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Child Protection Anxieties and the formation of UK child welfare and protection practices

Abstract

The history of child protection in the UK has had little critical attention yet 21st century childhoods and child care practices in the UK have been significantly influenced by what has been termed as the 'child protection industry'. This paper argues that whilst statutory services have expanded then contracted, children's charities have remerged as the most influential voices that have shaped 21st century child protection policy and practice. A combination of the emphasis of risk to children and young people, and tragedies in which statutory services have had a part, has produced a 'toxic' culture of child protection in which Social Work with children and families seems to have lost its moral compass and its earlier emphasis on family support. Suspicion of parents and an emphasis on child rescue is now a dominant paradigm. Equally parents are suspicious of social workers.

Introduction

Today, Social Work with children and families helps neither children nor the families in which they live. First acknowledged over twenty years ago (Mellon and Clapton, 1991, Department of Health, 1995), social work with families has become a narrow, unhelpful and reactive form of child protection. There is a 'generally perceived crisis of child welfare and protection services' (McGregor, 2015, p. 1631) that can be seen in a proliferation of works that have sought to re-frame child protection (Smith, 2002), re-visit (Cree and Morrison, 2016), re-imagine (Featherstone et al 2014), re-invent (The Observer, 2013), reform (Lonne et al , 2008), reclaim (Davis, 2013; Goodman and Trowler, 2011), or review it (Munro, 2011). Elsewhere the crisis is echoed by practitioners ('Why I Quit Social Work', Faulkner, 2016).

Evidence is mounting of the cost of this to children and family social workers in depression (Truter et al, 2017), shame (Frost, 2016), burn-out (Stalker, et al, 2007) and feelings of futility (Featherstone et al, 2014). Clapton et al argue that there is a rise of cynicism among state social workers and describe a 'coarsening of attitudes' (2013). Featherstone et al use the phrase 'muscular authoritarianism' to describe a new, oppressive, partnership-free form of social work with parents (2014).

At the same time, an accumulation of accounts from families has pointed to the social worker as someone to be afraid of, Mellon argues that 'We have built a child protection system which is experienced by families as a modern version of the Spanish Inquisition' (2009, p. 22). The upshot is that few parents are likely to approach statutory social services for help (Darlington et al, 2010).

Even if all these troubling indications of crisis were to be set aside for a moment, in the 'best interests' of children, and solace sought in the system's ability to protect them, is there evidence that children are safer? It seems not. Bilson and Martin argue that there is a 'lack of evidence that the child protection system reduces harm to young children' (2017) and cite a substantial study of child protection systems published in *The Lancet* that failed to find clear evidence, relating to the UK, for 'an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions' (Gilbert, 2012, p. 770).

In crisis, feared by families, and futile? How has this happened to social work? To engage with these questions, it is necessary to step back and acknowledge a number of key influences on how social work with children and families has altered over time.

An Age of General Anxiety, an Age of Specific Anxieties About Children

The sociologist, Ulrich Beck was one of the first to identify anxiety as a feature and consequence of modernity (1992). Writing in *Anxiety: A Short History*, Horwitz, considers anxiety 'a major aspect of Western culture' (2013, p. 118). Anxiety regularly takes the form of a heightened sense of the prevalence of risk. Warner et al argue that 'the language of risk is everywhere: in debates about health, childcare, pensions planning, banking, child protection, crime, what we eat, how we use our leisure time, what we buy' (2017, p. 1). Whilst not confined to children and childhood, ideas of risk are especially widespread when related to both children who may be at risk of harm from others (Furedi, 2001), and to young people's behaviour that might expose them to harm, e.g. use of social media, or be harmful e.g. illegal drug-taking or provoke alarm, e.g. organising raves (Critcher, 2003).

