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Engaging with uncertainty: studying child and family welfare in precarious times

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We live in a historic period of heightened and intersecting uncertainties. This article draws on Bauman’s (2012) metaphor of ‘liquid modernity’ to discuss the precariousness of family lives and child and family welfare provision in the context of austerity politics in contemporary England, before going on to consider the implications for research and researchers. Contexts of constant uncertainty have ethical and methodological implications for family research, particularly for studies concerned with services for children and families. When precarisation is an instrument of government, we need approaches to understanding ‘what works’ that are fit for liquid modern times: engaging with the complex contingencies of child and family lives and of the systems and services that they encounter, and actively resisting individualising and deficit-focused narratives in the study of child and family welfare. I focus my reflections on England because it is where I live and work, but the considerations I discuss have relevance for any context where the erosion of welfare provision coincides with growing inequality for children and families.

Key words welfare services • evaluation • methodology • precarity and precarisation • liquid modernity

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Child and family welfare¹ in ‘liquid modern’ times?

Since Families, Relationships and Societies was established ten years ago, it has carved a distinctive space among social science journals in its attention to the complex diversities of family lives and relationships in the context of wider societies and social inequalities. Inspired by that history, this article draws on Zygmunt Bauman’s (2012) concept of liquid modernity to argue that contemporary contexts of constant uncertainty have ethical and methodological implications for family research, particularly for studies
concerned with services for children and families. Over the years since *Families, Relationships and Societies* was established, reductions in public sector spending have coincided with increased targeting of provision, with a corresponding emphasis on the evaluation of service innovation. What does it mean to study welfare provision for children and families, when both family lives and child and family services have become increasingly precarious? Of course, ‘evidence’ is never politically neutral, but in precarious times there is a heightened need for research designs and research narratives to engage respectfully with the people whose lives we research.

Bauman coined the term ‘liquid modernity’ to describe what he saw as a shift to a new form of late modernity, a turn away from the traditional solidity of modernity, which he described as characterised by the idea that ‘no mould is broken without being replaced by another’ (Bauman, 2012: 7). He argued that this traditional conceptualisation of modernity, rooted in Enlightenment ideals, was characterised by the belief that the best solution for society can be defined and achieved, with the state playing a central role in this work. This, he wrote, was an inherently privileged and Eurocentric imaginary of the ‘modern’ nation-state, with the educated classes tasked with putting society in order. Bauman conceptualised the late-modern shift as moving from this traditional solidity to a liquid modernity, where the one constant is that nothing is permanent:

Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects – but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. To ‘be modern’ means to modernize – compulsively, obsessively; not so much just ‘to be’, let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever ‘becoming’, avoiding completion, staying underdefined. (Bauman, 2012: vii)

Bauman (2012) argued that this shift was driven by two things: first, the collapse of the belief that there is an end to the road – the belief that a final ideal society can be achieved; and second, the diminishing role of the state through an emphasis on individualisation, deregulation and privatisation.

Bauman’s work is not without critique, not least for his lack of attention to gender and ethnicity (for example, Francis and Skelton, 2008; Rattansi, 2017). Moreover, as Rattansi (2017: 229) notes, Bauman was far from the only scholar to point to ‘the rise of these new levels of inequality, insecurities, anxieties, addictions, risks and planetary dangers’. The metaphor of liquid modernity – and its evocation of the constancy of change – also resonates with debates about the role of the welfare state and the increasing normalisation of precarity within contemporary societies. In the context of a ‘virtual roundtable’ on precarity, edited by Jasbir Puar (2012), Isabell Lorey observed ‘The normalization of neoliberal precarity has a long history in industrial capitalism, where insecurity in working and living has, for a lot of people, been the norm, and the welfare state is the exception’ (Lorey 2012a: 165).

This same roundtable discussion addressed the uneven effects of precarity, positioning ‘some bodies and populations as less precarious in relation to those who are rendered more precarious’ (Puar, 2012: 169). Writers such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1992) have made claims to more gender–equally relationships in later modernity (see Mulinari and Sandell, 2009, for a feminist critique), but Lorey (2012a: 165) points in particular to the precarious position of women – and mothers – within the ‘heteronormative logic of social security, based on a male breadwinner’. Berlant (2012: 166) comments on the ‘uneven desiccation of the public sector materially, ideologically, and in fantasy
that “austerity” has come on offer as the name for the new realism’. She goes on to relate this to ‘affective and material hoarding’, and writes that, ‘the privatization of wealth, the diminution of the state to a servant of capital, the question of whether the body politic is a burden or the sovereign, all of these are at play now. Suddenly bromides of modernity are again in question’ (p. 171). As she explains:

