Supporting families : a historical lens on the contradiction of support and neoliberal objectives

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Abstract

An increased focus on 'family' has developed as part of the social investment state in many countries. In the particular case of England, an intensive state gaze on so-called Troubled Families has developed, where the emphasis is on families with more complex issues that draw on the financial resources of the state. Taking a historical perspective, an exploration of literature across several decades shows some continuity in the ideas of the troubled or problem family: interesting similarities across the decades are highlighted.

Along with these portrayals, ideas about how such families can be supported are presented through this historical lens. Thus, contemporary support to families is then problematized, as arguably such support now occupies a space where the retrenched rights (to support) and the vigorously emphasised responsibilities (of individual behaviour and labour market activation) intersect. This article adds to debates on the discourse surrounding troubled families and the neoliberal policy management of the family, providing a discussion of the role of support in such a context.

Key words: troubled families, family support

Introduction

At a policy level, family support approaches have been gaining increasing prominence in recent decades with the advent of Think Family approaches becoming widely implemented in different forms, for example whole family approaches (Malin, Tunmore & Wilcock, 2014). In many ways the family itself in its various forms has come to be seen as a key base in which many social problems are both rooted and where interventions to resolve issues can take place: a key tenet of the social investment approach (Lister, 2003). Arguably recent policy developments in the UK have tempered this move; in a context of retrenched resources the ideas of support have become somewhat narrowed to the confines of early and often shorter intervention (Frost, Abbot & Race, 2015). Certainly, however the general focus on family as an arena where more independent, economically active citizens with fewer social problems can be produced, has widely taken hold, as Murray and Barnes (2010) describe, family as a 'site' where care, neglect or various actions take place.

The relatively recent notion of the 'troubled family' which is a focus of this paper had been generated as a result of Coalition Government policy in the UK. This controversial construction of particular families has been explicitly linked with the involvement of the welfare state and with the level of state expenditure on what are seen as 'multi- problem' families (Levitas, 2014). This led to the re-branding of what were formerly known as intensive family intervention projects (FIPS) and had been set up following the 'Families at Risk' review (2008). After coverage of the London riots in England, the tone and language to describe the families changed markedly (Bristow, 2013) with the focus on individual blame and behaviour change within families. A speech by the Prime minister at this time cited the

'Troubled families' and marked the proposed roll out of a new targeted policy (Bristow, 2013). In this paper, drawing on a historical lens to examine the discourse around families with problems, it is clear that there is continuity over many decades in both the terms used to describe families and also the suggested approaches to deal with their issues. Thus the usefulness in exploring some of the history of these ideas is that it highlights both continuation and change. Hayden and Jenkins (2014) note the lack of lack of learning from previous periods in relation to how vulnerable families are treated. Thus brought into relief by this exploration are some of the particularities of the current context which both continues and exacerbates the conflicts in supporting families who have complex issues.

The continuity of supporting 'troubled families'- looking at history

In examining some of the literature on 'troubled' or 'problem' families through the decades, two areas of interest emerge. It is apparent that there are some similarities in the portrayal of such families and also the intensive intervention and support which is suggested as a solution to the associated issues. Looking at a flavour here of some of the literature, conceptualisations of poor families with multiple problems who are also often labelled as dysfunctional are evident in their continuity. In fact, some of the portrayals of such families appear to be almost identical despite the different geographic and temporal contexts; some of the discourse about such families therefore has long roots and has persisted over time. A number of writers have discussed the portrayal of troubled or problem families through history: in particular, Welshman (1999, 2012) examines the conceptualisations of poor families that reveals patterns of labels and depicting a form of 'underclass' through different points in history. In tracing social work history with the problem family at the turn of the 20th century, the rise of the eugenics movement was seen as a key contribution to such ideas that some kind of residual group of very problem families persisted (Welshman, 1999), with an overall move away from the ideas of individual pathology from the 1960s onwards. More recently, Murray and Barnes (2010) have suggested that an analysis of current policy documents in interventions with families reveal a 'categorisation' of families into responsible/resourceful and antisocial/socially excluded.

Below, two particular papers are presented as they provide an example of defining the characteristics of multi problem families from both a previous decade and a more recent source. Interestingly at these two different times and in two different locations, remarkably similar definitions are provided of troubled or problem families. Firstly, there is an extract from conference paper proceedings in Victoria, Australia (Tierney, 1959) where problem families and what could be done about them as a burning social issue was discussed. This extract is then juxtaposed with a very recent of issues from Casey's (2012) report on Troubled Families in England. The similarities over time relate to both the nature and characteristics of the problem family and, as will be discussed later, also refer to what could be done to solve the issue and how such families could be worked with. The two extracts are set out below:

> *'Intergenerational transmission; Large numbers of children; Shifting family make-up; Dysfunctional relationships; The anti-social family and friends network; Abuse*