Warner et al make an important distinction between 'real' risk, that is risk that is measurable, and risk that is 'constructed' i.e. determined by social and cultural forces (2017) and whilst this is not say that no child is at risk today, it is **constructions** of risk that contribute much to the present culture and practices of social work with families in which there has been a considerable increase in the numbers of families experiencing investigations for suspected abuse (Bilson and Martin, 2017), at the same time as the majority of such investigations finding no actual abuse. Devine and Parker echo this and have found a significant upward trend in referrals but **no** corresponding upward trend in either the number of substantiated cases of child abuse and no increase in the estimated prevalence of child abuse (2016). It can be suggested that that there appears to be little evidence of **increased** child maltreatment (by and in families – maltreatment by society is another matter). Yet whilst there seems to be little evidence of increased danger to children, the main, if not sole focus of attention by social workers, is risk. What has caused the dominance of unfounded anxieties over child safety and risk to eclipse supportive activity by statutory social services?

Out of the Past: Towards a Critical History of UK Child Protection

First a warning to the reader. History is messy and not linear. Any critical history will always be subjective and selective, some phases and periods overlap. Individual choice features. Pelz notes 'The logic of narration is more fictional than scientific' (1990, p. 765). So it will be for any history of child protection, especially one that sets out to be critical.

It is generally agreed that UK child protection in its modern form begins with a reaction to the general absence of state welfare provision in the 19th century and continues to a post-War II welfare state, with 'cradle to grave' provision. We see the rise of socially interventionist local and central Governments, the foundation of the National Health Service and the introduction of universal welfare benefits, then the emergence of neo-liberalism, state roll-back and Thatcherism epitomised by Thatcher's declaration 'there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families' (the continuing dominant narrative of 21st century). The consequences of the interplay between state and non-state children and families social work agencies, it will be argued, is one of the under-recognised but central influences on modern children and family practice and policy. And so this history sketches two parallel timelines: that of the fortunes of local government (state provision of child and family support), and those of the child welfare and protection charities (non-statutory agencies). First the child welfare and protection agencies.

One Hundred and Thirty Years of the Business of Children

Of the child welfare charities that began in the late nineteenth century, The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Barnardos, and Action for Children (formerly the National Children's Home) are the largest still in existence (https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/apr/24/top-1000-charities-donations-britain).

Clapton et al point to the emergence of these agencies in a combination of zeal and child rescue and argue that, in the case of the NSPCC, its establishment came about as a result of moral panic (2012). Clapton et al (2012; 2013) and Clapton and Cree (2017) have gone onto suggest that social work, in particular child protection, has continued with a propensity to either fuel moral panics or, indeed as in the case of the NSPCC, be involved in the inception

of them and this discussion will return to a variety of cases in which child protection and moral panics have been in close association. For now it is important to briefly set out what a moral panic is and is not.

Forty-five years ago, Stanley Cohen was one of the first chief architects of moral panic theory and his definition holds up today. A moral panic is in course when:

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; …Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (Cohen, 1972, p. 9)

Cohen was at pains to point out that 'The argument is not that there is "nothing there" … but that the reaction to what is observed or inferred is fundamentally inappropriate' (2002, p. 172). In other words there is 'disproportionality'. Goode and Ben-Yehuda suggest the following criteria need to be satisfied in order for an episode to be classified as a moral panic: 1. Volatility: there is public expression of concern as evinced via the media but it is mercurial and capable of subsiding very suddenly. 2. Hostility: in the course of an eruption of media concern, 'folk devils' are identified and endure intense scrutiny. They are cast as outsiders, enemies of society, and deserving of harsh punishment. 3. Measurable concern: The extent of public concern must be considerable and measurable through opinion polls, frequency of contributions in the media, etc. 4. Consensus: There is broad social and political unity that the grounds for concern are significant and that action must be taken. 5. Disproportionality: In the circumstances of moral panic, the measures instituted to address the problem are exaggerated and out of proportion to the magnitude of the threat posed. (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 33–39)

Cohen's notion of 'interest group' as source of moral panic is of special note and he draws attention to a collection of interested parties such as charities, rights groups, local

councillors and religious leaders that he describes as 'moral entrepreneurs' and states that any change in social policy or legislation following a moral panic is likely to be consistent with the moral entrepreneurs' definition of the problem. Goode and Ben-Yehuda suggest that Cohen's moral entrepreneurs belong in their interest group model, with the moral panic explained as the unintended outcome of moralizing projects undertaken by such interest groups in an effort to draw public attention to a specific 'moral evil'.

