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Failure in welfare partnerships -a gender hypothesis:
Reflections on a serendipity pattern in Local Safeguarding Children Boards

Dudau, A. (University of Glasgow) and McAllister, L. (University of Cardiff)

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Abstract

This paper examines the role that occupational segregation and gender bias in the welfare professions plays in persistent failures in inter-agency and inter-professional collaborations. Drawing on case study evidence from a Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) in England, a 'serendipity pattern' of gender dominance is identified within professions affecting inter-professional collaborations such as those prevalent in LSCBs. As we assign this pattern 'strategic interpretation', we suggest that policy measures taken to augment the effectiveness of welfare partnerships have, so far, paid insufficient attention to the critical variable of gender, due to over-emphasis on the organisations, rather than the professions, involved. The paper's contribution to practice is unraveling the potential of this oversight to contribute to failure to establish a collaborative mind-set. Our contribution to theory is highlighting specific cultural barriers to inter-professional collaborations, unraveling the power differentials rooted in gender inequity in public sector workforces and challenging professional and organizational traditionalism. In doing so, we offer empirical evidence of the 'gender hypothesis' in welfare partnerships and indicate how future investigations might be pursued in this area.

Keywords: gender, professions, partnerships, Local Safeguarding Children Boards, serendipity pattern, culture, welfare.

Introduction

Partnership working has been 'in vogue' since the late 1980s (Hudson, 1987) and has been promoted by numerous government reforms in the past two decades in most OECD countries. In spite of criticisms, it is still seen as a pre-requisite for effective policy design and delivery. The UK, in particular, is home to a plethora of alliances for public policy formulation and delivery. For example, the English and Welsh Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) are the delivery instruments of a statutory requirement for 'mandated joined-up working' (Barton and Quinn, 2001) whereby relevant local welfare agencies work find themselves under a statutory duty to work together and coordinate previously individual efforts to, for example, adapt national legislation to local needs, as well as to create their own local strategies within the wider policy scope of 'safeguarding children'. LSCBs were introduced through the Every Child Matters (ECM) policy programme[1] (DfES 2004, HMSO 2004, HM Government 2006),following a number of infamous cases of service failure due to lack of communication between the relevant professions, often with tragic consequences (as, for example, in the case of Victoria Climbié – see Laming, 2003).

Despite the expectations that the introduction of a statutory duty to collaborate will make these partnerships more effective, the outcomes have been far from encouraging. Two years after the introduction of the ECM policy programme, the death of baby Peter (an 18-month-old baby whose abuse was left undetected by Haringey Council professionals, despite several points of contact with numerous welfare agencies - see Ofsted, Healthcare Commission and HMIC, 2008) further exposed inherent obstacles to communication between organisations, despite the ECM having introduced new institutional mechanisms precisely to tackle them. More recently, cases like the Daniel Pelka's (Lock 2013) and Ayeeshia-Jayne Smith's (Myres, 2017) brought these issues back to the fore of public scrutiny.

What the public perceived as policy failure needs to be scrutinised in the light of literature

[1] Under the UK coalition government (2010-15), the policy area and the policy context changed, although many of the structures introduced by ECM (including the LSCBs) remained.

suggesting, for example, that there are 'gradients' to failure (e.g. McConnell's (2015) tolerable, conflicted and outright failure framework) and that failure is rarely objective, but rather is 'in the eyes of the beholder' or, at best, in the eyes of the stakeholders (Zittoun, 2015). Since the public at large is an important policy stakeholder, child deaths following miscommunication between local government agencies, even as isolated cases (i.e. even when they fall in McConnell's category of 'tolerability'), can lead to programme failure which can be followed, more or less directly, by political failure. To prevent such outcomes, policy alterations are made, but deeper, cultural roots of the poor inter-professional communication in inter-agency partnerships are not a quick fix, as they often incubate significant power asymmetry, so they typically are left to one side (e.g. Hudson 2009). Recognising the difficulty, and perhaps reticence, to address power differentials in inter-organisational collaborations, O'Flynn (2013) and Carey and Dickinson (2015) alert us to the danger of using 'collaboration' as a buzz-word, 'as a dress-up of the same old problems and ways of working' if we do not engage more thoroughly with critical issues such as power differentials rooted in gender inequity in public sector workforces. To counteract this possibility, there is a need to account for the plurality of interests and voices in public collaborations (O'Flynn 2013).

