
Article:
Walsh, J.C. and Mason, W. (2018) Walking the Walk: changing familial forms, government policy and social work practice. Social Policy and Society, 17 (4). pp. 603-618. ISSN 1474-7464

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000209

Walking the Walk: Changing Familial Forms, Government Policy and Everyday Social Work Practice in England

Julie Walsh* and Will Mason**

*Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, England.

E-mail: j.c.walsh@gmail.com

** Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield, England.

E-mail: w.j.mason@sheffield.ac.uk

Although contemporary sociological thought reports a diversification of family forms in *society, 'the family' continues to influence national and internat*ional political agendas. *Social workers, as 'street level bureaucrats', are social agents that both work with* citizens and implement policies made by senior officials. Despite this, the extent to which conceptual and policy developments in family diversity manifest in family-based social work practice remains under explored. This article brings together the findings of two comparative studies, and explores the transfer of conceptual understandings of family, and policy, in England, through two examples: gendered caring expectations and culturally located familial norms. Significantly, we show that when prompted, social workers recognise family complexity and diversity, but myriad constraints complicate the application of these understandings, and related policies. Bringing together literature from sociology, social policy and social work, this article, thereby, offers a unique lens and highlights a lag between conceptual developments, policy and implementation.

Keywords: Family practices, social work, migrant families, gender roles.

Introduction

This article brings together the typically disparate disciplines of sociology, social policy and social work to examine the ways in which contemporary familial diversity is recognised in family-based social work practice. Contemporary sociological thought reports a diversification of family forms and practices, although unevenly in the global context. Examples include an increase in single parent families, cohabitating (unmarried) parents, same-sex parent families, transnational families and changes in gendered caring norms within families (Morgan, 1996; Williams, 2004; Heath et al., 2011; Nordquist and Smart, 2014). Governments do, however, continue to pass and implement policies relating to 'family', some of which aim to reflect diversifying families (Cheal, 2008). Lipsky (1980) defines civil servants, including social workers, as 'street level bureaucrats'; professionals that, with some discretion, act as social agents between government policy makers and citizens and implement policy decisions made by senior officials. As such, social workers are key social agents, positioned between the family and the state. Despite this, the extent to which conceptual and political developments in family diversity manifest in family-based social work practice remains under explored. By drawing on the English data from two large scale studies concerned with family complexity and social work, we examine if and how contemporary conceptualisations of 'family', and related policy directives[1], transfer to social workers' every day practice. In doing so, we offer a unique sociological perspective on family complexity and the intersection between social policy and social work practice.

We argue, here, that despite social workers showing a sophisticated awareness of diversity in family structures and practices, this does not always reflect in their practice decisions and an emergent literature asserts that this is an international phenomenon (Studsrød et al., 2018). In this context of diversifying forms, social work researchers have argued that the adoption of a family practices approach in social work would have more utility and result in more productive practice responses (Saltiel, 2013). By giving attention to the operation of normative thinking in English family-based social work practice – namely gendered caring expectations and culturally located familial norms - we extend this debate. We contribute by showing that social workers do recognise diversity in family forms and practices, but when engaging with families they can rely on and consequently reify normative conceptions of 'family'. We conclude that this can be understood as an unconscious coping strategy, developed in the face of myriad, intersecting constraints, many of which, but not all, are connected to issues of resourcing. We argue that this is important because practitioners are unable to work in ways that they know to be more representative of familial lived realities.

Contemporary sociological thought

Traditionally, structural understandings of 'the family' have dominated family sociology and tend to define 'the family' in heterosexual, co-resident and biological terms (Parsons and Bales, 1956; Williams, 2004). More recently, scholars have reported a diversification of family forms influenced by changing patterns in marriage, a weakening of the male breadwinner/female care model, reproductive technologies and the global movement of people (Williams, 2004; Heath et al., 2011; Nordquist and Smart, 2014; Walsh, 2018). Over the past ten years, for example, the number of lone

parent families in the UK has steadily increased from 1.6 million in 1996 to nearly 2.0 million in 2015 (ONS, 2016). Over the last 30 years, cohabitation has trebled (Williams, 2004); and in 2015, the total number of international migrants reached 244 million (UN, 2016). For some, such changes are indicative of a broader 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992) and a demise in importance of 'the family' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1993), but for others, 'family' and kinship remain significant (Jamieson, 1997; Finch and Mason, 2000; Finch, 2007). Morgan, for example, argues that in this context, family is no longer defined by 'household' or 'biology', but is significant, and is instead expressed by the 'doing' of family practices; the 'little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken for granted existence of practitioners' (1996: 190). How families experience relatedness has, therefore, changed; whilst biological kin and marriage may be less significant, in contemporary personal life, individuals can share biographies and care obligations with fictive kin (Smart, 2007) and these relationships become family-like or, as Weeks et al. (2001) have described, 'families of choice'.

The practice context

For Gillies (2011: 2), the structure of 'the family' and the expression of familial relationships may be changed but 'few would deny the continued relevance of family as both an experience and an ideal'. In a context of diverse family forms, Morris et al. (2015) and Saltiel (2013) argue, therefore, that the adoption of a family practices approach in social work would have more utility. As 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky,1980), social workers are, however, influenced by policy defined by state governments. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash, wide-ranging austerity measures have been introduced in England, resulting in diminished public service provision for families and reductions in state benefits (Bywaters et al., 2017).