Behlmer's critical history of the NSPCC certainly suggests a capacity for fuelling moral panic and pulls no punches describing the NSPCC's propaganda as the 'politics of pathos' (1982, p. 3). Parent-blaming was a recurrent theme, 'illustrations of parental inhumanity' (ibid, 1982, p. 70) abounded:

> 'The National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) locate the root cause of abuse in the abusive parents' failure to feel proper regard for their children rather than in the parents' necessity (for child begging)

> (Flegel, 2009, p. 133)

Parent-blaming reached its logical conclusion in child rescue which often meant institutionalisation and in thousands of cases between the late 1800s and 1967, shipment to the colonies such as Canada and Australia (Bean and Melville, 1989). For decades from the end of the 19th century to the second half of the 20th century, interventions in families were predominately led by children's charities imbued with the notion of child rescue. Crucially these charities set the template for 20th century casework. Ferguson refers to the NSPCC's 'pioneering child protection practices' (2004, p. 37), although it stretches the imagination to conceive of Barnardos' involvement in child shipment overseas as pioneering.

The increasing responsibility for children's welfare that gradually accrued to statutory agencies from the middle of the 20th century began to eclipse the casework of the children's charities and although in the beginning local authority social workers and workers from the children's charities operated side-by-side (Clapton. 2009), soon the latter came to be regarded as anachronisms associated with the cold hand of charity (rather than entitlement), and do-gooding (rather than professionalism). The 'voluntarism' associated with the children's charities was patronizing 'a means of salving the consciences of the rich,

of papering over the cracks of an unjust society, and of denying the poor their true entitlements' (Finlayson, 1990, p. 188). The children's charities and the children's shelters and homes associated with them, were replaced by council social work professionals and local council-run children's homes (Holman, 1986). A slow withdrawal from direct involvement with families on child protection grounds took place. Holman writes of the leading child care charities' 'loss of leadership and influence' in this period. By the 1960s, children's charities like the NSPCC were in financial crisis. Hendrick explains the 1968 foundation of the NSPCC's Battered Child Research Unit:

> In its search to become a professional childcare agency the Society found itself competing with the expanding local-authority Children's Departments. The NSPCC found itself facing a financial crisis in 1964-5 when its expenditure exceed its income by more than a quarter of a million pounds. This, then, was the context in which the Society established its 'battered child' research unit (1993, p. 226).

The certitude of the 1880s gave way to crisis of existence in the 1960s and a process of specialisation, e.g. NSPCC now runs the call centre Childline, Barnardos and Action for Children concentrate on providing foster placements. Today, all three are very active in various campaigns against child maltreatment, some of which, Clapton and Cree have argued, spill over into making thinly evidenced claims as to the extent and depth of whatever aspect of child maltreatment is the focus (2017). I will return to the 21st century role and activities of these leading charities but suffice to say here it seemed to this newly qualified social worker in the 1970s that children's charities had outlived their usefulness and been replaced by more visionary practices that were not steeped in Victorian-era attitudes that condemned parents and rescued children.

The same period that witnessed the rise then fall of the influence of child protection charities, saw a steady increase to a post-World War II high in the 1960s and 1970s of local authority provision of family welfare services, but then a contraction of statutory sector services and the replacement of preventive social work with children and families in trouble with a concentration on investigation and monitoring activities.

The rise, then narrowing, of local government social work service provision

The post-World War II boom produced an expansion of the Welfare State. Alongside progressive measures such as increased social housing and universal health provision, social work developed rapidly. Fuelled by the social-reform ideals of Fabianism and inspired by radical thinkers such as Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1968), Sasz (*The Manufacture of Madness*, 1970), Greer (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970) and Illich (*Deschooling Society*, 1971) and a burgeoning women's movement and local struggles such as that waged by claimants unions (the first of these active campaigns for benefits-rights was formed in Birmingham in January 1969), a generation of young people who had matured during the civil rights struggles and European revolts of the 1960s, and were committed to challenging structural inequalities, began training as social workers. It is difficult to capture the excitement and spirit of this period when it seemed that life and work could merge in a progressive balance of commitment to change **and** a belief that social work was a profession that could enable this. 'Social' (Worker) and 'Socialist' have never felt closer together than at this point in history.

