Child Protection and Social Inequality: Editorial

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In the UK and internationally, reducing inequalities in health and education has become accepted across the political spectrum as an essential component of government policy. This represents a major change in a period of a little less than 40 years. In 1980, the Black (1980) Report on Inequalities in Health was so unwelcome to the Conservative government at the time (Conservative Party 2010), headed by Margaret Thatcher, that only a handful of copies were produced and it was published on an August bank holiday to minimise press attention. However, by 2010, the incoming Conservative government, headed by Cameron, highlighted as part of its manifesto the gap in male life expectancy between the richest and the poorest. Amidst a programme of privatisation and an emphasis on individual choice in health policy, there was a commitment to reducing health inequalities which were no longer unmentionable. While the content and success of this health inequalities policy remains very much open to question, it was a considerable political achievement to normalise a cross-party commitment to greater equity. Paralleling this specific change in the UK, the World Health Organisation embraced a focus on reducing health inequalities over the same period with the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (2008), led by Michael Marmot, that was reported in 2008.

There is a long history of social work identifying social conditions and social structures as crucial drivers of demand for services, as well as acknowledging that these are central to the adverse economic and social circumstances faced by service recipients. Yet there is also longstanding and widespread evidence of profound differences in the reported incidence, experiences, and outcomes of child abuse and neglect between countries, between areas within countries, and between subgroups of children and parents. Such differences are related to poverty and social class, race and ethnicity, child and parental disability or poor health, gender, age, and sexual orientation. Additionally, questions remain as to how such differences are framed and responded to in law, policy, and practice. The sharpest examples, perhaps, concern the experiences and treatment of indigenous peoples, in which the consequences of social work's historical role has too often been shameful.

However, the characterisation of these differences in child welfare as unjust and avoidable inequalities that are systematically associated with structural social disadvantage (Bywaters et al. 2015) is relatively recent. An inequalities perspective has played a limited and under-developed role in child protection research and discourse in comparison with the focus on inequalities in health and education. Thus, we cannot be certain whether—in the past or now—child protection systems and services merely reproduce wider social inequalities, whether they can be effective in reducing or compensating for social inequalities, or whether they may exacerbate inequalities in children's and parents' lives. The absence of an inequalities discourse has seen social work left behind when it comes to the development of theory and methodology, the production of empirical evidence, and the building and testing of policy and practice responses aimed at reducing inequity.

In the health inequalities field, a very considerable evidence base has developed, outlining and detailing the extent and nature of socially created inequalities. However, whilst instructive, debates about the nature of causation and, therefore, the best responses to socially created inequalities remain unresolved. As Bryan Turner (1995, pp. 3–4) argued for the healthcare field, the concern is to understand the 'subjective perspective, emotions and feelings of human agents as social individuals . . . the relationship between agency and structure . . . the problem of social order . . . (and) analysis of the fragile order of social relations and social exchange.' This involves 'enquiry into the inequalities in power and wealth in human society since we may regard health as a resource which results in a hierarchical distribution of illness within a community.' In the last sentence, replacing health with 'successful child development' and illness with 'child maltreatment' indicates the role that social structures—power and wealth—play in the definition of child abuse and neglect. It also highlights how the construction of child welfare policies and services can result in the steep social gradient seen in child welfare.