;Institutional care; Teenage mothers; Violence; Early signs of poor behaviour; School; Anti-social behaviour; Mental health – depression; drugs and alcohol'

(Casey, 2012)

'Characteristics: reluctance to use services, continually recurring problems, ill health, mental health, neglect financial problems, housing, school, relationships, drink problems, frequent moves, child behaviour'

(Tierney, 1959)

The first extract taken from list of contents/issues in Louise Casey's Troubled Families (2012) report runs alongside the extensive outlines of the Troubled Families policy and funding arrangements that the DCLG produced in 2012. This particular publication included the narratives of a number of families derived from in-depth interviews: the participant's accounts present a picture of some of the complex and long standing issues they face (Casey, 2012). The context of Tierney's description can be contextualised in terms of it occurring in a developed country that had established a compensatory welfare stare in the post war period. In Australia, however, this welfare provision was very much linked to paid employment, described as a *'wage earners' welfare state'* (Castles, 1985, cited in Harris & McDonald, 2000). Therefore Tierney's paper is written at a time when perhaps a perceived increase or persistence of problem families linked to issues of work/worklessness were apparent. Tierney himself became a leading family services scholar where the roots of the development of social services in Australia was beginning.

Descriptions of multi problem families that Tierney outlines above persisted through the next two decades in literature about families. Moving onto the 1970's, when the focus of welfare and social services would have shifted to taking a broader approach, rather than the individual pathology of families that was the focus of social work and psychology in the 1960's, there was still a focus on these particular families evident. Weissman (1978) discussed *'multi problem families'* in the US during the Johnson administration, whilst Fleischman, Horne & Arthur (1983, p.249) described families that were *'harder to work with'* characterised by personal issues, poverty and lone parenthood. This latter comment certainly has echoes in our very recent focus on 'hard to reach' families. Problem families are described as persisting even despite shifting economic conditions in this US context: *'…against a backdrop of improved social & economic conditions . . . .'* (Lahiff, 1981, p. 35). It appears that in different time periods in western societies, the issue of tackling poverty and social problems for families left a perception that there were a proportion of 'multi problem families' where issues persisted that required some kind of state attention.

A second feature of discourse around multi problem families that has persisted over time has been commentary of the estimated numbers of such families, and their projected cost to the public purse. In the UK post-war decade, the medical establishment, which was heavily involved in issues of child health, welfare and mortality rates published a number of documents about such families: indeed medical professionals and the eugenics movement had a key influence (Welshman, 1999). One example of this was the British Social Hygiene

Council. Commenting on resources required to deal with this issue of such families, he noted:

'…we should accept such expenditure as the lesser of 2 evils…' (Brockington, 1949, p. 10).

The Lancet medical journal around this time provided a quantitative estimate that there were 62 families in the North West of England, amounting to 1 in a 1000 families, which were characterised by multiple entrenched problems (Blacker, 1946). Of course these historical comments have clear echoes of the identification of estimated numbers of troubled families found in the Respect policy agenda in the UK many decades later and in the subsequent Troubled Families policy that followed this. Comparing this focus on the cost to public services in the UK that presently exists, a review of problem families in Norwich from archive material cited below, showed a focus on the cost of resources to a minority of families in the area with multiple problems in the 1940's:

> *'…household chaos & mismanagement…'* and *'…those that receive a disproportionate amount of resources and staff time…'* (Taylor & Rogaly 2007, p.452).

Turning again to the 1959 paper in Australia, in another part of the developed world, we find problem families are quantified and the cost of dealing with their entrenched problems is emphasised:

> *'…6% of families…' '….absorbing over half the community's health & welfare services…'-*
> *'…multi problem families who produce so many troubled people and cost the community large sums of money…'* (Tierney, 1959).

Again, It appears that across different decades and locations the issue of attempting to quantify the prevalence of multi problem families along with a focus on how much they use the resources of the state has been a cause for discussion.

A further area of similarity in considering multi problem families is found in writing on the subject that discusses potential solutions to their issues. Conference proceedings archived from the UK post-war period shows the suggestion of the kind of intensive work later mooted by Louise Casey and evident in the FIPs projects:

> *''…Patient intensive work over a long period…"* was required with families where*: ".the cost to the community in time energy & money is excessive…"* (Blacker, 1946, p. 5).

Writing in the Lancet medical journal, another writer in the 1940's suggested similarly that a close personal relationships and skilled workers were required to help such families, with the skill and tenacity of workers important (Brockington, 1949). Much later, a couple of decades forward in the US, a focus on the worker/client relationship is advocated in dealing with complex families, using: *'…kindly but firm control…'* (Feldman & Sherz ,1968, p.268). An interesting focus in the US at this time was on the difficulty in engaging with families

> *'…families suffering a variety of health & welfare problems, and with chronic dependence on community services, whilst nevertheless displaying apathy towards agency efforts or actually resisting or rejecting the services.'* (Brown, 1968, p.7).

