible to dispute inclusion of some of the items that have been placed on this list of needs, however, each possesses substantial credibility. Most of the items are consistent with the literature on *social indicators* and the *basic needs approach* used by many international agencies concerned with development (World Health Organization 1982).

The idea of a list of universal needs that have some ability to be objectively measured leads to consideration of (1) whether such a list can encapsulate all needs an individual may have; (2) the matter of needs satisfiers; and (3) how and by whom needs are interpreted. If the kinds of universal human needs that have been described are, for the most part, acceptable, one can, nonetheless, see a limitation by virtue of their

generality. More specific and perhaps subjective needs will arise in the lives of people that may not be subsumed under a list of universal needs, or if they are connected to a universal need, require individuals to interpret how their need can be best met. It would seem then that evaluating needs satisfaction is an exercise that entails the use of both objective and subjective measures; objective measures being those in which a standard or level of what is desirable has been set by experts or professionals, and subjective measures being ones in which a person's self-perception of need is considered. I suggest that these objective measures are best suited to being referred to as objective when they are at the level of basic needs for health and autonomy, and that many needs, while having some ability to be objectively verified through defined criteria, may also require subjective interpretation. With respect to the issue of interpretation, Fraser (1989), in her discussion of who should interpret needs, argues that interpretations are politically contested, that those with power have the most influence in the contest and that those who have a need must be given a much stronger voice in the resolution of conflicts. She concludes that the processes for resolving the political conflicts over needs must become more fair, democratic and egalitarian. Fraser fits largely into a relativist paradigm. Arbitration of the disagreement between the relativist and objectivist paradigms may not be possible. However, in presenting the opposing points of view, my intent has not been to resolve the disagreement, but rather to demonstrate that the literature reveals evidence that some needs are objective and universal, and some require subjective interpretation of need, especially as the level of specificity about the need increases.

The ecological/developmental perspectives

In addition to the conceptual considerations that have been discussed, it is fundamental to underpin the conceptualization of children's needs using the ecological and developmental perspectives. Ecological theory espouses the importance of the interaction between the person and the environment in understanding human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). During the late 1960s and early 1970s, risk researchers came to see human development from an interactional perspective (Werner 1986). In further refining that perspective, Werner (1986) supported moving away from a static linear perspective on interaction to a dynamic transactional model that seeks to explain the mutual influences of the child and the

caregiving environment. She succinctly outlined the transactional model, seeing children not only as simply reacting to their environment, but also as attempting to structure it. Outcomes for the child are determined by the transactions between the child and the caregiving environment. Those who have studied the application of ecological theory to at-risk children have found that in using the constructs of risk and protective factors, we can learn how ecological factors affect children whose needs are not being met (Dubowitz 1999; Masten 2001). Adopting a transactional approach to understanding the interplay of risk and protective factors means observing and evaluating how parent and child mutually influence each other on a continuous basis throughout childhood. For the purposes of the paper, risk factors shall be defined as factors that operate either directly or indirectly to increase the risk of impaired child development or poor child development outcomes. Protective factors shall be defined as attributes or circumstances that work in certain contexts to reduce or modify a child's response to particular combinations of risk and thereby reduce susceptibility to a range of social or psychological problems.

THE MEASUREMENT OF CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Research methods pertaining to the measurement of a construct such as need favour the use of more than one instrument (McKillip 1987). Any one method, because of its limitations, will only partially measure the construct. Use of multiple methods, although more costly, tends to eliminate bias and expand the level of understanding by capturing more than one perspective. For example, service providers and service users each have their own values that will be expressed when asked to define user needs. In the conceptual section of the paper, I suggested that both objective and subjective methods be used to measure needs satisfaction. Bradshaw's taxonomy of needs provides four approaches for measuring need that have stood the test of time since they were identified in 1972; the taxonomy includes both objective and subjective measures. (1) *Expressed need* is the demand for service by consumers. (2) *Normative need* is a standard or level set by the experts or professionals as desirable. (3) *Felt need* is a person's self-perception of his/her situation. (4) *Comparative need* is a need that is assessed by comparing those receiving a service with those in a community who have similar characteristics but are not receiving the service (Bradshaw 1972).

