Understanding Child Welfare Inequalities: Six UK Case Studies

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To become a stakeholder in the Child Welfare Inequalities Project
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The Case Studies

Two overarching questions

1. What is the interplay between decisions to intervene in children's lives and their social, economic and material circumstances?

2. Can we establish and investigate the IIL?

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Comparative

*Why is it that <u>similarly</u> deprived localities within **more or less deprived LAs** produce <u>different</u> child welfare intervention rates?*

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Mixed Methods

- Photographs and walking tours of case study sites

- Non-participant practice observation

- Semi-structured interviews (key informants)

- Focus groups (SWs/IRO)

- Case narratives

- Decision making flowcharts

- Analysis of documents

- Desk based research

Emerging Findings: Poverty as a Context

- **Poor localities are the usual sites of social work practice – this is an accepted norm.**

- The overwhelming scale and complexity of unmet need and the hollowing out of family support resources form a uniform experience across all the sites

- Poverty is ingrained, endemic but usually not visible in practice responses and, though there were differences, this was surprisingly consistent across all the sites

- When prompted social workers articulate their understanding of the circular relationship between poverty and harms

- This understanding was rarely evident in case planning

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The wallpaper of practice.....

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IRO: …you do see some good reports that analyse the blocks, and financial circumstances are mentioned in these, or home conditions, or having fled in a time of crisis, but **setting the child's needs in the overall macro political context of [Site] – whether you are reliant on benefits or availability of shops – that doesn't happen**. I don't see it happening as a matter of course. Poverty is looked at as part of a spectrum of issues that we could look at addressing, but in terms of the overall - "what it's like to live in [Site]as a five year old if your mum and dad don't speak English and your moving every six months because you can't afford a stable home and you are going to a school where 90% of the children are in the same circumstances" - it doesn't figure, no it doesn't feature.

Practice and Poverty

- **Our analysis suggest that existing frameworks cannot address the core issues for families. There is a need to reconnect with this and pay attention to the structural context that bear upon families**

- Social workers don't see anti poverty activity as 'core business' – they say they focus on risk / parenting and that others should be addressing issues of deprivation (food, warmth, shelter)

- Poverty as 'too big to tackle' in a context of ever diminishing resources

- The availability of services shape and constrain social work analysis

- In their attempts to practice equitably, some social workers consciously disengaged with the social and spatial distribution of social work demand

- Some systems and practices can reinforce the shame and suffering of poverty for family members

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IILSW: We also do a lot of signposting families to foodbanks, or we can issue foodbank vouchers. But we tend, if we can, **we are more than fully committed doing what we would consider our core business, which is doing parenting skills, parenting capacity change type of things. And this other stuff, whilst in a perfect world we should be doing it, and doing it with family, the reality is that the work load people would say "you need to be doing other things**, getting other people to do that sort of thing for them, you can't, you haven't got the capacity and if you do it, you **run the risk of drowning"**

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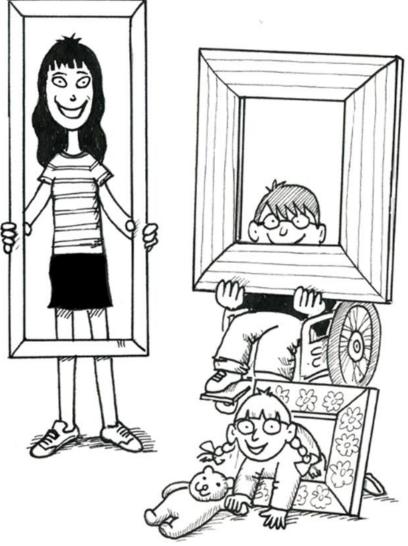
Summing Up: messages for practice and policy

- Re connect with the core business for *families* and value work to tackle issues of hunger, shelter and warmth (amend assessments, arrangements for family engagement, case plans)

- 'Poverty check' procedures, do they reinforce the shame and debilitating consequences of poverty?

- Identify and use income maximising services – form working partnerships with local services

- For some children additional resources can't solve the problems, but practice can still be humane (but isn't always).

- Practice isn't enough – structures and systems need to put deprivation and poverty at the heart of planning and service development

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The aim is to re-frame child welfare

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