Thus we are caught figuring out how to deal with antagonism, with the inevitable sense that resources are finite, with social cleavages and conflicting aims, which so often produce not more liberality and democracy but affective and material hoarding. What formal and informal institutions, but also what affective aspirations, should arise to create and multiply structures for our collective good-life imaginary? Refining and experimenting with these questions is the task of social theory right now – for me, anyway. Berlant (2012: 171–2)

These arguments – and Berlant’s imperative to prioritise these critical considerations ‘right now’ – are not just a matter for social theorists, but are highly relevant to researchers such as me, who study child and family lives, and services, in times of constant change and increasing precarity. We must recognise the implications of the changing contexts in which families are living, and in which child and family services are operating, and being researched. And we must acknowledge how our work contributes to a good-life imaginary of the relationship between state and family – to affective and material hoarding, and so to the uneven effects of precarity in contemporary society.

**Affective and material hoarding?**

Over the last ten or more years, the welfare landscape in England has changed – as of course has been the case in other countries too. In England, the 2010 UK general election brought a change of government – to a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, followed by the election of a Conservative government in 2015 (subsequently re-elected in 2017 and 2019) – and the introduction of a programme of political austerity, with the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review beginning a decade of cuts to public sector spending. As Berlant (2012) writes, austerity politics were – and continue to be – positioned through a discourse of realist necessity which belies their ideological underpinning. In England, ‘deficit reduction’ was framed in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review as ‘unavoidable’, ‘an urgent priority to ensure economic stability’ (HM Treasury, 2010: 5) given the legacy of the government’s Labour predecessors and the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis. Twelve years later, the most recent statement from the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer maintains this rhetoric of necessity in speaking of ‘decisions of eye-watering difficulty’ that will include reductions in public sector spending (Hunt, 2022).

Analysis by Harris et al (2019) highlighted that funding systems and funding levels have changed over the last ten years. Cuts to central grant funding coincided with increasing reliance on local tax generation, alongside successive freezes on council tax² (and hence, the potential for local income generation); consequently, overall revenues to local authorities have fallen significantly. Echoing Berlant’s (2012) observations about the ‘uneven desiccation’ of the public sector, these impacts have played out unevenly across the country. The most deprived municipalities have experienced the most significant fall in resources, with a 31 per cent reduction in net spending...
per person, compared with 16 per cent in the least deprived local authorities (Harris et al, 2019). Against this context, Harris et al (2019) recorded that local authority spending on children’s social care had increased slightly during the same period, but they note that this change is attributable to rising demand for safeguarding:

> Between 2009–10 and 2017–18, the number of so-called Section 47 enquiries (an enquiry into whether a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm) increased by 120%, the number of children on a protection plan increased by almost 40%, and the number of children looked after in foster homes or other settings increased by 17%. (Harris et al, 2019: 44)

This rise in demand for statutory safeguarding services coincides with dramatic cuts to non-statutory, universally accessible and/or early intervention provision (Webb and Bywaters, 2018). Smith et al (2018) have documented the decimation of the Sure Start children’s centre programme in England, which was a key initiative of the Labour government between 1998 and 2010. At its inception in 1998, the Sure Start programme was based on the ‘idea of a locally-based open access neighbourhood centre within “pram pushing” distance for parents’ (Smith et al, 2018: 20), providing universally accessible and targeted multi-agency support for young children and their families. Services provided by Sure Start children’s centres were open to all, but there was targeting in terms of location. The first 250 children’s centres were situated in areas of significant income deprivation; by 2009 there were over 3,600 children’s centres in England, of which 54 per cent were in the 30 per cent most deprived areas of the country. Yet Smith et al (2018) document a significant change in subsequent years. They report that local authority funding for early intervention fell by 64 per cent between 2010 and 2018, resulting in the closure of 1,000 children’s centres with the remainder at a ‘tipping point’ (p. 15), as the number and range of services offered by surviving centres has significantly reduced. Against this context of cuts, it is important to note that evidence of the effectiveness of the Sure Start approach has accumulated over time. For example, Cattan et al (2021) analysed the short- and medium-term health impacts and found that benefits from involvement grew over time in children’s lives, with significant savings to the NHS and particular benefits for children living in the poorest areas.