Expressed need – the demand for services by consumers – may not immediately spring to mind as pertinent to the measurement of needs in children's services. However, preferences are indicative of whether or not consumers deem a service or programme to have utility. Collecting data about service usage can be used by children's agencies to learn more about expressed need. The information can be employed both to improve existing services and to design new services. Child assessment instruments are, for the most part, designed to measure functioning, but are also capable of collecting information pertinent to assessing needs, and so fall into the category of normative measures of need, as do lists of universal needs developed by experts. The area of felt need is integral to the social work ethos. Assessing felt need is subjective in nature. Some people may not wish to admit they have a need. Others may seek help without especially needing the service they seek. Although relying on client perception of need has limitations, it is fundamental to the social work value that clients must determine the needs they wish to address. Undoubtedly, incorporating the measuring of felt need is essential in the delivery of services for children. Promoting equity of service delivery among geographical areas is often the reason for measuring comparative need. If a list of social indicators could be agreed upon regarding the needs that must be met to reduce the incidence of problems in child development, then understanding comparative need would help to determine whether particular geographical areas possessed the wherewithal to meet the assessed needs. Lists of objective and universal needs can effectively be applied to the study of comparative need (World Health Organization 1982; Doyal & Gough 1991; Ben-Arieh 2001). From this point forward, I will focus on increasing our knowledge about the normative measurement of need; this is done, without prejudice to the other approaches, in order to develop the linkage between measurement and the approach to conceptualization that has been proposed.

Evaluating need by examining the interaction of risk and protective factors

The importance of risk and protective factors emerging from the ecological/developmental perspectives suggests the utility of considering those factors in measuring needs. The focus on the assessment of risk, which gained wide acceptance during the 1980s in North America, the UK and Australia, is more advanced than is the study of protective factors. It

grew out of public concern that more accuracy was needed to assess the likelihood that children might suffer serious harm at the hands of their caregivers. In the English-speaking industrialized nations, child welfare agencies moved away from intervening in circumstances in which it was deemed children were being exposed to inadequate care and focused more on children who had suffered harm because of the behaviour of the parent, or were highly likely to suffer future harm without intervention. In time, it was recognized that a risk-based approach was not satisfactory, in part, because reducing risk in the lives of children does not necessarily result in their needs being met. Reviews and analyses of the child protection systems in the USA and the UK advocated reforms that emphasized the desirability of needs-based models of intervention (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995a; Daphne & Cullen 1996; Parton *et al.* 1997; Waldfogel 1998; Melton *et al.* 2002), models that consider both risk and protective factors.

We know that a concerted research effort is required to advance our understanding of the interaction of risk and protective factors (English 1999). The evaluation of the interaction of risk and protective factors represents a promising direction for research on the measurement of need because the process involved helps define both the problem and possible solutions. Little *et al.* (2004) propose that risk and protective factors, and how they impact on child development should be considered as the foundation for the assessment of children's needs. Typically, in the field of child welfare, the clinical instruments used for children measure the functioning of the child (Trocmé *et al.* 1998; Lou *et al.* 2008). While acquiring an understanding of the child's difficulties is important, a structured method for learning about not only the problems but also the possible solutions represents a step forward; instruments that include an analysis of the interaction of risk and protective factors are normative measures that can help identify both problems and possible solutions. Such a method has been applied by the Dartington Social Research Unit in its Common Language approach to the measurement of need in services for children (Axford *et al.* 2006). The key concepts of child development, needs and thresholds of impairment are combined to support the selection of measurable child outcomes, and ultimately, to choose the services required to bring about the desired outcomes. The term Common Language is used because its tools are intended to be applicable at the policy, practice and research levels of all children's services. The Common Language approach, operating within an ecological perspective, evaluates the interaction of the risk and protective factors in a child's life to assess needs across a range of developmental dimensions (physical, behavioural, intellectual, social and emotional). The methods used by the Dartington Social Research Unit are in the tradition of the literature that conceptualizes need as being comprised of both problems and solutions (McKillip 1987; Gabor *et al.* 1998; Sheppard & Woodcock 1999; Gasper 2004). Risk factors provide information about the problems, and protective factors provide clues about the possible solutions. After analysing the interaction between risk and protective factors, one acquires some sense of the appropriate child development objectives that ought to be selected. When needs are measured using this type of methodology, they are described using a language that is conducive to selecting the type of intervention most likely to benefit the child (Little *et al.* 2004).

