



Social Research for our Times

Thomas Coram Research Unit
past, present and future

Edited by Claire Cameron, Alison Koslowski,
Alison Lamont and Peter Moss

 **UCLPRESS**

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and Peter Moss

 **UCL**PRESS

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*To all those who have worked at, been associated with or been supporters
of Thomas Coram Research Unit over its first 50 years.*

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Foreword

Mavis Maclean

On my desk sits an elegant mug inscribed ‘TCRU 1973–2013 Celebrating 40 years of research excellence’, a welcome reminder of an excellent conference marking an earlier anniversary. And now this volume, *Social Research for our Times*, joins the mug and will be a reminder of Thomas Coram Research Unit’s 50 years of excellent research, reflecting on recent findings in the field of social issues affecting children, young people and families, adding discussion of developing research methods and including new work with minority and disadvantaged groups. But perhaps most important of all, this volume addresses the question of the relationship between research and policy. TCRU is well-placed to comment, having asked questions and collected research evidence for half a century, in order to produce answers and ideas which may be used to have a positive effect on the lives of children and families.

Three research units concerned with social issues affecting children and families have recently celebrated their 50th birthdays: the Centre for Family Research, in Cambridge, which began in the University’s Psychology Department; the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies in Oxford University’s Faculty of Law, with a group interested in families and the justice system who later moved to the Department of Social Policy and Intervention; and of course, TCRU in London. TCRU began as a government-funded dedicated research unit, sharing premises at the Coram Foundation, and has always been an integral part of the Institute of Education, which is now UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society. Always fully engaged in research into the lives of children and families and the services they use, TCRU has now expanded this to include diverse marginalised minority groups, most recently refugees, as well as broadening its teaching role.

I have been fortunate enough to be involved with all three groups, not only sharing academic interests but also supporting the development of all three, through their management structures and committees. It was

a great pleasure to welcome Ann Phoenix, from TCRU, to Oxford to give the annual Sidney Ball Memorial Lecture in November 2022. She received an enthusiastic and active response, from students and researchers of the Department of Social Policy and Intervention, to her lecture on contesting and transforming racialised histories.

There is a tale to be told of how the outward-looking, collaborative, skilled and energetic researchers of TCRU have developed and raised the profile of family studies over time, and how they have worked on creating an effective relationship between their research and policy development and implementation. But this volume also looks to the future! The editors focus on the linkage, exemplified by TCRU, between research and policy at every stage, from the initial identification of emerging issues to securing the necessary support to collect evidence to stimulate an effective policy response.

TCRU is to be warmly congratulated on producing a volume which not only sets out key research findings and developments in methodology, but shares the lived experience of policy-relevant research in a way that will both help this multidisciplinary, international but cohesive and focused group to move forward, and also help others to develop a more effective policy response to the changes that lie ahead for children and their families. Looking back, I note that the setting up of TCRU took place at a time when a formulation of the relationship between policymaking and research had been developed by Martin Rein when visiting LSE, which he set out in his book *Social Policy: Issues of choice and change* (Rein, 1970). He defines three kinds of research and how they can contribute to policymaking. 'Needs-resource research' attempts to identify the disparity between needs and resources, but is limited to examining funding for existing services. 'Distributive research' looks at reallocation rather than expansion of resources, but can go round in circles, limited by focusing on defects in performance rather than levels of resources. 'Allocative research', however, is designed to contribute to effective choice and prioritisation, aiming to reach a stated objective; it starts by trying to consider the real needs of service users. Rein warns that research findings are more likely to be welcomed by policymakers when they do not imply the need for major change, particularly in resource allocation. But he stresses the need to address the real difficulties of the clients – and to consider carefully the way findings are presented, if progress is to be made.

The founding members of TCRU may or may not have been aware of this analysis at the time, but they had clearly reached a very similar starting point and were managing their relationships with government funders with skill, while at the same time achieving impact. And now,

firmly embedded in the wider university structure, TCRU has added teaching to its already wide range of activities. But the warmth, sensitivity and ability to work collaboratively and creatively across disciplines and across countries remains unchanged, to great effect.

Part I clearly reflects the wide-ranging work of TCRU on services and policies for children and families, while developing new concepts, including social pedagogy (new, at least, in the UK), a public-health approach to child protection, and the impact on parenting of leave policies. **Part II** goes on to look at family life, gender and minority communities, including children with same-sex parents, refugees, and studies of fathering. While **Part III** focuses on innovative methodological developments, including working in participatory ways with children and young people and the methodological and ethical challenges of researching Islam and Muslims.

So this Foreword is not just a foreword. It is also a ‘thank you’ to TCRU, not only for 50 years of original and effective research, even during COVID, but also for pointing the way ahead, to a strong future for research into the needs of children and their families, and new ways of working towards meeting them. It has been a pleasure to serve as Chair of the Advisory Group, where ongoing work could be presented and discussed in a critical yet supportive setting with our loyal members from the worlds of policy as well as research.

Mavis Maclean, CBE

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1

Social research and spaces for possibility: an introduction to the Thomas Coram Research Unit and the book

Claire Cameron, Alison Koslowski, Alison Lamont
and Peter Moss

This is a book about the relationship between social research and policy, a relationship that is necessary but far from straightforward, productive but fraught too on occasion. It is about the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU), a centre for social research that first opened its doors in 1973 as part of what was then the Institute of Education, University of London. During the subsequent five decades, TCRU has researched a wide range of subjects, sampled in the chapters that follow, focused on England but with an increasingly international scope. Amidst this diversity has been a consistent theme: TCRU has viewed most of its research as related to policy, informed by values including a commitment to social justice. The policy–research relationship is expressed in TCRU’s earlier years by the term ‘policy oriented’; more recently the term ‘policy relevant’ appears. Over the years it has produced many important insights, bearing on social and health policies. But TCRU’s work has also raised important issues about the relationship between social research and policy, not least about the purposes and the nature of that relationship.

The book has several goals. It offers the story of a centre for research, which over its 50 years has weathered many different external conditions to maintain a continuous (though not exclusive) focus on children, families and services. It shares some of TCRU’s wealth of experience researching and thinking about major and diverse social issues,

experience that includes both rich findings and conclusions, and innovative methods that have been developed to undertake research. It provides reflections on social research, indeed it might be regarded as an inquiry into the relationship between social research and policy, drawing on the particular case of the Thomas Coram Research Unit.

This chapter opens that inquiry, offering a brief history of TCRU and an initial overview of its relationships with policy contexts that have altered markedly over 50 years. We dwell at some length on the ambitions that underlay the founding of TCRU, in particular to undertake ‘strategic’ research, and consider how far those ambitions have been realised as the years have passed, and how, too, TCRU has responded to the many changes that have taken place in its immediate environment and further afield. The chapter also introduces the book’s three parts and their contents. In the final chapter we will draw some conclusions and consider possible future directions for the relationship between social research and policy, bearing in mind the conditions of our times, notably the converging crises that confront this country and the world.

Thomas Coram Research Unit

The Thomas Coram Research Unit was founded in 1973. TCRU was the product of the vision and reputation of its first Director, Professor Jack Tizard, and the backing of a government department. Born in New Zealand in 1919, Tizard was orphaned at the age of five and grew up during the interwar Great Depression in a family of 13, constantly struggling to make ends meet. Having won a scholarship, he went on to gain a first-class degree in 1940 and the award of the University of New Zealand’s Senior Scholar in Philosophy, before five years spent in the field-ambulance service during the Second World War. Moving to the UK in 1945, he joined the Medical Research Council Social Psychiatry Unit at London’s Institute of Psychiatry in 1948, where he undertook research to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities.

In 1964, Tizard moved to the Institute of Education at the University of London as Professor of Child Development and in 1971 established the Child Development Research Unit. Two years later, he set up, with the support of the then Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS), the Thomas Coram Research Unit in premises in Bloomsbury’s Brunswick Square, rented from the Thomas Coram Foundation for Children (today’s Coram, which is still in Brunswick Square), a charity quite separate from TCRU. TCRU’s new offices overlooked the site of the eighteenth-century

Coram Foundling Hospital, a landmark institution in its day initiated by a sea captain, Thomas Coram (1668–1751), to save and improve the lives of London’s abandoned children (McClure, 1981), and whose name the new unit assumed. Its initial focus was the health, welfare and education of children and their families, including those with severe disabilities, and the services provided for them.

Jack Tizard died in 1979, aged just 60.¹ After an interim period, TCRU’s continuance was assured and Barbara Tizard, Jack’s widow and an eminent psychologist who had been active in TCRU since its inception, took over as Director (1980–90). Since her retirement, there have been six Directors: Harry McGurk (1990–5), Peter Aggleton (1995–2007), Ann Phoenix and Marjorie Smith (joint Directors, 2007–13), Margaret O’Brien (2013–21) and, from 2021, Alison Koslowski. In 1991, TCRU moved a short distance from Brunswick Square to offices in two Georgian houses in Woburn Square, adjacent to the main Institute of Education building on Bedford Way.

Over this period, the funding of TCRU has fundamentally changed. TCRU has always had multiple sources, but for many years its funding bedrock was government, initially the DHSS, then from 1988 the Department of Health (DH). However, from the early 1990s, this bedrock began to crumble. First, the DHSS/DH system of rolling contracts and ‘core’ funding, from which TCRU had benefited hugely since it provided a modicum of security, came under review. Then, in March 1994, it came to an end, with TCRU offered instead a five-year fixed-term contract, renewable for a further fixed term. Following the Labour government reassigning responsibility for non-paediatric children’s services from health to education in 1998, funding was shared between the Department for Health and the Department for Education and Employment. Finally, in 2010, this support was ended altogether.

Under successive directors, TCRU has successfully broadened its non-government funding base, including national and international sources, contributing to a period of stability, productivity and growth. But despite this success in gaining grants from a wide range of other funding bodies, the loss of substantial and sustained government funding, coinciding with a period of national austerity, was serious. An increasingly competitive research environment, smaller research budgets and shorter timescales also took their toll. By late 2013 it was clear that a more resilient and secure funding base was needed if TCRU was to survive. Faced by these challenging conditions, TCRU turned to undergraduate teaching as a new funding source. With colleagues in the wider Department of Social Sciences, TCRU launched a new degree (BSc Social

Sciences), a development that not only bolstered TCRU's financial position but offered an opportunity for revitalisation through the recruitment of early and mid-career staff combining teaching and research.

Fifty years on from opening its doors, TCRU today has a strong teaching component to its work while remaining an active centre for social research. That research is currently organised under three 'work clusters'. The first two – 'Children's wellbeing: Services and practices' and 'Gender, families and work' – reflect long-established interests, though with particular research projects focusing on important new social experiences and phenomena, for instance, parenting during the COVID pandemic, the experiences of young donor-conceiving adults, same-sex parent families, and identities and health among diverse members of the LGBTQI community. The third stream – 'Migration, mobility and diversity' – encompasses other current pressing societal concerns, including the experiences of child and adult refugees and other migrant groups. Here is evidence of TCRU's continued evolution in response to changing times, while retaining a broad focus on children and families, a capacity for evolution also apparent in methodology.

This evolution, illustrated in more detail in subsequent chapters, results in part from strategic decisions (for example, in the 1980s, to withdraw from learning disability as a major subject of research); in part from the constant renewal of TCRU's workforce, with new entrants bringing new interests and perspectives; and also from changing social, cultural, economic and political contexts. To discuss those changing contexts over half a century would require a book in its own right. We will point to just a few here.

TCRU's existence spans a period of profound economic and political change in the United Kingdom, with some historical overviews dividing the postwar period into three phases: the triumph of 'social democracy' in the postwar settlement; followed by a period of political and economic crisis during the 1970s; and, finally, the 'neoliberalism' hegemony and the accompanying financialisation of the economy. While this reading of the period has been questioned as too simplistic and reductionist ([Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Davies and Jackson, 2022](#)), it is undoubtedly the case that the country has experienced huge changes since the 1970s, so that what had seemed self-evident and almost natural back then has come to seem unthinkable and hopelessly outmoded today – and vice versa. This sense of a world turned upside-down is captured by the political scientist Susan George when she writes that:

In 1945 or 1950, if you had seriously proposed any of the ideas and policies in today's standard neoliberal toolkit, you would have been laughed off the stage or sent off to the insane asylum. At least in the Western countries, at that time, everyone was a Keynesian, a social democrat or a social-Christian democrat or some shade of Marxist. The idea that the market should be allowed to make major social and political decisions; the idea that the State should voluntarily reduce its role in the economy, or that corporations should be given total freedom, that trade unions should be curbed and citizens given much less rather than more social protection – such ideas were utterly foreign to the spirit of the time. Even if someone actually agreed with these ideas, he or she would have hesitated to take such a position in public and would have had a hard time finding an audience (George, 1999: 1).

But an audience, and a powerful one, was found for such ideas – and the unthinkable became the reality, with huge consequences. After the 1970s the public domain was ransacked, much of it sold off or contracted out to private businesses. Competition became the order of the day in all fields. Private-sector disciplines were imported to the public sector through the technologies of new public management, with a focus on establishing quantifiable standards and endless measurement of performance. Potential centres of opposition to the state (notably trade unions and local authorities) were hobbled and hollowed out. Nor were universities immune, being expected to become self-financing businesses, competing with their peers for 'customers' and on an increasing battery of performance measures. Social research itself has also been increasingly put out to the market, with ever more competition, between an array of research 'providers', to land contracts by offering best 'value for money' in processes of 'competitive tendering'.

From this perspective, it could be argued that TCRU was conceived at the end of the postwar 'social democratic' settlement, with its reformist politics and commitment to a strong welfare state; that it grew and took its first steps in a transitional period of crisis in the 1970s; and that it has lived out its life since during the subsequent 'neoliberal' ascendancy. The death of TCRU's founder, in 1979, coincided with the advent of the Thatcher years, to be followed by the era of New Labour and then a prolonged spell of Conservative government, an era of austerity, Brexit and pandemic. However, it is now possible that the 'neoliberal' ascendancy of the last 40 years is in decline, indeed has entered into a period of terminal crisis (Stiglitz, 2019; Beckert, 2020; Tooze, 2021); the last

decade or so, as Berman (2022) observes, has been ‘characterized by a Polanyian backlash to the negative consequences of the neoliberal era ... [with the West experiencing] rising social discontent and political extremism, as well as a widespread questioning of whether capitalism can still help humanity slouch towards utopia’. At the same time, and not coincidentally, the world is experiencing a series of other converging crises – environmental, political, military, economic and social; the Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* shows an ominous 90 seconds to midnight, ‘the closest the clock has ever been set to midnight’, a reflection that ‘we are living in a time of unprecedented danger’.² In this transitional period when, as Gramsci famously said, ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’, an interregnum characterised by ‘a great variety of morbid symptoms’ and whose outcome is uncertain, new demands are, or should be, placed on the relationship between social research and policy.

TCRU’s existence can also be mapped onto changes in the UK’s relationship with Europe. It largely coincides with the country’s membership of the European Economic Community and European Union, entering this regional body the year TCRU was founded, and leaving it 47 years later. From the 1980s, this membership provided opportunities and stimuli for TCRU’s researchers to participate in comparative work, including multinational networks and research, and hence for broadening TCRU’s horizons and building partnerships with researchers in other European countries. Along with burgeoning relationships with other transnational organisations, spanning the world beyond Europe, the EEC/EU enabled TCRU’s evolution from a national to an international player.

A third example would be the enormous changes in ideas about and attitudes towards identities, including gender, childhood, race and ethnicity, disability and sexuality, with the rise of accompanying social movements, discourses about rights, demands for social justice and new political formations. Some have argued that this amounts to a ‘recognition turn’, with Nancy Fraser identifying a shift in the grammar of political claim-making, where struggles for cultural recognition, on the one hand, and socio-economic redistribution, on the other, are becoming the two key sites of political resistance (Fraser, 1996). As a result, the struggle for identity and recognition has moved centre stage.

A final, and far more local, example of shifting contexts concerns TCRU’s place in the dramatically changed world of academia, itself the subject of the neoliberal turn. TCRU started out as a substantial player in a relatively small semi-autonomous higher-education organisation, the Institute of Education, then part of the federal University of London.

Within ten years of its opening, TCRU accounted for 45 per cent of the Institute's total external research funding (Aldrich and Woodin, 2021). Today, following the merger of the Institute of Education (IOE) in 2015 into a much larger entity, UCL, TCRU finds itself one part of a department (now entitled the Social Research Institute) that is part of a faculty, which in its turn is just one modest part of a huge academic institution with the largest student roll in the UK; this changed positioning brings both new opportunities and a certain loss of autonomy. (For a fuller history of TCRU, see Brannen et al., 2022).

The relationship between social research and policy

The relationship of research to policy is always in flux. As noted, societal and political contexts change, as do governments and the array and priorities of funders; researchers, too, come and go. The relationship of research and researchers to policy is not fixed and can vary on a continuum from close to distant, depending on the topic under research and when and in which type of organisation the research is done. There is also another important variable – whether research is strategic or tactical, long-term or more immediate in scope, a theme that recurs throughout TCRU's existence.

TCRU has always seen itself as, first and foremost, concerned with doing social research that has a relationship with policy, including services and practice. But what relationship? And how far has it changed over time? The term used in TCRU's early years was 'policy-oriented' research; for example, in a letter Jack Tizard wrote to the DHSS Chief Scientist in 1979, he referred four times to 'policy-oriented' research, and noted that 'policy-oriented research programmes such as ours [in the social sciences] are very rare indeed' (Tizard, J., 1979: 249).

It is worth exploring what that term might have meant, in particular the underpinning ideas about the relationship between social research and policy that Jack Tizard brought with him to TCRU when he founded it, having thought long and hard on the subject during his preceding research career. The exploration, however, is for more than just historical interest. For if, as we have suggested, society is entering a new period of transition, in which the neoliberal hegemony of recent decades gives way to something else, while at the same time a number of other existential crises are converging, then the relationship between research and policy that has evolved under this disintegrating hegemony may also need to be

rethought. As with so much else, such rethinking can benefit from revisiting previous discourses and experiences.

In 1971, the Rothschild report (Rothschild, 1971) to the government on the organisation and management of government research and development:

drew a sharp division between basic research, seen as the province of the universities and research councils, and applied research, which has a practical application as its objective. In future, it stated, all applied research funded by the government should be organised on a customer-contractor basis. A named contractor (the government policy maker, i.e. administrative civil servant) says what he wants; the contractor (the researcher) provides it; and the customer pays him (Tizard, B., 2003: 25).

Jack Tizard disagreed strongly with the Rothschild report's conclusions. He thought the proposed 'customer-contractor' relationship was neither appropriate nor even feasible, as 'customers' (for example, policymakers) often were not clear about what they wanted and tended not to look beyond immediate concerns (Tizard, J., 1979; Tizard, B., 2003). Nor did he accept the sharp distinction between basic and applied research, arguing instead that 'it is through a proper consideration of practical issues that social science is most likely to make theoretical advances during the present century' (Tizard, B., 2003: 26). At the same time, he distinguished three levels of policy-oriented research that TCRU might undertake: 'Some "tactical" projects have immediate service implications, some projects are concerned with broader "strategic" issues, others, more theoretically oriented, provide an underpinning for policy' (Tizard, B., 2003: 54).³

Tizard was not entirely opposed to undertaking 'tactical' work, responding to questions posed by policymakers and addressed to specific and immediate problems. Work of this kind might, he conceded, be undertaken by a dedicated social-research centre like TCRU. But overall, he was 'sceptical of the value of commissioning "projects" on a one-off basis in the belief that by doing so you are going to answer any but the most superficial questions' (Tizard, J., 1979: 248). Such contracted projects were unlikely, in his view, to be 'effective either in influencing policy or in leading to an accumulation of expertise in a particular field' (Tizard, B., 2003: 11). Instead, he wanted TCRU to be focusing more on 'strategic' research 'concerned with problems that were of considerable generality and importance, likely to endure over a period of decades'.

This approach to the relationship between research and policy had a number of implications. When it came to particular areas of work, policy problems, the relationship needed to be future-oriented, long-term and multilayered, including a concern for theory and method:

In selecting problems one has to have an eye to the future – to think in strategic rather than tactical terms ... It is very necessary that the Unit should continue to undertake so-called basic, or strategic work. Unless it does so it will ... move from project to project without long-term goals, and without giving serious consideration to theoretical issues or the development of methodologies which lend themselves to the empirical study of policy-related issues (Tizard, J., 1979: 250–2).

Such strategic research, as articulated by Tizard, was most likely to flourish in settings that not only provided an intellectual critical mass of researchers and created some staff continuity, but also brought together different disciplinary perspectives. Tizard, though a distinguished psychologist and indeed a president of the British Psychological Society, has been described as ‘less a psychologist, perhaps, than someone working on the boundaries of psychology, medicine, education and the social sciences’ (Tizard, B., 1983: 5). Researchers working in this diverse context were well positioned to conduct rigorous research, but could also provide policymakers with a rich resource of accumulated experience and knowledge. It is not, Tizard argued:

the specific results of most enquiries which have, or should have, a decisive effect upon national policy. Rather, it is the experience, knowledge, and way of looking at problems which research workers have, which could be of most use to [government] departments centrally in their consideration of policy issues ... [T]he best way to utilize what research workers have to offer government may often be by calling upon them as experts or consultants rather than asking departments to commission specific pieces of research and then attempt to assimilate directly the results of a large number of disparate enquiries (Tizard, J., 1979: 250).

Reference has already been made to the importance Tizard attached to developing methods, and he himself applied a variety: ‘work with an epidemiological basis, longitudinal studies, comparisons between institutions using standardised observations, work that was statistically irreproachable ... and experimental trials’ (Tizard, B., 2003: 54). At his

most ambitious, he sought to apply these methods through experimental interventions in services, searching for better ways to meet the needs of particular groups of children and families. Both before and during his period as Director of TCRU, he initiated or supported a number of such interventions that were actually or potentially transformative. To take just two examples: the Brooklands Project, an intervention in the late 1950s that removed a group of children with severe learning disabilities living in a dire hospital environment and offered them instead an upbringing in a domestic environment, contributed to a revolution in the future care of such children (Tizard, J., 1964); while his work with experimental Children's Centres (the subject of Chapter 2) offered a bold and visionary alternative to the totally inadequate system of early years services extant when TCRU was founded.

What drove Tizard was a belief in the power of scientifically rigorous research, for example, 'faith in demonstration projects ... because of their potential for instituting change, by providing models for others to replicate, draw upon, or adapt' (Tizard, B., 2003: 8), together with a deep commitment to social justice and a strong and inclusive welfare state. In many respects, Tizard represents the postwar 'social democratic' era, with its emphasis on active local authorities and government-funded solutions to social problems through the welfare state. He believed that social research needed to play a proactive role in policymaking, taking the initiative to identify problems and delve deeply into them, testing out alternative solutions, and offering informed opinions engendered by a collegial and multidisciplinary community of practice. 'Policy-oriented' research did not mean, for him, only research that was relevant to existing policy; it also meant prefigurative research that explored ways in which policy might become more relevant to the lives of children and adults, by better meeting the needs of society, including needs that policymakers did not yet recognise but which researchers identified as requiring attention. Research, in short, should not only follow a national policy agenda, but contribute to its formation.

This 'policy-oriented' approach did not ignore the government of the day and its policy interests. When it came to long-term government funding such as the 'rolling contracts' with DHSS/DH, so important in providing continuity for TCRU, there was a process of negotiation to arrive at a programme of research for the period of each contract that was acceptable to both parties. The relationship between researchers and policymakers was dialogic and equal (or at least, far more so than today), at odds with the 'customer-contractor' model, and led over the years to TCRU undertaking a wide range of innovative studies into subjects of

great policy relevance – though not necessarily of immediate high policy priority. For despite Jack Tizard’s premature death, TCRU has never lost the habit of conducting strategic research related to policy, supported either by ongoing government funding of the unit (until its eventual termination in 2010) or, increasingly, by funding from a range of other agencies, local, national and international. Reflecting on her own time as TCRU Director, Barbara Tizard wrote that:

Jack’s aim for the unit, that it should mainly carry out strategic rather than tactical research, continued to be achieved in the 1980s. Most work came from our own initiatives, in consultation with government in the case of DH funding, and was concerned with increasing understanding of the processes involved in outcomes for which government had some responsibility, for example achievement in the infant school, the development of children in different forms of day care, parental practices in relation to their children’s health, or less directly, of young people’s racialised experiences and racial identities, which bears on child care policies (Tizard, B., 2003: 57).

There was, however, one important change.

During the 1970s, there were a large number of experimental interventions in services, one might say this was then a major characteristic of the unit’s research, as it had been of Jack’s throughout his career ... During the 1980s there was only one intervention study – Ann Oakley’s [Deputy Director] provision of social support during pregnancy (Tizard, B., 2003: 54).

While maintaining that ‘an intervention study can be a very effective way of bringing about policy change’, Barbara Tizard added that the ‘difficulties involved in setting up and carrying out experimental interventions are considerable and can probably only be overcome by someone with status, determination, and persuasive skills’. But, in retrospect, she also noted the changing context, conjecturing that ‘the decline in experimental interventions during the 1980s was a response not only to the loss of Jack’s leadership, but also to a change in the *zeitgeist* – a loss of idealism, perhaps, of belief in the efficacy of action, of caution in the face of general retrenchment’ (Tizard, B., 2003: 56). The times were a-changing.

This methodological retreat was, however, balanced by advances elsewhere, maintaining the importance Tizard attached to a policy-oriented unit developing methods suited to the policy problems it confronted. A particular style of research characterised TCRU's work until the early 1980s, perhaps largely due to the dominance of psychology among its founding staff: studies with moderate to large-scale samples, employing interview and observation methods and analysis methods that relied primarily on the quantification of the data (Brannen, J., 2021). However, from the 1980s onwards, TCRU's work began to embrace a wider range of other methodologies, which over time have included qualitative methods, mixed- and multi-methods, ethnography, secondary analysis of large datasets, comparative international studies, participatory methods involving children and young people, and narrative approaches for studying everyday family practices. An important reason for this plurality of methods has been the continuing diversification of disciplines in TCRU, maintaining Tizard's belief in the value of different disciplinary perspectives; such multiplicity has been a distinguishing feature and source of strength.

While TCRU has maintained its founder's commitment to the importance of developing concepts and methods for tackling fundamental problems of policy-oriented research, there have been some shifts in the type of policy-oriented research it undertakes. In recent years TCRU has undertaken more tactical research work, for a variety of governmental and non-governmental bodies, and addressed to specific and immediate problems or informational needs. For example, in the early 2010s, as part of a government-funded and multi-site Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (CWRC), TCRU led on the provision of a 'responsive mode' of short-term research on topics initiated by the Department for Education. This built on previous more informal arrangements and proved a productive stream of work, drawing in numerous researchers from all the partner organisations to respond to government agendas. A more recent example of such research is supplied by the Children and Families Policy Research Unit (CPRU), one of 15 National Institute of Health Research policy research units. A senior researcher at TCRU (and author of [Chapter 6](#)) is codirector of CPRU, and leads its 'responsive facility'. This responds to evidence-specific needs from government departments within short timescales, ranging from an email exchange within 24 hours or a written briefing within a week, to commissioned research over a three- to twelve-month period. Funders of such work have not only been national government departments, but increasingly non-government organisations and local bodies.

This increasing focus on shorter-term ‘tactical’ work has been valuable and, as we have noted, was never seen by Jack Tizard as incompatible with more ‘strategic’ work. Indeed, to the degree that ‘strategic’ work in a research centre enables the creation and continuance of a critical mass of researchers with ‘the experience, knowledge, and way of looking at problems which research workers have’ (Tizard, J., 1979), the two can be complementary. Such researchers can offer a better informed and more thoughtful response to any request from policymakers – though this may not always count for much when competing for contracts against less knowledgeable but also cheaper rivals.

What does policy relevance mean?

The idea of a single research unit, such as TCRU, negotiating funding for a long-term multi-project research programme with a government department in the UK would be unthinkable today. The current marketised research context with its emphasis on ‘value for money’ and economic and societal ‘impact’ is very different from Tizard’s day. Government departments do still seek research contractors to address their immediate needs. But the idea of supporting future-oriented, long-term strategic research is ‘foreign to the spirit of the time’ as Susan George puts it.

Yet what is policy-relevant social research is always contestable. Arguably, the relevance of research, if it is to contribute to understandings of social constraints, political choices and planned changes, lies in its independence of thought and the adequacy and rigour of its findings, as well as the status of its theory (Eldridge, 1986). So, we may ask, does such research always have to address questions posed by governments of the day and be directly related to their policy concerns? Can policy-relevant social research address the policy field itself, raising questions that may be critical of current policy and its assumptions, including who and what is problematised? Can researchers explore emergent issues that may in the medium or longer term require policy responses or, indeed, even point to the need for new policy fields? How can social research contribute to new ways of thinking about or practising policy? Is there, in short, a place today for both tactical and strategic research?

Further, even supposing that research is relevant to current policy concerns, what are the conditions and processes under which it influences policy? In so far as research is only one, usually small, part of the mix of actors and interests involved in the policy process (Tizard, J., 1979; Brannen, P., 1986), research may be taken seriously only when the

‘evidence’ justifies, or appears to justify, policymakers’ preconceived opinions and predetermined decisions. Given, therefore, that the use made of social research is influenced by factors *within* organisations, it is most likely ‘to have influence in consensual political cultures and also in those parts of the policy agenda where there is most agreement’ (Brannen, P., 1986: 169).

Research may also influence policy in indirect and unpredictable ways, not just through a relationship with government, but through its influence in other spheres. Jack Tizard hoped that ‘good and interesting [research] work come[s] in time to influence teaching and training, and help[s] to change the attitudes of practitioners’. He took this line of argument further, concluding that ‘the major impact of most research, including ours, is not upon the Department, or central government, but at a local level and on the “climate of opinion”’ (Tizard, J., 1979: 250). In this way, ‘policy-oriented’ or ‘policy-relevant’ research is not, or should not be, the possession of policymakers, but may come to be absorbed into a new *zeitgeist* or contribute to a more progressive and nuanced public discourse. So, how research is communicated is also germane to matters of relevance because it raises questions about which audiences researchers speak to; indeed, it can be argued that in part because of the privatisation of much of the public sector and its services, there is an increasing range of actors with an interest in social research.

Centres for social research, like TCRU, may, by the sustained work of dedicated groups of researchers with a particular interest in a particular policy field, build up a depth of understanding and the ability to make judgements, which can be of great value to government, and others, who are engaged in the making of policy – not just strategic research but strategic researchers. As Jack Tizard argued:

All research is, of course, by its very nature, concerned with specific issues. But the people who engage in it must, if they are any good, look at their problems in a wider perspective. This takes time – and research workers who dart from one project to another are no more likely than politicians or the general public to look beyond their noses (Tizard, J., 1979: 250).

Here, as elsewhere, Tizard’s thinking about the relationship between social research and policy was not only about the relationship between the tactical and the strategic, but between the here and now and the future. Nearly fifty years after he established TCRU, some of the same issues that he recognised reappear in the 2022 annual lecture to the Academy of

Social Sciences, given by Geoff Mulgan, Professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation at UCL. Titled 'Possibility space: The role of social sciences in understanding, mapping and shaping the future', Mulgan advances a critique of recent developments in social research and their consequences, developments that might be said to have paid increasing attention to the tactical and the here and now:

Healthy pressures to attend to hard data and evidence have had the unintended consequence of squeezing out attention to the future, since by definition evidence and data refer to the past and present. A well-intentioned focus on impact has encouraged incremental work on policy – how to tweak a little, ideally aligned with the interests of the government of the day – but discouraged the serious design of how our society or economy might be a generation out since of course a brilliant idea that will flourish in 30 years' time won't show up in the REF [Research Excellence Framework]⁴ (Mulgan, 2022: 4).

While we reserve to the final chapter our main discussion of possible future directions for TCRU and the relationship of its research to policy, we reiterate our contention that this relationship needs to take account of a contemporary context of profound transitions and converging crises – political, military, social, environmental and economic, including the failing of the neoliberal project and the immense damage neoliberalism has wreaked. This points, we think, to a reconsideration and reprioritising of the role that strategic social research can play in creating policies, including services, that are relevant to surviving the crises and to the emergence of a new epoch, in which the huge challenge confronting societies globally will be to reimagine and radically rebuild a world that is more just, more democratic, more sustainable and more caring. In this scenario, strategic research, including the element of experimentation, may have a major part to play in what Mulgan describes as: 'expand[ing] our shared possibility space, the options for our societies ... work both within disciplines and across them ... to populate our fuzzy pictures of the future with complex, rich, plausible ideas, pictures of the possible – a possibility space that is capacious and helpful for action in the present' (Mulgan, 2022: 12). Mulgan's words encourage us to look to the role of social research in building the future. But reflecting on TCRU's history also encourages us to draw on the past, including its foundation 50 years ago and the ambitions of its founder, in understanding that role.

What follows

Following this introduction to the Thomas Coram Research Unit comes an opportunity to sample some of the rich research fare produced by TCRU's researchers over the last 50 years. There are 19 further chapters, contributed by more than 30 Coramites, some now retired or otherwise moved on, but most still active researchers working at TCRU today; a few authors have never worked at TCRU but have been collaborators on projects. The final chapter (20) draws out some conclusions about policy-oriented or policy-relevant social research and reflects on future directions, given the conditions of the times. The other chapters look at particular instances or clusters of research undertaken at TCRU, or at methods that have been used in conducting studies.

These chapters are organised into three parts, each with a short introduction from the editorial team; though it should be acknowledged that the allocation of chapters is not always clear-cut, with some that would have been equally at home in more than one section. **Part I** focuses on 'Services and policies for children, young people and families', including: innovative early childhood services and the situation of the early childhood workforce (**Chapters 2 and 3**); the continental European tradition of social pedagogy and attempts to introduce it to the UK (**Chapter 4**); improving the education of children in the care of public authorities (**Chapter 5**); the potential, challenge and risks of a public-health approach to working with vulnerable children and young people (**Chapter 6**); and the evolution of research into parenting-leave policies (**Chapter 7**). **Part II** is about 'Family life, gender and minority communities', including: the relationships, inclusion, wellbeing and resilience of diverse groups of young people (**Chapters 8 and 9**); minority stress experienced by same-sex parented families (**Chapter 10**); the experiences of asylum seekers in often hostile environments (**Chapters 11 and 12**); and changes and continuities in fatherhood and fathering practices over the last 50 years (**Chapter 13**). **Part III** turns attention to 'Innovative social-research methodologies', and includes: a variety of methods for working with children, including the youngest age groups, and young people (**Chapters 14, 16, 17 and 19**); conducting comparative and multilayered research with a focus on the research problem (**Chapter 18**); and researcher positionalities, in a conversation between researchers about the methodological and ethical challenges of researching Islam and Muslims (**Chapter 15**).

Because the book is reflective of life's messiness and the realities of social research, not all chapters fit neatly into their allotted section and

there are instances of overlap. The book can be read cover to cover, or dipped into, each chapter standing in its own right and including some suggestions for further reading, a selection (including some titles also found in the References section) that the authors recommend for those wanting to go deeper into the subject matter of the chapter. However approached, we hope TCRU's diversity – of interests, disciplines and methods – comes across, as do certain common threads in the unit's interests over time, including a concern with policy following the founder's commitment to being 'policy-oriented'. But, hopefully too, the reader will get a sense of how a social-research centre has been able to evolve over the years, finding new topics to research and new ways to do so, and how the relationship of research to policy has varied.

Notes

- 1 For an account of Tizard's life see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Tizard.
- 2 Doomsday Clock. <https://thebulletin.org/2023/01/press-release-doomsday-clock-set-at-90-seconds-to-midnight/>.
- 3 The terms tactical, strategic and basic research were taken from the 1971 Dainton Report on the future of the research council system: HMSO (1971) *A Framework for Government Research and Development*. Cmnd. 4814, HMSO: London.
- 4 Research Excellence Framework, an evaluation of research conducted in British higher education institutions and its impact.

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Part I

**Services and policies for children,
young people and families**

Introduction to Part I

Claire Cameron

From its inception in 1973, the core identity of Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) has been a concern with the quality and conditions of life as a child and young person. Fundamental to that quality of life is the way societies organise to support families in their upbringing, caring and educating of children and young people. In tandem, a core value of the research undertaken at TCRU has been social justice, and to represent, in some way, the voices of those usually unheard. The mission of TCRU, as with much social research, is and has been to exercise foresight and lead on the ways of understanding the social world, and in particular, in TCRU's case, for children, young people and families, with a view to improving or even transforming conditions of life in services, and their governing policies, whether in local, national or international contexts.

The chapters in [Part I](#) of this volume chart just some of the research and research infrastructure carried out at or developed through working at TCRU in relation to children, young people and families. The chapters exemplify various ways of 'doing' the relationship between research and policy, and various ways of 'doing' research in its relation to social action, all underpinned by a common value around making visible and finding ways to do, or recommend others do something – policy and/or practice – differently, and at scale.

Milotay (2018), writing about the European Union (EU) policymaking process, discusses the allure of 'evidence-based practice', which in theory reduces uncertainty and risk for policymakers by basing decisions on sound and transparent evidence, but argues that this risks narrow definitions and linear approaches to what are usually highly complex and dynamic social phenomena and potentially misguided policies with little stakeholder 'buy in'. The implication is that research evidence must proceed hand in hand with commonly held and inclusionary values, or have a moral claim to 'what's right' for a

population, such as children in care, or young children, taking into account emergent and consensual understandings. The relationship between research evidence and policymaking works well, Milotay argues, when there is a continual dialogue between the two, with the limitations of policymakers in terms of scope and inherited world views challenged by the foresight and lateral thinking, breadth and depth of high-quality research, while at the same time policymakers can set and refine research agendas. Essential ingredients in ongoing dialogue are structure (for example, mechanisms for exchange, such as field visits and seminars, and participation of peers and wider stakeholders such as NGOs) and outputs that are valued (for example, working papers, proposals for action).

This dual approach to research, both rigorous attention to major and diverse social issues for children and families, and premised on an understanding of equality and inclusion based on human and child rights, characterises much of the work discussed in this Part. Policy relevance becomes not just what we can say about the ways in which a policy ‘works’ in relation to its stated aims, but is also oriented to what the unanticipated consequences of the policy might be, or how policy levers (and practice implementation of policy) might be employed to better cater for the needs and aspirations of a group. In [Chapter 1](#), we introduced the Tizard distinction between ‘strategic’ and ‘tactical’ research, where strategic referred to the foresight work, built over time, with deep understanding of a field, to achieve a social change (which might be policy driven), and tactical work was that undertaken in more responsive mode, when asked, by government or others, to provide fairly immediate advice and guidance on a specific question.

[Part I](#) chapters document, in many instances, how these two work best in tandem, with the foundational knowledge from strategic work providing the base for researchers to undertake fast turnaround evidence gathering. In [Chapter 2](#), Moss discusses the vision and (brief) policy implementation of Children’s Centres. In TCRU’s early years, two demonstration projects were developed and evaluated, showing what might be done to support families with preschool-aged children, with care, education, health and upbringing. This project spawned much subsequent work at TCRU. Expertise was developed about the relationships between care responsibilities and working lives and between gender and care, and about policies to support parents of young children, the care workforce, the intersection of care and education for young children, and children in and leaving care. Studies were conducted of different kinds of service provision for children and families, such as nurseries, childminders, playgroups, play and holiday schemes, and

residential and foster care. Members of TCRU came to play leading roles in what might be termed international research infrastructure, including European networks on the reconciliation of employment and family responsibilities and for school-aged childcare, and global networks on parental leave (Chapter 7). More latterly, members of TCRU have been instrumental in setting up an international journal and a professional association to support the development of social pedagogy in the UK arising from original research (Chapter 4). Much of this strategic work has also had tactical ventures to respond to more immediate policy requests, made possible by continuity of core TCRU researchers, as well as renewal with new members of the unit.

Chapter 3 reviews the findings of research, over time, in the care workforce, showing considerable continuities over types of care work that are dominated by low-cost, low-pay models that very largely employ women with low levels of formal qualification. This strand of work included a very good example of strategic foresight, by bringing a gendered lens to employment in care work, and a better understanding of the relationship between pay and a highly gendered workforce. The gendered lens had its origins in both the studies of parents and work–life balance and in learning from policy and practice represented in the European Commission’s Childcare Network, led by a member of TCRU, and was integrated into one of the earlier workforce projects, which was run as part of the programme of work agreed with the Department of Health (DH) and resulted in one of the foundational texts on the issue of men working in care services (Cameron, Moss and Owen, 1999). National policy influence was limited as the government in England only briefly made gender a focus of early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy, but has had more purchase in other countries (such as Germany, where policy recognised the limitation of recruitment to a growing sector based on excluding men, half of a labour pool). Likewise early research findings on the differing employment conditions in private and public sectors led, eventually, to a forensic exposition of mergers and acquisitions in ECEC services in the current era, creating a volatile climate for both service users and workers and highly relevant to policy decisions in respect of care services of all kinds.

Understandings of the care workforce in a comparative context underpinned investigations into how other European countries care for, educate and bring up children in care of the state, discussed in Chapter 4. TCRU research, commissioned by the DH (and then the Department for Education and Skills), pioneered UK understandings of the role of the social pedagogue and social pedagogy as an approach to what in the UK

and other English speaking countries is called ‘care work’, but is more expansive in remit, being largely educative in orientation and broader in reach, as applicable to services for all ages and in many life circumstances. The social pedagogy work was a good example of research-policy alignment around values and mission, sustained by ongoing dialogue: the DH’s Chief Social Worker, Helen Jones, was clear about what she wanted, and ‘genuinely believed in evidence informed policy’ (June Statham, pers. comm. December 2022). At a national level, policy alignment with research evidence on social pedagogy did not last much beyond a change of government in 2010, when the so-called austerity era reduced civil-servant policy activity and pushed responsibility for change onto localities and providers, some of whom became champions for social pedagogy, and the new context created a demand for a more complex knowledge-exchange environment.

The conceptual and organisational split between education and care that characterised ECEC was also present in arrangements for children-in-care and their education, as detailed in [Chapter 5](#). Through research and sustained advocacy work, that split was organisationally addressed, first (in 1998) when ‘daycare’ services were moved from the Department of Health to the Department for Education and Skills (with further children’s services transferred later to the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and subsequently the Department for Education); and when, in 2006, local authority Departments of Children’s Services were introduced, along with a duty to educate children-in-care when a ‘corporate parent’. The issue of research-policy alignment recurs here, with Jackson’s By Degrees research recommendations, on improving access to and success in education for young people who are care-experienced, being accepted in full by a government committed to education and social justice. Implementation remains uneven, however, as access to universities for care-experienced young people remains well below that of other young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, let alone all young people of the same age. In this case, the evolution of the field of research required not just well-researched evidence and dogged commitment to its dissemination, but also partnership with influential bodies, including funders, and spreading the ideas internationally through comparative research and networking, and by different modes, such as participatory knowledge-exchange programmes in schools.

Turning to child abuse and neglect, [Chapter 6](#) argues that universal health provision, such as community-facing health professionals, provides a promising practice environment for a public-health approach to identifying and referring children who may be at risk. This work is in the

TCRU tradition of advocacy of universalism in access to services and a family focused or ‘think family’ approach to healthcare, recognising that families are children’s first educators and upbringers and societies have a responsibility to support families (parents) in their upbringing roles. The work is an example of foresight work, leading on bringing new ideas or new configurations of service provision to policy attention, in this case through the author’s role in the National Institute for Health and Care Research’s Children and Families Policy Research Unit, which is a multi-partner research centre with topics developed in collaboration with the Department of Health and Social Care, and includes a rapid-response mode. This is the closest current example in TCRU to the Milotay (2018) description of ‘Science Advice’, which provides evidence in an accessible format to policymakers, informs the development of long-term policies, provides informed advice during emergencies and engages in foresight activities.

Finally, [Chapter 7](#) details the scope and potential of a global network of academics drawn from over 50 countries, to leverage new ways of understanding common issues in ‘parenting leaves’, a policy issue, at the intersection of employment and family life, of increasing relevance to economies and societies. The network, with its annual review of policies and annual conference, functions as a sounding board, stimulus for new research, a resource when policy advisors require information and career-development opportunities for the scholarly community of leave researchers. The network is loosely organised and united around a belief in equality and a commitment to exchange. It is a powerful example of largely self-organising research infrastructure.

Three themes might be discernible from the accounts of research-policy relationships reported in these chapters. First, the relationship between strategic and tactical research which clearly works best from a researcher’s point of view when conducted in tandem, as one supports the other. However, from a policy perspective, there is a tendency to focus on the short term and immediate – or tactical – at the expense of the longer-term transformation that is often required to achieve the social change recommended by research evidence. A good example of lost opportunities is the research on early childhood education and care services, over 50 years, which has been both strategic and tactical but has rarely achieved policy breakthrough, and certainly now the services are in an extremely parlous state and not working for children, families or the workforce. On the other hand, the research on looked-after children, particularly on their right to education, and to an extent around the social pedagogic ideas of the value of meaningful relationships and activities as constituting learning and development, have achieved considerable policy acknowledgement.

Second, the interconnections between, and evolutions of, research topics and programmes discussed in [Part I](#) – and throughout this volume – is an indication of the power and potential of a dedicated research unit, with a good portion of secured funding, enabling at least some continuity of research staff, to deepen understandings over time in subject areas. This depth of work has been supported by both a collaborative ethos in the research environment, and cross-project working, so researchers can contribute thinking in one project to others. This evolving knowledge often stands in contrast to lack of continuity among civil servants or other policymakers, whose career paths value breadth, or, in recent times, are simply not there to engage with research.

Third, many of the [Part I](#) chapters document the value of working internationally, both through doing comparative work and through building international partnerships and networks. European Union membership made establishing networks and partnerships relatively straightforward and access to EU research funding for comparative work was immensely helpful. International comparisons both strengthened our research methods and enabled us to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about practice, ‘expanding the menu of the possible’ ([Tobin, 2021: 297](#)). One clear example was Moss’s editorship of *Children in Europe*, a twice-yearly magazine (2001–12), translated into 15 languages, that aimed to provide a forum for exchange and learning for all those working with or for children aged 0–10. Comparative work was often the springboard for other international projects such as edited volumes (for example, [Miller et al., 2018](#)). Using and adapting comparative evidence is a complex task; the risk is that policymakers ‘skip’ this step and translate only those insights that appeal to pre-existing ideas and stop short of challenging the fundamentals of service provision – such as introducing a social pedagogue as a ‘core’ worker with children and young people.

While these chapters are far from representing the whole of TCRU output in relation to children’s services and policies, they exemplify some of the research-policy issues that have enabled and constrained our work over 50 years. Enablers might be, first and foremost, an ongoing dialogue with and funding stream from policymakers such as government; second, a government and civil service committed to making use of research evidence, especially that which they commission; and, third, a research community committed to social-justice values that run alongside and inform their research designs, very often leading to participatory and collaborative approaches to research and knowledge exchange. Ideally, one would also see researchers employed on non-precarious contracts so

that research expertise can build up over time without constant changes of project personnel. All this has been in place at various times through TCRU's history.

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2

Jack Tizard and Children's Centres: visions for policy-relevant social research and transforming early childhood services

Peter Moss

Introduction

The Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) opened its doors in 1973. As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), TCRU's founder, Jack Tizard, had a clear vision of the kind of policy-relevant research he wanted the unit to conduct. He also had another vision, of the kind of transformative policy he wanted to research, in an area that was new to him: the provision of early childhood services. This chapter describes and discusses how these two visions intersected and with what effect. It also considers the long-term fate of Jack's plans for transforming early childhood and offers an assessment of both his visions. The assessment benefits not only from the vantage point of hindsight, but also from consideration of another experience of attempted transformation of early childhood provision, also underway in the early 1970s – in Sweden. Taking this comparative approach throws some light on why policies do, or do not change, and the different processes that may contribute to such change.

Research and policy: two visions

TCRU's founder and first director, Jack Tizard, had a clear role in mind for his new unit. It would conduct sustained research on strategic issues, which would enable an accumulation of expertise by a group of researchers. These strategic issues would not necessarily be high on the immediate agenda of policymakers, who tended 'not to look beyond their noses', but would be of growing significance looking ahead. The starting point for such research was epidemiological, getting a clearer picture of the scale and nature of the issue at stake, to be followed by experimental projects: 'setting up [service] models on a quasi-experimental basis – to see how they work and where they go wrong ... what they cost, what benefits and disadvantages they bring and how lessons can be generalised' (Tizard, J., 1975: n.p.).

Tizard had identified the strategic issue he wanted to focus on: services for preschool children and their families. Neglected by successive governments since the end of the Second World War, he was clear that these services would be increasingly needed and demanded. It was, he wrote:

[e]vident that society would be obliged to provide much more in the way of services for young children than we are planning ... It seemed important to explore the feasibility of piloting new types of service before public demand led to rapid expansion of services on traditional lines that might be functionally less satisfactory (Tizard, J., 1975: n.p.).

More services, he thought, were not only needed but would be demanded for the benefit of both young children and their parents, and especially mothers. At a time, the early 1970s, when 'mothers who do paid work, especially those with pre-school children, are a constant source of controversy, and are subject to strong and often dogmatic censure' (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976: 142), Tizard believed the numbers of mothers in employment would grow and that they should be actively supported, including better early childhood provision:

The increasing number of employed mothers is a secular, social and economic trend of major significance the implications of which have been largely ignored by industry, education, welfare and social services. Neglect is most apparent in the lamentable record of care for children under three, where public services have failed in quality

and quantity ... [W]e need a positive and comprehensive policy to enable women, including those who are mothers, to use their full potential and to share with men, on a basis of equality, the full range of domestic, social and employment experiences (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976: 157).

But employment was not the only reason that parents, and especially mothers, needed more provision. Tizard was aware of the increasing evidence that life for many women with young children was stressful and unhappy:

While many young mothers enjoy their lives, and find satisfaction in them, the numbers whose lives are marked by unhappiness, dissatisfaction and strain are much larger than generally recognised ... [The] lot of many mothers is unsatisfactory and unsatisfying, even damaging, and the causes may be inherent in existing family and social norms, roles and structures (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976: 153–4).

He foresaw not only increasing demands for early childhood provision, but that without fresh thinking about how that demand might best be met, the result would simply be more of the same – and that left a lot to be desired. Existing provision was not only inadequate in quantity but also dysfunctional because of fragmentation (nurseries, childminders, playgroups, nursery classes and nursery schools) and because of a fundamental split between ‘educational’ and ‘social’ provision, embedded in split-government responsibility, the former under the Department for Education, the latter under the (then) Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS). Provision was also inadequate in the range of services offered, unresponsive therefore to need, and was, especially on the ‘social’ side, too often targeted: ‘[s]imply providing for “priority” groups was not going to meet public demand which would, sooner or later, require a service as readily available (though not compulsory) as the educational services provided for children over the age of five’ (Tizard, J., 1975).

Faced by this underdeveloped and ramshackle system, Tizard thought that nothing short of total transformation was needed: provision that was integrated, comprehensive, universal, local and free – ‘[f]or a society which provides free education, including free higher education, and a free child health service, a free pre-school service is a logical corollary’ (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976: 214). What was called for was a new type of provision: a Children’s Centre, to be ‘the overall responsibility

of one authority at national and local level ... [embracing] children from birth onwards and [covering] education and care'. The Children's Centre should be open and free to all families with young children in its local catchment area (within 'pram-pushing distance' as Tizard put it), and offer a wide range of services. Some of these would be provided in all Centres, in particular education and care, including for children under three years ('the need for provision for this groups needs to be accepted') and child health ('a comprehensive service should include a strong paediatric component'); but others would be responsive to the particular needs and demands of local families.

In Tizard's view, therefore, the integrated Children's Centre, should offer:

high quality care for young children in its catchment area, at the age and, within reason, for the hours that their parents want. The service must therefore be available to all families, and not selective in its intake, and must be based on demand, not need. A centre for day-care and education might also offer a range of other services to young families living locally, even perhaps to the local community as a whole. For example a welfare clinic; a toy and book library; clothes-washing facilities ... a meeting place for local groups; a food cooperative (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976: 216).

In short, the Children's Centre would be a uniform type of provision, but with scope for considerable diversity according to the needs of local communities.

Two other features of the Children's Centre as advocated by Tizard should be mentioned. First, a reform of the early years workforce, since greater integration 'will require a more rational system of staffing, with a rethink in particular of the existing dichotomy between nursery nurses and teachers ... [which] impedes the setting up of a genuinely integrated service in which all needs are met by one group of staff in a multi-purpose neighbourhood centre' (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976: 218–19). Second, there should be substantial parent involvement, which:

does not mean simply helping mothers with difficulties, or holding mothers' classes ... [but] should mean enlisting the active participation of parents in the day-to-day life of the nursery, learning from as well as teaching them, working together ... Given encouragement, an increasing number [of parents] will probably wish to be involved in the discussion and shaping of aims and

methods – and the issue of parent power will become more pressing in the future (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976: 218, 226).

While acknowledging that ‘parental involvement in nursery centres is very necessary’, Tizard conceded that ‘how best to achieve it is not at all clear’.

Visions into practice

Jack Tizard endeavoured to put both his visions into practice. First, working with local authorities and voluntary organisations, he was able to establish two prototype Children’s Centres in London – the Thomas Coram Children’s Centre, serving an area of South Camden (which opened in January 1974) and the Dorothy Gardner Children’s Centre, serving an area in North Westminster (which opened in Spring 1975). Over time, they achieved much of what Tizard had envisaged, proving the feasibility of the service model. For example, the Coram Centre could be described in 1979 as:

largely successful in meeting its aims. It provides a flexible service which is available for most parents in the neighbourhood, as well as a wide range of other facilities for families with young children. As far as possible the distinction between ‘care’ and ‘education’ has been eliminated (Hughes et al., 1980: 158–9).

The Centre was open from 8.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. for 50 weeks a year, with each child attending for hours chosen by their family; in these circumstances, ‘labelling places “full-time” or “part-time” becomes irrelevant and an inaccurate way of describing the true variety that exists’ (Hughes et al., 1980: 157). There was one head responsible for the whole centre (herself qualified as both a teacher and nursery nurse), leading a team of teachers, nursery nurses and assistants, all of whom worked shifts and staggered holidays to ensure cover throughout the day and year; all staff, whatever their qualifications, participated in both teaching and caring and met regularly together to discuss their work. Among the ‘other facilities’ on offer were a weekly child-health clinic; a speech therapist coming in weekly; a social worker employed by the Centre, available to parents at any time; toy and book libraries; a children’s bookshop; a mother and baby group; a conversation group for parents speaking little English; and a launderette. All services were free, except for children’s lunches that parents paid for.

However, some parts of his vision were not fully achieved. The catchment area proved too large to provide places for all its children, necessitating a waiting list and some selection, though ‘on the whole the children in the Centre come from a wide range of backgrounds ... [and it] is *not* operating a service purely for “disadvantaged” children’ (Hughes et al., 1980: 156, original emphasis). More serious, the Coram Centre was unable to take more than a very few under-tuos. Furthermore, despite the considerable efforts made to blur the teacher/nursery-nurse distinctions, ‘some discrepancies still remain ... teachers get twelve weeks holiday a year and are paid on the Burnham [teachers’ pay] scale, whereas nursery-nurses and assistants [have six weeks holiday and] are paid on the lower Joint National Council scale’ (Hughes et al., 1980: 157).

The second way Tizard enacted his vision was by researching the feasibility of the new model of provision and examining parents’ response with a view to assessing the future demand for services. The Preschool Project, one of TCRU’s major studies in its early years, was funded from the initial DHSS grant for the new unit. The research team included a group who focused on the families, two researchers working in the centres, and two paediatricians who ran the child-health services in the centres (with the help of a dedicated health visitor) and conducted research on the health and wellbeing of local children.

Research began before TCRU was up and running, with some initial epidemiological work, which as we have seen was an integral part of Tizard’s thinking about the study of hitherto neglected areas. At the time (the early 1970s) little was known about parents’ actual use of early childhood education and care services or what services they might want. Initial surveys were conducted (on a shoestring) in 1972 in Kirkby, outside Liverpool, and in parts of London, of local families with young children (Moss, Tizard and Crook, 1973). Once open, TCRU conducted better-funded surveys in the catchment areas for both new Children’s Centres, and a control area, starting with a census of each area to identify every family with a preschool age child. These families were then interviewed, not only about their circumstances, but also their use of and preferences for early childhood services, and their problems and difficulties, including maternal mental health. Follow-up interviews were subsequently conducted.

The Preschool Project ended in 1979. Looking back, more than 40 years later, I am struck by its modest output in terms of academic journal articles, although there were some; it was a different time, with no Research Excellence Framework and the attendant imperative to publish. Two books were written (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976; Hughes et al.,

1980), both about early childhood provision and policy, both informed by the Preschool Project, and both full of important analyses and proposals. There were also copious reports written for the government funder.

One issue that became clear during the course of the Preschool Project was that nearly half of all mothers (46 per cent) with a child under three years in the study areas wanted a nursery place, at a time when three years was the recommended starting age for attending preschool provision. Moreover, 'less than half the mothers wanting a nursery place wanted "part-time" hours, that is four hours a day or less' (Hughes et al., 1980: 126–7), again contrary to the then official norm of 2½ hours a day for nursery education. A subsequent national survey conducted for the government found almost identical figures for preferred attendance, although no question was asked about preferred hours of attendance (Bone, 1977).

What happened next?

The 1970s saw flickers of government interest in early childhood policy – but these flickers soon died away. In 1972, a white paper from the Conservative Secretary of State for Education (Margaret Thatcher) proposed universal nursery education for 3- and 4-year-olds within 10 years; that did not happen. In 1976, the Labour government called a conference entitled 'Low Cost Day Care Provision for the Under Fives' where the Health Minister, Dr David Owen, argued that '[w]e could improve the provision for 0–5s substantially by spreading the low-cost best practice which already exists, proven and documented, on the ground' (Department for Health and Social Security, 1976). Tizard, who attended, was unimpressed and said so; nothing further came from it. The centres, along with a few other isolated examples, continued to operate after 1979, when Jack died prematurely and the Preschool Project ended, but neither Conservative nor Labour governments showed any interest in the pilot projects or the Children's Centre concept.

The first signs of change appeared during the Conservative government led by John Major (1990–7). Some financial support for the childcare costs of low-income families was introduced in 1994, a tentative scheme of demand-side subsidy. In the same year, the government announced a new push for nursery education, with funding to go to any provider that could meet certain standards – not just schools but also playgroups and private nurseries. Again, a demand-side funding strategy was favoured, through the use of vouchers, which were introduced, on a

trial basis, to four local authorities in 1996, shortly before the government fell at the 1997 general election.

Tentative policy interest in early childhood turned to policy priority under the three successive Labour governments (1997–2010). There were two strong drivers. First, the turn to a positive government attitude towards employed mothers, in part as a response to social changes already underway. From the late 1980s, employment among women with young children began to rise rapidly, in particular better-educated women choosing to return to their jobs after maternity leave¹ (Brannen and Moss, 1998); whereas previously employment among women with preschool-age children had been low and overwhelmingly part-time, allowing informal childcare arrangements to dominate, now a new generation of mothers emerged who needed more hours of childcare and more formal arrangements. In the absence of public services, the result was an explosive growth in private childcare provision in England. The number of places with childminders doubled between 1989 and 1997 (from 186,500 to 365,000), while places in private day-nurseries nearly quadrupled (from 46,500 to 173,500) (Department of Health, 1997); in less than a decade a large market in private and mainly for-profit childcare had emerged.

The second driver was a newfound belief in early childhood interventions as an effective ‘human technology’ for mitigating a raft of social problems, including child poverty, which had tripled between 1979 and 1996. The Labour government’s high expectations were expressed in a 2002 ‘interdepartmental childcare review’ document from the Cabinet Office:

The availability of good quality, affordable childcare is key to achieving some important government objectives. Childcare can improve educational outcomes for children. Childcare enables parents, particularly mothers, to go out to work, or increase their hours of work, thereby lifting their families out of poverty. It also plays a key role in extending choice for women by enhancing their ability to compete in the labour market on more equal terms ...

Childcare can also play an important role in meeting other top level objectives, for example in improving health, boosting productivity, improving public services, closing the gender pay gap and reducing crime. The targets to achieve 70 per cent employment among lone parents by 2010 and to eradicate child poverty by 2020 are those that are most obviously related. Childcare is essential for those objectives to be met (Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2002: 5).

This enthusiasm for early childhood provision found policy expression in several ways: increasing access to ‘childcare’, to boost employment, in particular by supporting the expansion of the private market; offering a universal entitlement to part-time early education for all 3- and 4-year-olds; and by implementing Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), targeted intervention programmes for children under 4 years and their families in areas with high levels of poverty. Each SSLP provided specified core services: outreach and home visiting; support for families and parents; play, learning and childcare; healthcare and advice about health and development; and support for children with special needs. But each local programme was also free to provide additional services.