Cuts to universal and targeted welfare provision have disproportionately affected families who are already disadvantaged in other ways, as a narrowing of support has coincided with cuts and restrictions on other welfare benefits, and increasing rates of material deprivation, labour market insecurity, and income inequality for families. Rehill and Oppenheim (2021: 3) document the ‘hollowing out’ of services designed to support families who are struggling, through spending reductions that have particularly affected public health and preventative services for children and families. At the same time, Gupta and Blumhardt (2016: 170) argue that the role of social work has increasingly been narrowed ‘from support to policing’, while the ‘distortion of relationships caused by a risk-saturated system mitigates against effective work to support families’.

Changes in social security and welfare provision have driven increased poverty in families with children, especially lone parents, larger families and those from minoritised ethnic groups (Carey and Bell, 2020; Stewart et al, 2021). For example, the introduction of Universal Credit in 2010 was presented as streamlining a complex benefits system, but also introduced new forms of sanction and conditionality, framed
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in terms of a ‘national crisis’ of ‘dependency culture’ (Duncan Smith, 2010). Larger families have been particularly affected by the implementation of a benefit cap, limiting Child Benefit to the first two children in a family (Stewart et al, 2021). Against this context, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that over the last decade, child poverty has increased (Stewart et al, 2021). Fitzpatrick et al (2020: 4) estimated that there are now over half a million children living in destitution in the UK, defined as ‘the circumstances facing people who cannot afford to buy the absolute essentials that we all need to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean’. Patterns of widening disadvantage have disproportionately affected certain families, with lone-parent households, large families and families from minoritised ethnic communities most at risk of the effects of poverty and insecurity (for example, O’Connell et al, 2019; Stewart et al, 2021).

To paraphrase Berlant (2012), the patterns discussed here highlight the ways in which resources are ‘hoarded’, both materially and affectively, under the guise of political austerity. They show a wider context of ongoing change – child and family poverty is increasing at the same time as services to support children and families are diminishing – which corresponds to Lorey’s writing about precarisation as an instrument of neoliberal government. She describes this as ‘governing through social insecurity, through regulating the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing insecurity […] promoted by proclaiming the alleged absence of alternatives’ (Lorey, 2012b: 2).

Lorey observes that this form of governance depends on managing the threshold of precarisation so that it does not seriously endanger the existing order: ‘in particular, it must not lead to insurrection’ (2012b: 2). Her arguments bring to mind Barbara Ehrenreich’s commentary on middle-class responses to poverty in the US of the 1960s: ‘There was very little that most middle-class people could actually do to advance the war against poverty – especially since no one was proposing the perfect ‘act of expiation’, which would have been for the more fortunate to share some of their wealth with the underprivileged’ (Ehrenreich, 2020: 39).

Fragility, temporariness and vulnerability … and an inclination to constant change?

Bauman’s (2012: vii) definition of liquid modernity, as noted above, speaks of diverse modern lives which have in common ‘fragility, temporariness, and vulnerability’. In this we can see what Berlant (2011: 192) described as a ‘spreading precarity’ – rooted in dependence and ‘significantly more than economic; permeating the affective (emotional) environment too’. This conceptualisation of spreading precarity is evident in Hall’s (2019) ethnography of Everyday Life in Austerity. For the families involved in her research, the effects of austerity were not only economic. The families and communities hit hardest by austerity policies were struggling already, because they did not have the security and intergenerational resources that more privileged others might take for granted. Hall observed how austerity exposed existing tensions and vulnerabilities in everyday lives, leading families to a tipping point. Consequently, crises and their effects become ‘mundane and expected, part and parcel of an already challenging everyday life’ (Hall, 2019: 190). Wood and Bennett (2022: 12) similarly discuss the ways in which, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, insecurity has been entrenched for families who rely on Universal Credit: ‘family relationships and mental health were already under strain due to years of financial struggle, and for many the pandemic layered additional worries on top, cutting off vital support networks and
increasing worry and insecurity’. Thus, as Lorey (2012b) writes, precarity becomes normalised, systematically established through contemporary welfare structures for the most economically disadvantaged children and families.