The progressive nature of social work, and those entering the profession, during this period was evidenced in the emphasis on the promotion of social welfare, community activism being regarded as part of the social work role (and taught as such), the foundation of the radical magazine for social workers, *Case-Con* (1970-1977) and a range of other publications such as *Radical Social Work* (Bailey and Brake, 1975) and *Social Work Practice Under Capitalism* (Corrigan and Leonard, 1978). On the ground, the Community Development Projects (1970-1978) held out the prospective of social and community workers being involved alongside tenants and residents in developing radical critiques of official housing and poverty strategies.

Also, crucially, progressive legislation emerged (the 1963 and 1969 Children and Young Person Acts), the Social Work (Scotland) 1968 and resources were dedicated to supportive family work**.** Legislation was expansive in its scope, e.g.:

> We recommend a new local authority department, providing a community- based
> and family oriented service, which will be available to all. This new department will,
> we believe, reach far beyond the discovery and rescue of social casualties; it will

enable the greatest number of individuals to act reciprocally, giving and receiving service for the well-being of the whole community.

(The Seebohm Report, 1968, p. 11).

The Seebohm Report argued that social workers should work with voluntary organisations and local people to promote community involvement (Dickens, 2011). The Seebohm Report's radicalism was also reflected in Scottish legislation which laid a duty on social workers to promote social welfare. Butler and Drakeford describe the provisions of the 1969 Children and Young Persons Act which was formulated on the basis of the Seebohm Report, as 'the final flowering of family-orientated, preventive treatment ideology' (2002, p. 79). Other leading social work writers have made a similar assessment. For example, Parton: '1971 marked the high point of optimism and confidence in social work', (2014a p. 23) and Adams describes the late 1960s/early1970s welfare legislation as 'a highwater mark' (2002).

What happened after the early 1970s to end this 'high water mark', to transform social work from 'first resort to last ditch' (Pinker quoted in Barclay, 1982)? Winter and Connolly (1996) draw attention to a process involving the decline of the economy, the rise of Thatcherism and neo-liberalism and the retrenchment of the welfare state that began in the early 1970s that forms a context for the evolution of social work after its high water mark and offer a children's rights perspective on the developments together with a broadly defensive of account of social work. To understand the present state of UK child protection, a more critical version of social work in the 20th and 21st centuries is necessary.

Tragedies and Panic

Writing of child protection, Parton describes 'a sense of crisis (that) has been almost perpetual since 1973' (2006, p. 28). This state can be attributed to a number of child deaths and tragedies. It is not that before the early 1970s, there were no tragedies, but a succession of children's names or places can be easily recalled by most social workers. The depth of impact on public interest, policy, practice and judicial circles has made certain events stand out. Maria Colwell, Jasmine Beckford, Cleveland and Orkney, Victoria Climbie, Baby P are familiar names and places. Why is this? Innes argues that some events go

beyond the concerns and attention of immediate circles and become fixed in the collective memory because they combine key factors. They become signal events because they are:

> …events that, in addition to affecting the immediate participants (ie. victims, witnesses, offenders) and those known to them, impact in some way upon a wider audience.
>
> (2003, p. 52).

The following choice of signal events in child and family social work can be questioned, why omit the death of Kimberly Carlile in 1986? Indeed some timelines include her death and that of others not already mentioned, see for instance Batty's Catalogue of Cruelty', available at https://www.theguardian.com/society/2003/jan/27/childrensservices.childprotection). More recent events such as those in Rotherham in 2016 involving the sexual exploitation of children that were looked after by the local authority have been described as the 'biggest child protection scandal in UK history' (Gladman and Heal, 2017, p. 28) may well be added to any timeline of significantly influential 'signal events', however the long-term impact of earlier events on social work policy, practice and thinking is more easily discernible. These events have some overlap with Butler and Drakeford's 'landmark instances' (2011, p. 226) and are best characterised as having reset social work attitudes from practitioner through manager up to policy-maker levels. They are the scandals that 'tend to set the social work agenda' (Bamford, 2015, p. 180). This agenda-resetting, but also the involvement of the media, politicians and the far-reaching influence on social worker's attitudes, are what has made them 'signal events'. Here is this author's list.

