**Families, policy and place in times of austerity**

**Introduction**

Families in the UK have over the past five years been hit with an array of cuts and reforms to state benefits and other forms of government support such as tax credits. These changes have been shown to affect socio-economically disadvantaged families with children disproportionately (FPI 2011, 2012) above other households. Different measures affect different groups of families, but the UK government’s own impact assessment of a recent reduction in the overall amount of benefits available (‘benefits cap’) suggests that more than 330,000 children will be adversely affected (Butler & Arnett 2015). These cuts to household income coupled with precarious employment and housing insecurity means that many more UK families are now struggling with access to basic amenities such as food, a home and health (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015, Ridge 2013).

Yet, as Clarke and Newman (2012) describe, the ‘alchemy’ of austerity involves not just economic changes and re-ordering, but a more discursive resettlement in relation to public services and social policy, around how citizens and their relationship to government are understood. Although families are being targeted by cuts to state support, in other ways they are being increasingly relied on as key to delivering aspects of the social changes which the UK government wishes to implement. This article begins by exploring this paradox further through a critical review of recent UK policy discourses and programmes. I then develop an argument about the importance of a geographical approach to understanding how socio-economically disadvantaged families experience these diverse pressures. I argue that whilst families are presented as decontextualised and individualised within current UK policy (Jensen and Tyler 2012), this perspective can be countered through attention to the wider geographies which shape their lives. These include their everyday landscapes of care, both material and emotional, which are in turn shaped by resources available including state services.

Overall I suggest that a revived interest in ‘family geographies’ (eg Evans 2014, Valentine and Hughes 2012) has not yet paid sufficient attention to welfare reform, policy, politics and governance, especially as they impact on the most disadvantaged families. Although informed by empirical research (Author 2012, Author 2013, Author forthcoming), the argument is developed here primarily through a policy and research literature review. The paper therefore makes the case for family geographers to make a significant contribution to social policy debates at the current time, and to add to the small existing literature which brings together family geographies with issues of policy, politics and state power (Harker and Martin 2012, Oswin and Olund 2010, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012). The paper will demonstrate how austerity is making the family a matter of policy concern in new ways (Jensen and Tyler 2012) and how the perspectives of social and cultural geography can be used to understand welfare in practice within the unequal contexts of everyday family lives.

**Imagining risky and resourceful families in social policy regimes**

In approaching the geographies of family, and the related geographies of home (Blunt and Dowling 2006), there is a sense of what Newman (2014) calls a ‘psychic splitting’ between powerful normative imagined entities and the fluidity and messiness of lived experience and practices of intimacy, belonging and attachment (Valentine 2008). Valentine and Hughes (2012, 254), drawing on Gillis (1996) discuss the co-existence of the ‘ ..(family) we live with (in everyday reality, with all its imperfections) and the one we live by (i.e. our idealised families that are constituted through rituals and representations and that serve as a moral anchor for the way we think our intimate relationships ought to be)’. Social policy is inevitably implicated in the latter versions of family, of promoting normative visions that occupy particular places within wider approaches to the social order and to welfare (Wilkinson 2013). This has led to academic debates about the extent to which social science researchers should use the idea of family as a framing concept at all (see Edwards and Gillies 2012, Wilkinson and Bell 2012).

Indeed although families have long been a target of policy intervention (see Rose 1990), particular visions of families can be seen as playing a key role within the ‘third way’ UK policy regimes of the past two decades (Giddens, 1998), given families’ potential to act as arenas of citizenship and community between the individual and the market. Lister (2003) has analysed the Labour administration’s (1997-2010) approaches to supporting families within the framework of the ‘social investment state’, whereby investing in families early is understood as a way of mitigating the ‘risks’ posed by children as they become future citizens who may either make active contributions or be a drain on public resources. Yet such a framing then raises further questions about which families might be imagined to be capable of such a role. Murray and Barnes (2010) use what they call a ‘trace’ analysis to identify competing constructions of families across a wide range of policy documents produced by the Labour government. They identify four constructions of ‘family’: 1) the ‘socially excluded’ family, who is seen as vulnerable and possibly risky to family members; 2) the ‘anti-social’ family, understood as risky to the wider community; 3) the ‘responsible’ family, performing appropriate roles, and 4) ‘resourceful’, actively promoting ‘pro-social’ behaviour among family members and the wider community. Within this vision, families are seen to either contain and mitigate against, or actively produce, forms of social risk. Such risks are particularly associated with parent-child relationships, and as Barnes and Murray (ibid) point out, much of what might be branded as family policy, in fact focuses on parenting.

