
commentary

COVID-19: changing fields of social work practice with children and young people

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Drawing on the theoretical work of Wacquant, Bourdieu and Foucault, we interrogate how the COVID-19 pandemic has weaponised child and family social work practices through reinvigorated mechanisms of discipline and surveillance. We explore how social workers are caught in the struggle between enforcement and relational welfare support. We consider how the *illusio* of social work obscures power dynamics impacting children, young people and families caught in child welfare systems, disproportionately affecting classed and racialised individuals.

Key words COVID-19 • social work • children and families • surveillance • social field

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Introduction

This reflexive essay uses Wacquant's (2010) 'thick sociological' understanding of the function of welfare and penal systems under neoliberalism to explore the changing role of social work during the COVID-19 pandemic. By exploring contemporary discourses concerning the protection of children, we draw on Bourdieu's (1999) notion of the bureaucratic field to propose that the pandemic has the potential to escalate the weaponising of welfare as accepted functions of the field of contemporary child and family social work. We situate this within the scholarship of Wacquant (2010) and Foucault (1995 [1975]), which outlines the function of power exercised through the penal functions of the state and its welfare function in the context of neoliberalism. Key to this understanding of neoliberalism, the 'left hand' and the 'right hand' of the state, characterising its respective social and enforcement functions, exist to administer a social and economic programme that promotes the deregulation of capital while maintaining regulation and control of working-class populations.

Drawing on this theoretical body of work, social work is positioned in the juggling act between the social and the penal functions of the state. Crossley (2016), drawing on Wacquant (2010), identifies the ways in which official discourses of the state articulate concepts of child and family welfare as necessarily punitive and assertive. The state's symbolic power thus diagnoses and prescribes the solution to a range of social problems. As holders of legitimated symbolic capital, social workers are caught in a struggle between managing and negotiating the dilemmas of welfare and enforcement (Garrett, 2007). It is within this theoretical framing that we will explore the changing fields of social work during the pandemic and the implications for practice.

The field of UK-based child protection social work

The association between the actors/agencies within the field of child protection is relational, each connected primarily through difference (Bourdieu, 1998). As a site of power and a mass of cultural and economic capital, the local authority is dominant. At the opposite end of the social space, the family remains a microcosm. Movement within the social space of child protection is wholly dependent on the type and structure of capital held by each actor or agency within the field (Bourdieu, 1989), yet the rules of progression are mostly unwritten and could be likened to that of a game, or *illusio*. Within this highly staked *illusio* of child protection, there is an underlying acknowledgement that if the risk of harm is not reduced, the child will be removed from their parents' care. For a parent, these are very high stakes indeed.

The *illusio* of child protection in the UK and its associated 'dangling of power' has been consistently confusing for children and families, particularly when it can influence and elevate the actor's positioning in the field (Aguilar and Sen, 2009: 432). COVID-19 has further changed the *illusio* of child protection, with confusing and contradictory commands being issued by the UK Conservative government to be followed by all households, including those with social workers. The replacement of protective welfare with disciplinary welfare was reported daily, for example, £100 on-the-spot police penalties for 'breaking the rules' of a new, highly staked *illusio* from which people can die (Metropolitan Police, 2020). Community members, along with families in the child protection system, were being increasingly monitored by their neighbours, their communities, their family and their friends, and now by the state, with the sudden explosion in the use of technology leaving families unaware as to who is watching them, and when – an ultimate and solemn nod to Foucault's panopticon.

The *illusio* of child protection, however, took a more sinister turn during the lockdown period of COVID-19, with the government tossing the rulebook (in the form of protective legislation) out of the window and abolishing protective welfare for children in care (HM Government, 2020). This was despite the solidarity and cohesiveness within the social work community, and without indication that social workers were unable to discharge their duties. Featherstone et al's (2018) social model response to child protection has tried to shift the professional gaze away from individuals (still the microcosm within the field of child protection social work, yet bearing the responsibility for every issue faced by them and their children) to communities. Indeed, while Wacquant (2016: 4) reminds us of the cultural trope of individual responsibility, child protection social work still sits uncomfortably as an enforcer 'whose selective and aggressive deployment in the lower regions of social space is constitutively injurious to the ideals of democratic citizenship'. In turn, the

pandemic social work response has been to focus once again on the family's habitus. This then begs the question as to why families are viewed as risky (and child protection laws remain the same), while children's homes and foster carers are deemed worthy and safe enough to abolish protections?