Maria Colwell

Parton dates an 'increasing sense of moral panic' around child protection from the time of Maria Colwell's death in 1973 and the subsequent inquiry (2006, p. 59). Butler and Drakeford view her death and the inquiry as 'a critical moment in the history of social work in the UK' (2011, p. 8).

Although there were other child deaths in the same year, Maria Colwell's became famous because of the reaction – involving campaigning locals, councillors, press, then politicians – that touched on the state of the nation's morals in the late 1960s, early 1970s, (Hendrick, 1993, p. 227). The trial of Maria's stepfather led to a firestorm of media coverage dominated by a search for scapegoats and calls to reinstate the recent abolished death penalty (Bamford, 2015, p. 40). A number of the classic factors involved in the creation of a moral panic, referred to earlier, were present in 1973. The Divorce Reform Act 1969 came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971. The Act, subsequently consolidated in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, made it possible for the first time for divorce to be petitioned for on the couple's separation. Divorces began a steep rise from 1973 and although it is difficult to establish figures and the connection can only be suggested, the early 1970s may have seen a rise in remarriages and a consequent increase in step-parenting, accompanied by concerns about the quality of step-parenting. Innes's 'wider audience' and the moral aspect of Cohen's panic theory combine here.

Whatever the causes for this tragedy to stimulate widespread concern, there is agreement that Maria Colwell's death 'can be seen as watershed in the contemporary history of social work' (Parton and Thomas, 1983, pp. 56-57). Clapton et al date the connection between child protection and moral panics much earlier in the 1880s' inception of modern child protection (2012) and Clapton and Cree point to evidence that moral panics may be generated from **within** social work (2017) as we will see when events in Cleveland and Orkney are discussed.

However, moral panics have not been the only feature surrounding child protection's 'signal events'. The 1980s saw a second high-profile, influential death of a child.

Jasmine Beckford

In 1986 Jasmine Beckford was killed by her stepfather. The report of the subsequent enquiry makes Jasmine's death a 'signal event' because in it, local authority social workers were publicly criticised for holding a 'the rule of optimism' (Brent Borough Council, 1985). This 'rule' was said to be one in which social workers were too ready to believe the best of parents and not be alert to the latter's untruths about the welfare of their children and dangers posed to children minimised. According to Corby, the Beckford Inquiry report

joined the impetus, and gave legitimacy, to the reframing of preventative work with families as that of solely child protection (1993, p. 33). Clapton et al have argued that such a categorisation of social workers' assessments as harmfully optimistic has inexorably led to the domination of the **opposite**, that is, a default 'rule of pessimism' amongst child protection practitioners by which social workers begin a child protection investigation by believing the worst of parents (2013).

There are other 'signal events' that mark any history of child protection in the 20th century these do not always involve deaths of children; with few exceptions, the subject of sexual abuse emerges. Two of our next signal events are tragedies but do not, thankfully, involve deaths. They show in stark light, social work's propensity for reacting to moral panics and an inner capacity for, if not generating such panics, fuelling them.

Cleveland and Orkney

Over a five month period in 1987 in Cleveland in the north of England, 121 children were removed from their families after what was eventually to be found to be erroneous diagnoses of sexual abuse. Similarly erroneous assessments, this time of 'satanic abuse', were the reason for dawn raids on families in Orkney in 1990. Clapton et al have argued that the events in Cleveland and Orkney were expressions of a readiness to believe exaggerated claims of sexual abuse and that these removals of children: 'may be indicative of what we believe, is a permanent state of readiness to panic – and a readiness to intervene, often to the detriment of the lives of children and families (2012, p. 205). As such it can be argued that, beginning with the signal event of the death of Maria Colwell, the Cleveland and Orkney removals of children were confirmation that a paradigm of child rescue (from neglectful and abusive parents) had returned but that also, just like in the 19th century, social work was capable of fuelling moral panic.