Consequently, since the election of a Coalition Government in 2010 and, more recently, a Conservative Government in 2015, there has been a shift in policy focus; preventative family support services within communities are significantly reduced and the government now sees its role as focusing any professional activity on problem groups to reduce what it sees as unnecessary public expense (Walsh et al., 2018). In this context, service provision for all family members, including fathers, and migrant families, is much reduced. In the following sections we outline ways in which the importance of 'family' persists in the policy and practice guidance relevant to the practice issues on which we focus: fathers in the care of their children; and practice responses to migrant families. These practice issue represent two thematic areas from the international studies of social work upon which this article draws.

Including fathers as care givers

Generic guidance related to working with families in England encourages health and social care professionals to involve fathers in their children's parenting. The Children Act (1989) stresses that fathers, irrespective of their legal parenting status – for example, resident or non-resident - should be as involved as mothers in decisions relating to their children. Furthermore, the Working Together to Safeguard Children (DfE, 2015) framework emphasises that managers and commissioners should make sure that services take account of the needs of fathers and actively look for ways to engage them, including non-resident fathers. In England, health and social care guidance, therefore, perceives fathers to have more than a traditional male breadwinner role. This is also supported in statute; in England, married and unmarried men that are named on their child's birth certificate do have statutory parental rights and responsibilities (Jarrett, 2017).

Despite this, gendered differences in the responsibility for children persist (Doucet, 2009); 89 per cent of lone parent families are, for example, headed by mothers (ONS, 2016) and it is estimated that two years after parents separate, one-in-five fathers do not have contact with their children (Poole et al., 2013). For Lewis (2001), women continue to be primary carers for children because, whilst gender equality is nominally on the political agenda, related policies embed a range of conditionalities for eligibility which reify traditional gendered parenting expectations. This is attributed to a number of causes. The welfare benefit system in England, for example, does not enable non-resident parents to share care for their children: recent government guidance shows that only the resident parent is, for example, able to receive Housing Benefit that will allow them to accommodate their child (Gov.uk., 2017). As such, in this context, it is difficult for fathers to fully share care for their children.

Literature further suggests that social workers continue to focus on the mother in their work, and fathers are infrequently involved (Scourfield et al., 2012; Osborn, 2014). Whilst developments in theoretical influences, such as attachment theory, have emphasised that the father-child relationship is significant (Lewis and Lamb, 2007) practice approaches continue to prioritise the mother-child relationship (Palkovitz and Hull, 2018). Further, fathers are frequently viewed in a negative light by social workers and whilst there are occasions where they are seen to have equal importance to others in child welfare cases, they are more commonly seen as irrelevant, or as a threat to the child, the mother or the social worker (Zanoni et al., 2013). Indeed, as Doucet (2006) notes, men's bodies can be seen as 'risky' in relation to child care (Doucet, 2006) and some fathers – for example those that are violent – are a risk, and services should manage contact with both mothers and children appropriately (Erikksen and

Hester, 2001). Mediating such risk is, however, complex and studies show that excluding violent fathers entirely from their children's lives is counter-productive; it does not always respond to the needs of the children, or support these men to develop non-violent parenting and partnering relationship patterns (Featherstone, 2014; Featherstone and Packover, 2007).[i]

Working with migrant families in the UK

In the UK, historical immigration has led to communities characterised by superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007). During the year ending June 2017, 572,000 immigrants also entered the UK of which 230,000 were of EU origin, with many people being from Central and Eastern European member states (ONS, 2017). This is because, in 2004, eight new countries joined the EU (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Czech Republic) and, in 2007, a further two (Romania and Bulgaria). Consequently, citizens of these new member states gained the right to move and reside freely within Member States (Favell, 2008).

Given the historical and new cultural diversity of the UK's population, it is the responsibility of social workers to be aware of cultural sensitivities when working with immigrant communities and refugees (Valtonen, 2008; Brotherton, 2016; Dominalli, 2018). In the English context, this is enshrined in statute and, as Boccagni (2015: 613) acknowledges, 'prescriptive accounts abound on how diversity should affect professional practice'. For example The Children Act (1989) highlights that due consideration should be given to a family's and child's needs arising from their race, culture and religion; and the Working Together to Safeguard Children (DfE, 2015) policy document outlines safeguarding duties for professionals working with immigrants and refugees. It should be noted, however, that for Bhambra (2017), EU

migrants living in the UK are not always recognised as migrants, because of their right to live in another member state and be treated equally to nationals of that member state, rather than be targeted for specific treatment. Subsequently, practitioners may not consider these statutory duties relating to working with cultural diversity when working with migrants of EU origin.

There are also further complexities to consider. In 2000, Victoria Climbe - an eight-year-old Ivorian girl living in England - died as a result of being physically abused by her guardians. The subsequent serious case review made recommendations that have had a significant impact on child protection policies and services in the UK. Those related to 'working with diversity' highlight that practitioners should guard against: the effect of assumptions based on race, ethnicity or cultural background; and the dangers of considering cultural issues before the primary objective of the safety of the child (Lamy, 2003). Cultural competence in social work has received increased international attention over the past 20 years (Ben-Ari and Strier, 2010; Kohli et al., 2010), though much of this work has been located outside of the UK (Shier et al., 2011). Harrison and Turner's (2011) Australian study explored social workers' understandings of cultural competence alongside its operation in practice. They found that whilst social workers endorsed cultural competency principles, their aspirations to apply these principles to practice were undermined by organisational and systemic constraints, with deadlines and timeframes cited as major impediments. Very similar pressures have been identified in UK social work contexts, with damaging implications for social workers and families (Morris et al., 2015). Indeed, as Furlong and Wight (2011) have argued, it is impossible to learn how to work cross-culturally without developing a capacity for reflective self-scrutiny, and this is something that requires time (Gambrill, 2008). Though some traditional cultural practices do 'place children at risk', in an