Cultural discrepancies between the professions interacting in child protection alliances have been extensively explored in the literature, albeit with different research foci to ours: communication between health professionals (see Allen 1997, Blattel-Mink and Kuhlman 2003), between social workers and nurses (for example, Mullaney and Liston 1974), between primary care and social work professionals (for example, Rummery and Coleman 2002) and between social services, police and health occupations (for example, Reder and Duncan 2003). Amongst the issues identified as contributing to poor communication channels are a lack of trust between the professionals, cultural misalignment, and a tendency to try to take exclusive ownership of issues. What we add to this body of literature is mainly the argument that the apparent cultural dissonance between welfare professions is also due to a certain 'gendered disposition' (Annesley et al. 2010). In doing so, we link the body of literature concerned with culture at inter-organisational and inter-professional levels of analysis

with the literature developed around gendered forms of organizing. This link is currently under-developed, although O'Flynn's (2013) and Carey and Dickinson's (2015) efforts to open research pathways in these directions are noteworthy. Therefore, our gender 'hypothesis' posits that gender segregation in traditional professions can help explain the cultural dissonance in interorganisational partnerships like the LSCBs. Gender segregation in these professions is regularly overlooked by welfare reforms (in their quest for solutions at an organisational level-an aspect also observed by Hudson (2009)) and this can explain the persistence of gender inequity in public sector organisations which have strong professional groups at their core.

In unravelling this 'gender hypothesis', the paper contributes to ongoing debates around 'hidden' cultural barriers to inter-professional collaborations (Molyneux 2001, Hall 2005, Gittel et al. 2013, O'Flynn 2013, Carey and Dickinson 2015) in public sector welfare partnerships. By taking a cultural approach to professions (in a similar way to Aaltio-Marjosola 1994, Gherardi 1995) but also to inter-professional collaborations (Van de Ven 1975), we argue that more needs to be done in terms of gendering policies affecting welfare professions. Until cultural alignment towards 'a flattened hierarchy with equality, respect and mutual understanding for the other members of the team' (Kneale 1994) is achieved, the effectiveness of collaborative work may be compromised (ibid). The creation of a cultural melting pot is important for collaborative structures, as it prevents members from 'pulling apart' on grounds of cultural dissonance (Lupton et al. 2001). The 'compatibility of linkages' between agencies has also been raised by Whetten (1981) and, more recently, by O'Flynn (2013) and it is claimed to pose the biggest threat to mandatory partnerships (Barton and Quinn, 2001) such as the LSCBs. Further research has been called for by Meier and colleagues (2006) to decipher gender-influenced relational work in organisations, and by O'Flynn (2013) and Carey and Dickinson (2015) to unravel what lies behind the 'collaborations' mantra in terms of critical issues such as power differentials rooted in gender inequity in and across organisations. This paper addresses these gaps directly.

Our arguments unfold as follows: we start with a theoretical background of gender, gender

equity / inequity and why it matters in professions and organisations; we then give centrality to methodological ‘serendipity’ and taking the reader through the specific serendipity pattern of ‘gender’ (in the sense of ‘occurrence of a hidden variable’ rather than of ‘happy coincidence’) which emerged from our research of a mandated partnership setting -an English LSCB; we then assign this patterns a ‘strategic interpretation’ in line with Merton’s (1948) theory. This strategic interpretation becomes a ‘tentative theory’ (Popper, 1972) of welfare partnerships’ failure to deliver their aims. The article concludes with points of contribution to both theory and practice, alongside an outline of future research avenues.

Gender matters

Despite the decrease in the tendency of certain professions to be dominated by one sex - for example, female nurses and male doctors - (Horman et al. 1987), occupational gender segregation (Guy and Newman 2004) still persists, particularly for the caring professions (see McKie et al. 2001).

Gender is conceptualized here, in accordance with current theories (e.g. Martin 1994, Anker 1998, Browne 2006), to represent a social construct, rather than a biological given. It refers to differences between masculinity and femininity as determined by social and cultural values and behaviours. Although our interpretation of ‘gender’ comes from this social constructionist perspective (Burr 1995), we do, however, recognize a partial overlap between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’. This overlap by the fact that changes in organisational cultures and behaviours, through what has been termed ‘substantive representation’, is often preceded by ‘descriptive’ representation, an increase in the simple numerical representation of women in institutions (Beveridge et al. 2000, Keiser et al. 2002, Lovenduski 2005, Mackay, 2005, Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006, Phillips, 1995, Kelly and Newman 2004). The basis for claims about descriptive and substantive representations can be found in the theory of representative bureaucracy (e.g. Kelly and Newman 2001)