It is here that Children’s Centres make a reappearance. For SSLPs did not last. The 2002 Cabinet Office document referred to above recommended the creation of Children’s Centres as an effective way of providing good-quality, integrated childcare and early years education as well as a range of other services for children and their families. A year later, it was announced that SSLPs were to be replaced by Sure Start Children’s Centres (SSCCs), which would also in time absorb another earlier government initiative, Neighbourhood Nurseries. SSCCs were subsequently developed in three phases: the first focused on the 20 per cent most disadvantaged areas; the second on the 30 per cent most disadvantaged areas, plus some other areas; and the third on achieving full coverage in the remaining 70 per cent of the country. By 2010, when the programme was complete, there were around 3,600 Children’s Centres, one in every community in England, a vast undertaking achieved in just seven years.

That, however, was the high-water mark for Children’s Centres. A 2018 report described their subsequent decline:

[Children’s Centres have moved] away from the original idea of an open access neighbourhood centre. Services are now ‘hollowed out’ – much more thinly spread, often no longer ‘in pram-pushing distance’. The focus of centres has changed to referred families with high need, and provision has diversified as national direction has weakened, with local authorities employing a variety of strategies to survive in an environment of declining resources and loss of strategic direction (Smith et al., 2018: 5).

Between 2010 and 2020, the number of centres fell by a third (Simpson, 2020).

At first reading, Children's Centres have simply been the victims of the years of post-2010 austerity:

[Under the Coalition government], the budget was no longer ring-fenced but merged with other programmes. National guidance on the 'core purpose' of children's centres in 2013 shifted focus to targeting 'high need' families, rather than open access to universal services. Substantial reductions in overall funding for local authorities meant the 'early intervention' allocation fell by 64% between 2010/11 and 2017/18 (Smith et al., 2018: 4).

But behind this has been a coolness, if not downright antipathy, from Conservative governments to provision closely associated with the preceding Labour government, provision such as Children's Centres and Extended Schools, with their combination of universal and targeted services. So, now, Children's Centres are out – and Family Hubs are in, the English government announcing a modest funding programme in 2022. These hubs are described as 'centres of advice for parents on how to care for their child, keep them safe and healthy and provide services including parenting and breastfeeding support ... [and] improving access to a wide range of integrated support services for families with children aged 0–19' (Gaunt, 2022). Apart from losing the Children's Centre's focus on preschool children and families, the Hub model lacks provision of early childhood education and care, so central to Tizard's vision. He envisaged Children's Centres as an important addition to a universal and comprehensive welfare state, attuned to local needs; today's depleted Children's Centres and modest Family Hubs are pale shadows of that optimistic vision.

Assessing the visions

Jack Tizard brought two visions to his new research unit. How did they work out? Did they translate into practice or, at least, to what extent did they do so? Looking back over the years, I think the answer is: mostly not.

Having spent 50 years working on policy, provision and practice in early childhood, in England and many other countries, I remain convinced that Tizard's concept of the integrated, comprehensive, universal, local and free Children's Centre was the right way to transform existing dysfunctional

provision and respond to increasing demands. As Barbara Tizard, Jack Tizard's wife and Director of TCRU after Jack's death, put it: 'Jack's proposal was simple but breathtakingly audacious' (Tizard, B., 2003: 13). And at first sight, it looks as if Tizard was vindicated by the Labour government's adoption of Children's Centres for national rollout. But look a little closer, and it's apparent that they were two very different concepts.

In Tizard's view, the Children's Centre would become the basis of a new, universal arm of the welfare state, replacing the existing hotchpotch of early childhood services, the product of decades of policy disinterest, and adding health and a variety of other services to the core education and care offer. But subsequent governments showed no interest in reform, and the hotchpotch simply got worse, not least because of the explosive growth of private day-nurseries, few and far between in the 1970s, numerous and widespread by the 2000s. The Labour government's response to prioritising early childhood provision relied heavily on more of the same, growing the 'childcare market' by encouraging even more private nurseries. These mainly for-profit businesses were primarily aimed at higher-income, employed parents, providing a socially divisive service far removed from the original inclusive concept of the public Children's Centre.

In this context, the government was at pains to ensure the new Children's Centres did not compete with established private services. All Children's Centres had to provide what was known as the 'core offer': information and advice to parents on a range of subjects, including looking after babies and young children, and the availability of local services such as childcare; drop-in sessions and activities for parents, carers and children; outreach and family-support services, including visits to all families within two months of a child's birth; child and family health services, including access to specialist services for those who need them; links with Jobcentre Plus for training and employment advice; and support for local childminders and a childminding network. But only Children's Centres serving the 30 per cent most deprived communities had in addition to offer integrated early education and childcare places for a minimum of five days a week, 10 hours a day, 48 weeks a year. Other Centres should only include such provision if there was unmet local demand, though all were expected to have some activities for children on site. Overall, therefore, Children's Centres did not replace existing early childhood services, but supplemented them in providing some early education and childcare only where the existing market was not able to meet demand – they were, in short, providers of last resort; the main focus was on the Children's Centre as an information and support service (Lewis, 2011).

The failure of Children's Centres to become a part of government policy for more than 20 years after TCRU's original Preschool Project, and then the failure of this type of provision to become the centrepiece of a re-formed and integrated early childhood system casts doubt on Tizard's vision of his research unit as contributing to strategic policy issues. Arguably, he was right in identifying early childhood policy and provision as an important long-term issue, in suggesting that demand was already high and would only grow, and in arguing that consequently it was important to explore the feasibility of piloting new types of service rather than relying on what was a patently unsatisfactory status quo. Unfortunately, the gap between that piloting and when government recognised the need to act was simply too long for TCRU's work in the 1970s to contribute; moreover, by 1997, the social democratic idealism that lay behind Tizard's vision of the Children's Centre had been superseded by a neoliberal belief in the virtues of privatised and marketised provision.

In one respect, however, Tizard's vision for research was more successful. TCRU went on to undertake sustained work on the strategic issue of early childhood policy, a group of researchers enabling an accumulation of expertise over many years after Tizard's death. Research was undertaken into other types of provision, including childminders, playgroups and nurseries. The Preschool Project and its interest in 'mothers' employment' stimulated work in the 1980s and beyond on what was to become a major (and reconceptualised) theme of TCRU's work: 'parental employment'. The early childhood workforce was studied, including its highly gendered state. A substantial and varied body of research, both national and comparative, has been undertaken, including on early childhood services and their integration, school-age childcare, and parenting leave. The Unit has engaged in work on both quality in early childhood education and care and critiques of the concept of quality.

All things considered, Tizard's original policy vision remains to be fulfilled. But failure must be shared with successive governments, who funded TCRU's work on Children's Centres yet did not engage with that work or the underlying policy issues. Should these governments have been capable of thinking in the long term, to foresee that early-childhood policies would become a matter of concern for society? Or is this too much to expect of politicians and policymakers? In conclusion, I want to consider what light the experience of another country might throw on these questions.

Concluding reflections

Between 2000 and 2002, researchers from TCRU (and a partner Scottish organisation) conducted a comparative research study on policy changes in England, Scotland and Sweden, countries that had recently transferred responsibility for all early-childhood education and care (ECEC) services to their education systems (Cohen et al., 2004). By then, such comparative work was a familiar part of TCRU's research repertoire; but it was not so in the early years of TCRU. Yet it could have proved relevant because Sweden faced the same problem as England towards the end of the 1960s: inadequate levels of provision and a system split between 'care' and 'education', represented by full-time daycare centres (*daghem*) and part-time kindergartens or playschools (*lekskolan*). Similar problems – but very different outcomes, and it is instructive to consider why and how.

Sweden experienced an economic boom in the 1960s, with a consequent labour shortage, which was combined with increasingly vocal demands from women for employment and equality. In response, the Social Democrat government established, in 1968, a national commission on *Barnstugeutredning* (nursery provision), which sat over four years, and was to prove 'the foundation, ideologically, pedagogically and organisationally for the full-scale expansion of childcare in the municipalities' (Korpi, 2007: 24) that followed. The commission 'mobilised expertise from every corner of the country to assist them in their work' (Korpi, 2007: 23). What emerged from this wide-ranging and open process was genuinely transformational, eventually bringing Sweden to the universal and integrated early-childhood system it enjoys today.

The commission recommended a 'dialogue pedagogy', inspired by the work of Paulo Freire and intended to develop a 'two-way relationship between active pedagogues and children, based on respect for the child, and treating the child as an individual, and having a belief in the child's ability, curiosity and desire to learn' (Korpi, 2007: 24). Organisationally, the commission proposed a new type of ECEC provision – the 'preschool' (*forskola*) that would bring together the traditions from daycare centres and playschools, integrating care with pedagogical activities. A re-formed provision required a re-formed workforce, integrating the different workforces from daycare centres and kindergartens to form a single, new profession: the preschool teacher. Underlying these reforms was a political commitment to these early-childhood services as a public responsibility, with the provision of preschools and *fritidshem* ('free-time

services' or what in the UK is termed 'school-age childcare') made a municipal duty, with most provided by these local authorities.

The early 1970s, therefore, reset the Swedish early-childhood system on a new course, which has been followed ever since. The number of places in preschools has vastly increased (and places in family daycare decreased), the number of children in early-childhood services rising more than ten-fold between 1970 to 1998, from 71,000 to 720,000; entitlement to an ECEC service has been extended until it now starts at 12 months-of-age and dovetails with well-paid parenting leave; the right of children not only to a preschool place but to an early-childhood education has been emphasised; the preschool workforce has evolved so that today just under half are graduate preschool teachers, qualified to work both in preschools and preschool classes in primary schools; and responsibility for ECEC services at national level was transferred in 1996 from the social-welfare system to the education system, a move already undertaken locally in many municipalities.

Why then the very different outcomes? One clear difference between England and Sweden was that the issue of early-childhood services was acknowledged as more pressing in Sweden in the late 1960s/early 1970s, because of both labour market and gender equality demands. Both were to be felt later in England, which in the early 1970s did not even have statutory maternity leave (while Sweden in 1975 was the first country to evolve leave policy by introducing parental leave). Such policy changes as were mooted in England in the 1970s were, as already noted, modest in scope and conservative in form.

But Sweden also had a different political culture, one more given to public deliberation and collective reflection. Faced by increasing demands to expand early-childhood provision, the Swedes set about the task in a methodical and participatory way, with their Commission on Nursery Provision. This was not the only commission around at this time in what became a 'decade of commissions'; of particular relevance, a commission into *Familjestödsutredningen* (family support) was appointed in 1974 to investigate the pedagogical conditions for the youngest children in ECEC services, as well as looking into parental leave. Subsequently, Sweden has become one of very few countries to integrate its policies on ECEC and parental leave.

A senior Swedish civil servant, deeply involved in the evolution of early-childhood policies, observed that through these commissions 'in the traditional Swedish manner, the issues were carefully examined, circulated for official comment and support was built up for decisions and reforms' (Korpi, 2007: 28). Moreover, she notes, these commissions were not the

start of public debate about early-childhood policies, as '[o]ne of the main ingredients of the history of Swedish preschool is the lengthy period over which debates were held on the merits of public child care – its advantages and disadvantages, how and why – and society's responsibility for its provision' (Korpi, 2007: 16). These precursive debates were stimulated by social reformers, such as Alva Myrdal, a sociologist and Social Democratic politician who in the 1930s presented her ideas for a reformed Swedish early-childhood system. This would integrate education and care in a new form of provision, the *storbarnkammare* (nursery for all), situated at the very heart of the community, providing for all children, whether or not their mothers were employed, and operating with high standards including a well-educated workforce.

In England, by contrast, even when early-childhood policies moved strongly onto the government agenda in 1997, there was no similar process of collective thinking and public debate. A senior civil servant was commissioned in 1998 to conduct a 'Comprehensive Spending Review on Services for Children Under Eight', but this focused narrowly on developing an intervention programme, Sure Start, for children from lower-income families. It was not a comprehensive review of the whole early-childhood policy and provision area, the opportunity being missed to carefully examine and transform the whole range of early-childhood policies, as the Swedes had done in their 'decade of commissions'. The deep-seated problems in the English early-childhood system, identified 30 years earlier by Jack Tizard, were left untouched.

Last but not least, the Sweden of the 1960s and early 1970s, when reform was taking shape, was still dominated by a social-democratic regime, which had been intent on building a universal and generous welfare state since the 1930s and into which it could readily incorporate a re-formed and expanded early-childhood system. England, by contrast, in the 1970s was entering a period of crisis and transition, moving away from a social-democratic postwar period into a sustained period of neoliberalism. In this changed context, private and marketised services were more appealing propositions than universal public provision.

In the light of Sweden's experience, we can see more clearly how economics, culture, politics and history were against Tizard's visions working out. They were, to a large extent, in the wrong place at the wrong time. But nothing stays the same, and we are on the cusp of another transition with neoliberalism in crisis (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Now, perhaps, is the time to rediscover strategic research and to revisit the concept of the universal, integrated and multipurpose Children's Centre.

Further reading

Unfortunately, much of Jack Tizard's writing about his visions for research and early-childhood services is no longer readily accessible. *Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a democratic education*, edited by Claire Cameron and Peter Moss, provides trenchant and wide-ranging critiques of past and present policy, and proposals for reform. Published by UCL Press, it can be downloaded free at <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/128464>. An accessible overview of the development of early-childhood services and policies in Sweden is to be found in 'The politics of pre-school: Intentions and decisions underlying the emergence and growth of the Swedish pre-school', written by Barbara Martin Korpi, published by the Swedish Ministry of Education, and available as a free download at <https://www.government.se/information-material/2007/10/the-politics-of-pre-school---intentions-and-decisions-underlying-the-emergence-and-growth-of-the-swedish-pre-school/> (accessed 19 June 2023).

Note

- 1 Statutory maternity leave was only introduced in the UK in 1976, late in European terms, and consisted of a long but poorly paid period of leave – 29 weeks after birth, only 6 weeks of which was paid at a higher level.

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3

Which way for the ‘care’ workforce?

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Introduction

Newspaper headlines testify to a crisis in England’s childcare services:¹ ‘UK faces childcare crisis as staff shortages force nurseries to close’ (*Guardian*, 30 April 2022), ‘Soaring nursery costs, recruitment issues and chronic underfunding – inside London’s childcare crisis’ (*Evening Standard*, 30 September 2022), ‘England’s childcare in crisis as costs rise and staff leave’ (*Financial Times*, 28 October 2022). The trade magazine *Nursery World* adds its voice to the clamour with the headline ‘Recruitment – crunch time’, the feature that follows reporting that ‘nurseries say recruitment is the biggest issue they face, with many having to limit intake, close rooms or even close entire settings because they can’t staff them’ ([Goddard, 2022](#)).

Central to the crisis, as these headlines indicate, is the workforce and the mounting problems service providers encounter in recruiting and retaining staff. Archer and Oppenheim ([2021](#): 23) confirm this picture and add detail:

Recruitment continues to be a significant challenge for early childhood education and care providers. According to Ceeda ([2019](#)), in 2018 32% of settings had vacant posts compared to the wider labour market where 20% of employers had vacancies ([Winterbotham et al., 2018](#)). Turnover of the early years workforce appears to be increasing, rising from 13% in England in 2013

(Department for Education, 2014) to 24% in 2018 (NDNA, 2019), with many staff leaving for better paid retail jobs, further exacerbating the recruitment challenge. This situation appears to have intensified since the start of the pandemic.

These reports of staff shortages and instability are symptoms of a deeper problem with the childcare workforce – indeed with the whole ‘care’ workforce, a crisis of ‘care’ work in England affecting those working in ‘care’ services for children or adults (‘childcare’, ‘social care’, and ‘eldercare’). For England, indeed the whole UK, has adopted a low pay and precarious employment model for these services, and that model is deeply flawed and utterly broken. In this chapter, we draw on research at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) to understand the model, the problem and the crisis, but also to look at possible solutions. But first, we present TCRU’s credentials on this fraught subject, an overview of 25 years of research, mainly, for reasons of space, focusing upon the English childcare workforce, a strategic engagement that has combined critical analysis of current policy, international comparative research, and thinking about alternatives.

Engaging with the care workforce

From the mid-1980s, TCRU researchers began to participate in European networks and other international work, through which they gained knowledge and some understanding of the workforces in other European countries, especially in early-childhood and school-age childcare services. This coincided with a government-funded study of playgroups, at the time a prominent form of sessional provision often managed by parent-run committees; while not focused on the workforce, the study did explore some of the issues around it. But it was the 1990s that saw the emergence of a sustained period of workforce research and publications, including work undertaken on social pedagogy and the profession and role of the social pedagogue (see [Chapter 4](#)). Social pedagogues work in continental Europe and beyond, in a wide range of services and across all age groups – one of the particular and most interesting aspects of the profession is its capacity to work (as they say in Denmark) with people from 0 to 100; but they have only recently appeared in the UK, and their presence is still marginal in the wider workforce.

Reviewing this large body of research and publications about various aspects of the care workforce, a few features of that engagement are apparent. First, while there has been a continuing interest in the

childcare workforce, and indeed the wider early-childhood education and care workforce, TCRU's interest has extended to include a range of workers in services for children, young people, and older adults. It has become apparent that while work in different settings and with different groups calls for a substantial degree of specialism, all care work and the whole care workforce have much in common.

While most work has been focused on formal services (that is, where there is an employment or contractual relationship, subject to official regulation), some TCRU studies have also considered what might be termed the informal care workforce. Their work is largely unpaid, not formally organised or regulated, and usually involves care for a person with whom the carer has an existing relationship (for example, partner/spouse, parent or child) (Simon and Owen, 2005). In one particularly important study, researchers at TCRU identified that a substantial contribution to this informal care work was being made by what was termed 'the pivot generation' – people in their fifties and sixties carrying out care for their parents and grandchildren whilst also in paid employment (Mooney, Statham and Simon, 2002).

Second, the work's strong international and comparative element, including the studies of social pedagogy and social pedagogues and a large EU-funded study on 'Care Work in Europe', has both built on and deepened understandings gained through earlier work in European networks focused on childcare and out-of-school care. It has demonstrated the value of cross-national research by 'challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, [and] expanding the menu of the possible' (Tobin, 2021: 298).

Third, a major strand of work has concerned the structuring and work conditions of workforces in services for children, young people and adults. Apart from highlighting dichotomies, such as that between the workforces in schools and in childcare services, and other dysfunctional splits, this has drawn attention to occupational hierarchies, the atrocious low pay and other employment conditions of the many 'care' workers at the bottom of these occupational hierarchies, and the persistently gendered nature of the work, so that care work of all kinds is mostly done by women. We will explore these structural features and work conditions later in the chapter, also locating them in a context where care services have been increasingly marketised and privatised.

TCRU's research into workforces has gone beyond structures and conditions. It has delved deeper into other important themes. It has, for instance, looked at the relationship between work and family life among workers in a number of occupations (Brannen et al., 2007; Statham, Brannen and Mooney, 2008); the understandings of different groups of

workers of what constitutes good-quality work in services for young children and older people (Cameron and Moss, 2007); the reasons for nursery workers and childminders leaving these types of employment (Mooney, Moss and Owen, 2001); and the profound and persistent gendering of employment. Research on gendering was informed by earlier work in a European network,² involving a TCRU researcher, that took ‘men as carers’ for one of its main themes, leading to a groundbreaking discussion paper on ‘Men as workers in childcare services’ (Jensen, 1996). TCRU research, beginning in 1997, looked in more detail at the reasons for the extreme gendering of the early childhood workforce, the experience of men working in early childhood services, and various innovative strategies for moving to a more gender-mixed workforce, drawing especially on partnerships with practitioners in England, Norway and Scotland (Owen, Cameron and Moss, 1998; Cameron, Moss and Owen, 1999; Owen, 2003).

These workforce studies not only covered a range of occupations and themes, but also used a variety of methods. As well as comparative approaches, they have included surveys, interviews, secondary analysis of large-scale datasets and ethnographic techniques using film as a stimulus or provocation to reflection about care work; often, a mix of methods has been applied, such as secondary analysis followed by qualitative enquiry. Of these, the development of methodology to interrogate national statistics (such as the Census and the Labour Force Survey (LFS)) has been of particular importance; they have proved invaluable sources, but their use has also led to identifying problems. For example, Simon has argued that while large-scale national data are very good at examining formal childcare provision and usage, they are weak for providing information about informal childcare for preschool children; while data on ‘childcare workers’ are often categorised separately from ‘education workers’, which makes it problematic to examine the workforce as a whole (Simon, 2019). Earlier attempts to use the European Labour Force Survey to compare workforces in different countries also ran into problems, especially with the classification of occupations, which limited its practical usefulness (Cameron and Moss, 2007).

The workforce context

Before diagnosing the problem of the childcare workforce, and the crisis to which it is giving rise, we need to place the workforce in context, a context that has contributed to and exacerbated today’s dire situation. Two features of the context are of particular importance. The first was

recognised by TCRU researchers back in the 1970s when, as noted in the previous chapter, they wrote that ‘a more rational system of staffing [was required in Children’s Centres], with a rethink in particular of the existing dichotomy between nursery nurses and teachers’. What Jack Tizard and his colleagues were pointing to was a split between childcare and school-based services, with a commensurate split between childcare workers and teachers (and teaching assistants), in effect two workforces unequal, as we shall see, in status, qualification, pay and other conditions. This split has remained, with an early childhood workforce increasingly dominated by childcare workers, as nursery provision has rapidly increased from the late 1980s. By 2021, according to the English government’s annual Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers, there were an ‘estimated 328,500 early-years staff in group-based or school-based settings or working as childminders or childminding assistants’, of whom 236,000 worked in childcare centres, mainly nurseries, far outnumbering the 53,900 school-based workers (mainly teachers and assistants working in nursery classes and nursery schools), and the 38,600 childminders ([Department for Education \(England\), 2021](#)).

The second major contextual feature of the childcare workforce is who they work for. Of the 236,000 childcare workers in ‘group-based’ settings, mainly nurseries, the majority work for private providers, most of whom are private companies operating for profit. When it comes to the privatisation of childcare services, childcare as business, England is truly world-leading. In 2021 the Department for Education reported that private companies accounted for 63 per cent of ‘group-based’ providers and 70 per cent of places ([Department for Education \(England\), 2021](#)). As noted in [Chapter 2](#), private nursery provision had been growing rapidly since the 1980s, and providers operate in a ‘childcare market’, with parents deemed consumers of the commodity, ‘childcare’, offered by nurseries and childminders. By the end of the 2010s, the character of this provision had changed from being a typically small-scale operation, often one person or a couple running a single nursery, to an increasing presence of larger scale corporations. In 2016, only 3 per cent of providers had 20 or more nurseries ([LaingBuisson, 2019](#)), but three years later that proportion had trebled ([Ceeda, 2019](#)). Analysing data from Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education), it was estimated that 57 per cent of providers had a single nursery, 14 per cent had two sites, 20 per cent had 3–19 and 9 per cent had 20 or more. This concentration of ownership continues apace: *Nursery World* regularly reports new acquisitions, especially by the large chains. They also publish an annual supplement, *Nursery Chains*, which gives more detail on the larger groups. The largest in 2014 was

Busy Bees, with 237 settings; it was still the largest group in 2021, with 359 sites. The second largest group in 2014 was Bright Horizons, with 202 sites; by 2021 this had increased to 304.

Though privatisation and marketisation of childcare has been encouraged and actively supported by successive governments since 1997, none has funded research into the workings of this policy, and little was known about how the estimated £3.9 billion public funding given to the private sector was used. Recent analysis by TCRU researchers (Simon et al., 2022a; Simon et al., 2022b) has shown that this ‘growth’ of larger-scale private-sector provision turns out to have been entirely due to mergers and acquisitions of smaller providers, rather than the creation of new places. Furthermore, it is fuelled by large amounts of debt, raising concerns over the long-term viability of companies operating in this way. The collapse during the global financial crisis in 2008 of ABC Learning, Australia’s largest childcare provider, due to high levels of debt (Sumsion, 2012), is a warning of what can happen.

What has been occurring is known as ‘financialisation’ (Blakeley and Quilter-Pinner, 2019), a process characterised by financial institutions, such as hedge funds and private equity, buying up institutions, such as care providers, typically funded by debt, selling-off property assets, and with profits usually paid offshore. It is not confined to childcare, indeed in other ‘care’ services privatisation, marketisation and financialisation have gone even further. In a review of children’s social care, MacAlister (2022: 120) points out that most of children’s residential care and fostering has been outsourced by local authorities to the private sector; over 83 per cent of the residential care market is now owned by the private sector, mainly by a few very large providers, while, ‘fostering is on the same trajectory of becoming increasingly privatised and consolidated in the hands of a few large providers ... [with] the top six IFAs [independent fostering agencies] account[ing] for 51% of all foster homes that are through an agency and 18% of all fostering households nationally’. In services for older people, ‘[p]rivate companies now own and run 84% of beds in care homes in England used by older people, as local councils have almost totally withdrawn from a key area of social care they used to dominate’ (Campbell, 2019). One study of private care homes in France, Germany and the UK concluded:

In all cases, profits of care home groups were transferred to parent holdings in offshore financial centres such as Luxembourg or Jersey ... The entry of risk-seeking financial actors with high profit expectations has changed the logic that governs care homes. The

care sector has been financialised, leading to a substantially decreased quality of care and to leaks of public money that could have been used for the actual provision of care. All this happened while private equity firms and their investors secured high, often double-digit returns. The original purpose of care homes – caring for the elderly and the sick has been replaced by a new one – the creation of added value for investors (Bourgeron, Metz and Wolf, 2021: 3).

Understanding the problem

At the heart of the problem of the childcare workforce, a problem that is contributing in large measure to today's crisis in childcare services, is an employment model that is morally dubious and practically unsustainable: a low-cost employment model reliant on a constant supply of cheap labour from just one section of the population.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the childcare workforce is its extreme gendering and how resistant to change this has proved – and in both respects, it is very similar to other parts of the 'care' workforce, in particular those working with older people in, for example, care homes. Sargent (2004) argues that in order for an occupation to be considered gendered, 85 per cent of the workers in this field need to be of the same sex. Our research at TCRU, and that of others (for example, Warin, Wilkinson and Greaves, 2021), consistently shows that workers in early-childhood education and care easily surpass this threshold, with 97–99 per cent being female. Over time, change has been minimal (Peeters, Rohrmann and Emilsen, 2015). Why?

One explanation put forward is that caring for children as paid work is so gendered because of low pay. But while, as we discuss below, the childcare workforce is badly paid, this does not seem a convincing reason for there being a gendered workforce. Countries where work in ECEC services requires higher qualifications and is better paid (such as in Denmark and Sweden) have a similar gender profile.

More convincing, and as we have concluded from TCRU's research on gender and employment in early-childhood services, the gendering of the workforce reflects a widespread belief and assumption that such employment is 'women's work', something they are innately equipped to do and therefore assumed to be low skilled, requiring only limited entry qualifications. Such attitudes are embedded in the whole system of training and employment, which presumes and is subsequently structured in favour

of a female workforce, making male students and workers liable to feel out of place. Nor is this presumption seriously challenged at the policy level; the 1997–2010 Labour government did briefly set a target for male early-childhood workers, only for it to be dropped and not reinstated. Services, networks and national policy examples show, in England, Scotland and Norway, that change in male worker representation is possible, but requires a sustained and strong commitment from government and employers and a willingness to analyse and act on disincentives to men entering early-childhood work (Cameron, Moss and Owen, 1999).

The deeply embedded idea that ‘childcare’ is ‘women’s work’ contributes to ‘childcare workers’ being treated as low-skilled workers and occupying a position in the lower reaches of the labour force, both overall and among the labour force working with children and young people. A 2009 study, using data from the 2001–5 LFS, conducted an analysis of 17 occupations working in services for children and young people, as well as a composite of occupations with a high percentage of female workers (Simon et al., 2007). These groups were compared on seven variables: average hourly pay, total usual hours worked, average age, percentage with qualifications equivalent to NVQ Level 3 or above, percentage in the non-private sector, percentage of female and percentage white. The analysis produced a hierarchy of three clusters of occupations:

Cluster 1: Education occupations (teachers) are on average better qualified and better paid than the others; they work longer hours, have a lower percentage of female and a higher percentage of white employees, and are slightly older.

Cluster 2: Welfare/health occupations (social workers, youth/community workers, housing/welfare officers, houseparents, nurses, midwives, nursing assistants, teaching assistants) are intermediate on qualifications, pay, hours, age and percentage female; they are the most likely to work outside the private sector and have the lowest percentage of white employees.

Cluster 3: Childcare/assistants occupations (nursery nurses, childminders, playgroup workers, care assistants, midday assistants, high-percentage female occupations) have the lowest levels of qualifications and pay; they are more likely to work part-time; they are the youngest group, with the highest percentage of female employees and are the least likely to work outside of the private sector.

Situated firmly at the bottom of this occupational hierarchy, childcare workers had, and continue to have, low levels of qualifications.

Some 15 years after the LFS analysis above, Archer and Oppenheim (2021: 4) point to research highlighting a ‘strong relationship between the level of staff qualifications and the quality of early childhood education and care’, yet found that:

the childcare workforce is less qualified than both the teaching workforce and the general female workforce. In the private, voluntary and independent sector, the proportion of staff with an NVQ Level 3 qualification fell from 83% in 2014/15 to 52% in 2018/19 (NDNA 2019). Current investment in qualifications and professional development is piecemeal and there is a lack of long-term strategy to develop the early childhood education and care workforce.

Low (and apparently falling) levels of qualification are matched by wretchedly low pay. Back in 2009, TCRU research placed childcare workers at the lower end of pay for workers in services for children and young people, earning just £5.72 per hour, compared with £9.98 per hour for all women workers and nearly £15 per hour for teachers. Subsequent analyses of the LFS, for 2012–14, showed little improvement, with an average hourly pay rate of £6.60 for childcare workers compared with £13.10 for other occupations (Simon, Owen and Hollingworth, 2016). While most recently, the Nuffield Foundation report cites an average wage in the early childhood education and care workforce of £7.42 an hour, compared to £11.37 an hour across the female workforce, and further notes that in 2019 ‘44.5% of childcare workers were claiming state benefits or tax credits’ (Archer and Oppenheim, 2021: 23), a sure sign of very low earnings.

Childcare workers are low paid in every country, less qualified and less valued than their teacher counterparts in schools. But the evidence is consistent that workers in the private, for-profit sector of early-childhood services are paid less than their peers in the public and private, non-profit, sectors. To take just one example, the TCRU analysis of the 2012–14 LFS found that hourly pay for childcare workers in the non-profit sector was £7.80 compared to £5.60 for those in the for-profit sector (Simon, Owen and Hollingworth, 2016). While not wholly accounting for low pay in childcare services, the large presence of for-profit providers is a contributory factor towards the UK’s low-cost employment model.

What is to be done? What future for the care workforce?

Deep-seated problems of recruitment and retention are not confined to childcare workers. They are endemic across the whole care workforce, which is huge. In addition to 275,000 childcare workers and childminders, the 'adult social care' workforce in post, mostly working with older people, has been estimated at 1.62 million (*Skills for Care, 2022*). Furthermore, that is just for England: add in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the total UK care workforce will be well over two million – and we acknowledge that this figure includes only those in formal, paid employment, the numbers who provide informal, unpaid care having been estimated at 10.6 million, or 1 in 5 adults in the UK (*Carers UK, n.d.*).

Our analysis of the childcare workforce applies equally to the whole care workforce. All care services are dominated by private, for-profit providers; all care services are strongly gendered, with women in a large majority; qualifications, on average, are low and pay poor; all rely on a low-cost employment model; and all face severe and increasing problems of recruitment and retention, with the vacancy rate in adult social care in 2021/22 at its highest since records began in 2012/13.

The number of vacancies increased by 52% in 2021/22 by 55,000 to 165,000 vacant posts. The vacancy rate in 2021/22 was 10.7%. This shows that the decrease in filled posts is due to recruitment and retention difficulties in the sector rather than a decrease in demand. Employers have not been able to recruit and keep all the staff they need. As a result, an increasing number of posts remain vacant (*Skills for Care, 2022*).

All care services are, in short, in crisis as the prevalent low-cost employment model breaks down; the assumed endless supply of cheap labour seems to be stuttering.

As a society, England is facing what has been called a crisis of care. Or put another way, who will do this important work in the future, as demand increases and supply struggles to keep pace? Based on the Care Work in Europe project, Cameron and Moss identified three possible answers being put forward: 1) to stimulate the supply of informal care through various policy incentives such as parenting and other forms of leave; 2) to exploit reserves of labour currently underused in care work, such as migrant workers and men; and 3) 'to restructure and revalue the work in the care domain via new professions and improved training'

(Cameron and Moss, 2007: 151). The first two options raise issues about gender equality (what happens if parenting leave is not equally shared between women and men, or if most migrant workers are women?) and the risk of sustaining exploitive conditions for care workers. It is also not clear if either option will actually solve the crisis of care.

TCRU researchers have discussed what the third option might involve. In relation to care and education provision for young children, the social pedagogue, a model developed and adapted in many countries, that brings together care, education and upbringing, holds promise (Cameron, 2020). If adopted in the same way as, for example, Germany or Denmark, it offers a graduate professional complemented with a non-graduate assistant, with a commensurate salary and located within a public-sector framework, in parallel with primary schools. Indeed, Cameron, Moss and Petrie suggest that ‘social pedagogy could form the theoretical basis for much care-related “people” work, including that subsumed within current social care’ or that, going even further:

England joins much of the rest of Europe in investing in social pedagogy and the social pedagogue as the basis for a range of services across the life course that currently come under the social care label. In this scenario, social care disappears as a concept and umbrella term, leaving a range of services across which social pedagogy and the social pedagogue as core practitioner provide a common approach to policy, professional development and practice, so affording overall coherence to the field (Cameron, Moss and Petrie, 2021: 10).

But despite early-childhood education and care becoming a government priority across the UK for 25 years, the childcare workforce has remained essentially stuck, unable to move away from its debilitating conditions of low qualifications, low pay and low status combined with high gendering. This is the case despite much research and many reports that document the current problematic situation, and much talk about the crucial importance of the workforce in ensuring a good experience for children and their parents.

The future of the childcare workforce is inseparable from the future of the ECEC system of which it is such an important part. As Jack Tizard argued 50 years ago, that means transformation, not further tweaking of the existing system – a transformation that involves replacing the current split between childcare and school-based services with an education-based and fully integrated system. Such a

transformation would include ‘a more rational system of staffing, with a rethink in particular of the existing dichotomy between nursery nurses and teachers’ (see [Chapter 2](#)).

We think that a rethink followed by structural change is justified and required for a number of reasons. First, the nature of the work is such that it should no longer rely on a low-qualified and low-paid workforce. We would not expect primary or secondary-school children to be educated by workers with a basic qualification such as the NVQ Level 3, equivalent to an upper-secondary education – so why should we do so for our youngest children, including those under 3 years of age. An increasing number of countries have drawn this same conclusion, including the Nordic States and New Zealand ([May, 2018](#); [Seepro, n.d.](#)).

There is also, we believe, an inherent problem with the current concept of ‘childcare services’ and ‘childcare workers’. One of the conclusions drawn from TCRU’s participation in the Care Work in Europe project was that ‘[w]here “care work” is viewed as a distinct field, then training, pay and other conditions are often poor; but where it is understood and defined as part of a wider and different field (for example, pedagogy or education), then employment quality is significantly better’ ([Cameron and Moss, 2007](#): 148). In other words, to carry the label of ‘care’ is a recipe for being trapped in second-class employment. To say this is not to regard ‘care’ as unimportant, it is and should indeed play an important role in *all* services for *all* children, young people and adults; but care understood as a way of working, or an ethic of care, and not as a distinct field or service, required by some, but not all, and not calling for a separate ‘care’ workforce. Rather, it is to acknowledge that ‘care services’ and ‘care workers’ will always struggle to gain parity – of qualification, pay and status – with other members of the children’s and young people’s workforce, such as teachers, social workers and nurses. In short, the way forward for care workers is to reconceptualise and reform their work, locating them instead within an established profession: care as part of a wider field.

This suggests that the split early-childhood workforce should move to being integrated around a new graduate profession, specialising in work with children under 6 years and their families and enjoying parity of qualification, pay and status with school teachers; like school teachers, this new profession should constitute more than half of the workforce in its sector. The problems of the current ECEC workforce and a transformative solution along these lines are explored in *Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a democratic education* ([Cameron and Moss, 2020](#)). A chapter on the workforce starts with a reminder that the 1997–2010 Labour government broached the subject of

transformational change in a 2005 Green Paper, the ‘Children’s Workforce Strategy’, which aspired to have in place a ‘world-class’ children’s workforce characterised by competent and confident practitioners who could build their skills and enjoy rewarding careers, and which held the trust and respect of parents, carers and children themselves (Department for Education and Skills (England), 2005). As part of a possible future workforce strategy, it put forward two models for early childhood education and care services: a ‘new’ teacher and a social pedagogue.

In the end, after a consultation period, the government got cold feet and chose neither model. It settled instead for creating a new graduate worker, the ‘Early Years Professional’, only for this concocted profession to be replaced, under the subsequent Conservative-led government, by another new graduate worker, the ‘Early Childhood Teacher’. But this new type of teacher lacked parity with teachers, denied Qualified Teacher Status (a requirement to teach in most schools) and with lower pay and poorer conditions. Furthermore, the modest goal of the Labour government that there should be a graduate leading all (mainly private) full-time childcare settings by 2015 has, subsequently, also been dropped.

Transforming Early Childhood in England argued that the two models for workforce reform put forward in the 2005 Green Paper should be returned to as providing the basis for a necessary debate about the future of the ECEC workforce. New Zealand and Sweden have opted for the early-years teacher model; Denmark and Germany for the social pedagogue. The chapter in the TCRU book concludes that:

Transforming the ECEC workforce in England to one with a coherent underlying concept, a level of education commensurate with the responsibilities and complexities of the role, and creating an attractive profession to work in, was a government aspiration in 2005. We have not progressed towards this goal in the intervening period. Policies have continued to recognise the need for and benefits of ECEC but have woefully neglected the workforce, maintaining both a dysfunctional split between ‘childcare’ and ‘education’ workers and exploitative, unsustainable conditions. A recruitment crisis is building. Examples from New Zealand and Denmark show there are alternatives and ways out of this downward spiral (Cameron, 2020: 80).

This sums up both the besetting problem of the care workforce in England, and indeed the problem of conducting research on this important policy area. Research by TCRU and others has made the importance of and

problems with the care workforce crystal clear; it has also offered plentiful and feasible recommendations about how to resolve the deepening crisis, supported by insights into the experience of other countries. In the childcare field, for instance, New Zealand has moved over 30 years from a split system similar to the one in England today, to an early-childhood workforce based on graduate early-childhood teachers, who currently constitute over 70 per cent of the early-childhood workforce in centres and kindergartens; substantial steps have also been taken towards achieving parity of pay and conditions with teachers in primary education (helped by a single trade union spanning early childhood and primary teachers). Underpinning these changes has been a funding system that provides additional money to services employing teachers.

Concluding reflections

Despite the accumulating evidence of the growing crisis and the setting out of possible solutions, nothing of significance has happened at a national policy level. Successive governments have applied numerous tweaks, but remained committed to, or at least unwilling to challenge, the low-cost employment model that pervades the workforce across ‘care’ sectors, and the privatisation of provision that is deeply implicated in the prevailing low-cost model. A case, perhaps, of research oriented to policy – but policy not oriented to research.

Further reading

Two reports, available free online, give a clear picture of the childcare workforce. ‘Is the “quality” of preschool childcare, measured by the qualifications and pay of the childcare workforce, improving in Britain?’ by Antonia Simon, Charlie Owen and Katie Hollingworth (*American Journal of Educational Research*) is available at <http://pubs.sciepub.com/education/4/1/4/>, while *Early Years Workforce Development in England* by Sara Bonetti is available at https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Early_years_workforce_development_EPI.pdf. An alarming insight into the private childcare sector can be found in *Acquisitions, Mergers and Debt: The new language of childcare* by Antonia Simon and colleagues, which is available free at <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10142357/7/Childcare%20Main%20Report%20010222.pdf>. For a discussion of the flawed early-years workforce in

England and how it might be transformed see ‘Towards a “rich” ECEC workforce’, a chapter by Claire Cameron in *Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a democratic education* that is available free at <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/128464>.

Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this chapter, ‘childcare’ services and the ‘childcare’ workforce or workers refer to group-based providers of services for children below compulsory school age and operating in non-domestic premises, mostly nurseries. ‘Early childhood’ or ‘early childhood education and care’ or ECEC refer to all formal services for this age group, including childminders and schools, and those working in them. ‘Care’ services and the ‘care’ workforce refers to both childcare and social care, for children, young people and adults.
- 2 The European Commission on Childcare and other Measures to reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, often referred to as the European Childcare Network, which undertook a wide range of work between 1986 and 1996 on services for children from birth to 10 years, parenting leave and men as carers.

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4

Introducing social pedagogy for children in care in the UK: from policy to research and from research to policy?

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The Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) was set up as a dedicated research centre to address significant concerns arising in the field of public policy, and how these might best be addressed by government or others. Such sustained, multifaceted work depends certainly on adequate funding, but also on cooperation between funders and researchers, based on shared concerns and, arguably, a mutual respect. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on the relationship between researchers and funders, more especially that which underlies government-commissioned research, and how this relationship, alongside other factors, affects whether certain findings come to public attention and lead to government action.

We will use a substantial body of work – TCRU’s social pedagogy studies – to explore the relationship. In 1999, when this work began, social pedagogy was a new area for TCRU and, indeed, for the UK. But TCRU’s research into social pedagogy was able to build on a policy/research relationship that had existed between the unit and the government from 1973. It was a relationship mediated by staff belonging to the relevant government departments. Accordingly, the studies were initially funded by the Department of Health (DH), building on a longstanding working relationship between departmental policy advisors and TCRU researchers. Equally important, the social pedagogy studies

benefitted from existing international networking and coordination activities of TCRU researchers and, importantly, from the breadth of their expertise in researching children’s services.

The studies produced evidence that was well received by government and led to its endorsement of social pedagogy, but stopped short of taking the next step – introducing a new profession into the children’s workforce. We offer some suggestions as to why this was so. The research also generated many innovative collaborations promoting social pedagogy in different ways and contexts. These stretch to the present day and TCRU members have been strongly involved in many of them. While we focus on developments in England, as the map in **Figure 4.1** shows, there have been parallel initiatives in other countries of the UK and in Ireland.

Our account begins with a brief introduction to social pedagogy, before moving to the policy background, particularly DH concerns about looked-after children, that is, those in the care of the state under the Children Act 1989, whether on a compulsory or a voluntary basis, and the Department’s commissioning of research into social pedagogy in various European countries, and its employment in residential care and foster care. The intention behind the commissioning was to provide evidence that would inform possible policy and practice changes for looked-after children in England, so we then consider implementation and subsequent developments, before reflecting on the policy–research relationship.



Figure 4.1 Map of the organisations involved in social pedagogy in UK and Northern Ireland up to 2022. © ThemPra Social Pedagogy.

What is social pedagogy?

Social pedagogy is a holistic, values-based approach to care, education and upbringing that is both theoretical and practical, and found in many countries in Europe and further afield. As a field of practice and theory, it is applicable across the life course; indeed the Danes, leading exponents, often repeat that pedagogues work with people from birth to 100, and some of the organisations represented in [Figure 4.1](#) work with adults. In this chapter, however, we focus on ‘social care’ provision, mostly in children’s residential care (group settings for young people usually aged 12+) but also in foster care (family-based provision for children from birth upwards). We refer to those working with children, including foster carers, as ‘professionals’ and we use the terms ‘social pedagogue’ and ‘pedagogue’ interchangeably.

The education of social pedagogues, the profession that practices social pedagogy, stresses that students are preparing for work that should be informed by egalitarian, democratic and emancipatory values. Nine social pedagogic principles have been drawn from the accounts of informants engaged in policy, training and practice across the European countries in which TCRU has undertaken studies, and have been widely taken up in the UK’s social pedagogy activities:

- A focus on the child as a whole person, and support for the child’s overall development.
- The practitioner seeing themselves as a person, in relationship with the child or young person.
- Children and staff seen as inhabiting the same life space, not as existing in separate hierarchical domains.
- As professionals, pedagogues are encouraged constantly to reflect on their practice and to apply both theoretical understandings and self-knowledge to the sometimes-challenging demands with which they are confronted.
- Pedagogues are also practical, so their training prepares them to share in many aspects of children’s daily lives and activities.
- Children’s associative life is seen as an important resource: workers should foster and make use of the group.
- Pedagogy builds on an understanding of children’s rights that is not limited to procedural matters or legislated requirements.
- There is an emphasis on teamwork and on valuing the contribution of others in ‘bringing up’ children: other professionals, members of the local community and, especially, parents.
- The centrality of relationship, and allied to this, the importance of listening and communicating ([Petrie et al., 2006: 22](#)).

In the relationship between professional and child (or adult), which is central to social pedagogy, pedagogues often draw on the educational philosophy of Swiss reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), who referred to the equal importance of ‘head, heart and hands’. Over time, this tripartite theory of moral, intellectual and social education has been adapted for different settings:

Head. Pedagogues should also listen to the child, observe them intently and come to know and understand them as a whole person. This also involves dialogue, teamwork and critical reflection on what they hear and see, to make sense of the complex dynamics involved in systematic work with each individual child. The pedagogue has goals that take account of both a child’s history and the immediate practice context. As Jensen (2000, n.p.) writes: ‘the focus is on the client’s personal story and his or her possibilities for development’. Professional reflection, an essential capacity, leads to a continuous reformulation and adjustment of goals and the means to achieve them, and putting appropriate means to effect.

Heart. In residential and foster care, the ‘heart’ is seen as the everyday hub of care and education. It alludes to the professional’s motivation to nurture a child’s wellbeing, their curiosity about her or him as a person and their emotional warmth towards them. Ideally, the pedagogue respects a child’s sensitivities but also includes the option, if the child permits, of physical closeness as in giving/receiving a hug. Social pedagogy regards compassion and the ‘heart’ as critical professional tools.

Hands. The domain of the hands refers to practical steps undertaken on behalf of the child, while acknowledging that not to act is sometimes the wisest course. In daily practice, the hands also symbolise joint practical and creative activities that can help build a child’s self-esteem and be a medium for building shared competences. Examples could include playing the guitar, gardening, or daily chores like washing up.

The policy background in England for looked-after and other vulnerable children

In the late twentieth century, the DH in England became increasingly concerned with the need to improve the life chances of children looked after by local authorities, and it was not alone. There was a recognisable community of interest in child welfare, with responsibilities for research, policy and practice ranging across charitable and professional organisations, government departments and academics. The scale and extent of this activity was already visible and unusual, surviving changes in government administrations and priorities, child care crises (such as scandals in residential care), and organisational turbulence.

Social Work Decisions in Child Care (Rowe, 1985) and *Patterns and Outcomes in Child Placement* (Department of Health, 1991) were the first research digests from a working party of child welfare researchers and practitioners. These reports contained evidence from a number of studies shedding light on the weaknesses and poor outcomes of social work practice, including the processes involved for looked-after children. They were also exemplars of the new relationship between research, policy and practice, which expected research reports to include an impact strategy as an aid to dissemination.

The reports' evidence about the effects of children's experiences on their developmental needs contributed, first, to comprehensive legislation, the Children Act 1989, and later to policy: *The Government's Objectives for Children's Social Services* (Department of Health, 1999). For example, research messages emphasised the importance of children being securely attached to adults capable of caring for them throughout childhood and, following this, that for children in care, such requirements were best served by foster care. This was against a theoretical background of concern for children who did not have long-lasting and close family attachments (see, for example, Bowlby's work on attachment theory, (1999; 1988), and the Robertsons' films of children's reactions to brief separation (Robertson and Robertson, 1971)).

The result was the closure of large institutions and reduced access to residential care for younger children. Residential care was now used largely for adolescents who had 'failed' in foster care, or chosen not to live in a foster family. Yet residential staff training had not kept pace with the demands placed on them by what appeared to be the very troubled children living in children's homes. Moreover, recurrent investigations found evidence of systematic abuse in children's residential homes going back

decades (for example, [Waterhouse, 2000](#)). In 1998, in response to these ongoing concerns, the DH launched the Quality Protects programme, to transform the management and delivery of children's social services. This was backed by additional spending of £885 million, over five years, that aimed to enhance children's quality of life over and above keeping them safe, thus promoting their welfare as required by the Children Act 1989. It was a decade later, in 1999, that the department commissioned what was to become a sustained period of research into social pedagogy at TCRU.

Commissioning research into social pedagogy

In [Chapter 1](#), the research environment at TCRU, with its ongoing contract with the DH, was discussed. Here we recount some of the background relevant to the relationship between government and researchers, and in the case of the social pedagogy studies, how the incidental played a part in this.

Even in TCRU's early days, with the security of a 'core programme' of research agreed with government funders, research-policy relations were not always harmonious. In an early example, interviews with mothers as part of TCRU's initial Preschool Project (see [Chapter 2](#)) led two of the research team, Berry Mayall and Pat Petrie, to research a subject not covered by the main study: childcare provided by childminders ([Mayall and Petrie, 1977](#)). At the time, registration was not always required of childminders and there was little regulation or training. The researchers' recommendations included compulsory registration and inspection, the provision of training and support, and a hub attached to local primary schools for the delivery of some of this provision. Neither these recommendations nor the findings on the deficiencies and dangers of childminding were welcomed by the DH, nor was the publicity they attracted when *The Times* reported the findings on its front page. All this was made clear in a stormy meeting held at the DH between civil servants, Jack Tizard and the two researchers. After the meeting, Tizard, protecting both the careers of the two researchers and their project, suggested they should extend the study via an ongoing Economic and Social Research Council programme.

This show of academic independence did not appear to harm the fundamental relationship between the DH and TCRU, and – incidentally – a reform of childminding was soon underway. The episode does, however, point to a possible cause of tension between government funders and researchers: what influence does or should the funder have on research findings? Research may, justifiably or not, attract adverse comments from both its academic reviewers and its eventual audience. The issue is different

where, as with the childminding studies, those responsible for both funding the research and implementing relevant public policy reject findings on the grounds that they are incompatible with that policy. This did not occur, however, in the social pedagogy studies.

The tension arising from the childminding research did not persist. In 1990, the DH accepted a research proposal from Pat Petrie on British out-of-school services, building on her work in England and continental Europe, during a period when she was not employed at TCRU, although in frequent communication with its members. In 1999, Petrie's European activities, including as cofounder of the European Network for School-Age Childcare (ENSAC), led her to apply for the DH to support a study of the culture and qualifications of the professionals working in 'out-of-school' services across Europe, including 'pedagogues'. At the time, Helen Jones was Chief Social Worker at the DH, with a remit for commissioning child-welfare research. Already impressed by European approaches, she recognised an opportunity for TCRU research to focus on social pedagogy in European residential settings, in line with long-standing government concerns. Both the DH and TCRU researchers wanted to learn what social pedagogy had to offer for policy towards, and practice in, children's services. The ensuing agreement resulted in more than 20 years of research and development in social pedagogy in the UK.

Implementation: TCRU's social pedagogy research

TCRU researchers began by investigating the question 'What is social pedagogy?', in relation to policy, training, qualifications and practice in children's residential care in five European countries. In doing so, TCRU could draw on its experience and contacts in Europe. For example, as well as ENSAC, another TCRU researcher (Peter Moss) had coordinated a European network on services for young children, between 1986 and 1996. There was also a general awareness that in continental Europe children's care and education were considered less divisible than they were in England, both being concerned with a child's *upbringing* shared between parents and the state. Moreover, the state was not considered as the adversary of poor parenting but more as a benign resource for families.

Subsequent comparative research investigated:

- social pedagogy in services such as children's residential care (Petrie et al., 2006), and foster care (Petrie, 2007);
- care work more generally, and the role of the social pedagogue in so-called 'care' settings (Cameron and Moss, 2007);

- experiences of families needing support (Boddy et al., 2008); and
- young people leaving care and their education (Jackson and Cameron, 2014; see Chapter 5 this volume).

This work drew on policy, theory and practice not only in Denmark and Germany, but also in France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Belgium (Flanders), Sweden, Spain and, to a lesser extent, Norway. Here, we focus on the findings of research in relation to children looked after in residential care, with a shorter account of social pedagogy as applied to foster care. Full details of design and methods for these studies are given in Petrie et al. (2006) and Petrie (2007).

Comparing residential care in England, Denmark and Germany

Typically, the main qualification for someone working in residential care in continental European countries is social pedagogy (or a variant) undertaken as a vocational diploma over three or four years with a substantial element of practice placement as well as academic studies (Petrie et al., 2006). Comparing residential care in England, Denmark and Germany, we found significant differences between practice in England and elsewhere. Compared with staff in English residential care, social pedagogues interviewed in Denmark and Germany rated their work more positively. They showed more appreciation for the quality of the relationships between staff and children, between their colleagues, and leadership within the provision. They drew attention to the reward of ‘being together’ with the children, showing that ‘we are on their side and support them’ (Petrie et al., 2006: 60). They referred to the working environment as one of debate, challenge, the exchange of ideas underpinned by evidence, and responsibilities distributed across the team. Despite there being little difference in salaries between the three countries, the children’s homes in Germany and Denmark had fewer problems with recruitment and retention of professionals and greater job satisfaction than those in England.

While across all three countries, nearly half (46 per cent) of all staff described the child they worked with most closely in mainly positive terms, among Danish participants this rose to three-quarters (76 per cent). Among the English participants, two-thirds (65 per cent) used impersonal or negative terms to describe the child for whom they were the key worker. There were differences, too, in how emotional support was practised. In response to vignettes involving young persons in difficult situations, or where they were emotionally upset, English staff most

frequently referred to taking action such as reorganising arrangements for a child's access to their family, or they responded in procedural terms, making reference to the residential home's rules and regulations. Most frequently they referred to a discursive approach: discussing, giving the strategies and options they thought best, and using procedural and short-term behaviour-management approaches. In vignettes where a child was distressed, the third most common response was to provide immediate emotional support by trying to learn the child's perspective. Their counterparts, particularly in Denmark, preferred relational approaches or made reference to longer-term aims for a child. They were more likely to be empathic – listening, naming feelings, spending time doing things together.

In response to questions about how they would react to children in difficult situations, there were again differences by country. In Denmark there was considerable use of the social pedagogic idea of working within a specific context and that responses might differ accordingly. Here, the most common response was to say 'it depends', followed by reference to procedures, taking action and providing emotional support. Having the confidence to say 'it depends' arguably reflects both an important pedagogic strategy of reflection on the complexities of any given situation and an understanding that most of the staff had a similar professional education, a factor that facilitated thinking a situation through in a spirit of teamwork. It may also be a characteristically Danish approach, as it was apparent, too, in our study of pedagogical work in early childhood centres (Cameron and Moss, 2007).

There were also differences in the level and coherence of the professional preparation for the role of working in residential care. Over 95 per cent of respondents in Denmark and Germany held either a higher qualification – a bachelor's degree or its equivalent (for example, the Danish 'ordinary' diploma in pedagogy or the German diploma in social pedagogy), or a medium level, more vocational, qualification, such as that of *Erzieher* (upbringer) in Germany, which follows a three-year course based on social pedagogy and practice placements. By contrast, a smaller proportion of English staff (56 per cent) held either a higher (such as a university degree or diploma) or a medium-level qualification (for example, NVQ Level 3) and a third (36 per cent) held no relevant qualifications at all. The English workforce, therefore, was less equipped via pre-entry qualifications to meet the challenges for children living in residential care than their continental European colleagues.

Policymakers in England needed evidence that social pedagogy could address the serious social exclusion of care-experienced young people. Accordingly, the study examined outcomes likely to be associated with favourable life chances, such as those linked to education and employment, becoming pregnant while still a teenager, and having a criminal record. The study's overall conclusion was that workforce characteristics were more important than child characteristics in accounting for children's outcomes. Young people in residential care in Denmark and Germany had a better quality of life and outcomes; in these countries social pedagogy provided the dominant framework for policy, training and practice (Petrie et al., 2006).

A cautionary note must be sounded, as the populations in residential care in the three countries differ. Germany and Denmark have a greater proportion of children in public care than does England, and in both continental countries a greater proportion of these children are in residential care than in England (at the time of the study, 14 per cent in England, 54 per cent in Denmark and 59 per cent in Germany) (Petrie et al., 2006: 37). These differences may be associated with a lower threshold for entering residential care, so that the children may be less challenging and respond more readily to staff practice, whether social pedagogic or not. Another possible explanation for these more favourable findings is that the Danish and German welfare systems in which residential care is embedded offer more holistic support to a wider group of children and families than is the case for England. If so, more favourable child outcomes may partly be down to the society at large and the way it deploys its collective resources.

Foster care

Subsequent TCRU research into social pedagogy and foster care, but not on outcomes of the approach, was conducted in Denmark, Sweden, France and Germany (Petrie, 2007). While social pedagogy played a smaller part than it did in residential care, fostering was underpinned by broadly educative understandings of the purpose of care. This suggests that social pedagogy, broadly speaking an educational approach, was part of the fundamental landscape of theory and practice. Fostering in these countries, as in England, was generally family-based and undertaken on a largely vocational basis, with some remuneration through fees and allowances. The strengths of the social pedagogic approach were seen as its orientation to action, and its focus on 'everyday' life and on children's competences. Support workers, who often had a social pedagogy qualification, could draw on these strengths to guide their work with foster

carers and help them 'be aware of the conflicts that arise in work which is at the same time both professional and personal' (Petrie, 2007: 77).

In Denmark and Germany, we found more evidence of professionalised approaches to foster care than in England; for example, fostering that took place in conjunction with local residential services in Denmark, and salaried foster care projects in Germany. In both countries, many of the professionals who supported foster carers were qualified in social pedagogy and its variants, thus providing the service with a broadly educational ethos. In Denmark, about a third of foster carers held a social-pedagogy qualification. In France, there were also educational support workers, and the carers themselves were formally employed as *éducateurs* (the term for staff referred to elsewhere as pedagogues), with specialised training and qualifications.

Subsequent developments

These and other findings from TCRU's research into social pedagogy met with government interest. An implementation framework was commissioned by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (Cameron and Petrie, 2007). Among numerous presentations of the findings to policymakers and practitioners, Pat Petrie was asked to give evidence to a Government Select Committee (House of Commons, 2009) and provided Hilary Armstrong, then Minister for Social Exclusion, with details of a Danish college for social pedagogy, which she visited.

In 2007, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (which in 2001 assumed the responsibility, and with it the relevant departmental staff, for children in care) published the *Care Matters* white paper, in which social pedagogy gained policy visibility. *Care Matters* proposed reforms to support children's residential care becoming a 'valued and dynamic setting, able to support children in their development' (DfES, 2007: 57), acknowledging social pedagogy's potential contribution.

Other countries have very different models of care from ours, including approaches in which carers are highly skilled and are recognised as expert professionals. Many are experts in 'social pedagogy', an approach which looks at the child in a holistic way, focusing on their development. Social pedagogy is grounded in a broad theoretical base spanning education, health and psychology and includes a wide range of skills including creative and practical subjects (DfES, 2007: 47).

Accordingly, *Care Matters* stated that there should be a ‘new framework of skills and qualifications incorporating the principles of social pedagogy’ (DfES, 2007: 48).

However, other government pronouncements indicated that any reform should be within current professional and occupational boundaries:

A full evaluation of the benefits of *this approach* will be conducted, with a view to spreading the use of the social pedagogic approach more widely. The evaluation will help to inform whether and how to implement a *pedagogic approach* more widely in English children’s homes ... [A]ny future roll out should not result in a separate new profession being created from the current workforce (House of Commons, 2009: 14; emphasis added).

It was on this confined basis that the DfES asked TCRU to conduct an experimental pilot programme, leading to an evaluation of the effectiveness of social pedagogy for England’s residential care. Consequently, a team based at TCRU set out to examine how social pedagogy might interact with an English cultural and practice context. The pilot, headed by Claire Cameron, ran from 2008–11 (Cameron et al., 2011), and was evaluated externally (Berridge et al., 2011).

For the pilot, 18 children’s homes were invited to employ one or more social pedagogues with qualifications gained in continental Europe, mostly from Germany. The programme provided support to facilitate mutual learning for children’s home staff. The aim was that social pedagogues would work alongside existing staff and introduce their ideas and practice as the basis for dialogue about a more educative approach to working with children, with education always understood in its broadest sense. During the pilot period, the employed social pedagogues found that some of their practices were distinctively different from those of their English colleagues. In particular, these social pedagogues were more accustomed than their English peers to:

- identifying the aim and thinking behind actions undertaken on behalf of young people;
- generating and constructively using critical reflection to inform and analyse practice;
- using and appreciating the value of a distinctive professional identity that was supported by academic qualifications and a status equal to that of other children’s services professionals, while at the same time specialising in working in the context of children’s everyday lives (Cameron et al., 2011).

There were three main ways in which the social pedagogues thought that staff and managers in the English homes responded to them. In the first two, some managers and staff had integrated social pedagogic theory and practice into existing ways of working or had embraced change through mutual and authentic learning, manifested in their adopting new ways of working. But a third group had, on the contrary, deployed organisational practices that had the effect of blocking learning about social pedagogic approaches. In ten of the 18 homes, changes towards a social pedagogic approach could be discerned. Its main effect was on staff confidence. Many of the staff and managers interviewed for the external evaluation thought social pedagogy should be introduced, with adaptations, into residential care in England (Berridge et al., 2011).