Why does inequality matter? Fundamentally, it matters because socially created inequity is contrary to social work's key principles of social justice and human rights. In addition to being a moral issue, inequality also has major significance for the efficient and effective use of welfare funding. The history of social work tells us that good intentions regarding justice and rights are no guarantee of good outcomes. Recent evidence that a child in Scotland is three or four times more likely to be in out-of-home care than a similar child in Northern Ireland, or that a child of Indian heritage in England is 20 times less likely to be in foster or residential care than a child of Black African-Caribbean parents, leaves no room for complacency about the forms and consequences of current policy and practice (Bywaters et al. 2018a, 2018b). An inequalities perspective acts as a reality check on the outcomes of well-intentioned policy, practice, and service provision. Moreover, because an inequalities perspective necessarily requires paying attention to comparisons across populations, rather than treating individuals as a series of cases, it opens up questions of causation in child maltreatment. It draws attention to factors beyond the immediate behavioural or individual context, highlighting the role of societal patterns and the structures that underpin them. It extends the consideration of family economic circumstances from a focus on poverty alone, taking into account relative social position. For example, the inequalities perspective can examine how wealth may replace or supplement parenting with private provision, protecting parents as well as children from the public gaze. It can also assess how the struggle to provide food, shelter, and warmth in the face of extreme disadvantage may undermine parenting, family relationships, and child development. This approach also draws attention to the relationship that social work practice has to the state and the wider society which legitimises it. It raises important questions, such as: how is abuse and neglect framed? What is the nature and role of the public discourse in wider social relations and in the construction of family? Is social work complicit in the maintenance of unequal power relations?

The Papers

The challenge we set to authors in this Special Issue was the theoretical, methodological, and empirical development of such an inequalities perspective. We welcomed submissions from authors with a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds in order to establish new thinking and new evidence about child protection inequalities internationally. The seven papers in this Special Issue, drawn from six separate countries with both developed and developing economies, attempt to answer that challenge.

Emily Keddell and Gabrielle Davie outline five key aspects of an inequalities perspective on child welfare:

- a focus on the development and treatment of all children, not just those in poverty;
- attention to the social gradient in child safeguarding and family support interventions, identifying what factors across the spectrum support or undermine family life;

- questioning whether the outcomes for different groups are inter-dependent; for example, questioning whether some groups fare better as a consequence of others doing worse;
- the concept of intersectionality: how the contribution of multiple aspects of children's and parents' identities (race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, social class) interact to create unequal outcomes;
- different approaches to understanding the factors generating inequalities; for example, the risk vs. bias debate, the role of neighbourhoods in addition to family socio-economic circumstances, the influence of service funding levels and service patterns, and whether the degree of inequality in a society or area is an additional factor.

The paper then exemplifies these key dimensions in Aotearoa-New Zealand, drawing on a variety of evidence to begin to unpick the complex relationships between service provision, family socio-economic circumstances, and ethnicity. They demonstrate evidence of stark inequalities in the patterns of child protection interventions between Maori (indigenous), Pasifika (Pacific), and Pakeha (European ancestry) families, which are partly, but not entirely, explained by socio-economic circumstances.

The conflict over explanations of child abuse and neglect, as well as the social policies developed as a consequence of these, is the theme of Ian Hyslop and Emily Keddell's contribution. The authors locate child protection policies and practices in the wider political and ideological context of globalised neo-liberalism. The authors discuss how—amongst other factors—the moral panic surrounding key child deaths (such as Daniel Pelka and Baby Peter in England and the Kahui twins in Aotearoa-New Zealand) has been 'a significant driver in shifting the narrative away from family empowerment and towards a child rescue paradigm'. Such cases have not only been employed to underline a key shift towards an emphasis on family responsibility, enabling a withdrawal of state liability, but have also been used to reinforce racist anti-Maori or anti-immigrant rhetoric. The authors call for social work to recognise how it has been co-opted by neo-liberal governments as the sharp end of such policies and to find ways to resist. Proposed strategies include re-imagining the connections between workers and families as 'we' relationships rather than 'other' relationships and enacting in everyday practice a deep understanding of the impact of 'debilitating economic scarcity' on family life and relationships.

The four subsequent papers expand the application of an inequalities perspective in child welfare in various specific ways and in a range of different international contexts. The first two reflect on parents' voices, whilst the second pair focus on the voices of young people caught up in sexual exploitation and abuse.

