



Editorial

Critical Child Protection Studies: An Introduction

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Until the last few years of the twentieth century, there was very little critical analysis surrounding child protection policies and practices. Child protection was seen as secondary to the question of understanding and explaining child abuse. First, you needed to understand and explain the problem (child abuse) and secondly, you needed to develop a societal response (child protection). It was what was done—or needed to be done—to prevent and stop child abuse. Child protection was in effect embedded in discussions of what to do about child abuse and had no existence or dynamic separation from discussion about child abuse. It was what constituted the technical, administrative, and legal response to the problem of child abuse.

For example, texts which state that their focus was child protection make this relationship clear. Section 1 of ‘The Child Protection Handbook’ (Wilson and James 2007, 3rd ed.) is headed ‘Understanding Child Abuse’; the book by Liz Davies and Nora Duckett ‘Proactive Child Protection and Social Work’ (Davies and Duckett 2008), after an introductory chapter on ‘legal safeguards and protective processes’, is made up of a series of chapters with titles reflecting various forms of child abuse (emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, physical abuse). Others, although often recognising that the nature of child abuse can vary and is often difficult to detect and define, also make it clear that it is concerns about child abuse which provide the rationale and focus for child protection policies and practices (for example Munro 2019). Texts about child protection often begin with a discussion of tragic child abuse cases. For example, John Myers book, ‘Child Protection in America’, opens with ‘every day across America, child protection agencies receive thousands of telephone calls reporting abuse and neglect’ (Myers 2006, p. 3) and is followed by an outline of a number of tragic cases of children who died—Eli Creekmore, Barbara Feaster, Jamal Olivier Waggner—to underline the nature of the work involved. Similarly, the book by Jane Waldfogel ‘The Future of Child Protection’ (which was one of the first critiques of child protection policies and practices in the US and made suggestions for reform) had the subtitle of ‘How to Break the Cycle of Abuse and Neglect’. It opened with ‘Our image of child abuse and neglect, and the role of child protection services, is often drawn from the case of one particular child who has been in the headlines or the television news’ (Waldfogel 1998, p. 1) and is followed by the outline of three such scandals: Lisa Steinberg, Elisa Izquierdo, and Lance Helms.

The core assumption is that it is concerns about child abuse and neglect which provide the rationale and focus for child protection policies and practices. It is not just that the two are seen to be inseparable and inherently inter-twined, but that the rationale and justification for child protection is assumed to be preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect.

However, in recent years the study of child protection has undergone something of a transformation and is seen as an important area for study in its own right. Rather than simply see concerns about child abuse as being *the* determining factor in explaining the nature and purposes of child protection, a number of studies have begun to look at the shape and effects of child protection policies and practices in a rather more critical and analytical light, including how such policies and practices came into existence. What has become increasingly evident is that child protection policies and practices cannot be



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understood simply as a response to the phenomena of child abuse. They have their own dynamics and determinations to the point where, increasingly, they seem to operate quite independently of the social problem, which it is assumed, they are trying to prevent and respond to. A whole range of political, cultural, and sociological influences come to bare on the development and operation of child protection policies, practices, and systems.

The purpose of this Special Issue is to argue that we should now explicitly recognise the importance of studying, critically, child protection and that 'child protection studies' should be identified as an emerging and distinct interdisciplinary social science 'field of study'. Up until this point, such a development has been incremental with much of the work involving detailed and significant empirical work. More recently we can also detect developments of a more comparative, conceptual, and theoretical nature. Researchers from a range of academic disciplines have been involved including: anthropology, criminology, health, history, penology, politics, psychology, social policy, sociology, and socio-legal studies, but it is probably the discipline of social work which has made the most significant contribution. This is evident in the disciplinary backgrounds of the researchers and the journals where many of the papers have been published and reflects the way child protection is often operationalised institutionally and professionally in policy and practice terms. In most advanced democracies where child protection has developed over the last sixty years, it is social work which has been given the central professional and statutory responsibility for doing something about it.

In the opening paper, *Comparative Research in Critical Child Protection Studies*, I argue that two interrelated factors have played important roles in the emergence of academic analyses of child protection policies and practices: the evidence of growing strains and crises in child protection systems, particularly in Anglophone countries, over the last forty years; and the development of the development of comparative research on different systems. In addition, the paper notes the importance of recent research which draws attention to the unequal impacts of child protection on different parts of the community, particularly in terms of the most deprived children and families, and the racialised nature of such interventions is also highlighted.