atmosphere of highly pressurised and risk averse practice, there is the potential that all non-normative, culturally located family practices are viewed as 'risky' (Welbourne and Dixon, 2015). As Gambrill (2008) has acknowledged, social workers are more likely to use heuristics and shortcuts in their decision making if they are working under pressure. For Brotherton (2016), this should be addressed and practitioners 'must also be able to identify need and support clients to access services or, if necessary, advocate on their behalf'.

Research methods

In this article, we draw on data taken from two international comparative studies of social work, both of which explored how social workers conceptualise 'family': The NORFACE funded Family Complexity and Social work (FACSK)[2] project; and, The Nuffield funded Child Welfare Inequalities (CWI) Project.

The FACSK project aimed to examine if and how social workers' conceptions of family impacted upon social work practice with complex families. This study compared social work in eight countries, representing four welfare state regimes, as defined by Hantrais (2004): Chile and Mexico (familialised); Lithuania and Bulgaria (refamilialised); Norway and Sweden (defamilialised); and England and Ireland (partly familialised). Qualitative, multimethod case studies were conducted in each country, across four complex service areas (child welfare, migration, mental health and substance misuse) to compare intersections between professional social work contexts, social work narratives of family complexity and social work decision making practices. As Yin (2014) has acknowledged, the intensive and in-depth nature of case study research makes case studies the preferred method for exploring 'how' and 'why' questions within 'real life' institutional contexts. Case studies included document

analysis of databases and policy and practice guidance, semi-structured interviews (n=37), and focus groups (n=47), with social workers, so as to examine the enactment of these policies.

The Nuffield funded Child Welfare Inequalities Project[3] sought to map and understand the association between area level deprivation and rates of child welfare intervention (see Bywaters et al., 2017 for an account of the quantitative methods employed). Mixed methods case studies explored the interplay between families' socioeconomic circumstances and social workers' decisions to intervene where there were child protection concerns. These case studies were based in six carefully selected local authorities[4] across England (n=4) and Scotland (n=2), with fieldwork focusing on comparable sites within each (Mason et al., forthcoming). Data collection within each site included a minimum of: semi structured interviews with senior social work professionals; focus groups with social workers; participant observation in social work assessment teams (5 days); family case narratives - collected from child protection social workers - and document analysis (including social work assessment tools).

In both studies oral data were digitally recorded and transcribed. These data were reviewed line-for-line and coded by the authors, using an open coding technique (Aronson, 1995). Data from each study were uploaded onto mixed-method frameworks (O'Cathain, 2010), allowing data sets to be traversed easily and compared by case and by code (Mason et al., 2018). Following the separate analysis of each data set a joint review of the two project matrices revealed points of concordance across both studies. In particular, each study revealed examples of disjuncture between social workers' articulation of family complexities, state policies, and the practice responses observed. By focusing on fathers in the care of their children and

practice responses to migrant families this article presents an example of this convergence.

Though both studies were international in scope, the data shared in this article are drawn from English child welfare data and are representative of the broader national data sets. As such, these data cannot be generalised outside of their national context. The findings detailed below are arguably also partial in that they focus solely on social work narratives and, as such, fail to capture the experiences of other professionals, such as family support workers. Quotations selected from the FACSK study are taken from one-to-one interviews with child welfare social workers, because they are indicative of the themes identified in the related corpus (8 focus groups, 7 one-to-one interviews, totalling 37 child welfare social workers). Quotations selected from the CWI study are taken from one-to-one interviews and focus groups with child welfare social workers. These extracts were also selected according to their typicality within the chosen case study (2 focus groups, 9 one-to-one interviews, totalling 17 child welfare social workers). Both studies secured ethical approval from relevant institutions and standard ethical procedures were followed: all data were stored securely, collected with informed consent and any information that would identify participants and/or research sites was changed (Gabb, 2010).

The findings

The two studies included within this article focus on the everyday rhythms of child and family social work, and each reveal some of the complexities and challenges facing both families and social workers. Domestic violence, poor housing conditions, debt, substance misuse, anti-social behaviour and mental health issues were cited as routine features of families involved within English child protection systems. At the

same time, social workers also described their working conditions as highly stressful and characterised by rising service demand in a context of diminishing resources (Morris et al., 2015). Here, however, we focus on examples of disjuncture between social workers' understandings of family complexity, governmental policy, and the social work practice observed. In each of the instances explored, we highlight the operation of normative judgments within social work decision making.

Reproduction of gendered caring roles in the family

In line with sociological thought, social workers in the FACSK project described diverse family forms and practices (Morgan, 1996) and recognised that these include relationships not defined by biology or marriage (Weeks et al., 2001). David, for example, a practitioner of 11 years, showed a sophisticated awareness that family-like caring practices can be enacted by individuals that are not traditionally positioned as 'family':

> Really, when I ask, like, a top 5 question, which is about who that child would go to if they needed support in their life, then I think that gives a clear indicator of, erm, who they trust in their family. There's not always the original meaning of family, like blood relations. I think it can sometimes be, like, your mum's best friend, for example, that you might call auntie, or with like teenagers and things, sometimes they've got a really close bond with their best friend's parents, for example, and they are a massive support to them. So, they're actually really important people in the child's life to have a conversation with.