In addition to the analysis of the interaction of risk and protective factors by a social worker at the level of the child and family, the aggregation of data about risk and protective factors can also be instrumental in understanding the needs of children. In my organization, a Canadian child welfare agency, we both conduct individual child assessment and aggregate that information using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman 1997), Aggregating Data (Little *et al.* 2002), Threshold (Little *et al.* 2003), and the Kidscreen Quality of Life Measure (Ravens-Sieberer 2006). Through asking social workers to employ Threshold, a structured decision-making tool, to analyse the interaction of risk and protective factors for individual children, and through sharing the aggregated data with the social workers, their knowledge of risk and protective factors has increased; they report being better equipped to think about how they can capitalize upon the identified protective factors to mitigate the risks present in the lives of children. For example, in defining the needs of a child who lives in a home with family discord but has a relative outside the family who is an important support, the social worker would be asked to think of a goal that incorporates the protective factor into dealing with family discord. Or if a child is underachieving academically but is liked by her teachers, the social worker would be asked to choose a goal that incorporates the protective factor of the teachers into dealing with the child's underachievement. Interestingly, this increased attention to protective factors may be related to positive child development outcomes for the children being served by my organization, as significant improvement

in functioning and perceptions of quality of life has been noted since implementing the approach that has been described.

An illustration of the methodology we are employing, albeit oversimplified, may serve to clarify how it might be applied. Take the situation of an 8-year-old boy who has various risk and protective factors in his life. The risk factors are living in an overcrowded housing, having a low income, single parent who has mental-health difficulties, being a shy child and having trouble making friends. The protective factors are that the boy is likeable and enjoys sports. If we were to focus on just one of his needs, some might say that the child has a need to overcome his problem of shyness, and others might say his need is to overcome his trouble making friends. Shyness focuses on the problem in the child's functioning, whereas the trouble making friends is more connected to a goal about the importance of having friends. When needs are conceptualized as being about both requisites and goals, a statement about need incorporates both attributes, resulting in greater clarity about how to meet the need. A needs statement for the hypothetical situation might read, 'The boy needs to improve social skills in order to achieve better peer relationships.' In addition, the protective factor of being good at sports ought to be considered as it may provide a strategy that might allow the child to apply social skills acquired through some form of intervention. In part, the impact of the parental mental-health risk factor may also be mitigated through the participation in sports and the acquisition of better social skills. The needs statement I have used in the illustration uses the format 'A needs X in order to achieve Y'. The statement indicates the level of functioning or goal (Y) that must be achieved, but X also refers to the strategy that must occur to achieve Y. A reliance on a measurement of either functioning or the problem is not sufficient because it neither helps us establish the strategies and solutions required to achieve the desired level of functioning for individual children receiving a service, nor does it encourage the social worker to think in a strength-based fashion. Measuring need in the manner I have described is a reminder that its measurement is inextricably tied to the conceptualization of need. Early on, I defined needs as basic requirements that must be attained to achieve well-being. I suggested that, in addition to identifying a problem, identification of strategies and goals is integral to defining a need. Hence, in the foregoing discussion, I have taken pains to underline the importance of incorporating goals into the measurement of need.

The effect of conceptualization on needs assessment

At a systemic level, how the conceptualization affects the measurement of need can clearly be seen through a comparison of the use of needs assessments in the UK and North America. In the UK, the Children Act (1989) signalled an intention to place more emphasis on the needs of children and families rather than focusing predominately on risks and safety. Such a philosophical shift did not occur in the USA until 1997 with the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act. By 2001, England and Wales began using the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families. The tool considers the needs and strengths of children and their parents in the context of an ecological/developmental perspective. Thus, it goes beyond conceptualizing needs as being concerned with problem resolution and incorporates the more goal-oriented approach of improving specific dimensions of child development. At the societal level, the UK's Every Child Matters Outcomes Framework sets goals and selects targets and indicators to promote the attainment of children's developmental needs. Gilgun et al. (2000) state that in the USA, the child welfare and child development fields have become much more aware of the need to include strengths, assets and abilities into the assessment of children and youth. However, Lou et al. (2008) found little evidence to suggest that a shift has occurred in child welfare assessment. Lou et al. (2008) completed a review of assessment instruments being used in child welfare in English-speaking countries, primarily the USA, to determine which instruments were comprehensive, demonstrated sound psychometric properties and used a developmental perspective incorporating risk and protective factors. This perspective was chosen by Lou et al. as the basis for conceptualizing child well-being because it offers a dynamic, bio-ecological and transactional conceptualization of child development (Luthar et al. 2000). Of 269 assessments reviewed, only 10 met those criteria. It is still the norm for the American child welfare systems, all of which are operated at the state level, to use needs assessments that measure the reduction of problems in children and parents. In 2006, while involved in a Canadian working group in the province of Ontario studying a number of popular needs assessments being used in the USA child welfare systems, I found that the assessments we reviewed almost exclusively conceptualized need as problem reduction. Ultimately, the Ontario child welfare system in Canada selected a needs assessment which measures the

