

“Family minded – a ‘coalition of despair’
or a ‘covenant of hope’?”

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What is family?

- Historically definition driven by composition
- In recent decades move towards understanding family by relationships and practices (how families do family)
- Value of 'family' as a means of describing how people organise their relationships
- Children are relational beings – and predominantly their families are the context for resolution
- Childrens accounts of 'family' are not bound by geography, proximity or blood ties

Who is in your family?



The settlement between the family and the state (England)

- A paradigm shift 'children in need' to 'high risk high harm' then to 'feckless and failing'
- Families as 'natural disasters' from which children require rescuing
- A substantial increase in investigations (80%) and within this unfounded investigations (60%)
- The hollowing out of family support: 'too little for too long, too much too late'
- Those with the least experience the greatest risks of scrutiny, intervention and out of home care – moral and ethical questions for practice and policy

Troubled families and troubled services

"a life of soiled nappies and scummy baths, chaos and hunger, hopelessness and despair",
Gove 2012

'Whatever you call them, we've known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations.'

Cameron 2011

- Government figures on 'troubled families' flawed and disputed – unlikely to be an homogenous group that is a static population
- Complex and contradictory experiences for families – simultaneously resourceful (kinship carers) and troubled (inherited dysfunction) (Murray and Barnes)
- Families as protectors and inhibitors of children's well being (Powers)
- Family support services have born the brunt of childrens services cuts, particular challenges for local voluntary organisations
- The role of social work is becoming redefined - social work is strangely absent from a raft of preventative and intensive programmes

.....'they are shrinking my space to live'

The inner world of families

- 'Family practices'

Family studies have witnessed a significant shift to understanding what families do, not what families are (Morgan, Finch), social work still to capitalise on this knowledge when considering highly vulnerable families: its is under developed in assessment, observation, '3D' planning

- The ethic of care

Families will seek to do right by vulnerable family members, families will apply a practical set of ethics to making difficult plans and decisions (Williams 2000). Models of family engagement reveal capacities to plan safely for children and vulnerable adults, and expose previously hidden knowledge, resources and care

The Focus of Concern

Who and what is family:

'do you mean who lives in this house or who is in my family?'

- Children's accounts of family are not bound by geography, proximity or blood ties – the value of dynamic genograms and whole family approaches (mother centric)
- Mutuality in not knowing – families accounts of services and services accounts of families

Practices that make a difference - drawn from family narratives

- No fixed 'identity at engagement'
- Demonstrated care in practice with curiosity not censure based conversations
- Strength focused interventions (signs of safety, FGCs, RSW)
- Some evidence that solution-focused methodologies, when delivered by committed and empathic practitioners, can benefit families with complex needs, and are generally viewed positively by family members
- The quality of the practitioner – confidence, strong messages of competence
- As ever, relationship based practice over time with practical help and familiarity
- Approaches that examine the complexity of family life and the multiple identities
- Stressors acknowledged and addressed – not converted into risk indicators

Inhibitors and Promoters (1)

Partial engagement :

they've always done that haven't they, like made appointments just for me and XXX, and then we'll go and see 'em and then we'll come back and .. these lot haven't got a clue what's going on, just apart from what I've told them

Avoidance / communication routes:

They didn't say XXXX had to go, but they were saying the best thing for me to do and for the kids was for me to get rid of him, but I never told XXX that.

Fresh Starts and Resistance

'It was just going from one agency to the next, to be told... it's like... you keep going on, repeating yourself, and they say the same things, and then you're like whoa, I've been in this situation before, but you're a different person. And it's just the same thing and in the end you think might as well...'

Inhibitors and Promoters (2)

The legacy of multiple experiences of repeated interventions should not be underestimated -moving the family on from an ingrained narrative about a service (e.g. social workers want your children, or police want to move you on, or teachers wont help) is important if change is to be supported:

'...if somebody else helps and it doesn't work you're still left, you're left with double the amount of work really, you can't do that anyway, why should you do that now, why should you let them.'

'Yes, she phoned up last week, it was meant to be YYY, but she's on maternity leave, so we've got somebody called XXX now, but we haven't met her....We've had social workers come and goes..... We've had two, three.....there's a lot of workers come and go, (our daughter) has got to know them and then they've gone off again, then someone else has come in.'

How do we harness the possibilities?

- The household is never enough – fragile and scrutinised yet likely to have the least capacity and be experiencing the greatest pressure (*'we used to live near her but we had to move because of the bedroom tax'*)
- Think relationally – know the child, their family and community (*'she talks to me about ordinary stuff'*)
- Seek out unbroken helpful connections / relationships for families (*'she shouldn't have but she kept popping back, just to say hello, but don't tell anyone I told you this'*)
- Despite developments in policies and family minded practice we remain mother centric – think systemically and change the load bearing points (*'I had to wait in the kitchen'* step grandfather in kinship care case)
- Spaces for enacting an ethic of care - are you adding to the problems or easing the load? (*'we want to help but it's two bus rides and by Tuesday I don't have the cash'*)

Strength based models in risk saturated systems

Families appreciate the change in tone and the skilful engagement

'At first he was coming out he was so judgemental and stuff like that. Now she is trying to understand rather than being in your face'

Tone, skills and change.....

'She is saying 'this is brilliant'. Nothing has changed, I have had to deal with the damage, and I am the one keeping my son safe'

However, opened up reciprocity but in a complex way....

'when Max came he was given 23 cases all in one day.....you don't want to put on, although there is help we could do with, but not all the time. Just every now and then'

Enacting Care: FGCs

- Family plans from FGCs reveal extended capacities to engage in *careful* practices
- Where FGCs are fully implemented we see significant increase in:
 - a) Extended family engagement
 - b) Reconfiguration of professional support and kinship support
 - c) Kinship placements
 - d) Recognition of 'mattering'
 - e) Changes in professional discourses about families
- Over 90% of families arrive at safe agreed plans
- Plans also reveal family practices in relation to care, and children respond positively to being the focus of concern

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