Despite the problematics of such policy constructions, the Labour government also developed a range of ambitious and innovative policy projects focused on families (Featherstone et al 2014, pp24-28). One of these was Sure Start, an area-based approach to providing a range of services to families with young children, initially in the most disadavantaged areas, but expanding to become a universal programme of Children’s Centres. Such a programme therefore took a community and area-based approach to support, opening up ‘possibilities for a more solidaristic and universalist approach to risk’ (Featherstone et al 2014, p 27, see also Horton and Kraftl, 2009, author 2013). This in itself tied in to a host of other area-based projects to tackle disadvantage under the Labour government, from New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal, and ‘Action Zones’ of different kinds (Imrie and Raco 2003).These programmes were also not unproblematic, but they represented attempts to examine issues and services in an holistic way within particular localities.

**The binaries of austerity-talk**

Within the context of the fragmentation and thinning of welfare and care within the current austerity state (Barnes 2011), binary understandings of families as either risky or resourceful can be seen as increasing (Jensen and Tyler 2012). This binary chimes with the ‘strivers vs skivers’ rhetoric around work and worklessness, also produced by UK government discourse (Coote and Lyall 2013). Bringing such binaries into view is a helpful way of analysing seemingly contradictory views of families emerging from policy discourses.

Within a logic of austerity therefore, there is increasing pressure for families to be self-sufficient in relation to welfare and care, yet this then poses further risks for responsible citizenship when they seem unable to fulfil this. Furthermore, such a binary between risky and resourceful families justifies a move away from universal support services for families (such as the Children’s Centre programme) to more targeted ‘interventions’ for particular families (see FPI 2012). A particular concern for the most ‘risky’ families also speaks to wider concerns in the UK media around child protection and abuse ( Featherstone et al 2014) which government has needed to be seen to be responding to.

Therefore one set of policy approaches sees families as increasingly relied on as sites of welfare resource, as services such as adult social care are cut or become increasingly fragmented. This can be viewed as what England (2010, 138), writing about welfare reform in the US, called ‘the re-privatisation of social reproduction’. Such a fragmentation is bolstered by new paradigms of service delivery calling for ‘personalisation’ and ‘co-production’ (Needham and Glasby 2014), whereby services are negotiated and produced at a much more individual level. These paradigms were developed under the previous Labour administration, and in many cases stem from important critiques of inflexible institutions and calls for the re-scaling of services around people’s specific needs (Carr 2014). However the coming together of these shifts with austerity can leave service users increasingly reliant on the unequal resources of care and support within individual homes and families (Barnes 2011). As institutions such as day centres are shut down service users may be increasingly ‘stuck at home’ (Needham 2014), with the geographies of care services contracting to be much more focused on unequal domestic settings (Needham 2015). Universally available services for children and young people outside the home, such as Children’s Centres and youth centres, as opposed to targeted social work services, have also been a particular victim of cuts (FPI 2012).

Yet whilst the emotional, material and practical resources of families are therefore being increasingly relied upon by the UK state, there is also an increased sense of stigma around the ‘non-resourceful family’. This has been reflected in popular media representations (Jensen 2014, Pykett 2014) which in themselves reflects political discourse which increasingly divide families into categories, particularly been ‘working’ and ‘dependent’ (on benefits) families, despite the fact that many low-wage *working* families are actually supported by the state (Shildrick et al 2014). Indeed as well as binaries around risky/risk-reducing and resourceful/dependent, another framing binary within contemporary social policy discourse about families might be understood to be around *stability* and *instability*.

**Unstable and troubling families**

A sense of instability as a feature of dysfunctional families can be seen within the policy statements associated with the ‘Troubled Families’ programme (Levitas 2014), one of the few new family-orientated initiatives of the current UK government, and which targets interventions at families seen as ‘troubled’ across a range of issues including worklessness and school attendance. The programme was launched on the back of a (subsequently much criticised, see Bailey 2012) ‘report’ (DCLG, 2012), based on interviews with a very small number of families participating in a family intervention service. The report frames lurid accounts of life within the nation’s most ‘anti-social’ families:

The most striking common theme that families described was the history of

sexual and physical abuse, often going back generations; the involvement of the care system in the lives of both parents and their children, parents having children very young... and the children going on to have behavioural problems, leading to exclusion from school, anti-social behaviour and crime.

(DCLG 2012, 1)

Such a generalised approach, linking young parenthood, the care system, behavioural problems and sexual and physical abuse, clearly plays into wider stigmatising discourses about socio-economically disadvantaged families.

