

Out of time: theorizing family in social work practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on a British Academy (BA) funded study exploring social workers' conceptions of family using a vignette and focus groups. The policy context is discussed and the data from the BA study are then compared and contrasted with families' accounts of their own situations using the data from a separate qualitative study about child protection social work. The paper discusses the themes emerging and argues for a renewed focus on theorizing family in children's social work and the implications for practice.

INTRODUCTION

Who is it for! It should be called a family protection plan and protect us as a family. . . I've got to do this and got to do that. . . If it doesn't work it will be my fault. (Mother)

The settlement between the family and the state has long been a contested area of academic, political and moral concern (Gilbert *et al.* 2011; Gilbert 2012). Of late, within child and family social work, some have argued that the interest has been distorted by a moral imperative to practise with a child-centred orientation (Featherstone *et al.* 2014). Families, it is argued (Morris 2012), are responded to within risk or resourceful paradigm. The UK 'Troubled Families' programme is an example of the risk paradigm, and the development of kinship care policies is an example of anticipated resourcefulness. Given this fluid, and at times contradictory policy context, this paper considers why theorizing family is a pressing requirement for children's social work. In developing this discussion, we seek to reopen questions about the value of family minded practice (a term adopted as a generic description of approaches to working with vulnerable families; Morris *et al.* 2008) when set against child centric interventions. Questioning the legitimacy, utility and veracity of child-centred practice potentially opens up the questioners to accusations of condoning poor parenting and excusing abusive environments (Gove 2012). Nevertheless, the realities are inescapable; children live in families; even those deemed to be at risk of

harm. Children removed from family under public law proceedings usually return, and families, whether they are stable and secure, or difficult and demanding, are often the context for resolution.

There has been developing academic attention paid to understanding how families 'do' family (family practices) in adversity (Ribbens McCarthy *et al.* 2013); however, less attention has been given to how contemporary social workers theorize families in their professional reasoning or their investigative and protective encounters. In developing this discussion, the contested nature of 'family' and the debates that continue about both its nature and function must be recognized:

The family as a specific blend of social relations has been constructed and re-constructed in many forms throughout history. . . The myriad conceptualisations of family reflect socio-cultural, economic, political, temporal and spatial contexts. Family can be kin and non-kin, and is often about care and trust in the context of enduring relationships. It has been a key site for debates concerning private and public responsibilities and gender relations. (Murray & Barnes 2010, p. 533)

Thus, attention in the social sciences has moved from structures to practices (Williams 2004). The limits of a use of 'family' as a generic descriptor are understood, but for the purposes of this paper, the term remains a meaningful and useful mechanism for discussing relationships and daily life. As Edwards *et al.* (2012, p. 743) argued, if we sidestep family as an organizing concept, we risk losing

important conceptual ground and distancing ourselves from lived experiences:

... the well-intentioned move to escape the stereotypes, orthodoxies and normative benchmarks associated with the concept of family, and the desire to encompass the complexity and diversity of relationships and experiences that is represented by arguments for sidestepping or subsuming families in a 'new' sociology, may well leave itself unable to address, or at least tangential to, a significant aspect of the public, political and policy shifts, as well as particular aspects of personal lives and relationships.

FAMILY LIFE IN TROUBLED TIMES: CONSTRUCTING FAMILY IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

The policy and service context for families facing adversity has experienced significant change during the past decade. The changes are many and multifaceted and too great in volume to cover exhaustively in this discussion. Here, we focus specifically on changes for families with care and protection needs. Murray & Barnes (2010) generated a number of categories or political positioning of families in their review of recent UK policy and this analysis remains a useful framework for interpreting the current landscape families must navigate. In essence, the rhetorical split between hard working families and failing families underscores the categories identified by Murray and Barnes. The 2010–2015 UK Coalition Government policy narratives accentuated the potential for divisive positions between these groups. Productive and unproductive families were juxtaposed and these divisions look set to continue and possibly accelerate under the current Conservative Government:

... it's unfair that when that person leaves their home early in the morning, they pull the door behind them, they're going off to do their job, they're looking at their next-door neighbour, the blinds are down, and that family is living a life on benefits. (Osbourne 2012).