In its essence, the theory of representative bureaucracy predicates that the gender and race composition of a public bureaucracy affects bureaucrats' relations with public service users and other policy beneficiaries and, ultimately, affects their work effectiveness (e.g. Miller and McTavish 2014). This theory has been extended over the years to include specific conditions in which 'passive' turns into 'active' representation. Such conditions were identified by Wilkins and Keiser (2004) to be a) the existence of discretion for bureaucrats and b) that the policy area is salient for the demographic characteristic on which representation is sought. We could argue that both conditions are met for bureaucracies with child protection remits, given that they have professionals at their core who are claimed to enjoy professional discretion (Evetts 2002) and that their clientele group is gendered (e.g. Lowi 1995, Scourfield and Coffey 2002, Scourfield 2006) hence likely to assign child protection arrangements a fair degree of importance.

The theory of representative bureaucracy addressed concerns around public bureaucracies being domains of masculinity (e.g. Stivers 2002, Johnston Miller and McTavish 2014). This was not specific to the public organisations, having been raised before in relation to private corporations (e.g. Maier 1999) and having been explained through 'hegemonic forms of masculinity present in the wider society' (Morgan 1996, p. 47). These societal 'forms' can find themselves reflected in the world of organisations –the masculinity bias mirroring into 'corporate masculinity' (Maier 1999). Mid-20th century social psychology put forward two theories which explain the processes through which such societal values translate into organizational values: 'similarity-attraction' and 'social contract' theories. 'Similarity-attraction' theory (Moreno 1943, Newcomb 1943) posits that visible demographic characteristics (such as sex, age and race) can be used as proxies for similarity (Tsui & O'Reilly) which get recruiters, managers and policy makers biased to workforce composition. Based on that, 'social contract' (Blau 1977, Kanter 1997) perspectives of group gender composition and work group relations (Talbert et al. 1999) observe majority groups being formed while minority members experience social isolation and social constraints in social interactions. These processes explain the emergence of 'feminine' and 'masculine' organisations (Maier 1999) embodying 'values,

characteristics, and qualities more commonly associated with one sex than the other' (p. 3). Maier (1999) also draws on Rothchild's (1992) 'feminine model of organising' and on Ferguson's (1991) 'feminist organizational structure' when he claims that these gendered processes reflect and reinforce conceptions of masculinity or femininity, such as the masculine focus on tasks and competition versus the feminine focus on people and cooperation.

While explaining femininity and masculinity in organisations, these theoretical strands also help explain occupational sex segregation (Jacobs 1999) –or occupational gender segregation (Guy and Newman 2004)- whereby certain occupations are over-populated by women, whereas others, by men. In his study of occupational segregation, Jacobs (1999) described it across three dimensions: the degree to which men and women are distributed unevenly across occupational fields, the crowding of women into a limited number of fields and the degree of intergroup contact or the probability of interaction on the job.

Despite societal and policy progress in these areas, the rate of decline for occupational segregation is very slow, so it is likely to continue throughout the 21st century (idem.). Given the accumulation of research after the turn of the century, it is fair to assume that this view is widely shared. Indeed, occupational, or horizontal (Guy and Newman 2004), segregation, preoccupied emotional labour scholars (e.g. Horsechild 1984), who claimed that occupations entailing emotional labour, such as teaching (Guy and Newman 2004), are gendered in nature (Meier et al. 2006). Then, from an economics angle, Kerr and colleagues (2002) looked at occupational segregation as a manifestation of the 'gendered economy' based on segmented labour market theory (e.g. Kerr et al. 2002). More recently, feminist scholars have developed the concept of feminist institutionalism which appears directly relevant to our study, as an alternative explanation of the creation and spreading of gender segregation in the professions. Krook and Mackay (2015) fused institutionalist theory around the culture and rules of organisations with a feminist perspective. In posing questions such as: "Why do institutions often reproduce or exacerbate patterns of disadvantage and discrimination, even when formally espousing ideals of equality?", their research reveals how seemingly neutral (and 'invisible')

structures and mechanisms for exercising power within institutions predicate male dominance especially with regard to values, thus replicating traditional patterns of authority and influence (e.g. Mackay and Waylen, 2014, Johnston Miller and McTavish 2014).