**Reactive rationing and evidence-based innovation**

Alongside fragility, temporariness and vulnerability, Bauman (2012) defines liquid modernity as characterised by an ‘obsessive’ inclination to constant change and modernisation – and we can recognise these qualities in relation to child and family welfare in England over the last decade or more. Alongside increasing targeting of available resources, one of the striking features of recent child and family welfare policy is a very strong emphasis on innovation, often involving independent organisations instead of state provision. As Hampson et al (2021) observed, this is an ideological position, driven by practical and political concerns:

> Substantial government investment has accelerated innovation activity in children’s social care in England over the past decade. Ethical concerns emerge when innovation seems to be propelled by a drive for efficiency and over-reliance on process output indicators as well as, or even instead of, improving the lives of children, families and societies. (Hampson et al, 2021: 198)

This emphasis contributes to the fragility, temporariness and vulnerability of services, as innovation is often focused on short-term interventions, which are in turn commissioned through time-limited funding (see Hanvey, 2019). During a period when these short-term funding opportunities coincide with devastating cuts to universal provision and ‘early’ intervention, a critical task for local authority managers has been the ongoing need to reconfigure provision in response to diminishing resources. This in turn has coincided with policy emphasis on commissioning rather than providing services, blurring boundaries between public and private provision (Hulme et al, 2015). The challenge was summed up by a director of children’s services, interviewed by Hulme et al (2015: 84), who commented that ‘in a period of austerity the policy drivers tend to be how you might be able to deliver the same level of service but with less resource’. Webb and Bywaters (2018: 392) discuss this paradox in terms of ‘reactive rationing’:

> When the resources available for delivery of public services are not adequate, this imposes constraints on what can be delivered, which can result in reactive rationing, where service providers and workers ration access and provision based on cultural ideas of deserving and undeserving recipients.

Their comments indicate the affective hoarding noted by Berlant (2012): when resources are limited, which families are worthy of help? Lorey’s (2012b) analysis of governmental precarisation illuminates this tension. She draws on Butler’s (2004) definition of precarity, and particularly, her discussion of which lives are ‘grievable’ or not. Butler (2004) notes that our shared existential precarity (or mutual vulnerability) gives rise to a defensive construction of the ‘other’, and so drives the creation of precarity through the hierarchical distribution of material and symbolic insecurities. As Lorey (2012b: 22) writes:
Precarity can therefore be understood as a functional effect arising from the political and legal regulations that are specifically supposed to protect against general, existential precariousness. From this perspective, domination means the attempt to safeguard some people from existential precariousness, while at the same time this privilege of protection is based on a differential distribution of the precarity of all those who are perceived as other and considered less worthy of protection.

Earlier, I quoted Berlant’s (2012) observation that austerity is an ideology framed as realism. As Lorey notes here, this is *instrumental* precarisation, affording some people the privilege of protection at the expense of other lives. Reductions in public sector spending on families and services combine with an emphasis on innovation through new forms of targeted intervention, and so generate precarity: disadvantaging and stigmatising families who already face hardship and inequality and excluding them from a ‘collective good life imaginary’ (Berlant 2012: 172). These practices of liquid modernity have sharp consequences for family lives and family welfare services, but they also incur critical questions about the role of research (and researchers) in such times.

**Researching child welfare in a context of liquid modernity?**

On the occasion of this tenth-anniversary issue of *Families, Relationships and Societies*, I highlight this ‘liquid modern’ context – and the normalisation of precarity for some families and services – not merely to set out my sociopolitical concerns. Rather, I want to draw attention to our responsibilities as researchers, and to the ethical and methodological considerations that arise when we conduct research in a context of normalised and uneven precarity, especially in the context of policy- or service-focused research or evaluation. We need approaches to understanding ‘what works’ that are fit for liquid modern times. As I argue below, that challenge demands methodological approaches that move beyond simple conceptualisations of linear causality, to engage with the complex and fluid contingencies of child and family lives and of the systems and services that they encounter. It is also crucial that researchers actively resist individualising and deficit-focused narratives in the study of child and family welfare, acknowledging the risk that the knowledge we produce becomes part of ‘the machinery of inequality’ (Tyler, 2020: 1). Addressing these linked concerns entails trying to understand what precarious services mean, and what those services can achieve, for families navigating precarious lives.

*What works* in the context of liquid modernity?