The programme therefore seeks to ‘turn around’ these families through a range of forms of intervention. Interestingly, the instability and risk associated with these families is seen as potentially threatening not just socially to a wider community but *economically* to the entire nation. Eric Pickles (2014), announcing some of the ‘successes’ of the programme recently stated:

The Troubled Families programme demonstrates exactly what our long-term economic plan means for people. New opportunities for families to turn their lives around and make something of themselves; more economic security for local communities blighted by worklessness; and more economic stability for taxpayers, as we reduce the bills for social failure and get this country living within its means (DCLG 2014)

This narrative therefore moves beyond New Labour’s promotion of the ‘social investment state’ in which spending on early intervention can save money over the lifecourse (Lister 2003), to justifying this programme in the context of immediate gains for other taxpayers.

Similar arguments around the promotion of certain versions of family as a source of stability (see also Wilkinson 2013) have been central to the work of the Centre for Social Justice, a right-wing think tank. Their recent report ‘Fractured Families’ (2013) on ‘how family breakdown continues to plague British society’ argues for the importance of shoring up family stability as key to the avoidance of a whole range of social ills. They make the claim that ‘family breakdown’ costs the country £46 billion a year, and that this figure is rising.

Such heightened constructions of risk in relation to families can place pressing new demands on children’s service practitioners. Recent research (FPI, 2011) on how local authorities in the UK are dealing with cuts to children’s services found that officials were aware that they were ‘presiding over decreasing budgets – yet were also being positioned at the centre of government ambitions to mend a ‘broken’ society’ (ibid, 19). Featherstone et al (2013) argue that within social work, paradigms of risk management, heightened fears around child protection and ‘early intervention’ approaches are combining to contribute to an increased pressure to remove children from families via care proceedings (ibid, 1739).

Thus far I have argued that new policy ‘versions’ of families have emerged over the past five years of austerity social policy in the UK, which have intensified some of the binaries in family imaginaries identified by Barnes and Murray (2010) in relation to the previous Labour government. On the one hand, shrinking public spending and new paradigms of welfare have placed ‘resourceful’ and ‘stable’ families as increasingly important in providing care that would have once been provided by the state. On the other hand ‘risky’ and ‘unstable’ families are targeted through increasingly stigmatising policy discourses and interventions that are justified through strategies to minimise the social and economic risks posed by these families to the wider community, economy and nation.

As already suggested, there is also a shifting geography of such policy, in which attempts to understand and provide services to families within their wider local contexts have been replaced by a much more individualising and moralising approach to families as units which either spread or contain social harm and risk. Although benign evocations of community as arenas for care may appear in policy literature on, for example ‘co-production’ (Needham and Carr 2009) there is no acknowledgement of the way austerity is impacting on these local contexts to create uneven geographies of care and support (Beatty and Fothergill 2013, Needham 2015) and therefore uneven capacities to ‘co-produce’ services.

In the rest of this paper I want to suggest how geographical research should contribute to a radical de-centering of these narratives, to frame versions of families as distributed and entangled across times and spaces, rather than self-contained units. Indeed much journalistic and policy orientated research has already begun to try to challenge paradigms of austerity by producing detailed empirical accounts of families in place (Ipsos MORI 2013, O’Hara 2014).

**Placing families across time and space: caringscapes**

As human geographers have argued over the past few years (see Valentine 2008, Valentine and Hughes 2012, Valentine et al 2012), there is a particular potential for:

geographers to make a significant contribution to understanding how people, in Morgan’s terms ‘do’ family. This is because of the opportunities afforded by the study of space and time to explore the relationships between individuals identities and practices and how the family is created and lived between people’ (Valentine and Hughes 2012, 243).

This quote captures something of the distributed nature of families-in-practice: as located between and beyond individuals and always-in-the-making. There is therefore considerable scope for geography research to explore how the ‘small everyday worlds’ (Ribbens McCarthy 2014, 329) of family life are emplaced within wider geographies which they both shape and are shaped by. Using geographical research to explore this in the light of the policy imaginations expressed above seems more pressing than ever, where, as already noted, the ‘troubled’ and ‘resourceful’ families of policy imaginings are de-contextualised and seemingly out of place.

However there remains a lack of such research, especially in relation to vulnerable families. Despite a fairly long standing strand of research on children and young people and neighbourhoods (Matthews et al 2000, Holloway and Valentine 2004) and some research on parenting and neighbourhoods (Holloway 1998, Author and co-author 2013) there is much more limited recent research on how neighbourhoods and localities shape family experiences, practices and understandings of what is means to be a family more broadly. Two exceptions (by non geographers) are firstly the research of Anne Power (2007, Power et al 2011) who led a project collecting and tracing over time 200 families’ experiences in four marginalised UK neighbourhoods. Within social work, Evans and Holland (2012) researched deprived neighbourhoods and social networks in Wales and how they shape collective approaches to childcare and risk.