There are two aspects of our research which this body of work elucidates. First, it explains horizontal segregation in welfare oganisations while at the same time clarifying that there is a link between descriptive and substantive representation and, therefore, that occupational segregation can be both 'seen' and 'felt'. Then, it clarifies the role of power in forming and perpetuating femininity and masculinity in these organisations. These lessons from research on gender in society and in organisations can extend to the professions. This is because these are well-established occupations which had the time and opportunity to develop strong identities, and long period of socialization to buy into the professional culture and develop a certain identity of a 'professional' (e.g. Ackroyd 1996). Their 'ways of organising' are not very different from those within organisations.

Gender matters in the professions

It is barely coincidental that the professions often associated with horizontal gender segregation are also old, traditional professions -doctors, nurses, social workers, teachers and police officers. These have acquired, over time, a strong social profile and have had the opportunity to separate from both lay people and other professional communities (Goode 1957, Ackroyd 1996). This 'occupational double closure' (Parkin 1972, Murphy 1988) is, in essence, a double ideological separation of professions from 'others'. Indeed, they have come to 'occupy specific, and often strategically powerful, enclaves within large organisations, within which they can be recognized as organisationally encapsulated quasi-organisations' (Ackroyd 1996, pp. 601). Hence, the five main professional groups involved in the ECM programme are at the very core of the organisations which formally employ them, and thus get to drive organisational aims and objectives.

However, there are status differences between these professions, as some are held in higher public regard than others. A common dichotomy used by sociologists of professions is that of ‘pure’, versus ‘semi’ or emerging, professions (Etzioni 1969, Simpson and Simpson 1969), to differentiate between the professionals who enjoy more autonomy from those who enjoy considerably less autonomy. ‘Pure’ professions are the least bureaucratic, require longer training and create and apply, rather than communicate knowledge. A classic example of a pure profession is medicine where the bureaucratic procedures for doctors are kept to a minimum and are designed by their peers, where training is typically long and requires continuous updating, and where the knowledge they tackle is typically one which they apply directly on their patients rather than communicate to their superiors or to other professionals (Etzioni 1969). In contrast, ‘semi’-professionals lack the full professional autonomy of the former and are subjected to a considerably larger body of rules and regulations governing their work, requiring shorter training and communicating, rather than creating or applying knowledge (ibid). A typical example of a semi-profession (sometimes labelled ‘emerging’ or ‘administrative’) is that of social workers, requiring considerably shorter training than medicine and having its knowledge base closer to ‘common sense’ than to science, it is claimed (Abbott and Meerabeau 1998).

The ECM/LSCB professions are polarized between semi-professions (social work, nursing, teaching and police) and pure professions (medicine) (e.g. Etzioni 1969, Hearn 1982). Whilst the example of police personnel does not satisfy the criteria for inclusion under the ‘pure’ professional category, it does, however, sit apart from the other ‘semi-professions’. Police work lacks long training, a specific body of ‘professional’ police knowledge and work autonomy for its members (Cain 1972). Nevertheless, it is well-equipped, well-trained, and largely self-controlled (Etzioni 1969, Simpson 1985). These distinctions around status are significant as they are found to underpin interactions in partnerships. One aspect that makes this polarization ‘visible’ is that the typical ‘pure’ professional is male, whereas the typical ‘semi-professional’ is female (Etzioni 1969, Hearn 1982,

Bolton and Muzio 2008). This underlines another gender dimension to the inter-professional interactions in this policy area.

If we accept that individual representatives in a partnership are conveyors of their professional identity (Evans 1997) and this is seen to be gendered, then the individuals come to 'speak' gender in ways which can either reinforce, or flatten, stereotypes of the type described by Horman et al (1987) in relation to the nursing and the medical professions:

> *'The image of the nursing profession…is pervasively linked to its predominantly female composition. As individuals, nurses are described as warm, loving, compassionate, and emotional, and their primary duties are perceived as stereotypically feminine… The image of the physician is also influenced by gender stereotypes. Historically, the medical profession has been overwhelmingly male, and the performance of the physician's role has been stereotypically male'* (p. 848).

Whilst generalizing, stereotypes are a reminder that at the bottom of organisational analysis are the people who contribute (with their inherent subjectivity) to forcing and reinforcing stereotypes. In the case of the LSCBs, we suggest that they do so through intensive interplay of professional identities. Hence, for a welfare partnership in perpetual crisis (e.g. Dudau and McAllister 2010, Dudau et al. 2016), gendered professions may be a contributing factor to this crisis. And if the difficulty to reach an effective integration of the professional cultures at the heart of these partnerships can be blamed for the successive serious case reviews of children falling through the child protection net in Britain, then achieving that cultural melting pot is essential to avoiding policy failure. Consequently, building effective and sustainable collaboration, a real challenge for contemporary public management, could be argued to be connected with the challenges which Carey and Dickinson (2015) propose to address with help from feminist theory.