The discourse of ‘evidence-based’ policy and intervention became politically prominent following Tony Blair’s assertion in the 1997 election manifesto that ‘what counts is what works’ (see Wells, 2007). Yet, understanding ‘what works’ – whether in child and family services or other forms of intervention into complex lives – is complicated (Moran et al, 2004; Boddy et al, 2011; Axford and Morpeth, 2013; Pearce and Raman, 2014; Rhodes and Lancaster, 2019). That methodological complexity is multiplied exponentially when the contexts of service provision are in a state of flux: when families’ lives are becoming more precarious and services are being designed
and delivered in the context of reactive rationing, with ongoing spending cuts and reconfiguration of local provision, and when all of this is happening alongside the disruptions and adaptations entailed by the COVID-19 pandemic and a deepening cost-of-living crisis (for example, Patrick and Pybus, 2022; Sen et al, 2022).

The discourse of evidence-based social policy often relies on hierarchal definitions of ‘robust standards of evidence’ which privilege experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Of course, these approaches have value, but they are not apolitical; political judgement has a strong influence on the construction of objective ‘evidence’:

So while RCTs [randomised controlled trials] promise to answer the question of ‘what works’ from a menu of policy interventions, determining which interventions are to be tested in the first place has been a political decision. Potential policy options regarded as politically unpalatable are unlikely to be tested, while a policy option may be so in tune with prevailing political values that subjecting it to tests is regarded by politicians as unnecessary or even unwelcome. (Pearce and Raman, 2014: 393)

Pearce and Raman (2014) caution that it is naive to regard randomised controlled trial (RCT) or quasi-experimental designs as politically neutral, especially in a climate of short-term or precarious funding for projects that may come to be seen as ‘unpalatable’ in the event of changes in political values or leadership. Such changes are not so unusual. To take one example from my own experience, in 2009 the Department of Health in England commissioned my colleagues and me to conduct a national study of health-related work in Family Intervention Projects (FIPs; see Boddy et al, 2016). The research was commissioned at the time when the Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, had just announced extra dedicated funding for developing work with families with multiple problems. We completed the study in 2012, almost two years after the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. Following the change of government, the FIP programme was discontinued; funding for individual projects was cut even as we were completing our fieldwork. While we were finalising our analysis, the policy landscape changed again – as the coalition government launched their Troubled Families programme, seeking to remedy ‘broken society’ by building ‘stronger families’ following civil unrest in August 2011 (Cameron, 2011). I give this example to highlight the complex contingencies of researching family services in precarious times. Ours was a multi-faceted qualitative longitudinal study, and so it was relatively straightforward to adapt to the flux that projects and families were facing (for example, using follow-up interviews to explore practitioner and/or family experiences of projects closing earlier than planned). But such experiences give lie to rationalistic assumptions about experimental ‘control’ within quasi/experimental designs. Ignoring uncertainty and ambiguity within a narrow discourse of ‘evidence’ can result in ‘very profound loss of meaning’ (Greenhalgh, 2012: 96).

Understanding efficacy in complex systemic interventions demands multiple ‘languages of evaluation’, applicable to diverse and dynamic contexts and conceptual frameworks (Boddy et al, 2011). Fitzsimons and McCracken’s (2020) overview of evaluations conducted in Round 2 of the Department for Education’s Children’s Social Care Innovation Programme reported that, despite an aspiration to use experimental or quasi-experimental designs whenever possible, this was often not feasible, for a whole variety of reasons, including ‘very small intervention group sizes, a
lack of genuinely comparable comparison groups, or difficulties accessing high quality data from comparators’ and delays to innovation projects ‘that meant they no longer expected to achieve impact on outcomes within the evaluation period’ (Fitzsimons and McCracken, 2020: 21). Arguably, such contingencies are to be expected given the constant uncertainties of liquid modern times. As Greenhalgh and Papoutsi (2018) observed, when the system itself is dynamic and turbulent, we need a different kind of approach:

Because the system is dynamic (turbulent, even), the conventional scientific quest for certainty, predictability and linear causality must be augmented by the study of how we can best deal with uncertainty, unpredictability and generative causality. For this, we need research designs and methods that foreground dynamic interactions and emergence – most notably, in-depth, mixed-method case studies that can act as concrete, context-dependent exemplars […] paying attention to interconnectedness and incorporating an understanding of how systems come together as a whole from different perspectives.

Attention to interconnectedness is especially important given the inherent interdependencies that characterise precarious lives and precarious services. Discussing health interventions, Rhodes and Lancaster (2019: 10) drew on Barad’s (2003) concept of ‘intra-action’, to argue that ‘we might better treat interventions as “intra-ventions” to acknowledge these as material effects of their situated entanglements in assemblages rather than as entities with some prior stable essence’. Their arguments are highly relevant to thinking about approaches to researching child and family services in contemporary times. We need to move beyond research designs that ‘measure what is easily measurable, rather than what we really want or need to know’ (Moran et al, 2004: 113) if we hope to understand the complex dynamic and relational contingencies of policy and services for families who are navigating everyday lives in contexts of systemic precarity.