Outcomes of the social pedagogy research

One effect of TCRU's social pedagogy studies was to highlight the disadvantages of England's care system. The studies, alongside reviews of child protection (for example, Munro, 2011), contributed significantly to a realisation that risk-averse social work practice had steered organisations, managers and practitioners to a procedure-led approach, with the sense of 'first cover your back' at its foundation. A line between the professional and the personal contribution to care work had been drawn, with little reference to, or understanding of, the human experience of relationships. In social pedagogy, both are seen as making an intrinsic contribution to professional practice. Moreover, the research findings led to work that focused on developing practice and theory not just for England, but for the UK as a whole, and that supported the emergence of training frameworks and the modelling of practice, conceptual critique and knowledge exchange (Figure 4.2).

Following the UK's 2010 election and subsequent Conservative-led governments, national-level policymakers withdrew from further consideration of social pedagogy. Not that they made any pronouncements against social pedagogy, but the former government's welcome of it as an 'approach' that could apply across professions, was to be its last national endorsement. Most tellingly, a government-appointed 'independent review of children's social care' (MacAlister, 2022) made no reference to 'social pedagogy' and cited none of the extensive publications on the subject from TCRU.

But a lack of national support and action has not blocked social pedagogy's further development in the UK. A positive endorsement was

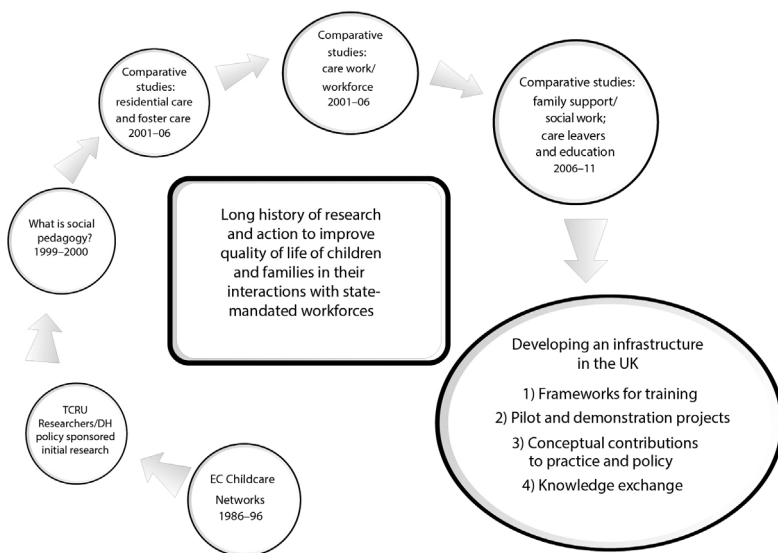


Figure 4.2 Developing social pedagogy in the UK: from European networks to development projects. Source: Authors.

given at the level of local government by the representative organisation, the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS). In 2013, ADCS published a position statement extolling the power and potential of social pedagogy to transform the way in which services for children and young people were organised, saying:

Social pedagogy is not an evidence-based programme but a conceptual model which can be used as a way of thinking and working across complex systems which in turn could help to further integrate local services – from schools, to healthcare, to specialist care provision – with a common outcomes focus (ADCS, 2013: 4–5).

During and after TCRU’s research, a network of active support for social pedagogy has arisen; interest in the professional discipline continues to influence changes in children’s social care – moving toward a more humane, relationship-centred approach, as noted by ADCS (2021: 8): ‘[since 2013], there has been a greater recognition and use of relationship-based and restorative practices which are at the heart of social pedagogy’. There have been innovative practice collaborations informed by social-pedagogy theory, values and practice, which have continued to develop evidence and infrastructure for a better way of working, primarily for those providing support and care for children and families. Some local

authorities and other organisations have, to greater or lesser extents, adopted social pedagogy and there are other initiatives that operate across and between agencies. Here are some of them:

The Fostering Network hosted a four-year social pedagogy programme called ‘Head, Heart, Hands’, for public, voluntary and private-sector fostering organisations, with training organisations, ThemPra and Jacaranda, and Pat Petrie, to collaboratively train foster carers and support learning about social pedagogy among agencies working with fostered children. Set up in 2012, in each demonstration site it brought together different professionals and managers, qualified social pedagogues, social workers, foster carers, organisational managers and, for example, teachers and psychologists. The Fostering Network reported that the common approach, with its shared language, was valued by foster carers across a range of so-called ‘defended sceptics, cautious optimists and early adopters’ (McDermid et al., 2016).

The Social Pedagogy Development Network (SPDN), a grassroots-led movement that began in 2008, was sparked by Essex County Council’s commitment to training practitioners in social pedagogy in all its children’s homes. Thereafter, it was sustained especially by the organisational and inspirational efforts of ThemPra, Jacaranda and others. The network has met once or twice a year ever since, across the four nations of the UK and in Ireland, and online, hosted mainly by employers and universities, providing opportunities to exchange experience of putting social pedagogy into practice, and for newcomers to become better acquainted with it.

The Social Pedagogy Professional Association (SPPA), a membership charity that arose following a meeting of the SPDN, and with its support. It was set up in 2017 in TCRU, with grants from charitable organisations and with the support of many individuals and organisations. The aim was to build an infrastructure for developing social pedagogy as an approach. SPPA uses a broadly-based knowledge exchange, including an annual conference and promoting qualifications for those with workplace-based social-pedagogy training.

The International Journal of Social Pedagogy (UCL Press) was established in 2012 and makes a substantial contribution to national and international discourse in the field. Initially edited by Gabriel

Eichsteller (ThemPra) and Pat Petrie and now by Claire Cameron, Robyn Kemp and Eichsteller, with the support of a large and international editorial board.

Social Pedagogy qualifications, levels 3 and 5, diploma, bachelor's and master's degrees have been created. An example may be drawn from the University of Central Lancashire, which over the last decade has introduced a variety of courses, from one-year introductions to social pedagogy, to first and higher degrees, including PhDs. PhDs in social pedagogy have also been awarded by IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, the University of Kingston, the University of Derby and the University of Edinburgh, among others. Some professionals have gone on, via a master's degree, to qualify as social workers. Others have found employment in a range of organisations and positions from Participation Advisor in a large national charity that is beginning to embed social pedagogy within its wider organisation, to employment in community circles and wellbeing teams nationally ([Charfe, 2022](#)).

Concluding reflections

The case of social pedagogy in residential and foster care as an evidence to policy relationship illustrates both the advantages of a government-led research-funding arrangement and the pivotal importance of a key knowledgeable individual within that government apparatus to help shape and interpret the research. But even with this research-friendly environment, the take up of child welfare research by decision-makers is fragile as there are individual, organisational and environmental barriers that require systematic attention to overcome, not least the definition of what counts as evidence and the adoption of a proactive, solution-oriented policy mindset ([Jack et al., 2010](#)).

Despite extensive research, writing and dissemination activity on the part of TCRU researchers (and a growing network of social pedagogy activists nationwide), the English government after 2010 made no positive steps to embed social pedagogy through policy on children's social care. This is in the context of rising levels of child poverty, now affecting 27 per cent of children in the UK ([Child Poverty Action Group, 2022](#)), rising numbers of children needing help and protection because of risks to their health or development (now 404,310 or 3.3 per cent of all

children) (National Statistics, 2022a) and rising numbers of children in care, now standing at over 80,000 compared to around 60,000 in 2005 (National Statistics, 2022b). In the context of an austerity era, where family-support services aimed at preventing children entering care have been eroded, children's social-care services remain a far cry from social-pedagogic approaches that relate to children holistically. Arguably, an increased reliance on the for-profit private sector and the inroads into care work of new public management do not sit well with the requirements of relational practice (see Chapter 3).

But while the translation of research findings into practice is rarely straightforward, and current policy inclement, all is not lost. Some employers and advocacy organisations regard the case for social pedagogy as a system of education, policy and practice underpinned by humanitarian and democratic values compelling. A broad range of social pedagogy theories, concepts, models and methods, set in a coherent ethical framework, have been introduced in myriad UK settings (see Figure 4.1). They have been explored and presented in ways that both inspire and challenge individuals and organisations. As a result, in some local authorities, barriers between different professionals have diminished and interprofessional respect and collaboration has grown (Vrouwenfelder, Milligan and Merrel, 2012).

Overall, the social pedagogy research showed that in some countries, children in residential and foster care could have the stability and warmth of relationships specified as the 'government's objectives' over two decades ago (Department of Health, 1999) and the subsequent demonstration projects showed the ways this might be achieved in a UK context. Importantly, the research grew out of an informed, respectful and long-term partnership between the civil servants responsible for implementing social policy, and the researchers who understood the social context and had knowledge and skills relevant for the enquiry. The relationship was informed on both sides by some prior acquaintance with European social pedagogy and importantly shared the values they recognised in it. The research was also sustained by support from a government committed to achieving no less for children in care than what 'each parent would have for their own child', to ensure a 'softer landing into adulthood' (DfES, 2007: 3–4).

But a sympathetic policy context was not enough for transformational change. The Labour government supported social pedagogy as 'an approach': but they stopped short of it being in any way a requirement for work with children in care, balking at moving from appreciating an approach to a commitment to implementing the approach. Was there a

reluctance to cause any supposed disruption to existing structures? It is worth noting, perhaps, that one of the social pedagogues employed as a social work manager in England, Bianka Lang, was awarded the accolade of Social Worker of the Year 2016 for her collaborative practice, showing the strengths of the social pedagogic approach once more.

Further reading

Three books from TCRU offer fuller details than possible here: *Working with Children in Care: European perspectives* (Petrie et al., 2006); *Social Pedagogy and Working with Children and Young People* (Cameron and Moss, 2011); and *Communicating with Adults and Children: Introducing social pedagogy* (Petrie, 2011). *The International Journal of Social Pedagogy* (IJSP) is available online free of charge at <https://uclpress.scienceopen.com/collection/ij-social-pedagogy>, and for an article in IJSP discussing the relationship between ‘social care’ and ‘social pedagogy’, see ‘For a social pedagogic approach to social care’ (Cameron, Moss and Petrie, 2021). The SPPA website (sppa-uk.org) and the ThemPra website (thempra.org.uk) provide a wealth of free online resources about current developments in social pedagogy.

Acknowledgements

Very sadly, Helen Jones OBE died during the production of this chapter. She was a great advocate for and champion of children and young people and social pedagogy. She will be missed.

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5

Educating children in out-of-home care: forty years of research and action

Sonia Jackson and Claire Cameron

Introduction

The education of children in care was not considered a matter of concern until the 1980s when a small group of scholars and activists brought the issue to national attention. At that time it was still common for children separated from their birth family to spend months, if not years, out of education because no one thought it sufficiently important to secure a school place for them (Blyth and Milner, 1996; Brodie, 2001). This chapter charts how the education of children in care, previously seen as a marginal issue, came to be recognised as a crucial factor in their current wellbeing and future life chances, to a considerable extent through studies carried out at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU).

In 1971, local authority welfare, mental health and children's departments were combined to become 'social services'. Almost overnight, welfare officers like Sonia Jackson (co-author of this chapter) were redesignated generic social workers. Many new social workers had never worked with children before but Sonia had some advantages, having trained as a clinical child-psychologist, taught in a primary school and for several years managed the advice service run by the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE).

Shortly after she began her new job, the social services department received an urgent request from a foster mother in her 60s for the removal

of her foster daughter. Most unusually, this girl had done well at school and was due to sit her school-leaving examinations (then called 'O' Levels and later General Certificate of Secondary Education or GCSEs). Sonia's manager advised her not to worry as 'she'll be leaving school in a few weeks anyway and she can always go and work in Woolworths' (a store selling cheap everyday goods with, at that time, a branch in every high street). Sonia was shocked by the assumption that this academically able girl would leave school at the first legal opportunity, and by her senior's indifference to the disruption a placement change would cause at a critical point in the young woman's education.

As a result of this experience, Sonia became convinced that the best way to improve outcomes for children in care or 'looked after' was to bring about a fundamental change in social work attitudes to education, which were still deeply classist. Because these children nearly all came from poor working-class backgrounds, social services departments considered education to be almost irrelevant to them. It was sufficient that they went to school: what they did there was of little interest provided they did not cause trouble. In fact, there was a firmly-held idea that education was not the business of social workers, paralleled by the view often expressed by teachers, that their job was teaching, and they could not be expected to take an interest in the social circumstances or emotional wellbeing of their students (Jackson, 1998). Tizard, Moss and Perry (1976) had earlier pointed to the absurdity of regarding nursery education and daycare as separate and unrelated services. The division between care and education was even more entrenched in services for children in the care of the state, but it was not until 1982 that the harmful effect of the professional split between social work and teaching was seriously challenged. Following a parliamentary enquiry chaired by Barbara Kahan which noted the low academic attainment of children in care, the Social Science Research Council commissioned Sonia Jackson to carry out a review. Published as *The Education of Children in Care* (Jackson, 1987), it attracted considerable press attention and much criticism from some social workers. Many newspapers headlined their stories 'Children in care only fit for the dole'. The report pointed to the link between lack of educational qualifications and unemployment but laid the blame firmly on the services, not the children.

At this stage, the discussion was mainly about basic education, school attendance, literacy and numeracy. The idea of progression was not even on the agenda. Despite the rapid expansion of higher education following the 1963 Robbins Report, social work was not yet a graduate profession. This meant that few members of the workforce had attended

university themselves, and rarely envisaged that any child in care might do so. That is no longer true. In fact, a recent major report on looked-after children and young people, commissioned by the UK government, states as one of its ‘missions’ to ‘double the proportion of care leavers attending university, and particularly high tariff universities, by 2026’ (MacAlister, 2022: 156).

Various ‘stories’ could be written about the development of research on the education of children in care and care leavers or ‘care experienced’ young people. We have elected to highlight here two major studies that were carried out at TCRU: first, *By Degrees* (funded by the Buttle Trust and others, 2001–5); and secondly *YiPPEE – Young People from a Public Care Background: Pathways to Education in Europe* (funded by the European Union (EU) Seventh Framework Programme, 2008–11). Our aim is to illustrate the difficult and sometimes erratic relationship between research evidence and policy action which, when they are in alignment, can produce results that change lives.

Gathering evidence

Perhaps the most important finding of *The Education of Children in Care* was how little had been written on the subject. Although the evidence was sparse it all pointed one way: the education of children in care was seriously neglected, with very negative consequences for their life chances. The report identified the ‘chasm’ between welfare and education services as the fundamental problem, with five main factors contributing to the probability that children looked after in local authority care would have difficulties at school and leave with no qualifications. These were: pre-care experience, disrupted schooling, low expectations held by teachers and carers, low self-esteem, and placement changes unrelated to the school curriculum or patterns of school life such as terms and holidays. Later research has identified other obstacles to educational success for children and young people in care, but it would be hard to argue that these have been superseded.

Following the report’s publication Sonia continued to speak and write about the lack of attention to education within the care system and the huge and persistent gap in attainment between children in care and others (Jackson, 1989; 1994; 2000). It was an uphill job, with numerous research applications and articles turned down on the grounds that it was a subject of only minority interest. But it then occurred to her to address the issue from the opposite perspective. Instead of asking why children

looked after by local authorities did so much less well in school than those not in care, why not study the small minority who achieved success and find out how they did it?

Doria Pilling (1990), in an analysis of findings from the National Child Development cohort study that followed the lives of all those born in one week in 1958 in England, Scotland and Wales, had shown that five GCSE passes were a crucial factor in 'escape from disadvantage', especially for girls. Sonia Jackson used this as a criterion for inclusion in her next study, *Successful in Care*, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. It involved calling for volunteers via the *Who Cares?* magazine, which was distributed to all young people in care whose local authorities subscribed. In the absence of any official database of people who had been in care as children, this was the only way to assemble a study group. Of the 154 responses received, 105 met the educational benchmark of five or more 'O' Levels or GCSEs with 'good' grades (A*–C).

Successful in Care was followed by a further study, *High Achievers in Care*, also funded by Leverhulme, consisting of in-depth interviews with a subsample of 38 (12 men and 26 women) who had continued into further or higher education. One of the questions was 'what part did your social worker play in your school progress and planning for higher education?' Almost all the respondents answered 'none', adding weight to Sonia's hypothesis that the split between care and education continued to blight the opportunities of young people looked after by local authorities (Jackson and Martin, 1998).

Sonia's co-author, Dr Pearl Martin, who had grown up in residential care, recruited a comparison group of young people who had similar characteristics to the original study sample but had not obtained any educational qualifications. There were stark differences in outcomes between the two groups, in employment, income, housing and problems arising from addiction and offending. The interviews illustrated the critical importance of sustained educational encouragement, especially an emphasis on reading, along with warm relationships with adults in care placements and at school. The most crucial factor in success was stability and continuity, in particular minimising changes of placement (Martin and Jackson, 2002).

During her time as Head of the Department of Social Policy and Applied Social Studies at Swansea University, Sonia Jackson was elected Chair of Children in Wales, an umbrella body serving statutory and voluntary organisations, which helped her to get to know many care-experienced children and young people and further develop her ideas about how to support their education (Jackson and Sachdev, 2001).

Then, at a meeting in the Rhondda Valley town of Tonypany, she met Hugo Perks, the newly appointed CEO of the Buttle Trust, a grant-giving body supporting the education and welfare of disadvantaged young people. Hugo Perks responded enthusiastically to Sonia's proposal to follow up the findings of the second Leverhulme-funded study and undertook to raise the money for a new and much more ambitious project, which became By Degrees.

By Degrees

The aim of By Degrees was twofold: to fund research on the factors that facilitate and present obstacles to successful university entrance and completion, and to raise money for bursaries to help care-experienced students get the most out of their time at university. TCRU and the Institute of Education (IOE), where Sonia was already a Professorial Fellow, were identified as the ideal base for the project.

The timing was propitious: a Labour government committed to improving the lives and prospects of looked-after children had been elected in 1997. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (CLCA) was implemented in 2001, for the first time giving care leavers the *right* to financial and personal support from their local authority beyond the age of 18, and up to age 24 for those in full-time education. Similar legislation was passed in Scotland, originally as an amendment to the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

Strongly influenced by research carried out at TCRU, for example *The Costs and Benefits of Educating Children in Care* (Jackson et al., 2002), subsequent legislation in 2004 laid a stronger duty on local authorities, to *promote* the educational achievement of children they looked after (as opposed to 'having regard' to their education as required by the Children Act 1989). The then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, personally commissioned the newly created Social Exclusion Unit to produce a report, the first government document to focus specifically on the education of children in care. The report, *A Better Education for Children in Care* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003), estimated that only one care leaver in a hundred went on from school to university. This meant that most local authorities had never supported a young person who had been in their care through a degree course and had no idea what was required. For that reason, one of the most important objectives of By Degrees was to provide practical advice to local authorities, including realistic estimates of the costs.

The Buttle Trust raised over £800,000 from charitable bodies and the government, funding the appointment of two researchers, Sarah Ajayi and Margaret Quigley. Through local authorities, they recruited research participants who had spent at least a year in care and been offered a place on a degree-level course for the following academic year. The first group (or cohort) was followed throughout their three-year courses, the second for two years and the third for their first year. The final sample of 129 young people attending 68 universities was by far the largest number of UK students formerly in care that had ever been studied.

Unlike most care-experienced young people, they had achieved close to average results for the general population: 70 per cent in cohorts one and two and 92 per cent in cohort three had obtained five or more A*–C grades at GCSE, successfully completing lower-secondary education. They had similar family backgrounds: 60 per cent had come into the care system because of abuse or neglect, the same proportion as in the care population generally. There was one big difference: just over half the participants were from minority ethnic groups and 16 per cent had come to England as unaccompanied asylum-seekers. Many of them said that their parents (often no longer alive) had impressed on them the importance of education and that had motivated them to aim for university.

In addition to up to three face-to-face or telephone interviews with the research participants, the research team carried out annual postal surveys of local authorities and higher-education institutions (HEIs), including all the Oxford and Cambridge colleges. The responses showed that few HEIs until then had recognised care leavers as an especially disadvantaged group, needing encouragement to apply for entrance and additional support once enrolled. Some were very willing to provide extra help but said they had no way of knowing which of their applicants had spent time in care, an issue that was addressed in a recommendation of the final report resulting in the addition of a tick-box to the university application form. Again, the climate was receptive, with many more universities appointing Widening Participation Officers.

Barriers and facilitators to successful university careers

By Degrees found that care-experienced students faced multiple obstacles in their journey through higher education. Financial issues dominated their stories. Some students missed the chance to apply for grants for which they were eligible because of delays in decision-making in their local authority. Almost all suffered from continual money problems, despite taking out the maximum available student loan every year.

Anxiety about lack of money pervaded their entire university experience. After three years their average debt was £2000 higher than the national average (£9,210 at the time). Only one local authority helped with paying off debt after students graduated. The government's response to this finding was to require local authorities to provide a £2000 bursary to formerly looked-after young people who obtained a university place.

Accommodation was another important issue. Those who lived in university halls of residence in their first year were much more likely to make friends, but some missed the opportunity to do so because confirmation of their local authority funding was not received in time. Others had been living independently in council flats and were afraid of losing their tenancies. This restricted their choice of universities and courses and their opportunity to participate in student life and make new social contacts (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2003).

Difficulties with academic work were common, and often took students by surprise because they had done well previously. Especially in their second year, when the work tended to become more demanding, gaps in their school education began to show up. They also had to contend with lack of time, exhaustion from taking on too much paid work as well as emotional and relationship problems. Unpredictable crises in their birth families often made it hard for them to focus on their university lives.

Because the first group of students started university before the CLCA was implemented and the second and third groups afterwards, this constituted a natural experiment. How helpful were the provisions of the Act? One indication was the clear difference in drop-out rates between the three groups. Of those who began their university studies before the CLCA came into force, a quarter were unable to continue, mainly due to financial stress, whereas in cohorts two and three only 10 per cent left prematurely (lower than the national average). Both academic progress and satisfaction with the experience of higher education were closely related to the help and support (or lack of it), financial and personal, provided by their local authority.

By Degrees had considerable policy impact; its 43 recommendations were accepted in full by the government. This was a remarkable turnaround from the previous neglect of the issue and an unusually speedy and full policy impact of any piece of social research. Several factors contributed. The national policy environment, with its focus on education, and remedying social injustice and (un)fairness, was critical. The networking and years of advocacy, by Sonia Jackson and others, found common cause with the then Labour Government's concern with social inclusion. The link between low educational attainment and social

exclusion had already been established by numerous researchers (Jackson, 2007). But also important in this story was the research climate at TCRU, which brought together a critical mass of researchers of children-in-care and disadvantage, under the umbrella of a research centre with a direct line of communication to policy units in government departments. The interchange of people, skills and mission was critical, as evidenced by the inclusion of the topic as a case study of research impact in the IOE's research excellence submission in 2014.¹

Interchange within TCRU was also foundational for the next study: that of the post-compulsory education of care leavers in other European countries. Led by Sonia Jackson and coordinated by Claire Cameron, the YiPPEE project moved the topic of education and state care onto the international stage.

European research on pathways to further and higher education (YiPPEE)

YiPPEE was a five-country investigation exploring the educational pathways of young people with care experience in post-compulsory education. The aim was to run parallel studies in different welfare regimes to identify what conditions provided a facilitative framework for participation beyond mandatory schooling (Jackson and Cameron, 2014). The welfare regimes of European nations are categorised according to their broad orientation to the allocation of public and private resources: (1) conservative-familial with high emphasis on preserving traditional status hierarchies; (2) liberal, emphasising work-ethic norms and low levels of tempering the impact of the free market; and (3) universalist social democratic, characterised by low levels of stratification and high levels of state support (Esping-Anderson, 1990). Although modified by later analysts, including adding in post-communist countries, designated 'emerging economies', this categorisation has proved remarkably robust over many years. The study countries selected were Denmark and Sweden (both universalist welfare regimes); Spain (conservative-familial); England (liberal), and Hungary (emerging economy).

The first phase of the study consisted of scrutiny of EU policy documents, comparison of national policies, and secondary analysis of statistics. In the second phase, data were collected from interviews with 36 managers in social services departments responsible for young people in care, 372 telephone-screening interviews followed by 170 face-to-face interviews with young people aged 18 to 24 years, which adopted a

biographical approach focusing on their present, past and future lives. One hundred and thirty-five of them were interviewed again a year later. In addition, we interviewed 112 adults nominated by research participants as having been important to their education.

Criteria for inclusion in the study were the same in all countries, namely having been in care for at least a year by age 16 and showing 'educational promise' (qualifications from school that made them eligible to progress to further or higher education). However, there were wide differences between countries in the organisation of support for young people in and leaving care which affected both recruitment of participants and eventual policy impact. For example, in England, initial engagement of local authorities proved difficult, and recruitment of potential research participants through local authority leaving care teams even more so, eventually reaching 32 participants instead of a projected 35. In Spain, the researcher had to manually trawl social work records to create a sampling frame of young people. In Hungary, there were no records; the research team searched lists of young people in care in supported housing or residential care where the criterion for eligibility was having a place in an educational institution or being in employment. By contrast, in Sweden and Denmark, the research teams were able to make extensive use of linked education and care records.

Despite welfare regime differences, there were common patterns in the educational pathways of young people with a care background. In every country, care leavers faced severe educational disadvantage. Even in Denmark and Sweden they were much less likely than their peers to complete secondary school, more likely to have to repeat a year, especially in Spain, leave school with no qualifications (England), and much less likely to attend schools likely to lead to university entrance (Hungary). Our best estimate on the basis of available data was that 6–8 per cent of care-experienced young people went to university, often after periods of delay (Cameron et al., 2012). In Sweden national data showed substantial early withdrawal from both upper secondary and university programmes. While 13 percent of those ever placed in care registered for college or university (compared to 41 percent of the age cohort), only about a third of the care-leaver group graduated with credits (Höjer and Johansson, 2014). As in the By Degrees research, study participants in all countries faced multiple problems due to competing demands on their time, for example caring for children or relatives, and difficulties with housing, employment, or immigration status.

We also found that, apart from some of those who had entered the country as unaccompanied asylum seekers, the family backgrounds of participant young people were similar across countries, characterised

by volatility and lack of engagement with school education. In Sweden, analysis of national data found that parental education was the biggest predictor of educational grades. Only after young people had been in care for five years or more did their educational performance relative to those not in care start to improve (Höjer and Johansson, 2014). Except in England, placement in care usually seemed to offer a stable place to live, but many study participants reported that ‘most social workers failed to give as much importance to school as to care placements, resulting in delays and gaps in attendance’ (Jackson and Cameron, 2012: 1111).

Two conclusions from initial findings were, first, that all countries had neglected the post-compulsory education of care-experienced young people at a time when expanding education was a key European policy ambition (European Commission, 2009); and second, that the conceptual separation of ‘education’ and ‘care’ was not confined to England. But in some countries young people’s accounts of living in care settings illustrated ways in which education, broadly defined, was more integrated into the care experience. For example, in Hungary, young people emphasised the importance of learning as a basic value: ‘I wanted to become an educated person’ was how one young man expressed it. Being able to stay in free or subsidised residential provision (a ‘residence’) beyond compulsory education, available both in Hungary and Spain, helped to alleviate the problems experienced by those living on their own, and gave them more opportunity to concentrate on their studies, although it might also require conformity to strict rules and sometimes spartan living conditions (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). In Denmark, the custom of offering school students a year in a boarding environment gave children in care the opportunity for extensive contact with well-qualified social pedagogues (see Chapter 4). Some study participants reported this as the time when they developed their plans for higher education.

Overall, foster care had a better record than children’s homes (group residential care) of promoting educational achievement and keeping in touch with young people after they left the care system. In the Swedish case, 21 of the 27 young people who had been in foster care reported good relations with at least one foster family, although not necessarily the most recent. Several saw their long-term foster family as their ‘real’ family (Höjer and Johansen, 2014). As with By Degrees, foster carers who gave high importance to education made it much more likely that their young people would continue to study to an advanced level (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007; Bentley, 2013).

The findings underlined the importance of placement stability and the integration of care and education in both home and school settings, for instance having someone, such as a school nurse or teacher, with whom the young people could establish a supportive relationship and be helped to feel good about themselves. Foster carers who supported young people's talents and took a keen interest in educational progress were also crucial to success, as one participant in England testified: 'they've always been very, very supportive of me educationally wise, because I've always done well and I've always wanted to do well, so they've always supported me' (Hauari and Cameron, 2014).

The approach to educational ambition adopted by social workers, pedagogues and other support personnel for care leavers was a critical factor. However, in all countries aspirations for these young people tended to be low: there was a strong tendency to steer them into vocational rather than academic pathways. Social workers usually gave priority to early financial independence: one 21-year-old young woman in Spain explained:

I wanted to be a social educator, and I remember that at the residence ... they told me: 'you can't', because obviously, being at a residence I couldn't study general upper secondary (academic) education, as it wouldn't give me a quick entry into the labour market.

Unusually, one leaving-care team in England employed a teacher, Mark Farmer, whose remit was to help young people access further and higher education. His support was greatly valued by all those interviewed. One participant reported:

he was the one that got me into dance classes and dance college. He helped me get funding for private lessons for an audition. He helps with everything, he's more than a teacher ... It's good that I've got him really.

Farmer's appointment resulted in a steep rise in the number of young people in the care of his local authority aspiring to go to university. Several students successfully completed degree courses and one young woman continued to master's level. But the role was always seen as anomalous within the social work team and when Farmer moved to another area, he was not replaced.

Sustained policy engagement

Policy stakeholder engagement at the level of local fieldwork sites, national governments and the European Union was integrated into the YIPPEE study from the beginning. To raise awareness of the needs of care-experienced young people, we held conferences with local policy actors and accepted invitations to attend practitioner-focused events in all partner countries, as well as in Brussels, as part of the European Union's Directorate overseeing research projects on youth and social inclusion. We used email and our website to disseminate regular project bulletins about progress and findings, which helped to generate conference audiences, culminating in a cross-national end-of-project conference in London, including all partners. This raised awareness, critiqued policy and practice, and took inspiration from the achievements and personal accounts of young people. The combination of academic research, authentic voices, and a wide audience of national and local policymakers, as well as practitioners from our fieldwork sites and beyond, gave an important impetus to a more ambitious vision for the education of children in and leaving care.

New directions

Findings from *By Degrees* inspired the Buttle Trust to launch a Quality Mark awarded to universities that implemented a policy on recruiting and supporting care leavers (Starks, 2013). Buttle halted its scheme when most, if not all, universities had signed up. Care leavers are now one of several underrepresented groups noted by the national Office for Students for whom equality of educational access and progression is a policy goal in England (Office for Students, 2022). The idea of recognition for universities which provide a bespoke package of support for care-experienced applicants and students has resurfaced in the form of a Kitemark (MacAlister, 2022: 161).

Since *By Degrees* and YIPPEE, there have been further studies of post-compulsory educational transitions of care-experienced young people in a number of countries such as Germany and Finland (Cameron, Hauari and Arisi, 2018), Australia (Harvey et al., 2017; Mendis, Lehmann and Gardner, 2018), New Zealand (Matheson, 2019), Israel (Grupper and Zagury, 2019), the US (Courtney and Okpych, 2019), and Canada (Flynn et al, 2018).

The Rees Centre at the Department of Education, Oxford University was established in 2012 for the purposes of research in foster care and education and stimulated a new evidence base using systematic reviews and administrative data coupled with consultations with young people, carers, social workers and administrators. From being sidelined as a marginal issue, the massive disadvantage for children in care and care leavers in their pathway through education is now seen as an important aspect of the broader debate on widening participation ([Department for Education, 2019](#)).

TCRU research in the field has also continued. In 2016, we ran a study examining provision for care leavers in 15 countries worldwide ([Cameron, 2016](#); [Cameron, Hauari and Arisi, 2018](#)) and in 2018 the Access and Widening Participation office at UCL commissioned a study of the factors that support care leavers to stay at university once they are there ([Hauari, Hollingworth and Cameron, 2019](#); see [Chapter 19](#), this volume). TCRU also evaluated the Foundling Museum's arts traineeship programme with care leavers ([Hollingworth and Cameron, 2021](#)); and pioneered, with the UCL Centre for Inclusive Education (a training and strategic support service for schools), a programme to improve the environment for children in care in school ([Carroll and Cameron, 2017](#)). Turning to the younger age group, a pilot study and a knowledge exchange programme on preschool-aged foster children and their education ([Meetoo et al., 2020](#); [Cameron et al., 2020a](#)) developed into an international inquiry into the barriers to early education participation for fostered children ([Cameron et al., 2020b](#)). Jackson, Figueira-Bates and Hollingworth (2022) have pointed to the neglect in research and policy of the youngest children in care, and argued that far more attention should be paid to the characteristics, circumstances and educational level of those foster carers who are asked to look after them, urging that their role should be clearly defined as therapeutic and developmental, not simply as temporary caregiving.

Concluding reflections

After four decades of research and campaigning to improve the education of children in care, their low school attainment and much lower than average rate of entry to higher education remains a persistent problem which severely limits their future opportunities. According to the Department for Education (2021) in England, in 2019–20, only 13 per cent of young people in care for 12 months or more at the age of 16,

entered higher education by age 19. This compares with 43 per cent of those who have not been in care and 27 per cent of those who, as children, were living in impoverished households that qualified for free school meals, a common indicator of social disadvantage. Moreover, over the ten years to 2019–20, while the higher-education participation rate in England rose by ten percentage points for all young people, the increase was only four points for care-experienced young people.

As we noted some years ago (Cameron, Connolly and Jackson, 2015), policy, and by implication research evidence, has had only limited impact. We argued then that a different and more holistic approach was needed. We saw education (in its broadest sense) as needing to be given high importance from birth (Jackson and Forbes, 2015), and certainly from the moment children enter local authority care. This means that ‘education is too important to be left to schools’. It requires practitioners at all stages of a child’s journey to bring an educational approach into work defined as ‘care’ and vice versa (Cameron, Connolly and Jackson, 2015: 229).

This would make a child’s experience of being in care in the UK more in line with the best of continental European social pedagogic practice. Further, policy and practice should seek to disentangle the multiple practical, logistical and relational factors that prevent care leavers from taking up further and higher education places. Many young people continue to need the support of foster carers and advisors throughout this period even when they also yearn for independence, which has important implications for foster care training. Timing is also important. Too often, in addition to educational progression, care leavers are asked to cope with other major transitions, such as housing, health-service access, and financial self-reliance, at the same time or in quick succession (Hollingworth and Jackson, 2016).

Finally, what does this story of an evolving field have to say about the policy–research relationship? The story told here has focused on the gradual accumulation of evidence and policy implementation as if there were a smooth progression and synergy between them. This overlooks the many false starts and rejections overcome on the way. What seems to have happened is a chain reaction among like-minded scholars and activists, which gradually gained a foothold in policy attention so that now, in the UK, compared to many countries worldwide, there is good recognition, at the level of systems and institutions, of the particular needs of care-experienced young people in education. To turn this into effective practice, which has the potential to transform educational lives, presents a continuing challenge.

Further reading

Educating Children and Young People in Care: Learning placements and caring schools (Cameron, Connolly and Jackson, 2015) goes further into the approach taken to the education of children in care. It takes a life-course approach, drawing on ideas from social pedagogy, and examples from Scotland as well as England. Uniquely, it treats the care and school environments as equally significant in young people's lives and shows how they interact with each other. The website of the Oxford University Rees Centre (<https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/rees-centre/>) has a wealth of freely available research findings about the education of children in care, including reports, videos and blogs.

Note

- 1 The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. Institutions are invited to make submissions for subject-based units of assessment; submissions are assessed by an expert sub-panel for each unit, working under the guidance of four main panels.

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6

Child abuse and neglect: how can healthcare services enact a public-health approach?

Jenny Woodman

Introduction

Child abuse and neglect has most often been treated as a child welfare issue, targeting families via the social work system on the basis of evidence of abuse and/or neglect. This chapter argues that a different, more universal, public health approach holds promise. In 2012, myself and colleagues joined calls for a public health approach to safeguarding of children, by which we aimed to address the critical role of prevention through universal services.

In this chapter I discuss what is meant by a public health approach and how it might be applied to child abuse and neglect. This work builds on three long-standing concerns among researchers at Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU). First, to understand health within a multidisciplinary perspective. Second, to study and understand public service and professional practice so that the way systems and professionals support children and families can be improved. And third, a family approach to child health whereby we see child, sibling and parental health and wellbeing as interrelated and understand that supporting parental health is one way to help the child.

What do we mean by a public health approach?

The core feature of a public health approach is intervention for *whole* populations who are not (yet) sick or not yet *very* sick, first articulated by Geoffrey Rose (2001). To the modern reader, there might not seem anything particularly controversial about supporting already healthy populations to maintain and improve their health. This is testament to the widespread adoption of public health principles within health and social-care policy across the globe. Rose contrasted the ‘population approach’ with the ‘high risk’ intervention strategy which he described as a ‘targeted rescue operation’ which treated the ‘sick’ and ignored the ‘healthy’ (Rose, Khaw and Marmot, 2008). Although, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, a distinguishing feature of a public health approach is that it *includes* population strategies to prevent ill health as well as treatment or ‘rescue’ interventions for those already affected.

Underlying a public health approach is the concept of a health continuum and a focus on prevention. Prevention strategies have been conceptualised as operating at three points along the health continuum, known as primary, secondary and tertiary prevention or universal, targeted selective and targeted indicated interventions (Asmussen et al., 2022). These approaches are described in detail in Figure 6.1 and Box 6.1.

The focus on population-level prevention means that public health approaches are associated with efforts to tackle upstream social determinants of health, such as poverty, housing or neighbourhood quality, including

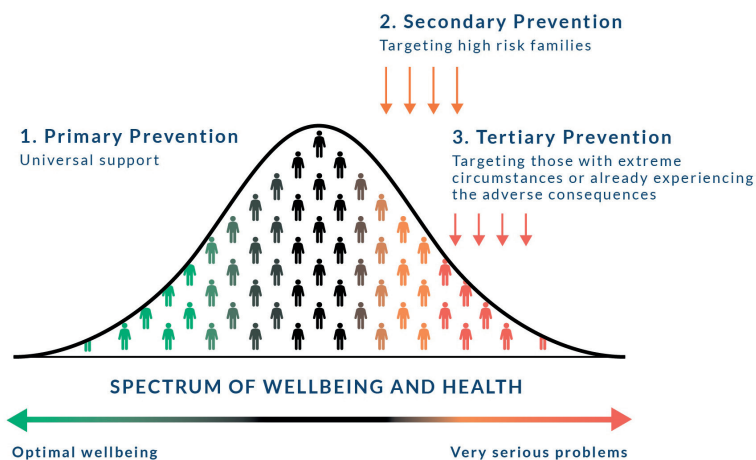


Figure 6.1 Primary, secondary and tertiary prevention for responding to child abuse and neglect, adapted from Gilbert, Woodman and Logan, 2012.

promoting clean air and green spaces. A simple analogy is that of the fence that protects people from falling over a cliff. The fence represents an upstream intervention which impacts everyone, relying on processes that do not require individuals to invest a high degree of their own resources or effort to produce benefits which can be described as low-agency interventions (Ford et al., 2021; Everest et al., 2022). In contrast, the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff is a ‘rescue’ response or tertiary prevention strategy.

Box 6.1 Primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies for child abuse and neglect. See [Figure 6.1](#) for visual depiction.

- 1. Primary prevention:** strategies aimed at whole populations of children and families which will include some children who are at risk of or are currently being harmed due to abuse and neglect. The aim of universal interventions is to shift the population curve towards ‘better’ family life by improving things for everyone across the whole continuum. For example, parenting classes available at no cost to all parents regardless of income, ethnicity, parental age, as was offered by the government in England in 2012 (Cullen, Cullen and Lindsay, 2016) or universal cash transfers to all households with children, which have recently been trialled or implemented in many countries including: Austria, Estonia, Finland and Germany (Overseas Development Institute and United Nations Children’s Fund, 2020).
- 2. Secondary prevention:** strategies aimed at specific demographic groups, identified as higher than average risk of experiencing problems or at risk of ‘poor outcomes’. For example, the Family Nurse Partnership (in England) or Nurse Family Partnership (USA and Australia), a home-visiting programme commissioned for specific groups of mothers such as young first-time mothers in England or mothers with a First Nations baby in Australia (Massi et al., 2021).
- 3. Tertiary prevention:** interventions for individual children and families who have already experienced abuse or neglect and/or its adverse consequences. These interventions aim to mitigate the impact and/or reduce duration, severity or recurrence, are often intensive and, in the context of child protection, not voluntary (noncompliance can trigger care proceedings). For example, Multisystemic Therapy – Building Stronger Families (MST-BSF) is an intensive whole-family intervention implemented and tested in the USA for families with substantiated

concerns about abuse or neglect and where parents are using substances (Schaeffer, Swenson and Powell, 2021). MST-BSF is adapted from Multisystemic Therapy, which has been disseminated and trialled across North America and Europe (including the UK) to support young people with problem behaviour (Swenson et al., 2009; Littell et al., 2021). Another adaptation is MST-CAN (Child Abuse and Neglect), for families in contact with child protective services (Early Intervention Foundation, 2017). Child removal into state care is also an example of a tertiary prevention intervention for children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

For most social problems, national and local policymakers and service providers will need multi-component strategies that include primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. In practice, public health approaches tend to default to 'high-agency' interventions which rely on individuals mobilising personal resources to benefit from a theoretically universal intervention (Everest et al., 2022). High-agency population approaches can inadvertently widen inequalities. This is because although they are available to everyone, those who have more time, money, fewer competing stresses and can navigate the system are much more able to access and benefit from the intervention (Everest et al., 2022).

Publicly funded access to preschool education and care for three-year-olds in England is an example of primary prevention strategy which relies on high-agency from parents. At the time of writing (2022) every three- and four-year-old is entitled to 15 hours free childcare, for 38 weeks a year, and additional hours are available for parents who work over 15 hours and meet income criteria (Gov.uk, 2022a; 2022b). However, this universally available intervention is not always taken up and ethnic minority and special educational needs children use the offer less than other families (Archer and Oppenheim, 2021). Recent TCRU research has found that the context of complex rules, poor distribution and poor flexibility of preschools were driving non-uptake among parents in one disadvantaged London borough (Albert and Cameron, 2022).

When population-level interventions are implemented within a public health approach, they are characterised by cross-sector partnerships. Although target problems of a public health approach are often criminal offences, for example violence and violent crime, substance misuse, child abuse and neglect, a public health approach always goes beyond the criminal-justice system. In other words, public health strategies may include but are never limited to fining, arresting or

imprisoning people, even if a ‘crime’ has been committed. Prevention strategies often rely on large-scale quantitative datasets for surveillance and monitoring, either to understand how much of the population might be ‘at risk’ or ‘affected’ or to monitor who receives an intervention.

How can a public health approach be applied to child abuse and neglect?

Calls for a ‘public health approach’ to child abuse and neglect first emerged around 2008 in England, America and Australia. They began to gather momentum around 2010–11, reinforced in England by the Allen report (Allen, 2011) and the Munro Review of Child Protection (Munro, 2011) both of which emphasised early intervention and prevention as part of child safeguarding. My colleagues and I also joined these calls (Gilbert, Woodman and Logan, 2012; Woodman and Gilbert, 2013).

The central premise of a public health approach to child abuse and neglect is that early intervention and prevention across both statutory and non-statutory services should be a key part of child welfare policy and practice (O’Donnell, Scott and Stanley, 2008; Barlow and Calam, 2011; Sethi et al., 2018). This approach to child welfare is enshrined in Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (albeit introduced in 1991 and without any additional resources given to local authorities) and is supported by policy guidance (HM Government, 1989; 2004). Although the phrase ‘public health approach to child abuse and neglect’ appears to have lost traction since 2012, current arguments for population approaches and early intervention and prevention are public health approaches in all but name (MacAlister, 2022).

A public health approach to child abuse and neglect makes sense for three key reasons. First, it is right and fair. From a human rights perspective, every child has the right to protection, provision and participation (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and should be given care, relationships and environments in which to flourish. The way societies are structured results in gross inequalities: some people have more money, safer and healthier local environments and more opportunities than others, or are more likely to experience abuse and neglect than others (and when they do are likely to experience abuse and neglect as part of cumulative adversity). The Children’s Commissioner for England (2021), a national advocacy role for children, recently wrote: ‘Growing up in poverty doesn’t necessarily mean an unhappy childhood but it makes life a lot harder’. There is strong international evidence for the

relationship between poverty, abuse and neglect and statutory intervention by child-protection services (Bywaters and Skinner, 2022). This relationship might result from poorer families not being able to buy what's needed, having less access to human, social and cultural capital, living with the psychosocial consequences of parenting in poverty and/or being more likely to be experiencing other problems such as mental-health difficulties, gambling, drug and alcohol abuse and disability or physical health problems, which can be both cause and consequence of poverty (Cooper and Stewart, 2021; Bywaters and Skinner, 2022). Higher rates of child protection involvement with poor families may also be related to unequal levels of surveillance and identification of problems: for example, a family receiving services for poverty might be more subject to scrutiny than wealthier families that can more easily avoid contact with services. The social patterning of child abuse and neglect means there is a strong social justice argument for intervening at a population level to prevent the concentration of adversity in certain groups of families. There is a particularly strong moral argument for intervention at a structural level.

Second, identification of children for tertiary intervention is difficult. Children's experiences may be completely hidden, only partially known and/or may only come to the attention of professionals in ways that require a great amount of professionals' time and skills to interpret (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). If child welfare exists along a continuum which ranges from optimal (where a child has all they need to be safe, healthy, happy and to thrive) to severely abusive and neglectful, where do we draw the line between poor treatment or poor parenting of children and 'abuse and neglect'? What constitutes acceptable or 'good enough' parenting has been a key question in social work for several decades (Winnicott, 1973). The answer will differ across time and place, as demonstrated by attitudes to physical punishment of children. By the early 1980s, only two countries (Sweden in 1979 and Finland in 1983) had banned all corporal punishment of children, including that by parents, compared to 62 countries today (End Violence Against Children, 2021). There is a large grey area within the continuum of child welfare where children can be thought of as 'marginally maltreated' (Waldfoegel, 2009).

Whether or not children with known problems are described as abused and neglected is tangled up with decisions about whether a child meets the legal threshold for statutory child protection services (HM Government, 2004; Bywaters and Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team, 2020; Bywaters et al., 2020; MacAlister, 2022). If a child is abused or neglected, they should receive statutory protection from the state and

yet nowhere is there enough resource within child-protection systems for all abused and neglected children to receive services (Hood et al., 2016; Devaney, 2019). This means that available resources determine thresholds for labelling abuse and neglect or as Professor Brandon summarised: ‘Teachers, GPs [General Practitioners], health visitors [are] working with child abuse, but they are not allowed to call it child abuse’ (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013).

Because the identification of abuse and neglect is conceptually and practically difficult, the provision of only tertiary prevention interventions will miss the majority of children whose experiences are consistent with agreed definitions of abuse or neglect. Taking a whole-population approach and intervening across the spectrum of abuse and neglect increases the likelihood that more abused and neglected children will receive some support.

Third, a high proportion of children who might fall into the category of ‘at risk’ of abuse and neglect, are also described as ‘vulnerable’ (Virokannas, Liuski and Kuronen, 2020). Children living in poverty can be considered an ‘at risk’ group for secondary prevention of abuse and neglect. In 2019–20, 31 per cent of all children in England were in relative poverty (below 60 per cent of median income), rising to higher rates for subgroups, including young children, ethnic minority families and families in the northeast of England (Oppenheim and Milton, 2021). Even if we take a much narrower definition of ‘vulnerable children’ in England, such as that used by the House of Lords Public Services Committee (2021), these are far from marginal populations: 43 per cent of all children have been referred to children’s social care services, 25 per cent classified ‘in need’ and 37 per cent received special educational needs (SEN) provision before their 16th birthday (Jay and Gilbert, 2021; Jay et al., 2021). In our study on hospital use during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in England, a fifth of children aged 11 to 16 years were receiving statutory support or services in that year: 14.2 per cent SEN support only, 3.6 per cent children’s social care services only and 2.7 per cent received both SEN and children’s social care support, based on three million children (Mc Grath-Lone et al., 2022).

In summary, as there are approximately 12 million children under 18 years in England, we may be talking about a fifth (2.4 million children), a third (4 million), one half or more (6 million+) of all children falling into definitions of ‘vulnerable’. If such large proportions of the population can be conceived of as ‘vulnerable’, the public health ambition of prevention could be achieved *in theory* for high numbers of vulnerable children by using universal and/or large-population approaches. This is

not a needle-in-a-haystack situation. In practice, interventions would have to be effective, work well across a wide range of groups and achieve high reach across whole populations, which is easier said than done.

What are the criticisms of a public health approach to child abuse and neglect?

Although a public health approach to abuse and neglect makes sense in many ways, the language and vision of a public health approach can inadvertently justify and bolster a system which exerts more social control over some groups than others, can stigmatise whole groups with ‘risk factors’ such as poverty and is at odds with a system of scarce resources where thresholds for intervention are very high, even for ‘early intervention’. The case of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is a good example of this in the UK, where thresholds for the service are notoriously high. Nigel Parton (2016) described the social patterning of state control as ‘[a state which is] liberal at the top for the upper classes but paternalistic and authoritarian at the bottom for the lower classes’, which encapsulates and defines Wacquant’s concept of the ‘Centaur State’ (Wacquant, 2009). Being mindful of these issues is a key part of developing public services for child welfare that leverage benefits from a public health approach while minimising potential harms.

A public health approach to child abuse and neglect in healthcare services

In this section, I start by describing the statutory obligation that healthcare professionals have in terms of protecting children and young people from abuse and neglect and its consequence. These statutory responses can be thought of as tertiary prevention within the public health model. I then use my own and others’ work to illustrate how secondary and primary prevention approaches might be used within healthcare services as part of a public health response to child abuse and neglect, including the challenges and limitations of doing so.

Tertiary prevention in healthcare services

In England, healthcare professionals, like others working with children, have a statutory obligation to refer to a social worker children that they

consider to be abused and neglected and to be a safeguarding partner to the local authority children's services departments (HM Government, 1989; 2004; Department for Education, 2018). This identification and referral role might be called a 'sentinel' role, while interprofessional working might be considered as a 'team player' role (Woodman et al., 2014; Woodman, Rafi and de Lusignan, 2014). However, the sentinel and team player role will never be enough for healthcare professionals to enact a public health approach to child abuse and neglect. This is because both the children's social-care system and other tertiary prevention interventions such as CAMHS do not have sufficient resources to support the very large numbers of at-risk or marginally maltreated children in the population, even if these children are identified and referred.

Secondary prevention

Secondary prevention offers the most potential for a public health approach to child abuse and response to be enacted within healthcare services. In 2009, guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2009) recognised that health professionals might see children who are, or are at risk of being, abused and neglected but who do not meet thresholds for referral to, or intervention from, children's social care. This guidance advised that healthcare professionals have a continued role for these children and suggested that health professionals discuss concerns with an experienced colleague, gather information and ensure review of the child. But how might healthcare professionals go beyond a sentinel role for children and their families where there are concerns about abuse and neglect? Evidence from three of my studies shows what might be done. These are: a qualitative study of primary healthcare professionals in England (Woodman et al., 2013; Woodman, 2016), and two scoping reviews of evidence about approaches already implemented within general practice, in the UK (Woodman et al., 2014) and across all healthcare settings internationally (Woodman et al., 2019).

To address the potential for healthcare professionals to adopt secondary prevention, we investigated the extent to which such responses were already embedded in everyday practice, and if so, how, for whom, in which contexts and with what impact on services and children and families. Through focusing on everyday professional practice, we coined the term 'direct responses' (Woodman, Rafi and de Lusignan, 2014) to reflect that these practices happen outside of, and in parallel with, intervention from children's social care. When I started using this term, from 2011 onwards, it resonated with primary care professionals and

their experiences and was supported by the Royal College of General Practitioners and the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in a 2014 joint report with us (Woodman et al., 2014).

From qualitative interviews conducted in England in 2011, with 14 GPs, two practice nurses and two health visitors, about their everyday practice, we concluded that in at least some places in England, GPs were enacting a case-holding role for families with multiple social and medical problems as part of responding to concerns, related to child abuse and neglect, that were entangled with family-health need (Woodman et al., 2013; Woodman, 2016). This case-holding role was oriented towards whole families and much of the work by GPs was with the parent, usually the mother, often in the absence of seeing the child. The focus on parents is important for potential harms and limitations of direct responses, as I describe later in this chapter. GPs, practice nurses and health visitors described how they enacted direct responses, by:

- **monitoring** the family, for example inviting the parents and/or child in for repeated review and through sharing information between their local colleagues;
- **advocating** for the family, helping them through the complex health and social care system; and,
- **coaching** parents to change their behaviour with the aim of improving parental health, parenting capacity and behaviour and indirectly, child health and wellbeing.

These direct responses occurred before, during and after referral to children's social care, most frequently for families below the threshold for intervention from children's social care or who 'bounced' in and out of children's social care over childhood. We found that direct responses were underpinned by relational work with families; GPs went out of their way to be seen as helpful and empathic by parents in order to keep parents coming back to see the professional. This engagement was seen as necessary to facilitate disclosure and help-seeking around problems such as alcohol use, violence or mental health difficulties. In the context of these family problems, encouraging help-seeking is challenging because parents can perceive contact with services, including healthcare services, 'as risky in terms of losing resources, being misunderstood or harshly judged, and carrying the ultimate threat of losing custody of their children' (Canvin et al., 2007: 984).

GPs described direct responses to concerns about child abuse and neglect as part of their everyday, routine practice: they were seen as the

'bread and butter' of GP practice. However, these direct responses are likely to be the exception rather than the rule. This is for two reasons. First, the healthcare system works as a barrier to GPs and other healthcare professionals enacting direct responses. Direct responses speak to the traditional role of the GP as the 'family doctor', who can provide continuity of care for multiple family members; they thereby develop a therapeutic relationship with and knowledge of particular families over long periods of time. However, it is now very unlikely that parents or children will see the same GP each time; continuity of practitioner has been eroded across GP and wider primary care by the pressures of increasing demand, insufficient workforce and increasingly 'shared' caseloads. Moreover, the emotional labour of GP's work in responding to child abuse and neglect has recently been documented (Kuruppu et al., 2022). Whether direct responses are used is likely to depend on whether there is a lead GP championing these approaches in a practice and offering training, support and supervision to colleagues. In fact, many of the GPs in our study held national or local safeguarding roles (Woodman et al., 2013). Other studies, based on less specialised samples of GPs and GP practices, have found little to no evidence that clinicians spoke directly to children or raised the issue of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) with their parents even when there was information in the child's electronic medical record about DVA (Roy et al., 2022).

The second reason direct responses are likely to be the exception rather than the rule is that the GPs we interviewed limited these responses to a subset of the families who prompted concerns about abuse and neglect. Specifically, the families who were seen to already engage well with the GP practice, with known high levels of 'help seeking' behaviour (as perceived by the GPs), and where health professionals were able to frame families' problems as 'medical', thereby legitimising their active and ongoing involvement with families (Woodman, 2016). In summary, although we found evidence that direct responses were being used for children beyond the 'sharp' end of the child welfare spectrum, these responses were not consistent with a public health model because they were not systematically offered across whole populations with risk factors (see Figure 6.1). We are currently conducting a large mixed-methods study (2022–6) investigating whether and how health visitors in England carry out similar monitoring, advocacy and coaching roles as direct responses to children at risk of abuse and neglect, as part of their everyday practice (Woodman et al., 2022).

Our international review revealed that direct responses, especially the case-holder role and use of therapeutic relationships with parents,

were being used as secondary and sometimes tertiary prevention approaches to concerns about abuse and neglect across OECD countries (Woodman et al., 2019). This analysis of 62 interventions aiming to address the interrelated health needs of children and parents within healthcare settings or delivered by healthcare professionals found that most ($N = 45/62$; 73 per cent) positioned the parent as patient, focused on addressing maternal depression, self-harm or stress (mental health), substance/alcohol misuse, abuse and/or domestic violence, in order to improve parenting capacity and thus indirectly improve child health and wellbeing. The therapeutic relationship between the practitioner and family (usually the parent) was most often the key mechanism for change, underpinning advocacy and coaching from health professionals. The scoping review interventions were overwhelmingly in primary care settings, reflecting its unique position in terms of reach and potential for relationship building as a service, even within systems that have eroded the historic role of the 'family doctor' and continuity of care.

The review provided some insights into how healthcare services might take a more systematic approach to enacting direct responses to child abuse and neglect, for example via routine questioning within healthcare settings. Questions to identify children at risk of abuse and neglect were universally applied either to parents when their children attended an appointment (usually for well-child visits/routine checkups in paediatric primary care in the USA) or as a 'parent finding' exercise among adults presenting to healthcare services, whereby professionals identify which presenting adults have dependent children. In the Netherlands, for example, a parent-finding strategy is one where all adults presenting to emergency departments with DVA, self-harm, substance misuse or mental health problems are asked if they have any dependent children, in order to identify children at risk of abuse or neglect. The scoping review found similar approaches in Australian and English emergency departments.

However, a routine questioning approach in healthcare settings is likely to identify high numbers of at-risk families, too many for current health service capacities. Equally, if routine questioning triggers referral to children's social care, already-stretched services will likely be overwhelmed and there is potential for resources to be diverted away from intervention and into filtering the higher numbers of referrals. An alternative, given these capacity and system issues, would be to establish a referral pathway to other services. The scoping review found examples such as referral into adult mental health, paediatric outpatients, specialised charities, peer-mentor programmes or an internal clinical social worker or

safeguarding team which comprises specialist health and/or social care professionals employed within the healthcare setting. In a minority of studies we reviewed, primary care professionals were adequately resourced to enact direct responses themselves following routine questioning, comprising monitoring of mental health treatment adherence and symptoms in parents, motivational interviewing and relationship building to increase engagement of parents with the service. These direct responses for all at-risk children identified were part of a well-resourced intervention, which was implemented and evaluated for impact. We found little evidence that direct responses could be enacted to large groups of at-risk children within business-as-usual healthcare settings.

To date, there has been no evaluation of potential harms of direct responses to concerns about child abuse and neglect in healthcare settings. We do not know, as yet, how far the relational work within direct responses is, or can be, 'supportive yet challenging', as Brigid Daniel and her colleagues argue needs to be the case within social work practice (Daniel, Taylor and Scott, 2011). Healthcare professionals do not receive the same training as social workers on managing the relationships with parents in order to help and protect the child. We don't know how far health professionals have the skills and expertise to use direct responses alongside monitoring of the child's wellbeing as a helpful 'containment' strategy (Howe, 2010). Healthcare professionals usually have only brief contacts with parents and/or children and, unlike social workers, health professionals are unable to gather wider information to assess safeguarding risk. In this context, it might be that instead of being a helpful containment strategy, direct responses act as an 'accommodative strategy' towards the parent (Strong, 2001) that ends up affirming patterns of 'bad' behaviour (Chew-Graham, May and Roland, 2004) whilst the child's needs are overlooked. This risk was highlighted in work about Australian GPs and their response to child abuse and neglect (Kuruppu et al., 2022).

Training and ongoing supervision is critical for direct responses to be feasible within healthcare settings, as is investigation into how this approach might be scaled up and extended beyond a specific subset of the families who prompt concerns about abuse and neglect. System modification is necessary for the approach to work to help children, such as embedding social work supervision for professionals, allowing longer consultations or creating referral pathways, within health services for children and families, to sufficiently resourced teams. All of this requires extra funding and workforce.

Primary Prevention

Primary prevention approaches for child abuse and neglect are more difficult to embed into healthcare services but the greatest opportunity lies in healthcare services with mandated universal contacts with families. For example, health visiting teams (public health nursing teams) in England should have contact with every family at least four times before their child is three years old (Public Health England, 2021). This theoretically universal reach should allow primary prevention approaches, such as advice and guidance on parenting. However, our recent work on health visiting suggested that in practice the reach of health visiting falls well below universal (Fraser et al., 2022).

Concluding reflections

Direct responses of healthcare professionals are a promising approach for enacting a public health response to child abuse and neglect in healthcare settings and can be thought of as a secondary prevention approach. Direct responses are especially promising when combined with routine questioning which facilitates a systematic population approach. It is likely that direct responses can only be enacted by health professionals who work in a system that allows continuity of care, where the same GP sees a child or parent repeatedly over time rather than families seeing a different GP every time.

There remain many empirical questions about the benefits and harms of direct responses as well as the feasibility of scaling up such approaches within healthcare services. System modification is likely to be necessary for these approaches to work to help children, which will require extra funding and workforce within business-as-usual services and/or additional referral pathways. Although healthcare professionals have limited options for effecting structural intervention at a societal level across whole populations, such as changes to welfare payments or housing policy, primary prevention approaches in healthcare settings are theoretically possible. Work on this, including our own, is starting, and with the door open for policy change in this area, this is a space to watch.