This pejorative discourse about vulnerable families is well documented elsewhere (Welshman 2013; Beddoe 2014; Crossley 2015), but with the demise of social exclusion as a driver for welfare reform and the emergence of a strong policy narrative about troublesome families, there emerges a changing settlement between families and the state. Families are no longer judged to be struggling in the face of adversity (a presumption that arguably informed the UK 1989 Children Act), instead they are presented as wilfully failing to exercise good judgement to take up opportunities to become

hard working families, or are argued to make making 'poor choices', e.g. to live in violent relationships. Families are thus ascribed the agency necessary to change their situation, and arguably as a consequence, less attention is paid to their social and economic circumstances (Gupta *et al.* 2014). This sets the conditions for a punitive set of public and social policies to emerge. As a result, there is a markedly different tone and substance in the settlement between families and the state from previous decades.

This change is played out in the role and activity of social work, arguably the pinch point in the settlement. The UK has seen a rise in care and protection interventions, and a retrenchment of family support services. The data revealing the inequality in UK child welfare interventions (Bywaters *et al.* 2014a,b) suggest a set of social work practices concerned with risk management and interventionist approaches that can be mapped directly onto levels of poverty and disadvantage. Thus, minimal family support is provided by the state and formal intervention becomes more likely if the family is poor and disadvantaged. With non-consensual adoption becoming a favoured social work intervention by policy-makers, the settlement between the family and the state becomes ever more complex. This is contested territory and not the primary focus of this paper; however, any analysis of social work with families must acknowledge the influence on practice of the development of political preference for permanent care outside the family for some children. The introduction of adoption targets (Adoption Scorecards, Department for Education, 2015) and ministerial pressure to rescue children from natural disaster (their families; Gove 2012) has led to criticism from the judiciary about the absence of rights to representation for families, and attempts to reaffirm the established judicial interpretation of the settlement between the family and the state:

We are all frail human beings, with our fair share of unattractive character traits, which sometimes manifest themselves in bad behaviours which may be copied by our children. But the state does not and cannot take away the children of all the people who commit crimes, who abuse alcohol or drugs, who suffer from physical and mental illnesses or who espouse anti-social political or religious beliefs. (Hale 2013, para. 143)

This brief summary suggests that the ways in which social workers understand families have become a serious matter for practice, specifically it suggests that social workers are critical actors in the playing out of the state's settlement with families in turbulent times. Consequently, if we are to arrive at strategies that support helpful relationships between families and

practitioners, we must render visible the theorizing of and about family by practitioners.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE COULD DO BETTER: JUDGING THE FAMILY IN SOCIAL WORK

Social workers are involved in acts of meaning-making, which are often collaborative, bound by available linguistic repertoires of interpretation, and take place in particular social and organizational contexts. They must be able to justify and ‘perform’ their judgements for the child or family, or for colleagues, or in some other arena of accountability or judgement-making, like the courts. They must also ‘work-up’ written synopses of their thinking for case files, reports and other records and these are often more than technical descriptions. They embody a ‘folk logic’, legitimating and normalizing culturally shared, moral attributions of blameworthiness and creditworthiness.

[F]olk logic is not simply a set of implicit rules and shared beliefs, but includes the *practice of using* these rules and beliefs through blames and accounts. (Buttny 1993, p. 49)

These are particularly loaded in the context of the family. Studies of institutional sense-making in child welfare have shown that practitioners frequently invoke theory or institutional categories to authorize *ex post-facto* judgements made on other grounds (*inter alia*, Taylor & White 2006; Firkins & Candlin 2006). However, children and families themselves are not passive; they are rational, motivated actors who come to services with their own moral tales to tell. Horlick Jones (2003, p. 224) talks of the ‘complex discursive “dance” of categorization’ involving professionals and those who come to their attention.