Halvor Fauske, Bente Heggem Kojan, and Antia Skarstad Storhaug explore issues of social class and marginalisation in Norway. Norway is commonly categorised as a family-orientated child welfare system operating in an economy with relatively low levels of poverty and inequality compared to other developed nations, despite some contrary trends since the turn of the millennium. For example, residential and foster care are conceptualised as part of the range of state provided family support services, with half of all children in out-of-home care being placed 'voluntarily'. Nevertheless, families in contact with welfare services are characterised by multiple dimensions of marginalisation. Reporting on a large interview-based study of families involved with child welfare, the authors demonstrate significant differences in the degree of marginalisation of families holding different social class positions, but also in their relationship to services. More marginalised families experienced both more deprived social conditions and relationships. They were less likely to be self-referred and less likely to feel involved in welfare decision-making or to feel that their perspective was recognised by welfare services. Crucially, they argue that 'the struggles of families for recognition in child welfare are associated with underlying class inequalities.' Applying Bourdieu's concept of capital, the paper argues that differences in values and language between families and workers can accentuate mistrust and that, in agreement with Fraser, redistribution, recognition, and representation are key elements of reformed child welfare services.

The relationship of the state to parents and parenting in an unequal society is also the focus of Shirley Lewis and Geraldine Brady's paper on adoption in England, where comparatively high levels of non-consensual adoption have developed in the past 20 years compared to other European countries. Although adoption is described as a last resort in the legal framework, austerity-based cuts in family support, accompanied by an ideological shift towards decontextualised parental responsibility, raises the question whether this is the reality. The authors 'highlight the ways in which the adoption process reflects and/or exacerbates inequality', as evidenced by in-depth interviews with 12 birth mothers and two birth fathers using a life history approach. The parents gave graphic details of the difficult material, practical, health, and relationship circumstances they faced leading up to the placement of their children for adoption. It is the combination of these interlocking problems, often following long periods of deprivation and personal difficulty, which comes through in the accounts: 'you've got the health, you've got my housekeeping, not brilliant (laughs) you've got domestic violence, you've got gangs and crime (pause), that is a great number of things to deal with in one context.' The placement of children in care adds not only emotional stress but also additional scrutiny, whilst exacerbating material and practical difficulties. Parents spoke about conflicts between the requirements set by social workers to attend meetings, contact visits with their child and parenting support sessions, the costs involved, and incompatibility with work or the demands of benefits agencies. Post-adoption, parents continued to face adversity, with their sense of failure reinforced by social stigma and the advantaged circumstances their children were now experiencing: 'she's going to be along the lines of upper class whereas she's going to see her dad on the poverty line'. The authors conclude that in a context of steep social and economic inequalities, adoption, while sometimes necessary, can be seen as compounding the cumulative social insults parents have already experienced.

Two further papers discuss the experience of young people, mainly girls, subject to prostitution in Malawi or sex trafficking into the USA, discussing aspects of sexual abuse in the context of intersecting social inequalities. The lives of young women and girls in Malawi, discussed by Pearson Nkhoma and Helen Charnley, take place in a very different context to the developed countries in the other papers. Half the population of Malawi is under 15 years of age and nearly three quarters of the population are living on less than $1.25 a day, with access to education and healthcare beyond most people's means. This economic context, when coupled with significant levels of HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria, and other diseases, contributes to the high number of orphaned children and young people. These profound disadvantages are reinforced by cultural patterns of gender inequality, characterised by early marriage and pregnancy, school drop-out, and domestic violence. Against this background the paper reports research which explored the causes of female child prostitution and participants' perspectives on their involvement in and routes out of prostitution. The findings powerfully illustrate what the authors describe as ambiguous agency—in the context of highly curtailed choices, participants see prostitution as a survival mechanism for themselves and other family members, but it has uncontrollable consequences in terms of subsequent exploitation and abuse. The authors argue that Sen's capabilities approach offers 'a multidimensional way of conceptualising child prostitution, drawing attention to structural factors, as well as individual behaviour and experiences, and linking child prostitution to questions of national development and social justice.'