Further reading

In England, there is increasing interest in the role of healthcare in tackling poverty, which can be considered a secondary prevention intervention for children and families not only at risk of abuse and neglect but also at risk of ill physical and mental health and poorer life chances. In 2021 the King's Fund published a discussion paper on how healthcare services in England could tackle poverty, available free at <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/nhss-role-tackling-poverty.pdf>. Our current study on how health visiting is delivered to families living with adversity is exploring primary, secondary and tertiary responses to child abuse and neglect by the health-visiting service in England; the protocol for this study is available free at *BMJ Open* <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/12/9/e066880> and will be followed by publications detailing results as the study progresses. A recent qualitative study of Australian GPs provides an international perspective on the emotional labour involved in direct responses to child abuse and neglect, making it clear why these responses cannot easily be scaled up for large numbers of children; this is available free at <https://bmcpimcare.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12875-022-01661-7>.

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The development of an international research field: the case of parenting leaves

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Introduction

The provision of leave from employment to care for a newborn is now a key international policy area, with implications to transform early childhood, parenting practices, gender relations and work life. Research at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) was formative in the identification and expansion of research in this area. The unit has become a hub for international and comparative parenting-leave research with colleagues leading a tradition of collaborative work which has defined this research field, so developing a rich, and global, research-policy infrastructure. The structural frame of this research hub has been the International Network on Leave Policies and Research, entering its 20th Anniversary year in 2023, with 50 country members spanning six continents. This chapter considers the practicalities which have supported the development of this specific research field with the aim of providing suggestions as to how other networks might be developed in other research-informed policy areas.

Parenting leave is an umbrella term for the care leaves available for adults to care for infants, examples of which include maternity, paternity and parental leaves (see, for example, [Dobrotić, Blum and Koslowski, 2022](#)). Many leave-policy scholars are also interested in those policies

which might support parents beyond the infant phase, and other carers, recognising the potential role of leaves throughout the life course (see, for example, Doucet, McKay and Mathieu, 2019; Merla and Deven, 2019; Baird et al., 2022). Parenting leave is a very specific policy, but it intersects with many other areas. Much of the leave scholarship provides an example of how a narrow focus can be used as an entry point to deeper insight into broader sociological, economic and political issues. For example, Twamley's work on UK mixed-sex couples' negotiations of sharing parental leave reveals how love and intimacy intersect with gender equality, so that at times a wish for a more intimate relationship with one's child or partner may enhance couple equality through shifts in gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work, but more often actually inhibits such transformative change (Twamley, 2019). This throws light more generally on why gendered family practices have been so difficult to shift, as well as the importance of *structural* interventions (such as appropriately designed leave policies) for meaningful change in gender relations.

Following the historical concerns with improving the lives of families and children at TCRU, colleagues have been deeply involved with the establishment and governance of the International Network on Leave Policies and Research, referred to hereafter as 'the network', which finds us well placed to reflect on its strategic development. Peter Moss, Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Provision at TCRU, was one of two founding members of the network (the other being Fred Deven from Belgium). Peter Moss and Fred Deven were the coordinators of the network until 2015. Peter Moss has also been involved with editing every annual review of the network (for a short history, see Deven and Moss, 2022). Margaret O'Brien, Professor of Child and Family Policy and TCRU Director from 2013 to 2021, has been involved with the network from its inception and was co-coordinator of the network (with Ann-Zofie Duvander) from 2015 to 2021. Alison Koslowski, Professor of Social Policy and current TCRU Director has been involved with the network from 2013, following a PhD project very much inspired by network members' publications. She has been the lead editor of the annual review for most years since 2016 and as such has been on the organising committee. Merve Uzunalioglu was a PhD researcher at TCRU until 2022 and during this time has been one of the network's social-media coordinators.

The network is a flourishing example of an 'epistemic community' (Haas, 1992: 3). In what follows, we first describe the form and activities of the network and reflect on what has maintained collaboration over the 20 years since inception. Second, we consider the extent to which a shared vision binds the network members – and the role of such a shared

vision. Third, we reflect upon the physical and intellectual spaces that the network has provided for ‘slow research’ or what might be termed ‘strategic’ research, and relationships built over time. Finally, we note how the network has been able to have considerable international policy impact. In each section, we conclude with a summary of recommendations to other scholars who might be considering how to build up such a network in their research and policy field.

The International Network on Leave Policies and Research

The backbone of the collaborative work discussed in this chapter is ‘the network’ (<https://www.leavenetwork.org/introducing-the-network/>). The members of this network of scholars have been meeting annually under this moniker since 2004, with the 20th annual seminar in 2023. In addition to the annual seminar at which members present their research, another annual activity is the compiling of the *International Review on Leave Policies and Research*, also referred to as ‘the annual review’, which has happened every year since 2005. The network has also stimulated many research collaborations and edited book projects. Most recently, the network has been strongly involved with securing a European Union (EU) COST Action on Parental Leave Policies and Social Sustainability running from 2022 to 2026 (<https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA21150/>).

The breadth of membership of the network is supported by the absence of a membership fee. Rather, members are expected to contribute actively to the work of the network. Typically, this involvement takes the form of contributing to the respective country note for the annual review and regular seminar attendance. To date, membership has been limited to four members per country. The aim of this limitation was to avoid membership being skewed heavily to those countries with a greater density of parenting-leave scholarship and to promote international exchange. There has also been discussion around the benefits of a participatory workshop feel to annual seminars which is facilitated by smaller numbers than experienced at many conferences. There are four membership categories: full members, honorary members, associate members, and junior affiliates.

There is no formal written constitution of the network. Rather, colleagues have shared the responsibilities of coordinating the network. Joint coordinators – currently there are four coordinators in role until 2026, chosen in part to represent a geographic diversity Marian Baird (Australia), Andrea Doucet (Canada), Johanna Lammi-Taskula (Finland) and Gerardo Meil (Spain) – look after membership, seminar planning (in

terms of location), strategic direction and act as a focal point for external enquiries. There is consultation with the membership around the appointment of new co-coordinators.

In terms of communication between members, this is largely via a Google Groups mailing list which is currently maintained by research and administration support provided by one of the coordinators. There is a social-media presence (on Twitter and Facebook), but not all members are active users. In addition, there is a short network business meeting every year at the annual seminar.

The seminar is hosted each year by one of the country teams, usually at a university. There is no attendance fee and participants are often able to secure funding for travel and accommodation from their home institutions. One of the conditions of hosting is the capacity to raise local funding to cover any room-hire costs and a seminar dinner. Sometimes the host institution may also be able to cover limited travel costs for colleagues without access to institutional funding. The annual seminars are held over two days. The schedule usually devotes the first morning to developments in the host country. There is a call for papers from other members usually around a particular theme chosen by the hosts.¹

Seminars have mostly been held in autumn each year, though sometimes they are held in the summer. Sometimes, the seminar is held at the same time as another bigger conference (such as the International Sociological Association) to enable more people to secure funding from their institutions and to increase the network's external connections. As the network membership expands its geographic coverage, there is less agreement on the ideal timing for a seminar in terms of the academic year. The network seminars have also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with 2020 and 2021 being held online and 2022 as hybrid. The online seminars have potentially opened new avenues for collaboration as we now see network-related book workshops and other events (often of a shorter duration) bring together colleagues across time zones 'on Zoom'. The hybrid seminar worked less well (at least for the online participants) as it was found to be a more challenging format for the longer event. It will be very interesting to see how the future of meetings develops, as our ways of working evolve post pandemic. For now, the plan is to continue to hold seminars in person to cater for serendipitous interpersonal connections as well as the more formal programme. TCRU hosted the second network seminar in London in 2005. The location rotates around European cities and more recently has twice been held in North America, in Toronto and in New York, boosted by the network's links with the Work and Family Researchers Network. The predominance of European sites reflects

Europe's place as an early crucible for innovation in parenting-leave policies and related scholarship – and thus network membership.

As mentioned above, the other annual rhythm of the leave network is the production of the annual review of leave policies and research (<https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports/>). This brings together scholarship from across all member-country 'notes' into one report. The report therefore allows a comparative overview of policies and developments across the member countries. The report consists of country notes which cover four themes: (1) current leave and other employment-related policies to support parents; (2) relationship between leave policy and early childhood education and care policy; (3) changes in policy since April in the preceding year; and (4) uptake of leave. In addition, a series of cross-national tables are compiled by the editors from the country notes. Every January, the editorial team (now five editors) divide up the country notes between them and by mid-February, all country-note teams are contacted by their editor and asked to make any updates to their notes and to report any changes to leave policies in their countries. The aim is to launch the updated review each year in September. There have been some discussions over the years whether the review should be annual or biannual to reduce workload, but the role of maintaining connections and having an annual reason to check in with the network is widely regarded as part of the value of the exercise.

Another very important function held by a member of the Leave Network is the web coordinator based at the University of Vienna, who kindly hosts (and thus funds) the network website. The website is a crucial calling card and repository of key information and outputs of the network. It is a challenge to find a host for a website such as ours, which endures over time, given the lack of a single institutional home.

A remarkable aspect of the network has been the absence of direct funding for its activities. This has enabled the network to remain independent and thereby maintain its academic integrity. This means that the network is dependent on individual members' access to local institutional funding and infrastructure and thus receives indirect funding from many sources.

In summary, key recommendations from the experience of our 'example of a self-organizing international learning community' (Deven and Moss, 2022: 15) for other colleagues setting up a network would be:

- Find a way to meet regularly, in person, probably once a year.
- Have a key activity which brings together many members of the network (such as the annual review).

- Find a website host and someone to manage an email list.
- Set up a membership system which allows for a distribution of members from a range of countries (if the goal is international collaboration).
- A light-touch governance enables an informal feel to the network and reduces workload for the coordination team.

Shared vision and values: towards more equal parenting

The network has been an intellectual home-from-home for many members. Scholars with a theoretical interest in the gendered division of labour and fathering have thrived in the network, as well as those focused on care and welfare state regimes. What unites members is not a shared discipline or methodological approach, as the range of disciplines represented in the network is extensive: demography, education, labour economics, law, political science, public policy, sociology, social policy, and social work. Methods worked with also vary from ethnographic fieldwork to analysis of large-scale administrative data and everything in between. Rather, the glue of the network is a loosely articulated shared vision of (more) equal parenting, and the power of structural and policy-oriented interventions to realise this vision. By more equal parenting, we mean that which is much less constrained by gender roles, in contrast to a world where mothers tend only to certain aspects of parenting practices whilst fathers tend only to other aspects. This vision is not formally written down (there is no formal written constitution of the network) and it is a fluid rather than a fixed vision, but nonetheless, we argue in this chapter that it is this shared vision that brings members together and keeps them connecting.

Another value shared by network members is a strong belief in the value of comparative information and associated analysis, made possible by international collaboration. The network now spans all 27 EU member states as well as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and the UK; it also includes EU accession countries Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Turkey. Then there is Russia, the United States, Mexico and Canada in North America, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay in South America, South Africa, our only African country, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea in East Asia, and also Australia and New Zealand. Members have in general sought out the network rather than the other way around. That is to say, international scholars have been looking for one another for collaboration and intellectual sharing. Occasionally, the annual review editorial team goes looking for a new colleague to take over the writing of an existing country

note when a colleague retires, but mostly the network has gradually and organically expanded from a handful of EU country members to the larger group that it is today as scholars have reached out to the network, eager to join the international collaboration and exchange.

The research focus of the network has not been evenly distributed across the types of parenting leaves. Rather, there has been more focus on parental leave and paternity leave with, as Deven and Moss (2022: 14) note, ‘a strong emphasis on issues of gendered use and gender equality’. As observed by Deven and Moss (2022), publications associated with the network have demonstrated a strong emphasis on fathers and leave. Other, though far fewer, publications focused on child wellbeing (Moss and O’Brien, 2006; O’Brien, 2009), the impact of children on female employment, and other consequences of leave taking. However, new themes have emerged: an interest in the politics of leave and most recently an interest in leave eligibility and social inequalities (see, for example, McKay, Mathieu and Doucet, 2016; Dobrotić and Blum, 2020; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). For example, Andrea Doucet leads an ongoing project on reimagining care/work policies, informed by a feminist ethics-of-care approach. She and colleagues argue for a reconceptualisation of parental leave benefits ‘not only as employment policy but also as a care and social protection policy’ (Doucet, Mathieu and McKay, 2021: 272). Increasingly, the shared vision of the network is shifting from a focus on gender inequalities towards a broader emphasis on social inequalities. This reflects the wide remit of parental leave as an apparently narrow topic, but one which touches upon many different aspects of everyday life and social justice.

With its central interest in parenting and particularly fathers, the network has overlapped with the issues discussed in Chapter 13 in this volume (see also O’Brien and Wall, 2017; Twamley and Schober, 2019; Kosłowski, 2021). The research focus of the network has been mostly on higher-income countries, as these countries are most likely to have a sufficiently large formal economy and related developments of the welfare state to support parenting-leave policies. As Son (2022) notes in her work about paid maternity leave in sub-Saharan Africa, the challenge for these countries is how to provide for those working in the informal economy, as whilst there are maternity (but not parental) entitlements, there is very narrow access to these entitlements, due to most workers being in the informal economy.

Every country manages to design leave policy in a unique way. There is extraordinary variation. This provides a wonderful natural laboratory, to understand the intricacies of policy design and the

associated impacts of different designs. Often this knowledge can then be used by network members to lobby for policy change, both in their own countries and sometimes at international level. As such, the network can be said to be both a scholarly network and a network of activists lobbying for a shared vision of change in this policy area. Doucet and Duvander (2022: 134) reflect on ‘the challenges leave researchers can experience when faced with questions and demands from the media, policymakers, and politicians, who are all hoping to convey simple messages and solutions, especially in terms of the problem of gender inequalities in home and work life’.

In summary, the experience of our network is that it is key to have a shared vision as this will be the glue that binds members together and keeps them prioritising the network over the many competing interests of academic life. In our case, whilst acknowledging that there are many perspectives that could be taken, the network can be said to have a broadly shared vision of equal parenting. Shared values around the specific policy area allow scholars from a variety of methodological backgrounds and disciplines to coalesce around a shared vision. The shared values also help as we work towards policy change. Consistent findings from network-related research are that individual entitlement to well-paid leave for fathers as well as mothers is a necessary condition for promoting equal parenting (for example, [Koslowski and O’Brien, 2022](#)). Leave policy design matters if policies are to lead to change in family gender roles; the ‘wrong’ design can rather reinforce existing gender roles. Network members work together to share national data and research evidence quickly when an opportunity arises for potential policy influence. However, evidence-based paradigm shifts in policy can be hard to achieve, perhaps where they seem to go against the cultural grain, or in times of austerity (see, for example, [Moss and O’Brien, 2019](#)).

Slow research and the long view: academic careers in the making

This chapter is about a network that is going from strength to strength after 20 years, in a book about a research unit celebrating its half-century. Taking the long view is, in our experience, well rewarded. Professional relationships are also personal relationships, and they take time to develop, particularly over international borders. Moreover, taking a ‘slow’ approach to scholarship recognises that ‘good scholarship requires time’ ([Mountz et al., 2015](#): 1236; see also [Garey, Hertz and Nelson, 2014](#)).

The slow-scholarship movement is constituted as a feminist ethics-of-care response to the neoliberal university, foregrounding collaborative ways of working (Mountz et al., 2015). With this in mind, the network works collectively, slowly and cumulatively within the field of parenting leave, ensuring that all members contribute while also supporting early-career (and often precariously employed) members for whom 'slow scholarship' is most challenging. At the same time, the repetitive annual cycle of reviews ensures that the research is timely and relevant, providing a go-to up-to-date resource for scholars and policymakers alike.

In a couple of decades of the network we can see multiple examples of academic careers being made. There are a number of colleagues who have joined the network as enthusiastic PhD or postdoctoral scholars and are now full professors in leadership positions. The network supports colleagues with their careers in numerous ways. The junior affiliate membership is targeted at PhD students (who might or might not contribute to country notes). When someone expresses interest in the network, it is often in the form of wishing to contribute a new country note to the review, making a commitment to do so for the next few years ahead. This can disadvantage junior members not yet in a secure position. Thus, the junior affiliate status was created to support early-career researchers and to nurture the pipeline of scholars. The network also provides colleagues with international leadership and collaboration experience for which evidence is often requested for promotion and/or job applications.

The annual seminars allow for professional relationships to build gradually over time. They provide opportunities to connect and to network. Colleagues find each other at seminars to secure agreement to collaborate on research grants, consultancy, an edited book, or perhaps to organise a symposium within a bigger conference.

Another aspect of academic life supported by the network are research exchange visits. It might be from a few conversations over seminar dinners that a plan to spend a week, a month, or even a year in another institution in another country shapes up. The network provides the scientific rationale for such a visit and related funding opportunities. Such visits are often long in the planning. For example, it might take six or seven years for an academic to become eligible for a sabbatical that they can use for such a research visit, and certainly most visits are planned years in advance.

From such research visits grow projects that require some gestation, such as edited books. *Parental Leave and Beyond* (Moss, Duvander and Koslowski, 2019) is one such example. Much of this work occurred whilst

Alison Koslowski was on a research visit for an extended period at Stockholm University, hosted by Ann-Zofie Duvander.

Similarly, research grants can be years in the planning and so having a steady network and a firmly established group of international colleagues is very helpful to sustain this kind of activity. For example, the planning for the large collaborative grant Families and Societies, which ran from 2013 to 2017 (€6.5 million in EU contribution; grant no. 320116) and involved many network members (and many others), began several years earlier. Similarly, work towards the COST Action CA21150: Parental Leave Policies and Social Sustainability grant, which runs from 2022 to 2026, began many years earlier. There are many other examples.

Anyone who has been involved in attempts to change policy, will know that such an endeavour takes time and tenacity. As colleagues from the network have reflected, in multiple publications, patience is necessary (Kamerman and Moss, 2011; Moss, Duvander and Koslowski, 2019; Doucet and Duvander, 2022). It is difficult to know when the political time will be right, and it pays to be ready. Scholars never know when their government might call upon them for information and direction. We know from the experience of many network members that policymakers do call upon you, but you have to sit and wait sometimes for decades. Doucet and Duvander (2022) note that the pace of change with regard to leave policies has been more of a ‘slow drip’ (Sullivan, Gershuny and Robinson, 2018) of uneven, but gradual, incremental change. Slow research is required to match the slow pace of change (Stengers, 2018), while nimble responses to policymakers are also necessary. In the UK such network activities may ultimately contribute to a REF impact case study,² years and possibly decades to come to fruition. Again, this kind of activity is very much sustained by long running networks which perhaps endure longer than institutional contracts.

In summary, we highlight the value of being able to take time to build and nurture professional relationships. Scholars benefit in multiple ways from long-term membership of a network which is independent of their institutional affiliation. Colleagues hugely benefit from being employed by an organisation that does allow time and resource for such networking activities, though in some cases, in the absence of such support, scholars also dedicate their own time and resources to network membership.

Policy impact and international collaboration

One of the most satisfying moments in a leave scholar's career must be when their government – or another policymaking body – invites them to participate in policymaking and accepts their recommendations for changes to leave policies. For example, during 2017, two members of the network (Margaret O'Brien, Olivier Thevenon) were honoured to be invited to share their expertise in direct briefings to the EU Commissioner leading on the 2019 Parental Leave Directive (EU 2019/1158) on work-life balance for parents and carers. More often, policymakers and politicians may accept the theoretical premise of the recommendation, but then struggle to manifest it in a tangible, practical, political way.

One of the strengths of comparative work is the ability it gives any given country to point to another and thus challenge what is 'normal' in their country. Of course, all countries are different, and it is rarely the case that simply lifting a policy design from one place and dropping it in another will translate as hoped, but that said, core assumptions – for example, around parenting practices – can be challenged. If, in one country, it is unusual for children to be attending early-childhood education and care before the age of three years (as with the case of post-communist Hungary), but in another it is very unusual for them not to be attending these services from the age of one year (as with the case of Sweden), then this at least illustrates that these supposedly biologically-determined 'facts' about what is good for children are rather socially and culturally determined. This international framing of the network opens opportunities for network members to collaborate with policymakers at global and supranational levels. O'Brien and Uzunalioglu (2022: 67) note that 'while most individuals experience leave within their own country, workplace and family, all levels of significant influence, we argue that the supranational level, in the form of international organisations, also has an important impact on leave policymaking'.

As well as academic collaboration, the network influences and attracts members from international organisations such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and the ILO (International Labour Organization). Members were invited to participate in recent centenary celebrations of 100 Years of Maternity Protection: Transforming Leave and Care Policies for All, in 2019, that took place in Geneva. Members have also been involved with work at the United Nations. Similarly, in recent years, network involvement (in terms of guest speakers and consultancy) with the European Institute for Gender

Equality – an EU organisation which collects and analyses data on equality between women and men – led to the 2019 *Gender Equality Index* having its thematic focus (which varies every year) on work–life balance, which included an emphasis on eligibility to parental leave (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019; 2020).

The ‘networking abilities’ of the network are key, since the take-up of evidence by policymakers relies on not just the consumption of reports or texts, but the relationships they build with researchers (Davies, Nutley and Smith, 2000). Collaboration with the European Commission and network members has been particularly strong. As mentioned above, colleagues drafting the recent EU Directive involved the network in the development phase and they are now also involved in the evaluation phase. Colleagues are involved in such groups as European Council working groups, to agree what should be considered as ‘parental leave’, distinct from ‘maternity leave’ and ‘paternity leave’ for the purposes of monitoring parental-leave take-up. The network thus draws on international research and collaboration which in turn strengthens our evidence base and gives credence to our international standing. No other network can compare in this policy area, given the wide outreach and expertise we encompass.

As well as international opportunities to connect and influence, there are also many local opportunities. Speaking from our own experience, we have recently been involved in such activities as being an invited expert to a Scottish Parliament cross-party working group on shared parenting which has led to a parliamentary motion arguing for Scotland to ‘match’ the recent EU directive. We know that governments contact our members when the time is right for them for reform. For example, this has recently happened in Australia where our Australian country team has been asked for a policy briefing paper by government (at short notice). There will be many other national examples.

In summary, the key recommendation from the experience of network members is that the body of regularly updated knowledge you are able to draw upon, as a result of the sum of the comparative collaborative work, when called upon to do so by invitations from policymakers at all levels, is tremendously enabling and would be nigh on impossible as an individual.

Concluding reflections

One of the strengths of long-term research relationships within a research unit such as TCRU is that these can extend beyond the unit to contribute to the stability of international networks and research relationships over long periods of time. The example of the International Network on Leave Policies and Research, for which TCRU is more than just the UK hub given the leadership roles in the coordinating team fulfilled by colleagues based at TCRU, is an extraordinary tale of the potency of having a long view. The experience of the network shows that there is a desire among researchers, especially in newer fields, for professional and collaborative relations with others, and that you can achieve this with a shared vision without funding or formality, but that one possibly necessary condition is the stability of the organisers being anchored in an institution with some degree of permanence and which provides time and resource for such activity. Long-term, slow research can build a tremendous body of (regularly updated) knowledge, which includes knowing whom to ask about a given topic, on which researchers can draw when speed – also known as ‘tactical research’ – is of the essence. Such speedy moments are often at the behest of policymakers – and occasionally the researcher is then ready to support policy change according to the shared vision of the wider group. We are greater than the sum of our parts.

Further reading

For examples of edited books in the field which are illustrative of the international collaboration discussed in this chapter we refer the reader to *Research Handbook on Leave Policy: Parenting and social inequalities in a global perspective* (Dobrotić, Blum and Koslowski, 2022); *Parental Leave and Beyond* (Moss, Duvander and Koslowski, 2019); *Comparative Perspectives on Work-Life Balance and Gender Equality: Fathers on leave alone* (O’Brien and Wall, 2017), which is available to access free online at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-42970-0>; and *The Politics of Parental Leave Policies: Children, parenting, gender and the labour market* (Kamerman and Moss, 2011). The *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2022*, and all previous years back to 2005, as well as presentations from seminars, can be found open access at <https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports>. As noted in Chapter 18 in this volume, there are few books on international collaboration in the social

sciences and on comparative data collection and harmonisation in general. Such expertise is more likely to be found in the appendices of reports published by international organisations such as Eurostat, the International Labour Organization and the World Bank.

Notes

- 1 For a list of the contents of all seminars and many presentations see <https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-seminars/> (accessed 10 January 2023).
- 2 The 'REF' is an expert review of academic outputs created by university research staff in the UK. An impact case study makes up part of this review.

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Part II

**Family life, gender and minority
communities**

Introduction to Part II

Alison Koslowski

Focusing the lens on those who are not usually so visible and putting their voices at the centre of research, is a theme that runs through much of the work presented in the chapters in this section of *Social Research for our Times*. The focus of research ranges from family life, to gender, and to the experience of being part of a minority community. Three main areas of research are represented: work about young people and their wellbeing, work about the migration and asylum experience, and work about gender and parenting. The work presented in this section spans various disciplines including social psychology, sociology and anthropology, reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU).

The projects presented are mostly from the 2000s and 2010s (with the exception of [Chapter 13](#) which spans the range from the 1970s to 2022) and the shift from government-department funding for the research to other sources is evident. Despite these changes, the consistency of focus of work at TCRU during this period is striking and suggests successful inter-cohort collaboration and transfer of values and knowledge over time. This is reflected in some chapters by the co-authors spanning multiple cohorts. The authors of the first chapter in this section, [Chapter 8](#), are not currently based at TCRU but provide an example of the enduring ties that colleagues have to the unit. Peter Aggleton is a former TCRU Director (1995 to 2007) and Elaine Chase and Ian Warwick are colleagues based at the Institute of Education. The authors of [Chapter 9](#) also include a former codirector (Marjorie Smith, 2007 to 2014) and two current TCRU colleagues, Katie Quy and Lisa Fridkin. [Chapter 10](#) is an example of the fruits of hosting international visitors and the collaborations that often follow. David Frost is a current TCRU colleague who hosted Mário Tombolato in 2021 and the chapter is a collaboration between the two of them and another colleague from Mário's home institution in Brazil, Isabel Gomes. [Chapter 11](#) is written by TCRU

colleague Michela Franceschelli. The authors of [Chapter 12](#) are university researchers based at TCRU (Mette Louise Berg and Eve Dickson) and co-researchers with personal experience of the asylum system and trained for the project from which this chapter is drawn (Faith Nyamakanga and Nelson Gómez). Images are also provided by another research participant, Rasha Kotaiche. This chapter exemplifies the voices of the research participants being central to the research process. The final chapter in [Part II](#) is an exemplar of intergenerational collaboration between researchers, with four cohorts represented (Julia Brannen, Charlotte Faircloth, Catherine Jones, Margaret O'Brien (former director 2015 to 2021) and Katherine Twamley).

[Chapter 8](#) reflects on the importance of partnership and joint working for research, policy and practice and notes how this is more likely to happen when values are aligned between partners in government, researchers and the community sector, as they were in the UK during the New Labour government of the late 1990s and 2000s. Two government-funded case studies are presented as exemplars. The first is a study of young people seeking asylum alone (2006 to 2008) and the second considers bullying of gender and sexuality-minority young people in schools in the early 2000s. The chapter notes the role of values in the questions asked by social researchers and contributes to the discussion that those working at TCRU share and are guided by a particular set of values in their research, not least the importance of working with research participants (rather than research 'on' a topic).

[Chapter 9](#) presents more examples of projects with young people, with a focus on the nature of social research into the emotional wellbeing of young people in the UK. It provides information on three case studies of work carried out in the unit since 2008. The first was the Stress in Children study, funded by the Department of Health (2008 to 2011), a similar era to that of the studies described in [Chapter 8](#). The next two studies are both more recent and are examples of the adaptive social research carried out by the unit during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the studies showcase how we research children and young people's wellbeing, with children's own perspectives being central to the approach.

As well as the methodological value of placing research participants at the centre of work, TCRU has often contributed to theoretical innovation which renders a clearer focus on a particular minority community. [Chapter 10](#) presents a good example of this as it explores extending the well-established 'minority-stress theory' to include the level of the family when researching the experiences of same-sex parents in Brazil. Again, it is work that puts those who are the focus of the work

at the centre of telling their story. This chapter illustrates the research focus of TCRU scholars at the intersection of sexuality, gender, relationships, and parenting in marginalised and diverse family contexts, including same-sex couples and same-sex parenting families.

The following two chapters present poignant accounts of the experience of being in limbo, that can be caused by malfunctioning asylum systems. They both reflect on the particular form of precarity experienced by this group of people. [Chapter 11](#) takes an ethnographic approach and follows the story of a young African migrant in Italy, as it considers transitions to adulthood and lives in suspension for young migrants. This chapter presents the theoretical innovation of the concept of ‘waithood’. [Chapter 12](#) works with a collaborative ethnographic approach and follows the experiences of people in the asylum system in the UK. This research took place during the pandemic and so also had to adapt to the new research environment, using creative methods such as a walkabout and capturing places through images. This is very much work which seeks to empower, aiming for collaborative and nonextractive relationships with the co-researchers and research participants. There is a strong overlap between research and teaching exemplified in this chapter, with the long-term training schedule for the co-researchers. A shift that we see is that the researchers are no longer working with government to improve the asylum experience (as in [Chapter 8](#)) but rather, despite government initiatives.

[Chapter 13](#) concludes [Part II](#) by focusing on a dimension of TCRU research that has been present throughout the decades: enquiry into the complexities of gender relations in caring and employment practices, including studies of men working in childcare and other children’s services ([Chapter 4](#)) and of leave policies ([Chapter 7](#)). This chapter particularly considers change and continuity in men’s fathering and employment practices. It is an example of researchers coming together around a particular substantive area from different conceptual backgrounds and disciplines. Here in one chapter, we have psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists working together. It is another example of research which is putting the lens on that which is not so visible in the literature: which can be the case with father–child relationships. It is taking the long view; something that can happen given the institutional memory and continued collaboration at TCRU. The chapter also includes an example of social research adapting to the pandemic conditions.

Thus, we can see at least three uniting themes emerge from this section on family life, gender, and minority communities. The first is a methodological practice rooted in shared values: that of making sure the

voices of the research participants are central to the work. The second, which is present in many if not all the chapters in the section, is the ability to adapt the social research methods to the prevailing environment: in particular to the conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Adapting ‘social research for our times’ has been a long running theme in TCRU, and the COVID-19 pandemic was no exception. Many chapters in this section provide examples of how data-collection techniques were adapted to the evolving situation in 2020 and 2021. Work largely went online (Chapters 9, 10, 12 and 13). There was innovation in the use of digital applications (Chapter 13). Walkabout ‘interviews’ were introduced (Chapter 12). This section also illustrates well how researchers have adapted to changing political times, with the change of direction of government policy, for example around migration.

Thirdly, the chapters exemplify that while research may be in distinct areas, the work is underpinned by a set of values, which include a desire for ‘practical justice’ (Aggleton, Broom and Moss, 2019; Bell, Aggleton and Gibson, 2021) as discussed in Chapter 8. TCRU is a hub for research about child migrants; a hub for research in gender and sexual-minority families; and a hub for work on the role of fathers in families. What these substantive areas share is a desire to improve the situation for the groups (often marginalised) in a practical way, through the research, into policy and practice.

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8

Young people, diversity, wellbeing and inclusion: towards values-led research and practice

Peter Aggleton, Elaine Chase and Ian Warwick

Introduction

Throughout much of its history, work within the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) has focused on young people, wellbeing and inclusion and, for a time in the 1990s and 2000s, UK government policy, researchers and the community sector were at one in actively advocating for a coherent and joined-up approach to engaging with the difficult issues affecting many young people's lives. Partnership and joint working were promoted on topics as diverse as teenage pregnancy, health and social-care provision for unaccompanied migrants and refugees, young people's mental health, and work with sexuality and gender minorities.

Using two case studies informed by social research conducted within TCRU, this chapter considers what effective support for diversity and wellbeing might look like for marginalised and excluded young people. It identifies structural, policy and practice-level levers for bringing about positive change in their lives as part of a multifaceted, multilevelled approach. The two case studies focused on here engage with services and support for young people arriving in the UK to seek asylum alone, and provision for gender and sexuality of diverse young people in schools and other educational settings. Lessons are identified on how best to develop values-driven research, policy and practice that make a positive and tangible difference in young people's lives.

Understanding wellbeing among young people seeking asylum alone in the UK

Between 2017 and 2021, the number of children and young people arriving to claim asylum in the UK each year, without an accompanying adult, ranged from 2,400 to around 3,760 (Refugee Council, 2022), while an unknown number of unaccompanied children arrived without making themselves known to authorities (Chase and Allsopp, 2020). To be recognised as a refugee in need of international protection, children and young people must establish a well-founded fear of persecution (in keeping with the UN 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol). In practice, this is difficult to do and, in most cases, unaccompanied children and young people are given time-limited discretionary forms of protection for the duration of their childhood. During this time, they are typically placed under the care of local authorities who provide them with accommodation, support services and access to education and learning opportunities (Coram Children's Legal Centre, 2017; Chase and Allsopp, 2020).

As they approach 'institutional' adulthood (at age 18 years), many young people face the potential of no longer being eligible for protections, being removed from local authority care and confronting the possibility of being forcibly removed to countries of origin. At this juncture, many avoid the risk of return by disengaging from statutory services and living their lives irregularly (Chase and Allsopp, 2020). These issues are exacerbated by an immigration and asylum system which is notoriously slow in decision making, often leaving young people in limbo and uncertainty for many years. This has detrimental impacts on their health and wellbeing. While many young people may experience emotional and mental-health difficulties as a result of events prior to and during their migration to the UK, post-migration stressors, not least the vagaries of inefficient and ineffective asylum and immigration systems, have a detrimental impact (Chase, Rezaie and Zada, 2019; Jolly, Singh and Lobo, 2022).

In 2006–8, TCRU led a Department of Health (DH)-funded study into the emotional wellbeing of unaccompanied minors in the UK, that is children and young people under the age of 18 who arrive in the country without an accompanying adult (Chase, Knight and Statham, 2008a; 2008b). Findings from this work led to a number of recommendations with respect to appropriate training for primary healthcare, social care and legal practitioners, to redress some of the inadequacies in service provision and support in relation to mental health and wellbeing as well

as wider care and support systems which should help young people navigate asylum systems. The research broke the mould in terms of engaging with questions of mental health and wellbeing for members of this population. At the time, related research drew heavily on the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry with a focus on post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression. In contrast, the TCRU DH-funded study used a largely qualitative methodology to explore in-depth and sociologically the factors that shaped the emotional and mental health and wellbeing of young people based on their own experiences over time.

The research employed participatory methods such as Photovoice (Rogers, Carr and Hickman, 2018) and facilitated young people to engage with broad questions about the factors that made them feel well and happy and the factors which made them feel sad or had created difficulties for them since arriving in the UK. This approach enabled us to develop our understanding along a number of axes. For example, we were able to develop a better chronological understanding of young people's experiences of mental health and emotional wellbeing, including being able to distinguish more clearly between pre- and peri-migration stressors and significant post-migration events. The latter include extended liminality and uncertainty in relation to legal status and related social-care support, along with concerns related to the transition to institutional adulthood (at 18 years) for many young people and the associated loss of opportunities such as access to education, housing and other services, alongside well-founded fears of forced removal to countries of origin.

This work also highlighted a number of other issues where there was a need for further evidence and research. These included understanding the contested spaces of care and immigration control which shape professional practice and responses to young people, as well as the misnomers and misunderstandings associated with the term 'unaccompanied', which tends to individualise and decontextualise young people's experiences, ignoring transnational and local connections to family and community, and the responsibilities young people carry to support others throughout their processes of migration. The research also revealed how, despite past traumas and distress associated with events prior to migrating and during the journey, young people associated feelings of wellbeing with a sense of ontological security and the possibility of carving out a viable future for themselves in the UK or elsewhere.

The DH-funded study provided the basis for an ongoing programme of research which has made substantial empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions to our understanding of the lives and experiences of children and young people migrating alone to the UK. The

interdisciplinary aspects of the work have broadened over time and current work involves scholarship combining the disciplines of law, human rights, sociology, psychology and political science, as well as anthropology, education, migration studies and international development. More broadly, the work harnessed research funding and policy impetus to build synergy across different meta-disciplines such as between health sciences and the law, and between the social sciences and the arts and humanities.

Methodologically, the participatory approach used in the initial research laid the foundations for a series of projects which helped shift the parameters of how research is now conducted in the field. For example, the later ESRC-funded¹ project, *Becoming Adult*, which was conducted between 2014–17, picked up the issues of post-18 transitions for migrant young people and explored the wellbeing outcomes of unaccompanied children and young people making the transition to adulthood within immigration governance systems in the UK and Italy. The emphasis in this study lay in repoliticising ideas of wellbeing and demonstrating how, in many cases, the immigration governance systems and the limiting social-care regimes and structures encountered by young people during their migratory experiences could be more detrimental to their health and wellbeing than the factors that had driven them to migrate in the first place (Chase and Allsopp, 2020).

The later ESRC-funded *Children Caring on the Move* project adopted a similar peer-led research approach to investigate separated child migrants' experiences of care and caring for others as they navigated the complexities of the immigration-welfare nexus in England (co-investigators Rosen and Chase). Yet another ESRC-funded project, *Lives on Hold our Stories Told*, is, at the time of writing, using a similar peer-led research approach to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on access to legal advice and social-care support in England for unaccompanied young people seeking asylum. By engaging young people directly in the design of each study from the start, and by working in close collaboration with civil-society organisations, these efforts help shift some of the power dynamics with respect to agenda-setting in research and make sure that evidence gathering relates to the priorities of young people's lives and the organisations that work with them.

Collectively, this body of work has highlighted the disconnect between policy relating to the governance of child and youth migration and the realities of many young people's lives. It has consistently highlighted inadequacies of care and protection for young people seeking asylum alone and the devastating impact this deficit can have on mental health and wellbeing. The work has also pioneered innovations in terms

of methodology – with a focus on peer-led research and on working with civil-society organisations to help inform policy and build the evidence base for joint action. This, in turn, has positioned the work strategically in relation to advocacy and policy change.

As we look forward towards what more needs to be done to understand the challenges facing young people seeking asylum and what forward-looking policy and practice responses might look like, we are acutely aware of the shifting policy landscape. The overriding challenge remains how best to help shape and inform highly politicised and constantly changing policies on immigration governance by demonstrating their direct impact on young people’s lives and how they limit young people’s access to health, welfare, education and other services. The so-called ‘hostile’ environment in the UK, typified by the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, constitutes purposefully designed immigration policies which make it extremely difficult for people arriving in the UK to access housing, healthcare, education and work. It underscores the importance of widening partnerships with civil-society organisations, progressive policy actors and caring practitioners, to better evidence the impact of specific policies and advocate for changes which are more conducive to the wellbeing of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK and beyond.

Importantly, the research described raises key questions for policy and practice in relation to care, revealing conflicts in the positionality of social care, health and other practitioners and the tensions between their professional codes of practice and the roles they are expected to assume in immigration governance. It also problematises ideas about who provides and practises care, shifting away from ideas concerning the unidirectionality of care of, and towards, children and young people by adults, recognising instead the complex ways in which migrant children and young people provide care to each other and to others, particularly in the face of the injustices they face in an increasingly hostile immigration landscape.

Gender and sexuality diverse young people: tackling bullying through schools

We turn now to a second example of policy and practice-relevant research conducted by TCRU and its focus on bullying in schools. While there have been changes in the UK over the last twenty years in policy and government guidance related to gender and sexuality ([Hankivsky, De Merich and Christoffersen, 2019](#); [Mukoro, 2021](#)), gender and sexuality diverse young

people continue to experience bullying, in addition to having their views and experiences marginalised and disregarded in schools (Harris, Wilson-Daily and Fuller, 2021; Moyano and del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes, 2020). Focusing on England, since September 2020, all secondary schools have been required to teach Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), and all primary schools have been required to teach Relationships Education (RE). However, there remains concern about the high rates of bullying experienced by LGBTQ² young people as well as the lack of inclusive curricula in primary and secondary schools (Carlile, 2020; Atkinson, 2021; Epps, Markowski and Cleaver, 2021; Stonewall, 2022a; 2022b).

Early work, focusing on what we then termed homophobic bullying towards young lesbians and young gay men, and conducted at the then Institute of Education, University of London, documented how workers in schools often ‘played it safe’ when it came to tackling homophobic bullying. While being aware of such bullying, teachers were often confused, unable or unwilling to address the needs of lesbian and gay pupils (Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001). Notwithstanding this, some schools were ahead of others in tackling homophobia, often achieving this through collaborations with external professionals (Douglas et al., 2001). A number of such schools took part in a study which led to the development of the best practice guide *Safe for All* (Warwick and Douglas, 2001). Study findings were framed around the value of adopting a ‘whole school approach’, which recognises interacting elements (including national and school policies, community partnerships, curricula and school ethos) that influence life in a school.

Published in 2004, a TCRU review for the then Department of Education and Skills (DfES) in England sought to identify the extent and impact of homophobic bullying in schools, how homophobia and sexual orientation were addressed within classrooms and across schools, and in what ways, if any, issues of equity and diversity in relation to sexual orientation were engaged with in the school workforce (Warwick et al., 2004). The review identified diverse forms of homophobic bullying (such as verbal, physical, harassment, being ignored), the challenges of recording the extent to which it occurred (routinely identified in studies from Australia, the UK and USA as affecting between 30 and 50 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people), and the impact of such bullying on the emotional, physical and educational wellbeing of young people, including their absence from school.

While there was clear evidence of some schools acknowledging and responding to homophobia, some of the respondents interviewed noted a general lack of commitment to doing so, outlining inconsistencies within

and across schools, with ‘inaction’ being viewed as tacit approval of homophobia. One reason for inaction was said to relate to the legacy of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act (legislation which applied to local authorities) which, while not directly applicable to schools, had created an ethos of ‘confusion, fear and inertia, limiting professionals’ ability or willingness to address homophobic bullying’ (Warwick et al., 2004: 16). Given this situation, the review drew attention to a range of then current government policies, programmes and areas of work through which homophobic bullying could be addressed. These included the DfES Every Child Matters strategy, the Make a Difference campaign, the Behaviour Improvement Programme, the Don’t Suffer in Silence anti-bullying resource, the National Healthy School Standard, and the National Strategies for Key Stage Three and primary schools. Together, these initiatives sought to advance school improvement by reducing violence and improving behaviour, and promoting children’s and young people’s wellbeing in general – actions which could be leveraged to respond to and prevent homophobic bullying. A later study in three secondary schools in London noted the ways in which concerns to promote equal opportunities and diversity more generally engaged with these policies to tackle not only homophobic bullying, but also racism and other forms of harassment and discrimination (Warwick and Aggleton, 2014).

Informed by this and related work, in 2018 the government in England launched a £2.6 million initiative to provide resources to support teachers to work on LGBTQ issues, to ensure all pupils feel accepted and included, with over £1 million of this money being pledged towards combatting homophobic bullying in schools. More recently, however, the same Conservative government refused to renew funding for this initiative, which had allowed schools to provide training and workshops to combat anti-LGBTQ bullying. This, together with increasing evidence of continued harassment and bullying towards gender and sexuality diverse students, signals the need for continued vigilance in relation to school and government policy and practice in what is, for some it would appear to be, an easily forgotten-about field.

Promoting inclusion and respect with regard to sexuality and gender diversity in schools requires vigilance to keep pace with rapidly occurring changes on the ground. The last few years have seen a growth of ‘new’ sex, gender and sexuality identities (Cover, 2018). The glossary to the latest Stonewall³ toolkit for preventing and tackling homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in secondary schools contains terms such as: ace, cisgender, demisexual, aromantic, intersex, LGBTQ, nonbinary, questioning, romantic orientation, sexual orientation and

trans, as some of the more common descriptors (of the self and of others) that teachers may meet in the course of their everyday work (Stonewall, 2022b). Such terms mark the emergence of new ways of thinking about (and living) gender and sexuality, new ways of thinking about and identifying oneself, new forms of discrimination and new challenges and opportunities for school policy, curricula and professional practice.

In ongoing work we are looking to existing policy levers to prevent and tackle homophobia in schools – there is no need to build everything anew. Opportunities to do good can be found in several pieces of national legislation usefully summarised in the document *Preventing and Tackling Bullying: Advice for headteachers, staff and governing bodies* (Department for Education, 2017). For example:

Section 89 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 provides that maintained schools must have measures to encourage good behaviour and prevent all forms of bullying amongst pupils. These measures should be part of the school's behaviour policy which must be communicated to all pupils, school staff and parents (Department for Education, 2017: 5).

And:

A key provision in the Equality Act 2010 is the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), which came into force on 5 April 2011 and covers age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The Duty requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

Maintained schools and Academies are required to comply with the PSED. In addition, Part 6 of the Act makes it unlawful for the responsible body of a school to discriminate against, harass or victimise a pupil or potential pupil in relation to admissions, the way it provides education for pupils, provision of pupil access to any benefit, facility or service, or by excluding a pupil or subjecting them to any other detriment (Department for Education, 2017: 5).

And:

When there is ‘reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm’ a bullying incident should be addressed as a child protection concern under the Children Act 1989 (Department for Education, 2017: 6).

The Advice notes that schools which are successful in this area are those that provide teachers with good-quality staff training:

Schools can invest in specialised skills to help their staff understand the needs of their pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGB&T) pupils (Department for Education, 2017: 11).

Alongside the above statements there is guidance and resources to support schools in their work. Some of the guidance engages with intersectionality, drawing attention to the special circumstances of LGBTQ people of colour, of faith, and those who are disabled. Addressing the homophobic and transphobic bullying of such young people, it is said, must be an integral part of school policies and actions to prevent and respond to bullying and violence more generally (see, for example, Stonewall, 2022a; 2022b). This positioning of homo, trans- and biphobic bullying within a broader context can also be found in calls to address violence and promote wellbeing as part of a ‘whole school approach’ – through school policy, through school leadership and community partnerships, as part of the curriculum, in physical and social-emotional settings, and through linked health services (World Health Organization, 2021). As an increasing number of studies have noted, violence against gender and sexuality diverse students is not best dealt with through stand-alone programmes, but rather by the creation of a supportive school environment for all (Formby, 2015; Dominguez-Martinez and Robles, 2019; Atkinson, 2021; Ferfolja and Ullman, 2021; Harris, Wilson-Daily and Fuller, 2021; 2022).

The UK Government’s White Paper, *Opportunity for All: Strong schools with great teachers for your child* shows recognition of this. Its ambition, ‘to support children to achieve their potential wherever they live and whatever their background’, calls for a ‘wider vision of giving everyone the opportunity to flourish’ (HM Government, 2022: 10). By 2030, all children should be taught ‘in calm, orderly, safe and supportive

schools with high levels of attendance’ (HM Government, 2022: 24). Regarding extracurricular activities, the document states that:

As part of a richer school week, all children should be entitled to take part in sport, music and cultural opportunities. These opportunities are an essential part of a broad and ambitious curriculum, and support children’s health, wellbeing and wider development (HM Government, 2022: 29).

While it might be hoped that reference to ‘all’ within this statement includes concern for the wellbeing of sexuality and gender diverse students, policy and strategy documents can often be non-specific about who is included in the statements they contain. This is certainly true for other seemingly positive statements of intent, including the internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goals, which likewise make no reference whatsoever to gender or sexuality diversity (Aggleton, Sciortino and Newman, in press).

Recognition of the value of engaging with diversity among young people is also present in the Teachers’ Standards (Department for Education, 2021) (which, in England, define a minimum level of conduct and practice for teachers and trainees to achieve qualified teacher status) and these offer an additional lever for good practice. The standards state that teachers should establish a safe educational environment and promote courteous behaviour during classes as well as in school more generally. Teachers require an understanding of the needs of all pupils and the range of factors that can inhibit their learning and social, physical and emotional development – and adapt the support they provide. Working to these Standards not only requires action to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, but also makes teachers accountable for supporting, inspiring and motivating all pupils regardless of their gender and sexuality.

Given that there is no specific mention of gender and sexual diversity in *Opportunity for All* or in the Teachers’ Standards, it is, we argue, time to be more specific about these issues. A key stimulus for this lies in evidence concerning children’s and young people’s own experiences of gender and sexuality. As indicated earlier, there is clear evidence of a rapid growth in new gender and sexuality identities among young people. A list of over 245 genders now appears on the internet (Gender Wiki, n.d.), along with a somewhat smaller (but constantly expanding) list of sexualities (Sexuality Wiki, n.d.). It is important to recognise that these diverse identifications are not ‘epiphenomena’, but descriptors increasingly used by adults as well,

revealing a major shift in understandings of gender, sex and sexuality in the twenty-first century.

What then are the implications of these developments, for research, policy and practice? Without new empirical or policy-related enquiry of the type undertaken earlier, the response must be provisional. What is clear, however, is that tackling discrimination in school, on the grounds of gender and sexuality, requires engagement with a bigger picture – in this case, ongoing transformations in gender, sex and sexuality in the wider society. At the institutional level, tackling discrimination requires the use of a whole-school or whole-college/university approach in which contemporary challenges to the binaries of female/male and homo/heterosexuality are recognised, and their intersectionality with other social structures (of race, ethnicity, disability) validated. More specifically, enabling young people to build empathy and understanding related to sexuality- and gender-diversity, and providing them with the means to challenge bullying when it happens, can help schools become safer environments for all young people (Rivers, 2021).

Within and beyond schools, action continues to be needed more generally to address the root causes of exclusion in respect of gender, sex and sexuality. These are deeply rooted in popular politics, patriarchy and the economy – all of which have a role to play in creating discrimination and exclusion, ultimately denying equality and justice to a growing number of people not only in the UK but also in other parts of the world (Sciortino, 2020; Aggleton et al., in press).

Towards values-led practice, research and policy

Taken together, the two case studies described above point to some of the seminal work developed at TCRU over past decades. While the focus of each of them is distinct, both are underpinned by a set of values that remains true of much of the unit's work today. Good-quality policy-related research cannot be value free, and values are of immense significance when it comes to promoting the recognition and inclusion of marginalised and excluded groups including young people. So, what then do we see as some of the core values and how have they been operationalised in TCRU's and our own work?

The first of them relates to the desire for social justice and what, more recently, has come to be known as 'practical justice' (Aggleton, Broom and Moss, 2019; Bell, Aggleton and Gibson, 2021). Aligned with the idea of real utopias (Olin Wright, 2010), practical justice is concerned

with how we move from theories of justice and what ‘should’ happen in order to uphold justice and fairness, as defined by rights and justice frameworks, towards what needs to happen in policy and practice in order to bring change in the real world. Within the context of our own work at TCRU and beyond, the pursuit of practical justice has been concerned with the mechanisms required to address, and redress, deeply-embedded inequalities and inequities in the systems and structures that undermine the wellbeing of children and young people.

A second value links to the importance of building inclusive partnerships in research to uphold a commitment to fairness and equality. Beyond academic rigour, meaningful alliances are required with policymakers at community and grassroots levels, civil-society organisations and movements for social change, and caring practitioners. Only this way can research facilitate the creation of the multifaceted and multi-level actions, programmes and interventions that have the best chance of bringing about systemic change towards equality. Such a values-driven commitment to partnership building or allyship has figured strongly in our own and much of TCRU’s work.

A third value, equity, speaks to the importance of improving the situation of people most likely to face marginalisation and discrimination by centring their voices and experiences within the evidence base for shifts in policy and practice. Doing so successfully requires inclusive forms of research engagement, ranging from the use of participatory methods to peer-led research in which the power relations within research are unsettled in ways that enable young people to exert influence over research agendas and the way in which research is conducted. Such approaches help keep research connected to the priorities of people’s lives and illuminate aspects of their experience which otherwise may remain ignored (Bell, Aggleton and Gibson, 2021).

A fourth value relates to engaging with complexity rather than aiming for reductionist ‘quick-fix’ solutions to social problems. Complexity, here, is about developing insights into people’s lives as part of historically grounded multilayered and interactive systems. Understanding the ways in which key historical forces and ongoing social structures shape and become shaped by individual and collective biographies can help identify how change might best be brought about through action at the structural, organisational, collective and personal levels. This may bring about change in relation to institutional ethos, educational environments, curricula, pedagogies and policies that are conducive to promoting justice, inclusion and the wellbeing of all young people and staff. This speaks once more to the value of working in partnership and to addressing equality and

diversity in ways that promote inclusivity, irrespective of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and disability – among other characteristics.

A fifth value stresses the importance of engaging with the ongoing temporalities of people's lives and the imperative of staying up-to-date, not only with relevant policy and legislation but also shifting realities in children's and young people's circumstances. With respect to young people seeking asylum, this requires us to stay abreast of rapidly changing immigration and social-care systems of governance which directly impact on young people and, in turn, shape their own responses to such controls. These systems have been shown to fundamentally determine the sorts of risks to their health and wellbeing that young people may be willing to take, often resulting in harmful consequences, whether or not these are intended (Chase, 2020; Chase and Allsopp, 2020). In the case of gender and sexuality diversity, being up-to-date means being aware of 'new' and emerging identities and the opportunities these create for promoting young people's health and wellbeing, not only in schools, colleges and other formal educational settings, but also within the broader contexts of collective and community life.

Our work with young people has consistently sought to embed the principles of practical justice, meaningful and inclusive partnerships, equity, engaging with multilevel complexity and attention to shifting and changing real-world contexts. Throughout we have been transparent in our own positionality as researchers, making it clear that our work is underpinned by these values. As such we are explicitly not 'neutral' but seek to actively engage with the power structures that create and reproduce different forms of marginalisation and which require radical systemic legislative and policy change. Research with young people seeking asylum has served to unsettle the language and associations used to describe and refer to this area of social care and immigration governance. It has enabled us to push back against, for example, reductive descriptions of children and young people as 'unaccompanied', recognising that young people's ties and connections transnationally and within host countries and societies are expansive and often involve social and financial remittances which sustain communities across the globe. It has also helped problematise the narrow criteria against which claims for asylum can be made, recognising the multiple and interconnected drivers of migration linked to war, conflict, poverty, food insecurity, climate injustices and interfamily conflict, combined with aspirations for better and more viable futures for young people themselves and others.

Moving away from 'crisis' notions of migration and movement (Rosen et al., 2023), the research we have led asks bigger policy questions of how

the UK as a receiving country can better cater for the international movement of young people as an integral feature of globalisation. With respect to work with gender and sexuality diverse young people, work has highlighted the need to centre young people's voices in research and policy development, leverage existing policy frameworks to full advantage as well as develop new ones, and for professionals to work together to recognise and engage with the different forms of violence faced by young people.

Concluding reflections

The values outlined above signal the importance of researchers critically engaging with, and shaping, how policies relating to young people at risk of marginalisation are designed and implemented. Nevertheless, there remain questions about how best to bring such values to life.

For example, how can we ensure that principles of inclusion, dignity, equality and social justice are embedded in the research we undertake and constitute the intended outcomes of subsequent policy frameworks? While, in theory, adherence to these principles in research may be largely uncontested, how can we remain true to them in the process by which policy is developed? If for example we frame all young people as 'problematic', troubled and as somehow requiring 'fixing', a tendency implicit in much recent policy relating to young people and health, surely we fall at the first hurdle – namely, that of respect for autonomy and human dignity? Alternatively, if we design policies that speak only to the needs of some young people while missing out others, do we fail on two other counts – those of inclusion and equality? And if we implement policies in ways that inadvertently exacerbate the difficulties young people face, or cause one group of young people to be set up against another in society, does this not compromise our commitment to social justice?

In this chapter we can only make a start on what we understand as a values-led approach to research, to informing policy and programme development, and to practice with young people at risk of marginalisation and exclusion. The challenges that remain lie in determining what 'doing good' might mean in the contexts that matter most to particular constituencies of young people, as well as in working out, in partnership, how best to achieve beneficial goals.

Further reading

The book *Youth Migration and the Politics of Wellbeing: Stories of life in transition* (Chase and Allsopp, 2020) examines a range of factors affecting the health and wellbeing of young people as they transition to adulthood within broader contexts of prolonged and politically induced uncertainty. The life experiences of over one hundred unaccompanied young migrants – primarily from Afghanistan, Albania and Eritrea – are explored, drawing on unique longitudinal data. The authors highlight the challenges faced by young people and their responses to these as they seek safe and secure futures – and demonstrate the urgent need for policy reform.

Issues related to genders and sexualities can be presented using complex and perhaps confusing language. The three easy-to-read *Graphic Guides* (Barker and Scheele, 2016, 2019 and 2021) bring to life something of the breadth and depth of scholarship across the fields of gender, sexuality and queer studies – and do so in an accessible form; readers can quickly identify key issues in which they are interested and follow up any areas of interest by way of the resource sections. Finally, the two-volume *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A comprehensive and international review of research and intervention* (Smith and O’Higgins Norman, 2021) includes a wide range of research on bullying and covers a variety of settings – including schools, workplaces and social media – across low-, middle- and high-income country contexts.

Notes

- 1 The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), formerly the Social Science Research Council, is part of UK Research and Innovation.
- 2 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer.
- 3 Stonewall is a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights charity in the United Kingdom.

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Children and young people navigating a complex world: coping, motivation and resilience

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Introduction

Children and families have been central to research at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) since the unit's inception in 1973. A major tranche of our work has been concerned with understanding the factors that facilitate the health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families, and inform the development of related services. This has meant that the unit's research has had a key relevance to social policy and to society.

In this chapter, we explore the nature of social research into the emotional wellbeing of children and young people in the UK, drawing on three research studies carried out at TCRU since 2008. We first describe the Stress in Children study, a large-scale Department of Health-funded study investigating the prevalence and patterning of somatic symptoms and anxiety in a community sample of children aged between seven and eleven years, and the association of these with events or activities that are stressful for children. We then turn to more recent studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. We trace the changing nature of stressors through studies exploring the wellbeing and coping of children and families during COVID-19. A third study explores the experiences of young people studying at university during the shift to online learning. Finally, we highlight the most important themes running through the research examined and look ahead to next steps.

All children and young people today are navigating a fast-changing world, facing an ever-expanding range of stressors, including increasing concerns about our impact on the environment and climate change, inequalities of income, opportunity, race, poverty and identity (Hickman et al., 2021). Such issues are typically exacerbated for vulnerable groups, and subject to global variation. It is therefore key to identify ways to support children, young people and their families and thus safeguard wellbeing and mental health. Our research is carried out with this aim central to its focus.

Conceptualising children's wellbeing

While there remains considerable debate about what constitutes individual wellbeing, the construct may be best conceptualised in terms of quality of life (Rees et al., 2010). Measurement of wellbeing encompasses two main types of indicators: objective indicators, such as health and economic status and educational resources, and subjective measures such as happiness, perceived life satisfaction and sense of belonging and purpose (Statham and Chase, 2010; Westerhof and Keyes, 2010; The Children's Society, 2020). It is important here to separate the concept of wellbeing from that of mental ill health. Evidence suggests that while there is some relationship between the two, it is a relatively weak one (Patalay and Fitzsimons, 2016). Wellbeing is more than just the absence of mental disorder or ill health, and can remain resilient even during experiences of mental distress (Weich et al., 2011). It is a sense of 'doing ok', managing life and sense of self, and being able to get on with day-to-day activities. Subjective wellbeing has both hedonic and eudaimonic components, the former referring to affective (happiness) and cognitive (satisfaction) aspects of wellbeing, and the latter referring to psychological aspects, which focuses on meaning, personal development and sense of purpose (Ryan and Deci, 2001). The research discussed in this chapter focuses primarily on the individual's own views and perceptions, and so is concerned with subjective wellbeing.

Children's wellbeing may be conceptualised in a similar way to that of adults, although the determinants of wellbeing may vary considerably from those of adults. McAuley and Rose (2010) identify four major influences on the concept of childhood wellbeing – children's rights (such as being listened to and heard), sociological influences (being allowed to be children – the distinction between wellbeing and 'well-becoming'), ecological factors (relationships, contexts and networks) and happiness,

mapping approximately onto the hedonic and eudaimonic components discussed above. In recent years there has also been a major shift in how we research children's wellbeing, with children's own perspectives, rather than the reports of adults, considered the 'gold-standard' (Children's Society, 2020).

Challenges to children's wellbeing

Factors that can support or disrupt our wellbeing are often presented through socio-ecological models such as Bronfenbrenner (1994) where our development and wellbeing are inextricably linked to the world around us. Children's lives are embedded in wider contextual factors such as family, community, cultural routines, as well as the wider sociocultural system. These factors together contribute to both the probability that we might be exposed to adverse events and also the likelihood of processes that mitigate (or not) the impact of adverse events. A number of factors are known to exacerbate the impact of risk factors in children. These include critical periods, such as adolescence; individual vulnerability as a result of other social and emotional difficulties; the nature of the parent-child dyad, such as high parent-child conflict or low parent-child warmth, and the parent's own ability to manage distress or adversity (Belsky and Jaffee, 2015; Masten, 2018).

While stress is widely understood to have potentially damaging effects, there is some evidence that the factors often identified as giving rise to stress, typically described as adverse life events, are increasing in terms of both the number and reach of stressors (Collishaw, 2015). The largely domestic and local factors that have been recognised historically as leading to stress in children, such as domestic violence or frequent house moves, which would impact discrete groups, are now broadened and extended to a wider population due to the addition of more widespread anxieties about issues such as the ecological crises, food poverty, and health crisis (Marmot et al., 2020). The stripping away over time of protective factors, such as contact with extended family or access to green space, or more stark impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing social isolation and removing the central support of friendships and school communities, further increases vulnerability (see, for example, Daly and Allen, 2018).