There is limited evidence, however, that this awareness of changing caring expectations has transferred into social work practice in England. Whilst policy promotes the inclusion of fathers in child welfare cases (DoH, 2007; DfE, 2015), data show that social workers tend to reify gendered caring roles within the family. Here, for example, when asked what his first action would be upon receiving a referral, Mike (a practitioner of eight years) quickly positioned the mother as the parent, and person, primarily responsible for the care of family children:

> OK, so after I've read and looked at the history of all the information that we know, I'd make contact with the family, usually calling mum, usually. Erm, give mum a quick call and introduce myself and ask her if she is aware that the referral has been made to children's services […]

He went on to explain that a father may be involved, but describes a co-resident, heterosexual functionalist family; the mother is expected to provide emotional and domestic support to the family unit, whilst it is the father's responsibility to 'hopefully' provide for the family financially (Parsons and Bales, 1956; Williams, 2004). Mike then states, however, that this construct is uncommon in the families with whom he works, but the father is still not expected, or afforded, to fulfil a role other than the male 'breadwinner':

> I would always try to draw people into that partnership and working together and, erm, but I suppose when you're working with families, you do look like, at the stereotypes don't you. Mum will be at home, possibly with the younger children and does the more caring stuff, take them to school and lots of the

> families we work with no-one is working with the family, sadly, because that's just the type of families that we often have to work with, but a lot of families, dad will hopefully be off to work somewhere and try and do something in terms of gainful employment and earning a crust for his family and I think there's still a lot of that type of stuff that goes on.

A further participant, Jacob (a social worker of four years) when asked what 'family' meant to him, again positioned the mother as the main carer and, despite suggesting extended family members that might care for family children, he did not include the father:

> […] If you were in a situation where it was felt that it wasn't safe for the children to remain in the parent's care, with mum, whoever, then wider family would be our next course of action. We would look at what family members are there because we know that actually, children fair a lot better staying within their family than what they do when they end up in foster care.

Despite his initial, broad description of family, when asked how he initially approaches a referral, David echoed Jacob's prioritising of the mother, and further notes that this is grounded in his practice experiences when working with contemporary families. He noted that he would talk to both 'parents' but acknowledged that, as argued by Osborn (2014) fathers are infrequently involved, and that he mainly works with mothers:

> I would talk to the parents, but what I've discovered is that it's mainly the mums that I work with, that are mainly involved. The fathers are either off the scene, or maybe, they are not keen to come on board.

Here, his justifications for this – he's 'off the scene' and 'not keen' - imply that it is optional for fathers to be involved in the lives of their children but, also, that he does not see it as his role, as a practitioner, to promote inclusion of fathers in family life, whether they are co-resident or non-resident. This uncritical approach to whom cares for children indicates that policy relating to the rights and responsibilities of fathers seems to have limited impact and practice reproduces, rather than challenges, gendered caring assumptions. The following section examines factors that contribute to the maintenance of this status quo in the child welfare setting.

The institutional embeddedness of normative gendered assumptions

Notably, Jacob does attempt to include fathers in social work assessments and he reports that including fathers in decisions about the family and/or supporting them to improve their parenting, can be difficult. He notes that there is a practice tendency to position the mother as the main carer (Palkovitz and Hull, 2018) and that this can lead to fathers being disadvantaged and excluded from their children's lives. Consequently, he engages in activities with families that highlight the disproportionate responsibility for domestic and emotional labour placed on the mother:

> [I] try to involve the dads more because mostly the plans are around the mother, all the things are, like, to the mother and she's usually the one at the forefront of it all, but the fathers seem to kind of get away with it, and so when I'm working

> I try as much as I can to try and involve fathers. I want them to be involved. I want to see what they can do and take responsibility for the children, for some of the things on the plan, and even sometimes, even children themselves. I would be expecting them to take some responsibility in all that. I've got a case at the moment, for example, a case that I have, where it was a big family, and the children were just letting the mother, the mum, do most of the chores in the house and we had concerns about the home environments because it was constantly very poor and so I had a group discussion with all the children and we sat around the table and I had a set of cards with chores on, and I was asking 'who does this chore?', then, whoever said they did it, I would give the person the card. Most of the cards went to mum, well almost all of them, only one or two didn't. She ended up with a heap like that [indicates a pile of cards on the table] and so that visual representation was powerful in showing them all to see who was doing what.

This challenge to gendered parenting norms is not, however, prevalent and the imperative to include fathers in their children's lives is often framed in legal terms. In the UK, mothers automatically have legal 'Parental Responsibility' (PR) for their children. By contrast, fathers that are not named on their child's birth certificate do not have these rights and responsibilities (Jarrett, 2017). In the NORFACE data, the decision to include a father in the lives of his children is often influenced by his PR status, as indicated in Steve's statement that, 'anyone with PR could, we would go to extensive lengths to get them involved in the assessment'. Whilst the mother is overwhelmingly expected to be the responsible parent, inclusion of fathers is only seen to be a necessity when this is ascribed in statute. Although it is positive that legislation

aims to protect paternal rights, this can result in the social and biological role of fathers being reduced to a legal definition.