Sarah Payne

In 2000 Sarah Payne was abducted and murdered by a paedophile. Although there was no social work involvement in any aspect of the tragedy, the NSPCC, became involved and, it is suggested the rise of anxiety over paedophilia that had been developing found a useful interlocutor, and the NSPCC found a national platform. A 'Summit on Sarah' was called in 6 August 2000 and it involved the tabloid newspaper *The News of the World*, criminal justice

agencies and the NSPCC. Whilst the NSPCC has always included campaigns against child sexual abuse, Clapton et al have argued that a step change occurred in early 2000s with NSPCC collaboration with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (now the National Crime Agency) and continued with the Metropolitan Police on Operation Yewtree investigating Jimmy Saville's behaviour. Clapton et al also go on to suggest that, the NSPCC has revived the notion of parent-blaming, especially in relation to neglect of children and young people's on-line activities. At the beginning of the millennium the big children's charities had recovered their voice. In 'Communicating Concern or Claims-making?', Clapton and Cree argue that on a range of issues, campaigns by children's charities shade into providing fuel for moral panics (2017). In keeping with Clapton and Cree's suggestion of a financial motive in stoking alarms, McLaughlin has pointed out the reason for a concentration on bad news about children:

> Within social policy there is often fierce competition for limited funds, creating the paradox that "good news" may not be something that the organisation wishes to significantly publicise. After all, if children really are safer than they have ever been, it could be argued that the NSPCC and similar organisations such as AFC require less government funding and public donations than they currently receive.

> (McLaughlin 2015, p. 243)

And in turn, bad news about risks to children contributes to a pervasive risk and rescue culture. However, to return to this brief sketch of the milestones in the history of child protection and the main parties, the year 2000 also witnessed another child death.

Victoria Climbié

Although it is argued that a renewed emphasis on child rescue was the dominant motif emerging since the 'highwater' mark of social work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, every so often a call has been made for preventative resources to be offered to families to avoid any suggestion of peremptory child removal. The enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié did just that when it argued for parent and family support to be given priority:

> It is not possible to separate the protection of children from wider support to families.

(Laming Report, 2003, 1.30)

However the consequent legislation that followed the Inquiry ('Every Child Matters') did not reflect this. Munro argued that the legislation betrayed a 'wholesale lack of trust in parents' (2004).

Peter Connolly (Baby P.)

Reaction to the death of Peter Connolly in 2007, also confirmed an increased emphasis on 'better safe than sorry' culture, parent-distrust (which has taken the form of the emergence of the phrase and concept of 'disguised compliance', a formulation that suggests that parents who co-operate with social services may, paradoxically, have something to hide) and, child rescue. The steep rise in receptions into public care, both in Haringey where Peter was killed, and throughout England and Wales indicate this (Parton, 2014a).

The next discussion argues that the convergence of the timelines of the local authority social work (now nervous and defensive) and children's charities (now confident and outspoken), has not been good for children and family social work.

21st century child protection: beset, exhausted and bereft of imagination

The introduction to this paper described 21st century child protection as in crisis. This is not a new state of affairs. Over twenty years ago Cooper et al. drew attention to a 'siege mentality' in local authority social work departments:

> When French social workers participating in our study first walked through the doors of a London area office, they were astounded by the fortress atmosphere of the reception area.

> (Cooper et al., 1995, p. 111).

The evidence of an 'us and them' mentality (us = social workers, them = clients) has mounted. Three years later, Croghan and Miell's study found that service users' experience of social work was negative and distressing. As one 'bad mother' said:

> "My warning to people now is that if you need help the last people you should go to is to social services. We warn anybody we can. They are not there to help".

(Croghan and Miell, 1998, p. 454).