Gender: a 'serendipity pattern' in LSCBs

This paper's focus on gender emerged from a wider study into catalysts and barriers to partnership working (reported in Author 2016), based on an investigation of LSCBs comprising representatives of organisations and professions providing services for children and families. In line with Merton's (1948) 'serendipity pattern' theory, the findings of that wider study indicated a potentially significant, yet so far virtually hidden, variable in the inter-organisational management literature: occupational gender segregation. The path from this 'serendipity pattern' to theory formulation took us through an exploration of the secondary data on occupational gender segregation in welfare professions, coupled with a thorough literature incursion into the concepts of gender and professionalism. The latter has been covered in the front half of this paper, while the former is reported in the next section. This section of the paper reports on the methodology through which primary data was collected, on how it was analysed and on how we arrived at our 'gender hypothesis'. The structure we adopt here runs contrary to the usual structure of a methodology section (i.e. context-data collection-analysis) but it helps getting the story 'heard' as we heard it from the field.

Data around collaborative (inter-organisational, inter-professional) working was collected through ethnographic methods (two years of participant and non-participant observation of an LSCB's meetings in North-West England) as well as interviews with professionals involved in that particular LSCB. The data was qualitative in nature and recorded in writing during, as well as immediately after, each data collection episode (i.e. each interview and each observed meeting). The main findings of the research revealed that the individual professionals (rather than their professional bodies or their organisations) involved are essential to the success of the partnerships (Author 2016). At the same time, however, and in line with Merton's (1948) 'serendipity pattern' which we explain later in this section, the data also revealed an unexpected element of the inter-personal interaction: a gendered discourse, occupational segregation and gender stereotyping, all alluding to power differences which appeared to contribute to communication barriers within the partnership.

The first instance in which the authors were prompted in this direction came from an interviewee who was asked to recall examples of cultural misalignment with LSCB partners and who

offered the example of a Child Protection Conference meeting where the police officer (male) asked the social worker (woman) to make him a cup of tea. This example was used by the interviewee to illustrate some of the more subtle but inherent difficulties in partnership working. The fact that this was used to contribute to a conceptually wider discussion is, we think, revealing of the potential importance of the gender dimension within welfare partnerships such as the LSCBs. The issue of gender was seen to be intimately connected to that of inter-personal dynamics in partnerships – indeed, the incident exemplified was allegedly followed by an open inter-personal exchange that brought the meeting to a hasty end. There is some evidence from new approaches to feminist methodologies and epistemologies as to how relatively minor incidents like this, conveyed in an anecdotal manner can, nevertheless, be powerful illustrations of deeper 'truths' (Sprague, 2005).

To reiterate, gender was not a key variable at the start of our investigation. The anecdotal evidence emerging from that one interview occurred again and was then further prompted in other interviews (see Annex). The ethnographic content analysis (Tesch 1990) which was applied to the data emerging from both our interviews and our observations allowed us to pay attention to the variables emerging at various stages of the study to essentially guide our understanding of the data at subsequent stages. Ethnographic content analysis is a type of content analysis involving a great degree of interpretation of the textual units of analysis in accordance with the organisational culture that the ethnographer(s) perceived during their fieldwork. It relies on coding and on categorizing, just like content analysis, but the categories for coding words and phrases are not fixed; rather, they are allowed to emerge gradually throughout the study (Altheide 1987).

Alongside the interviews, the observational element of the study revealed additional evidence for the 'gender' hypothesis: that the dynamics between people were seemingly affected by their perceived compliance with the gender bias of each profession. Thus, amongst the four police representatives to both the executive and the strategic LSCB boards in the area, the only one perceived by LSCB colleagues as 'collaborative' (one interview question asked the 20 respondents to identify their most and least collaborative partners, and their answers were then triangulated by observation

of collaborative work at the LSCB meetings) was openly critical to the male culture dominance in mainstream police work (referring to the 'macho' culture in her profession and to the fact that child protection did not sit well with this type of culture). Conversely, the only social care representative who was perceived to be a 'reluctant partner' was a social worker who was seen as standing against the 'feminine' culture of their organisation. Finally, non-participant observation of the LSCB meetings following the departure of a male LSCB chair witnessed his leadership being challenged for being too 'firm- no similar claim was made about the leadership of the female LSCB chair who followed. The Annex table centralises these distinct pieces of evidence.