Again, in terms of how such families interacted with services, Smith (1974, p.20) described large chaotic families where there was a *'mutually mistrustful impasse'*. This certainly echoes with current discourses in the UK, where troubled families are portrayed as hard to engage and having rejected the input of services. Moving on to the present day, Casey (2012, p. 4) suggests: that workers with Troubled Families, owing to the families history of engagement with a number of services, would use: *"… persistence and assertiveness with families to keep them engaged."*

Several writers have explored this intensive approach in intervening with multi-problem families, linking intensive family support type work to the early role of social work in the family service organisations (Welshman, 1999). These organisations emerged from the Pacifist Service Units who began to focus on casework: they had a style that was but very involved, relationship based and involved practical help for families, suggesting that the idea of an intensive type of intervention is one that has been used at various points in time. Indeed, more recently Parr (2009) explored the links between the FIP projects, arguably the forerunners of the Troubled Families projects, and social work roots and practice.

Current context: The neoliberal policy management of the family

The literature outlined shows similarities in the depictions of and discourse about multi-problem families over time. In particular, there is continuity in the ideas of an 'underclass' of families and the state's concern with particular families. It is useful to consider these similarities but they also throw into relief some of the differences in our current climate as some aspects of this discourse become amplified. In terms of thinking about the family itself in relation to policy: there has been a shift in the state/ family balance worldwide: with a focus on social investment it seems the family has become a site of interest to many governments. Family has long been a concern of the state to some extent and therefore a focus of policy, with various approaches to 'governing the family' (Parton, 2014). However, the current more intensive focus on some families is a key area of change. This rebalancing has taken a particular form in the case of England, with the re-branding of the former intensive family support services (FIPs) into the Troubled Families projects. So whilst state interest has developed in relation to all families, it is so-called 'problem' families who are seen as the root of much antisocial behaviour (Featherstone, Morris & White, 2014). Because of this, a more assertive, well-planned state focus on what are deemed a troubled minority of families has developed in the UK, and also in other countries such as New Zealand (Beddoe, 2014). This increased focus on multi problem citizens such as troubled families in itself is not surprising in a neoliberal society, as Webb (2006) points out, this developing division between capable citizens and contrasting 'underclass' populations who require targeted intervention is apparent. In the case of families, this targeted intervention becomes largely focussed on parents and their behaviour. The focus on parenting generally has grown but with a particular emphasis in the Troubled Families programme in England where parents are seen in policy terms as an important site of intervention.

There is a body of writing that illustrates the clear continuity through many decades of ideas around poverty and idea of the deserving/undeserving poor, as cited earlier. There are echoes of this prevailing discourse in the writing around problem families, with reference to poor living conditions. There appears to be a clear overtone of the perceived existence of an 'underclass' in relation to multi problem or troubled families. This emerging depiction of families as some kind of subgroup with entrenched problems that are different in scale and intensity to other families is evident throughout the historical literature. And moving forward to the present day, such accounts seems inextricably linked with views on welfare claimants and the notions of the undeserving poor (Welshman, 2012). The intense scrutiny within the Troubled Families programme is set in the context of a discourse of labelling the 'underclass' (Bristow, 2013).

Neoliberal governments clearly emphasise notions of individual responsibility: it would seem in particular that poverty and structural causes as an explanation for the troubles of families is all but gone, replaced by the idea of individual responsibility (Bunting, Webb & Shannon,2015). The focus on worklessness in the Troubled Families programme is an example of this shift: it is the behaviour of families and of parents that become the focus for intervention, along with the emphasis on their activation into the labour market as a key route out of poverty. In the more recent policy documents in England, intergenerational worklessness is cited as a key reason for the targeted interventions of programmes (Casey, 2014, 2015), with poverty itself not mentioned. Beddoe (2014) notes the similar decline of welfare and increased authoritarianism that has framed the approach to what are termed 'feral families' in new Zealand. Importantly, this vigorous portrayal of a cohort of families is also accompanied by a general retrenchment of welfare and support services. This is linked with a widespread move in most countries from welfare as compensatory to conditional (Taylor-Gooby, 2008). The shift in the discourse away from structural issues onto the individual and heralds a poverty management approach that promotes the management of problem populations (Wacquant, 2014), including those who are deemed to be 'troubled' or multi problem families.