The above extracts indicate that the inclusion of fathers in English child welfare cases is limited for three broad reasons: social workers do not consider it their role to challenge these norms; institutional practices and assessment processes make this difficult; and it is not legally necessary to do so. Data also show that the capacity of social workers to include fathers is influenced by a lack of resource and diminished public service provision for families (Bywaters et al., 2017). David, for example, reflects on the decisions he makes when assessing a family, but notes that he may not 'realistically' have time to respond to the needs of all family members:

> What does mum need, what does dad need, what do the children need. What support is needed? Are there any services we can put in place? Is there any work that I can do as a social worker, you know? Is there any one-to-one work I can do with the children, with mum, with dad? Do I realistically have time to do it? You know?

Further, Gill, a social worker of nine years, is driven to include fathers (in this case non-resident) in the lives of their children, but reports a lack of interventions tailored to their needs:

> Yeah, and while we're aware that we need to involve fathers and generally speaking we do, we try as hard as we can to do that […] but, I've certainly not come across any interventions such as really positive dad and children's groups. I've rarely seen them. I think I've heard of one.

Despite an awareness of diversity in family forms, the data presented shows a disjuncture between policy promoting the inclusion of fathers in social care practice (DfE, 2015), awareness of a need to include fathers, and everyday practice. Rather than promote gender equality in caring roles, the social workers in these data present limited challenge to normative caring practices, and others report an inability to do so, because these normative assumptions are embedded within the institution in which they work.

Working with migrant families

The case study examined here was situated in Marshland, a relatively deprived neighbourhood in an expansive rural area, built upon the farming and food industry. Seasonal industrial and agricultural work had attracted a growing Central and Eastern European migrant community to the area and social workers argued that the population posed challenges for children's services, not least in terms of disproportionate levels of service demand. Our data show that - at the 31st March 2015 - 39.3 per cent of children on Child Protection Plans (CPPs) in the case study site were White British and 32.1 per cent of children on CPPs were in the 'White Other' category. 10.7 per cent were Roma. There was also a substantial proportion where the information was not reported, 14.3 per cent of children on CPPs. Local employment opportunities were central to practice narratives about Central and Eastern European families in this site and Susan, a Consultant Social Worker, showed a clear understanding of the complexities faced by many of these families, that could trigger the attention of children's services. The following account is instructive and worth quoting at length:

> Yeah, I would say that it's, the population of migrant families is really big, there can be issues around standards of properties that families are living in, private rented properties, or families that are, whose often, they are working in contracts that you wouldn't expect, they are not formal contracts, there is a culture around; they [employers] will offer work and if it is not accepted then they will not offer it again. So there are discrete unsaid expectations around people that are really inflexible... Sometimes they are offered housing as part of contracts to work on the land, or there can be main landlords that are key contacts that have relationships with the employers and stuff. It can be really complex and sometimes we are involved because families are living in a multi occupancy house where perhaps there is domestic abuse. It may not be related to the parents of that child, it might be two other adults in the household, but the concerns are that the family perhaps leave the children with people in the home to supervise whilst they are at work and it is those arrangements that then cause difficulties and present a risk to children. So there can be these very specific issues from working with this kind of population.

Susan's framing is sensitive to, and sympathetic of the constraints impeding some Central and Eastern European's family practices. Contractual obligations facing agricultural workers are described as 'discreet', 'inflexible' and difficult to understand, with expectations that are 'unsaid' and therefore beyond their control. This is a point emphasised by the acknowledgment that if work is offered and not accepted '[employers] will not offer it again'. The financial implications of seasonal work are then recognised (with impacts for housing implied), before recognising that cheaper multi-

occupancy housing can be overcrowded and undesirable. Susan acknowledges that the intersection of factors described 'can be really complex', before recognising explicitly that in some cases it is childcare arrangements, produced by this intersection of circumstances, that constitute the reason for child protection involvement. However, as Harrison and Turner (2011) have found, further analysis reveals some uncoupling of the understandings articulated by social workers and the observed social work response.

Knowing's not enough

Our analysis identified a disjuncture between social workers' expressions of family complexity and their professional responses (Studsrød et al., 2018). This was particularly clear when social workers were unable to utilise extended family support in case work; a situation migrant families were especially vulnerable to, when extended family members remained in their country of origin. Ruth, a Consultant Social Worker stated, for example:

> We have a number of families where they have very little in terms of wider family support in the UK, they have come here to seek employment … and they work very hard to ensure that they have a level of financial stability and housing for their child. But, because that has to be prioritised, it raises big issues in terms of who looks after their children and the arrangements that they can reasonably make and access. Because we as a service don't give money for childcare, particularly if the child is aged under two, it is mainly that group of children, because when children are in school that helps and we have some funding that families can access, but pre-aged 2 it really is a difficult time. So you will often

> find that we will become involved because a child is left at home or left with an inappropriate carer of some kind. We come in and say "you need to be responsible for your child, the expectation is that you identify a suitable childminder, preferably a registered childminder" but we are not going to offer any support for that.

Ruth's comments exemplify the limits of Marshland Children's Services, when responding to complex family situations. Whilst acknowledging that migrant families can find themselves in virtually impossible situations, she cannot support the families to locate or finance registered childminders. Though she stressed the importance of being 'reasonable and flexible with what parents want and what they can achieve' she still concludes that if suitable arrangements cannot be negotiated:

> We would have to run through the options and ask "what were the options in your country of origin? What was the reason for coming here?