Whilst challenges are inevitable, and effects of adversity can build over time to negatively impact wellbeing, the ability to successfully manage challenges can contribute to positive wellbeing and mental health (Masten, 2014). Individuals have the ability to exercise self-control

through emotion-regulation and self-efficacy, to develop problem-solving skills, and these modulate our response to a situation. Detrimental effects to wellbeing are therefore aligned with how these factors are balanced.

Although theoretical models informing research on wellbeing have evolved over time, the developing understanding of factors that pose risks to children, as well as those that support healthy development, and the ability to successfully navigate adversity have been central to TCRU research.

The Stress in Children study

The Stress in Children study (2008–11) was conducted when programmes such as the Healthy Schools programme were being developed, and initiatives such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (Primary SEAL) were being implemented in primary schools in England. The research was important in assessing emotional health and wellbeing in children, including the scale and extent of the challenges to children’s wellbeing. Better information on the psychosocial or school factors that contribute to somatic (bodily) or anxiety symptoms in children is a first step towards intervening more effectively to help children to cope with stresses.

Previously, most attention to children’s behaviour in schools was focused on conduct disorders and other behaviours disruptive to the classroom or school environment. Little attention was paid to nondisruptive children, who were instead experiencing internalising symptoms such as anxiety. This was perhaps not surprising as such children are often reported by parents or teachers to be conscientious, sensitive, ‘good’ children, who are keen to succeed at school (Garralda, 1999). Nonetheless, there was evidence that increasing numbers of children were reporting that they felt stressed (Fearon and Hotopf, 2001). A contemporaneous report (Primary Review, 2007) identified deep concern among community representatives, including parents and children themselves, about the ‘pervasive anxiety’ characterising children’s lives. Some of this was attributed to stress caused by the national programme of intensive testing for children aged seven and eleven years, however, as identified earlier, concerns about the wider world, including safety and the fear of violence, terrorism, climate change, pollution and poverty, were also contributory factors. In a study of teenage children, exams were the most frequently cited cause of stress, but relationships, self-image, parental pressure, peer pressure and

bullying were reported by more than half the teenagers (Williams and Pow, 2007).

The Stress in Children study sought to address this gap in knowledge by addressing four key questions:

- What is the prevalence and patterning of somatic and anxiety symptoms in children aged 7–11 years?
- How are these symptoms associated with events or activities that are stressful for children?
- What coping strategies do children employ to manage stress?
- How are these strategies associated with symptoms?

The methodology involved a community sample, with a two-stage design. The larger first stage utilised standardised quantitative measures, administered to class groups in schools ($N = 2566$, 15 schools), with children's caretaking parents ($N = 1358$, 53 per cent of parents) completing parallel questionnaires at home. The purpose of this stage was to establish the prevalence and patterning of symptoms of anxiety and somatisation in children, and their association with each other, and investigate the strategies children use for coping.

This was followed by a more focused and in-depth second stage, involving a smaller subgroup of children and their parents ($N = 144$) purposively selected from the first stage, based on children's reports of their symptoms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted separately at home with children and their care-taking parents (largely mothers) and obtained a mix of qualitative and quantitative information, including eight-day symptom and event diaries completed by children, in which children reported daily on their feelings, and any significant events at home or school. The main purposes of this stage were to identify family or school factors associated with higher levels of anxiety or somatic symptoms in children. This approach enabled questionnaire data to be linked to the more detailed and focused information from the interviews, as well as enabling coordination and comparison of maternal and children's reports of symptoms and aspects of family functioning. A decision was taken in the design of this study to treat children's accounts as the 'gold standard' in terms of information on their internal state. As well as the common-sense reason for supposing that children will be the most accurate informants on their own 'inner state', including feelings of anxiety and somatic symptoms, the rationale for this decision was based on previous research findings showing that correlations between parents' and children's accounts of children's internalising symptoms were usually

only modest (Achenbach, McConaughy and Howell, 1987; Nauta et al., 2004) – and this was confirmed in this research.

This research identified that, despite the burgeoning number of initiatives in schools focusing on emotional health and wellbeing, for many primary-aged children there was still a considerable burden of ‘pervasive anxiety’ in their daily lives. This finding was also reflected in other areas of functioning: children reporting high levels of anxiety symptoms were also likely to have raised levels of functional somatic symptoms – that is, unexplained physical symptoms – and vice versa. They were also more likely to report higher levels of physical symptoms, such as colds and coughs, as well as greater vulnerability to stressors and lower levels of wellbeing.

From the age of seven years – the youngest children involved in the research – gendered differences in anxiety and somatic symptoms were evident, with girls reporting higher levels of symptoms of anxiety than boys, providing evidence that the precursors of the noted differences in prevalence of emotional and mental health disorders were apparent early in childhood. The study also offered new evidence of gendered differences in children’s response to daily stressors, with girls reporting higher levels of stress than boys, particularly so in relation to the social stress of friends or other children.

The study also provided robust evidence that patterns of coping that involved rumination (difficulty stopping thinking about a problem) and perseveration (persistence of negative feelings) in the face of difficulties were particularly associated with higher levels of both anxiety and somatic symptoms – with both these coping responses more common in girls than in boys. These specific and gendered patterns of children’s coping responses were also evident and established in children as young as seven years of age.

One of the more subtle and complex findings relates to the role of different reporters in relation to children’s symptomatology and their interpretation. While the rather low correlation between carers’ and children’s reports of children’s symptoms was not unexpected and was consistent with previous findings, this indicated the possibility that carers were not always fully attuned to their children’s emotional health and wellbeing, and may not report on the same aspects of anxiety as children. This interpretation was supported by the considerable number of children who reported not, or not always, telling their primary carer about things that were worrying them.

One explanation, in relation to symptoms of anxiety at least, relates to the nature of what is being assessed in children and their parents. It

may be that in their questionnaire responses, children were reporting predominantly on 'state' anxiety – the instructions were to report on anxiety symptoms in the previous two weeks – while parents (with the same instructions) were reporting more on the child's 'trait' anxiety. This would provide at least a partial explanation for the low level of association between mothers' and children's reports of children's symptoms. It would also provide a plausible explanation for the variables that were found to be associated with children's reports of their symptoms – which were mostly variables relating to the 'here and now', and school-based factors, such as friendships, bullying and school refusal – but also sibling relations. We suggested that children's own reports of their symptomatology should be given primacy over parents' reports in assessing the severity of symptoms and resulting functional disability, but that note should be taken of parents' response to, and interpretation of, the child's symptoms in order to address and manage them effectively.

A further possible implication is that parents' response to children's anxiety or complaints of somatic symptoms is important in determining their course and outcome. For example, anxious parents who effectively reinforce children's symptoms may actually serve to exacerbate rather than reduce children's symptoms. On the other hand, parents who focus on helping children to develop effective coping strategies, and support their children in managing their anxieties while keeping them actively involved in normal activities, are likely to reduce their children's anxiety and somatic symptoms over time.

Overall, the Stress in Children study highlighted some important issues which continue to resonate today. While emotional health and wellbeing was increasingly becoming an active focus of health initiatives for children at the time, findings from this research suggested that many children were experiencing a significant weight of worry and anxiety which permeated their daily lives and was often overlooked. This was particularly evident for children reporting functional somatic symptoms without apparent physical cause. The robust association between such symptoms and other symptoms of anxiety suggests that somatic symptoms in children should be taken seriously as an indication of distress and of children 'talking with their bodies' (as it has been described), to say that all is not well. This study also supported the importance of listening to children's own reports of their wellbeing, and work to support them to achieve the best emotional outcomes, a common theme in research carried out by TCRU.

Contemporary wellbeing: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

We turn now to TCRU's recent work in this area, focusing on two studies examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first, conducted in 2020 focuses on primary school age children and their parents and carers. This study set out to understand child and parent perspectives on coping and wellbeing in relation to the pandemic, with quantitative survey data collected at two timepoints. In the second study, we investigated the undergraduate student experience during the academic year 2020–1, when courses were taught online and 'lockdowns' were normalised. The focus here was to understand better the variations over time and interactions between academic stress, coping and motivation and learning, and how these might impact different groups. These studies draw attention to the continuing value and relevance of understanding the effect of factors that trigger uncertainty, their potential effects, and how wellbeing and mental health for children and young people can be supported.

Coping and wellbeing in families during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Stress in Children study demonstrated that internalising symptoms were common in childhood, confirming concerns about rising levels of anxiety in children and young people. Research also highlights a growing range of stressors facing children and young people (Hickman et al., 2021). Added to these, and more recently, a global threat to wellbeing experienced by all children and young people has been the COVID-19 health crisis. During the pandemic, children and families experienced unprecedented levels of stress and associated risk (for example, Gadermann et al., 2021). The pandemic, particularly in the early months, was a time of enormous uncertainty as schools and workplaces were forced to close and parents and children had to navigate new ways of learning and working. For children and young people, the security of daily routines and regular activity were suddenly lost, along with face-to-face contacts with classmates and friends. Additionally, there was increased anxiety around health and the safety of key workers. Even after children were allowed back to school there was a need to adapt to changing rules around contact and mask wearing. In such circumstances wellbeing is closely tied to a capacity to manage in the face of adversity,

and in times of such an emergency, children's wellbeing will be inextricably linked to the wellbeing of their primary carers.

To investigate potential impacts of the pandemic on wellbeing, we undertook a small-scale study designed to capture perspectives of children and families. We sought to address four key questions:

- What coping strategies are being used by children aged 7–11 years to manage worries during the COVID-19 crisis?
- What coping strategies are being used by parents to manage worries during the COVID-19 crisis?
- What are children's perspectives on their anxiety and wellbeing during this time?
- What are parents' perspectives on children's wellbeing and coping during this time?

Data were collected during the first UK-wide lockdown (May 2020) using online questionnaires completed at home by children aged 7 to 11 years and their families (child $N = 100$, parent $N = 143$). Families were recruited via schools in London and neighbouring Essex and Hertfordshire. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on data collected from children.

Findings reflected those in previous studies, in that girls reported significantly higher levels of anxiety than boys, and they were significantly more likely to endorse maladaptive coping strategies, such as preoccupation with problems and persistence of negative feelings. There were no significant differences between boys and girls on measures of subjective wellbeing or use of adaptive coping. Higher levels of anxiety were associated with increased use of maladaptive coping strategies and decreased use of adaptive strategies. Interestingly, levels of anxiety in this sample were lower than those found in the Stress in Children study (16 per cent lower on average).

Individual strategies reported by children were differentially associated with emotional outcomes and wellbeing. Feeling able to improve a situation, constructive problem solving, belief in ability to regulate emotions, and seeing the positives, were all associated with both significantly lower anxiety and higher life-satisfaction and overall subjective wellbeing. In contrast, perseverance of negative affect and feeling helpless were significantly associated with higher anxiety, and lower life-satisfaction and overall subjective wellbeing.

Other strategies such as rumination and inability to identify sources of upset were significantly associated with higher anxiety but were not associated with overall life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing. Getting

angry in response to worries and avoidant thinking were unrelated to level of anxiety, life satisfaction or subjective wellbeing.

Children were also asked about sources of worry. While some reported worries related to the pandemic, such as not seeing friends, concerns about family members falling ill, and germs and COVID itself, others reported concerns about friendships, strangers, and parental disharmony.

In terms of wellbeing, children reported being relatively happy with all elements of their lives as measured by the *Good Childhood Index* (Rees et al., 2010), scoring on average 8.2 out of 10. On individual dimensions, less than 2 per cent scored below the midpoint on satisfaction with their home and possessions, 4 per cent on happiness with friends, family relationships, the way they spent their time, and health, and 7 per cent on satisfaction with choice in life and their future. Just over 8 per cent scored below the midpoint on satisfaction with their appearance and with their school.

In terms of life satisfaction, children were somewhat ambivalent. Around half, 46 per cent, agreed their life was going well, 44 per cent felt their life was just right, 50 per cent felt they had a good life, and 44 per cent reported having what they wanted in life. Nonetheless, 72 per cent did not wish to have a different kind of life. Overall, 11.5 per cent of children scored below the midpoint on life satisfaction, and were deemed to have low wellbeing, in line with findings from the 2021 *Good Childhood Report* and considerably lower than the 18 per cent reported in 2020 (Children's Society, 2020; 2021).

Overall, these findings suggest that children, in this sample at least, were managing to cope fairly well with the early impacts of the pandemic, and they were not reporting any unexpectedly high levels of anxiety or maladaptive coping, or negative impacts on life satisfaction or subjective wellbeing. This evidence of resilience, at least in the short term, reflects findings reported in the 2020 Department for Education *State of the Nation* report (Department for Education, 2020). It is possible that children in the age group are, to some extent, protected from some of the immediate impacts of the pandemic based on their age and position in society. Nonetheless, the findings reported here suggest that there continues to be a significant level of anxiety permeating children's lives, as there was pre-pandemic.

Coping, anxiety, learning and motivation: the CALM study

Impacts of stress and coping during the pandemic were also investigated in a population of young adults attending Higher Education (HE) colleges in the UK (see [figure 9.1](#) for a breakdown of survey participants). As in primary and secondary schools, the pandemic had a sharp impact on these HE institutions, forcing the abrupt closure and consequent sudden and immediate switch to 100 per cent online teaching and learning for many courses. As campuses closed, travel became increasingly difficult and normal day-to-day operations shut down, students were faced with very real and immediate challenges in both their personal and academic life as they made decisions about whether or not to return home – when, for many, home is overseas. In university life, the impact was felt not only in how teaching was organised and delivered but also in the student experience as a whole. Students were pushed into a situation characterised by its uncertainty and loss of expected structure and direct support from peers, academic and professional staff and services ([Plakhotnik et al., 2021](#)).

As a result, many students were studying from their family home, in different towns and countries, and often in less-than-ideal situations, with limited access to technology, sharing bedrooms with siblings and having to help with household chores. For international cohorts, these students also suddenly lost the contextual props that support negotiating study and understanding of cultural difference in a second language, alongside opportunities to extend their language skills. Students were required to maintain their own motivation to engage with recorded lectures and seminars, and to pose questions in a formal way through ‘drop ins’, fora or scheduled appointments.

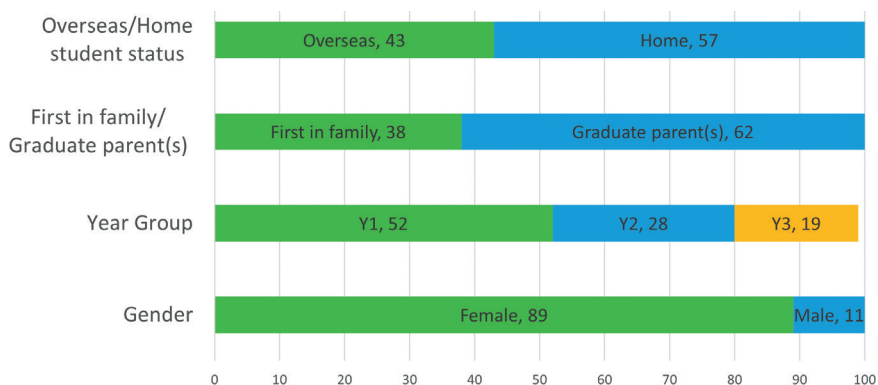


Figure 9.1 Characteristics of CALM survey sample (%). Source: Authors.

We already know that uncertainty has detrimental effect on coping (Taha et al., 2014), and on outcomes such as anxiety levels and academic performance (Masten, 2014), and the relationship between academic motivation and performance is also widely documented (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Furthermore, motivation is an indicator of eudaimonic wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2001) and is vulnerable to a range of factors linked to anxiety, learning and academic performance (for example, Pekrun et al., 2017). Students in HE have been identified as a vulnerable group in terms of mental health and wellbeing (Denovan and Macaskill, 2017) and as discussed earlier, impacts of adverse events have a cumulative effect. Likewise, the wellbeing of specific groups is also disproportionately affected by uncertainty, and so prevailing inequalities for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, minority ethnic groups, women and first-in-family students might be anticipated to be more affected. Therefore, it was to be expected that research highlighted that the pandemic was challenging in myriad ways for university students and posed a threat to both a positive learning experience and student wellbeing.

We sought to address two key questions:

1. How do young adult undergraduate students (aged 18 to 23 years) perceive their coping, learning strategies, academic motivation and academic stress across different phases of the academic year?
2. How did online learning affect certain student groups, specifically year of study and those first-in-family to attend university?

In line with TCRU tradition, we placed high importance on the participant voice to help us grasp a more detailed perspective of this experience and this was reflected in our methodology.

Using a repeated cross-sectional design we collected three waves of data from our sample of 177 students attending a single, well-resourced, UK HE institution, via online surveys across the academic year 2020/21. These surveys used adapted versions of established measures (see Table 9.1).

Open-ended questions offered participants an opportunity to share supplementary information related to the student experience of online study against the backdrop of the pandemic. Additionally, the online focus groups (between survey waves two and three) allowed us to explore quantitative findings and understand the student perspective.

Variables	Measure	Subscales
Academic stress	Perception of Academic Stress Scale (Bedewy and Gabriel, 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-perceptions • workload-related stress • performance-related stress
Coping	Profile of Coping Dimensions in Children (Quy et al., 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adaptive and maladaptive coping
Academic motivation and learning strategies	Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich et al., 1991)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intrinsic and extrinsic goal orientation • self-efficacy • self-regulation • organisation • help-seeking behaviours

Table 9.1 Measures used in the CALM study.

Findings identified several areas important to our understanding of the undergraduate learning experience: how stress, motivation and coping are affected in times of high uncertainty, and which groups may be most vulnerable to negative effects. Firstly, the second wave data (February 2021) signalled that this point in the academic year presented a crunch point for the students, with statistically significant higher levels of reported stress and lower levels of intrinsic motivation. This is an important finding in an educational context where intrinsic motivation is a consistent predictor of academic performance and is closely aligned with levels of effort and engagement based on internally driven interest. Significantly, intrinsic motivation did not recover for students who were first-in-family to attend university. It was also found that this group was statistically more likely to rely on maladaptive coping strategies, such as perseveration and rumination. Performance stress was significantly higher for year-one students, highlighting the additional pressure for new starters. As the pandemic wore on and coping strategies became more difficult to maintain, engagement often dipped sharply and students found it much more difficult to keep up with the demands of study and assessments.

Our qualitative data corroborated the finding that students became fatigued by the situation and increasingly stressed as the academic year

continued. They struggled to maintain their motivation once the novelty of the online environment wore off and the challenges of that environment set in, as this student's comment from wave-two survey data illustrates:

The first term of online teaching was interesting, like an adventure. Now I'm in a slump. The most difficult part is reading, because it takes so much motivation and sustained focus. This makes me feel like I'm building up a backlog, because I know I will eventually have to read for assessments.

There was evidence that stress was exacerbated by the social isolation of students, and the fact that they were often unable to avail of 'traditional' coping strategies to ameliorate stress, such as spending time with friends, study support with peers, direct contact with faculty and availability of student support.

'I felt like I had no reference like, am I going the right way? Is this what is expected from me?' (Student A, Focus Group 1).

'Because of like everything being online, when say something stressful happens, it feels like it can like take over your whole life because your life is like stunted at the moment' (Student B, Focus Group 2).

Students overwhelmingly voiced their feelings around waning motivation, struggles to engage online and keep up with workload. They felt keenly the loss of the academic environment and struggled with the disconnection from peers, tutors and university life. International students spoke to us about the effort to overcome language barriers and many students shared their poor mental health due to anxiety related to work, progress, finances, health and future prospects.

'It just feels like university is supposed to be this process where you kind of grow into yourself and you, like a lot of self growth and development, and like, experiences and social experiences, especially, um and it just feels like that's been put on pause and like me as a person has been put on pause' (Student C, Focus Group 2).

'I think, for me, it was a lot of sort of in the beginning, I felt like I could do things, but then, if I missed one thing, suddenly, I started missing others and it and it just became much more difficult to, to go, to keep up to feel like you are able to handle everything' (Student D, Focus Group 2).

Our findings identify a need to support student wellbeing generally, and also signify that some groups, such as those that are first-in-family to attend university, may need more targeted support to manage adverse events. The importance of adopting positive coping strategies is clear and there are indications that this may also help to buoy self-efficacy and personal growth which are key to wellbeing.

Overall, this study provided some key insights into the student experience during COVID-19, and particularly the varying impact that the shift to online learning had for different groups of students. The research also highlighted some of the challenges of working during a pandemic, as many of the issues of isolation and disconnect reported by students were mirrored in the research process itself, as we navigated the obstacles and invention of research at a distance.

Concluding reflections

We have used the studies outlined in this chapter to review some of the research into the wellbeing of children, young people and families, conducted in TCRU over the years. We have highlighted the impact of stress and anxiety on coping strategies and how these can potentially affect outcomes. Moreover, we draw attention to the changing and broadening nature of stressors and anxieties that children and young people face, and note a shift from the domestic and local potential stressors of 50 years ago to the broader and more complex potential stressors of today. One important outcome now is to address how we can ensure children and young people are growing up with the tools to manage these challenges, and to foster resilience that supports positive outcomes. We suggest that interventions designed to support both motivation and adaptive coping will be beneficial in helping children and young people achieve this. We also highlight that the inclusion of the voice and participation of children and young people is central to understanding their experience and perspective, and therefore also central to understanding what is needed in terms of intervention. Such participation was a pioneering methodological innovation when it was first introduced, and we recognise its continuing contribution and value to current research in the studies discussed here, a theme echoed in much of the work done within TCRU.

Translating these findings into policy and practice is challenging. While supporting wellbeing at the individual level can be valuable, as in current initiatives such as the Better Health – Every Mind Matters

campaign (2020), there is as yet limited evidence for the efficacy of such universal interventions (Public Health England, 2019). To fully tackle threats to wellbeing, we advocate an approach that takes into account societal and structural factors along with individual ones, as well as responsibility for addressing social problems (Price, 2017).

Looking ahead, we will continue to explore the experiences of children and young people in these contexts to ensure that recommendations reflect need. The pace of current, global instability shows no sign of slowing, and it may be of particular importance therefore to pay attention to those from already vulnerable groups who may otherwise be overwhelmed. This also takes into account the necessity to keep in mind differences between immediate and long-term impacts and the significance of cumulative effects. We anticipate that through understanding these processes, research will necessarily focus on supporting resilience in the face of the inevitable challenges ahead.

Further reading

To further explore progress in addressing health inequalities in the UK, we recommend a report commissioned by the Health Foundation, *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on*. It is available at <https://health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>. For a UK perspective on international evidence for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, see the article 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and well-being of children and young people' (Cowie and Myers, *Children and Society*, 2021), which draws on both international evidence and reports from UK charities.

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Minority stress in same-sex-parented families: extending minority-stress theory to the family level

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Introduction

Research on same-sex couples and same-sex-parented families consistently points to their continued experience of stigma, prejudice and discrimination, despite recent improvements in the social and policy climates of many countries. Building on the central focus of the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) on the wellbeing of young people and families, this area of work has become an important part of research at TCRU in recent years. Specifically, over the past two decades, TCRU scholars have been a leading force in research at the intersection of sexuality, gender, relationships and parenting in marginalised and diverse family contexts, including same-sex couples and same-sex-parented families (see, for example, [Warwick, Aggleton and Chase, 2004](#); [Chase et al., 2006](#); [LeBlanc, Frost and Wight, 2015](#); [Frost, 2020](#); [Frost, Fingerhut and Meyer, 2022](#); [Zadeh, Imrie and Golombok, 2021](#)). Minority-stress theory is the predominant model in the social sciences used to guide research into the implications of stigma for the wellbeing of sexual-minority and gender-minority individuals. Couple-level minority-stress (CLMS) theory was developed to explain the impact of stigma on the wellbeing of same-sex couples. However, the theory does not account for the experiences of stigma within same-sex-parented families and its implications for the wellbeing of parents and children.

This chapter extends CLMS theory to the family level. Drawing on data from a qualitative longitudinal study of Brazilian same-sex couples and their children, we illustrate CLMS experiences and processes in how the wellbeing of families is shaped by cultural, social and economic factors, as well as by the particularities of the historic moment in which they are inserted. Specifically, this work is linked to the international collaboration between TCRU and University of São Paulo, Brazil, through research visits hosted by TCRU. We illustrate the role of increased visibility of same-sex-parented families in Brazil – a recent social reality permeated by controversy – which creates unique family-level experiences of minority stress related to prejudice and discrimination. The new familial minority-stress theory offered in this chapter is a useful tool to generate new research questions and guide further research in social-scientific investigations into the legitimation and acceptance of the plurality of family forms existing in the context of rapid social and policy change.¹

Same-sex couples and their children

Changes in the configuration of family structure and functioning throughout history have continually expanded the meaning of family as a social institution (Ariès, 1965; Lévi-Strauss, 1969). The emergence of multiple and varied family arrangements should not be understood, necessarily, as resulting from a crisis in the family as a social institution, but rather as reflections of the recurrent changes that drive society and modify the conceptions of dominant values and the way in which family life is experienced and understood (Roudinesco, 2003; Golombok, 2022). From this perspective, the family pluralism that characterises the present day can be understood as ‘the result of a profound transformation of gender relations and the emergence of a new balance between individual autonomy and family belonging’ (Peixoto, 2007: 12). Thus, the definition of family is not something that is ‘naturally’ predetermined, but rather it is determined by sociocultural, political and economic aspects of a time, which impose variations in its dynamics and structure (Badinter, 1981; Singly, 2007).

We are witnessing the emergence of several family forms that distance themselves from the ‘traditional’ model – usually defined by the monogamous marriage between cisgender and heterosexual individuals with biological children. One such new family form is characterised by same-sex couples and their children (Costa, Pereira and Leal, 2012; Gomes, 2018). The beginning of the scientific literature on lesbian and

gay parenting dates back to the mid-1970s (Golombok, Spencer and Rutter, 1983; Gato and Fontaine, 2014). Studies conducted in a range of different contexts have shown that families formed by same-sex couples and their children share features and functions with any other type of family arrangement, such as: care, responsibility and challenges in child rearing; the planning of budget and daily routines; leisure time, among others (Gato, 2014; Goldberg and Gartrell, 2014; Rosa et al., 2016; Golombok, 2022).

Golombok (2022) argues that if the child has a father or a mother, or both, if they recognise themselves as men and/or women, if the spouses are of the same or opposite sex, if the child was conceived naturally or through assisted human reproduction, these characteristics are less relevant to the child than the quality of the family relationship and the support received from the society in which they live. In a complementary way, Crouch, McNair and Waters (2016) reveal that family stability, quality of the (marital) relationship, family income and region of residence are important factors for the health and wellbeing of children, regardless of the sexual orientations of parental couples. Research carried out in several countries shows that children of heterosexual and same-sex couples do not have significant differences in terms of cognitive development, gender roles, gender identity, psychological wellbeing or sexual preferences. In this sense, regarding the parent–child relationship, same-sex couples showed better relationships with their children when compared to heterosexual couples (Crowl, Ahn and Baker, 2008; Fedewa, Black and Ahn, 2015; Golombok, 2022).

Same-sex-parented families and their children in Brazil

In May 2011, the Brazilian Supreme Court declared the recognition of the civil partnership for same-sex couples, thus legally legitimising them as a family entity in Brazilian society. Two years after this event, in May 2013, during the 169th plenary session of the National Council of Justice, the resolution enabling the celebration of civil marriage, or the conversion of a stable union into marriage for same-sex couples, was approved (Conselho Nacional de Justiça, 2013). Therefore, this contemporary interpretation of the current legislation of the Brazilian Constitution allows same-sex couples the possibility of civil marriage, safeguarding their human, civil, social and political rights (Tombolato, 2019). Such facts consolidate a milestone in the achievement of the rights of the LGBTQIA+² population. In the daily lives of these couples and families, it

means a legal support that can contribute both to changes in the view of these families' configurations, and to curb prejudice, discrimination and violence (Tombolato et al., 2018). Brazilian legislation, in this regard, met the need to adapt to changes in society, considering the dynamic and complex dimension of social and family relationships.

Most studies in Brazil that deal with families formed by same-sex couples follow a qualitative approach and started around the 2000s (Tarnovski, 2002; Uziel, 2002; Santos, 2004). Many authors regard these families as a recent occurrence in the Brazilian scene, and argue that their members are often faced with manifestations of discrimination and prejudice in a range of social contexts – schools, churches, and workplaces (Lira, Morais and Boris, 2016; Tombolato et al., 2018; Tombolato, Maia and Santos, 2019). These characteristics affect, for instance, the aura of invisibility that still looms over same-sex-parented families.

The literature review carried out by Silva, Sousa and Fernandes-Eloi (2017) reveals that empirical research on same-sex couples in the Brazilian context is still scarce, with few references in the national context to guide and steer, for example, preventive and/or intervention programmes. This has also hindered the development of specific public policies focused on understanding and addressing the social factors that contribute to the wellbeing of same-sex couples and their children in Brazil. More research is needed also to build knowledge of same-sex-parented families within wider education in psychology and related areas, which in turn will improve the training of professionals in healthcare, education, law and other fields (Oliveira, 2011; Machin, 2016). Based on the prerogatives of a plural society that respects differences, the dissemination of scientific research in this area should be conducive to new ways of thinking that can change prejudicial and marginalising attitudes toward diverse family forms. Among the many issues considered to discriminate against the legitimacy of new family forms, in Brazil there is still prejudice against and social stigmatisation of non-heterosexual sexual orientations (Grossi, Uziel and Mello, 2007; Tombolato et al., 2018; Tombolato, 2019; Ribeiro and Granato, 2021). As same-sex couples and their families gain rights and visibility, they consequently experience stressors that have yet to be conceptualised.

In June 2019, the Brazilian Supreme Court established that homophobia and transphobia belong to the article of law that criminalises racism. The data from this process showed that the LGBTQIA+ population is vulnerable and exposed to hateful acts without effective protection from the state. Thus, homophobic and transphobic conduct can be equated with crimes of racism, considering the fundamental rights and

guarantees of victims and accused persons, as well as the constitutionally provided legislative process for the establishment of new criminal offences. Despite this advance in the Brazilian legal field, in social reality, ideological and prejudiced practices persist (Tombolato, 2019).

The Global Dialogues for Sexual Health and Well-Being, developed in collaboration with TCRU (Ford Foundation, 2009), aimed to provide greater visibility, depth and legitimacy to work in the field of sexuality. The report already pointed out the difficulties and challenges of working in this area – despite some advances in the legislation of some nations, the potency of certain conservative political and religious ideals persists in different contexts. As the report suggests, for the consolidation of a more plural society where human rights fully prevail, one of the ways is to build a solid base of knowledge – research and publications, fostering and expanding partnerships between research and society, both nationally and internationally.

Research is needed in the Brazilian context, which identifies the stress experiences of same-sex families and their children, in order to understand how social stigma affects the health and wellbeing of diverse family forms, and how they cope with these social stressors (Frost et al., 2017).

Minority-stress theory: individual and couple levels

Meyer's (2003) minority-stress framework illustrates the ways in which sexual-minority individuals experience social stress, stemming from their disadvantaged and stigmatised status in society relative to heterosexuals. Specifically, the minority-stress framework identifies how stressors in the form of prejudice, discrimination, expectation of rejection, concealment and internalised homophobia represent a unique and additive stress burden, which places sexual-minority individuals at greater risk for negative mental-health outcomes, relative to their heterosexual peers, who do not experience these forms of minority stress. Since its publication, the minority-stress framework has become one of the most cited frameworks for the study of sexual-minority health and wellbeing (for example, Hoy-Ellis, 2021).

Researchers have since noted how the framework could be expanded, to understand how same-sex couples experience minority stress and its impact on their mental health and relational wellbeing. Specifically, the couple-level minority-stress theory (LeBlanc, Frost and Wight, 2015) notes how same-sex couples experience unique forms of minority stress that cannot be reduced to their experiences as

sexual-minority individuals. For example, same-sex couples experience minority stress related to limitations to their participation in their families of origin (Frost et al., 2017). A married gay man may be invited to attend a family Christmas gathering, but only if he comes alone, without his husband. This man does not experience limitations to participation in this family event because of his individual sexual-orientation identity, but rather because of his relationship status as a partner in a same-sex couple.

Research shows that there is a unique burden of couple-level minority stress on mental health for members of same-sex couples, above and beyond the impact of the minority stress they experience as individuals (LeBlanc and Frost, 2020). However, just as sexual-minority individuals can be resilient in the face of individual-level minority stress, same-sex couples might engage couple-level resilience resources and coping strategies to resist the negative impact of couple-level minority stress on their health and relationships (Stewart, Frost and LeBlanc, 2019).

Developing a family-level minority-stress theory: theoretical–methodological trajectory

Although the couple-level minority-stress model has informed research and policy focused on better understanding the social factors that shape the wellbeing of same-sex couples (for example, LeBlanc and Frost, 2020), the experiences of minority stress within the context of same-sex-parented families remain under-theorised and in need of a guiding framework. When people become part of a same-sex couple, they become vulnerable to unique minority stressors at the couple level that are not reducible to their experiences as sexual-minority individuals (Frost et al., 2017). When same-sex couples become parents, their experiences of minority stress are not reducible to the individual or couple levels and require attention to stress experiences within the broader context of the family, including relational experiences of stress shared between parents and children. In other words, when same-sex couples have children, forming a family, they become vulnerable to unique minority stressors at the family level that are distinct from their experiences as individuals and as same-sex couples. Namely, family-level minority stressors may be experienced by individual members, jointly by couples or families as a result of the stigmatised status of their sexual orientations and/or family relationships.

In our attempts to develop a family-level minority-stress framework to guide future research on same-sex-parented families in Brazil, we adapted the previously described couple-level minority-stress framework

(Frost et al., 2017) through an ongoing longitudinal qualitative study of same-sex parents and their children in Brazil.

The longitudinal qualitative character of the data in this chapter comes from two distinct moments of data collection. First, the data collected in 2016 with four families formed by gay and lesbian couples and their children, resulted in a doctoral thesis (Tombolato, 2019). The interviews were conducted personally by the researcher, in the cities that each of the families inhabited.

As previously mentioned, families formed by same-sex couples and their children are a recent phenomenon in Brazilian society. The members of these families often live with experiences of discrimination and prejudice across varied social contexts. Among these and other factors, the researchers highlight the complexity of locating and contacting this segment of the population. Thus, sampling and recruitment for the present study relied on searches on the internet, contact through other researchers who work with the subject, and dissemination through the researchers' social network. In this sense, contact with families did not take place within the scope of institutions or organisations through which they could maintain a direct connection (such as schools or hospitals).

Eleven families that met the criteria for selection and inclusion of participants in this study were located and contacted. It is important, in this regard, to recognise some adversities encountered when willing to investigate a phenomenon that is still infrequent and yet visible in Brazilian society: locating, contacting, receiving acceptance from the participants (unanimous agreement of family members), and collecting data. Therefore, of the 11 potential families that the researcher contacted, four actually participated in the study. They come from the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro, which belong to the Southeast Region of Brazil.

In the second wave of data collection, the same four families were interviewed in 2021, in line with the objective that refers to the study of family dynamics and changes over time in the lives of same-sex couples and their children. At this time, the interviews were conducted virtually, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection was carried out with the presence and joint participation of family members. An online meeting was held with each of the four families and the researcher interviewed couples and their children simultaneously.

For data collection, these techniques were applied: (1) participant identification form, to obtain general data on participants, such as age, gender, education level, professional activity and family income; and (2) semi-structured interview, covering topics such as the family and its

dynamics (marital, parental and filial), families of origin, experiences after the first data collection (in 2016) and about the COVID-19 pandemic.

To carry out the analysis of the results, the data were first transcribed in Brazilian Portuguese. Next, researchers identified reports of experiences of minority stress within the context of same-sex-parented families as the primary unit of analysis. These quotations were then translated into English and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Our approach to analysis involved both deductive and inductive elements. We started with previous iterations of the minority-stress model, as described above (Meyer, 2003; Frost et al., 2017), but allowed for the identification of elements of the minority-stress experiences of parents and children to emerge from the analysis, that were not accounted for in previous articulations of the theory. The analysis identified 11 concepts, which were extended to family level in participants' narratives of their lived experiences:

1. fears of rejection, devaluation and discrimination;
2. experiences of rejection, devaluation and discrimination;
3. internalised stigma;
4. coming out as a same-sex couple/family;
5. seeking safety and community;
6. not being perceived as a couple/family;
7. having children or not;
8. navigating benefits for same-sex couples;
9. limitations to participation in family;
10. managing stereotypes of what same-sex couples/families are like;
11. feeling public scrutiny.

In addition to these forms of minority stress, our analysis also focused on resilience.

In the remainder of this chapter, we present an abbreviated account of these findings, along with participants' narratives, as an illustration of the utility of a family-level minority-stress framework for understanding the experiences of same-sex-parented families in Brazil. Specifically, we focus on concepts 2 and 11 from the list above (experiences of rejection, devaluation and discrimination; feeling public scrutiny) and also on resilience. Participants often discussed these themes in ways that illustrated their intertwined and mutually constitutive nature in lived experiences, and thus we do not separate these themes.

Experiences of family-level minority stress within same-sex-parented families in Brazil

Considering the members of the couples are lesbian women and gay men, they commented on the difficulties of acceptance by their families of origin. Participants reported experiences of suffering and difficulties arising from the fact that their families of origin did not accept them because they were lesbian/gay and because they were members of a same-sex-parented family. Currently, after years of living together as stable couples, most family members accept them. In other words, the intolerance and discrimination faced within the families of origin, caused by the non-acceptance of sexual orientation, has been modified over time, due to the fact that these men who love other men and these women who love other women have established themselves as socially competent families: 'Having a child is seen as an important step in the recognition and affirmation of the built family, including enabling a (re)approximation with their families of origin, when the discovery of sexuality would have caused distances' (Machin, 2016: 358).

Thus, as an example of the concept of 'experiences of rejection, devaluation and discrimination', it can be observed when Bogart, a father, reports on the prejudice the family experienced in relation to his partner's family of origin: 'It was a lot of rejection, I even heard from Paulo's brother that it [a gay relationship] was shameful. Nowadays his brother welcomes me at home'. Paulo then comments: 'We had been together for almost five years that she [Paulo's mother] started to accept me, little by little my sisters; some who accepted us were already showing that, and she [Paulo's mother] began to understand. I was letting Rodrigo [their son] approach her'. Bogart had already adopted Rodrigo when he met Paulo. From the beginning of the couple's relationship, the three already lived together as a family. Paulo's mother took years to accept Bogart and Rodrigo as Paulo's new family.

In this way, the couples in the present study recognise that they have achieved social legitimacy by performing the parental role and making it visible through their public exposure of the role. However, the participants also mention that certain people from their respective families of origin are still reluctant to accept them because they are same-sex parents, even though they are married and live in a nuclear-family configuration, maintained by a way of life based on conservative value standards. The study conducted by Santos and Bruns (2006) showed that prejudice in families of origin tends to be minimised with the experience

of living closely with families that differ from the heteronormative pattern. Results from other studies indicate that ‘among the problems faced by homosexual couples is the difficulty of family acceptance, as they do not have normative rituals, as well as marriage’ (Rodrigues and Carmo, 2013: 19). However, the present study demonstrates data that contradict this finding, since the interviewed couples, even being under the respectability of the institution of marriage, continue to face prejudice from some family members due to their same-sex-parented families.

Accordingly, the experiences of prejudice from society and families of origin are, in different ways, part of the daily life of these families of same-sex couples and their children. Participants experienced situations of prejudice and discrimination in the work environment, as well as with family and friends, at school and on social media. So, another example of the concept of ‘experiences of rejection, devaluation and discrimination’, can be considered when Gabriela, a daughter of a lesbian couple, comments on the harassment and discrimination she experienced at school: ‘They [classmates] still made fun of me, “Oh, Gabriela ... you bitch, the daughter of a dyke”. I joined in the fun, because if I got nervous, it was worse ... There were days when I couldn’t study, I was shaking from crying so much. There were times when I even had to go home. But there were always people supporting me’. That is, Gabriela was the target of discrimination not because of her individual characteristics, but because her mothers are lesbians.

These situations were also configured in different ways, from direct discriminatory actions through acts of psychological and moral violence, as mentioned by Gabriela in the context of her relationship with schoolmates, to actions understood as veiled, in which discrimination and/or prejudice appeared in a subtle way, as, for example, in the expression of disapproving looks. An example of the concept of ‘feeling public scrutiny’ can be seen when Gabriela says: ‘Prejudice is everywhere. Like, if I’m going to a party with my mom. Then people stop, stare, you know? And start talking to each other. Then I get a little embarrassed, I don’t leave the venue’. This situation experienced by Gabriela is understood as stress at the family level. She felt public scrutiny once people knew she is the daughter of lesbians. Once again, Gabriela was a victim of prejudice for living in a family of lesbian mothers.

Another two examples of the concept of ‘experiences of rejection, devaluation and discrimination’ can be seen when Tulipa says: ‘my son couldn’t play with the neighbours, because he was the son of two women ... When my son went outside to play, everyone collected their children ... he was physically attacked by the children of the neighbourhood’. Américo,

Tulipa's wife, describes that a child held Torquato (her son) while another child beat him. Thus, according to Tulipa's view: 'the child had no evil, who taught this to the children? The families, the parents'. In interviews with the social worker for the adoption process, Cláudio reports: 'she asked: "but how is it going to be? Aren't you afraid of the child seeing that you're homosexual, and the child, suddenly, suffering some retaliation at school?"', and I said to her, "I don't know how it's going to be"'.

These data confirm the results of previous research (Tombolato et al., 2018), in which it was found that the prejudices experienced by the participants were directed to their ways of living, as out same-sex-parented families, challenging social conventions and gender stereotypes. Manifestations of prejudice and intolerance, in different forms and shades, were identified in the daily lives of the families.

Family narratives also illustrated resilience in the face of minority stress, operating at the family level in their lived experiences of the Brazilian context. These forms of resilience can be understood in light of Corrigan and Matthews' (2003) three ways to transform public stigma (that is, an objective characteristic that receives a negative social valuation): protest, education and contact. Briefly, the protests highlight the injustice of a specific stigma, pointing out, through the bias of morality, that people change their conceptions about the phenomenon in question. Education, in turn, focuses on replacing myths and beliefs with facts that contradict them. This type of strategy can lead to little change. Contact has been studied as the best way to change stereotypes and prejudices. Contact effects are understood in terms of familiarity, that is, the change in attitudes results from contact that is maintained over time and is related to a change in behaviour. For example, contact between gays and heterosexuals has lessened stigmatising attitudes about gays among heterosexual people. Thus, 'coming out' (coming out lesbian/gay socially) is seen as an essential way to facilitate visibility and contact and has significant value in the process to reduce the stigma experienced by gays and lesbians. An example of the concept of 'resilience' can be seen when Tulipa recommends: 'you have to act against prejudice, not fighting, you know?' Thus, according to Américo, it is like this: 'the person begins to know you', and 'you showing that you are not different, that you are not a mysterious creature'. The couple reports that the fight against prejudice is a process. They have to constantly demonstrate to society that they are not abnormal. 'Although' they are lesbians, they are legally married, they have given birth to a child by artificial insemination and have raised him 'normally'. The family is adapted to social values.

On the other hand, the families mentioned that there was support from the school, as an institution, through staff and teachers with a more welcoming, tolerant and inclusive attitude towards their same-sex-parented families. In other words, the participants understand the school institution as a source of support and therefore acting as a resilience resource. Nevertheless, in a study conducted in the United States in order to analyse children's behavioural adaptation and their school experiences, data were collected from 96 gay fathers and lesbian mothers, their 50 adopted children, and 48 teachers. The results revealed that although there is support from the school around families, children of lesbians and gays may experience specific difficulties in the school context, arising from their family structures (Farr, Oakley and Ollen, 2016). Tannuri (2017) indicates that in the school environment there are tensions between acceptance and discrimination in relation to families of same-sex couples, which can originate from a variety of actors within the educational environment (staff, teachers and students). This shows how much prejudice is still in force in the collective environment, including in institutions that should be at the forefront of social criticism, questioning gender and sexual-orientation codes and stereotypes, and dictating more flexible and plural norms.

Another example of the family-level-resilience concept can be considered when Tulipa comments:

'since he was a little boy, having to keep explaining that we were different than people, than society in general, we had a family, we had a slightly, a little different background, but that there were other families in the same situation as us. So, having to have this complicity with him since he was very young, so there's this relationship, you know? Of complicity, of talking about everything.'

When considering that her son could face social challenges because he was a member of a same-sex family, Tulipa had to explain to him that their way of being a family was different from most families. However, the participant also told her son that there were other families just like them. Due to the need to have to talk openly since the child was little, the family developed a great complicity between the members.

Concluding reflections

Minority-stress theory argues that sexual-minority people experience specific stressors due to their stigmatised status, on top of the everyday stressors that people experience, regardless of their sexual orientation. Health inequalities can be explained in large part by stressors induced by heterosexist and homophobic culture, which often results in chronic experiences of harassment, maltreatment, discrimination and victimisation. Considering that same-sex relationships and, consequently, their families, are devalued and called into question by society, they may face challenges and difficulties individually or jointly (couple and family) because their ways of living are stigmatised.

Research in Brazil has demonstrated that same-sex-parented families are faced with difficulty and prejudice in various contexts, differently from families parented by cisgender and heterosexual individuals. Focusing on the Brazilian context, this chapter identified the minority-stress experiences of same-sex families and their children, and sheds light on how social stigma may shape their lived experiences, social relationships and wellbeing. This study also provides an illustration of how same-sex-parented families attempt to exercise resilience in the face of these social stressors.

In doing so, the chapter offers some initial insight into the family-level experiences of minority stress, thereby offering an extension of the minority-stress model to the family level. We suggest the need for a new familial minority-stress theory, as illustrated by the lived experiences shared in the chapter, which has the potential to serve as a useful tool to generate new research questions, and to encourage and guide the development of research on same-sex-parented families and their wellbeing. As many countries, like Brazil, are undergoing periods of rapid social change regarding the legality and acceptance of same-sex-parented families, research evidence makes clear these families continue to experience stigma and related social stressors. A family-level understanding of minority-stress processes and their impact on the wellbeing of parents and children will therefore be of importance to researchers, clinicians and policymakers for the foreseeable future.

Further reading

For an overview of research with families formed by same-sex couples and their children in Brazil, demonstrating their characteristics and challenges, we suggest two articles: ‘O processo de construção e a experiência da parentalidade em casais homossexuais’ [‘The structuring process and the experience of parenthood in same-sex couples’] (Araldi and Serralta, *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa*, 2019) <https://doi.org/10.1590/0102.3772e35nspe1>; and ‘A vivência da parentalidade por casais homossexuais: Revisão sistemática de teses e dissertações’ [‘The experience of parenthood by homosexual couples: Systematic review of dissertations and theses’] (Santos and Bossi, *Pensando Famílias*, 2022) http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1679-494X2022060000011&lng=pt&nrm=iso.

The book *Modern Families: Parents and children in new family forms* (Golombok, Cambridge University Press, 2015) offers in-depth reading on research with same-sex-parented families; while the book chapter ‘LGBTQ-parent families in non-Western contexts’ (*LGBTQ-parent Families*, Costa and Shenkman, Springer, 2020) gives a specific view on studies with LGBTQ-parented families in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and South America. Finally, for an overview of the couple-level minority-stress framework and initial evidence for its utility in same-sex couples, see ‘Minority stress and stress proliferation among same-sex and other marginalized couples’ (LeBlanc, Frost and Wight, 2015), and ‘Couple-level minority stress: An examination of same-sex couples’ unique experiences’ (Frost et al., 2017).

Notes

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- 2 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromatic/agender, plus others.

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Life-course transitions and global migration: conceptual reflections on the biographical trajectories of young African migrants in Italy

Michela Franceschelli

Introduction

In general, the pathways of transitioning to adulthood vary considerably across and within societies and are influenced by socio-economic, cultural and institutional contexts. Transitions to adulthood are particularly challenging for young migrants. Research at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) has long focused on young people, wellbeing and inclusion and this extends increasingly to a focus on young migrants, in particular how policy and practice in malfunctioning asylum systems are causing further harm. This chapter considers a particular case-study approach for better understanding pathways to adulthood for young migrants.

The idea of a normative adulthood – intended as a linear sequence of passages between key stages, starting with completing education, finding work and achieving financial independence, leaving the parental home and eventually forming a family – has been contested within life-course studies (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). In the latter part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, traditional markers of adulthood have been reconceptualised by the tensions which see them – on one hand – as being increasingly structured and so shaped by the intersections of gender, class and race, ethnicity and culture (Grabska, De

Regt and Del Franco, 2018), but – on the other hand – also more individualised (Arnett, 2007), delayed, disorderly and reversible (for example, Biggart and Walther, 2006). Research from the Global South has particularly questioned the ethnocentric character of normative transitions by emphasising how life course is shaped by the institutional fabric, culture and history and by the global interdependencies that define the relationships between countries and economies (Juárez et al., 2013; Grabska, De Regt and Del Franco, 2018). Based on research in Mozambique, South Africa, Senegal and Tunisia, Honwana argues that the idea of ‘waithood’ could play a role in reshaping the conceptual framework of adulthood and related processes of coming of age. In this context, waithood is defined as a liminal space – ‘a neither here nor there state’ – and so a period of suspension which causes an involuntary delay in reaching a state of adulthood (Honwana, 2012: 3–4).

This chapter reflects on the life-course transitions of young African migrants in the context of deepening global inequalities, increasing migration flows to Europe and the crisis of the European migration and asylum regimes. Drawing on fieldwork conducted on the Italian island of Lampedusa, the chapter particularly focuses on the experiences of one young African migrant – Momodou – within the malfunctioning, highly bureaucratic and policing-led Italian asylum system, with implications for the unfolding of his life-course transitions. Through Momodou’s journey within this system, the chapter seeks to make sense of the complex relation between time, asylum systems and migrants’ life-course transitions. It therefore explores whether the concept of ‘waithood’ – a prolonged and uncertain state between childhood and adulthood – can offer an alternative to normative understandings of linear transitions to adulthood while providing insights into young Africans’ experiences of spending a long time navigating exclusionary migration and asylum regimes.

Life-course transitions within European asylum regimes: ‘waithood’ as a new state of adulthood?

The so called ‘refugee and migration crisis’ and the deaths at sea (McMahon and Sigona, 2020) have evidently put into question ideas about ‘hospitable’ European countries and instead highlighted the duress and ineffectiveness of European migration and asylum regimes (Pastore and Henry, 2016; Stierl, 2020). In this context, young asylum seekers and refugees find themselves growing up within precarious and unstable legal and institutional frameworks (Chase, 2020; see also Chapter 8 in this

volume), which often withdraw support from individuals as they reach the age of legal adulthood. This threshold also defines boundaries between deservingness and undeservingness of children versus young adults (Marchetti, 2020; Wernesjö, 2020). Literature about unaccompanied migrant minors evidences the range of challenges these young people face (Rania et al., 2014) when trying to navigate the complexity between family expectations back home, a search for independence and the asylum system they find themselves in. The case of young unaccompanied Afghan migrants suggests that their arrival to the UK becomes connected to hopes for new possibilities about their present and future: ‘to study, to enjoy life, to travel, to have fun, to become a different self’ (Meloni, 2020: 433, see also Chapter 12 in this volume).

But, as we shall see, for older migrants in their twenties, such as Momodou, these aspirations come together with a strong sense of duty and responsibility to provide for the family and prove the accomplishment of a successful migration project particularly marked by financial and housing independence. These desires for independence and self-governance also develop in the context of neoliberal policies promoting ideas of straightforward transitions to socio-economic adulthood and holding hard-working and self-sufficient individuals as those responsible for effecting them (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008). The implications of these policies and ideas lead to a ‘moral breakdown’ (Meloni, 2020) triggered by young migrants’ incapacity for handling multiple pressures: family expectations, a sense of self-responsibility and the institutional restrictions placed by asylum and migration regimes.

Yet, within the uncertainty set out by this liminality, young migrants tend to maintain a sense of hope and possibility, to finally make a viable life (Meloni, 2020). Based on research in different African countries, Honwana (2012: 3–4) defines this liminal space as a state of ‘waithood’, a life-course state causing an involuntary delay in reaching the socio-economic adulthood destinations. ‘Waithood’, according to Honwana (2012), helps to make sense of the changing nature of the life course in light of young people’s increasingly precarious working, social and personal lives.

The concept of waithood has been used widely in studies of youth in the Global South to define a new state in young people’s life course. Writing about young people in the Middle East, Dhillon and Yousef (2011) spoke about ‘a generation in waiting’ facing challenges that are different from those of previous generations whose transitions to adulthood were more easily mediated by family, community and welfare. From the 1980s onwards, Dhillon and Yousef argue that these patterns have started

weakening, making life-course transitions in the Middle East increasingly more uncertain. Researching delayed marriage in Egypt, Singerman (2007: 7) explains how young Egyptians have been forced to put their lives on hold: 'In a similar vein, many young people in Egypt and throughout the region experience a "wait adulthood" or "waithood" as they negotiate their prolonged adolescence and remain single for long periods of time while trying to save money to marry'. According to Singerman, waithood is the 'liminal world' (Singerman, 2007: 7) that bridges childhood and adulthood and that extends youth dependence on family.

In a different context, Batan's (2012) research with Filipino youth refers to their interruption of the coming-of-age process as 'istambay', a colloquial term that derives from the English phrase 'on standby'. Youth on 'istambay' are 'not transitioning into adults' mostly because of lacking access to education and difficulties with finding work (Batan 2012: 103) with implications for being perceived as 'lazy' and leading to low self-esteem (Batan, 2012: 124). Schwarz's (2017) analysis of Moroccan unemployed graduates has a critical take on the concept of waithood. Schwarz (2017: 375) argues that even though waithood addresses important issues related to the life course of young people in the area, it also equally promotes stereotypes of an 'economically passive and politically lethargic 'victim youth'. Jeffrey's (2010) analysis of unemployed lower-middle-class young men in the Indian city of Meerut captures another dimension of how socio-economic circumstances affect the timing of young people's transitions. Jeffrey explains how years of neoliberal economic policies have unsettled these young people's experiences of time, by failing to create salaried jobs while also impoverishing educational opportunities and so pushing them into a state of 'timepassing' (Jeffrey, 2010: 473).

However, these readings of the nature of transitions to adulthood may run the risk of making an erroneous reduction of the complexity of the life course by reiterating a sense of normative linearity. Honwana (2012) suggests that waithood is a prolonged state toward adulthood, but not a passive one and so it is characterised by the active struggles of young people to make a living within challenging contextual circumstances. Indeed, her research participants in the four African countries accomplished different markers of adulthood: some had children, but then struggled to provide and look after them; they became independent but only just about survived on low-paid and precarious work; others attempted difficult migration to reach financial security. Amid these considerations, rather than a type of 'failed transitions' or a 'deviant' case, Honwana argues that waithood could be read as a long-term condition

which defines a new form of precarious state toward adulthood in the context of the Global South but with wider implications for youth in the Global North (Honwana, 2012: 37).

Relevant to this chapter, Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi (2022) reflect more specifically on the life-course biographies of irregular migrants and asylum seekers and how their time is consumed by long-lasting bureaucratic procedures set out by migration and asylum regimes. Temporal insecurity is a marker of migration and asylum seeking and 'waiting' presents a new analytical perspective able to make sense of the 'shifting nature of bordering, belonging, state power, exclusion and inclusion' (Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi, 2022: 2) typical of current migration processes and practice.

This chapter particularly explores the effects of the asylum and migration institutional system on the life-course transitions of young African migrants in Italy. In so doing, it also seeks to understand whether a liminal state of waithood can help with the development of new notions of adulthood which reflect the precarity and instability of these young people's and young adults' circumstances.

The context: the Italian asylum system

The socio-institutional and political context of the receiving countries is a significant factor influencing young migrants' opportunities to achieve socio-economic adulthood but also adult identities in their wider sense. Applying for asylum is currently the only legal route for migrants originally from the Global South to avoid immediate repatriation once they reach Italy. Access to housing, healthcare and basic training is provided for asylum seekers waiting for their claims to be processed, and refugees who have been granted international protection in line with international law, including European Union (EU) Directives (Marchetti and Franceschelli, 2021). In Italy, asylum seekers have the right to work from 60 days after they present their claim to the Italian authorities. However, as this empirical case suggests, the challenges that they face in finding work are many: lack of credentials, skills, qualifications or experience are substantial barriers that add to the main structural obstacles which characterise the poorly performing, exclusionary and highly racialised Italian labour market. Many migrants and asylum seekers in Italy are only able to find employment in the informal, more precarious often exploitative low-paid sectors (Chiaromonte and Federico, 2021).

Making migration illegal is widely discussed by scholarship (for example, [Anderson and Ruhs, 2010](#)), as well as the related distinction between economic migrants and refugees and their distinctive deservingness to legal status and state support ([Marchetti, 2020](#)). In Italy, since its outset in the 1990s with the Martelli Law, when migration became more central to the Italian policy agenda, the Italian legislation and asylum and refugee systems have been driven by a rationale intending to control and police, which is reflected in the characteristics of the service provision ([Giudici, 2020](#); [Marchetti and Franceschelli, 2021](#)). This need to control illegal migration has been reinforced by the ‘Bossi-Fini’ law of 2002, which introduced the legal requirement of a ‘residence contract’ for non-EU migrants wanting to enter Italy. The contract sets out the requirement for accommodation and the employers’ commitment to the payment of travel expenses for the workers to eventually return to their country of origin. Importantly, the Bossi-Fini law established that the lack of this contract must be treated as a criminal offence, leading to migrants being outlawed and repatriated. Inevitably, the Bossi-Fini law closed doors to non-EU migrant workers and made seeking asylum the only lawful way to reach Italy (and Europe) without being immediately repatriated.

In 2018, these policy trends toward the criminalisation and illegalisation of migrants fed into the ‘Immigration and Security Decree’ (or Salvini Decree) issued by then head of the Ministry of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right Lega party. The decree aimed to drastically reduce the numbers of residency permits issued on humanitarian grounds by abolishing the ‘humanitarian protection’ – a special type of protection granted in Italy to asylum seekers who do not qualify for international protection. From 2008–17 more than 100,000 asylum seekers in Italy were granted residency based on humanitarian protection (see [Marchetti and Franceschelli, 2020](#)) and saw their status put into question by the Salvini decree, while many new claims were rejected. Today, the decree has been mostly overtaken by newer legislation, but the rationale behind it has continued to increase public support for the criminalisation of economic migrants and their being perceived as undeserving.

The current service provision for asylum seekers and refugees in Italy reflects this legal context and is two-tiered. Primary services consist of hotspots or CAS (*Centri di Accoglienza Straordinari* / Emergency Reception Centres) focused on identification, the first stage of processing of asylum claims, and on the delivery of basic and immediate support or repatriation. They are short-term and emergency led but – due to the increasing numbers of claimants – they have become sites of prolonged

stay for asylum-seekers, in some cases for months or even years after their arrival. Within these services, the ‘hotspots’ have specifically been conceived as the EU response to increasing numbers of migrants and their aim is to enforce migrants’ identification, fingerprinting and initiate the processes of claiming asylum. Lampedusa’s hotspot is a case in point, with the delays and malfunctioning of these services. By contrast, ‘secondary provision’ – delivered in partnership by local authorities and third-sector agencies – is only aimed at those who have already received some form of protection (such as humanitarian or subsidiary) and to refugees. This complex institutional environment (Giudici, 2020), subjected to constant changes and revisions, creates the preconditions for a prolonged ‘waithood’ with implications for the life-course transitions and life opportunities of young men and women left lingering in the system waiting for the claims to be processed, often for several years.

Reflections from an empirical case: Momodou’s waithood, the legal status and life-course transitions

The population of refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants ‘waiting’ in refugee camps, asylum reception and detention centres and at border crossings has proliferated (Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi, 2022). In Italy, the specific role of the asylum system in pushing young migrants into long-term states of ‘waithood’ is exemplified by the journey of a young African man – Momodou – from when he arrived in the hotspot of Lampedusa to his last placement in a migration centre in Northern Italy. This case is based on ethnographic research and interviews (see Franceschelli, 2020) conducted on the island – which was also disseminated via a film documentary (Franceschelli and Galipò, 2021) – exploring the everyday concerns of the local community, and so shifting attention away from migration as a global issue to examine its effects on a local level (Franceschelli and Galipò, 2020).

Lampedusa is a small island 200 km from the southern coast of Sicily and 70 km from Tunisia, with a total resident population of 6,572 and a surface area of only 25 square km. Over the past 20 years, the island has acquired increasing global visibility because of its strategic location as the first European port in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and its centrality to the movement of people often referred to as the ‘Mediterranean migration crisis’ (Franceschelli, 2020). In autumn 2013 a boat carrying Eritreans, Somalians and Ghanaians capsized and sank close to the island shore, leading to 366 deaths. That event was followed

by several others which brought Lampedusa to the centre of debates about migration to Europe, leading to its opposing representations as a site of both 'hospitality and hostility' (Franceschelli and Galipò, 2020).