 In the 1970's in the UK, Means (1977) had described media and social outrage about a small number of problem families on a housing estate in the midlands. Examples such as this show that media coverage about a subgroup of problem families is not new. In recent times however this kind of media coverage has increased, with a particular focus on recipients of welfare payments. Media portrayals of families intensified recently in the UK after the riots in 2012, with reports of families as the root of anti-social behaviour linked welfare dependency (Bristow 2013). This runs alongside a raft of television programmes and news stories that fuel populist discourses about welfare around need and individual responsibility. So despite the continuity and similarities in the depictions of troubled and multi problem families, the stories of families who are the subject of intensive family intervention in Casey's report (2012) are set in this current context of this more individualised construction of family behaviour and will arguably be perceived and interpreted in this new context.

A dichotomy between support and policy objectives?

What was evident from some of the historical literature along with the conceptualisation of problem families, was the suggested solutions and how to intervene with such families. The features of working with families are described as an intense involvement, with workers who are persistent but patient and get involved in practical tasks (Feldman & Sherz ,1968). Of course, this very much mirrors the idea of the key worker currently: this has been particularly important in the Troubled Families projects, as it had been in their forerunner, the FIP projects. Casey (2012) describes the features of such key working, outlining a no-nonsense, 'sleeves rolled up' style that combines practical and supportive approach: ''…*deeply practical, unafraid to roll up their sleeves and get things done''* (Casey, 2014, p. 60); workers who are firm and supportive, having to "… strike a difficult balance between being supportive and being challenging…" (Casey, 2013 p.460). There are some important resemblances in the approaches across the decades here, but in the present climate keyworkers will be operating in this more recent policy setting. So whilst the role of those intervening with such families shows continuity through different points in time, providing 'support' in the current policy context produces some tensions for those operating on the frontline.

There are already a number of areas of critique of such 'support' provided to families in these circumstances in current times, not least from an ideological standpoint, in terms of what this 'support' actually means for families. Key workers set out to provide intensive support based on practical and emotional elements, occupying a particular position in the physical space of the family's home (Parr, 2011). Here, the particularly intensive nature of intervention can be experienced as intrusive (Parr, 2011). There are also critiques of such intensive support provision in terms of its coercive nature, where contracts and sanctions are in use, along with the problematic use of categorisation that is intrinsic to the Troubled Families project. Butler (2014) notes the harsh moralising of the social recovery model that pervades child welfare services in general, but especially for those who are disadvantaged. Furthermore, the very notion of 'support' itself can be questioned, where the focus is intervention to produce behaviour changes rather that provide support in itself.

However, the idea of promoting the welfare of some of the vulnerable and complex families through a range of practical and emotional support is a crucial idea for the family support arena. Thus many have pointed out that the intensive approach, which was exemplified in the FIPs and then translated into Troubled Families policy, has proved advantageous for families (Flint et al, 2011). The FIPs arguably produced improved outcomes for children, young people and families: a range of benefits and outcomes that were clearly positive in the majority of cases; recently emerging evidence from troubled families' projects indicates similar positive results (Jones, Matczak, Davis & Byford, 2015). Families with a range of complex and long standing issues feel they have been supported through a range of interventions. Research findings from interviews with both frontline key workers and service users in small scale studies have indicated very positive results that are reflected in the literature (Parr, 2015).

Along with the key worker role, other features of an intensive working approach such as the targeted approach and multi- agency input have been part of this. However the benefits of

the intensive key working role, particularly in terms of relationship building is seen as pivotal (Parr, 2015). Bond Taylor (2015) raises the issue of the empowerment of families through the key worker input by enhancing less tangible qualities such as emotional and psychological well-being: her concern is whether this can be maintained as fully in the restrictions of the payment by results element of Troubled Families phase two. Such emotional and psychological benefits, along with increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy are viewed as being intangible and difficult to measure as 'softer' outcomes. Although such a relational style of working as part of keyworker intervention may be seen as a softer and more unfocussed option, Parr (2015) points out that this relational approach is based on a rich set of skills with the relational aspect *in itself* producing positive effects for the families. Early findings from troubled family teams point to a continuity of the work carried out by FIPs, with an emphasis on a relationship based approach rather than an instrumental focus on intervention.

Conclusion

Exploring some of the depictions of troubled or multi problem families can be useful in highlighting current policy and practice developments. Whilst some continuity is clear in the perceptions of a perceived subgroup of families, the suggested interventions with families also show some interesting similarities. The positive aspects of this kind of intensive intervention and support is outlined above and in the current derivatives of troubled families project, is targeted at particular families. This intervention exists now however as part of the neoliberal policy management of problem families that creates it. For frontline and key workers, this means that they operate within this tension, created by providing a supportive and positive approach in the context of a discourse of risk and blame. This creates a dichotomy within which frontline workers operate: providing positive support but in a more punitive and authoritarian state context that focuses on behaviour change and individual responsibility. The targeted and intensive support which proves so successful is located in this policy discourse and a retrenched system of funding and support, thereby situating workers where rights of families and children (to support) and responsibilities (of individual behaviour and labour market activation) intersect.

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