While these do not, in themselves, serve as evidence of gender disconnect, they reveal a variable of inter-professional collaboration which our research went on to suggest was beyond accidental. To strengthen our claims, we propose that the 'gender hypothesis' we put forward represents what Merton (1948) referred to as 'serendipity pattern': an observed 'unanticipated, anomalous and strategic datum which becomes the occasion for developing a new theory or for extending an existing theory' (Merton 1948, p. 506). It is what quantitative research sometimes refers to as a 'latent' or 'hidden' variable.

'Serendipity patterns' have been connected with case studies, particularly those of an ethnographic nature (Snow and Anderson, 1991) due to the fact that the latter tend to start with broad research questions (in our case, the exploration of barriers and catalysis to partnership work for children and families in England and Wales). Merton's (1948) characteristics of serendipity patterns include the fact that they are unexpected, surprising, findings to which the investigator brings a 'strategic interpretation'. The 'gender' variable in our investigation was surprising, as it was not in our initial interview protocol; the only questions which could have prompted the respondents to speak about gender were (1) to reflect on issues which, in their view, represent barriers to collaborative work in the LSCB, (2) to reflect on potential catalysis to collaborative work in their LSCB and (3) to indicate who their 'collaborative' and 'reluctant' partners were. These questions, as well as our theoretical sensitivity at the outset of the ethnographic research, were informed by our review of the

literature on welfare partnerships, in which gender is not a prominent variable. This 'absence' is another argument that supports our claim that gender is indeed a 'hidden' variable for our purposes. As the case for the 'serendipitous' quality of the 'gender hypothesis' has been made, the discussion develops next into the 'strategic interpretation' (Merton 1948) of this variable in the context of inter-organisational and inter-professional collaborations like the LSCBs.

To do so, we resort to secondary data to explore the effect of gender on collaborations to establish the link between the social and the biological constructions of 'gender' and explain their partial overlap. This quantitative data was analysed qualitatively in light of Hakim's (1993) thresholds for what constitutes 'gendered' professions. The results are suggestive of an intra-professional bias with implications for joined-up welfare service delivery. These results are interpreted in relation to the professional composition of LSCBs and further literature-based evidence on additional characteristics of those professionals as well as in relation to gender segregation, gender bias and the notion of representation. While this theoretical body of the paper is given at the start, it has been developed after the emergence of the 'gender' pattern from the data, alongside the development of an argument for strategic interpretation through secondary data. We elaborate on the latter next.

Pressure points for gender in LSCBs –a strategic interpretation of our serendipity pattern?

LSCB interactions are inter-organisational, inter-professional and inter-personal (Currie et al. 2008, Dudau et al. 2016). The inter-professional dynamics are central as they are affected by, and entail elements of, the other two levels of partnership interactions. This is due to the fact that the individual adheres to their professional identity (Evans 1997) and secondly, due to the dominance of one profession within each LSCB partner organisation. Indeed, all the main professionals involved in children's safeguard partnerships sit at the very core of their wider organisations, numerically, substantively and operationally (i.e. without teachers, there cannot be an education sector, and without nurses, hospitals lose operational purpose).

Applying Hakim's (1993) thresholds to UK welfare professions, official government statistics show that the strongest 'gender bias' exists in the nursing profession, with nearly 90 per cent of the qualifying nursing, midwifery and health visiting stuff being women, and only 10 per cent men (DoH 2013). The bias is even clearer amongst nurses working with children: 96 per cent are women (ibid.). In social work, children's services and adult services workers are not too dissimilar where gender distribution is concerned: 83 to 82 percent female social workers respectively (Hussein 2009, based on NMDS-SC May 2009; HSCIC 2013), therefore both showing clear gender dominance. A similar situation is noted in primary education, where teachers are predominantly women and men represent only 17 per cent of the workforce although they go up to a 30-percent figure for nursery and primary school heads (DfES 2011). The DfES (2011) statistics reveal a slightly more balanced, although still female dominated, picture amongst secondary school teachers (61 percent female). However, at school head teacher level, men are the majority of secondary school heads -70 percent- however, not crossing the 75 percent threshold to becoming a male-concentrated professional category. A profession that appears unequivocally male-dominated is that of police officers, with almost three times as many male police officers as female officers in England and Wales (Home Office 2013). The picture for general medical practice seems overall more gender-balanced: 47 percent of the GP doctors were female in 2012 (DoH 2013), and given the upward trajectory from 35.3 percent in 2002 (ibid) to 40 percent in 2005 (DoH 2005) to the 2012 figures, it is conceivable that female GP doctors will soon cross the 55 percent threshold to form a female-dominated profession. Overall then, the key ECM professions are significantly gender imbalanced.