reduction of problems in children and parents. If we wish social workers to assess the needs of children through the analysis of risk and protective factors as recommended in the ecological/developmental perspective, then, how need is conceptualized as well as the design of assessment instruments based on sound conceptualization is imperative. Public policy-makers in most Canadian provinces have not set goals and selected targets and indicators to promote the attainment of children's developmental needs. Some provinces are taking steps in that direction through the adoption of Looking After Children for children in their care. However, more commitment and clarity at the policy level of children's services are called for if social work practice in Canada is to become more effective in assessing and addressing the needs of children. Finally, social workers must have the time to assess and intervene. In both North America and the UK, social workers have expressed that the completion of assessments becomes more an administrative task than a clinical undertaking when agencies do not have the resources to allow them adequate time to work with families.

SUMMARY

In review, I have (1) clarified the issues concerning the definition of need; (2) provided evidence for defining need as both a requisite and a goal; (3) presented evidence in support of the recognition of the objective and universal needs of all human beings to attain physical health and autonomy; (4) outlined the conflicting arguments about the objective and subjective interpretation of need; and (5) explained that the ecological and developmental perspectives act to underpin the conceptualization of the needs of children. From conceptualization, the paper shifted to measurement. The literature reveals that multiple measures of need should be used as various perspectives are more likely to promote the most complete assessment of needs satisfaction. I then suggested that the actual measurement of the needs of children can be best accomplished through acquiring an understanding of the interaction of risk and protective factors operating in their lives. An examination of the interaction of risk and protective factors affecting a child in each of the major developmental dimensions will allow a practitioner to know what a child requires to achieve positive outcomes. Applying the analysis of the interaction of risk and protective factors to the creation of needs statements that include both the problem and the strategy is a more complex, analytical and strength-based exercise than thinking about need in terms of problem or risk reduction. The approach being recommended is not meant to remove the necessity of developing and using clinical instruments and decision-making tools that measure need from a developmental perspective. However, as social workers engage in planning for how to intervene with children, it provides a methodology that will help them think about needs differently and more effectively. We know that more structured approaches to decision-making, such as checklists, surveys and decision-making tools, are recommended to supplement clinical judgement in the child welfare field (Munro 1999). The approach I am recommending provides a structure for thinking about and assessing needs that will work well in concert with tools exhibiting an ecological/developmental perspective and characterized by a risk/strengths orientation. For social workers using this approach to conceptualizing and measuring need, they will be rewarded by being better able to set goals for their clients conducive to identifying intervention rooted in the attainment of positive child development outcomes.

REFERENCES

Aldgate, J. & Tunstill, J. (1995) *Making Sense of Section 17*. HSMO, London.

Axford, N., Berry, V., Little, M. & Morpeth, L. (2006) Developing a common language in children's services through research-based inter-disciplinary training. *Social Work Education*, **25,** 161–176.

Ben-Arieh, A. (2001) *Measuring and Monitoring Child Well-being*. Kluwer Academic Publishing, Boston, MA.

Bradshaw, J. (1972) The concept of social need. *New Society*, **496,** 640–643.

Braybrooke, D. (1987) *Meeting Needs*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Colton, M., Drury, C. & Williams, M. (1995) *Children in Need*. Avebury, Aldershot, UK.

Daphne, B. & Cullen, D. (eds) (1996) *Child Protection: The Therapeutic Option*. BAAF, London.

Dartington Social Research Unit (1995a) *Child Protection – Messages from Research*. HMSO, London.

Dartington Social Research Unit (1995b) *Matching Needs and Services*. Richard Smith, Totnes, UK.

Dean, R. & Poorvu, N. (2008) Assessment and formulation: a contemporary social work perspective. *Families in Society*, **89,** 596–604.

Doyal, L. & Gough, I. (1991) *A Theory of Human Need*. Guilford Press, New York.

Dubowitz, H. (1999) Research recommendations and future directions. In: *Neglected Children: Research, Practice and Policy*

(ed. H. Dubowitz). Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

English, D. (1999) Evaluation and risk assessment of neglect. In: *Neglected Children: Research, Practice and Policy* (ed. H. Dubowitz). Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Fraser, N. (1989) Talking about needs: interpretive contests as political conflicts in welfare-state societies. *Ethics*, **99**, 291–313.