Ethnographic work has shown that child welfare takes place in a moral context where children are generally exonerated from blame and parents constructed as potentially culpable for problems exhibited by the child (see for example Arribas-Ayllon *et al.* 2008a,b). This may be summarized in the tacit rule: ‘identify those features of the parent that have produced the troubled child’ (White & Stancombe 2003, p. 103). This is particularly apposite when applied to judgements about parenting (usually mothering). For example, the literature on parent–professional interaction in medical encounters provides compelling evidence of parents’ awareness that they may be blamed by clinicians in some way. Parents, and particularly mothers, must present their actions in the context of canonical versions of responsible parenthood (Strong 1979; Heritage & Lindstrom 1998; Morris 2012).

In the context of these dominant professional heuristics, the families’ own understandings of their troubles can struggle to get a hearing, or may in fact reinforce the presuppositions of the professional system, e.g. by parents being seen to prioritize their own needs over those of the child. In the aforementioned political and economic context, we argue that there is an imperative to examine the extent to which social work has absorbed the changing policy narratives and any emerging new settlement. How have social workers adjusted their conceptual understandings of family as the policy context shifts? The following discussion suggests that further empirical work is vital in building a body of knowledge that can inform the development of family minded practice and support awareness amongst practitioners of the impact of the broader social and political changes.

METHODOLOGY

We draw on two studies: a British Academy (BA) funded study of social workers’ understanding of family (the early stages of a forthcoming large-scale international study) and a case study exploring dimensions of child protection. The BA study used focus groups. The discussion within the focus groups was stimulated using a three-stage case vignette, which provided social workers with increasing amounts of information, of which social workers had to make sense and come to their decisions about how to proceed. The case vignette method is useful to find out about thinking ‘on the ground’ because in their reasoning and decision-making social workers reproduce local practices, resources and structures (Hetherington *et al.* 2001).

Synopsis of Case Vignette

Stage 1: Maria is 14, an only child to parents age 30 and 32. She has grandparents who live locally, the rest of the family do not live nearby. She tells the school counsellor that she is pregnant following a brief relationship with a boy from her neighbourhood (Peter, age 16), that no-one else knows, that she wants her mother to look after the baby until she is an adult, and is ashamed she is pregnant. Maria also explains that she and her mother are afraid when her father gets angry and that he has been violent towards them in the past.

Stage 2: Maria is 16, has dropped out of school and is finding it difficult to be a parent and agrees

to her child (Penny) being fostered. Maria is also unable to live with her parents because of the violence between her parents. Child protection services have decided that Maria is to be moved into supported housing in the community.

Stage 3: Maria is 18. She attends the local authority offices to explain she has a job and emotional stability and wants her daughter returned to her care. She explains that she and her mother have been to a meeting with a psychologist who was worried for Penny because she is hitting other children. Maria has seen Penny approximately one weekend every month during the previous two years. Penny has had several changes in foster carers and Maria believes that she would be able to provide Penny with more stability than she has experienced in the foster system.

Five focus groups were held in England, three with 'established teams', who worked together consistently in a distinctive 'team' in the same physical space, and two with 'wider networks' of social workers who either met and worked together on a regular basis, or who worked for the same local authority. A total of 30 practitioners participated in the project, 27 were qualified social workers. The majority of participants were female and the age of participants ranged from 23 to 65, with participants having between 1 and 30 years of social work experience.

The second study focuses on parents whose children were the subject of an ongoing child protection intervention, seeking to identify parents' perceptions and understandings of why children's services were involved. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 parents from across one large local authority. Open questions gave parents the opportunity to provide extempore responses that they themselves considered important and which provoked further discussion.

