

Review Article

‘Getting with the (troubled families) programme’: a review

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Introduction

The commitment of the appointed Director General of the Troubled Families Unit, Louise Casey, that the Troubled Families Programme (TFP) was ‘an opportunity not to repeat the failed attempts of the past’ masks several enduring continuities (Casey, 2012: 3). This review article argues that the TFP should be seen as part of a wider spectrum of policies which locates ‘troubles’ or ‘problems’ in the family itself and emphasises behaviour as the target of action without regard to wider social or economic considerations. This policy process must be understood within a wider context of not only historical efforts ‘to constrain the redistributive potential of state welfare’ (Macnicol, 1987: 316) but also of contemporary forms of neoliberal governance of ‘the family’ (Butler, 2014; Crossley, 2016a; Gillies, 2014).

This article seeks to explore these interconnected movements, exemplified in the intentions and interventions of the TFP. First, we consider the longer history of the TFP as part of an ‘underclass’ discourse. Second, the more recent history of Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) in developing modes of family intervention is discussed. Third, we then discuss the implementation of policies in local authorities and the conflicting pressures workers and providers are subjected to. Fourth, the relationship of the TFP to wider coalition and Conservative government neoliberal policy measures and austerity priorities will be assessed. Finally, the TFP will be placed within an international context, pointing to larger developments.

The Troubled Families Programme and the ‘underclass’

The TFP represents only the most recent of a series of iterations which conflate social and economic problems of poverty with individual and family failings, and find their remedy in punitive policies rather than welfare provision (Macnicol, 1987; Morris, 1994; Welshman, 2013). Macnicol has argued that such narratives originated in the principles of the English Poor Laws (Macnicol, 1998: 164), but that their significance lies in their relationship to the industrial society and to their periodic ‘rediscovery’ (Macnicol, 1987: 296, 314). Welshman has further noted that ‘rediscovery’ is a cycle whereby new terms emerge in response to temporal anxieties, obtain popularity and then disappear once they gain negative connotations (Welshman, 2013).

Both Macnicol and Welshman have traced the rise and decline of such labels in the UK:

- the 'residuum' of the 1880s;
- the 'unemployable' of the 1900s;
- the 'social problem group' of the 1930s;
- the 'problem family' of the 1950s;
- the 'cycle of deprivation' developed under Sir Keith Joseph in the 1970s;
- the notion of an 'underclass' imported from the USA throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Macnicol, 1987; Welshman, 2013).

Welshman has further located five points of continuity in this 'rediscovery of the underclass': the role of ascribing undeservingness to sections of the poor; scapegoating and stereotyping of their behaviour; similarities in the form and functions of labelling as a process; emergence during crises or exposure through rising affluence in wider society; and the difficulty of applying such conceptions to practical policy and verifying the results (Welshman, 2013: 230). Historians have shown concern that these reinventions point towards this commonality in the Victorian 'residuum' (Mazumdar, 1980; Stedman Jones, 1984; Crossick, 1991), the Edwardian 'unemployables' (Stedman Jones, 1984; Welshman, 2006) and the interwar 'social problem group' (Jones, 1986; Macnicol, 1989; Welshman, 2013). Although within each of these iterations experts sought to identify common characteristics within the 'underclass' – unrespectable behaviour, poverty and their perpetuation in the family – the ambiguities of definition prevented any substantive policy outcome.

The transference of the conception of an 'underclass' into concrete policies emerged in post-war Britain through family policy and social work. Public concern over the habits of 'unruly children' during the wartime evacuation (Macnicol, 1986; Welshman, 1999) led to the 'underclass' being recast as 'problem families'; with their 'rehabilitation' achieved through intensive supervision both in their own home (Starkey, 2000b) and for the more difficult cases in residential homes (Welshman, 2008). Problems of neglected and 'unruly children', household squalor, poverty and delinquency were located in the family, and services framed intervention by finding the cause of these problems and the social work solution in the mother. The publicity that these 'rehabilitation' services generated over their purported 'success' shaped post-war family social work policies and interventions, despite their limited evidential basis (Starkey, 2000a). These themes would be recycled but not 'rediscovered' through the TFP (Parr, 2011b). Recognition of social and economic difficulties and the 'rediscovery' of poverty by sociologists in the 1960s shifted policy emphasis away from finding fault in the family, to wider structural barriers (Taylor and Rogaly, 2007; Todd, 2014).