Ruth's case shows that systemic constraints for both families and social workers can intersect, undermining professionals' aspirations to provide relevant and appropriate support to families (Harrison and Turner, 2011; Morris et al., 2015). The operation of said constraints were also influenced by normative expectations of family practices. As Gambrill's (2008) review of decision making in child welfare has suggested, heuristics and simplifying strategies are more likely to feature in decision making where time is limited and resources are constrained. Indeed, examples of highly normative thinking were evident across our data. The following exchange between two senior social workers is illustrative:

SW1: We have the Eastern European population and there are different ways of parenting. Parenting, actually the way they do that isn't acceptable in what we accept in this country.

SW2: There are different responses to domestic abuse in Latvia, and the police will say it's a family matter and so it's how we respond to it and support them and get them to that level of "this is a concern for this and this and this" and sometimes that works really well but sometimes not. It just depends on how they respond to it.

In the practice observed and discussed, culturally normative expectations (expressed using adjectives like 'different' alongside references to 'we' and 'them') frequently underpinned articulations of the complex and structurally rooted issues that families presented. In summary two factors are clear: Ruth's professional assessment of suitable childcare contrasts with the childcare her clients were able to deliver; and, Ruth's capacity to support this family was constrained by her access to resources. Indeed, this case study produced strong practice narratives about funding cuts, the tightening of unit budgets and the consequent reduction in money available to support families. One Consultant Social Worker recalled how, for example, in 2012, she was 'regularly giving out £10 for gas or electricity, to get the bus here or the kids need new shoes, whereas now [I] have to really scrutinise those £10 you are giving out'.

What these data reveal, is that normative cultural expectations of family practices are evident in professional assessments of what is and is not deemed to be acceptable parenting. These judgments are also influenced by the intersection of

systemic pressures, associated with rising social work demand at a time of diminishing supply (Gambrill, 2008; Morris et al., 2015). Similar processes can also be observed across diverse practice examples, namely, gendered assessments of caring roles within families. These findings resonate with other qualitative studies of decision making in social work, that evidence a tendency, among social workers, to think within conventional paradigmatic depictions of 'the family' (Saltiel, 2013).

Discussion and conclusion

In the English context, there has been a diversification in family forms, a purported move toward gender equality in the family, and an increasing cultural diversity within families. Further, these changes are, to varying degrees, reflected in state level policy and legislation. Social work sits at the interface between the state and families. Given the critical heritage of the social work profession (Featherstone et al., 2014) and, if social workers are street level bureaucrats, these changes should be reflected in social work approaches to working with families.

We have drawn on two major international studies of the social work profession, and shown that, whilst social workers consistently recognise contemporary families to be diverse and multifaceted, social work practice decisions are shaped by many expectations, including those related to normative family practices. In the context of Eastern European migrants, social workers recognise the multiple challenges of being a migrant worker with children, but assess parenting grounded in UK based norms and expectations. Whilst social and economic constraints may be the reason migrant parents adopt the family practices described (Kilkey et al. 2014), social workers assume that these are 'risky' (Welbourne and Dixon, 2015) alternative cultural familial practices. In terms of recognising or promoting gender equality in the family, we show

that social workers do not necessarily see it as their responsibility to challenge these norms. Instead, they continue to position women as the carer most responsible for the care of children, resulting in women carrying the weight of child welfare expectations and men being excluded from their children's lives. Within child welfare in England, there is a tendency to accept traditional gendered practices within families, or to expect what might be seen to be white British family practices. This apparent disconnect between demographic change, policy, legislation and practice decisions indicates that, rather than challenge, social workers reproduce normative family practices and expectations.

The operation of normative expectations cannot, however, be disaggregated from the multiple factors at play in social workers' decision making processes. We argue that, as previous research shows, social work decision making can be influenced and limited by a range of factors including: time and workload pressures; a pervasive culture of risk aversion; formulaic assessment processes; and far reaching austerity measures resulting in the retrenchment of state services (Gambrill, 2008; Wastell et al., 2010; Saltiel, 2013; Featherstone et al., 2014). In a neo-liberal, individualised context, social workers can, thereby, rely on a family's statutory entitlement to services as a way to manage assessment within these restrictions (Walsh et al., 2018). Here, however, entitlement is given limited, or no, consideration.

We contend that despite social workers recognising diversification of family forms and the complexity of life for the families with whom they work, the constraints of the child welfare system and resource scarcity intersect. This coming together of factors creates a situation where the most vulnerable are receiving the least service and social workers can be seen to reproduce normative thinking in their practice responses. In this context the uncritical acceptance of, or the expectation that families

should conform to these normative family practices, is understood as a response to the limited ways in which social workers can support families. As Laird et al. (2015: 1328) have acknowledged, 'in circumstances where administrative burdens and high caseloads remain in place, everyone runs out of time, regardless of training, underpinning theories and models of intervention'. International comparative studies of social work practice have revealed striking similarities across countries and regime typologies, suggesting that this might, increasingly, be an international phenomenon (Nygren et al., 2018).

Whilst we agree, therefore, that a family practices approach to social work would be more reflective of the lived realities of complex families, the data presented indicates that in a context of multiple constraints, this is more complex. What we have evidenced is, therefore, that there is both a lag in, and a barrier between, the development of ideas and their implementation. In the social work context, where practitioners have restricted capacity to reflect, or act on their knowledge, the implementation of a family practices approach is, to some extent, utopian.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the FACSK and CWiP research teams, and the respondents involved in both studies. We would also like to thank the Editorial team at Social Policy and Society and the anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive and detailed comments.