A content analysis was completed to identify themes arising in the focus group discussions about the vignette. The data were coded and organized to arrive at the themes. Common themes were identified across the five focus groups. The same analysis was completed in relation to the interviews with parents. Data from both studies were then compared and contrasted. All studies were approved by the relevant institutions' ethical and research governance procedures and subject to informed consent from participants. All data have been anonymized to protect the identities of all participants.

THE FOCUS GROUPS: PROFESSIONAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FAMILY

Theme One: A hierarchy of family forms

Participants expressed a uniform view that family is the best place for a child and there was a general consensus amongst participants that the care system should be considered only after wider kin had been assessed. Within this consensus, participants constructed in their discussions a hierarchy of family forms and composition:

1. Mother–infant dyad

Maintaining the mother and infant dyad was a constant consideration across all five focus groups. Given that the case vignette detailed domestic violence within Maria's immediate family (household), the focus on keeping Maria and Penny together placed them together in different scenarios:

Talking to Maria's [maternal] grandparents and seeing if there is anything that can be done there, where she would be in a stable and safe environment with a young baby . . . because she has been living with her parents she has not had that opportunity to sort of be removed from that situation to sort of have a go at actually being a mother away from that. (Focus Group 5)

The above example is for Maria and Penny to live with maternal grandparents. Discussion was also concerned with whether the suitability of a mother and baby unit or placing mother and baby together in a non-family foster placement.

2. Immediate/biological family – maternal

Whilst being rendered problematic and risky because of the potential for domestic violence, Maria's parents and then wider maternal family (grandparents) were the first points of discussion of family and support for Maria and Penny.

What I do when I first meet a family is I first establish who is in the biological family, then I turn the paper over and say right: who is important to you? (Focus Group 2)

Wider considerations were discussed as 'back up' plans and linked to court proceedings.

3. Paternal family

Social workers established that the case vignette gave little information about Penny's paternal family and that this needed to be further explored during assessment. However, paternal family (grandparents) was situated as a potentially problematic long-term solution. It was recognized that assessment and inclusion of paternal family, particularly assessment of fathers, was something that needed to be addressed more:

I think the reality is sometimes fathers aren't included in assessments. We are really trying to address that in social work practise here. (Focus Group 4)

Making sense of the case therefore focused on Maria's family in the first instance with consideration of Penny's paternal family as an alternative option after this, but before non-family foster care was considered.

Towards the end of focus groups, participants were asked to explain how they understood 'family'. It was at this point that wider notions of family, family fluidity and different ways of defining what family means were discussed in greater detail. These discussions also broadened to focus on people connected to children such as those providing support, and to whom a child has a sense of belonging, with the parent-child dyad remaining a priority. The social worker in the following extract from focus group 1 maintains the hierarchy already discussed, by opening their description of family in terms of blood (biology) or legal ties. Then they move on to extended family, bonds and belonging.

My concept of a family is people who are related by blood or ties of marriage so usually related. Obviously there is a lot of reconstituted families so children that have been brought up by other adults and that includes extended families and step parents and it is about the responsibility for the child and the experiences of that child has got and the attachment that there is between adults and children and so responsibility, love and care for each other, that is my concept of a family. So it is a sense of belonging and of understanding of each other's experiences and those are all the people that we would normally consider when we're working with children I suppose as being relevant. (Focus Group 1)

This is similar to the social worker in focus group 2:

Firstly, there's the birth family, the immediate family by blood. But then second, there's who is important. (Focus Group 2)

Broader conceptions of family included reconstituted families, and the potential emergence of previously unknown family members. It was agreed that what constitutes family should not be judged in accordance with individual workers' own ideas with references made to varying cultural understandings of family, alongside recognition that rigid notions of the nuclear family can restrict the ability for children to remain with people who matter to them. However, and this links to our earlier discussions about the persistent influence of wider discourses, the issue of time (both practitioner time and timelines for the child) was cited as a barrier to wider family engagement. Concerns about time and resources curtailed the implementation in practice of theoretical acknowledgements of wider family.