In a similarly depressing observation, Jones noted in his study of perceptions of statutory social work that 'In many disadvantaged and marginalised working-class places, social workers are seen as part of the problem and not as part of the solution' (Jones, 2001, p. 558). Such antagonism has grown (Lonne et al, 2009; Office of Children's Commissioner, 2010) and 'fortress social work' has intensified in the years since. Alongside this state of siege, there is 'compassion fatigue' (Richardson, 2011), hopelessness (van Heugten, 2011) and extremely low practitioner morale (Martin et al., 2010) - all have been noted among child protection workers (Local Government Association, 2009) and a decline of optimism (Clapton et al, 2013 p. 809). A complex set of pressures involving the morphing of family support into child protection as a result of the effect of the accumulation of the signal events discussed earlier, and the influence of children's charities in promulgating an ever-expanding list of worries (many of which are not unfounded so much as disproportionate) has led to 'net-widening' or an expansion of items on the 'child protection radar'. A Perfect Storm in which social work finds itself. Daily alarms about children buffet Social Work and goad policy-makers into producing new guidance and drafting fresh legislation. 21st century child protection concerns and risks to children and young people are now legion and include historic abuse, Female Genital Mutilation, child sexual exploitation, 'sexting', cyber-bullying, the internet, childhood obesity, emotional neglect, childhood trafficking, with the existing information about each one being described as 'the tip of the iceberg'. The list could continue for a page more. In three consecutive days in October 2016 in one UK newspaper, the following alarms appeared:

We are wobbling behind in the race to address obesity

11.10.16

Human trafficking strategy launched by Scottish Government

12.10.16

Child abuse calls in Scotland soar against rest of UK after Jimmy Savile inquiry

13.10.16

Not every worry directly relates to social work, however alarms such as these are a contributory factor to the generalised heightened sense of anxiety that exists (Clapton and Cree, 2017) and 'a toxic climate of suspicion and fear of blame in children's services' (Jowett, 2016). These are the conditions that have led to the return of child rescue as an intervention.

The return of child rescue, net-widening and the problem of the phrase 'child protection'

"I am set primarily for the saving of children" (Dr Barnardo, quoted in Holman, 1986)

The call by Lord Laming for family support to go hand-in-hand with child protection and Government initiatives such as 'Think Family' (Cabinet Office, 2007) seem to be blips in a child protection history that has been dominated by a rescue mind-set that is suspicious of parents, in Bob Holman's words, 'a reluctance to pursue prevention' has been the standpoint of child care practice for virtually all its history (1986, p. 2). The short-lived period in the 1960s and 1970s when social workers' emphasis was on family support seemed to have been just that, over quickly. 'Child protection' is now the main, if not the only, reason for local authority social workers to be involved with families, to the extent that supporting families is not even seen as part of the role of social workers in safeguarding the welfare of children (Scourfield and Welsh, 2003). Social workers regularly counterpose the welfare of families with that of children, and interventions are badged as 'for the children'.

 In an illustration of how children's charities can set the social work agenda, in 2010, Action for Children resurrected the combination of child neglect and child rescue (from their parents) with an urgent call to: '…rescue the thousands of children who live with its devastating effects every single day' (Action for Children, 2010, p. 2).

and the AFC campaign bore fruit with Government guidance:

> Social workers, their managers and other professionals should always consider the plan from the child's perspective. A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to **rescue** children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes.
>
> (HM Government, 2013, p. 22, emphasis added).

Note also the reference to avoiding optimism.

A renewed emphasis on child rescue, voiced by the 'cheerleaders for removal' (Featherstone et al, 2014) is in keeping with other child-saving trends, for instance championing adoption (PIU, 2000, Department for Education, 2011), that emphasise that child protection systems are designed to protect children from parents, not from neglectful government policies and systemic injustices such as having to rely on food banks. Bluntly put the social work message is 'We are here for your children not you' (social worker quoted in Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, 2010, p. 21).

The effect of a risk-rescue paradigm on child protection practice (and parents and families) is far-reaching.