Although some LSCB professions are not explicitly mentioned here - for example, health visitors- they are still included in our analysis through their 'root' professions (nursing, in the case of health visitors).

Discussion

Our exploration of partnership working took place in a policy sphere which incorporates gendered organisations and professions, all collaborating on a gendered policy area. Following our analysis of secondary data about the partners, it appears that our 'gender hypothesis' to partnership failure, and indirectly, to policy failure, may be relevant to most welfare partnerships, in the UK as well as beyond. Indeed, our analysis indicates that the issues which led to perceived policy failure in child protection are due to persistent miscommunication between culturally dissonant organisations, formed around traditional, gendered professions. These issues are not specific to a particular national and political culture, but are universal: welfare professions are traditional and therefore likely to be gendered everywhere in the world. Although democratic processes may play a role in ameliorating the gendered disposition of welfare professions, complex institutional matrixes are a powerful force in maintaining the 'old professionalism' (see, for example, Henricksson et al., 2006).

That most welfare professions are 'feminine' in their gender composition and discourse, and deal with policy issues perceived to be gendered (as per Scourfield and Coffey's (2002) analysis of child protection being gendered both in terms of sex composition and gendered organizational processes and in terms of clientele), makes the position of the masculine professions non-dominant in the collaborative work for children and families. However, the role of male dominated professions, such as police and medicine, is essential to the aims of the ECM policy which designates them as key statutory partners, and that makes action necessary in this field. This is all the more important as the most recent UK serious case reviews raise serious concerns over the fact that male members of families are overlooked by professional investigations (e.g. Scourfield 2006).

Gender stereotyping and occupational segregation, as well as the implication that they could act as a barrier to inter-professional and inter-organisational collaboration, have been rehearsed by Kneale (1994), Leathard (1994) and Hall (2005). However, this has been limited both in scope and depth of analysis. Kneale (1994) raised the potential effects of discrimination on working together effectively, but did not engage any empirical data, while Leathard (1994) mentioned gender, albeit in

passing, as a barrier to the collaboration between health and social workers. Hall (2005, p. 189) addressed the issue of gender in more detail, claiming that the historical development of gender and social class issues have informed the ways in which professional cultures evolved and, later, the 'friction and conflict that has existed between professionals until present day'. However, all three authors took a theoretical, rather than empirical perspective, on such issues, perhaps reinforcing Gherardi's (1995, p. 15) observation that gender is difficult to identify clearly in practice, despite the perception that 'our direct experience tells us that organisational cultures … are strongly gendered'. Our paper has developed this body of work by taking an empirical direction where the 'gender' dimension emerged naturally from the data initially collected to observe partnership working in the English LSCBs. It is through this contribution to literature that we aim to further the conversation about 'hidden', cultural barriers to inter-professional collaborations (Molyneux 2001, Hall 2005, Gittel et al. 2013). Indeed, our findings suggest that, in public sector welfare partnerships, gender is one such 'hidden' barrier, which ultimately endangers the ECM policy.

The core of our 'gender hypothesis' is that occupational gender segregation can be a potent barrier to collaborative work by enhancing cultural dissonance between the professions involved. In advancing this hypothesis, we respond directly to Carey and Dickinson's (2015) concern with the two major 'silences' that exist in recent public administration scholarship- first, around gender equity in the public service workforce and secondly, around the role of feminist theories in tackling contemporary public management challenges. This gender hypothesis reverses the 'invisibility' of gender as a contributory factor to many public administration and policy dilemmas, including around collaborative, boundary-spanning and skills requirements for future public administrators (O'Flynn 2013).

Concluding remarks

Our findings contribute directly to the literature on partnership working, indirectly to that of policy failure and, more widely, to a less coordinated, indeed emergent, body of work on professional

and organisational traditionalism (e.g. Halford and Leonard, 2001). In considering factors which may lead to failure, whether ‘outright’, ‘conflicted’, or ‘tolerable’ (McConnell, 2015), professional traditionalism was seen to be holding inter-agency mandatory projects such as the English LSCBs to failure. In our study, we saw this to be at least partially due to the disruptive role of gendered interactions in the creation of a cultural melting pot of professional cultures contributing jointly to a policy outcome which exceeds the individual expertise of any one profession.