Sociological studies exposing the experiences of poverty and their structural causes did not prevent the 'rediscovery' of the 'underclass' after the 1960s. During the 1970s, Sir Keith Joseph promoted the idea of a 'cycle of deprivation' rooted in poor parenting (Welshman, 2012) and encouraged research on 'problem families' (Rutter and Madge, 1976; Brown and Madge, 1982). During the 1980s and 1990s, the idea of an 'underclass' led to the continuation of similar concerns, particularly in the work of Charles Murray which transferred such debates from the USA to the UK (Murray, 1990, 1994, 2000). However, whilst the 'underclass' has been periodically reinvented in history, 'problem families' have particular significance in locating these behavioural problems in the family,

and enabling policy and social work interventions beyond discourse and moral panic; themes which both Macnicol and Welshman discuss in this issue.

New Labour, family intervention projects and evidence-based policy

The most recent label to emerge from within the 'underclass' discourse is 'social exclusion', developed under New Labour. 'Social exclusion' was also realised in policy through FIPs seeking to target families 'at risk' to prevent intergenerational 'cycles of disadvantage'. These can be seen as a direct forerunner to the punitive and expansive growth of the TFP (Butler, 2014).

Although initially woven with redistributive elements (Sefton and Sutherland, 2005), 'social exclusion' soon became a *condition* rather than a *process* accounting for poverty (Fairclough, 2000: 56). The targeting of broader 'excluded' groups, including rough sleepers, truants, teenage mothers and those with mental health needs, eclipsed consideration of the contexts in which they emerged (SEU, 2004; Burchardt, 2005; Hill, 2006). Problematically, such elasticity in definition also made measurement of success difficult to prove (Levitas, 1998: 159–77). These interrelated concerns led to the problem of 'exclusion' being traced back to the family as the root cause, as a failed site of social reproduction (Jordan and Jordan, 2000). Crucially, seeing 'social exclusion' as a condition allowed social work services to move to a refined targeted approach, identifying those 'at risk' earlier, intervening quickly, more effectively and cheaply (Nixon *et al.*, 2010).

This primacy of the family within later New Labour 'social exclusion' discourses can be seen in the rise of FIPs, although similar rhetoric was found in other services such as Sure Start (Read, 2015). FIPs as a policy solution were pioneered through the Dundee Families Project, whose evaluation in 2001 claimed to demonstrably reduce anti-social behaviour in 'problem families' and inhibit 'social exclusion' (Dillane *et al.*, 2001). Early evaluations elsewhere also affirmed the ability of targeted, intensive intervention services (Nixon *et al.*, 2006; White *et al.*, 2008). David Gregg has criticised the sanction-driven methods which underpinned many of the projects, arguing that poor health, poverty and chronic difficulties were of greater importance as issues in the research evaluations than the measurement of behaviour (Gregg, 2010). The preference for FIPs as a policy to manage 'social exclusion' by New Labour meant that much of the evidence provided by government commissioned research inevitably justified their utility (Churchill, 2011; Gregg, 2015: 35–60).

FIPs were rolled out as a strategy for reducing 'social exclusion', aiming for services to 'grip' the 'problem families' (RTF, 2006: 22). In tandem with 'successful' methods of intervention was the development of the Families and Children Study, which identified 120,000 'at risk' families 'with multiple disadvantage' as those experiencing five out of seven problems:

- no parent in work;
- family lives in poor quality or overcrowded housing;
- no parent has any qualifications;
- mother has mental health problems;
- at least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity;
- family has low income (60% below median);
- family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items (SETF, 2007: 4).