Theme Two: Institutionalized family policies in practice

This situation is very surreal (referring to the vignette), there would be a whole process we'd go through before it got to this. (Focus Group 3)

References to permanency were pervasive as were considerations about court orders regulating the placement of children. All groups were concerned about the psychological damage to Penny as a result of multiple placements and lack of stability. Penny's age was a significant criterion, with considerations about the difficulty of finding a permanent placement for older children and 'early intervention' having been missed:

It's too late really here for early intervention, but this should have happened ages ago. We knew about this family at the pre-birth stage, this is when this stuff should have happened. (Focus Group 2)

You know we know that it would be harder to find something permanent for her the older she gets, in the meantime she would become more damaged by the systems that she is in so it is . . . for here it is about getting things sorted as quickly as possible. Some permanence plan, whatever that may be for a child, as soon as possible. (Focus Group 3)

It was noted that 'drift', a ubiquitous practitioner category, is more likely in cases where parents have voluntarily agreed for the child to be accommodated (section 20, Children Act 1989), as there are fewer legal enforcements. There was unanimous agreement that if a child cannot remain with a parent, permanency should be established as soon as possible and firmed up by various court orders (residence order, special guardianship order).

Notably across the focus groups are consistent references to institutional categories and processes such as formal agreements with parents, legal categories of parent – the need for parental responsibility to be clearly defined by a court – and orders being required to transfer parenting responsibility. The legal process was clearly integral to understandings of 'permanency'. Of particular note was the reference to the legal category of adoption within timeframes '*We would expect the child would have been adopted within a twelve month period wouldn't you?*'. A further example of this used the term 'forever' to describe permanency and this is linked to adoption:

They [Maria's parents] don't have any parental responsibility for Penny so I don't know how much they would be included. . . Permanency, definitely permanency of some kind. She needs to know she's going to be with someone forever. No more moves . . . it needs to be a long-term plan. . . It should have been adoption really. (Focus Group 2)

The discussion explored the time frame for practice and restrictive court time frames, if the family had 'had long enough' and the paramountcy of the needs of the child as a separate consideration from the family needs, strengths and difficulties.

Theme Three: Categorizing the case

Pervasive across the focus groups was the view that the case could remain outside the parameters of social care dependant on the outcome of the initial assessment. Universal (or more 'targeted') services would be accessible and have a prominent role in the case. Children's social care, in contrast, deals with high-risk cases, explicitly defining a particular role for social workers with families. Other services were perceived as offering longer-term support, i.e. the supportive and long-term work was largely deemed to be the responsibility of universal (or targeted) services.

[that] service doesn't exist anymore and that is deemed to be a real loss so it kind of puts . . . although there is a huge kind of political agenda about early help, when there isn't the money there to source that, it makes it more difficult for social workers to actually . . . you're kind of reacting to stuff that comes in rather than providing that help which would be more preventative work. . . (Focus Group 4)

It was noted, at times with regret, that longer term work may once have been the responsibility of social work, and participants suggested that children's social work's emphasis on risk can mean therapeutic relationships become residual.

I don't know how realistic it is to have cases where they are an open case to social care forever really . . . if we could just leave it open for that one thing . . . just to see how things are and without that they suddenly feel like they're left on their own and no support. . . (Focus Group 3)

Throughout the focus groups, children's social work involvement was equated to assessing risk. In all the discussions, risk, particularly the potential for domestic violence, was the tipping point for social work intervention with the family.