Notes

1 Due to the multi-level nature of governance in the UK context, and the devolution of some powers to individual nations, some examples of legislation,

professional guidelines and policy are applicable to all of the UK, whilst others are only relevant to one country of the UK. For this reason, although we draw on data collected in, and make conclusions related to England, often the policy context referenced relates to the UK as a whole.

2 https://welfarestatefutures.org/research-network/facsk-family-complexity-and-social-work-a-comparative-study-of-family-based-welfare-work-in-different-welfare-regimes/

3 www.coventry.ac.uk/cwip

4 The administrative body responsible for public services and facilities in a particular geographical area.

References

Aronson, J. (1995) 'A pragmatic view of thematic analysis', The Qualitative Report, 2, 1, 1-3.

Beck, U. and Beck-Germshein, E. (1993) Individualisation, London: Sage.

Ben-Ari, A. and Strier, R. E. (2010) 'Rethinking cultural competence: what can we learn from Levinas?' British Journal of Social Work, 7, 1, 2155-67.

Bhambra, G. (2017) 'Brexit, Commonwealth and exclusionary Citizenship', Open Democracy, https://www.opendemocracy.net/gurminder-k-bhambra/brexit-commonwealth-and-exclusionary-citizenship [accessed 11.12.2017].

Boccagni, P. (2015) '(Super)diversity and the migration–social work nexus: a new lens on the field of access and inclusion?', Ethnic and Racial Studies, 38, 4, 608-20.

Brotherton, G. (2016) 'How migration and radicalisation are making British social work global', Community Care,

http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/02/24/migration-radicalisation-making-british-social-work-global/ [accessed 09.12.2017].

Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Bunting, L., Daniel, B., Featherstone, B., Jones, C., Morris, K., Scourfield, J., Sparks, T. and Webb, C. (2017) 'Inequalities in English child protection practice under austerity: a universal challenge?', Child and Family Social Work, 23, 1, 53-61.

Cheal, D. (2008) *Families in Today's World*, UK: Routledge.

Children Act (1989), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents/enacted [accessed 15.05.2018].

Department for Education (DfE) (2015) '*Working Together to Safeguard Children'*, London: DfE.

Department of Health (DoH) (2007) Maternity Matters, London: DoH, http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Healthcare/Children/Maternity/MaternityMatters/index.htm [accessed 30.05.2018].

Dominelli, L. (2018) Anti-Racist Social Work, 4th edn, London: Palgrave.

Doucet, A. (2006) 'Estrogen filled worlds': fathers as primary caregivers and embodiment', The Sociological Review, 54 ,4, 696-716.

Doucet, A. (2009) 'Dad and baby in the first year: gendered responsibilities and embodiment', Political and Social Science, 624, 1, 78–98.

Erikksen, M. and Hester, M. (2001) 'Violent men as good enough fathers? A look at England and Sweden', Violence against Women, 7, 7, 779-98.

Favell, A., (2008) 'The New Face of East-West Migration in Europe', Journal of Ethnic and Migration and Studies, 34, 5, 701-716

Featherstone, B. (2014) 'Working with fathers: risk or resource?', in J. Ribbens Mccarthy, C. Hooper and V. Gillies (eds.), Family Troubles?: Exploring Changes and Challenges in the Family Lives of Children and Young People, Bristol: Policy Press, 315-26.

Featherstone, B. and Packover, S. (2007) 'Letting them get away with it: fathers, domestic violence and child welfare', Critical Social Policy, 27, 2, 181-202.

Featherstone, B., White, S. and Morris, K. (2014) Reimagining Child Protection, UK: Polity Press.

Finch, J. (2007) 'Displaying families', Sociology, 41, 1, 65-81.

Finch, J. and Mason, J. (2000) Passing on: Kinship and Inheritance in England, Oxon: Routledge.

Furlong, M. and Wight, J. (2011) 'Promoting "critical awareness" and critiquing "cultural competence": towards disrupting received professional knowledge', Australian Social Work, 64, 1, 38-54.

Gabb, J. (2010) Researching Intimacy in Families, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gambrill, E. (2008) Decision making in child welfare: constraints and potentials', in D. Lindsey and A. Shlonsky (eds.), Child Welfare Research: Advances for Practice and Policy, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Giddens, A. (1992) The Transformation of Intimacy, UK: Wiley.

Gillies, V. (2011) 'From function to competence: engaging with the new politics of family', Sociological Research Online, 16, 4.

Gov.uk (2017) 'Housing benefit', https://www.gov.uk/housing-benefit/overview [accessed 11.12.2017].

Hantrais (2004) Family Policy Matters: Responding to Family Change in Europe, Bristol: Polity Press.

Harrison, G. and R. Turner (2011) 'Being a "culturally competent" social worker', British Journal of Social Work, 41, 333–50.

Heath, S., McGhee, D. and Trevena, T, (2011) 'Lost in transnationalism', Sociological Research Online, 16, 4.

Jamieson, L. (1997) Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Jarrett, T. (2017) Children: parental responsibility – what is it and how is it gained and lost (England and Wales), Briefing Paper No. 2827, House of Commons Library, http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN02827 [accessed 05.03.2018].