Social workers and services were provided with a clearer conception of the ‘problem family’, and provided with a means of identifying them earlier. These new criteria made the process of evaluation less stratified across local authorities and allowed for a degree of standardisation, but not to the extent realised under the TFP through payment by results (PbR) (Bond-Taylor and Somerville, 2013: 45–50; Hayden and Jenkins, 2014: 641–5). Retaining a degree of local autonomy was key to the personalism many FIP practitioners identified, and families experienced, as positive in the evaluations (Parr, 2009, 2011a; Morris, 2013; Thoburn *et al.*, 2013) although it must be situated within a wider professional anxiety over status and performance delivery experienced by social workers (Jones, 2001). Moreover, the gendered content of practices, comparable to post-war ‘problem families’, in managing mothers through parenting interventions, shows the significance of targeted, in preference to universal, welfare measures for the ‘underclass’ (Gillies, 2012: 104–6).

Crucially, Ruth Levitas has demonstrated continuity of FIPs in the TFP through the appropriation of indicators and the number of such families from the Families and Children Study (Levitas, 2012: 8). It also created a discursive shift from families *with* troubles to ‘troubled families’ with FIPs the preferred and proven model for targeted family intervention.

Implementation, negotiation and resistance

All 152 local authorities in England ‘signed up’ to take part in the TFP, which, given the funding attached to the programme amidst wider cuts to services and the political profile it enjoyed, is perhaps unsurprising. In keeping with a wider government desire to promote localism, no statutory guidance or legislation was issued for the TFP. Local authorities were free to decide how to implement the programme in their areas and could also apply a ‘local filter criteria’, in addition to the three criteria established by the Department for Communities and Local Government, to identify ‘trouble families’ (DCLG, 2012: 9). Local authorities were not, however, given an entirely free rein. They were expected to use a ‘family intervention approach’ (Cameron, 2011; DCLG, 2012) and had to achieve the outcomes set by the government to receive PbR funding. They were also expected to meet the timescale established for ‘turning around’ all ‘troubled families’ by the end of the Coalition Government’s term of office in May 2015. In 2014, local authorities were informed that to be eligible for the second phase of the programme, they would have to meet hastily introduced ‘eligibility thresholds’, effectively requiring them to turn around almost 100% of their target of ‘troubled families’ by the end of the first phase of the TFP (Crossley, 2015).

Most local authorities used the discretion afforded to recontextualise the programme, with many preferring to drop the term ‘troubled families’ from their titles (Hayden and Jenkins, 2014: 642). More generic or ‘positive’ sounding terms such as *Families First*, *Thriving Families*, or *Stronger Families* were used by local authorities to describe the work they were doing under the TFP.

Individual workers involved in the delivery of the programme have similarly attempted to distance themselves from the national narrative that portrays families as ‘neighbours from hell’, and there has been little evidence of a local reliance on sanctions to engage families. Bond-Taylor (2015) has highlighted the difficulties faced by keyworkers working with ‘troubled families’, who simultaneously attempt to resist the *responsibilising* national discourse, which blames families for their own circumstances. Other research (Hayden

and Jenkins, 2014: 642; Crossley, 2016b) has highlighted how keyworkers have sought to reinsert the issue of poverty into their local practice, despite the topic being conspicuously absent from the national narratives surrounding the 'root causes' of the problems faced by 'troubled families'. The extent to which local practice manages to contest or subvert political discourses is, however, unclear and some practitioners are very supportive of the programme. These themes are explored further in the contribution by Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage in this issue.

These findings are in keeping with the wide body of literature on the role of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), such as social workers, youth workers, teachers and police officers, in negotiating, resisting and adapting national policies for the citizens on the receiving end. Similar practices have been identified in relation to 'problem families' during the post-war period (Todd, 2014) and under pioneer projects under New Labour. Parr and Nixon (2009: 108–9) note that local FIPs 'developed an alternative conceptualisation "of the problem" of ASB [anti-social behaviour] that, in part, contradicted the national popular discourse at the time' and that individual workers 'actively challenged media stereotypes that referred to families as "neighbours from hell" or "yobs" (see also Parr, 2009; Ball *et al.*, 2016). A further central concern of FIPs and the TFP is their construction as a response not just to 'troublesome' families but to the putative failures of costlier ways of delivering services to such families. The emphasis on earlier identification and intervention applies not just to the families in question, but also to the service as a means to reduce dependency on the state (Davies, 2015).