Theme Four: Whole family: think family approaches to decision-making

There was discussion about supporting family decision-making; however, this was patchy and tended to be centred on universal services providing this model (a team around the child, or a team around the family) with recognition that a model of working with

families as a collective was not embedded in practice and the safety of Penny was the primary focus:

. . . to try and figure out whether it is safe guarding or not and that is our prime focus. . . I think the sort of family group conference type model hasn't taken off particularly here . . . so those kind of models are used very, very occasionally but our thresholds are so tight now that if you're exploring family group conferences then that is something that really somebody from Universal Services can manage rather than us, even if they think that they can't. (Focus Group 1)

The reference to thresholds being 'tight' points to resources impacting upon the time available for local authority social workers to explore family group decision-making. Where family group decision-making was described as more established, it was seen to be a forum for encouraging the family to work together.

so that we can try to encourage all the family members in this particular . . . well this particular child's family to work together so there . . . yes you would like have a lead carer but then everybody, kind of support. . . This is the beauty of family group conferences. We won't share without consent . . . although sometimes this is just necessary. Sometimes people won't want us to share information, we have a lot of confidential information. (Focus Group 3)

Overall, the focus group data reveal the influence of the wider policy discourses, and the limits this imposes to theorizing and practising with families. There was a general consensus across the groups that duration on events in the case vignette was both unusual and unacceptable. The discussion explored the restrictive time frames for practice and the courts, whether the family had 'had long enough' and the paramountcy of the needs of the child as a separate consideration from the family needs, strengths and difficulties. Practising with uncertainty and family complexity was curtailed by assumptions about the child as an individual rights bearer (Morris 2012) whose needs could be met independently of those of the family and whose well-being would be enhanced by permanent separation. In making this argument, we must note for clarity, the self-evident need for some children to be removed from abusive environments and that supportive and transformative work is undertaken by social workers with families. However, when we examine the reported experiences of family members, there is a strong indication of an urgent need to acknowledge and work with complexity within families and for professional practices to take careful account of the impact of their presence on family responses. We now consider these experiences.

UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES WITH FAMILIES FROM A PARENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Theme One: Beginnings

All parents interviewed said they understood why children's services were involved with them and their children. All parents explained that they found the first contact with children's services frightening and that they were apprehensive and defensive. Parents who described not being consulted describe the 'quickness' of the *initial* decision and link this to the practitioner not listening or knowing the family and or not *taking into account* that parents are initially 'frightened and defensive':

They jumped the gun too quick . . . if they'd have looked properly they'd have understood it more. Understood us more. It was so quick, just a quick, like a flash in a pan and it, he were here one minute and gone the next and so, it were like, well where've they taken him! (Parent)

This had an impact upon future parental help-seeking and also mediated against parents having meaningful participation with child protection plans thereafter, in terms of attending meetings or participating in them in dialogue. For example:

. . . we don't say much do we. There's no point. They didn't listen and we're just waiting till we don't have to go any more. (Parent)

Parents expressed that they would like the context and reasons for initial defensiveness to be taken into consideration, especially where they had not perceived any indication that a child protection plan might be a possibility. They stated clearly that they preferred open and honest ongoing face-to-face communication with the social worker. It can be inferred from this that there is a potential opportunity for listening and (re)negotiation with parents if their responses, however hostile and defensive, are considered to be 'understandable in the circumstances'. Where parents perceived they were not consulted or listened to, the disagreement about the findings of abuse or neglect prevailed (see Farmer & Owen, 1995 for similar findings).

Theme Two: Family and professional help

Parents look within their close networks for help before seeking looking to professionals (Broadhurst 2007). For parents to seek help from children's social care is a major step. Parents provided varied responses to questions about help from family, particularly

about family involvement in local authority decision-making. Some parents felt that professionals did not consider this adequately and the impact of some family members being excluded from helping was a strain for the family. Here, a mother explains how the children's grandmother was not permitted to be with the children without supervision because of domestic violence in her relationship with her husband:

No overnight stays, yeah fine, yeah, but to say, to stop my mum from completely having contact with them on her own . . . and that well, put a bad strain on me and my mum and the kids . . . they used to see her all the time. She used to come round more or less every day and she'd take them to the shop or she'd watch them while I needed to do something and she weren't allowed to . . . my mum wasn't allowed to babysit unless it was a special emergency. (Parent)