Indeed in their book challenging many key paradigms in current social work with children, Featherstone et al (2014, 105-112) also argue for a return to a much more ‘emplaced’ approach to families, which returns to notions of ‘patch work’ and ‘getting alongside’ families within communities and localities to understand their everyday lives in context. Such an approach, they argue, would draw attention to the capacities and resources within so-called disadvantaged families and their wider settings, as opposed to seeing deprived families as always lacking and needing intervention

Featherstone et al (2014) also draw attention to the idea of ‘ordinary help’ rather than ‘professional intervention’ for families. Previous research on Children’s Centres (author 2013) and school inclusion workers (author 2014) has demonstrated the importance of workers who can connect families to other contexts, institutions and networks, for example enabling inclusion in playgroups and access to services. My research has also drawn attention to the fact that it was the collective support offered by other parents within these ‘in-between’ spaces that was often most valued by users, despite this being marginal to the stated aims of the services. Such ‘inbetween’ roles and programmes may be particularly invisible and vulnerable to cuts in services yet may make crucial differences to families.

One potential avenue for exploring these issues is to use Bowlby et al’s (2010) notion of ‘caringscapes’ to explore spatial and temporal landscapes of care, including relationships, formal and informal, emotional and material kinds of support as well as the (uncreasingly uneven) geographies of service provision and place. This concept was developed in order to ground some of the more abstract analysis of care within the practices and experiences of everyday lives, and to speak to policy and practice (Bowlby et al 2010, Evans 2014).

A caringscapes approach can reveal how landscapes of care become routinised over time, but can also shift. Indeed in researching families as geographers, it seems important to focus on *time* as well as space in tracing how families may move between problems, troubles, resolutions, coping and ‘normality’: both within cycles of the everyday and also over the lifecourse (Ribbens McCarthy et al 2014). Within current contexts of increasing poverty and pressure on disadvantaged families, everyday pressures may be concerned with the short term material demands of food, heating, and housing, ‘the politics of daily life’ (Wekerle 2004). Mapping such material constraints brings back into view what may seem an obvious link between conditions of *poverty* and family ‘troubles’ (Dermott 2012). Crucially they show how the resources and risks navigated by families are not just located within families themselves but within the wider landscapes in which they are emplaced.

In the longer term, research (author 2013, 2014) on various forms of family support service has also shown that the needs and aspirations of families shift dramatically over time, relating to children growing up, family members become elderly and so on. This importance of temporality therefore enables us to think differently about vulnerability, interdependency and change in families and to make the case for forms of flexible, long term support based on sustained relationships rather than short term interventions.

**Conclusions**

There are particular challenges in linking the intimate geographies of family (Valentine 2008) with wider social, cultural, economic and political geographies (Pain and Staeheli 2014). As Clayton et al (2015) show, experiences of austerity are often primarily individualised or privatised within households and families, and this has implications for the development of a wider progressive politics. As my analysis has shown, current UK family policy promotes individualised and binary understandings of families within discourses, as well as reducing services in order that care becomes an increasingly privatised matter within unequal domestic and familial contexts.

Within this context, therefore, an important role for the emergent revived interest in ‘family geographies’ is in exploring families as emplaced within localities and wider geographies and temporalities that shape their experiences and opportunities in relation to family life and care. Such an exploration can demonstrate that families may be *both* risky and resourceful, and have strengths as well as vulnerabilities, and that these change over time.

Indeed it would be wrong to suggest that those delivering services on the ground do not necessarily share these aspirations. Despite attempts by policy to shape practitioners’ views of families, public sector workers are often able to work across and between policy programmes in creative ways, whilst retaining different values to those envisaged in policy (author 2013). For example, the Troubled Families programmes in practice has often overlayed previous programmes and approaches to family support work (Hayden and Jenkins 2014), which invoke quite different versions of family. Indeed in researching the wider geographies of family life, research can also point to the ways in which policy ‘versions’ of families are contested and unravelled on an ongoing basis within the ‘witches brew’ (Li 2007, 86) of state programmes in practice. This paper has argued that it is important that geography research engages with social policy around vulnerable families. However, if as researchers we limit engagement with policy to critical readings of policy documents, then there is a danger that we miss the ways that family policy programmes in practice are always more messy but also more hopeful (Horton and Kraftl 2009) than might be imagined.

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