Austerity Britain: 'hard-working families' v 'troubled families'?

In 2010, the Coalition Government of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats promised to put aside their political differences in order to 'work in the national interest'. The parties were agreed that a programme of austerity was required to improve the country's finances. The focus of this austerity was cuts to public services and welfare provision to such an extent that, if realised, the reductions would see the UK 'have the lowest share of public spending among major capitalist economies, including the USA' (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). Austerity was, then, 'ideologically reworked' (Clarke and Newman, 2012: 300) from being an economic response required by the financial crisis of 2007–8 to a political response to the perceived unsustainability of a welfare system that allegedly encouraged worklessness and dependency.

Research from many organisations has demonstrated that reductions in local government funding and the effects of welfare reforms have hit disadvantaged populations the greatest (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013, 2016; Innes and Tetlow, 2015). Analysis of the Conservative Government's proposed welfare reforms from 2015–2020 undertaken by academics at Sheffield Hallam University (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016: 3) concluded that as '83 per cent of the loss from the post-2015 reforms ... can be expected to fall on families with dependent children'. Lone parents with two or more children are estimated to lose, on average, £1,750 per year by 2020.

The effects of the welfare reforms and tax changes were undoubtedly uneven, despite rhetoric that the country was 'all in it together' and the Prime Minister's official spokesperson stating that the government would 'ask those with the broadest shoulders to contribute the most' (in Hope and Winnett, 2012). A much more divisive rhetoric was, however, also evident within the Coalition Government. Political statements about

helping 'hard-working families' whilst simultaneously intervening in the lives of 'troubled families' and promising to get tough on 'benefit fraud' played out in the popular press as the government being on the side of 'strivers', not 'skivers' and 'workers' not 'shirkers'. The function of the TFP in solidifying a status and class divide of 'us' and 'them' and functioning beyond the confines of the programme are explored in the contributions from Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage, and Sayer (this issue).

The launch of the TFP, and its subsequent expansion, during a prolonged period of austerity, serves to highlight the centrality of the family in contemporary forms of neoliberal governance in the UK. The policy shift from 'social exclusion' to 'troubled families' has already been noted. Cameron's broad brush concern about a 'Broken Britain' as Leader of the Opposition has also crystallised into a political programme that emphasises the importance of work, sometimes underscored by the threat of sanctions with, or on, 'the family' to resolve almost any issue of policy concern. Cameron (2014) has argued that:

Whether it's tackling crime and anti-social behaviour or debt and drug addiction; whether it's dealing with welfare dependency or improving education outcomes – whatever the social issue we want to grasp – the answer should always begin with family.

More recently, he argued that 'Families are the best anti-poverty measure ever invented. They are a welfare, education and counselling system all wrapped up into one' (Cameron, 2016). In this new welfare landscape, it is no coincidence, then, that the poor and disadvantaged families who were the biggest losers in the government's welfare reforms are also the main targets of the flagship TFP – 'perhaps the most intensive form of state intervention there is' (Cameron, 2016). Whilst Cameron was keen to highlight the intensity of the 'troubled families' approach, a civil servant suggested the evaluation of the TFP was being 'suppressed' because the analysis suggested that the programme had no discernible impact on issues such as truancy, criminality and unemployment (Cook, 2016).

International iterations

The idea of an underclass is not, as has been noted above, unique to England or the UK. It should, however, be noted that the programme only operates in England and there are no similar or comparable programmes in the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Although the 'family intervention' approach of the TFP is often traced back to the Dundee Families Project, academics have noted the 'significant change in emphasis' (Nixon *et al.*, 2010: 312), which accompanied the journey across the border. Nixon *et al* (2010: 313) argue that the introduction of sanctions and the discursive shift from 'family support' to 'family intervention' demonstrated that 'English FIPs were clearly designed as a disciplinary form of technology acting to both contain and control behaviour'.