Parents described examples of how the involvement of wider family without support also caused heightened stress and created or exacerbated disharmony within the family and wider kin:

. . . They asked me if there was anybody out of the family who could have him and all my family knew what, the things that he'd done to me . . . so I knew none of them would want to have him there. They'd basically fallen out with him, you know, because he'd done that much . . . He ended up going to live with [his sister] . . . who got offered a council house but when they [the council] knew he'd be with her, they turned her down. She couldn't have it. . . He did go then from my daughter's . . . to a children's home . . . (Parent)

Partial engagement or neglect of wider family can create additional pressures and lead to problematic relationships. When set alongside the data from the focus groups, the complexity of the terrain becomes evident.

Responses from parents drew on a number of issues in relation to professional help much of which focused on continuity of family-professional relationships (Ruch *et al.* 2010), the number of professionals involved with the family, and practical help. The status of the practitioner-parent relationship was discussed by most parents. It was acknowledged that the practitioner had to make judgements about parents. However, where the parent perceived that the worker had taken time to get to know the family or would spend time with them ('stand by them'), parents expressed that they felt receptive to guidance and expression of concern. Parents describe their children becoming anxious when there is a change of worker. The overall message from parents was that the family needed to have a sense of being 'settled' in the family-professional relationship and this was linked by parents to becoming open and motivated to change.

Theme Three: Workable child protection plans – time for a ‘family plan?’

As the extract of the beginning of paper demonstrates, parents talked about whether or not the child protection plan was ‘workable’ in the sense that it was a plan they could manage on a day-to-day basis. That is, one which fitted with practicalities of family life in terms of what was expected and its impacts

there’s a lot to remember and I forget a lot . . . the appointments and that. . . It’s hard is all that and seeing everyone and everything. Every week and all the different people. (Parent)

The practicalities and impact on family life is also discussed by the parent in the following example:

. . . well we had all these people coming in and it was over the summer holidays. . . Summer holidays should be freer than that and the social worker wouldn’t listen. . . I’d have to come back say at 1 just to be here for 10 minutes for a visit . . . and I couldn’t go out for the day without questions and I just stopped interacting with them. I was too restricted and limited and we were standing out because we’d have to come back home half way through the day . . . They were getting me more stressed. (Parent)

A key phrase used by the majority of parents was that both they and their children struggled to ‘manage everything’ (changes of worker, appointments for treatment/therapy, various meetings and home visits) and they were ‘exhausted’ as a result of child protection intervention, often trying to find ways of coping with the extent and remit of professional involvement with the family. Some of these coping strategies could potentially be categorized as ‘non-engagement’ with the child protection plan:

I’d have just ignored them and go and stand in the kitchen and wait until they’d gone. . . I mean . . . in one week I’d have [lists several people scheduled to visit the parent at home] it went on and on really. I mean how many people is that coming round!. . . Every time I got rid of one I’d think, that’s one less. (Parent)

Examples such as this one were common and recognized by some social workers; however, a parent not answering the door for a scheduled visit from a professional would likely attract negative attention.

This underscores the disjuncture between professional and family time frames and the way in which the family is fragmented into ‘problem categories’ and perhaps the need for balance between ‘many hands make light work’ and ‘too many cooks spoil the broth’.

The connections to the focus group preoccupations merit close attention. The partial nature of family engagement is evident in both data sets, as are the

limits and possibilities of wider thinking about family. The ‘timely’ theme within worker and family narratives becomes a significant issue, interventions are rationalized on the basis of timelines, and family disengagement is justified on the basis of the timing of professional interactions. Above all, we see practice and plans shaped by temporal concerns, and, as we reflect on the changes in the settlement between the family and the state, we must begin to unpick the origins, nature and influence of temporality on our decision-making and moral judgements about child and family vulnerability.