As part of the ethnographic work on the island, we spent time with local activist groups, including the Forum Solidale Lampedusa, who were welcoming migrants rescued or escorted by the Italian Navy, at their arrival at the port. We were also volunteering at the Archivio Storico di Lampedusa (Historical Archive of Lampedusa). The Archivio had become, at that time, a safe space where many young migrants who were staying in the 'hotspot' (temporary accommodation centre) gravitated during the afternoons and evenings, where they could check their email, access social media and take free Italian language lessons delivered by volunteers, including the project's research team. We mainly engaged with young men, some in their late teens but mostly well into their twenties, who were in greater numbers than women, as women are moved more quickly to the Italian mainland, especially if accompanying children. Minors are also targeted by special support services and hosted at specific centres on the mainland, so they were not among our participants.

I first met Momodou, a young man from West Africa with whom I have kept in touch regularly up to today, on his arrival in Lampedusa's port, and then I got to know him better at the Archivio. Momodou comes from a rural area of a densely populated country whose history and landscape have been deeply shaped by colonialism and has become a main source of the current African migration to Europe. Before migrating, he completed some very basic education and spoke a little English. From a young age he mostly worked in agriculture, but also in street selling and finally helping a mechanic. He was 19 when he left home, about 21 years old when he first arrived in Lampedusa and he has now spent the last six years in different centres within the Italian asylum system; he has now turned 27. The first time I greeted Momodou at Lampedusa's port he was very quiet and withdrawn, and I wasn't sure how well he spoke or understood English. I was told later that the dinghy in which he embarked from Libya had capsized quite a few kilometres away from Lampedusa's shore, and even if luckily no one got hurt, he was still in shock. Momodou and the other migrants were all rescued by the Italian Navy and taken to the island. Unlike the narratives of invasion, which depict boats full of migrants reaching the Italian coastline, small dinghies with migrants tend to call for help and are picked up by Italian authorities or NGOs.

Shortly after his arrival, I saw Momodou again in Viale Roma, the island's high street. He was with some other young men who arrived at the same time, he smiled and greeted me, so I went to say hello and asked

them to join us the day after at the Archivio. He liked it there and became a 'regular'. Momodou was the one who showed me the passage in the fence of the hotspot used by migrants to come in and out. Migrants are formally not allowed to leave the hotspot's premises, but conversations with them confirmed that it was not impossible, and risky to force so many people into an overcrowded building well over its capacity.

Even if most asylum seekers are moved relatively quickly from the hotspot, which is meant to be only a temporary site for migrants' registration with the authorities, some, like Momodou, fall through the net. His departure to the mainland was delayed for unknown reasons and I was shocked when I saw him again during my second trip to Lampedusa in the early summer of 2017, meaning that he spent at least eight weeks there rather than just a few days.

During his time in Lampedusa, Momodou started feeling unwell, suffering from migraine, insomnia, and difficulties with breathing. Some NGO workers and local volunteers at the Archivio explained this was not unusual and often related to the trauma of the journey.

Momodou never spoke in detail about the route from his village in West Africa to Libya, where he spent several months before departing to Italy, but he mentioned the hardship and violence he experienced there. Lampedusa represented the end of that first long traumatic journey, which lasted well over a year, but also the beginning of a new one within the Italian asylum regime. At first, he did not mind staying in Lampedusa, as he felt safe – as he said – but he expressed an increasing sense of frustration about waiting while not knowing 'what's next', referring to Lampedusa as a 'waiting site' or 'waiting room' (*sala d'attesa*). He was indeed eager to start the life he has looked forward to.

Instead, his story suggests he found himself in a prolonged limbo, even after his departure from Lampedusa, moved from one temporary accommodation to another, from the South to Northern Italy, unable to find decent work or even learn Italian well enough to get by.

From Lampedusa's hotspot, Momodou was moved to a hotel adapted to emergency accommodation for asylum seekers in a poor and disadvantaged area of Southern Italy. These sites are often located in hard-to-reach locations with poor or no transport links so the chances of engaging with local communities or finding any work, formal or informal, are very small. In the case of Momodou, the accommodation centre was based on a ski resort in a remote area in Southern Italy which witnessed a drop in tourist numbers and looked at asylum seekers as a way to fill the empty facilities in exchange for government subsidies. While there, Momodou witnessed migrants engaging in riots protesting against the

poor conditions of the facilities, the isolation and the cold. The response of the authorities was to make promises about improving the services and then send some of the migrants elsewhere. Many left the centre on the night of the protest, Momodou said.

At that point, he was moved to another ‘temporary centre’ in the same region. This second ‘reception centre’ (Walker and Gunaratnam, 2021) had previously made the news because of presumed connections with local organised crime; it was more centrally located and easier to reach, but also more strictly policed, resembling a detention centre with curfews and limitations on the time that could be spent outside. During that time, he also fell ill. He could not register with the local GP surgery because he had never received his national insurance number (*codice fiscale*) and spent time in his room waiting to get better. He felt angry and powerless, he said.

During the three years spent in Southern Italy, Momodou only got some sporadic, low-paid and casual work in agriculture, mostly picking fruit and vegetables. Even if formally allowed to work, he always struggled to find any job. The racialised Italian labour market, which offers few opportunities to asylum claimants, was surely a major factor but also, compared to other participants in the study, Momodou lacked strong social networks with other migrants, the confidence to look for work and the knowledge of how to find or apply for a job. These barriers created a strong sense of frustration, made him feel incapable of reaching a viable future and providing for his family.

It was clear from the start that the main priority of Momodou – similar to most of the other young men in the study – was to be able to work and earn a living, and that to do this, he needed ‘the papers’. ‘The papers’ allow the acquisition of a legal status and residency rights by granting a type of ‘protection’ – international, humanitarian or subsidiary (Marchetti and Franceschelli, 2020) – and become a main enabler of life-course transitions. Yet, through his time in Italy, ‘the papers’ also became increasingly difficult to obtain due to progressively more restrictive asylum policies. In 2018, when the Ministry of the Interior under Matteo Salvini issued the ‘Security Decree’ (*Decreto Sicurezza*), Momodou’s position in the Italian asylum system became more vulnerable and the outcomes of his journey more uncertain.

At the end of 2019, just before the outbreak of the pandemic and while still waiting to find out about his asylum application, he was sent to the north of Italy, without any explanation and no news about his application. He still lives there, in an area dominated by supporters of the far-right Lega with strong anti-migrant feelings. Leaving his friends back

in the south of Italy, COVID-19 meant further waiting but also loneliness and isolation. During this time, he spoke of days spent on his own trying to learn Italian through a mobile app, cooking West African food to remind himself of home, missing his family and battling between the feeling of failure and the desire to prove he can still succeed. While approaching 30, we can see how Momodou is caught in a state of ‘waithood’ handling contrasting emotions. On one hand, he wonders where his time has gone, expressing increasing concerns about not being able to ‘move on’ (*il tempo passa, io sto fermo*). He ‘feels old’ and disheartened because his aspired life still feels out of reach, but he still discloses strong hopes for the accomplishment of adulthood. In this sense, waithood allows space for the tensions between the possibility for a viable future and the resignation to the stillness of the present.

Concluding reflections

Even though normative adulthood is considered to be unattainable, the case of Momodou suggests that it is still – subconsciously – a point of reference for individual expectations and aspirations. The case links with evidence emerging from studies about younger unaccompanied migrants (Meloni, 2020; Chapter 8 in this volume), suggesting that while neoliberal policy models promote ideas about self-sufficient adulthood they significantly fail to provide the adequate support and guidance required to orient life courses in this direction particularly for this group of young adults. Most importantly, the case sheds light onto how the pressures and barriers posed by the structural context – and more specifically the institutional and socio-legal arrangements that shape migration regimes – challenge the neoliberal argument that waithood can be simply fixed by individuals’ commitment and endurance.

Momodou’s preoccupations about normative adulthood led to anxiety about his actual life experiences being ‘out of sync’ (Varriale, 2019) with normative life expectations and so about the mismatch between objective markers – determined by grand narratives about individuals’ power over their life-course transitions – and subjective experiences of adulthood. This mismatch increases preoccupations about the inability to fulfil societal gendered and classed roles (such as providing for his family in West Africa – as the eldest son – and forming a family of his own).

Finally, the case suggests that if the idea of waithood is able to capture the sense of precarity faced by young people like Momodou, it does not necessarily imply idleness and absence of long-term prospects

(Schwarz, 2017). Yet, waitthood entails putting life aspirations and desires on hold, but not renouncing them, leaving space for hope but also for agency and possibilities. In Honwana's terms, waitthood involves continuing to look for new ways to carry on with life-course transitions with potential to make sense of young people's (and young adults') complex relationship with time, as shaped by national and global institutional systems. However, there is also an ultimate risk attached to the state of 'waitthood', which is that of entailing 'tacit normativities' (Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi, 2022) and so to continue to frame life-course transitions as linearly shaped by checkpoints within migration bureaucracies.

Momodou is a case of an unwanted waitthood and of the tensions that come with it. His migration journey and experiences of the asylum system are personal and subjective, but also related to a wider collective history that sees generations of young Africans on the move, wanting to live life. As a case study of one research participant, his experiences are not transferable to others, but they elucidate questions of how individuals respond to the structural and institutional constraints they find themselves in and the implications for their life course. These questions also reveal the complexity of the meanings and the variety of experiences associated with different *adulthoods*.

While still waiting for the assessment of his claim in the asylum seekers' centre in Northern Italy, Momodou has recently found a job in construction. This can have a positive impact on his right to residency and asylum application. However, there are already new challenges to face: the lack of a national insurance number means he cannot have a contract and a bank account yet. Momodou remains optimistic: 'I just want to have all the time I spent here (Italy) back and move on'.

Further reading

The research discussed in this chapter was disseminated by a film documentary, *Here We Are: Lives on hold in Lampedusa*, available at <https://youtu.be/yWwklC6yorc>. More details about the research can be found in three articles: 'Global migration, local communities and the absent state: Resentment and resignation on the Italian island of Lampedusa' (Franceschelli, 2019); 'Exploring practices of hospitality and hostility toward migrants through the making of a film documentary: Insights from research in Lampedusa' (Franceschelli and Galipò, 2020); and 'The use of film documentary in social science research: Audio-visual accounts of the "migration crisis" from the Italian island of Lampedusa'

(Franceschelli and Galipò, 2021). The idea of ‘waithood’ is discussed in the book *The Time of Youth: Work, social change, and politics in Africa* (Honwana, 2012), which also provides a critical account of the failed neoliberal global socioeconomic policies and their effects on transitions to adulthoods. The edited book *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration* (Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi, 2022) offers important critical insights into the issue of ‘waiting’ specifically within the asylum system, while addressing legal, bureaucratic, ethical, gendered, and affective dimensions of time and migration.

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12

My name is not 'asylum seeker': countering silencing, unhearing and labelling in the UK asylum system through co-research

Mette Louise Berg, Eve Dickson, Faith
Nyamakanga and Nelson Gómez

Photos by Rasha Kotaiche

Introduction

'To be an asylum seeker, it's like to have a tattoo on the forehead with all those 12 letters. Many people don't like us, the most of them don't understand why we are here, they don't know our stories and have their own conclusions' (Nelson).

'Having been in the asylum system for four years, my dreams have shrunk. My dreams are those of a meal in a nice place, nice clothes and friends. I wasn't like that, but with time passing in waiting for my case to move reality sunk in. Perception towards life changes. As long as I see another £40 in the coming week, it's all that matters. Forget self, forget food of your choice, forget clothes that proper fit. As long as you see tomorrow with a roof on top of you. I wondered if I could fail to recognise me just within four years ... what about those that have waited for more years. Is there even a piece of them

left? I doubt it. It's costly, you trade you to live far from wars, abuse or human trafficking, whatever the case may be. Who am I, who will I be, what have become of those that have gotten their paper? I don't know' (Faith).

These are difficult times for those seeking sanctuary across the Global North. We only rarely hear their voices, not because they cannot speak, but because asylum policy is framed in such narrowly defined terms as to dehumanise and cast those seeking refuge as a 'burden' (Jeffers, 2012; Darling, 2016; Abby et al., 2021). As Arundhati Roy has remarked 'there's really no such thing as the "voiceless", there are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard' (Roy, 2004). Deliberately silencing and unhearing combine with acts of labelling as powerful political and bureaucratic tools through which 'a client group', here asylum seekers, are defined (Zetter, 1991: 44). The act of labelling inevitably entails stereotyping, delinking, and control (Zetter, 1991), and, as Nelson's words above powerfully remind us, the 'asylum seeker' label imposed by the state is like 'a tattoo on the forehead', there for all to see. In this chapter, we want to tell a different story, one that centralises the experiences and voices of people in the asylum system. Drawing on ethnographic co-research, we focus on the challenges those seeking asylum face, and the insights they provide into the damaging powers and effects of silencing, unhearing and labelling.

The chapter is cowritten by two TCRU (and so university) based researchers (Mette Louise Berg and Eve Dickson) and two co-researchers with personal experience of the asylum system (Faith Nyamakanga and Nelson Gómez). The material on which our chapter is based also draws on research by co-researchers 'Abby', Misbah Almisbahi, Sanaa El-Khatib, and Arsalan Ghasemi, all of whom have experienced the violence of the UK's asylum system. The Nordforsk-funded research presented here forms part of a multi-sited ethnography in Denmark, Sweden and the UK, exploring how solidarities are imagined and practiced in negotiations of migrant deservingness.

We want first to tell a story about the research process we embarked on together, starting from the particular juncture at which the government's hostile environment policy (Jones et al., 2017), a fragmented and privatised asylum system (Berg and Dickson, 2022), and the COVID-19 pandemic collided in Halifax, a town in West Yorkshire, an asylum dispersal area in England. We will then share what we learnt about experiences within the asylum dispersal system.

Co-research in times of COVID-19: fostering conviviality and solidarities

We begin in the autumn of 2020 when Eve and Mette set out to start research on dispersal housing in Yorkshire, a historic county in northern England. At this point in time, Yorkshire, as well as the rest of the UK, was under COVID-19-related lockdown measures, with instructions for everyone to stay at home. We were unsure about how to proceed with our planned in-person fieldwork; Yorkshire, only hours away from London by train, was firmly inaccessible. Asylum support organisations we reached out to were barely managing, overwhelmed by the challenges of working remotely and struggling to meet the needs of people in the asylum system, many of whom did not have wi-fi at home and had only recently arrived in the UK. It was clear that the pandemic was intensifying pre-existing pressures and precariousness in the asylum system, including inadequate housing and digital exclusion. The pandemic also saw an increase in the use of so-called ‘temporary’ accommodation, often hotels. Anti-migrant groups were trespassing in hotels that were housing asylum seekers and posting hostile videos online fomenting hatred (Taylor, 2020; 2021) – events that our co-researchers were acutely aware of, and which informed some of their ethnographic responses which we draw on here.

Our research focus on asylum-dispersal housing took on a different kind of urgency in this context and we decided to embark on virtual, ‘home-bound fieldwork’ (Horton, 2021), working in partnership with St Augustine’s Centre, a local organisation in Halifax that supports refugees and people in the asylum system. With their help, we recruited six co-researchers with personal experience of the asylum system, among whom were Faith and Nelson. The co-researcher group included three men and three women at different stages of the asylum process, from five different countries across three continents. None of them, apart from Nelson and his partner Abby, knew each other beforehand; all were keen to contribute to the research project to make a difference.

At the outset, Faith produced a hauntingly powerful audio message setting out her reasons for wanting to become a co-researcher, and centring the importance of voice and lived experience:

‘I want to be a researcher because I am inspired by an Akan proverb which translates: “If you do not tell your story, be sure that someone else will, and they would not tell it right”. I want to be a researcher because who is better to tell the story of asylum living conditions

than the people actually living and experiencing the system? I want to be a researcher, I want to help bring out the Black and African voice, or rather the experience of Africans in the asylum system. I want to be a researcher because it makes me feel, look, and act like a Superwoman, a Superwoman that will maybe, at the end of the research, help solve at least one, at least two, at least three, or perhaps all of the asylum accommodation problems' (Faith).

Through weekly online meetings, we started a learning and research process scheduled to last five months. Each meeting would start with an icebreaker activity, so we gradually got to know each other. We would then move to the training part, sequenced in six phases: ethics; ethnography and autoethnography; visual methods; focused conversations; data analysis; and dissemination. Between each meeting, co-researchers would generate ethnographic material, which could be written text, audio clips, video, still photography, or a mix of these.

Mette and Eve sought to forge collaborative and nonextractive relationships with the co-researchers and research participants (Back and Sinha, 2018). We designed the training process iteratively and developed it through dialogue and listening. Every week we would design training material and plan sessions in response to the discussions we were having in the co-research group. We set weekly prompts for the co-researchers and asked one or more of them to share their responses with the group every week. Most people in the asylum system are not allowed to work, so we compensated co-researchers for their time with mobile phones, data packages and vouchers. We also provided certificates of participation, organised a webinar on access to higher education and sanctuary scholarships, and have offered letters of reference to the co-researchers. Interviewees were compensated with vouchers.

From the beginning, we recognised the importance of group-building and group dynamics. We wanted to avoid transactional encounters and establish the research process as a space of conviviality and support (Phoenix, 2019). Group meetings were followed up with one-to-one conversations between university researchers and co-researchers to ensure everyone felt included, and to address individual questions or issues. Doing research and training online set certain restrictions, but also enabled participation and inclusion as co-researchers were able to fit the meetings in with care work and other commitments.

Although none of the co-researchers had ever studied ethnography, they quickly grasped its potential. From the start, the co-research process produced rich and nuanced ethnographic material, which prompted

further reflections and discussion, leading to the generation of more material. We found that solidarities, a key concept in the research project, were also enacted in and through the research process as co-researchers shared their stories and group members supported one another. We were all moved when Misbah shared a piercing video about the challenges of surviving on £40 per week (see <https://solidarities.net/gallery/>), and we listened with bated breath when Hedi shared his story of receiving first a letter to tell him he was allowed to work because his qualifications were deemed to be on the so-called 'shortage occupations list', and not long thereafter another letter to say his asylum application had been successful. The shortage occupations list, of mainly specialised occupations, is determined by the UK Home Office (the government department dealing with asylum applications). People seeking asylum who have been waiting for more than 12 months on their claim 'through no fault of their own', are allowed to request to seek permission to work if they are qualified to work within one of the occupations on the list (Law Centre NI, 2022). Faith reflected on the co-research experience:

'The most challenging part for me is, you know, sometimes we had to share our stories and when you're in such a space you can't hide your emotions, you can't suppress them. When you're telling what you've been going through and all of that, you can't suppress your emotions, you can't hide, so I think that was challenging, you know, like, I believe at that time you just break down, I believe at times your voice is shaking, this is really upsetting, you can't believe what you've actually been going through. Those kind of awakenings were challenging'.

As well as drawing on their own experiences, the co-researcher group also conducted interviews with third-sector workers and other people seeking asylum, drawing on their language skills, which included Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish Sorani and Spanish. Interviewing other people in the asylum system was at times challenging, as Faith explains:

'This research involved other asylum or sanctuary seekers, listening to their stories. Yes, you know, you might be going through it, but there's another person actually going through worse than you. It was a bit challenging hearing what people were going through, especially people that are educated, people that were doctors, that had professions, like doctors and lawyers in their own countries, and then they're just, all of those years of investment in education is just put on hold. It was challenging to hear that as well'.

The co-researchers were keen to share the insights and understanding they were developing through the research with other people in the asylum system. When St Augustine's Centre held an open day in June 2021, they organised a stall about the research project, centred on raising awareness of rights and making a difference in the real world.

At the time of writing, nearly a year after the co-research process ended, one co-researcher has moved away from Halifax to study at university elsewhere; two have found work in the asylum and refugee support sector; two have moved away from Halifax in search of work. Our WhatsApp group is still active and the friendships we established are continuing.

In the rest of this chapter, we focus on the everyday experiences of people in the asylum system in Halifax. The photographs are by Yorkshire-based Rasha Kotaiche and were taken in the spring of 2022 during a walk-along with Mette and Faith, based on a list, generated by the co-researcher group, of places and spaces that are significant for people in the asylum system in Halifax.

The UK asylum system: hostile, fragmented, privatised and under-resourced

The Home Office is the government department responsible for and overseeing the asylum system and making decisions on asylum applications. Yet the asylum support system, including accommodation and support provision for people awaiting the outcome of their asylum application, was fully privatised in 2012. This means that asylum support is set completely apart from the mainstream welfare system and services are provided by for-profit companies, operating through complex subcontracting arrangements. In 2020, the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee found that the Home Office lacked 'an effective line of sight into how [asylum] services are delivered locally' ([Public Accounts Committee, 2020](#)).

In the UK, as in other European countries, asylum seekers are subject to dispersal on a no-choice basis, but not all local areas host people in the asylum system. Dispersal areas are places where 'there is a greater supply of suitable accommodation' ([Local Government and the Home Office, 2019](#): 4), which in practice means cheap or hard-to-let housing, often in deprived small towns and rural areas in decline, with few services and poor public transport ([Gill, 2009](#)), reflecting wider social and geographic inequalities in the UK. Under the privatised system, dispersal of asylum seekers to places that have 'strong institutional capacity and

better housing' has decreased (Alonso and Andrews, 2021), and concerns have been raised about the dispersal policy potentially 'undermining the support and consent of local communities' (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2018). Reports by parliamentary committees and third-sector organisations have repeatedly pointed out the substandard service and conditions that people in the asylum system are subject to, including dirty, unsafe and uninhabitable housing (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2018), issues that were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (British Red Cross, 2021).

Asylum application processing is under-resourced with a large backlog of unresolved cases (Hewett and The Refugee Council, 2021), and there is a growing number of people who have been waiting for longer than six months on a decision on their asylum application (Migration Advisory Committee, 2021: 31). This means that in many cases, people will spend months or even years living in substandard dispersal accommodation (Hewett and The Refugee Council, 2021).

During the period of waiting, while their asylum claim is being processed, most people seeking asylum are not allowed to work, or to open a bank account. There are very limited circumstances in which a person seeking asylum may be allowed to work. It is possible for people seeking asylum to apply for the right to work, but only if they have been waiting more than 12 months for an initial decision or a response to further submissions. However, even if granted permission, people seeking asylum will only be able to take up employment if a job is on the UK's shortage occupations list. There is limited state provision in the form of cash and accommodation for those who are deemed 'destitute' or at risk of destitution. The maintenance support of £40.85 per week is, as co-researcher Hedi put it, 'just enough that we don't die'. It is paid via a prepaid debit card called ASPEN, which enables Home Office monitoring of expenditure and movements (Privacy International, 2021), and makes asylum seekers immediately identifiable in shops. This mode of governance is part of a broader regime of surveillance and border securitisation targeted at ethnic-minority groups in Britain, particularly those seeking asylum, who in recent years have been especially demonised by both media and state (Webber, 2022). Alongside the increasing criminalisation of 'undesirable' migrants, more generally, the British government's preoccupation with securing the borders against small-boat Channel crossings has resulted in increasingly punitive tactics of control, such as plans for physical pushbacks and the recent initiative for 'offshore' processing of asylum claims in Rwanda.

The Home Office has a duty under human rights law to adequately support people in the asylum system (Mayblin and James, 2019), yet the experiences and testimonies of our research participants tell a different story, one of a fragile and fragmented system with inadequate support structures and charities stepping in to ‘fill the gaps’ (Mayblin and James, 2019). Nelson writes about his and Abby’s experience, they mention Migrant Help which is a charity contracted by the Home Office to offer a telephone helpline to people in the asylum system.

We came to the UK at the beginning of 2020, stayed in a hostel in London for a few days, and then, we were moved to another town, far away from there. We shared a month with many other people seeking asylum, some of them spoke our language, but most spoke others very strange for us. Our diet was the same every day for a month: cereal, milk, boiled eggs, and toast for breakfast; canned minestrone soup, chips, and salad for lunch; a special dish for dinner, maybe fried chicken, lasagne, real meatballs (I mean not canned). We made a few friends there. None of us had money to get more things, like to get different food or medicine. We were not allowed to work.

We got our accommodation just three days before the lockdown, so we didn’t have enough time to get to know our town or make friends. It was a very disgusting time. I remember when we arrived at the flat. There were two chairs, a table, a sofa, a stove, and a fridge. Our bedroom with an old double bed. We just had our luggage and phones; no money, no food. The woman from MEARS (the company who provides accommodation) gave us our ASPEN [card]. It was Wednesday afternoon. And we went to look for a supermarket and get some food. We were so happy because finally we could eat the food we wanted. We tried to pay. “Your card was declined”, said the Lidl [supermarket] cashier. Very embarrassed, we left the supermarket and went back to our ‘new’ flat.

We heard about St. Augustine’s Centre. The next day we were there to get some help from them, even not knowing what kind of help they offer. They helped us to enrol in the NHS system and to call Migrant Help about our card and lack of money. The answer from Migrant Help was: “You have to wait till next Monday. Look for a food bank”.

We now turn to the local context in Halifax and the experiences of living in dispersal housing and finding support.

Living in Halifax and finding support

Halifax is a former mill town in Yorkshire, located within Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council, and has been a dispersal area since the early 2000s. Most asylum seekers in Halifax live in Park Ward, an ethnically diverse and densely populated central area, ranked among the ten-per-cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the country (Ministry of Housing, 2019).

Asylum housing conditions were poor (see Figure 12.1), something that came up repeatedly in our interviews with people seeking asylum and those supporting them in third-sector organisations, and which echoes what has been found in other research (Asylum Matters, 2020; Mort and Morris, 2020: 44). Houses are often inadequately furnished and equipped, and housing providers are not contractually required to supply even basic items or amenities such as wi-fi, vacuum cleaners, or TVs (Home Office, 2019: 17–18, 22). Among the co-researcher group, Hedi had no TV in his house during the pandemic; he was stuck at home for long periods of time and would have liked a TV to help him learn English. Abby and Nelson were provided with crockery and cutlery for just one person in their flat for couples. Sanaa had large holes in the floor of her kitchen in the house where she lived with young children.



Figure 12.1 Alleyway in Park Ward. © Rasha Kotaiche.

Research participants talked to us about difficulties they experienced in maintaining their accommodation themselves without cleaning equipment such as a vacuum cleaner. Participants also talked about the challenges of sharing a house with others who might have different standards of cleanliness. One participant described sharing a house with someone who would lock themselves in the only bathroom for hours and play loud music.

To report issues, people in dispersal accommodation are required to call a national phonenumber, contracted to and operated by the charity Migrant Help. Participants described repeatedly attempting to get accommodation issues resolved, including leaks and boiler breakdowns, through calling Migrant Help and contacting their housing officer, but said they were 'ignored' and forced to resort to approaching third-sector organisations for advocacy support.

Our co-research group felt strongly that private housing providers were more likely to respond to third-sector organisations than those seeking asylum themselves. This tended to be understood by co-researchers as being a consequence of their position as 'asylum seekers'. They felt they were not deemed to be 'deserving' of the same respect or rights as other residents in the UK, often being treated like they did not 'matter'. This is the logical outcome of government and media rhetoric that for decades has sought to dehumanise and demonise those seeking asylum and legitimate differential treatment (Sales, 2002; Darling, 2021). As Faith put it:

'Asylum seekers are human, they are not a statistic ... you ring Migrant Help, they want a number, a reference number ... No, I'm Faith, I am a face before I am a number, I am not a statistic'.

Many participants talked about the significance of support organisations and groups such as St Augustine's Centre, Sisters United, and Light Up Black and African Heritage Calderdale, where they felt they had been able to find a sense of community, make friendships and give and receive support:

'So, in St Augustine's Centre I met with many people. There we can see each other and ... we can find friends. In St Augustine's Centre, it's a good place for asylum seeker really. Really useful for classes, English class. Like DIY [do it yourself] group – they have a DIY group, you can help, you can start to work, like volunteer, so that's good when we are asylum seeker, we are not allowed to work, so that's a good place to spend time, you know, not stay at home sleeping' (Arman).

Passing time, waiting in limbo

As we found, rather than providing opportunities to rebuild lives, the uncertainty of the asylum system means that asylum seekers live their lives in suspension. This resonates with other research, which has shown waiting as an integral part of asylum policy (Rotter, 2015; Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi, 2020).

‘When I saw this picture [Figure 12.2], I instantly thought of all the time we had to wait to get our status. Since you arrive to the airport, starts the “waiting time”, which can be years. In our case it was about three years, but I’ve known about cases of people who had to wait for 7 or 10 years’ (Nelson).

This is the context within which those caught in the limbo created by the UK’s asylum system nevertheless endeavour to build their lives and find a sense of belonging. As Faith puts it: ‘It takes a fit mind, soul and body to walk this asylum journey’.



Figure 12.2 Clocks in shop window. © Rasha Kotaiche.

Foodbanks and volunteering

‘At this Methodist church [see [Figure 12.3](#)], there is a Food Bank, which was a very symbolic place for us. When we arrived to Halifax for the first time, we didn’t have more than £1 and didn’t have any food. The ASPEN card had nothing on it till next Monday, and it was Wednesday. We got to the food bank, and they shared some canned food with us, which gave us some relief for a while. It’s really hard to remember that time.

It’s very difficult and sad to feel yourself alone, with no friends, money, food, in a place which is not yours, without your culture and language, in a situation like this’ (Nelson).

‘We used to attend the community fridge daily at the mosque [see [Figure 12.4](#)]. They offer food every day to everyone who needs it. It’s a big help for people seeking asylum, who don’t have enough money for food or other needs, as they are not allowed to work’ (Nelson).

As well as receiving food and support, many research participants also described volunteering at local foodbanks and organisations as something that gave them a sense of purpose and helped to distract them from the uncertainty of their cases and the ‘empty time’ that resulted from not .being allowed to work – a strategy to defend against the limbo of asylum policy (see also [Rotter, 2015](#)).



Figure 12.3 St James’s Church, Halifax. © Rasha Kotaiche.



Figure 12.4 Halifax community fridge by the Jamia Madni Mosque. © Rasha Kotaiche.

‘It really helps people to do volunteering and be involved [in] some activity. It helps people with mental problems. Here at home, I’m doing nothing, because I’m not allowed to work. I am asylum seeker – I’m getting crazy’ (Ravrov).

Building a new life

The impossibilities of building a life in a new place while being kept in enforced destitution and barred from working, having little control over one’s life, and being suspended in time while waiting for a decision on their asylum application, were felt acutely by those involved in our research. Research participants described the cumulative negative impact on their mental health and sense of self-value, as well as the constraints imposed on making and maintaining relationships and meaningful lives. Poor accommodation conditions meant many interviewees were unable to invite friends round. This was exacerbated by having to subsist on very low financial support:

‘I haven’t been in the cinema for four years because it’s very expensive. And I never afford myself to bring my friend, or make friends because I’m afraid, because you are not allowed to work and you have not enough money to pay for a cup of coffee or a bottle of beer or something – it’s just like discrimination towards asylum seekers who are waiting more than three years, four years, or I don’t know how many ... if you are asylum seeker, you are not a person, you are nothing, because you have no [national] insurance number’ (Ravrov).



Figure 12.5 King Cross Road, Park Ward, Halifax. © Rasha Kotaiche.

‘This picture is my everyday life [Figure 12.5]. I walk through this road almost every day to everywhere. The air is different, it’s filled with different aroma, used cooking oil from a local fish and chip shop, the chicken spice from a chicken and chip shop. Then there is Mother Hubbard, I would say is the best. With some dessert shops as well. This street is my go-to street when I want to treat myself to something special. Some within my ASPEN budget. Even that comes at a cost. I would have to sacrifice some basic food just for a chicken chip or a bigger sacrifice to get Mother Hubbard’ (Faith).

Concluding reflections

The UK asylum system is fragmented and fragile (*Asylum Matters*, 2020). Support for those inside the system is outsourced to private companies, with the third sector ‘filling the gaps’ where the UK government fails to fulfill its obligations according to international law (*Mayblin and James*, 2019). Waiting times for asylum decisions are long, leaving many to spend months and even years in dispersal accommodation in enforced destitution, barred from work and with very limited opportunities to rebuild their lives (*Hewett and The Refugee Council*, 2021). It is a system deliberately designed to be hostile and to produce ‘intense social

exclusion' (Sales, 2002). The power of labelling, silencing, and unhearing have the effect of stripping victims of their dignity, and 'rather than offering them refuge through care and understanding, it causes them further distress' (Bralo, 2022: 72). In this chapter we have counterposed the hostility of the asylum system by foregrounding words by people with personal experience, claiming their right to dignity, belonging and humanity. In Faith's words:

'I may be a refugee, I may be an asylum [seeker], I may be a migrant, but I need you, we need you, and I believe, we all need each other. ... Take a moment and think about it. Yes, I am an asylum seeker. We are asylum seekers. We are refugees. We are migrants. But, we are also human, just like you.'

As Faith and Sanaa, wrote together (<https://solidarities.net/my-name-is-not-asylum-seeker-on-labels-dignity-and-respect/>):

My name is not 'asylum seeker'. Yes, being an 'asylum seeker' is a part of me, but I'm more than that. I am a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a friend. Society labels asylum seekers as if we are different, as if we don't belong. Yes, we are different. We are stronger than everyone else. The sacrifices we make on a daily basis are unimaginable. But have you ever wondered why people are seeking asylum, why are people leaving their country? Everyone has their own dark, upsetting reason to flee their country. But, it's starting to seem as if asylum seekers are less than humans.

We are people. We have rights. So, respect and feel for us. Welcome us and call us by our names, because my name is not 'asylum seeker'.

Further reading

The research presented here is part of the international research project Migrants and Solidarities: Negotiating deservingness in welfare micropublics (<https://solidarities.net/>); more information can be found on our website, which includes several blog posts written by the co-researchers. Our approach to collaborative ethnography has been deeply informed by the book *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented immigrants and new directions in social science* (Alonso Bejarano et al.,

2019); we have found it an inspiring resource for thinking through the process of co-research from a social justice perspective. Jonathan Darling's book *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the denial of asylum* (Darling, Pluto Press, 2022) provides a lucid and critical account of the political geography of asylum dispersal in the UK, while Lucy Mayblin's *Impoverishment and Asylum: Social policy as slow violence* (Mayblin, Routledge, 2019) documents the British government's purposeful impoverishment of people seeking asylum in the UK. Patricia Hynes's book *The Dispersal and Social Exclusion of Asylum Seekers: Between liminality and belonging* (Hynes, Policy Press, 2011) offers an overview of the asylum dispersal system in the UK and how it has been experienced by those seeking asylum over the years.

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Change and continuity in men's fathering and employment practices: a slow gender revolution?

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Introduction

The extensive movement of women into employment in the 1970s has been characterised as the 'first gender revolution', to be followed by a 'second gender revolution' as men become more active in the private sphere of family life (for example, [Goldscheider, 2000](#)). This optimistic vision, influenced by twentieth-century gender-equality legislation contributed to a caregiving-father cultural model ([Collier and Sheldon, 2008](#)). But despite significant socio-legal and cultural shifts, change in the domestic space has been slower than anticipated, with women still undertaking more care and housework than men.

Enquiry into these complexities in gender relations has been a dimension of the research at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) over the last 50 years. Uniquely (at the time), the place of men and fathers as well as women and mothers, both as parents and workers, has been incorporated into the research framing. This chapter draws on the extensive range of studies conducted by TCRU researchers from the 1970s onwards, demonstrating how our research has been formative to the field of fatherhood, both in the UK and beyond. Over this time, TCRU has

attracted researchers from different conceptual backgrounds and disciplines, adopting diverse methodologies to study the interface of parenthood and employment. The scholarship has also underpinned TCRU's position as an evidence-based research unit for better international parental-leave policies, examined in more detail in [Chapter 7](#).

We begin with the story of the 'discovery' of fatherhood during the 1970s and 1980s. We then highlight a body of work on the UK's labour-market trends in mothers' and fathers' employment since the 1990s. Third, we draw on qualitative research that traces continuities in fathering across family generations. Next, we look at fathering practices among men who are primary caregivers. Finally, we discuss studies of change in couples' parenting cultures and relationality at the transition to parenthood. In the concluding section, we examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fatherhood.

The emergence of fatherhood research in the social sciences

The late 1970s saw the beginning of British research on fathers, in part pioneered in the UK by Lorna McKee and Margaret O'Brien, who would go on to become Director of TCRU in 2013, with the publication of *The Father Figure* ([McKee and O'Brien, 1982](#)). This work arose in the context of feminists' fight for equal rights with men in the workplace and for their emancipation from oppressive family and sex-based responsibilities (for example, [Rowbotham, 1973](#)). The study of women's lives in the domestic sphere, by the renowned sociologist Ann Oakley, at one time TCRU's Deputy Director (1985–90), was also gaining legitimacy, pioneered in her paradigm-breaking books *The Sociology of Housework* (1974) and *Becoming a Mother* (1979). This feminist work upended 'family sociology' as being essentially about 'wives' and seen through the lens of mothers ([Safilios-Rothschild, 1969](#)). Developmental psychology was also criticised for its neglect of fathers' contributions and tendency towards a mother-blaming culture ([Lamb, 1975](#); [Phoenix and Woollett, 1991](#)).

In the first wave of British fatherhood research, men's experiences were put centre stage ([McKee and O'Brien, 1982](#)). The exploration of men's experiences of pregnancy, the labour ward, childbirth and the transition to parenthood, for example, was an important first step. In the 1960s childbirth had become increasingly hospital-based, with little expectation that prospective fathers had any role during labour and delivery. Professional staff displayed little recognition of men's emotional and embodied relationships

with their partners and infants or awareness that men, like women, could be emotionally affected by birth, infertility, or miscarriage. Our work therefore had important implications for scholarship and policy and practice.

Many first-wave studies generated portrayals of nurturant and emotionally close father–child relationships in a range of diverse family/life settings, including early parenthood, primary-caring fathers, post-separation lone fathers, stepfamily life, grandparenthood and practitioner settings such as counselling, social work and hospital (for example: [Moss, 1980](#); [Backett, 1982](#); [Beail and McGuire, 1982](#); [McKee, 1982](#); [Richman, 1982](#); [Lewis, 1986](#); [Lewis and O'Brien, 1987](#)). They disrupted the stereotype of the distant and disengaged father that was current at the time and was important in breaking down the male breadwinner–female homemaker nuclear-family norm so often assumed in social policy and wider public discourses. We recognise, however, that not all diversity was addressed, particularly around race, ethnicity and sexuality. More recent TCRU research has examined the experiences of minority ethnic, same-sex and trans-parenting (for example, [Hamilton, 2022](#); [Bower-Brown and Zadeh, 2021](#), and see [Chapter 10](#) in this volume). However, this first wave of 1980s fatherhood research helped pave the way for the future body of UK work on fatherhood and masculinity, again much of it led by TCRU researchers (for example, [Brannen and Nilsen, 2006](#); [Dermott, 2008](#); [Miller, 2011](#)). It also linked to European and North American scholarship (for example, [Lamb, 1975](#); [Bjornberg, 1992](#); [Hobson, 2002](#); [Doucet, 2006](#); [Lamb, 2010](#); [Cabrera and Tamis-LeMonda, 2013](#)).

Mothers' and fathers' employment: the first gender revolution

Expectations of fathers' 'main breadwinner' responsibility were embedded in Britain's postwar welfare regime and a cultural signifier of what it means to be a father ([Creighton, 1999](#)). The 1980s' focus on mothers' accelerated employment highlighted how fathers were also constrained by employment. Analysis of macro-level data of fathers' time in paid work demonstrated the extent and intensity of men's engagement in employment, and its relationship with mothers' paid employment. Following an influential national survey of women and employment ([Martin and Roberts, 1984](#)), TCRU researchers tracked the national trends of fathers and mothers in paid work ([Moss, 1980](#); [Brannen et al., 1997](#)), later extended by Margaret O'Brien with the National Centre for Social Research (an independent social-research organisation) and the

University of East Anglia (Aldrich et al., 2016; Connolly et al., 2016), building on the Equal Opportunities Commission-funded Working Fathers project (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003; O'Brien, 2005).

By 2001, dual-earner couple households had increased in the UK, with fathers continuing to work long hours and mothers expanding their employment time (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003). Over the 2000s, the working hours of mothers in part-time employment gradually increased, as did their participation in full-time employment. By the end of the decade the full-time dual-earner family model grew in significance for British coupled parents (Connolly et al., 2016).

Although the proportion of male full-time sole-breadwinner households has remained stable over the 2000s at about 22 per cent (Connolly et al., 2016), it has clearly declined as a viable family practice for most British families. More recent data from the UK Office for National Statistics (2021) suggest an even greater shift, arguably deepening the scale of the first gender revolution (Goldscheider, 2000): during April to June 2021, 50.4 per cent of working families had both parents employed full-time (more than 30 paid hours per week). At the same time, paid work has become more precarious, with a rise in insecure employment such as zero-hour contracts (Warren, 2021).

Generational changes and continuities in fatherhood: a second gender revolution?

As mothers' paid-work time has increased, time-use studies have found a global increase in the absolute amount of time fathers devote to the care of young children (but not in housework), particularly for highly educated men (Sullivan, 2019). Yet fathers' relative time contribution remains lower than that for equivalent mothers pointing to the 'intensification' of parenting, discussed below.

In a quest to understand these changes, between the late 1990s and 2010 Julia Brannen, Peter Moss, Ann Mooney and other colleagues at TCRU conducted studies that focused on fathers and mothers belonging to several historical and family generations (Brannen, Moss and Mooney, 2004) and subsequently on fathers in multigeneration families with a migration background (Brannen, 2015). The approaches adopted included a biographical perspective, life-story narrative and historical contextualisation (Mills, 1980; Wengraf, 2001; Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe, 2006).

These studies sought explanations, both internal and external, for patterns and processes of change and continuity between generations of fathers, taking a multigeneration family as the unit of analysis (Hammersley, Gomm and Foster, 2000). The studies sought to understand how fatherhood was scheduled in the life course in the context of other life-course transitions, including how fatherhood fitted into men's lives as providers; how different generations narrated fatherhood as a status and fathering as a practice; and the ways in which fatherhood and fathering were transmitted, or not, across generations.

In this four-generation study, the great-grandfathers first became fathers in the interwar years (Brannen, Moss and Mooney, 2004). The middle grandfather generation was born in the post Second World War period, married and had children at a relatively young age in the 1960s. For this generation the once normative markers of work, marriage and fatherhood fell thick and fast within a very few years. The youngest generation of fathers grew up in the period of neoliberalism and, unlike older generations, lived with their partners before marriage, becoming parents during the 1990s downturn in the UK economy. For some of this generation their transitions were staggered over time, reflecting the older age at which they became fathers and an extended phase in school and education – a time in which, as 'young adults', they were able to experiment and try out different patterns of living.

The study typified men's narratives of fathering accordingly. The first group were the employment-focused fathers whose identities were primarily shaped by the work ethic; this group was found across all three generations. A second group, termed 'family men', were main breadwinners but placed high value on 'being there' for their families and children. They worked a '9 to 5' day and, as nonmanual or skilled workers, did not need to work overtime to bring in a 'decent wage'. This group was concentrated in the middle generation. The third group consisted of a small number of 'hands-on' fathers and were only found in the youngest generation. None had been main breadwinners other than for very short periods and all were heavily involved in caring for their young children, several having done so on a full-time basis for significant periods. Significantly, none of the hands-on fathers had qualifications; those who had been in employment were unskilled, a finding that is perhaps counterintuitive to the stereotype of the 'progressive middle-class father'.

To some extent men's narratives of fathering reflect changing historical and cultural conditions. However, generalisations about change can be misleading. By adopting a family-generation perspective, the studies were able to trace what made a difference in a particular family

and social context. In the four-generation study and the migration study interesting examples were identified of a new model of fathering, one that emerged in the context of the weakened labour-market conditions for unskilled men in the 1990s and a period that diminished the traditional resources available to men of their social class, namely the opportunity to be main breadwinners. These structural changes provided some men with opportunities to do fathering differently, especially when account was also taken of the rise in mothers' education and employment opportunities. The stories told by different family generations thereby reflect the ways in which men and women, as parents and couples, engage with new gender beliefs and practices with regard to the care of children. Further, these multigenerational studies show the ways in which changing structural conditions intersect with what men seek to transmit to their sons and the ways in which new generations of fathers can identify, or not, with their own fathers.

Inevitably, multigeneration family research alerts researchers to slippages in both lay and conceptual language: in this case the significance of institutional aspects of 'fatherhood' for older generations and the relational and doing aspects of 'fathering' for younger generations. On the other hand, the studies found that fathers of all generations do 'care' both for and about their children, albeit in varied ways and to different extents (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006). Therefore, understanding the 'gender revolution' means taking into account how parents engage with the new cultural and ideological resources concerning parenting and the opportunities and constraints relating to the changing economy and the increasingly pressurised and precarious labour-market conditions.

New ways of fathering? Primary caregiving fathers

As the work of Brannen, Moss and Mooney (2004) highlights, change in practices and cultures of fatherhood is apparent across the generations. Even small changes are important; as argued by Dermott and Miller (2015: 184): 'what may appear as minor shifts across these domains when viewed individually, may be cumulatively significant, acquiring greater meaning through their multiplicity'. This is evident in a small proportion of families with fathers who are primary caregivers, sometimes termed 'stay-at-home fathers' (Boyer et al., 2017). In 2021, families where a mother worked full-time and her partner part-time represented just 3 per cent of coupled families in the UK, in contrast to 44 per cent of families where a father worked full-time and his partner part-time (Office for National Statistics,

2021). Yet, this minority family type represents two interesting shifts: on the one hand, a rise in the practice of a new 'intimate' form of fatherhood, with a lessened emphasis on breadwinning and a greater stress on the emotional bond between father and child (Dermott, 2008). On the other hand, these families signify the shift in women's employment practices, namely more women in full-time employment.

The little research on fathers in the primary-caregiver role has rarely explored these fathers within the wider family context. Drawing upon family systems theory (Bowen, 1985), TCRU researcher Catherine Jones's comparative study of primary caregivers set out to provide a new understanding of the conditions under which families decide to arrange their work and childcare in ways that differ from the norm, and what might be the consequences of doing so for parents and children. The study interviewed and observed 127 mother–father families (of which, 41 families had a primary-caregiver father) with young children aged 3–6 years old across the UK (Jones, Foley and Golombok, 2021; Jones et al., 2021).

The study offers three key reflections on involved fatherhood. Firstly, primary-caregiver fathers did not differ from primary-caregiver mothers regarding parenting quality and the quality of parent–child relationship (Jones, Foley and Golombok, 2021), countering long-held assumptions about the capabilities of fathers as primary caregivers. These assumptions within psychological thought are often, although not exclusively, rooted in Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory. Secondly, the fathers described their decision to become the primary caregiver as pragmatic, rather than radical. Nearly half the reasons given were economic, such as their spouse having higher earnings or more stable employment. Some fathers wanted to be more involved and mentioned the benefits for children of having a stay-at-home parent, while others mentioned workplace stress or employment issues. Yet, in the longer term, most of these fathers anticipated a return to paid work, particularly once their child had started primary school (Jones et al., 2021b). Thirdly, all the fathers reported having experienced stigmatising attitudes, with references to 'daddy daycare', being called 'Mrs Doubtfire', and being asked if they were 'babysitting'. Fathers said these comments were demeaning and commonplace, and that society failed to acknowledge that 'dads are just as capable'. Alongside this prejudice, the fathers came across physical barriers such as a lack of baby-changing facilities in men's public toilets and parent–baby groups specifically called mums' groups.

Whilst primacy is still given to motherhood over fatherhood, these barriers seem likely to continue. In general, the behaviours, perspectives and experiences of these primary-caregiver fathers suggest that taking on

this parenting role does not signal a transformation in fatherhood. Instead, as these families show, given the opportunity, and with sufficient financial resources, small changes can lead to a more equitable division of labour, and this appears to benefit the parent–child relationship too. However, social attitudes and resources to bring further change lag behind.

Parenting culture, couple intimacy and equality: a revolution full circle?

Whilst these more ‘radical’ fathers point to further possibilities for the gender revolution, this pattern is not reflected across the population. A picture of involved or ‘intimate’ fatherhood (Dermott, 2008) has emerged but *without* the concomitant realisation of gender equality in paid and unpaid work for the vast majority (Sullivan, 2019).

More recently, TCRU researchers have returned to the couple domain to examine the implications of these ‘gender revolutions’ at the micro-level, focusing in particular on mixed-sex couples’ divisions of both care and housework. This is important: Oakley (1974) and other feminists in the 1970s argued that childcare and housework, while often overlapping, must be considered separately in interrogations of gendered practices, given their very different attractions and affordances.

Charlotte Faircloth’s qualitative work draws on a body of interdisciplinary scholarship which has highlighted the recent expansion of ‘parenting’ (Lee et al., 2014). Although parenting has always been subject to moralising and guidance (Hardyment, 2007), expectations around raising children in the US and the UK, particularly since the mid-1970s, has increased exponentially. This is reflected in the gender-neutral verb ‘parenting’: parenting classes, parenting manuals, parenting experts and parenting ‘interventions’ are now so commonplace as to be unremarkable (Lee et al., 2014). Rather than being something that is simple, straightforward or common sense, parenting today is re-presented as a task requiring expert guidance and supervision, fuelling a multi-million-pound industry of advice and ‘support’ (Lee et al., 2014). The assumed transformative potential of ‘parenting’ is also to solve ‘social problems’, meaning that parenting has been the subject of much policy intervention in recent years, especially under the auspices of ‘early intervention’ in deprived communities (Macvarish, 2016; Gillies, Edwards and Horsley, 2017).

Despite the gender-neutral language of ‘parenting’, studies have drawn attention to the contemporary phenomenon of ‘intensive

mothering' (Hays, 1996; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Faircloth, 2014; Lee et al., 2014): 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996: 8). The 'intensive' mother is considered responsible for all aspects of her child's development – physical, social, emotional and cognitive – above and beyond anyone else, including the father (Hays, 1996: 46). Ideally, she demonstrates this commitment through embodied means, such as, for example, by birthing 'without intervention' or breastfeeding 'on demand'; no cost, physical or otherwise, is considered too great in her efforts to optimise her child (Wolf, 2011). Linking to our interest in 'gender revolutions', Hays notes a paradox in the rise in intensive expectations around motherhood at the same time as women's wholesale entry into the workforce: while one may expect a lowering of expectations, in fact the opposite is true. For Hays this is part of a wider sacralisation of motherhood as a sphere beyond that of the market or remuneration (Hays, 1996). Fathers have not been immune from this trend (Dermott, 2008; Collier and Sheldon, 2008; Shirani, Henwood and Coltart, 2012), and whilst most scholars agree that it remains mothers to whom these cultural messages are largely targeted, there have been some interesting implications for men's experiences of fathering. Recent work has documented the experiences of men grappling with shifting ideals of a more intensive, 'involved' fatherhood (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011; Shirani, Henwood and Coltart, 2012) and the tensions this may generate in producing a gender-equitable division of labour (Faircloth, 2021).

Katherine Twamley grounds her research on couple parenting in the sociology of intimacy and relationality (Connell, 2002), with motherhood and fatherhood seen as contingent and interrelated (Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2007). Parents negotiate their roles together within a socially constructed and moralised context that frames understandings of 'mother' and 'father'. This work also draws on the proposition that intimacy ideals mediate couples' divisions of labour based on previous research that found that (childless) women were willing to ignore instances of inequality if they felt 'loved' by their partners (Jamieson, 2012; Twamley, 2014). Using parental leave as a lens to explore the intersections of intimacy with gender equality, Twamley's research explores how couples navigate the divisions of paid and unpaid work at the transition to parenthood. Like the work of O'Brien and Wall (2017), she found that while many fathers were keen to be more actively involved in childcare than their fathers before them, as expressed through their take-up of extended parental leave, this did not necessarily equate with desires for practices of 'equality' (Twamley, 2021; O'Brien and Twamley,

2017): they may want a more emotionally involved relationship with their child, but in practice they take on less childcare and domestic work than mothers. Linked to this, women's distrust in men's willingness to participate in housework (not care work), encourages some women to block their partners from taking parental leave, in order to protect their own relationship with their child (Twamley, 2019). Those women who do seek to achieve more equal divisions of paid and unpaid work rarely ground their negotiations in appeals to equality, but more often position the man as more powerful in the negotiations, even when women earn more. These women may encourage take-up of leave but are unable to shift the balance in their partners' share of household work and childcare.

Faircloth's recent work (2021) has also looked at the tensions that occur when couples become parents. Her findings suggest that new parents are caught in an uncomfortable confluence between competing discourses around ideal relationships and those around ideal parenting. On the one hand, they feel they must be committed to egalitarian ideals about the division of care. On the other, they must parent 'intensively', in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers, and which makes paternal involvement more complicated. Drawing largely on the narratives of couples who have faced relationship difficulties, Faircloth's work points to the social pressures at play in raising the next generation in material, physiological and cultural ways. She suggests that an 'intensive' mothering ideology has *negative* implications for couples, having the potential to displace men and making it harder for them to know how to be 'involved' (and easier for them to 'check out') at the same time as heaping demands on women and leaving them overwhelmed.

Twamley and Faircloth jointly addressed the tensions between the three dominant discourses of 'modern parenting': intensive parenting cultures, couple intimacy, and gender equality concerning the negotiation of paid and unpaid work (Twamley and Faircloth, 2022). They show that where 'gender consciousness' amongst men is high, employment constraints continue to loom large – that is, even if men want to adopt a more 'gender equal' pattern of parenting, there remain material and cultural barriers to this being realised. Gendered practices endure even amongst those who are best resourced in terms of financial, social and cultural capital. This work therefore draws attention to a 'culture-policy' gap (Twamley and Schober, 2019), which makes fathers' active engagement in parenting and domestic work difficult. Given the power of these discourses in the context of the constraints of full-time work, unsurprisingly men and women had changeable and differing perspectives on 'equality': sometimes they rely on an idea of '50/50', while at other

times on ‘balance’, ‘fairness’ or ‘breaking gendered roles’, making it easy to rationalise a variety of domestic set-ups as ‘equitable’ when they might otherwise be read as anything but (Twamley and Faircloth, 2022).

Fathers during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic afforded a critical moment to assess changes in the gender ordering of domestic life and children’s care, with media reports at the beginning of lockdown suggesting that the pandemic would provoke radical transformations in men and women’s divisions of paid and unpaid work. TCRU research led by Claire Cameron and Margaret O’Brien examined the experiences of Families in Tower Hamlets (Cameron et al., 2021; Cameron et al., 2022a) in East London; and another study, led by Katherine Twamley, Charlotte Faircloth and Humera Iqbal – Families and Community in the Time of COVID-19 (FACT) – looked both nationally and internationally at the impact of COVID on family life (Twamley, Faircloth and Iqbal, 2022; Twamley, Iqbal and Faircloth, 2023).

While the repercussions of the pandemic were huge, with many parents juggling full-time childcare and schooling with full-time paid work, the FACT study found no radical transformation in gendered divisions of labour in the UK (Carroll et al., 2022). Rather, the distribution of care and housework remained largely unchanged, albeit with more hours undertaken overall, findings confirmed by time-use studies conducted during the first UK lockdown in April 2020 (Andrew et al., 2020). The reasons for a lack of change are unsurprising. Parents’ division of labour started from an uneven base. The pandemic was seen as an exceptional time and not a moment to challenge the status quo; it was also seen as an event when it made ‘more sense’ for women to take on more unpaid work. By contrast, where fathers were used to long commutes, the lack of a need to commute enabled more participation in childcare and housework, but not gender-equal parenting. In addition, some parents and children expressed enjoyment in spending more time together, despite the challenges that confinement provoked.

The Tower Hamlets longitudinal study targeted poorer households. The researchers found more child caregiving and housework by a minority of fathers, especially when mothers earned the same or more than partners (Cameron et al., 2022b). Some fathers became more involved in the care of the children and routine housework, for example, when they were at home more, when mothers had to leave the house to go to work, or when kin could not help. Also, when employment and welfare benefits

were insecure or erratic, fathers and mothers engaged in new caring and earning practices, even when they contravened the prevailing breadwinning and religious masculinities in their family cultures.

In both the FACT and the Tower Hamlets studies, the kinds and amount of labour undertaken by men and women during lockdowns was strongly influenced by families' socio-economic situation. Participants in Tower Hamlets from lower socio-economic groups struggled to isolate in ways that wealthier families could: they were more likely to work in jobs that meant leaving the house and they had to use public spaces for leisure because they lacked gardens and space at home (Cameron et al., 2022b).

Thus, the gender 'revolution' does not seem to have materialised as a result of the pandemic, although evidence is still emerging (for example, Burgess, Goldman and Davies, 2022). Rather, the pandemic appears to have solidified pre-pandemic intra-household relationships. Even in cases where some change has been observed, its impact on increasing gender equality overall is still unclear.

Concluding reflections

Our findings are a result of TCRU researchers engaging in fatherhood research over a long period of time, from multiple social-science perspectives and using a variety of methods. The unit provided a hub from where new avenues in research were fostered and supported by scholars across generations. Each study built on and contributed to that which had come before, as scholarly advancements always should.

As we have outlined, our research demonstrates how fatherhood in the UK can be told as the story of two revolutions. The first revolution concerned the rise in maternal employment and gender-equal rights in the workplace. Yet, *despite* equality legislation and shared parental leave, the UK's political economy and labour market have remained hostile to parents' employment, as TCRU's research has long demonstrated. Both parents now expect and need to work full-time and, at the upper end of the income distribution, to work more intensively, while lower-earning families' work is characterised by increasingly insecure, often part-time low-paid employment with no guaranteed hours. Differences also relate to place, with limited opportunities for parents in the 'left behind' parts of Britain to join the gender revolution. This spatial polarisation is likely to worsen as the UK government promises further deregulation and as the cost-of-living crisis grows.

The second gender revolution suggests that the cultural lag between mothers and fathers may be beginning to close, with a generational lens pointing to new understandings and expectations of fathering, building on earlier caregiving fatherhood ideals. However, as our research has also suggested, while a minority of fathers are taking on an equal, or greater, share of childcare, many families still divide childcare along more traditional gendered lines. Even when significant disruptions occur, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in which we may have expected gender inequalities to lessen, traditional gendered divisions in care and domestic arrangements tended to endure (see, for example, Frey and Alajääskö, 2021).

The UK's public policy has been less about fostering gender equality, work–family reconciliation and early childhood services and more about promoting an intensive parenting and employment activation agenda that encourages parents to do both more paid work and also spend more time with their children. However, as we have shown, the intensive parenting agenda is in tension with the goals of greater gender equality and couple intimacy. Indeed, even if ‘involving’ fathers more in family life would go some way towards easing the burden of care shouldered by mothers, fathers may experience a similar ‘cultural contradiction’ between the worlds of work and home, without significant institutional change. The current times look uncertain for the next steps in the gender revolution.

Further reading

The reference list for this chapter provides a wealth of academic articles and books to read on fatherhood, but an early popular book by Adrienne Burgess, of the UK's Fatherhood Institute and a long-standing friend of TCRU, remains well worth reading, *Fatherhood Reclaimed* (Burgess, Vermilion, 1997). A recent example of international collaborative thinking on fatherhood is an open-access book from a fascinating seminar hosted by Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, *Engaged Fatherhood for Men, Families and Gender Equality: Healthcare, social policy, and work perspectives* (Grau-Grau, las Heras Maestro and Riley Bowles, Springer, 2021. <https://library.open.org/handle/20.500.12657/50717>). There are several papers on the methodological challenges in understanding how fathers and mothers depict family life, including ‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave: Experiences of doing “multiple perspectives” research in families’ (Harden, Backett-Milburn, Hill and MacLean (2010)

International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 13 (5), 441–52). Finally, the French social historian Ivan Jablonka provides an enlightened read on the challenges societies, families and individual men still face in creating gender justice, in *A History of Masculinity: From patriarchy to gender justice* (Jablonka, Allen Lane, 2022).

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Part III

**Innovative social-research
methodologies**

Introduction to Part III

Alison Lamont

In [Part III](#) we depart from the Thomas Coram Research Unit's (TCRU) substantive areas of interest to look at our innovative work in methods and methodologies. As a deliberately multidisciplinary research unit, TCRU has pursued both quantitative and qualitative research since its inception and, most prominently, also developed mixed-methods research to draw the rich texture of qualitative findings into conversation with the broad patterns and population-level insights garnered from quantitative work. This preference for mixed-methods approaches continues, as shown in [Chapter 18](#). Perhaps the most creative areas of methodological innovation at TCRU have been the qualitative approaches which predominate in this section, but our leading work in social statistics and computational work in the 1970s and 1980s should not be overlooked, nor the extensive experience of secondary analysis of official statistics ([Tizard, 2003](#)).

The wealth of methodological approaches we have collectively developed and advanced is beyond what is presented here: notable omissions include the NOVELLA (Narratives of Varied Everyday Lives and Linked Approaches) project led by Ann Phoenix and others at TCRU between 2011–14, which sought to develop narrative approaches to data but also to find ways to reuse qualitative data. A key innovation of this project was to bring three separate projects (on parenting identity and practices; family and food; and family and environment) together through a shared methodological focus on narratives (for example, [Phoenix and Brannen, 2014](#)). This project was a node of the National Centre of Research Methods' Economic and Social Research Council-funded grant, and resulted in sustained methodological reflection, the development of new methods and practical research methods training. Other major programmes which factored in innovation in methods include the use of coproduction methods in ActEarly ([Islam et al., 2022](#)), funded by the UK

Prevention Research Partnership, and the use of visual methods in a cross-national context in the EU-funded Care Work in Europe study (Cameron and Moss, 2007). Our leadership in methodological work, as well as the development of distinct methods, is reflected in the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, a scholarly journal cofounded by Julia Brannen at TCRU. The journal has successfully become a forum where methodological discussions and developments across qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods can be shared internationally and across the social-science disciplines.