The case we have considered – that of the LSCB inter-professional and inter-organisational partnership – is significant in that it brings together professions which are long established – hence ‘traditional’ – and which appear to be gender-segregated. The argument we advanced is that occupational gender segregation can jeopardize effective communication by reinforcing traditional boundaries between the core agencies involved in service delivery. In building this argument, we looked at inter-professional aspects of partnership work and concluded that gender dominance in the welfare professions could explain the persistent failure of communication between professionals working for children and families in England and Wales. This is an important issue that transcends national as well as policy realm boundaries, as welfare professions are traditional establishments in many countries and policy reams.

It is important to engage further with such ‘traditionalism’ by way of persistent gender segregation within welfare professions, in the context of the more ‘contemporary’ reality of partnership working. On a practical level, balancing the gender composition of welfare profession and organisations is worth pursuing alongside institutional reform (such as ECM) if the goals of partnership working are to be achieved as these are highly dependent on cultural integration. Maintaining occupational segregation adds another level of risk to an already fragile framework of child-welfare service provision. It would appear incongruous, therefore, not to pursue further exploration of the gender variable in organisational and professional cultures if the goal of more effective collaboration (in this case, for the critical aim of child safety) is to be achieved. Therefore, the steps already taken by the government to address historically poor, inter-agency communication

(see, for example, DoH 1991), via the introduction of the statutory duty to collaborate, is insufficient. That mandated partnerships are not a panacea to persistent collaboration problems has also been raised by Barton and Quinn (2001) as well as that they should at best be complemented by other policies –our suggestion for LSCBs is policies aimed at reducing the substantive gender gaps within and between traditional welfare professions.

Future research may find ways to further substantiate the evidence presented here by adding more empirical weight to the claims in this specific, as well as other, policy areas and partnerships that might well reveal similar gender dissonance and thus gaps in communication and collaboration. Gender is a generally poorly explored dimension of the dissonance that, if addressed rigorously, has the potential to make a measurable improvement to the effectiveness of local policy delivery for children. We believe that, given a similar fragility in many other multi-agency partnerships, critically exploring gender as a significant factor has the potential to bring improvements in other policy collaborations. Yet there may be other 'hidden' variables which might help elucidate persistent failure in the work of welfare partnerships like the LSCBs. Finally, the research on organisations has progressed to reveal a widening gap between the *modus operandi* and the assumptions behind traditional and 'newer' organisations; what we have witnessed in the LSCBs may well be a manifestation of tensions arising from that gap. We contend that amassing more observations of traditional 'baggage' in contemporary working modes for public service delivery will assist in improving policy collaboration.

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Annex: Gender data occurrence from the case study

Source of data	Respondent / in relation to whom was it observed	Emergent occurrence or prompted by interviewer	Data
Interviews	Social worker, male	Emergent	The interviewee offered the example of a failed Child Protection Conference meeting where the police officer (male) asked the social worker (woman) to make him a cup of tea.
	Police officer, female	Emergent	The police officer commented on the non-traditional decorations in her office claiming that she needed to 'take a stand' against the 'suffocating' masculine culture in her department. She then moved on to say she was a 'token' officer moving up in the ranks and that she was glad this was the case if it enabled her to make a difference for children in the community, a cause to which her male colleagues were not particularly interested to contribute as it was not very 'masculine'
	Head teacher, male	Prompted	This interviewee thought gender was a dimension of collaborative work, but that it was too much of a 'personal' characteristic to consider for management purposes
	Youth worker, woman	Prompted	This interviewee thought gender used to be an issue in collaborative work, but that it was no longer the case as the professions were becoming more accessible
	Nurse, female	Prompted	This interviewee agreed that gender is an issue which shapes interactions between professionals, but could not think of an example in the LSCB

Ethnographic observation (LSCB meetings)	Police officer, female	Emergent	Amongst the four police representatives to both the executive and strategic LSCB boards, the only one perceived by LSCB colleagues as ‘collaborative’ was a woman and one who was openly critical to the male culture dominance in mainstream police work.
	Social worker (social care), female	Emergent	The only social care representative who was perceived to be a ‘reluctant partner’ was a female social worker who was seen as speaking out against the ‘feminine’ culture of her organisation
	Social worker (LSCB chair), male	Emergent	The only LSCB chair whose leadership was challenged (after his departure) on grounds of being too ‘firm’