What do we really want and need to know?

The discourse of the deserving and undeserving poor has a long history in English child welfare policy, from Elizabethan and Victorian poor laws to present-day political narratives. Shildrick (2018) examines the persistence of these myths of ‘poverty propaganda’, noting how they enable austerity politics, contribute to stigmatisation, and obscure the realities of poverty in contemporary Britain: ‘Ignoring facts and hard evidence, muddying the waters and generally orchestrating confusion mean that poverty – and its causes and consequences – can remain hidden from plain sight (Shildrick, 2018: 10).

To understand how such discourses are maintained and reinforced within contemporary political contexts, we need to recognise the role of research. In times when austerity politics drive reactive rationing of public sector provision (Webb and Bywaters, 2018), the question of ‘what we really want or need to know’ (Moran et al, 2004: 113) is unavoidably political: the gaze of exact observation becomes ‘part of the overall functioning of power’ (Foucault, 1977: 171).

Liquid modernity is an individualising project, taking attention away from the responsibilities of the state and emphasising individual responsibilities. This is also a stigmatising project: a practice of objectification and othering that Imogen Tyler
describes as the ‘stigma machine of austerity’. In this context, she notes, the devastating effects of austerity can remain unseen: ‘repeatedly denied by the politicians who implemented this programme of reform’ despite ‘mountains of scientific and statistical evidence’ (Tyler, 2020: 173).

This denial must be understood in the context of the evidence-based policy discourse. Given the political prominence of evidence-based policy initiatives such as the What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care and the Department for Education’s Innovation Programme in Children’s Social Care, we might reasonably assume that politicians and policy makers are engaging with (some forms of) research. Tyler (2020: 175) asks ‘how might those concerned with rising levels of poverty in contemporary Britain articulate the evidence?’. The concerns that Tyler documents cannot be restricted to critical academic writing, material that politicians or policy makers may have neither the time nor the inclination to read. Researchers who engage in service-focused research, writing reports that are directly aimed at policy makers and service commissioners, have a distinctive opportunity – and a heightened responsibility – to bring critical understandings of poverty and precarity into their work. There is an ethical imperative to include this context in our analysis: to ask ‘what works’ when rising poverty coincides with the uneven desiccation of the welfare state. Attention to precarity and its effects is a matter of ethico-political choice for the researcher who studies child and family services.

The stigmatisation of low-income families is reinforced through the use of particular kinds of research (see, Crossley, 2016; Dermott and Pomati, 2016; Gillies et al, 2017; Gupta, 2017). As Crossley (2016: 273) writes, the political construction of the ‘troubled family’ ‘neatly deflects attention away from more complex (and costly to address) economic, environmental and structural conditions’. At the same time, Dermott and Pomati point out that those families who are among the most well-resourced, educationally and economically, are represented as ‘ordinary’ through governmental discourses of evidence-based parenting: ‘The most educationally advantaged fraction of the middle class is setting the tone and standard in terms of key markers of educationally “appropriate” and “supportive” parenting’ Dermott and Pomati (2016: 138).

When these kinds of assumptions get built into research designs – in defining outcome indicators, for example – societal inequalities are obscured. As researchers studying child and family services, we must recognise our relative power – and concomitant responsibilities – in relation to those whose lives we research: [w]hen we construct our texts in or on their words, we decide how to nuance our relations with/for/despite those who have been deemed Others’ (Fine, 1994: 74).

When we write our texts, in or on the words of the children and families with whom we research, we make an ethico-political choice. Do we judge people’s lives against de-politicised ‘normative’ criteria – do we evaluate if they have been improved by the innovation or intervention, made more responsible, or more similar to the White, middle-class, heteronormative ideal-type family (Edwards et al, 2012)? Do we focus on individualised outcomes, instead of attending to the challenges engendered by precarity, and the complex relational subjectivities of families’ experiences? Problem-focused research can have a powerful political impact by helping with the task of affective hoarding – justifying certain forms of service provision in a wider landscape of austerity, or helping with decisions about how to target services by informing judgements about who is deserving or worthy of help. Such research narratives become part of the stigma machine of austerity: they function to reinforce
the scientific classification of the ‘other’, acting as ‘dividing practices’ of exclusion and objectification in Foucault’s (1983) terms.