Gabor, P., Unrau, Y. & Grinnell, R. (1998) *Evaluation for Social Workers*. Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA.

Gasper, D. (2004) *Conceptualizing Human Need and Well-Being*. Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands.

Gewirth, A. (1978) *Reason and Morality*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Gilgun, J.F., Klein, C. & Pranis, K. (2000) The significance of resources in models of risk. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, **14**, 627–646.

Goodman, R. (1997) The strengths and difficulties questionnaire: a research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, and Allied Disciplines*, **38**, 581–586.

Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y.S. (1982) The place of values in needs assessment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, **4**, 311–320.

Jackson, T., Jager, W. & Stagl, S. (2004) *Beyond Satiability: Needs Theory, Consumption and Sustainability*. University of Surrey, Surrey, UK.

Jirojanakul, P. & Skevington, S. (2000) Developing a quality of life measure for children aged 5–8 years. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, **5**, 299–321.

Jordan, B. (2006) Well being: the next revolution in children's services. *Journal of Children's Services*, **1**, 41–50.

Kaufman, R.A. (1972) *Educational System Planning*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Kreuger, L. & Neuman, W. (2006) *Social Work Research Methods*. Pearson Education Inc, Boston, MA.

Labrecque, M. (1999) Development and validation of needs assessment model using stakeholders in a university program. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, **14**, 85–102.

Little, M., Axford, A. & Morpeth, L. (2002) *Aggregating Data*. Warren House, Totnes, UK.

Little, M., Axford, A. & Morpeth, L. (2003) *Threshold*. Warren House, Totnes, UK.

Little, M., Axford, N. & Morpeth, L. (2004) Risk and protection in the context of services for children in need. *Child and Family Social Work*, **9**, 105–118.

Lou, C., Anthony, E., Stone, S., Vu, C. & Austin, M. (2008) Assessing child and youth well-being: implications for child welfare practice. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, **5**, 91–133.

Luthar, S.S., Cicchetti, D., Becker, B., Von Eye, A., Schuster, C.,

Roosa, M.W. et al. (2000) The construct of resilience: a critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, **71**, 543–575.

Masten, A.S. (2001) Ordinary magic: resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, **56**, 227–238.

McKillip, J. (1987) *Needs Analysis: Tools for the Human Services and Education*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA.

Melton, G., Thompson, R. & Small, M. (2002) *Toward a Child-Centered, Neighborhood-Based Child Protection System*. Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT.

Munro, E. (1999) Common errors of reasoning in child protection work. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **23**, 745–758.

Nussbaum, M.C. & Glover, J. (eds) (1995) *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Nussbaum, M.C. & Sen, A. (eds) (1993) *The Quality of Life*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Parton, N., Thorpe, D. & Wattam, C. (1997) *Child Protection-Risk and the Moral Order*. Macmillan Press Ltd, London.

Plant, R., Lesser, H. & Taylor-Gooby, P. (1980) *Political Philosophy and Social Welfare*. Routledge, London.

Ravens-Sieberer, U. (2006) *The Kidscreen Questionnaires*. Pabst Science Publishers, Berlin, Germany.

Scriven, M. & Roth, J. (1978) Needs assessment: concept and practice. *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, **1**, 1–11.

Sen, A. (1984) *Resources, Values and Development*. Blackwell, Oxford.

Sen, A. (1985) *Commodities and Capabilities*. Elsevier, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Sen, A. (1987) *The Standard of Living: The Tanner Lectures*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Sheppard, M. & Woodcock, J. (1999) Need as an operating concept: the case of social work with children and families. *Child & Family Social Work*, **4**, 67–76.

Soydan, H. (1999) *The History of Ideas in Social Work*. Venture Press, Birmingham, England.

Thompson, G. (1987) *Needs*. Routledge, London.

Trocmé, N., Oxman-Martinez, J., Moreau, J., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B., Schumaker, K. et al. (1998) *Client Outcomes in Child Welfare: Outcomes Framework*. University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada.

Waldfogel, J. (1998) *The Future of Child Protection*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Werner, E.E. (1986) The concept of risk from a developmental perspective. *Advances in Special Education*, **5**, 1–23.

Wiggens, D. (1985) Claims of need. In: *Morality and Objectivity* (ed. T. Honderich). Routledge, London.

World Health Organization (1982) *Manuals on Child Mental Health and Psychosocial Development*. WHO, Geneva, Switzerland.