Net widening

> A growing body of research across what have become known as Anglophone countries with similar systems (Lonne et al, 2009) suggests that there has been a considerable increase in the numbers of families experiencing investigations for suspected abuse in the last decades (Trocmé et al, 2014; Bilson et al, 2015; Devine and Parker, 2015). Further interrogation suggests that the vast majority of such investigations do not uncover actual abuse and/or result in help being offered to families (Trocmé et al, 2014).
>
> (Featherstone et al 2016, p. 2)

Of all the children born in England in 2009/10, by 31st March 2015, Bilson and Martin (2017) draw attention to the following:

• 22.5% had been referred to children's services;

• 17.0% had had an assessment;

• 14.3% were identified as a child in need;

• 6.3% were subject of a strategy discussion;

• 5.4% were subject of a section 47 enquiry;

• 3.5% were subject of a child protection plan.

The number of children investigated and **not** found to have been significantly harmed increased from 45,000 in 2009/10 to 98,000 in 2014/15. Devine and Parker have looked at a longer span (1991/1992 to 2013/2014 - 22 years) and found similar examples of a 'net widening' process that increase the number of families investigated by social workers. They find an 311% increase the number of referrals to Children's Services Departments in England increasing from an estimated 160,000 to 657,800 a year and argue that this is not explained by population increase. Nor, they argue, has there been a proportionate increase in child abuse in the referred children – they find a consistent **downward** factor progressing beyond each threshold stage (referral, assessment, deemed 'in need', strategy, child protection plan). In short a significant upward trend in referrals has occurred but with **no** corresponding upward trend. They conclude:

> …the findings suggest that a large number of families who require support services are needlessly 'risk assessed', potentially without their consent, causing resourcing issues for the social work profession and contributing to a fear of the consequence of missing a serious case of abuse. This scenario may be deterring families seeking services and damaging those who do.
>
> (Devine and Parker, 2016)

The irony is that at the same time as one in five children in England and Wales is referred to children's services, 'there is little or no evidence that this growing culture of high levels of

suspicion of abuse provides better protection for children and some evidence that unfounded investigations are in themselves harmful' (Jowett, 2016).

'Child protection'

'Child protection' has always posed an unsaid question, 'protection from what'? Child protection has rarely meant protection from poverty and the effects of poverty such as malnutrition, homelessness, poor educational achievement, and bad health, nor is it protection from bullying, from racism, or from risk of road accidents. Child protection means protection from parents. It:

> …involves a very different conception of the relationship between an individual or group, and others than does care. **Caring** seems to involve taking the concerns and needs of the other as the basis for action. **Protection** presumes the bad intentions and harm that the other is likely to bring to bear against the self or group and to require a response to that potential harm.
>
> (Tronto, 1993, pp. 105–106)

Evidence is mounting relating to the damage that child protection measures can cause to **children** and that once 'rescued' and in public care, children's lives tend not to have good long-term outcomes (Ofsted, 2010). Such child-focussed evidence of the detrimental effects of child protection is damming and has led to damnation, not from the expected media quarters but from fellow professionals. One memorable paper is headed 'Has child protection become a form of madness?' (Gregoire and Hornby, 2011). The authors conclude that it has.

Conclusion

So if UK child protection operates in a toxic climate of parent-blaming and – ultimately questionable - child rescue, and is beset and exhausted and ineffectual, what is to be done?

Featherstone et al point to the central importance of the connection a child has with its parents and argue that the extended family and his or her community have been

'decoupled'. They argue that the assets of families are often overlooked and call for understanding the family as the primary protector of children:

> Children are not free-floating individuals. However tempting it looks in the face of another tragedy, there is no easy moral mandate to rescue more and more children from impoverished families and communities. We need to understand and work with the relational ties of blood, kin, friendship, place and community. These are the primary contexts for the resolution of children's needs.
>
> (Featherstone et al, 2013)

However such a 'Think Family' option, as indicated, has not gained traction in the past, nor might an 'Act Family' prove any more resilient. Neither should the 'highwater' mark of family support in the 1960s and 1970s be seen as something to be returned to. That clock cannot be turned back. Practice then was not exemplary, e.g. the effects of domestic violence and child sexual abuse were barely understood and there was little explicit attention to listening to children. For social work to survive and thrive, struggling mothers and fathers must cease to be seen as the problem and, the – perhaps initially satisfying to social workers – business of child rescue be wound up. If contemporary child protection is a form of 'madness' then it must stop, it cannot be reformed.

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