The alternative is to construct research designs and research narratives that engage respectfully – to write for the people whose lives we research, recognising the responsibilities that we take on when people decide to ‘leave their stories in your hands’ (Grietens, 2018: 10). Meeting this challenge depends on establishing alternatives to the dominant discourse of evidence hierarchies, recognising the need for a mosaic of evidence to understand contingency, plurality and dynamic complexity. As noted above, Greenhalgh and Papoutsi (2018) argue that mixed methods and case-based approaches are valuable in this regard. Jennifer Mason’s (2011: 77) conceptualisation of facet methodology is also highly relevant; she uses the metaphor of the facets of a gemstone to illuminate the benefits of linking ‘different lines of enquiry, and different ways of seeing’. As she explains:

The facets are different shapes and sizes, and they catch and cast the light differently, depending on the direction and strength of the illumination as well as which planes and depths are left in shadow. It is important to note that sometimes it is the smallest facets that create particularly intense or brilliant shafts of light and colour. (Mason, 2011: 77)

It is also necessary to bridge the conceptual and methodological silos between ‘mainstream’ family studies and research focused on intervention with those deemed vulnerable or ‘problematic’, to disrupt false binaries and attend to the specificities of dynamic and relational lives in context (see McCarthy et al, 2019). Neale’s (2021) writing about the landmark Timescapes study illuminates this argument. Timescapes was not concerned with service evaluation; the research aimed to understand how personal and family relationships develop and change over time. Yet, as Neale (2021) observes, the study’s qualitative longitudinal methodology enables a finely-grained understanding of complex and fluid causality. It is therefore highly relevant to evaluation research, enabling respectful engagement with families and moving beyond linear conceptions of ‘impact’ to illuminate how policy and services can make a meaningful difference to family lives, in context and over time.

Conclusion

Bauman’s (2012) metaphor of liquid modernity provides a way of thinking through the systematised and interwoven precariousness of family lives and child and family welfare in the context of contemporary austerity politics. For families, austerity is embodied, through governmental practices such as benefit systems that are designed to be dehumanising and humiliating (Tyler, 2020), and embedded in the practice of interdependent everyday lives over time (Hall, 2019). When change is constant in a desiccated public sector (cf. Berlant, 2012), the possibilities for policy and services to make a difference in family lives are inevitably uncertain, and rooted in unpredictable contingencies. This systemic precarisation of family lives and child family welfare has distinctive implications for research and researchers. In ‘liquid modern’ times, when precarity functions as an instrument of government (cf. Lorey, 2012b), studies of child and family services or family lives may be de-politicised, but they are never politically neutral. The knowledge we create contributes to public and political understandings of ‘our collective good-life imaginary’ (Berlant, 2012:...
to the conceptualisation of the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘other’. Those of us who
research policy and provision for children and families have heightened ethical and
methodological responsibilities in this context – as do the journals that publish
our research. Attention to the interplay between families, relationships and societies is
critical to understanding: recognising the instrumental precarisation of family services
and family lives, and challenging conceptualisations of ‘evidence’ that function to
obscure systemic inequalities and the impact of poverty and stigma on family lives.
Methodologically, we need designs that can engage with the ‘situated entanglements’
(Rhodes and Lancaster, 2019: 10) and contextual contingencies that shape what
policy and services can mean for children and families over time. Ethically, we must
recognise the potential for our research to challenge – or else form part of – the
stigma machine (cf. Tyler, 2020).

Notes
1 Throughout, I use ‘welfare’ as an umbrella term to encompass services and wider forms
of provision for children and families (for example, benefits); when I refer to child and
family services, I include universal, targeted and statutory services.
2 Council tax is an annual tax charged by the local authority (or municipality) which is
payable by a household and which funds a wide variety of locally provided services,
including waste disposal and local facilities such as parks, libraries and leisure centres, as
well as contributing to core services such as police, fire and education provision.
3 The DfE’s £200 million Innovation Programme was launched in 2014 ‘to test and share
effective ways of supporting vulnerable children and young people who need help from
children’s social care services’ through the support of 98 specific projects which targeted
a range of policy priorities (DfE, 2020).
4 I include myself in this group, having spent my academic career as a researcher studying
family lives and services for children and families. For two recent examples, see Boddy

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Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Engaging with uncertainty