In the 1960s, the American cultural anthropologist Oscar Lewis propagated the idea of a culture of poverty in developing countries based on research carried out in Latin American communities and, more recently, Charles Murray and others have promoted the idea of an underclass in the USA (O'Connor, 2001). In 1999, the American sociologist Elijah Anderson drew a distinction between 'decent families' and 'street families' (see Wacquant, 2002, for a trenchant critique of this and similar work). Different iterations of the underclass label are usually applied to members of poor and marginalised black

communities in the USA, and racialised elements can be found in other countries. In New Zealand, for example, Beddoe (2014) has traced a concern about 'feral families' associated with the Maori population, and, in parts of mainland Europe, it is young North African males that have been targeted by punitive policies aimed at curbing anti-social behaviour (Burney, 2008: 143–63). Inevitably, both have historical antecedents (Labrum, 2004; Nasiali, 2012).

As one might expect, wherever the 'problem' of an underclass can be found, a policy 'solution' also usually exists. Much of the evidence drawn upon by proponents of intensive social work with 'problem families' in the post-war period drew heavily upon studies and practice from North America (Geismar and La Sorte, 1964; Brown, 1968; Schleisinger, 1970). The alleged innovative approach of the TFP, and the FIPs before it, belies the work that Garrett (2007) has done in highlighting not just domestic antecedents to the idea of 'family intervention' but also international comparators. He (Garrett, 2007: 209–11) identifies similarities between different elements of the original FIPs and approaches used to address 'asocial families' in Germany in the 1930s and 'socially weak' and 'anti-social' families the Netherlands in the 1950s (see also De Regt, 1982; Van Wel, 1992). Projects targeting families – more specifically, parents – that combine elements of family support with some more challenging forms of intervention can also be found in France (Join-Lambert, 2016; Martin, 2015), Germany (Ostner and Stolberg, 2015) and Sweden (Lundqvist, 2015). This international focus on parenting practices in disadvantaged, marginalised, 'troubled' or 'high-need' families (Join-Lambert, 2016) demonstrates that the increasing political fixation with 'family' is not specific to the UK. Further discussion of international perspectives can be found in the Useful Sources section of this issue.

Conclusion

The TFP, then, along with its international siblings, is perhaps best viewed, not as a programme that is 'distinct' from austerity measures taking place across the globe or one that is somehow 'different' to other welfare reforms, but rather as a central pillar in efforts to shape a 'new' form of state in the UK and beyond, with 'the family' often placed at the centre of these efforts.

In the UK, the use of deprivation statistics, along with population figures, to estimate the number of 'troubled families' in each local authority area meant that poorer areas, which saw the biggest reductions in central government funding, were allocated more 'troubled families' (and funding) than more affluent areas with similar population levels. Some of the household types hit hardest by the welfare reforms, such as poorer families, lone parents and families with more than three children, are also those who are disproportionately represented in the TFP. Whilst (often universal) public services supporting marginalised groups in deprived areas have been cut, the more targeted and outcome focused TFP has been simultaneously rolled out.

Discussion on the efficacy of family intervention, such as that which followed the leaking of the TFP evaluation report to BBC Newsnight (Cook, 2016), has largely occurred without reference to the wider socio-economic context in which it is situated, and belies the purpose the TFP serves. It is not 'troubled' families nor 'troubled' services which constitute the key area of concern but one of 'troubling' states and governments.

Considering the TFP solely as a service-driven policy change overlooks the impact the 'enabling' state has in destabilising, marketising and marginalising vulnerable sections of society in everyday experiences. Consequently, the contributors within this issue seek to broaden these narrow horizons and draw upon historical, sociological, economic, social policy and social work frameworks to understand the wider significance of the TFP as part of a broader process and understand its relevance beyond the narrow discussion it has so far elicited from the public and policy-makers.

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