DISCUSSION: FAMILY MINDED?

All of the focus groups identified a preference for maintaining children within their families, and seeking to avoid entry into the care system, as a guiding principle for their practice. However, data also generated important insights into how social workers respond to families’ stories and construct notions of family in their practices.

Whilst the group discussions indicated wider understandings of family networks, when discussing the vignette and social workers’ practices, the limited application of this broader understanding became apparent. Echoing work by others (Featherstone 2009; Ashley 2011), the biological father’s role either came after discussion about maternal grandparents, or after the facilitator of the group asked about other family members or a further prompt about whether the baby’s father would have been assessed. Yet the interviews with parents identified how important consultation about family networks is, and the value of being involved. Parents talked about family complexity and the need for nuanced discussions and agreement about who within the family is included in the work undertaken. Parents discussed how events decoupled the child from the family in terms of placement and decision-making. Parents perceived a child-focused within the work, and argued this often militated against workable solutions with the whole family.

The responses to the vignette began to reveal the extent to which social work responses to families have become imbued with relatively recent political discourses and policy drives. The proposed assessments of the family in the vignette were functional, based on an instrumental view of the family’s capacity to manage risk and meet professional requirements. Participants in the groups expressed concerns about drift. The strong sense of a necessity for rapid moves towards permanency planning where a child’s

immediate family cannot care reflected the wider UK policy shift towards early decision-making about permanent alternative arrangements for children.

Complex matters underpin notions of 'long enough', 'good enough', 'quick enough' and all these tensions were evident in the data. How and where such notions intersect with rights, responsibilities and the family/state settlement become important considerations if we seek to consider fresh approaches to supporting families and protecting children.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued that looking at how social workers and parents 'speak family' is revealing. Social work has been slow to see family as a set of practices. The data reveal the limited engagement with 'family' as an active, dynamic entity and illustrate the manner in which identities become shaped by initial risk judgements.

For families, the settlement with the state is changing. We know that the settlement is different in other jurisdictions. For example, the UK is not unique in allowing non-consensual adoptions. They are also possible in other European countries but for comparative purposes, in Germany in 2010, 250 children were placed for adoption without consent, whereas in the UK in 2013, the equivalent figure was 3020 children (Council of Europe 2015, p. 9). We can see the influence of permanency debates in our research. The temporal constraints of practice coupled with the drive for adoption presents families with very different rules of engagement with the state. These are difficult waters to navigate. Families receive limited early assistance but may face the full wrath of the state if their care is found wanting, including increased risk of permanent removal of their children. Disadvantaged poor families have reduced recourse to public funds to challenge state interventions, making access to justice difficult. Few of us would ask for state help in these circumstances, indeed trying to avoid the scrutiny of the state becomes an imperative for some.

In this context, it is anticipated that the data we have analysed here and those generated by the forthcoming international comparative project will promote debate and spark neglected conceptual and theoretical work that could help support humane family minded practice. Practical options could include, families (co)producing their own solutions, restorative practices and supporting people in finding a constructive solution to issues.

Strength-based models of family practice have had something of a boost in recent years in areas of the UK with the rise of restorative practices and models such as Signs of Safety (Turnell & Edwards 1997, 1999) and Family Group Conferences. The evidence underpinning such models is, in some aspects, underdeveloped (Morris 2012). Recent practice developments in the UK, for example, the Department for Education (2014) Innovations Programme, may well produce empirical work that will be significant in understanding the value of impact of such models. How such models can be accommodated in a practice context, which the data suggest remains problem-saturated, is a challenge. A challenge further exacerbated by the dominance of a practice focus upon individuals within the family and the minimal reach of family inclusion strategies and practices. Social work focused empirical studies, such as those described here, which examine professional 'reasoning as usual' and explore the operation of tacit categories and ad hoc heuristics may support fresh approaches to work with families where children are deemed to be at risk. In the interests of children and their families, this is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

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