Chapters in Part III showcase just some of the disciplinary work we do: Chapters 14 and 17 are rooted in social psychology; Chapter 15 is contributed by two of our resident anthropologists and a political sociologist; and Chapters 16, 18 and 19 sit under the umbrella of sociology. This multidisciplinary environment has helped us draw on the often-similar methodological debates that happen in a siloed way in different fields, for example around issues of power and positionality. As Hoque, Galton and Redclift reflect in Chapter 15, TCRU anthropologists sitting outside an anthropology department still find plenty of areas of overlap and commonality with psychologists and sociologists in how to approach and understand research questions. This is helped by a shared core of values that is at the heart of all TCRU research, centring around social justice and the importance of finding how to hear and report the stories of participants in ways they would recognise as appropriate and accurate, and which meet the rigours of social-science research ethics. Nowhere is this concern more unifying than in our methodological work.

Unsurprisingly for a unit with a 50-year interest in understanding children and children's services, researchers at TCRU have led the way in developing methods that meaningfully rely on children's voices. Clark's work in Chapter 16 reflects on the material funding requirements for methodological innovation in this field. Clark also raises the challenge that research with child participants has had in being taken seriously, an issue that is also noted in Chapter 17. However, these chapters also document the persistence of TCRU colleagues in overcoming funding challenges, and in translating the knowledge that was needed to persuade a wider policy and academic audience to recognise children as experts in their own worlds. The chapters here trace these complexities across disciplinary fields and across different areas of policy interest, including children being raised in same-sex or gender nonbinary families, children who have migrated and act as interpreters for their adult family members, as well as children and young people in other areas of life.

Throughout the chapters there is an underlying recognition that research co-constructs realities, and so the research that we do, how we do it, and how we represent our findings, matter. Iqbal, Crafter and Prokopiou's work (Chapter 14) draws together the stories of children from different backgrounds sharing the same challenge and invites them to collaboratively write a shared story that connects their unique experiences, and in doing so build a sense of shared experience and community. Clark (Chapter 16) raises epistemological and ontological discussions that would not be alien to STS (science and technology studies) researchers and the ontological turn in sociology more widely: the Mosaic approach demands both professional and epistemological humility of those deploying the toolkit to create conditions in which children are, first, understood as having things to say, and second, that what children say can be heard by adults. Brannen and O'Connell (Chapter 18) address epistemological questions in a pincer manoeuvre, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a multifaceted and deep understanding of approaches to food by families in hard times, and what food poverty 'means' in different places. Hoque, Galton and Redclift (Chapter 15) demonstrate that by taking seriously the challenge of communicating who we are, and the questions we want to answer, our relationships in the field can shift and change our relationships to our research projects on a personal level, reminding us that researchers are as human and complex as the participants we work with. The key questions of identity, intersectionality and the problem of interpretation and representation emerge here, and throughout.

Our humanity and the core of TCRU values appear throughout this section as questions, variously expressed, about being able to 'hear' and interpret the worldview of participants with hugely different experiences to the researchers' own. In this sense TCRU has always valued an interpretivist understanding of social research, understanding that social experience can be multiple and contradictory even within groups presumed to be at least relatively homogenous. From this intersectionally-informed perspective, the centrality of lived experience emerges as the focusing lens through which to navigate ideas of truth and what is 'really' going on. It is the duty of our methods, therefore, to capture as clearly as possible the views and voices of those who have volunteered their time and energy to participate in our programmes of research. This positioning has led to a long engagement with participatory methods (Chapter 19), spurred innovation for the creation of new approaches such as the Mosaic approach (Chapter 16) and allowed for the fruitful critical appraisal and adaptation of 'traditional' methods (Chapter 14, 15 and 17).

Introducing the chapters in this section in more detail, [Chapter 14](#) by Humera Iqbal and her co-researchers Sarah Crafter (Open University), and Evangelia Prokopiou (Northampton University) showcases TCRU's work both with children and in the field of migration. By exploring how children communicate their experiences of interpreting for their parents, Iqbal, Crafter and Prokopiou open spaces for children to reflect (or refuse to reflect) on the pressures that this brings, and what it means for them to have a shared space with other child language brokers. Drawing on methods that have emerged from therapeutic settings, the authors show how the data generated can be ambiguous and intriguing but allow the participants to experience themselves as connected and supported by peers. The difficulty of communication is highlighted here both in terms of the topic approached (children who have English as an additional language that they use to translate for their parents living in the UK) and the difficulty of bridging linguistic and adult-child divides in communication between researchers and participants. This theme is returned to in [Chapter 19](#), as well as in the following chapter.

In [Chapter 15](#), Jon Galton, Ash Hoque and Victoria Redclift take up the emergent theme of communication from the view of two anthropologists and a sociologist reflecting on their research practice with participants who are variously like and unlike themselves. Hoque and Galton's discussion of their own journey into anthropology, and their reflections on how to conceptualise their always-complex and always-dynamic relationship with research participants is a helpful tonic to the 'insider/outsider' dichotomy that can sometimes be presented as binary and static. The international and transnational focus of Hoque and Galton's work is a further reflection of TCRU's long tradition of looking within and beyond English examples to trace continuities and connections as well as alternatives and differences of experience. As methods from the ethnographic toolkit have long been part of TCRU's work, this discussion finds resonance and response from Redclift as a political sociologist, whose response to Hoque and Galton situates the discussion in conversation with the methodological literature around positionality.

[Chapter 16](#) picks up some of this idea of positionality in a different context, as Alison Clark gives a summary of the Mosaic approach that she pioneered at TCRU. This approach to doing research with children has been very successful and is now used in different contexts and countries around the world by researchers and practitioners in a range of disciplines. Her work picks up the challenges to methodology brought by childhood studies in thinking about what it means to research 'with' children, and to what extent adult researchers can understand children in their own terms.

It is notable that where Iqbal, Crafter and Prokopiou ([Chapter 14](#)) draw on a method developed in therapy, the flexibility and utility of Clark's Mosaic approach has found it being drawn into use in therapeutic work.

[Chapter 17](#) showcases the contemporary work TCRU has done with children in the field of psychology. Catherine Jones, Sophie Zadeh and Susan Imrie review four projects of which they have been part, looking at how children understand the idea of family, particularly in the context of 'modern' family forms of same-sex, trans and gender-non-binary parenting. Work that seeks to capture children's understanding of their own family, and to give empirical weight to the idea that children in diverse family forms thrive in loving contexts, is vital to anchoring these often-contentious debates in children's own lived experiences. This research team also reflects TCRU's long connection with researchers from the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge, where this chapter's co-authors all worked before coming to TCRU.

In [Chapter 18](#), the political importance of finding methods that can account for children's experiences is further highlighted. Continuing their collaboration from the NOVELLA project, Julia Brannen and Rebecca O'Connell reflect on the history and context of their international and mixed-method study for understanding family's food practices during the hard times following the 2008 recession across Europe. This chapter ably situates methods as more than just a step in the research process but as also of crucial importance to research funders, and how good methods depend on good interpersonal relationships across research teams. As the work here shows, good communication within research teams about the how and why of method is a vital component of enabling collaboration and research which can speak meaningfully across borders. This research continued the mixed-methods work Brannen pioneered in TCRU in the 1980s and draws on O'Connell's expertise in anthropology. They build a skilful discussion of the complexity and scale of the support and ongoing mentoring this kind of multinational work requires to succeed in practice.

The closing chapter of this section, [Chapter 19](#), also exhibits this sense of a continued story of methodological expertise developing and advancing at TCRU. Veena Meetoo, Hanan Hauari and Ann Phoenix trace the early work in participatory methods at TCRU before Meetoo and Hauari introduce two recent projects they have been part of, one at UCL and one in a multi-university project, both seeking to find ways to collaborate with marginalised young people, with the aim of sharing their experiences with a wider audience. In terms of policy relevance, this kind of participatory method has transformative potential to allow the voices of marginalised people to be heard in places of power. This closing chapter

brings us full circle to connect with [Chapter 14](#) in thinking about what kind of stories young people can tell if given space to be heard, and how the telling of those stories is, in itself, an intervention into the social world.

Together, these chapters document a long history of methodologically engaged research which seeks to inform policy by creating representations of children's and marginalised people's perspectives that are grounded in their lived reality and enlivened by their voices. The careful attention paid to a core of methodological insights – that communication is always imperfect (and so must be worked on); that power is always present (and so must be attended to); and that narratives are never simple (and so require committed listeners) – connects TCRU in the 1970s to TCRU today.

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Collecting stories of identity and culture with young people: the Synallactic Collective Image Technique

Humera Iqbal, Sarah Crafter
and Evangelia Prokopiou

Introduction

The leader of an arts-based workshop, Evangelia, has asked the young people involved to consider a time they translated or interpreted and to think about how they were feeling. One young man named Tariq looks unsure and mumbles, 'I don't got feelings' and then asks the question more loudly: 'do you have feelings when you translate, do you have feelings?'. A couple of his friends smile but no one replies. Throughout the workshop he casts sideways looks at the others' drawings. In the end, with a black pen he draws an oval face, with two round circles for eyes that are blank in the middle. The face has a little bit of hair, a line for a nose and a round circle for the mouth. The only bit of colour is a red tongue in the mouth. It is a stark face, for its lack of detail. For his story Tariq writes: 'don't have any story about translating, mean I do but don't really remember them', and 'don't have any feelings while I am translating', and on the back of his drawing he writes '#Nofeelings' and, a little further down the page, 'Concern'.

This excerpt is drawn from an arts-based workshop which was part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, based at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) between 2014–17. The project

focused on child language brokers; children and young people who translate and interpret for family members, peers and the local community. We were broadly concerned with exploring how child language brokers acted as both cultural and linguistic mediators of knowledge and what impact this had on their sense of identity and belonging. Methodologically this presented a challenge because cultural knowledge has an intangible quality and can be hard to put into words. One oft-noted feature of child language brokering that is particularly salient for this chapter, is that 'brokering' implies an activity beyond word-for-word translation and interpretation. Rather, young people are said to be the mediators of cultural knowledge, values, systemic and institution knowledge and in some cases, a kind of bridge or link between the home culture and the public world (Orellana, 2009; Jones, Trickett and Birman, 2012; Nash, 2017). Consequently, when we set out on this project, we considered that it might be challenging to capture these aspects of child language brokering through purely talk-based methods. In addition, we were conscious that our child language brokers might still be in the early stages of learning one or more of their languages. Therefore, we sought to provide multiple avenues to our participants to express themselves by using a combination of arts-based methods (drama, podcast and art workshops) alongside more traditional qualitative social-science methods, which included vignette interviews (see Crafter and Iqbal, 2020; 2022; Iqbal and Crafter, 2022).

In this chapter, we focus on one of our arts-based workshops that employed the Synallactic Collective Image Technique (SCIT), a technique used for sharing personal and collective stories, memories and experiences. In this instance, we brought together a group of young language brokers (aged 13–16) who took part in a SCIT workshop. Through sharing individual drawings and narratives of personal experiences of language brokering, interpersonal transactions within the group unfold. Research on language brokering already had a precedence within TCRU. For example, the Transforming Experiences: Re-Conceptualising Identities and 'Non-Normative' Childhoods project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and led by Professor Ann Phoenix, used narrative and life-story methods with adult brokers to reflect on their past experiences. This, and other work, led to important collaborations and outputs with Professor Marjorie Orellana and Dr Elaine Bauer. The research detailed in this chapter focuses on work with young people who were active language brokers at the time of research. Our use of an arts-based approach for working with children also aligns

with past work at TCRU such as Alison Clark (see [Chapter 16](#)) and Veena Meetoo and colleagues in their participatory approach (see [Chapter 19](#)).

Methodological approaches to gathering data about child language brokering

The research field of child language brokering has attracted a rich disciplinary and interdisciplinary range of methodological approaches. In the mid-90s, when the study of child language brokering began as a distinct field of research, a key concern was understanding the prevalence, form and intensity of the practice, or what Jones and Trickett (2005: 408) refer to as the ‘who, what, where, and how of brokering’. On the whole, data-collection methodologies employed at this time were quantitative measures in the form of language-brokering surveys (Tse, 1996; Buriel et al., 1998), though McQuillan and Tse (1995) also undertook interviews. Several studies have since developed and adapted different versions of the language-brokering experiences and proficiency scales (see Weiskirch and Alva, 2002; Crafter, Cline and Prokopiou, 2017; Morales and Wang, 2018; Rainey et al., 2019). In addition, and at about this time and continuing today, a strong tradition of using quantitative approaches to capture the emotional, relational and behavioural impacts of the practice emerged within the child language-brokering research.

Psychologically oriented research has been interested in focusing on the relationships between child language brokering and emotional traits, by using scales that are designed to measure, for example, depression, mood and anxiety (Rainey et al., 2014; Kim, Hou and Gonzalez, 2017; Arellano et al., 2018) as well as more general psychological wellbeing (Tomasi and Narchal, 2020). Studies linking emotions to behaviours have tended to focus on the link between the negative stressors of language brokering and any ensuing unhealthy coping behaviours, such as substance misuse (Kam, 2011; Kam and Lazarevic, 2014). Within this, framing parent–child relationships have linked traits such as depression, anxiety and distress, with concepts like parental bonds or feelings of attachment (Kim, Hou and Gonzalez, 2017; Arellano et al., 2018). While these approaches have provided the field with important information, many of these studies have taken a negatively oriented approach to child language brokering, which in part was operationalised through the choice of methodology (Mier-Chairez et al., 2019; Crafter, 2023). There are exceptions, such as studies by Kam, Guntzviller and Pines (2017), Guan and Shen (2015) and Guan, Greenfield and Orellana (2014), who

include positive features such as prosocial capacities, parental praise and empathetic concern.

Nevertheless, the ways in which child language brokering is framed and studied depends on the theoretical and epistemological stance taken. Sociological and critical-psychological orientations towards child language brokering adopt an approach that views child language brokering as a socioculturally and historically embedded practice within the family. This is a framing that is strongly shared by all the child language brokering work that has taken place within TCRU. These critical and socioculturally located bodies of work seek to employ methodologies that tap into the relationship between dynamic personal experiences that may change across time and context and be influenced by immigration regimes, and structural and institutional inequalities (Orellana and Phoenix, 2016; Crafter and Iqbal, 2020; 2022; Phoenix and Orellana, 2021; Iqbal and Crafter, 2022). In line with this, the methodological approaches employed have tended to be qualitative or combine both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Examples include ethnographic-style studies inclusive of in-depth observations, recordings of naturally occurring conversations, journal entries and interviews (see Ceccoli, 2022; García-Sánchez, 2014; Orellana, 2009); and narrative, biographical or episodic interviewing which sought to explore 'non-normative' stories (Orellana and Phoenix, 2016; Crafter, Cline and Prokopiou, 2017; Sherman and Homoláč, 2017; Phoenix and Orellana, 2021). Beyond standard semi-structured interviewing, vignette interviewing in the form of presenting short story scenarios have arguably captured complex and multifaceted identity positions (O'Dell et al., 2012; Crafter et al., 2015; Crafter and Iqbal, 2020). More unusual in the field are arts-based approaches that may be used as a stimulus to capture stories through participatory artwork elicitation (Toressi, 2017; Crafter and Iqbal, 2019).

The research study and using SCIT

Who took part in this workshop

We write elsewhere about the wider project which sought to investigate child language brokers' own understandings of how cultural knowledge is mediated during brokering encounters (Crafter and Iqbal, 2020; 2022; Iqbal and Crafter, 2022). For the purposes of this chapter, we draw on data from an arts-based workshop led by the third author, Evangelia

Prokopiou. We chose to write about this particular method here due to its effectiveness in eliciting group discussions amongst young people on often sensitive social topics (aligning with other work at TCRU). Furthermore, very little has been written about it from an academic perspective, since the approach was initially developed as a therapeutic tool (see Prokopiou, 2007).

The workshop took place in a secondary school in Greater London on a Saturday morning. Ten young people who were aged between 13 and 16 years attended the workshop. Five workshop participants had been interviewed by us previously for the study, while five others responded to a general invitation from the English as an Additional Language coordinator in the school. Most of the young people in the group had undertaken transnational journeys before arriving in the UK and spoke at least two other languages in addition to English. Some of the young people belonged to an informal ‘young interpreters club’ set up by a teaching assistant at their school, which they chose to be a part of, and all of them were active language brokers for their families at the time of the workshop. Some young people also helped with interpreting activities at school, such as supporting new students who did not speak English. Given this, the topic of language brokering was one they were familiar with.

Table 14.1 on the following page shows the details of our participants as they were provided to us by the young people themselves. While the sample is varied in terms of country of origin, the young people were of similar ages, attended the same school and shared the commonality of being a member of the ‘young interpreters club’. They also all knew each other. This was the first time the children had engaged with the SCIT activity.

The SCIT approach

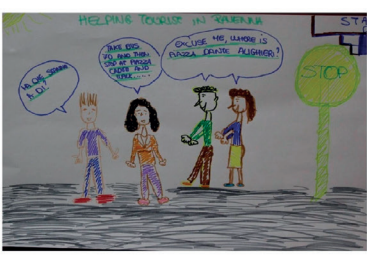
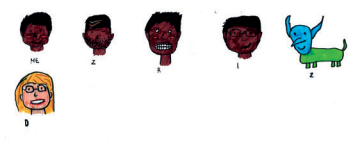
The Synallactic Collective Image Technique (SCIT) was developed in the Greek context to be used within systemic psychotherapy by Vassiliou and Vassiliou (1981). The term synallactic roughly translates into ‘transactional’ and denotes a ‘free multilateral transaction of all the participants taking part in the group; each participant is in process with all other participants’ (Prokopiou, 2017: 72). A modified version of this technique was used to fit within the wider study’s objectives, around understanding child language brokering and cultural mediation. The young people are asked to bring their own perspectives, memories and emotions of their experiences. Evangelia, the third author, was invited by the research team to deliver the SCIT workshop which was titled ‘Let ME

Name	Country of origin	Age arrived in England	Family languages other than English
Kukomo	Nigerian origin but born in Italy	14 years	Italian and Igbo
Estera	Polish	13 years	Polish
Marta	Polish	Unknown	Polish
Hristo	Bulgarian	14 years	Bulgarian
Sadir	Bengali origin but born in Italy	Unknown	Italian and Bengali
Tariq	Bengali origin but born in Italy	Unknown	Italian and Bengali
Makin	Origin unknown, came to the UK via Italy	Unknown	Unknown
Samadhi	Sri Lankan origin but born in Italy	15 years	Italian and Sinhalese
Elijah	Bengali origin but born in Italy	14 years	Italian
Ellora	Mauritian and Indian but born in Italy	13 years	Italian, Creole, Hindi and French

Table 14.1 Participant details.

tell you OUR Story ...'. She has previously used this method in different research projects (Prokopiou, 2007). The procedure is as follows:

1. Each young person is given a sheet of white paper and a set of coloured pens. They were given the following instructions: 'Think about a specific occasion where you translated for someone else in a specific setting (school, GP surgery, bank, market, etc.) and try to identify within yourself how you feel. When you feel ready, choose whatever colours you want and try to express this feeling on the paper with a drawing that will depict this occasion'.
2. Following this, on a separate piece of paper, they were asked to describe what was depicted in the drawing, how they felt when they had this experience, how they were feeling whilst drawing it and to give the drawing a title.
3. The young people were then invited to sit in a circle and to bring together their individual drawings.



#U

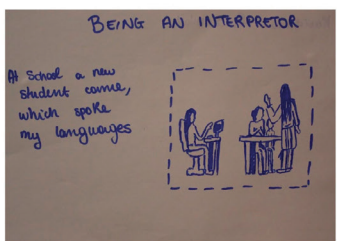
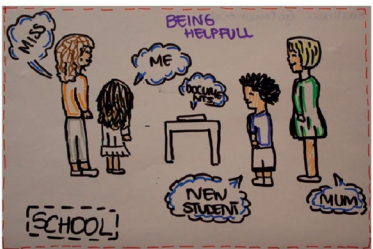
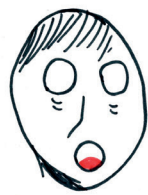
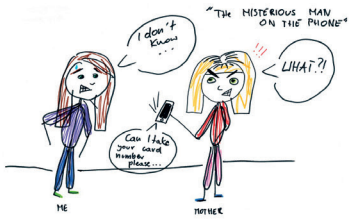


Figure 14.1 The collection of images laid out in order (left to right, top row to bottom, like the illustrations in a comic.). Source: Authors.

4. Group members then voted on which drawing should start the 'collective story' and it was placed on the floor where everyone could see it. The young people described their story.
5. In turn, a vote was cast for the next drawing to be placed in the sequence and represented a 'chapter' in the story. The last young person writes the final 'chapter' by laying down their drawing and telling the group about it.
6. Finally, this was followed by a facilitated group discussion whereby a group theme is established, highlighting how their personal stories are similar and different and how a personal story can be a collective story for young people sharing the same experience. [Figure 14.1](#) shows how the final drawings were placed in an order.

The final collective story was made into a book and given to the young people. For dissemination purposes it was eventually re-illustrated in the form of a comic book.

Examining the individual and collective accounts of the language brokers

Reflecting the steps taken in the workshop, we divide our findings into two sections. The first focuses on key themes reflected in individual accounts from the young people's drawings and short narratives of language brokering. The second focuses on the wider collective discussion around brokering shared by the group once all the drawings had been laid out and the young people voted for the order they would take, in the form of a book. It is important to reiterate here that the children were active brokers for their families and in using this method our intention was to give them a space to reflect on this practice, be it positive, negative or neutral. Some teenagers actively identified as being child language brokers, while for others, this was not an important part of their sense of self.

Individual accounts of brokering

The young people's drawings and stories included the discussion of: (1) language brokering as (un)belonging; (2) language brokering as a means to provide support; and lastly, (3) language brokering in situations of conflict.

Language brokering as un(belonging)

While most of the group members depicted a drawing involving the interactions between adults and young people, Sadir focuses on a 'language club' within the school (see [Figure 14.2](#)). The club was run during the school day by a teaching assistant within the English as an Additional Language department and was very highly attended. There is an interesting dialogical relationship between his drawing and his narrative because he individually named his friends in the drawing of the club and yet the narrative writeup takes a storytelling approach by describing them in the third person, 'All the character¹ present in the drawing are in a language club'. This opening line suggests a shared social identity and sense of belonging. Equally, Sadir's story points to the diversity within the group when he says that 'Each of them speak a different languages' while stating that 'English is the language in common'. For Sadir, membership of the club legitimised their linguistic repertoire of English, the non-native language for all here, although he positions the 'secondary languages' of the club as Bengali, Polish and Italian.

Thereafter, Sadir begins to write his story in the first person. He writes about how when he started in the language club he 'felt very confident'. Over time, this has not changed but he finds value as 'we are also enjoying in group'.

To Sadir the club seems to represent more than a space to practice English language. Sadir's narrative suggests it was a realm in which migrant youth could come together in a friendly space. This is important as child brokers can often find themselves in asymmetrical power relations and spaces dominated by adults ([Iqbal and Crafter, 2022](#)).

We began our chapter with the example of a young person in the arts workshop group named Tariq, who appeared to struggle to foreground his language-brokering practice as an element of his identity. In his drawing he depicts a self-portrait which is actively minimalist. In his story he writes: 'don't have any story about translating, mean I do but don't really remember them', and 'don't have any feelings while I am translating'. As other members of the workshop begin their drawings, he looks somewhat lost and asks Evangelia the generic question: 'Do you have feelings when you translate?'. Underneath his story text he writes the hashtag #Nofeelings and a little further down the page he has added 'Concern'. He didn't want to tell a story about his drawing and he exercised his right to not do so. Consequently, we cannot say why he chose to do a fairly stark drawing (see [Figure 14.3](#)). The

reason for this could be that Tariq does not foreground his translating as part of his self-identity, or because he didn't feel confident/proud about the practice. It could also be a mode of resistance and reclaiming power, through self-exclusion.

It is interesting to contrast Sadir's image with Tariq's, as Tariq, unlike Sadir, depicts his language brokering as something singular and individual, rather than being a social activity or as something which fostered a sense of belonging with other young people at school. He struggles to situate anyone else except himself in the frame of practice.



Figure 14.2 'The young interpreter club' by Sadir.² Source: Authors.



Figure 14.3 '#Nofeelings' by Tariq. Source: Authors.

The helpful mediators

From other images (such as those of Samadhi and Ellora), we find aspects of sharing and providing support as common themes associated with language brokering. In her image, Figure 14.4a, 'being helpful', Samadhi is acting as the mediator between a new pupil, their parent and the school, through her interpreting work. She is in a complex interactional language-brokering dynamic with Samadhi, two adults (the parent and her teacher) as well as the new student. Ellora's work, Figure 14.4b, titled 'being an interpreter', shows a picture of a young interpreter in discussion

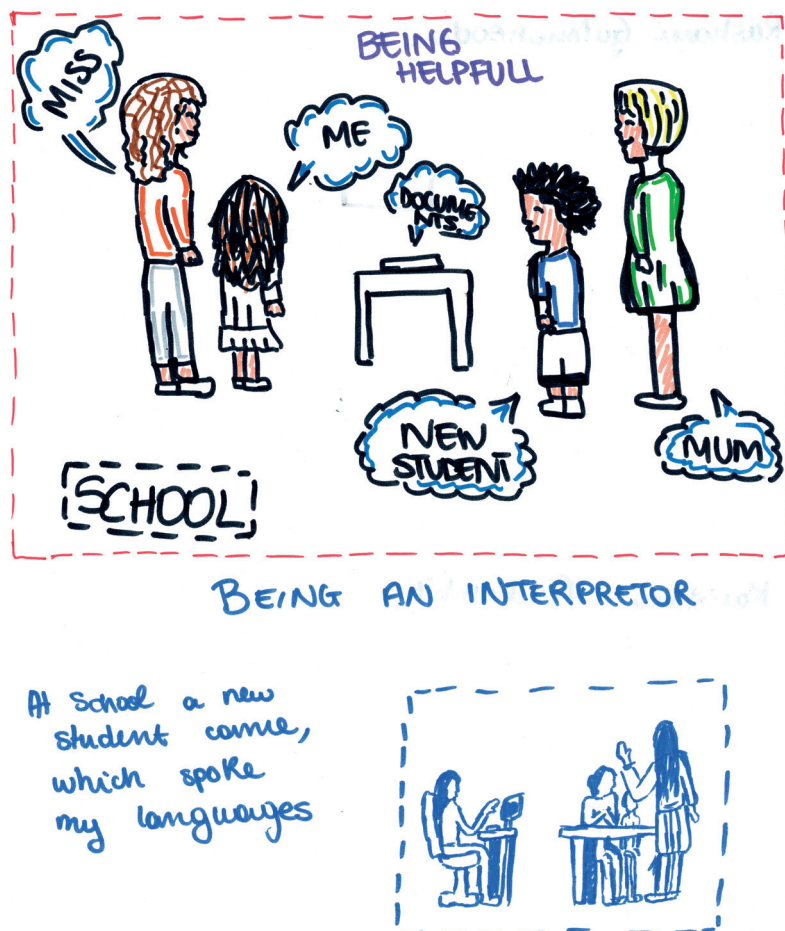


Figure 14.4 (a) 'Being helpful' by Samadhi; (b) 'Being an interpreter' by Ellora. Source: Authors.

with other students. Ellora explained that it was the role of language brokers to offer advice, knowledge and help to new students with shared home languages.

In both depictions, the parents and new students are recent arrivals to the country.

In these images, we get a sense of the advocacy work and cultural mediation that child language brokers can perform. We see their ability to link between two cultures: the home and the institution (here, the school). For example, Ellora's work shows her ability to explain 'the rules' or in essence, describe a new school system. Samadhi similarly understands that her role is to 'translate information about the school, uniform and paperwork'. Here, she is speaking as the dominating voice of the 'white public space' (Reynolds and Orellana, 2009).

For Samadhi and Ellora, their narratives reflect on both the past and the present. Samadhi, for example, continues to help introduce new pupils in the school, to the point that: 'Now it become usual to help other students'. Ellora's activities are written up in the past tense and therefore framed as something that she used to do. She enjoyed feeling 'helpful' but finishes her narrative by saying: 'I don't know how I feel about it now'. The doubts that surfaced at the end of Ellora's narratives are also evident in Hristo's story, see Figure 14.5, about helping to register his sister into primary school on behalf of his parents. He wrote in his story that: 'I feeled very nervous from the fact that I will make mistake or I would be

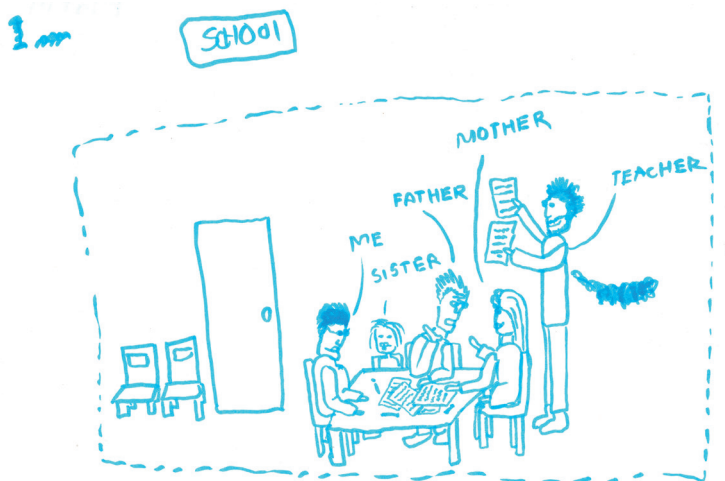


Figure 14.5 Drawing showing Hristo brokering for his parents, in order to get his sister registered at school. Source: Authors.

confused to translate something'. While his nervousness is very understandable, he framed it as 'very bad' and suggested instead that: 'You must be calm and don't worry about anything'.

Language brokering in situations of conflict

Estera and Marta both discussed instances of brokering in situations of conflict or unequal power relations. Estera's story is titled 'the mysterious man on the phone' (see Figure 14.6) and depicts a real-life situation where Estera was acting as an interpreter for her mother and a bank employee who was on the phone. Interpreting phone conversations is one type of practice that brokers have reported as doing frequently (Antonini, 2010). The bank employee was asking Estera's mother for financial details and Estera, who was 13 years old at the time, found the questions challenging and difficult to interpret. Estera's confusion and hesitation was also causing her mother to feel frustrated. Estera further explains her feelings in her story:

'Usually, my mum needs to phone someone very important like the bank and she asks me to translate it to her in Polish. Previously I couldn't understand most of it which was always making my mum angry and me very nervous. I felt that the pressure that made me feel stressed.'

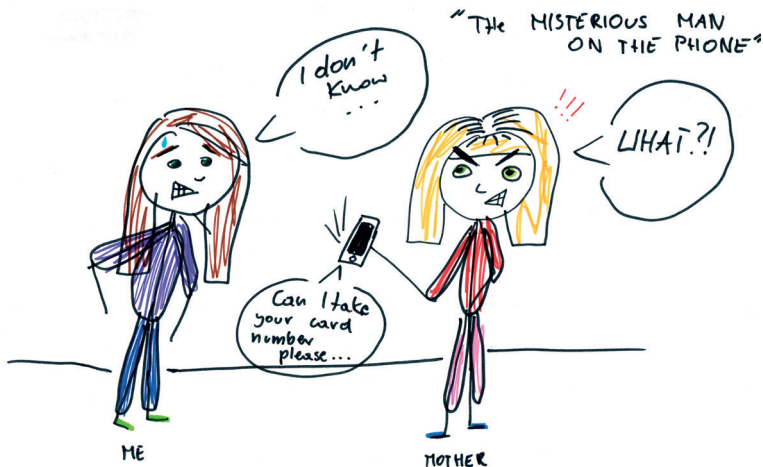


Figure 14.6 'The mysterious man on the phone' by Estera. Source: Authors.

Like Samadhi and Ellora, Estera's narrative weaves together her feelings of brokering from the past with the present. It is also of note that Estera's story involves a financial institution where arguably the stakes are higher. The coalescing of her mother's anger and her own nervousness leads her to then write: 'I hate that feeling when I can't translate something. Because of that I had to learn more and more of both languages'. Over time these feelings have improved: 'Now, I feel more confident but still quite unsure of some phrases'. However, that feeling of conflict and uncertainty remains present as she writes: 'I am avoiding translating or interpreting to my parents. I hate it'.

Similar to Estera's account, Marta discusses the tensions and difficulties she experienced while brokering, in her drawing titled 'A witch at the Bank'. In this drawing, shown in Figure 14.7, Marta depicts her and her mother going to the bank. Clearly, interpreting in a financial setting has the potential to be difficult and stressful. Marta depicts this situation being made worse by the two key adults in the situation, her mother and the bank assistant. She feels that: 'I usually can't understand it and makes my mum angry'. Equally, there is a hostile bank assistant or as Marta describes it: 'There's the monster lady who is waiting for us'.

In the end, Marta blames herself for the adults' responses, saying: 'In a situation like this I feel confused because I am not sure if I am good translating ... and that's it'.



Figure 14.7 'A witch at the Bank' by Marta. Source: Authors.

Let ME tell you OUR Story: the collective narrative

Following the creation of individual accounts, the young people came together to share their stories with one another, with space to debate, share stories and express emotion. It was agreed that the collective story would follow the experiences of a group of young people who were part of a language club, with Sadir's image starting the book. During the discussion, Estera reflected on the challenges she felt the group members faced which made their situation shared and unique:

'I think most of us came here without speaking English language so we didn't speak English at first and it was hard for us because people didn't really understand us, especially the British people who live here forever they don't understand the struggle we have had.'

Estera's comment resonates with Sadir's depiction of the young interpreters club where the shared sense of belonging centres around speaking multiple languages or having English as an additional language. Estera goes a step further by highlighting the shared hardship associated with migration when you can't speak the local language. Later in the discussion, Evangelia probed this point further with Estera, and Kukomo joins the discussion:

Estera: We are kind of similar, like everyone who is coming here is kind of new, has the same story. We all come from different background and stuff but we are all kind of similar.

Evangelia: And do you think it is important to share stories about experiences?

Estera: I think it is about support. We support each other in some way.

Evangelia: How do you do this?

Kukomo: By telling each other our problems and situations we have passed through and seeing if one of us have passed through it as well.

Evangelia: And how can this be supportive?

Estera: Cause you don't feel alone.

All of these young people were active brokers for their families, and as we see from individual accounts, sometimes taking on much responsibility in adult spaces. We see from the above discussion the importance of the school and the young interpreters club in providing a space for support, company and safety for our young participants.

Concluding reflections

In this chapter we have shared our experiences of using a modified version of the Synallactic Collective Image Technique (SCIT), an arts-based method used for understanding individual and shared stories of language brokering. We focused on the nuances depicted in the individual drawings and stories of the young language brokers, as well as the collective transactional story created as a group. While the SCIT approach was just one part of a wider set of qualitative social science and arts-based approaches we utilised, we found it particularly useful when working with young people discussing potentially complex and socially sensitive issues. Perhaps this in part is due to its therapeutic groundings, in that it enables participants to think deeply about their personal experiences whilst also creating a shared collective story as a group. The individual stories can gain a new significance when they become part of a collective narrative which can empower and create new spaces of belonging.

The drawings largely depicted two major contexts in which the brokering took place: either at school or at the bank. The young people's responses to these situations reflected varying degrees of feelings mediated by the complexity of the situation and the ensuing impact on key relationships, alongside a reflection on how they felt both in the past and the present. On the point about brokering in a variety of contexts, Orellana, Dorner and Pulido (2003) make a distinction between 'specialised encounters' and 'everyday ways'. They note that 'specialised encounters' that include heightened or dramatic experiences are often experienced as burdensome. Interactions with financial institutions would fit this description and were shown through Estera's and Marta's difficult experiences on the phone and at the bank respectively. Additionally, as we have reported from our interview data, these kinds of encounters can heighten tensions between parents and children, particularly when faced with a hostile adult in a position of authority, as reflected in the drawings (Crafter and Iqbal, 2020; 2022; Iqbal and Crafter, 2022).

School is a complex context to unpick. On the one hand school is shown through Sadir's narrative as a setting that celebrates multilingualism and creates a sense of shared belonging through their interpreters club. Language brokers are clearly used to support 'everyday' normal encounters between teachers, parents and children. Samadhi and Ellora, for example, seem to have been regularly recruited to help newly arrived pupils and their parents communicate with the school. They enjoyed being 'helpful' and seemed to gain pleasure in demonstrating their knowledge about the 'rules' of the system. Yet, there was a noted ambiguity of feeling when reflecting on the past: 'I don't know how I feel about it now'.

There are limitations to the approach. Like many arts-based techniques, they do not suit all members of a group. Whilst most of the young people took the opportunity to reflect and share a personal memory of language brokering, Tariq struggled with the task. As we described at the beginning of this chapter, he appeared discomfited by the idea that he could not (or did not want to) put to paper a memory of language brokering and held '#Nofeelings' about it. It is not possible to disentangle whether this was because language brokering was not an important part of his life or whether the methodological approach did not sit well with him. Regardless, the approach revealed sometimes subtle ambiguities in the young people's reflections of past encounters. In the end, the collective story paved the way for a shared sense of understanding, that in experiences of some of the challenges of language brokering, the young people were not alone.

Further reading and listening

A detailed description of the study can be found in *Child Language Brokering*, our final project report, available at <https://languagebrokeringidentities.wordpress.com/>. Further, in the BBC Radio 4 documentary titled *Translating for Mum and Dad* and based on our research, you can hear directly about the experiences of being a child language broker: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0005mg0>.

Notes

- 1 Throughout there are grammatical errors in the quoted text but these reflect how the young people wrote themselves.
- 2 All names in this chapter have been changed, including the names shown in drawings and the school's name.

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15

Politics, position and personality in ethnographic research: a conversation and a response

Jonathan Galton, Ashraf Hoque
and Victoria Redclift

Introduction

In this chapter, two anthropologists at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) have a bracingly honest conversation about the methodological and ethical challenges we have faced in our work. Ashraf Hoque reflects on the impulses that led him, as a British Bangladeshi Muslim, to anthropology following the declaration of the ‘War on Terror’, while Jonathan Galton – white, British, secular and queer – considers his very different route into the anthropology of India and, more recently, British queer-Muslim intersectionality. We pick away at the notions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ anthropologists, in the process illustrating how multilayered our positionalities are with respect to our fieldwork (see, for example, [Jones, 1970](#); [Narayan, 1993](#)). We demonstrate that sharing broad-brush identity categories (such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality) with our interlocutors does not always mean that we feel like insiders, or are viewed as such by our interlocutors, although those reading our work may assume otherwise. We also consider the personal qualities that make for effective and ethical anthropology and whether these are innate or learned characteristics, or both, or indeed whether this is a meaningful question. Finally, we discuss the implications of conducting research in

the interdisciplinary environment of TCRU and the opportunities and challenges this brings to us both.

A response to the conversation is provided by Victoria Redclift, a political sociologist at TCRU who has also conducted research in Bangladesh and the UK among Muslim research participants. She takes forward particular points – being ‘placeable’ in the field, and the personal qualities of ethnographers among others – and embeds them in a broader body of literature on ethnographic positionality and decolonising methods. She also offers a compelling vision of what it really means to work in the interdisciplinary ‘family’ of TCRU. Further reading recommendations are provided at the end of the chapter.

The conversation: Ashraf Hoque and Jonathan Galton

Becoming anthropologists

Jonathan Galton (JG): Could we start with you telling me a little bit about your own research and how you’ve come to do it?

Ashraf Hoque (AH): Well, I’m a bit of a synthesiser. I work within different disciplinary intersections, but also thematic ones. I’m interested in migration and diaspora, the anthropology of Islam, and the political economy of South Asia and its diaspora – my work is a synthesis of these various topics.

I studied history at SOAS¹ in the early 2000s, which piqued my interest although I was always going to go on and become a lawyer because that’s what good South Asian boys do. After the declaration of the ‘War on Terror’, and later the 2005 London bombings, I found the public discourse around Islam and Muslims extremely narrow, quite xenophobic and, importantly, it didn’t include the voices of Muslims themselves. There were public intellectuals and politicians who enacted policies that directly affected Muslims without asking Muslims what their perspectives were.

I thought all this was extremely problematic and wondered, in a grandiose way, what can I do to correct this wrong? I’d studied an anthropology module as part of my degree so I had an idea about the ethnographic method² and I realised that anthropology is the discipline we need right now, to humanise all this complexity that seems to frighten people so much.

So I converted to anthropology, and for my PhD went to conduct research in Luton which was regarded at the time as a hotbed for Islamic radicalisation. I studied young, British-born Muslim men, who were the ‘folk devils’ of society then (and arguably still are) and tried to understand their everyday experiences – their aspirations, how they viewed themselves, their relationship with the state, their identity as Muslims and as young British people. My gut feeling had always been that the discourse about these people was misconceived, but I only realised the extent of this misconception as I began to do my fieldwork.³

Since then, I’ve moved on to Tower Hamlets in London, another part of the country with a high concentration of Muslims, looking at political participation among the Bangladeshis and the struggles that that community has gone through in the last couple of decades. But I’ve also been tracing transnational links with Sylhet, the region that most British Bangladeshis are from (including my own family, actually), and trying to look at the translocalism⁴ that’s emerged which theoretically undermines methodological nationalism and the idea of a singular national identity. This links back to the transnational religious identities that cropped up in my work in Luton, the idea of a global *ummah*.⁵

JG: Wow, there are so many things to unpick there! One thing that stands out is how different your route into anthropology has been to mine. I came to anthropology from a more indulgent perspective. It wasn’t that I’d necessarily identified a problem in society and saw ethnography as the best tool to address it.

I guess the story starts with India. I first visited aged 18, on a classic ‘white middle-class gap year’ teaching English in Tamil Nadu (in Southern India) and then again at 21 when I volunteered with an NGO in Rajasthan. These trips left me with an obsession with India but I actually spent the first seven years after graduating working in an environmental consultancy. And that was a vocation, I suppose, in that I was responding to what I saw as *the* pressing global problem – climate change – and trying to find a way to contribute to that struggle. But the work turned out to be pretty boring, and I slowly realised I wasn’t doing much good, and I couldn’t see myself *ever* being able to do much good. Meanwhile, the fascination with India kept gnawing away and I had what I call a quarter-life crisis when I turned 30 – well, that’s not a quarter of a life, is it?

AH: It is if you're white and middle class, mate!

JG: Haha! I had friends who were doing PhDs in anthropology which I found absolutely fascinating and I just thought ... this is what I really want to do, and if not now, when? So I applied to SOAS, firstly for a master's, then a PhD and decided to research everyday language use and identity in Mumbai, which was something I had actually thought about a lot in my earlier travels. But it was hardly a response to an urgent societal problem, was it?

Anyway, by the time I started fieldwork, my assumptions about anthropology (which were drenched in all the worst orientalist-colonialist stereotypes of the early twentieth century) had been firmly challenged and I had doubts about whether I should be doing this kind of research at all. But nobody around me seemed to share these doubts, and it felt like I was already at the point of no return, so I forged ahead. The research actually shifted towards broader questions of social identity, among Hindus and Buddhists, and – as you mentioned in the context of your work in Tower Hamlets – challenging the idea of singular national identities.⁶

By the time I'd completed the thesis I felt that, despite all the criticisms anthropology faces as a discipline, this is where I belong, this is what I want to do. And so here I am, a few years later, on a postdoctoral project called 'Progressive Islamophilia and the British Queer-Muslim intersection', which uses ethnography to ask how the British political left can provide a political home for both Muslim communities and LGBTQI communities (the latter being a 'community' I belong to as a gay man).

AH: Yes, it makes sense that you're interested in LGBTQI politics, but why 'Islamophilia'? And why the left?

JG: Good questions! It partly stems from my own experiences. Politically I have shifted increasingly leftwards over the years. One thing that has interested and perhaps slightly troubled me, in the context of a general British climate of Islamophobia, is what I perceive as a left-wing affinity towards ... sympathy for ... fascination with ... *some* sort of connection to Islam or Muslim communities. Whether that's a benign empathy for the most marginalised in society, or a more orientalist fetishisation ...

AH: Or both?

JG: Or yes, perhaps both of those things. That's what I'm trying to understand. In my mind this phenomenon has acquired the label 'Islamophilia', and I felt that nobody was really talking about this apart from Douglas Murray, who is coming from the right-wing conservative perspective.⁷ Since I myself participate to some extent in this Islamophilia, not least as a result of all the time I've spent in India, I decided I needed to investigate it further.

It then struck me that a particularly knotty issue here is the way the rights of Muslims often seem to get pitted against the rights of the LGBTQI community (and vice versa), which is awkward for many on the left who profess to embrace the struggles of all minorities. For example, the protests that occurred a few years ago outside primary schools in Birmingham were framed in the mainstream media as 'Muslim parents' protesting against the 'LGBTQI agenda' of the teachers. I remember at the time being very confused and uncomfortable, not knowing what I 'should' be thinking. But there actually *was* a strand of discourse emerging from some left-wing academics and activists at the time of 'actually, no we don't want to pit these two marginalised identities against each other and, by the way, there's a huge intersection of individuals and organisations that are queer *and* Muslim'.⁸

So, in trying to understand what it means in practice for the left to actually support both these struggles and not weaponise one against the other, I'm also positioning myself in this debate as a queer, left-leaning Islamophile.

Incorporating identities into research

AH: A 'queer, left-leaning Islamophile'! But how do you reconcile such diverse research interests? For your PhD you were working in a neighbourhood in India and, as you're an Indophile, that makes sense. So how did the transition from there to this ... coming back home, as it were? Researching in the UK, exploring your sense of who you are, your own politics, your identity as a gay man, and of course researching Muslims, which is a totally new area for you?

JG: Yes it's funny actually, when I was in the middle of writing up the PhD some non-anthropologist friends would ask me where I might go next for research – you know, Indonesia? Nigeria? – I always got quite angry about that: 'I'm not some sort of orientalist butterfly flitting from culture to culture, extracting knowledge!'

And yet in a sense this is what I've done, although in this case, as you say, it's a kind of homecoming. One thread I might draw between the studies is the 'anthropology of ideas' – how do people talk about ideas?

As it happens I did originally think of this [Islamophilia] project as multi-sited, both in the UK and India, as I feel there are some interesting parallels between left-wing discourse in both countries. But pragmatism won out, since I was applying during a [COVID] lockdown and the possibility of overseas research felt pretty remote.

AH: So it's feasible that you might investigate this later, down the line in a multi-sited context?

JG: I'm not sure I'd be the right person to do that.

AH: Why not?

JG: Umm, because I think already in the context of my research here I have a mixed 'insider-outsider' position. Yes I'm gay, I'm left-leaning, I'm British. But I'm not Muslim and there's already a worry about treading on toes and blundering into debates that I perhaps don't need to be part of. All that gets massively magnified if you transpose it into an Indian context. I simply don't have the background or perhaps even the *right* to try and get involved in left-queer-Muslim politics over there.

Going back to your earlier question, when I started out as an anthropologist, I was very resistant to the idea of incorporating my sexuality into the research I did. This idea that just because I'm gay I'm expected to make everything about being gay. Whereas now I'm delighted that my sexuality is at the forefront of the project.

AH: Why is that? What happened?

JG: I guess the way I think about my queerness has changed. Rather than feeling that 'I just happen to be attracted to the same sex, but it's only a tiny part of who I am', I've come to treasure this as part of my identity and so I feel much more comfortable with it being the motivating force for a research project.

AH: Fascinating. I must say it's very courageous this project that you're embarking on. To put yourself out there and own that aspect of your identity despite all the prejudices that people from the LGBTQI community face to this day, and to deal with people

who might be hostile towards you because of that, is a bold thing to do. The fact that you've thought about all that and still decided to do the project *does* suggest a vocational urge.

Feeling like outsiders

JG: Thank you. As we're talking about researcher positionality, let's think about your doctoral research into Islamic masculinity in Luton. I imagine many people might look at this and call it real 'insider' research – a British Muslim man researching other British Muslim men. What would you say to that?

AH: This was actually a debate we had in the PhD viva! My examiners liked my thesis but they both told me that 'we don't learn anything about you, Ash'. And I got annoyed because it was obvious they wouldn't have asked a white researcher this question. In the end, though, I took their point that my positionality was important from an epistemological viewpoint: the fact that I wanted to study this area that I was personally embroiled in; the way being South Asian opened up access in some areas and maybe closed it off in others, and meant my particular experience of growing up in Britain gives me a unique gaze not just on the community I was studying but also on wider British society.

So in my book I do agonise a bit because there were lots of similarities between me and my respondents insofar as we're from South Asia, have similar complexions, similar cultures (in some ways) and we're all Muslims. But there were some profound differences as well. Most of my interlocutors (in Luton) were Pakistani Kashmiri in origin. They speak Pahari or Pothwari (variants of Punjabi) which I had to learn as I spoke Sylheti or Bengali at home. There were some cultural differences as well, as Kashmiris put more emphasis on clan-based organisation than do Bengalis.

The other big difference was that I grew up in an affluent London suburb where there weren't many other black and brown people (by the way, I hate using black and brown ... what the fuck does 'brown' mean?) and of course in the 80s and 90s there was a lot of racism, brutal racism. Violent racism. I'd never had this sense of community that my interlocutors both in Luton and Tower Hamlets have. They grew up in a neighbourhood where the majority of the people looked like them, shared the same religion,

went to the same mosque, ate the same food and so they had more confidence in the way they looked and the things they believed than I did. At the risk of psychoanalysing myself in a rather tinpot way, I think I've always yearned for that kind of solidarity.

JG: That's so interesting that you say you yearned for something and perhaps found it in your fieldwork. One thing I learned when I was researching in Mumbai was that I don't have a very strong sense of *being* from somewhere. Some of my interlocutors were migrants from villages near Mumbai who lived together in dormitories, each linked to a specific village. Living together with friends and relatives from the same village in these tiny rooms in Mumbai, they really experience this intense sense of belonging to their village, and their emotional lives are often quite bound up in the world of the village.⁹

This made me realise how shallow my sense of belonging to *anywhere* is. I was born in Essex and brought up in Exeter, and Exeter is where my formative childhood experiences took place. But neither of my parents are from either of those places – my dad was born in London and my mum in Johannesburg and my roots are predominantly Ashkenazi (Jewish) from Eastern Europe. Exeter feels like home, in a way, but I don't have that sense of generations going back, of my parents' childhood stories being set in Exeter or anything like that. So it's interesting how fieldwork can sometimes address a psychological need, in a way.

AH: Yes, or at least make one conscious of it. On the subject of 'outsiderism', I genuinely think that *all* anthropologists have a sense of being an outsider. Maybe that's what attracts us to this vocation. In my Luton work, this came up again with the issue of class. The community in Luton is very working class, with lots of people running small businesses, working in retail, service industry, taxi-driving. Very entrepreneurial. I think that's the aspiration, to have your own business and earn potentially unlimited amounts of money. In my family we were never encouraged to go after money for money's sake, our whole thing was to get better through education. So my family never had a problem with me studying social sciences, whereas my interlocutors were perennially confused as to what I was doing and why I was doing it. They all thought I'd come from the council to do a survey or something. When I explained it to them, they'd all be like: 'Why are you wasting your life? Go and be a doctor or an engineer!'

So here I was meeting people who looked like me, spoke similar languages, followed the same religion, but had completely different aspirations and ideas about success. And all of that made me feel like an outsider. To be fair, I was never *made* to feel like an outsider. People were always very kind to me, very generous, and I felt a lot of love from everyone. But I always felt like an outsider and I suspect deep down my friends there felt this too.

JG: This makes me realise that the insider-ness/outsider-ness is very much a matter of perspective, and while some people (perhaps your PhD examiners) might have considered you an insider, your interlocutors, and you yourself, saw this very differently. In your case it seems that not only did an existing sense of being an outsider draw you to anthropology, but that becoming an anthropologist actually intensified that. A lot of that resonates with my Mumbai fieldwork where I was an outsider by most yardsticks – race, class, linguistic background, place of origin.

AH: Caste!

JG: Yes caste. Actually, being completely outside the caste system felt strangely like an advantage as it meant I was not aligned to either of the two main castes living in the neighbourhood. One (the Marathas) belonged to the upper end of the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy, while the other (the Mahars) were Dalits traditionally viewed as untouchable and hence highly marginalised. While, on a day-to-day level, there might be friendships, love affairs and other links between individuals from these communities, there was a lot of mistrust between them. But I never picked up on any sense that people were suspicious of me for spending time with both groups. If anything the main reaction was amusement that I would bother spending time with the ‘other community’, but I think it was partly *because* I was not placeable as part of that dynamic that I had this comparative ease of access there.

Currently, though, I’m conducting research here in my own country in this fraught nexus of politics, religion and sexuality which I partly inhabit and partly don’t. I feel far more placeable in the social landscape and power structures around me and, maybe because of this, there is actually *more* potential to feel like an outsider than in Mumbai.

Rapport-building and empathy

- JG:** So far we've discussed identity categories like race, religion, sexuality and how these place us with respect to our research participants. Do you think personality also plays a role here?
- AH:** Without a shadow of a doubt! I might get into trouble with my colleagues – not at TCRU, because we've got brilliant ethnographers here, but I mean in the wider discipline of anthropology – but you sometimes encounter anthropologists and simply cannot understand how they've done fieldwork.
- JG:** Yes, I know exactly what you mean.
- AH:** To be an ethnographer you have to be a good listener, you have to be affable, you have to be extremely sensitive and have a lot of empathy. If you struggle with empathy, or you're closed off and very reserved – then this is not conducive to being a good ethnographer. And I just don't think you can fully teach this. You can teach the abstraction, the erudition, the conceptual-analytical thinking processes, but I don't see how you can theoretically teach someone how to build rapport, or to get into the shoes of someone else.
- JG:** So are you saying that's an innate quality? Not a skill you can develop?
- AH:** It's an innate quality that can be further cultivated. Someone like you, for example, before you became an anthropologist, you would have had the skills of an ethnographer, the raw talent, but since then you've built on this by reading, learning from other people, being thrown into the field. But if you don't have that raw talent in the first place, the ethnographic method is something you probably aren't equipped for.
- JG:** Hmm, thinking this through with reference to my own experience I wonder how much these skills were innate rather than something I developed in my teens and as a young adult, through education, socialisation, life experiences. I don't think the ten-year-old me was especially empathic or 'affable'!
- AH:** I totally agree that being an ethnographer can be honed by teaching, but I do think that some are better at it than others. After all, humans have different personalities – some are good at abstraction,

some are more practical, some have more empathy for others, and I don't think this can be entirely explained away through the Western liberal debate over nature versus nurture. In any case, this debate doesn't have the same resonance within other ontological or cultural systems. For example, there's a core Qur'anic concept called *fitra* which is linked to a fixed, essential 'human nature' which encapsulates both nature and nurture. So, within Islamic scholarship at least, not everything is a social construction.

JG: Oh yes let's please not get bogged down in nature versus nurture! It seems like we agree that it's possible to work more formally on these skills. Listening and not constantly wanting to interject is one. I used to hate it when I felt people thought I knew less than I actually did about a topic, and I would always want to interrupt to prove myself. But fieldwork has taught me that you have stop minding that someone thinks you don't know what the caste system is, or what a *hadith* is. I've really tried to train myself to stop bristling with indignation and instead just shut up and listen to what they want to tell me. A similar thing is resisting the urge to moralise. I have some friends who would otherwise make brilliant ethnographers because they're warm, empathic, curious, but they're so ideologically driven that they probably couldn't stop themselves from imposing their moral values on their interlocutors.

AH: That's an astute point actually. But you can be ideologically driven and be a good ethnographer as long as you're interested in listening. I have strong, left-wing political views but I often spend time with people who have completely different views and I actually don't struggle to interrupt them because for me I just want them to keep talking. And I think for most people that's what they want – they want to be heard, and they don't mind if the person listening to them doesn't agree with everything they say.

JG: I think that point, about wanting to be heard, touches really deeply on the whole orientation of my project which is about how groups of people who might not share the same views can live alongside each other. I've had conversations with very religious people – not only Muslims, by the way – who as far as I know might profoundly disagree with my lifestyle.

AH: Based on your sexual orientation?

JG: Yes, exactly. But if I resist the impulse to proselytise and to actually listen, we can have a civilised, even cordial conversation that we might both learn from.

AH: And someone who isn't an anthropologist probably wouldn't do that, right?

Anthropologists in exile

JG: Quite! I want to finish by returning to your point that you can really see in our colleagues here at TCRU those personal qualities needed to be ethnographers. How do you find it as an anthropologist working outside an anthropology department but in this multidisciplinary department where we work with sociologists, with psychologists, with people who specialise in families, children and other topics far removed from our core focus of interests?

AH: Ooh ... Instinctively I'd say that I love it because for me working anywhere is all about the people and the number one thing for me is to be around nice people, people I can learn from and grow around. All of that I have here at TCRU and I love it. The interdisciplinary aspect is *the* reason I applied for and accepted the post. Just like at SOAS, there's an understanding that it's in the intersections where the really interesting stuff happens, so on that front I really appreciate being here with people who are working in a whole range of ways towards the goal of making the world a better place. And let's not forget that many of our colleagues, even if not anthropologists themselves, use ethnography as a method. Sometimes it's tricky because I'm not very familiar with colleagues' disciplinary cores and vice versa so the engagement doesn't always happen. And students who study my courses are often unfamiliar with anthropology and find it a challenge, although many of them really take to it.

The only area where I'd like the TCRU to move towards is in the realm of religion, because fundamentally I'm a scholar of religion and specifically Islam. But this is beginning to change now, and overall I much prefer working in a multidisciplinary environment like TCRU to a monodisciplinary anthropology department. How do you find it?

JG: I feel the same way – enjoying the interdisciplinarity even if I sometimes feel a little at sea where some colleagues’ work is concerned. But that would probably be true even in an anthropology department. I was struck by something that was said to describe TCRU recently at a staff leaving do: not only was it a unit that was primarily established to study the family, but it also *feels* like a family. I couldn’t agree more!

Concluding reflections: the response by Victoria Redclift

This conversation provides a very personal response to a number of wider epistemological and moral questions. Above all, it illustrates the way that research on social relationships is in itself a social relationship; the position/identity of the researcher and the respondent are confronted in different ways by all the social sciences. The role of politics in relation to positionality comes out in particularly interesting ways here. Ash (Ashraf Hoque) was drawn to this work initially because of his own experience; he wanted to ‘correct’ a wrong. Jon (Jonathan Galton) on the other hand came to ‘position himself’ and his politics in his own research over time. The political is central to their interest but also their approach. The impossibility of separating out the poetic and the political in what we do is juxtaposed very often in social science with ‘the persistence of an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience’ (Clifford, 1986).

I am more aware of this in an interdisciplinary environment like TCRU than in my previous disciplinary homes because we come with a broader array of ontological starting points. And therefore we are confronted more often with the fundamental question of whether science is embedded in, or distinct from, historical and political processes. I would argue Ash and Jon’s own journeys into anthropology provide powerful illustrations of the centrality of history and power to the research process. As James Clifford (1986: 7) explained over thirty years ago, ‘even the best ethnographic texts ... are systems, or economies, of truth (“true fictions”)’ because ‘cultures do not hold still for their portraits’. Ash and Jon both, in different ways, hint at the failure of ‘dominant’ anthropology (Restrepo and Escobar, 2005: 100) to fully engage with the decolonial challenge (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019). Its theory remains Eurocentric, and its method continues to endorse a model of scholarship in which power is distributed upward, from the researched to the researcher (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019). The political, the historical, and the partial work through the

ethnographic text, in ways that pulled both Ash and Jon into the discipline in the first place, but which forces a reckoning with it too.

Being placeable

These issues of power and positionality have become central in anthropology because of the unresolved power dynamics of its postcolonial past and the extreme cultural disparities that have been its *raison d'être*. For a long time, outsidership was seen as a positive benefit, which is one of the reasons anthropology has been forced to grapple with issues of power and positionality more than some disciplines. The shift that occurred in the 1980s, influenced by the general postmodernist move but also by the explosion of gender debates, highlighted the question of 'voice'. French feminism, Derrida and others (Irigaray, 1985; Cixous and Clement, 1986) had also created a debate about 'difference' which led to all differences becoming open for discussion. Since then the insider/outsider binary has been unpicked in ways Ash and Jon both speak to. Ash's experience reveals the negotiation of identity and legitimacy that is necessary of all anthropologists (Narayan, 1993). No one is an insider by default and there is no singular audience that judges who is an insider and who is not.