The links between macro-economic forces—a history of colonialism and globalisation in the article by Nkhoma and Charnley—and the lived experience of sexual abuse and exploitation is also apparent in Lisa Werkmeister Rozas, Jason Ostrander, and Megan Feely's research on domestic minor sex trafficking within the USA. The complex relationship between the young women involved and the traffickers, often family members or peers, is contrasted with the clearer economic and patriarchal hierarchy between trafficked individuals and perpetrators, intersected by other dimensions of identity such as race and gender. The paper describes an underlying policy shift in the USA from criminalising child prostitutes to viewing them as victims, transferring the focus of law enforcement onto traffickers and trafficking. Alongside law enforcement, child welfare services traditionally aim to prevent the abuse of young people already involved with child welfare, identifying individuals considered at

risk by focusing on their behaviour. This had the effect of neglecting both young people outside the child welfare system and the wider societal context in which exploitation takes place. The authors describe how a structural social work approach involving critical consciousness led to new forms of practice which address contributory factors in service systems, legal frameworks, and the wider public discourse. It also transformed workers' relationships to the individual young people involved by recognising their agency alongside their right to protection. Applying this comprehensive, structurally informed policy to the issue of domestic minor sex trafficking required extensive training for a wide range of relevant audiences and a fundamental reconsideration of the nature and content of service provision.

A similar shift from individualising practice to a strategic approach is found in the final paper in this Special Issue, which outlines the reframing of anti-poverty work as a central task of social work in Northern Ireland. Claire McCartan, Aine Morrison, Lisa Bunting, Gavin Davidson, and Jackie McIlroy report on recent evidence from a large UK wide research study, which found that poverty was often a taken-for-granted backdrop to social work practice in child protection: 'too big to tackle and too familiar to notice'. Social work has to a large extent withdrawn from engaging with families' socio-economic conditions, instead placing expectations on parents to meet particular requirements despite the absence of adequate resources and services. They report on the development of an anti-poverty framework for social work as a direct response to these findings. They identify anti-poverty work as a core business for social workers and a necessary element of ethical and effective practice.

Where Next?

Collectively, these papers go some way to establishing the international relevance of an inequalities perspective on child welfare—an unsurprising outcome at a time when increasing inequality is a central concern of global social relations, lived out in struggles over migration and climate change, working conditions and housing, and the rise of populist politics. It is arguable that struggles between families and the state over the definition of and responses to child abuse and neglect is one of the clearest manifestations of contemporary conflicts over inequality, power, and social order. There are few more extreme examples of state power than the forcible separation of a child from their parents.

Methodologically, the papers reinforce the need for mixed methods of study to elucidate the day by day experience of living at the sharp end of unequal societies. Without hearing directly from parents and children, it is impossible to adequately capture the subtle interplay of different forms of power, involving, not just economic forces but also the longstanding exploitative patterns based on race, gender, and health/disability. However, the papers in this Special Issue also make it clear that such daily experiences of exploitation, abuse, and adversity cannot be understood in the absence of a wider political context. This includes the consequences of colonialism built upon notions of racial and gendered superiority. The absence of papers employing contemporary quantitative methods of presenting and analysing evidence is a significant limitation. It is through the mutual interaction of evidence that patterns of inequality at the population level and how these work out in myriad human interactions that the building blocks of socially just policy and practice will emerge.

Empirically, the papers add to our understanding of the ways in which social inequalities are central to specific child welfare practices, such as adoption or responses to sexual exploitation. They demonstrate how an unreflexive approach to social work can find itself reinforcing social inequalities; for example, by responding differently to families according to their social class position or by denying—in practice, if not in principle—the role that economic circumstances plays in adequate parenting. However, particularly in the examples from Northern Ireland and the USA, the papers also show how a clear-sighted strategic approach to practice, operating at multiple levels from higher-order policy to the frontline, can shift the centre of gravity towards services which aim to equalise the power imbalances faced by families and individuals.

Theoretically, the papers in this issue all advocate explanations which link private and public worlds. They reinforce a sense of social work's ambiguous position in shaping and managing the

conceptions of families', parents', and children's lives in the context of profoundly unequal societies. There is more work to be done to get to grips with the roots of that ambiguity and questions remain regarding how to reposition social work and how to reshape social relations in ways that create more equal life chances for parents and families.

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