The next two papers focus on the position of parents in child protection. *Ambivalence in Child Protection Proceedings: Parents Views on their Interactions with Child Protection Authorities* by Schoch and Aeby is based on research which focuses on the participation of parents in statutory child protection proceedings and the ambivalence they experience in their interactions with the Child and Adult Protection Authority in Switzerland. Establishing trust, recognizing parents' expertise, and acknowledging their needs is seen as fundamental for reducing the ambivalence and enhancing parental participation in child protection. A similar theme is addressed by Haworth, Bilson, Drayak, Mayes, and Saar-Heiman's paper, *Parental Partnership, Advocacy and Engagement: The Way Forward*. Written with parents as co-authors, the paper has two aims: first, to provide a critical view of the English child protection system based on parents' views and to locate these within contemporary child protection studies; and, secondly, to present the value of 'co-production' in the context of child protection as a form of critical scholarship and as a way of influencing policy and practice.

Although the focus of the paper by Devaney and McGregor is rather different, it also addresses the tensions at the heart of child protection practice. *Protective Support and Supportive Protection: Critical Reflections on Safe Practice and Safety in Supervision* is based on a framework which has been developed for professional practice and supervision that attempts to maximise the capacity of workers to provide support and protection simultaneously. To illustrate this framework, a case study is provided to demonstrate the complex interplay of needs for support and protection over an extended time.

An important element in all child protection systems is the provision of residential care for children and young people when it is no longer considered appropriate for them to live at home. The paper by Garcia-Melsosa and Cases, *The Subjective Well-Being of Children in Residential Care: Has it Changed in Recent Years?* reports on a study carried out in Catalonia

in Northeastern Spain which compares the subjective well-being displayed by adolescents aged 11–14 in both 2014 and 2020. However, no significant differences were identified.

Although child protection systems were originally designed for interventions into the private family, the concepts of child protection and safeguarding have increasingly broadened to address concerns external to the family and we have several papers where this is the focus. Firmin and Lloyd discuss the challenges of using a Contextual Safeguarding framework to respond to the growing concerns of actual and potential significant harm to children and young people in a range of social contexts from adults and peers who are unconnected to their care caregivers in the UK (*Green Lights and Red Flags: The (Im)Possibilities of Contextual Safeguarding Responses to Extra-Familial Harm in the UK*). The paper presents results from an embedded research project in which five local authority children's departments used the framework. Although progress was demonstrated at the local level, the project identified major problems with the national contexts and which raise fundamental questions of the statutory systems which all too often act to criminalise young people.

The paper by Wroe, *When Helping Hurts: A Zemiological Analysis of a Child Protection Intervention in Adolescence: Implications for a Critical Child Protection Studies*, discusses a study of the use of 'relocation' as a response to extra-familial harm in adolescence. Professionals and young people reported a range of harms related to the relocations whilst recognising the intervention also increased safety. The data was analysed zemiologically to understand this ambivalence, connecting micro accounts of harm with meso, institutional, and macro structures that determine child protection interventions.

Suarez-Alvarez, Vazquez-Barrio and Frutos-Torres paper, *Parental Digital Mediation—According to the Age of Minors: From Restraint and Control to Active Mediation*, reports on research with 776 families in Spain which identified the parental mediation strategies with children and young people's use of the internet. The strategies varied according to the age of the child and became more dialogical and collaborative as the age of the children increased.

Mari, Quaglieri, Giannini, and Lausi's paper, *Missing Children in Italy from 2000 to 2020: A Review of the Phenomenon reported by Newspapers*, analyses the increasing reporting in newspapers of the disappearance of children and which has become a growing public issue, and which is posing a growing institutional challenge.

Our final two papers are related to safeguarding in sport. The first by Wilson and Rhind, *Tracking Progress towards the International Safeguards for Children in Sport*, provides a review of the adoption and implementation of the 'International Safeguards for Children in Sport' policies. Overall, the review concludes that it seemed that there was an increase in organisations' engagement with safeguarding but that there were also areas where this was not the case. Finally, Macpherson, Battaglia, Kerr, Wensel, McGee, Milne, Principe and Willson, in their *Evaluation of Publicly Accessible Child Protection in Sport Education and Reporting Initiatives* paper examine the extent to which the publicly accessible information provided by three sport-specific child protection organisations (The US Centre for SafeSport; the UK Child Protection in Sport Unit at the NSPCC; and Sport Integrity Australia) regarding education and reporting was aligned with the recommendations provided by researchers and athletes. The findings are interpreted and critiqued in the context of previous literature and recommendations for future research and practice and provided.

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