Digital social work and the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated an escalation of digital technology as the dominant vehicle to enable engagement and interaction with children and their families. Social workers quickly harnessed the use of mobile technologies to undertake virtual practice with children and their families, including the use of screen-based technology. Within days, a lexicon of remote working and virtual statutory visits and meetings was incorporated into practice, as the electronic and digital 'turn' within social work ruptured into a digital shock.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995 [1975]) describes 'lock-up' measures to contain the plague, recounting how such a crisis enables and provides a rationale for the full articulation of a disciplining and surveying society. The plague requires segregation, categorisation, sight of and permanent self-reporting of the populace, enabling complex and auto-functioning mechanisms of surveillance and control to pervade society for inhabitants' own good. Foucault's (1995 [1975]: 196, 176) description of 'each individual fixed in his place', required 'to appear at the window ... answering to his name and showing himself when asked', resonates with how children's social work practice in the UK has been forced to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the overnight closing of schools and the immersion of children into domestic settings, normal avenues of safeguarding support and recognition of abuse were severed. Within the UK, this disruption to the professional gaze has coincided with a palpable description of children's social work as a distinctly *visual* practice of surveillance and risk identification, with a chorus of appeals from government ministers and children's charities for workers to 'see' (Talbot, 2020), 'knock on doors' (Richardson, 2020) and have 'visibility' (Weale, 2020) of children.

As the ability of multi-professionals to *see* is interrupted, the purposeful need to 'have eyes' on children is rearticulated (Weale and Adams, 2020), seemingly as the primary skill set of social work practitioners. In this way, the social worker is recast as Foucault's syndic, charged with observing the child's face at the window, on the doorstep or through a two-dimensional screen as a primary mechanism of safeguarding. This narrative of a disciplining and assertive professional gaze, synonymous with notions of muscular social work practice (Featherstone et al, 2014), appears reinvigorated by well-placed and appropriate concerns about the absence of proximity and interruption of dialogue with children. Digitally enabled 'windows' into children's home environments have provided a solution for some of these concerns, even if this is accepted as inferior to the embodied presence of practitioners in children's lived environments (Ferguson, 2011; Social Work England, 2020).

Invoking Wacquant's (2016) description of the modern bureaucratic field, the (re) assertion by government of children's social work practice as one of risk identification and familial inspection (or policing) reinforces a punitive and re-masculinised vision of child welfare. In this context, the purposeful use of mediated technology in social

work has quickly been embraced as a legitimate and enabling vehicle to continue these disciplining and surveying practices.

Yet, the framing of statutory visits functioning as a purely visual audit of children's safety is misguided. [Cossar et al \(2013\)](#) reminds us that safety for children comes with meaningful, prolonged and persistent encounters and trusting relationships. In this sense, digitised and mediated practice offers potential to be harnessed to promote relationships and the inclusion of children, young people and their families ([Jeyasingham, 2020](#)). Indeed, contemporaneous reflections from practitioners throughout the pandemic suggest that regular online conversations through text-based media have assisted with improved engagement and acceptance of support and help, and the use of 'virtual windows' are most effective when completed in collaboration and negotiation with service users ([Featherstone and Bowyer, 2020](#)).

Extra-familial harm and the pandemic

With the acknowledgement of 'extra-familial' harm in 'Working together to safeguard children' ([HM Government, 2018](#)), a new social work field emerges. Extra-familial contexts present new challenges for social workers ([Firmin and Lloyd, 2020](#)), who are tasked with responding to a range of harms in spaces outside of the family home. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction has provided a frame for understanding young people's experiences of harm beyond their homes ([Firmin, 2017](#)), signalling the mutually constitutive relationship between young people's behaviour, the social contexts in which they operate and the acquisition (or not) of capital as a mediator of harm. Therefore, it has been proposed that child protection interventions in extra-familial contexts might focus on increasing a young person's capital, that is, to bolster the resources they have available to navigate harmful contexts, or to address the harmful 'rules at play', through a range of interventions, including changes to physical design and introducing community guardians ([Firmin, 2017](#)).

The extension of the child protection lens into extra-familial contexts flexes the powerful 'left arm' of the state in a broader range of public spaces ([Wacquant, 2010](#); [Wroe and Lloyd, 2020](#)). If safety is created by increasing a young person's capital and disrupting the harmful 'rules' of a given social field ([Firmin, 2017](#)), those seeking to protect children should be in the business of elevating the status of young people, allowing them to rewrite the rules and to amass capital ([Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo, 2013](#)). However, some have warned that interventions into extra-familial harms, such as those related to drug trafficking, while ostensibly seeking to create safety for young people and communities, are experienced as acts of symbolic power 'provoking increased (and negative) attention to affected neighbourhoods, through racialised and sensationalist reporting' (Mason, 2019: 11), resulting in social exclusion, damaged opportunities and anxiety (see [Wroe and Lloyd, 2020](#)).