Kilkey, M., Plomien, A. and Perrons, D. (2014) 'Migrant men's fathering narrative, practices and projects in national and transnational spaces: recent polish male migrants in London', International Migration, 52, 1, 178-91.

Kohli, H. K., Huber, R. and Faul, A. C. (2010) 'Historical and theoretical development of culturally competent social work practice', Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 30, 3, 252-71.

Laird, S., Morris, K., Archard, P. and Clawson, R. (2016) 'Working with the whole family: what case files tell us about social work practices', Child and Family Social Work, 22, 1, 1322-9.

Lamy, D. (2003) The Victoria Climbe Enquiry, London: HMSO.

Lewis, C. and Lamb, M. E. (2007) 'Understanding fatherhood: a review of recent research', Lancaster: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Lewis, J. (2001) 'The decline of the male breadwinner model', Social Politics, 8, 2, 152-69.

Lipsky, M. (1980) Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service, New York: The Russell Sage Foundation.

Mason, W., Mirza, N. and Webb, C. (2018) 'Using the framework to analyse mixed methods case studies', Sage Research Methods Cases, Part 2.

Mason, W., Morris, K., Webb, C., Daniels, B., Featherstone, B., Bywater, P., Mirza, N., Hooper, J., Brady, G., Bunting, L. and Scourfield, J. (forthcoming) 'Investigating child welfare inequalities: the use of mixed methods case studies', Journal of Mixed Methods Research.

Morgan, D. (1996) Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Morris, K., White, S., Doherty, P. and Warwick, L. (2015) 'Out of time: theorizing family in social work practice' Child and Family Social Work, 22, 3, 51-60.

Nordquist, P. and Smart, C. (2014) Relative Strangers, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nygren, L., White, S. and Ellingsen, I. (2018) 'Investigating welfare regime typologies: paradoxes, pitfalls and potentialities in comparative social work research', Social Policy and Society, [doi to be inserted by copyeditor].

O'Cathain, A., Murphy, E. and Nicholl, J. (2010) 'Three techniques for integrating data in mixed methods studies', BMJ, 341, 4587.

ONS (2016) 'Lone Parent Families in the UK, by Country, 1996 – 2015', https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/adhocs/006183loneparentfamiliesintheukbycountry1996to2015 [accessed 11.12.2017].

ONS (2017) Migration Statistics Quarterly Report: November 2017, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigrati

on/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/november 2017 [accessed 01.01.2018].

Osborn, M. (2014) 'Working with fathers to safeguard children', Child Abuse and Neglect, 38, 993-1001.

Palkovitz, R. and Hull, J. (2018) 'Towards a resource theory of fathering', Journal of Family Theory and Review, 10, 181-98.

Parsons, T. and Bales, R. (1956) Family, Socialization and Interaction Process, London: Routledge.

Poole, E., Speight, S., O'Brien, M., Connolly, S. and Aldrich, M. (2013) 'What do we know about non-resident fathers?', Understanding Society, https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/522028 [accessed 09.08.2017].

Saltiel, D. (2013) 'Understanding complexity in families' lives: the usefulness of family practices as an aid to decision making', Child and Family Social Work, 18, 1, 15-24.

Scourfield, J., Tolman, R., Maxwell, N., Holland, S., Bullock, A. and Sloan, L. (2012) 'Results of training course for social workers on engaging fathers in child protection', Children and Youth Service Review, 34, 1425-32.

Shier, M. L., Engstrom, S. and Graham, J. R. (2011) 'International migration and social work: a review of the literature', Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies, 9, 1, 38-56.

Smart, C. (2007) Personal Life, Cambridge: Polity.

Studsrød, I., Ellingsen, I., Muñoz Guzmán, C., Mancinas Espinoza, S. E. (forthcoming) 'Conceptualizations of family and social work family practice in Chile, Mexico and Norway', Social Policy and Society, [doi to be inserted by copyeditor].

United Nations (2016) International Migration Report, 2015, Department of Economic Social Affairs, New York: United Nations.

Valtonen, K. (2008) Social Work and Migration: Immigrant and Refugee Settlement and Integration, London: Routledge.

Vertovec, S. (2007) 'Superdiversity and its implications', Ethnic and Racial Studies, 30, 6, 1024-54.

Walsh, J. (2018) 'Migrant family display: a strategy for achieving recognition and validation in the host country', Sociological Research Online, 23, 1, 67-83.

Walsh, J., White, S., Morris, K. and Doherty, P. (2018) 'How do you solve a problem like Maria: family complexity and institutional complications in UK Social Work', European Journal of Social Work, doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1461068.

Wastell, D., White, S., Broadhurst, K., Hall, C., Peckover, S. and Pithouse, A. (2010) 'Children's services in the iron cage of performance management: street level bureaucracy and the spectre of Švejkism', International Journal of Social Welfare, 19, 310–20.

Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. and Donovan, C. (2001) Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments, London: Routledge.

Welbourne, P. and Dixon, J. (2015) 'Child protection and welfare: cultures, policies and practices', European Journal of Social Work, 19, 6, 827-40.

Williams, F. (2004) Rethinking Family, UK: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Yin, R. K. (2014) Case Study Research: Design and Methods, London: Sage.

Zanoni, L., Warburton, W., Bussey, K. and McMaugh, A. (2013) 'Fathers as 'core business' in child welfare practice and research: an interdisciplinary review', Children and Youth Service Review, 35, 1055-70.