Symbolic power is exercised in a number of ways. Child protection agencies, as sites of amassed capital, dictate what is knowable and sayable about the types of harms young people encounter beyond their front doors. They write the rulebook of legitimised harms in extra-familial contexts. Poverty, poor housing, inadequate asylum and immigration processes, and racism within education establishments, for example, cause a range of significant harms to young people that are likely to be escalated by the pandemic and the looming recession. Yet, these are not the extra-familial harms reflected in social work assessments. Simultaneously, the child protection lens

teaches professionals and laypeople to read a range of childhood behaviours (such as cannabis use and sexual activity) through the lens of abuse and exploitation. Social ills, such as poverty and racism, become unknowable and unsayable in the social work field, distilled into individual risks associated with ‘county lines’ or ‘child criminal exploitation’. This can escalate notions of risk and bring young people under the lens of statutory assessment, monitoring and surveillance, while leaving opportunities to create structural safety unexplored.

COVID-19 has led to a range of panicked reactions, accusations and inferences about the extent to which lockdown will create new opportunities for harm in extra-familial contexts (NYA, 2020). Foucault (1995 [1975]) describes ‘crisis’ as enabling and escalating the disciplining and surveilling of society. Indeed, powerful ‘risk’ narratives are emerging that justify a range of intrusive interventions and surveillance of young people’s private and public lives. Taking ‘county lines’ as an example, the pandemic has been framed as an ‘opportunity’ for harsher policing of county lines ‘drug dealers’ (Bulman, 2020a). Inevitably, young Black males become subject to the disciplining lens of ‘crisis’. Young Black males are over-represented in ‘county lines’ cohorts (CSPRP, 2020), where the state dictates they are victims, and in ‘gangs’ cohorts (Amnesty, 2018), where the state dictates they are criminals. Simultaneously, Black people are disproportionately targeted under COVID-19 laws (ITV, 2020), while also at a higher risk of unemployment and mental health crisis as a result of the pandemic (Sheffield University, no date; The Guardian, 2020). Safeguarding, crime prevention and public health safety converge under ‘crisis’ to double-down on the surveilling and monitoring of racialised groups of young people. A National Youth Agency (NYA, 2020: 7) report on gangs and exploitation during COVID-19 claims that ‘the pandemic has amplified vulnerabilities and exposed more young people to gang-associated activities and exploitation’, despite evidence (in the same report) that missing episodes, drug arrests, ‘county lines’ activity, serious youth violence and ‘gang’ activity have decreased during lockdown. Discourses of risk legitimise the penal and welfare functions of the state (Wacquant, 2010), in this case, through the (necessary) accumulation of funding for youth services, but at what cost? Alternatively, through processes of critical professional reflection and engagement with young people, could social workers flex their amassed capital to leverage resources for young people without resorting to deficit narratives of risk? Could they reposition themselves from agents of state capital to *social capital agents* (Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo, 2013) for young people?

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic compounds the instability of a child welfare system already in crisis (Care Crisis Review, 2018). We are experiencing the deregulation of hard-won protections for children, alongside an increase in proceedings and referrals to foster care, heightened poverty and a reduction in support (Bulman, 2020b). All will disproportionately impact classed and racialised families.

The UK government is committed to a disciplinarian approach that distils economic, social and health crises into a matrix of individual responsibilities and choices, from punitive fines through to the blaming narrative of ‘coviidiots’. Social work reproduces this punitive lens through discourses of risk and complicated professionalised and bureaucratic assumptions and practices that often bear little resemblance to the lives

and needs of families. Dictating what is knowable, sayable and seeable as harm, risk and opportunities for safety, the *illusio* of child protection is incomprehensible and incoherent. Simultaneously, families are made responsible for an array of risks they pose to themselves and others, and are stripped of material and social resources. Families are invited into an *illusio* in which staying at home is both safe and dangerous, going to school is both responsible and risky, and going to work is both essential and deadly.

With the outcome of the pandemic still unknown, the game is not over. Social work is thereby afforded an opportunity to interrogate what is knowable and sayable about the lives of families, and to admit that we too do not understand the rules of this game, despite being professionally equipped to play it. We need to challenge the rule of risk that blinds us to the future possibilities and demands for safety that are right in front of us.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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