I was struck by Jon's comment that he became more of an outsider to his research in the UK than in India because he was more placeable within it. He became placeable in the social landscape and power structures around him, in much the same way Ash was placeable during his work in Luton; placeable as outside. Once you are placeable because of some degree of connectedness you then become an outsider in new ways. Like Jon, I have benefitted from the fact that I have not been 'placeable' within much of my research. Sometimes people have let me into their worlds in ways they might not if I was a little bit closer, more immediately readable. In this way, my research, and my white middle-class identity, is implicated in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practice within which the 'pursuit of knowledge' is embedded. Despite many years of critique, and decades of interest in positionality and power, ethnography is still plagued by its inextricable relation to the worst excesses of colonialism (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Those looking to challenge those excesses soon find resistance in the centuries-old colonial-academic project (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019). Perhaps, what is at issue then, whether 'insider' or 'outsider', whether 'home' or 'away', is seeking out the discomfort of a more explicitly political approach to research that remakes the problematic ideologies and relationships which underlie ethnographic practice more generally (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019).

Ethnographic personalities

I wonder about the suggestion of an ‘innate talent’ all ethnographers must possess, because on the one hand I recognise there are social skills which are essential to the ethnographic method, and on the other hand I’m not sure many of the excellent ethnographers whose work I’ve enjoyed have always been as empathetic, sensitive and affable as Ash and Jon (after all, ‘affable’ is surely a gendered term, applied mostly to men). You certainly have to be a good listener, but listening (like empathy, as Jon mentions) is not a skill anyone is born with. In order to completely pass the buck (!), I would argue that one of the wonderful things about the practice of ethnography is that it does not so much teach you these skills as hone your reflexivity around them; sharpening your sensitivity to their presence and absence, and intensifying your understanding of their value.

This also makes me think of the role of ethnography in sociology. Many sociologists use ethnography but, I wonder, does less allegiance to ethnography as a method produce different ethnography in sociology? And given that, beyond ethnography, research relationships in sociology are sometimes more formally circumscribed, does this mean that sociology is less well equipped to tackle the questions of power and positionality discussed by Ash and Jon? If ethnographic truths are widely accepted now within anthropology as ‘partial truths’, contingent and incomplete (Clifford, 1986), this point continues to be resisted by those outside anthropology who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. I would argue that, though unfinished, it is thanks to the political and epistemological self-consciousness of ethnography (Clifford, 1986) that sociologists have been forced to take seriously the rhetorical, the contingent, and the incomplete in what we do. And the paradigm shifts of the 1980s discussed above, which included an entente of sorts between anthropological and sociological ethnography in the attempt to institutionalise cultural studies of distinct varieties (Marcus, 2002), is a legacy many of us benefit from.

An interdisciplinary family?

Ethnography has long been important to TCRU, especially following an influx of sociologists in the 1980s who embraced a range of qualitative methods in their research on the sociology of childhood (Brannen et al., 2022). Today it remains important across TCRU’s work on childhood, families and gender but also in relation to more recent interest in migration. TCRU has clearly evolved over the years, but it continues to be characterised

as a ‘family’. This seems unlikely considering its interdisciplinary orientation, and the wide ontological or epistemological differences that exist between us. Perhaps that is what connects all families, the internal discontinuities, although I’m not sure the answer is quite so banal. In struggling to make sense of it, I have turned to Roland Barthes:

Interdisciplinary work ... is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go). To do something inter-disciplinary it’s not enough to choose a ‘subject’ (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one (Barthes, 1972: 3).

I wonder if that is exactly what TCRU has, for the last fifty years, done best, exemplified in projects such as NOVELLA (Narratives of Varied Everyday Lives and Linked Approaches, <http://www.novella.ac.uk>) which brought different disciplinary perspectives together to produce real methodological innovations (Brannan et al., 2022). It has created new objects, with specific inclusions and exclusions, specific poetics and politics, certain contingency and values, which belong to no one discipline, but around which we come together.

Further reading

In many ways, the conversation and response above build on decades of introspection among anthropologists that followed the publication of *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus, University of California Press, 1986). The questions of *who* gets to conduct ethnographic research, and what it means to be an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ anthropologist (or both, or neither) have been addressed in rich and influential articles by Delmos Jones (1970) and Kirin Narayan (1993) among others. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) asks researchers to consider questions such as ‘Whose research is it?’, ‘Who owns it?’, ‘Who will benefit from it?’ and ‘How will its results be disseminated?’. Further interventions situated explicitly within the discourse of decolonisation include *Decolonizing Ethnography* (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019) and the freely accessible Decolonizing Sexualities Network (<https://decolonizingsexualities.org/>).

Notes

- 1 School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- 2 The ethnographic method is the cornerstone of anthropology and typically refers to long-term participant observation where the researcher spends an extended period in a field setting.
- 3 See for example, Hoque (2015; 2019).
- 4 Translocalism refers to connections between localities that are created by migration and experienced by migrants.
- 5 In Islam, *ummah* refers to the global community of believers.
- 6 See Galton (2018).
- 7 Murray (2013).
- 8 For example, Balani (2019).
- 9 See Galton (2019).

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Designing ways of listening to young children: the development and growth of the Mosaic approach

Alison Clark

Introduction

In my cave listening to music. It's magic music from my magic radio.

Gary was one of the young children involved in the Listening to Young Children study (1999–2000) talking about his favourite place in nursery (Clark and Moss, 2001). The groundbreaking study demonstrated how young children, under five years old, could become co-researchers as ‘experts in their own lives’ (Langsted, 1994: 42), and led to the development of the visual and participatory Mosaic approach for listening to and engaging with young children’s perspectives (Clark and Moss, 2005; Clark, 2005; 2010a; 2017). The Mosaic approach has since been adopted and adapted nationally and internationally by researchers and practitioners as a methodology for listening to children and adults in early childhood (for example, Stephenson, 2009; Greenfield, 2011; Merewether and Fleet, 2014; Moore, 2015; Botsoglou et al., 2019) and in other disciplines, including nursing (Aldiss et al., 2009); social work (Beresford et al., 2004; Mitchell, 2010) educational psychology (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2014); and urban planning (Azunre and Sowrirajan, 2021).

This applied methodology is both multi-method and polyvocal. A range of research methods are drawn together to co-construct a picture or ‘mosaic’ with participants about their views and experiences. The

methods are chosen to provide participants with the opportunity to express themselves through verbal and nonverbal communication. Photography has shown itself to be a powerful visual tool in working with the Mosaic approach. The inclusion of young children's photographs in a research study was very unusual in the late 1990s, as I reflected here:

Cameras provide a participatory tool through which the young children could communicate. Walker refers to the 'silent voice of the camera' ... A number of recent studies have incorporated the use of cameras with older children ... The silent tool also appears to have potential for use with young children (Clark, 2004: 145).

Table 16.1 shows the range of methods that were brought together in the Listening to Young Children study to involve children under five in the evaluation of a group of services for children and families (see the following section). The polyvocal element was introduced to include adults, parents and practitioners as well as older siblings who knew the children well. These elements were not intended to distract from the material co-constructed with the younger children but to aid in the building up of more textured portraits.

Detailed observations of daily life formed the bedrock for the participatory tools that included walking tours, informal conversations as well as more structured interviews and opportunities for drawing, photography, map and book making. This listening, talking, making and walking formed part of a continuous process of revisiting material with the children involved. Time for revisiting was an essential part of the epistemological underpinning of working with the Mosaic approach. The intention was that this could give children the opportunity to 'think what they think', to co-construct meanings about being in a particular place based on the idea of knowledge creation or co-creation rather than knowledge extraction (Veale, 2005; Clark, 2017: 18–19.)

I set out to consider in this chapter the factors that contributed to the development of the Mosaic approach in the late 1990s and the subsequent adaptation and travel of this participatory methodology across generational, professional and cultural boundaries. I consider some of the possibilities and challenges raised when a methodology continues to grow in this way. The discussion explores the link between listening and the relationship with time in research and practice. This raises questions about how academic research environments can address urgent contemporary issues whilst being able to take a longer view about past policy, practice and research.

Stage One: Children and adults gathering documentation	
Methods	Description
Observation	Narrative observation based on extended periods of time during a day.
Walking tour	An adaptation of a method seen in participatory rural appraisal. Children guided the researcher around their learning environment and the children documented the tour with photographs.
Photobook	An individual visual record compiled of children's photographs and captions.
Child conference or interview	An informal interview, sometimes conducted with children outside or on the move, carried out individually or with a small group.
Mapmaking	A visual artefact representing the learning environment, co-created with children, with their own photographs and drawings and displayed for peers, family and educators to see.
Practitioner and parent interviews	An informal interview, about children's experiences.
Interviews, tours and mapmaking with siblings	A range of methods to draw on siblings' knowledge about their younger brothers and sisters.
Stage Two: Piecing together material for dialogue, reflection and interpretation	
Review	The opportunity for children, practitioners, parents and researcher to revisit the material.

Table 16.1 The original structure of the Mosaic approach in the Listening to Young Children study (Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark, 2004).

Contexts

What are the conditions that make it possible for some methodological ideas to take flight and have long lives whilst others are never realised? The contributing factors are numerous and may relate in part to the international, national and institutional contexts in which the research emerges. These contexts are not discrete but interconnected. I aim in this section to reflect on my perceptions of this web of factors that influenced

the development of the Mosaic approach, from a distance of several decades, and with reference to my earlier reflections on this process (Clark, 2004; 2012; 2014).

When I began researching with young children in the late 1990s there had been a decade of increasing policy and practice interest in children's participation following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Two Articles in the UNCRC in particular were a catalyst for change. Article 12 stated the right of children, who are capable, to express their views about matters that affect them and Article 13 underlined the right to freedom of expression. The importance of listening to children's wishes was reinforced at a national level by the introduction of the Children Act (1989) and amended in Section 53 of the Children Act 2004. Despite these changes, the practicalities remained about how children's 'voices' could be included in matters that impacted on their lives. This posed a specific challenge when considering the views and experiences of the youngest children (under five years of age) and children and young people who employed a range of nonverbal communication skills. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, an independent voluntary sector organisation with an emphasis on promoting social justice and social change, funded the Listening to Young Children study, which led to the development of the Mosaic approach. This was an eighteen-month part-time study intended to include the youngest children under five in a wider evaluation of a group of children's services (Wigfall and Moss, 2001):

The [wider] project was designed to evaluate the Coram Community Campus, a model of multi-agency working which included early years provision, a parents' centre and a homeless families project. Access did not present a problem as this had been designed as a collaborative venture. It was unusual at the time for funding to include a development stage to allow new methods to be explored (Clark, 2004: 157).

Three significant and related factors occur to me in reviewing the positive context in which the Listening to Young Children study took place: multiagency collaboration, international connections and time for exploring creative possibilities. First, concerning multiagency working, the research study built on the culture of collaboration that was in the DNA of the Thomas Coram Research Unit (Brannen et al., 2022; see also Chapter 20, this volume). A pattern of regular dialogue existed with voluntary-sector organisations at both a national and local level, with

schools and early-childhood centres as well as with academics working in different universities and policymakers. There were close connections between Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) and Coram Family (formerly known as the Thomas Coram Foundation and subsequently as Coram) which stemmed from the early days of the research unit under Jack Tizard's leadership (see [Chapter 1](#) in this volume).

This collaborative style of conducting research was evident in the range of members of the advisory group for the Listening to Young Children study. This included two representatives of Coram Family, including Gillian Pugh, Director at the time; Lonica Vanclay from the Family Welfare Association; the Head of the Pen Green Centre in Corby, Margy Whalley; a representative from the Department for Education and Employment and from two local authorities and academics; Teresa Smith from the University of Oxford; and Iram Siraj from the Institute of Education. I remain grateful to this experienced group who engaged generously in dialogue about the study and helped to make it a more rigorous and grounded piece of research.

Second, the Listening to Young Children study benefitted from TCRU's European interests and contacts. Building on well-established European networks ([Brannen et al., 2022](#)) I was given the opportunity, working with Peter Moss as project leader, to look more broadly at what was happening in Scandinavia, in terms of young children's participation and to use this as a catalyst for creative thinking about what research methods might be possible in a UK context. During the first months of the study, I had the opportunity to undertake a two-week study tour to Denmark and Norway, focusing on children's participation. This is an extract from my report:

The purpose of the study tour has been to look at children's participation in early childcare settings in Denmark and Norway. I have visited day-care settings in both countries and talked to pre-school trainers and researchers working with young children. At a national level I had meetings at the Children's Council in Denmark and with staff of the Ombudsman for Children in Norway ([Clark, 1999](#)).

The key questions which underpinned my visit were:

- How are children enabled to be involved in everyday decisions in their day-care¹ settings?
- In what way has the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child influenced practice in Denmark and Norway?

- How are researchers including the voices of young children in their research?

The third factor that I believe was important in the development of the Mosaic approach was the open nature of the brief and the time available to explore creative possibilities. The grant proposal had been designed in such a way as to include a development stage for creating a new methodology for including the views and experiences of children under five. This openness made it possible to step back from the immediate issues and concerns of how to involve young children in an evaluation of children's services in a particular context and to look with a wider frame. A more prescriptive research design would have limited the possibilities to be innovative. There was a temporal dimension to this methodological openness. There was room to 'take my time'. I could prioritise reading within and beyond the field of early-childhood education. I was aware it was a privilege to be researching in an academic context that encouraged and enabled such depth of enquiry. The availability of time was also a positive factor in being able to draw on expertise shared through the multiagency advisory group and the international study tour.

Each of these three factors – multiagency collaboration, international connections and time – contributed to the original shaping of the Mosaic approach. This shape has continued to develop. The following two decades since the publication of *Listening to Young Children* (Clark and Moss, 2001) have been characterised by methodological attempts to bridge a range of boundaries including those relating to age, professional contexts and cultures.

Bridging boundaries

Bridging age boundaries

The term 'child-friendly methods' has been employed to describe methods that support children's communication of their views and experiences (for example, Roerig and Evers, 2019). Punch commented about the apparent paradox of calling for specially designed methods to listen to children's perspectives whilst at the same time emphasising children's competency: 'If children are competent social actors, why are special 'child-friendly' methods needed to communicate with them?' (Punch, 2002: 322).

'Child-friendly' is not a term that I would readily use to describe the Mosaic approach. I would want to emphasise the broader epistemological

goal of seeking to value knowledge co-created with participants, whilst recognising the original context of developing methods with young children:

If the research enquiry involves gathering local knowledge of an individual about their everyday lives then the age of that individual is not necessarily the defining factor in deciding on the methodology. What is important is making explicit that this local knowledge is of value and subsequently finding modes of communication that play to that individual's strengths (Clark, 2012: 77).

There was an opportunity to explore bridging this possible methodological boundary between research methods for children and for adults in the longitudinal Living Spaces study (Clark, 2010a; 2011). This study explored how young children could be involved in the design and review of early-childhood environments. The two case studies were based on a collaboration with architects, practitioners and young children about existing spaces, hopes for new environments and reflections on new premises. The second of these case studies focused on the review of a newly completed complex of community facilities that included an early-childhood centre. This presented the opportunity to stretch the Mosaic approach to work not only with young children but also with practitioners about their own views and experiences of working in the new environment. Taking the principles that underpinned the approach, I explored what research tools could 'play to the strengths' of the practitioners and could provide the opportunity to step back and reflect on the day-to-day experience of working there. Working in pairs, practitioners walked colleagues around the site, taking photographs along the way to document what was important to them in the new building. The practitioners then compiled their own maps which were displayed in prominent parts of the building. These maps became the focus for discussion with colleagues in different work teams and with the architects, which became an important source of information for the post-occupancy review of the completed site.

A group of practitioners, who had only recently joined the team and had few formal qualifications, decided to work together on compiling their map. The three practitioners discussed their photographs and came up with the idea of making two maps, one showing spaces that they thought were working well and a second map to show physical areas of the early-childhood centre that they thought could be improved. The visual documentation composed in this way magnified their collective 'voice' within the review process, alongside their more long-standing,

higher-qualified and higher-status colleagues. As I have described elsewhere (Clark, 2011), adapting the Mosaic approach in this way made the case for this methodology not to be limited to a particular age group but to bridge age boundaries.

Bridging professional boundaries

There is the possibility that ideas can travel swiftly in a multidisciplinary research base that is outward focused and open to thinking differently. This was my experience whilst developing the Mosaic approach. There were numerous opportunities for informal conversations in the corridors and more formal discussions in seminars, about research in progress, with colleagues at Thomas Coram Research Unit. This culture resulted in a methodology developed in an early-childhood education context rapidly becoming part of dialogue about children's experiences of social-care provision, and in particular in adoption and fostering (Clark and Statham, 2005). These discussions led to a jointly authored article that made the case for young children's views and experiences to play a greater part in the planning and review of adoption and fostering processes:

There has been little research that has started from the child's view of their own world now – what is important to them in the present as well as feelings about the past and the future, what makes them feel happy and secure, what meanings do they attach to the physical spaces they inhabit and to the people and activities in their lives? (Clark and Statham, 2005: 46).

Bridging professional boundaries has also occurred when other professionals have read about the Mosaic approach and discussed and applied or adapted this framework for listening to children's views and perspectives in their own contexts. Duncan and Daniela Mercieca have considered the applicability of the Mosaic approach for educational psychologists (2014) and continue to write about the approach (Mercieca, Mercieca and Mercieca, 2021). They discuss how listening to children is central to the role of educational psychologists but have commented on how speeded-up school contexts make such listening harder to achieve. They point to the underlying principles that have an impact on the role of adults working with the approach: 'Rather than being another method, the Mosaic approach espouses uncertainty and allows for unexpectedness – young children are seen as giving adults the possibility to listen to them' (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2014: 22). They describe this uncertainty as

offering a professional freedom rather than constraint or weakness: 'It is an exercise in engaging with uncertainty (Mercieca, 2011) where adults are released from the need to know with certainty' (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2014: 28).

I return to this theme of engaging with uncertainty, in the discussion.

Bridging cultural boundaries?

The early-childhood education research community has well-established international networks. One is the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) that has a worldwide membership and has held annual conferences since 1991. Special interest groups (SIGs) are one of the mechanisms for exchange of ideas and research collaborations. Discussion of young children's participation has been a consistent feature of these conferences. Following the 2004 EECERA conference I cofounded a SIG on Children's Perspectives with Deborah Harcourt who was Director of Early Childhood at the International Centre for Early Childhood, Singapore. The aims of the SIG are:

- to generate critical reflection on children's perspectives and children's rights,
- to support and encourage cross-national perspectives on seeking children's perspectives,
- to support SIG members' research in a collaborative and cooperative manner,
- to share innovative and reflexive research on children's perspectives and children's rights. (<https://www.eecera.org/sig/young-childrens-perspectives>).

Working with the participatory methods in a range of cultural contexts has been one of the themes explored in the SIG. The research study Professionals Seeking Children's Perspectives is one example that emerged from such discussions (Clark, 2017; Nordtømme and Clark, 2019). The aim of this Danish study, led and funded by the Danish Evaluation Institute, was to explore some of the methodological challenges facing early-childhood pedagogues² who wished to engage in a deeper way with young children's views and experiences. Working with Danish researchers Persille Schwartz and Laura Detlefsen and ten pedagogues in five kindergartens³ across Denmark, we explored how the Mosaic approach might be adopted and adapted in these local contexts. The starting point of the study was to listen to pedagogues' existing ways

of incorporating young children's perspectives. This was followed by an introduction to the Mosaic approach and an exploration of some of the research tools involved, together with discussions about the ethics of listening. The Danish members of the research team facilitated regular discussion with the pedagogues as they identified key questions they were interested in exploring with young children in their kindergartens:

Each pedagogue invited three or four children who they felt they knew least about to take part in the project. Pedagogues were then encouraged to explore with these children their experiences of places, things, activities and relationships (Clark, 2017: 136).

At first the pedagogues were concerned that they might get the Mosaic approach 'wrong'. This echoes some of the criticism made by Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) who interpreted the approach as a fixed set of 'activities' to be administered to children. However, once the pedagogues realised that they could bring their own skills in attentive listening and creativity to the process, new research tools were added or adjustments made to the original tools, according to individual children's abilities and interests and to the specific cultural context. For example, one of the pedagogues, Line, had mapped her observations of the children's use of the outdoor play space by drawing a trail of footprints on a plan of the site to trace the children's movements. Kristian, a two-year-old in Line's group saw the observation sheet and called it a 'treasure map'. This led to a moment of pedagogical improvisation when Line decided to retrace Kristian's route with the map looking for 'treasure'. This is a glimpse of how adapting working with the Mosaic approach in this different context led to a sometimes unexpected 'pedagogical dance' with the children, listening and learning more about their perspectives along the way (Clark, 2017: 137). Applying the Mosaic approach in a Danish context presented the opportunity to work with this methodology in a cultural context underpinned by democracy as a way of living and where pedagogy has a strong social pedagogical root (Van Manen, 2016; Broström, Einarsdottir and Pramling Samuelsson, 2018).

This is in contrast to a more recent study taking place in China where the Mosaic approach has been the starting point for developing methods for listening to young children about their transition from early-childhood provision to primary school (Gao et al., 2021). The '(Re) constructing school readiness from Chinese young children's perspectives' study is a collaboration between a research team at UCL in the UK and Beijing Normal University in China. Writing in the interim report, Jie Gao

and colleagues make the case for how ‘children’s perspectives can potentially challenge the dominant discourses on school readiness and contribute to building up *ready family* and *ready school* for smooth transition from preschool to primary school’ (Gao et al., 2021: 7).

The research team had identified the Mosaic approach as a possible methodology for co-constructing young children’s views and feelings about their current environment in preschool and about starting school. I was invited to be an advisor to the study. This included an online presentation and workshop with the research team, including the Chinese research assistants who would be working directly with the children. The pilot study with seven young children from a private preschool involved child-led tours of the preschool, taking photographs, ‘picture book making’ and children’s drawings of their preschool and anticipations of their future schools (Gao et al., 2021: 21). Research tools were chosen as a basis for co-constructing materials with the children and for facilitating exchange between the preschools and schools. The children’s drawings in particular conveyed the intensity of feeling and at times high levels of anxiety about the perceived sharp contrast between the play-oriented life in preschool and the structured, rule-bound school environment. This intensely competitive education system, as described by the anthropologist Teresa Kuan (2015), is one element of the complex cultural context in which contemporary Chinese childhood takes place. This raises some potentially uncomfortable questions about what happens when working with a research methodology, with specific values about the agency of children and the importance of their rights, in a different cultural context. Methodologies may travel but what tensions may emerge and how difficult will it be for practice to change?

I reflect on some of the issues emerging from these studies in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

Facing uncertainty

One of the challenges of working with the Mosaic approach, whether in a research context or in practice, is the need as a professional to be comfortable with uncertainty. This applies whether the context is early-childhood education or a different professional context as Mercieca and Mercieca (2014) have indicated. Facing uncertainty as a professional can challenge models of professionalism that are based on hierarchical

delivery models of expert knowledge (Urban, 2008). This appears to be one of the tensions to emerge in the Chinese pilot study exploring children's perspectives of transitions, discussed above. Listening that is open to hearing the unexpected from children and to changing attitudes and practice as a result requires a level of professional humility. I have referred to this in research terms: 'participatory methods require an epistemological humility which values the narratives of others' (Clark, 2010a: 190).

This highlights that the Mosaic approach is aligned with pedagogical approaches that view knowledge as co-constructed, and that it presents a challenge when adopted and adapted within transmissive models of learning. In the context of early-childhood education and care, Urban (2008) debates alternatives to the model of professionalism that is based on expert knowledge. He outlines a more expansive model of professionalism, drawing on a conceptual frame of hermeneutics. Here openness and uncertainty is welcomed and a hierarchical model of knowledge production is replaced by a co-construction of professional knowledge that includes a range of perspectives including community and parents' views and experience.

If uncertainty is valued, there can be more opportunities for children to be free to explore and to exercise their agency. This is one of the points raised in the influential New Zealand early-childhood curriculum document: 'Children are most likely to generate and refine working theories in learning environments where uncertainty is valued, inquiry is modelled, and making meaning is the goal' (Ministry of Education (New Zealand), 2017: 23). Being comfortable with uncertainty also has a temporal dimension. Unscripted explorations take longer than scripted activities. This leads into discussion of the connections between listening and 'slow'.

From listening to slow pedagogies

Listening requires a slowing down. Threaded through the Mosaic approach are opportunities for the researcher or practitioner to adjust to a different pace, led by the participants, whether children or adults. An approach that involves multiple methods is, by design, likely to be a more lengthy process than a single-method framework. The epistemological emphasis on revisiting ideas and artefacts co-created during the process also takes time. A further layer is added by the need to respond. This can be understood as a slow pedagogy (Clark, 2020; 2023) that values process over outcome and makes explicit the relationship with time. The

‘unhurried’ conditions of the original funding and research brief that led to the Mosaic approach can be understood in retrospect as embracing such a pedagogy of research design (Clark, 2023: 108–14).

A slow pedagogy can in turn lead to the creation of slow knowledge. I first reflected on these ideas in relation to working with the Mosaic approach in an article for a special issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* on children’s participation:

These complex explorations do not provide quick solutions to ‘user engagement’ but may contribute to new understandings between children and adults, professionals and lay communities. Perhaps this can be seen as a form of ‘slow knowledge’ not retrievable in the same way through a questionnaire but with the possibility of more rewarding and surprising results (Clark, 2010b: 122).

In the intervening years I have become increasingly concerned about the accelerating pace of teaching and learning across education, starting in early childhood education and care and stretching into higher education as Berg and Seeber (2016) among others have explored. I have had the opportunity to carry out a two-year study funded by the Froebel Trust to explore the question of the ‘hurried child’ in early childhood services and alternative narratives involving slow practices, including in key informant interviews with participants from eleven countries (Clark, 2023; Hedges, 2022: 127). One of the themes to arise was a critical reflection on the concept of ‘slow’ and an acknowledgement that this debate stretched beyond thinking about the pace of interactions in research and practice to questions about the relationship with time, past, present and future. I describe this as valuing the ‘here and now and...’. Close attention can be paid to the present, whilst also recognising children’s past knowledge and experiences and being mindful of their future (Cross, 2011).

Taking the longer view

I turn in this final section to think about how an ability to take the longer view might apply to the role of a research community. Taking the longer view can be understood as an ability to face in two directions, looking both to the past and into the future. A research community that can do so is able to give attentiveness to the present moment, whilst being mindful both of past research and practice and to be open to future possibilities and synergies. These characteristics might operate at an international level, for example in the EECERA network discussed earlier. But they can

also be present in institutions. I have experienced this ability for an institution to take the longer view most clearly whilst working at TCRU (1999–2007) and during subsequent ongoing research associations with the unit. This ambition not to be solely driven by short-term goals echoes the founder of TCRU, Jack Tizard’s emphasis on the value of research beyond the responsive mode to the immediate concerns of government (Brannen et al., 2022: 3).

An institution that takes the longer view is aware of and values its collective memory.

TCRU has acted as a collective memory holder particularly in a wider political environment of changing governments and civil-service personnel. I experienced the value of this role in relation to my own research on listening to young children. During my time in TCRU I witnessed several cycles of policy interest about questions of quality in ECEC and an ebbing and flowing of support for programmes to promote listening and children’s participation (Clark, 2020). Drawing on expertise within TCRU I was involved in explicit attempts to ‘remind’ policymakers of past and present successes and challenges by arranging policy seminars in government departments, as happened with the dissemination of a State of Art review of listening and consulting with young children that took place at the Department for Education and Skills (currently the Department for Education) in England in 2002. There is a strong ethical dimension to being a ‘memory holder’, particularly when the focus of research across the decades has involved the lives of children and young people, including some of the most marginalised groups and those who work and care for them. This ethical responsibility includes remaining alert to policy and societal changes and being attentive to where are the new questions and what or who is being forgotten.

Concluding reflections

This chapter has traced the origins and development of a particular methodology at a distance of several decades. I have highlighted certain aspects that contributed to the way this body of research on listening to young children has travelled, been adapted and changed. My reflections in the chapter have also drawn attention to the unique research environment in which these ideas began and have been influenced by my subsequent studies. I have emphasised the importance for social research of the relationship with time and the ability to slow down. The geographer Doreen Massey warned in an editorial in 2002 about the pressures on time for

research: ‘The issue of having time to think is more than one of whether we can preserve a free afternoon here and there. It is more about the overall pace and atmosphere of things; it is about what is valued’ (2002: 259).

These pressures have increased substantially over the last two decades. The opportunities to read, discuss, collaborate and carry out research that has a wide impact deserves a place in the universities of the future.

Further reading

Developing a research methodology to listen to the perspectives of young children raises questions about what it means to know children’s experiences. The Norwegian academic Reidun Tangen explores this question from her disciplinary background of Special Needs Education. She discusses the concepts of outsider and insider knowledge and the role of what she describes as ‘relational and participatory methodologies’ including the Mosaic approach in ‘Listening to children’s voices in educational research, some theoretical and methodological problems’ (Tangen, 2008). Daniela Mercieca and Duncan Mercieca have discussed and adapted the Mosaic approach in their work for over a decade, bringing professional insights from educational psychology, together with their engagement with philosophical ideas, including the work of Jacques Rancière. In ‘Uncertainty and practical judgement in research: A call for attentive “listening”’, written together with Sarah Piscopo Mercieca (Mercieca, Mercieca and Mercieca, 2021), they explore further the value of ‘befriending uncertainty’ and deep listening in research.

Notes

- 1 Terminology referred to in the original study.
- 2 Pedagogues in Denmark are practitioners who hold a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and care (ECEC) – see Chapter 4.
- 3 ‘Kindergarten’ refers here to ECEC provision for children from six months old to six years.

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Research with children in changing families

Catherine Jones, Sophie Zadeh and Susan Imrie

Introduction

The last century has seen perhaps some of the most dramatic changes to family life to date: new ways of becoming parents, new possibilities for navigating family relationships, new technologies and new laws. ‘Changing families’ – families that reflect social and technological change, including changes brought about by assisted reproductive technologies – are the focus of our research and this chapter.¹ In this reflection, we draw upon material from research we conducted where each of our academic journeys began – at the Centre for Family Research (CFR), University of Cambridge, under the direction of Professor Susan Golombok. Similar to the history of the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) (see [Chapter 1](#) in this volume), founded by Jack Tizard in 1973, the CFR was founded by the psychologist Martin Richards, whose primary interest was in children’s early experiences of care and their development. As two UK research centres at the forefront of scholarship on children and families, it is not surprising that TCRU and the CFR have been closely connected for several decades, with collaborations between researchers across the centres ongoing today (for example, [Jones et al., 2022](#); [Zadeh, Jadva and Golombok, 2022](#)).

Having all joined TCRU from the CFR, in this chapter we consider the connections between our previous research at CFR and the legacy of TCRU researchers who have, since the unit’s beginnings, drawn upon

different social-scientific disciplines, approaches and methodological tools to study children and families. Using multiple research case studies, we demonstrate the importance of inviting children to take part in family research. Throughout the chapter, we emphasise the various ways in which our research enters into dialogue with policy. We conclude by identifying future directions for child-centred family research at TCRU.

Overall, we aim through this reflection to encourage other family researchers to consider children as ‘experts on their families’ (Brannen, 2002) when undertaking their research, so that when policy draws upon research evidence, children’s perspectives are always taken into account. This is especially important in policymaking about changing families, which often relies upon adult ideas about what is in children’s ‘best interests’ that are not always substantiated by empirical evidence.

Responding to changing times

The last few decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century saw significant social, legal and policy change influencing family life. Internationally, the creation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), the most comprehensive statement of children’s rights worldwide, signified a fundamental change in the way children are treated and viewed. On a national level, changes in laws and regulations paved the way for greater access to different routes to parenthood. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act was passed in 1990, leading to the establishment of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, outlining regulations for gamete donation in the UK. In 2002 the Adoption and Children Act gave unmarried couples, including those in same-gender partnerships, the right to adopt. These changes reflected the continued diversification of family forms at this time. Alongside these changes, significant policies about family support came into place; for example, the Labour government’s Comprehensive Spending Review in 1998 saw the proposal of the Sure Start intervention programme for families and young children, which led to the development of thousands of centres, many targeted in economically vulnerable areas around the UK.

It is against this backdrop of social change relating to families that scholars within the social sciences drove forward research which afforded greater attention to children’s perspectives of family life. This can be characterised as a bidirectional relationship, whereby the academic scholarship fed into social-policy change, and vice versa. Scholars at TCRU

were not only important contributors to this discourse but also pioneers of empirical research that prioritised children's perspectives and experiences of family at the time (see, for example, [Brannen and O'Brien, 1996](#)). Professor Emerita Julia Brannen's study of children's concepts of care and their experiences of family life serves as an especially illustrative example of this scholarship, which has at once made theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions (see for example, Brannen, [Heptinstall and Bhopal, 2000](#); [Brannen, 2002](#); [2008](#)). Brannen's experiences during this research project also bring into sharp focus some of the challenges that, in our experience, still resonate with child-centred family researchers today, some two decades later. These include, but are not limited to, the challenges involved in redressing the imbalance of power inherent in research by adults with children ([Brannen, 2008](#)), which involves great care and sensitivity in research design and implementation, and the challenges involved in navigating others' beliefs about the (limited) value of including children in research ([Brannen, 2002](#)), which involves great determination, especially when disseminating research findings to different audiences. Despite these challenges, child-centred research has continued to be a large part of TCRU's work; for a detailed insight into this scholarship, see [Chapters 14, 16 and 19](#) in this volume.

Children's perspectives in changing families

In the time since the early studies of children's perspectives of family life, routes to parenthood have become increasingly diverse ([Golombok, 2020](#)). Yet despite notable expansions to the fields of the sociology of childhood and childhood studies, these literatures have not often engaged with changing families and even less with children's perspectives in these families. The psychological literature suffers similar shortcomings. In the following section, we outline four case studies of our research – of primary-caregiver-father families, solo-mother families, families formed via egg donation, and families with a trans parent. Public and policy debates about each of these families tend to centre upon the conflicting ideas of adults about what is in children's 'best interests' rather than empirical evidence ([Golombok, 2020](#)).

Like the early child-centred research at TCRU, the four studies we showcase in this chapter share the foundational principles that children's perspectives of family life are worthy of study, that children are experts on their family experiences, and that their views should therefore always be sought. In keeping with the ethos of both TCRU and CFR, these studies

are also multidisciplinary, combining developmental and social psychological approaches, methods and perspectives with sociological insights where relevant.

Each case study has been selected to highlight a specific feature of our child-centred research and highlights different tools that can be used to carry out research with children and young people. The primary-caregiver father families case study serves as an example of when children's accounts may differ from those of other family members; the solo-mother families case study attests to the importance of using multiple methods in child-centred research; the egg-donation families case study evidences the role of children's perspectives in longitudinal research; and the trans-parent families case study is an example of theorising from children's perspectives.

'You don't have to follow the norm or the rules': perspectives of family life in primary-caregiver-father families

The past few decades have seen a significant increase in the proportion of mothers in employment and greater father involvement in caregiving (see [Chapter 13](#) of this volume). Yet, despite these changes, policy lags behind, and barriers to accessing well-paid parental leave and flexible-working policies contribute to – among other factors – mothers on average taking on a larger share of childcare than fathers ([Burgess, Goldman and Davies, 2022](#)). This makes the study of families who go against this trend, such as those with a primary-caregiver father and a mother working full-time, particularly interesting; how does this influence family life? Our study of married primary-caregiver fathers in heterosexual relationships explored the experiences of members of a family type that challenges stereotypical gender roles in parenting ([Jones, Foley and Golombok, 2021](#); [Jones et al., 2021](#)). The fathers in this study identified as stay-at-home fathers, with half not being in consistent paid employment, and half being in some form of part-time paid work, with their partners working more hours than them. The two comparison groups comprised primary-caregiving mother families and dual-earner families respectively. We were interested to explore the roles that young children perceived their parents to play and whether these differed between families with different ways of organising work and care.

To best explore children's perspectives on family life in a sample of young children aged 3–6 years old, we carefully considered how to make the tasks age-appropriate, and fun, for our youngest participants. We

used the Structured Child Assessment of Relationships in Families (SCARF) (Strachan, Lund and Garcia, 2010), designed for use with children and young people up to the age of 14 years. Initially designed by the authors due to the absence of relevant, appropriate tools for assessing children's perspectives on their families, for custody rulings, the measure asks children questions about the everyday tasks a parent does with them (for example, 'Who plays with you?'), and the emotional closeness felt to each parent (for example, 'Who do you like to hug or cuddle?'). The method involves using a flip-book chart and stamps, with different caregivers assigned a different space on the chart, a 'both' space (if the answer is 'both parents') and a 'bin' space (if the answer is 'neither parent'), included to prevent false positives from children who simply enjoy using the stamps (Strachan, Lund and Garcia, 2010). Given that responses can be made by stamping – without speaking – the measure can be useful in gaining the insights of children who would rather not speak their responses aloud. The SCARF can also be adapted for different numbers of caregivers and caregivers with different identities.

The use of this task in our study enabled us to understand the roles children perceive their parents to play, and more broadly, offered insight into how mothers and fathers negotiate parenting tasks in primary-caregiving father families. We found that children rated the three types of primary-caregiver parents (primary-caregiver fathers, primary-caregiver mothers, and equally-sharing dual-earner mothers) similarly regarding positive parenting, and rated primary-caregiver fathers as higher on positive parenting than fathers who were married to primary-caregiver mothers and worked full-time. However, children rated their emotional security to their parent higher for primary-caregiver mothers than primary-caregiver fathers. Interestingly, the interviews with parents did not reflect this finding, with primary-caregiver fathers and mothers scoring similarly on parenting quality, including warmth and sensitivity (Jones, Foley and Golombok, 2021). When looking at the children's responses in primary-caregiver father families, fathers were rated as doing more of the practical tasks such as taking the child to school than mothers in these families, and children felt equally understood by their parents, yet still sought their mothers more for hugs and physical affection.

Including children's perspectives in this study enabled us to gain insight into their experiences of family life. Given that their accounts did not always align with their parents' with regards to family members' roles, relying solely on parents' reports of children's views would have resulted in an incomplete picture.

'I'd describe him as a half Dad like he's half not my Dad': using multiple methods in child-centred research

Our study of single-mother families formed through the use of donor insemination began in 2011 (Golombok et al., 2016; Zadeh, Freeman and Golombok, 2016). This family type has been the focus of much scrutiny, with the 2008 change to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act replacing the requirement for clinicians to consider a child's 'need for a father' with the need for 'supportive parenting' having been decried by one politician as 'the last nail in the coffin of the traditional family' (Ian Duncan Smith, quoted in McCandless and Sheldon, 2010; see also Zadeh and Foster, 2016).

In the first phase of the study, the children were aged 3–9 years, and as a research team we were relatively inexperienced in researching children's perspectives. We were also apprehensive about asking children direct questions about the absence of a father in their households, or the role of a donor in their conception, as we wished not to reaffirm the normative assumptions we knew from mothers' reports to have been presented to children at school and by peers (Zadeh, Freeman and Golombok, 2017). Following the work of Judy Dunn and colleagues on stepfamilies (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001), using nondirective tasks such as the five-field map completion task (Samuelsson, Thernlund and Ringstrom, 1996) provided an insight into whom children deemed themselves closest to. This task involves children drawing their network into a series of concentric circles, with themselves at the centre (for an example, see Zadeh, 2020). In many cases, these map drawings were followed by a discussion about family members and the role of other individuals in children's lives, as well as their thoughts and feelings about whether their family ought to be different (Zadeh, Freeman and Golombok, 2017). In a minority of cases, children included the donor on their map (Zadeh, 2020).

The study's second phase involved us revisiting the children, almost all of whom were now aged between 8–12 years (Zadeh et al., 2017). We knew from the existing literature on adoption that by this time, children would likely have an understanding of biological connections (Brodzinsky, 2011), though we also knew that they may or may not view these connections as significant to their own families (Mason and Tipper, 2008). Our aim was to understand their perspectives and experiences of both family life and donor conception. In terms of methods, we asked children to draw their family; to undertake the family map task (see

above); and to draw a family tree (Tasker and Granville, 2011). We also asked the children to draw or explain to us how babies (in general) are – and how they (in particular) were – made (Bernstein and Cowan, 1975). Finally, we asked children to take part in the Friends and Family Interview (Steele and Steele, 2005), a semi-structured interview that asks about family members, friends, teachers and school experiences, and is designed to assess security of attachment in middle childhood and adolescence. We complemented this interview with a series of further open-ended questions about children’s thoughts and feelings about their donor, using the schedule devised by Blake et al. (2010).

The use of multiple methods was a strength of this phase of the research, with different children clearly enjoying some tasks more than others, and tasks being adapted *in situ* to suit. For example, some of the older children were reluctant to join in with the drawing tasks. In these cases, they were asked to tell rather than show, and the in-depth interviews provided a better opportunity for them to share their perspectives. Among other children, however, the use of visual methods afforded them the space to share something different to their verbal accounts. In particular, children’s drawings of their understanding of conception sometimes featured love hearts, a man, and a woman: despite their verbal accounts of their mother’s journey to parenthood with a sperm donor, their depictions were of heterosexual, cisgender reproduction. These differences attest not only to the weight of normative ideas about reproduction and families on children’s perspectives (a finding that features across each of the studies described in this chapter), but also to the value of using multiple methods in child-centred research.

Similar differences arose according to method in the findings relating to children’s perspectives on their donors. Paralleling findings from the first phase of the study, children rarely included the donor as part of their family drawings or family trees. Yet, when interviewed, a significant minority of children described the donor in terms that would suggest they perceived his role in terms of their ideas about fathers. For some children, this meant emphasising the genetic connection between themselves and the donor; for others, this meant considering his role as a member of their family in the future. Again, without the range of methods employed, these nuances in children’s understandings of family life and donor conception would not have been apparent.

'Every family is different': the accounts of children in a longitudinal study of egg donation families

Our research has sought to understand children's perspectives in families in which children do not share a genetic connection to one of their parents (Imrie et al., 2019). In families with heterosexual parents who have used egg donation to conceive, children are genetically related to their father but not to their mother. Earlier research with families created in this way had included interviews with children aged 7 and 10 years (Blake et al., 2010; Blake et al., 2013). In this study, we wanted to understand younger children's views on the parent-child relationship, especially given that changes to policy and practice around gamete donation in the UK since the Blake, Casey, Jadvá and Golombok (2013) study were likely to have made a difference to donor-conceived children's experiences in these more recently formed families. Increasingly, fertility clinics had been advising parents to tell children about their method of conception at an early age (Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, 2021) and we knew from our interviews with parents (carried out when the children were infants) that most planned to start telling their children from around the age of 4 years. As a result, by age 5 years (when the second phase of our study took place), many of the children had already been told some information about their method of conception. From observational assessments of mother-child interactions in the study's first phase, we had also found less optimal relationship quality in egg-donation mother-infant dyads compared to IVF dyads (in which families had conceived using their own gametes) (Imrie et al., 2019), and we wanted to know whether this persisted into early childhood, when assessed from children's perspectives.

In this study, we used the Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI) (Measelle et al., 1998) to assess children's perceptions of their family relationships and themselves. The BPI is a well-validated measure that was developed from the tradition of using puppets in clinical applications and includes a range of scales that can be used to measure different constructs, such as children's perceptions of their family environment. It uses two identical dog puppets who have a peer-like interaction with the child (see <https://dslab.uoregon.edu/about/berkeley-puppet-interview/> for further information). The BPI has been shown to provide unique information not provided by adult reports (Arseneault et al., 2005; Huber et al., 2019). We were given permission by the authors to add two additional, open-ended questions to the measure, meaning that both qualitative and quantitative data were collected.

We found that children in egg-donation families rated their mothers as significantly higher in warmth and enjoyment in the relationship than did children in IVF families, a finding that was not explained by demographic or family process variables, thus suggesting that it was a feature of family type. We also found that children did not differ in their ratings of their own psychological adjustment or in their strengths and competencies (Imrie et al., 2022). In this way, the children's reports suggested that the early differences identified in the first phase of the study had not affected mother-child relationship quality in early childhood from the child's perspective. Inviting children to give their own accounts therefore not only gave us an important, and different, perspective on their family relationships, but also highlights the value of incorporating children's views in longitudinal research, even if this is not something that is possible in all phases of a research project.

'They're still your parent, it's not going to change how they care about you': theorising from children's perspectives in trans-parent families

An area of research in which children's perspectives had been highlighted as notably absent was in families with trans parents (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2019). Assumptions about the presumed detrimental effect on children of growing up with trans parents had resulted in trans parents losing their parental rights on the basis of their gender identity (see, for example, Pyne, Bauer and Bradley, 2015), but few studies in this area had used standardised measures of family functioning or parent-child relationships, or had involved school-aged children as participants. This study did both, using quantitative and qualitative methods (Imrie et al., 2020; Zadeh, Imrie and Golombok, 2021). Given the paucity of research, we recruited families with children of any age, meaning that we needed to develop different protocols, involving different measures and, in the end, three different interview schedules, each with differently worded questions, that would be appropriate across the children's overall age range (between 5 and 18 years).

Although by this time we were experienced in carrying out interviews with children, there had been a recent and significant increase in public anti-trans sentiment (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020). Coupled with the sensitive themes and topics of our research, this meant that we needed to consult various stakeholders in preparing for the study. First, we involved two community contacts, from the national charitable

organisations Stonewall and Gendered Intelligence, drawing on their expertise to ensure that our overall approach (from the methods we had chosen to the terminology we would use in explaining our research) would help the children we were inviting to take part to feel safe. We undertook trans-awareness training with Gendered Intelligence and attended academic workshops on transgender research before beginning our study. Prior to each research interview, we also showed parents the questions we would ask of their children and asked them to adapt any phrasing to better reflect the terms used within their family.

Given its design, we were able to collect quantitative data on parent–child relationship quality from 25 children aged from 8 to 18 years, using the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) (Rohner, 2005). We adapted this questionnaire so that it could be completed by the child on their own; completed by question and answer with the researcher; or like the SCARF in our study of married primary-caregiver fathers, completed nonverbally, using prompts – something that was preferred by some of the younger children taking part. Overall, we found that children rated their trans parents as more accepting than rejecting, thus at once indicating good relationship quality, and providing the first assessment worldwide of child-reported relationship quality in trans-parent families using a standardised measure (Imrie et al., 2020).

We also carried out in-depth interviews with 29 children and young people aged 5 to 18 years to explore their experiences of family relationships and their perspectives on family life. At the time it was published, this was the only study to have focused exclusively on the perspectives of minors in trans-parent families. In line with what we learned from the PARQ, we found that most children described their parent’s gender identity as having little or no impact on their relationship with them, challenging both the (limited) existing literature and growing public anti-trans sentiment at the time. However, our findings also highlighted the work undertaken by many of the children in navigating the social world as part of a trans-parent family, for example, in educating others about what it means to be trans, or in situated pronoun use to ensure their family’s safety in certain public spaces (Zadeh, Imrie and Golombok, 2021).

Overall, we described these findings as presenting a rich, and mixed, picture of children’s views and experiences. The fact that the children we interviewed had provided such detailed and nuanced accounts of their family lives as they are lived (that is, in context) led us to think with theory about what they had shared with us. Using the sociological concept of ‘family display’ (Finch, 2007), we were able to better understand the

variations in their experiences within and outside of their households. We also reflected that children growing up in different changing families may share these experiences and have since developed the concept in our more recent research on single-father families (Zadeh, Jadva and Golombok, 2022). It is unlikely that we would have arrived at these insights without including children and young people in the trans-parent study, and without giving them the space to tell us, in depth, about their experiences.

Concluding reflections

The case studies focused on in this chapter are examples of child-centred family research that has been motivated by public and policy debates about what is in children's 'best interests' when it comes to family life. These studies share with the historical and contemporary work of TCRU scholars a commitment to prioritising children's perspectives and experiences in both family research and policy (Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). We are particularly proud that our research has gone on to inform policy and practice relating to changing families. One prominent example is the change in law in January 2019 that has since enabled single people in the UK to become the legal parents of their children born through surrogacy. The UK government's proposal to change this law was informed by the findings of the solo-mothers study relating to both children's psychological adjustment and their views on family life. Similarly, our study of trans-parent families has gained attention from lawyers and members of the public supporting trans parents with parental-rights court cases, who have more than once made contact to request our research findings. Overall, our research provides an important foundation for policymakers charged with making decisions that will affect children in changing families by enabling them to access their perspectives in an ethical, rigorous way.

At the same time, we have faced challenges in convincing reviewers of high-profile family journals that children's accounts are in and of themselves important; the perspectives of the children who have taken part in our research have also been misshapen by journalists in media reports of our findings. Some of the measures used in our studies, for example measures of attachment security, and parental roles, have been instructive, but are not always well understood beyond the academic context. Indeed, a powerful recent article discussed the ways in which attachment theory and research is often misunderstood and misapplied in family court settings (Forslund et al., 2022), highlighting the need for

more translational work. In terms of research on changing families, this work could focus on targeting practitioners, who have been shown to discriminate against prospective parents in changing families (Bower-Brown and Zadeh, 2021), in some cases despite related changes to policy (Tippett, 2023).

In the meantime at TCRU, we have been working on new research projects and translating our findings to other audiences. A new multiphase study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Zadeh), focuses on donor-conceived young adults, and will thus extend what we know about the perspectives of those in families conceived through assisted reproduction, beyond childhood and adolescence. A new digital resource was designed and produced (Jones), supported by an IOE Early Career Impact Fellowship, to educate young people aged 16 to 18 years about families formed through assisted reproduction.² The idea for this resource came from the insights gained from our research, as well as others', that children's experiences of stigma and bullying in school about their family type or their own gender or sexual identity can be detrimental to their school experience and psychological adjustment (Jadva et al., 2021; Bos and Gartrell, 2010).

Our current research at TCRU thus extends the understanding we have gained from researching children and young people in changing families; that their voices need to be heard and represented in ways that go beyond just academic outputs, and the ways in which carefully and sensitively designed studies can help provide in-depth insights into their perspectives on family life. With changing families at the centre of ongoing policy debates in the UK and beyond, family researchers must continue to ensure that children's perspectives on family life and family relationships are taken into account. This chapter, and the other chapters in the third section of this book, on innovative methods, make clear some of the ways that TCRU scholars will continue to produce research that is inclusive of children, the methodological tools available to do so, and the potential of this work to shape future research and policy.

Further reading

Golombok's work on new family forms offers unprecedented insight into the experiences of a wide variety of families. *We Are Family: What really matters for parents and children* (Golombok, 2020) outlines studies of lesbian mothers, gay fathers, single parents, donor conception parents, coparents, trans parents, surrogates, and donors, and children from diverse family

forms. A useful summary of Golombok's research on children's perspectives can be found in 'The voices of children in new family forms: A provocation paper' (Golombok, 2020), a paper given at the British Academy, which can be accessed free online at <https://medium.com/reframing-childhood-past-and-present/the-voices-of-children-in-new-family-forms-f7f4199fc8ff>.

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Notes

- 1 The term 'changing families' is drawn from the work of Dunn and Deater-Deckard (2001). The families who are the focus of our research have, over the years, also been described as 'non-traditional' (Golombok, 2014), 'modern' (Golombok, 2015), and 'new' (Golombok, 2020).
- 2 *Assisted Reproduction: A short educational film*, can be accessed via the UCL Media Central website, <https://mediacentral.ucl.ac.uk/Play/87999>.

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International collaboration: practice and praxis

Julia Brannen and Rebecca O'Connell

Introduction

Over the last three decades international research has become a significant area of UK universities' research portfolio, particularly that funded by the European Union (EU). This growth has occurred in the context of several developments. Initially cooperation between scholars in eastern and Western Europe was fostered in the early postwar period in which there was a need to rebuild society. Later came the drive for research to be more 'policy relevant' and thereby to tackle the global challenges of the twenty-first century. At the same time international research was facilitated by the possibilities of technology and, with increasing importance given to multi- and interdisciplinarity, it grew in scale and ambition (Hantrais, 2022). The current times of increased global tension make international collaboration ever more necessary. However, at the level of universities, it is also riven by requirements to be competitive.¹

Until the exit of the UK from the EU, British researchers have been disproportionately successful in winning EU grants, including in the social sciences. In large part this happened because of the preeminence of English as the common language of research communication and also because UK researchers had become skilled in writing research proposals that promised the 'societal impact' demanded by UK funders.

From the 1990s, the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) has taken part in international research, especially in programmes funded by

the EU, with several researchers becoming project coordinators, project partners and members of international teams. In this chapter we examine research ‘praxis’, understood as a set of iterative processes that integrate theory and method, by drawing on a piece of European research, Families and Food in Hard Times (FFHT) that was led by TCRU and involved research centres in two other countries. Funded by the European Research Council (ERC) from 2014–19 under its Starting Grants scheme,² Rebecca O’Connell, the principal investigator (PI), led an international team, with researchers in the UK, Portugal and Norway.³ We begin by describing the context in which the study was conceived, funded and carried out, before discussing how the research questions were (re)defined, the different approaches and practices that made collaboration possible, and its comparative methodology. In focusing on key methodological elements of research, we argue that international collaborations require the integration of theory and methodological practices – praxis.

Families and Food in Hard Times

In setting FFHT in its international context, it is instructive to set out the layers of context in which this international project was conceived and carried out. The project’s *political context* was a global crisis – the 2008 financial crisis, the consequences of which the project sought to examine for the food practices of families on low incomes. The *funding context* at European level (the ERC Starting Grant scheme) set the conditions for the international project, namely an explicit expectation of developing research collaboration together with promoting research excellence and learning the skills necessary for leading an international project as part of the European Research Area (ERA).

The specific *institutional context* was also important for the project, namely its coincidence with a period of restructuring. The project was funded before the Institute of Education (IOE) merged with UCL ([Chapter 1](#) in this volume). The IOE had invested in a European Proposal Officer who was highly supportive and effective. This role ceased to exist following the absorption of the IOE into UCL. In writing the proposal, preparing for the ERC final selection panel and in carrying out the research, informal interpersonal support was necessary both from those involved in the project and in the institution. This is particularly necessary in the case of the ERC Starting Grant scheme that focuses on PIs who are inexperienced in international research. Indeed, leadership of such grants is typically premised on ‘sponsorship’ by more senior researchers. By sponsorship we

mean both the leveraging power to promote less-experienced and less-senior personnel (O'Connor et al., 2020) and an ethic of care that requires a commitment 'to lift as we climb' (Davis, 1990: 6). Finally, another critical context that was particularly important to a project focused on food poverty was the interaction with those with a stake in the research. Policy engagement and advice were provided by the project's advisory group. This was achieved in the UK part of the research through liaison with the oldest pressure-group in the country, the Child Poverty Action Group, who work closely with policymakers (Brannen, P., 1987).⁴

Among the methodological matters that arise in international research in general, and in FFHT in particular, the most important is how we define 'the thing' that we are interested in studying. This is particularly 'tricky' in international multidisciplinary research (Wilson, 2022: 4) because it requires the team to transcend intellectual and research traditions. A second matter, rarely discussed in methodology texts, or accounts of the development of modern social research (for example, Thompson, Plummer and Demireva, 2021), is team collaboration. In international research in which the collaborators may not be known to each other or have worked together before, this matter requires careful consideration. A third important consideration is the application of a comparative approach, a method that is not always employed in international research but may be a rationale.

Defining the research problem

Bernstein described sociology as having given way to 'an array of specialised knowledges that fragments the experience of the acquirer and shatters any sense of underlying unity'. The result, he suggests, is 'rather like visiting a gallery where paintings are in continuous motion, some being taken down, others replacing and all in an unfinished state' (1999: 170). In international research, defining the research problem is more complicated because it typically involves different fields of knowledge or traditions within one field.

Bernstein's solution is to shift focus to the 'languages of empirical description', by which he means that the task of knowledge production should concentrate on a dedication to the 'research problem and its vicissitudes' (Bernstein, 1999: 170) and thereby escape the silos of specialised knowledges and counteract preferences or predispositions for epistemological traditions (Galtung, 1982).

FFHT illustrates the process by which a research problem, food poverty, came to be defined in an international research collaboration. In the UK we realised that many European countries were experiencing a large increase in poverty following the 2008 international financial crisis that also manifested itself in rising levels of food poverty or ‘household food insecurity’. Evidence for the UK suggested that growing numbers of children were going hungry and that families were resorting to food banks that had increased massively in number (see [O’Connell and Brannen, 2021](#)).

In setting out to study food poverty in several countries, we recognised that food poverty and poverty itself were also ‘social problems’ that were likely to be framed differently in each context ([Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016](#); [Sayer, 2017](#)) and that societal responses to social problems would vary. In the UK, those living in poverty were typically portrayed in public discourses such as the printed mass-media as blameworthy and as ‘sponging’ off the state, with the term ‘food poverty’ largely synonymous with those using food banks. In Portugal less emphasis seemed to be placed on blaming those in poverty. Moreover, the fact that many middle-class families in Portugal were adversely affected by the 2008 financial crisis gave rise in common parlance to the term the ‘new poor’. Portugal’s response to food poverty was also shaped by the long-established existence of charitable organisations that emphasised ‘solidarity’ as an intrinsic feature of Portuguese society. In Norway, poverty discourses were muted ([Walker and Chase, 2014](#)), with official discourses maintaining that social deprivation had been eradicated by the establishment of Norway’s strong protective welfare state ([Hagen and Lødemel, 2003](#): 210). Indeed, food poverty as such did not officially exist, having been relegated to the distant past ([Borch and Kjaerness, 2016](#); [Skuland, 2018](#)).

In preparing a funding proposal to the ERC we decided to focus on families with children aged 11–16 years who were likely to be particularly at risk of poverty ([O’Connell and Brannen, 2021](#)). To address the research question of whether low income led to food insecurity, we selected European countries that were differently impacted by austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis and that had different levels of social protection in terms of their welfare states and national indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita rankings. The UK’s increasingly residualist welfare state provided a low level of welfare benefits while the labour market offered poor pay and employment conditions. The UK therefore provided a sharp contrast with Norway’s comprehensive Nordic welfare state with its generous level of welfare benefits that supported those on low incomes.

Portugal's welfare state, described as 'familialist' (Esping Andersen, 1990), offered a low level of welfare benefits while extended families were expected to compensate or substitute for a weak welfare safety net. In terms of their global GDP per capita rankings, Norway was in third position, the UK in fourteenth place and Portugal in twenty-second place.

As Sayer (2000: 27) argues, 'How we "carve up" and define our objects of study tends to set the fate of any subsequent research' (see also Vaughan, 1992). In FFHT we needed first to think hard about how we conceptualised our research 'object', poverty and food poverty in particular, before we decided on 'methods' that were 'appropriate to their objects and the kind of questions we ask[ed] of them' (Sayer and Morgan, 2022: 12). Because definitions of poverty vary over time and place, we adopted a broad definition, taking on board Townsend's concept of relative poverty (1979: 31), namely when people 'lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong'. This definition brings together social with physical needs and suggests that they cannot be usefully divided, since the ways in which seemingly 'basic' needs such as nutrition are met are mediated by social norms and fulfil social functions (Hick, 2014: 301).

In the design of the study, we considered that both poverty and food insecurity were likely not only to be affected by country-level characteristics, but also by the *specific* social conditions in which low-income groups found themselves, in trying to access the resources needed to feed themselves properly. Under what conditions are children and families in wealthy countries unable to do so? Our solution was to examine the social problem extensively and intensively through different types of data, quantitative and qualitative. We carried out comparative analysis of the broader social contexts of the three countries but also the study of small samples of families in comparable local contexts in each country and with a range of different family forms and employment statuses. The research problem was examined at three intersecting but distinct analytic levels of social contexts:

- The macro level of the nation state: their histories, social institutions and characteristics, and national policies and discourses, and policies related to poverty, food and nutrition;
- The meso level of the locality: its characteristics in terms of population, employment opportunities, housing, schools, shopping amenities, charities and other local services;

- The individual/household level of everyday family life: how parents and children accessed resources, their everyday intra-household negotiations and practices, and the support they accessed from kinship and social networks, including schools.

At the macro level, to identify the types of families most at risk of food poverty in each country, secondary quantitative analysis of existing international datasets was carried out: the EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) and the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) for the three countries. Using documentary analysis methods, national policies and programmes, relevant official statistics and newspaper reports on families, poverty and food were examined (Knight et al., 2018). This part of the research contextualised food poverty by taking account of the different histories of the three countries, their welfare states and dominant discourses concerning families, food and poverty.

At the meso level, we recruited families for the qualitative study from both urban and nonurban areas in each country, in order to capture the differences that housing, employment opportunities, transport and shopping facilities made to how families accessed food. In the interviews we asked about participants' informal social networks, their neighbourhoods and the extent to which the local area afforded families access to shops and services. Through our contacts with schools, which were sites of recruitment for some of the families, we inquired about school food provision and policies. We drew on our fieldwork and recruitment notes and talks with gatekeepers, namely food banks, charities and social services, and consulted literature such as national and local-authority regulation, policies and reports.

At the micro level of the household, we adopted a case-based approach. As the case-study literature suggests, cases must be 'cases of something' (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011). However, there is always a danger of conceptualising the 'case of' too narrowly, as Bernstein suggests, concepts should always be 'capacious' enough to allow for their subsequent refinement (personal communication). Also, as Ragin (1992) argues, we should not confine the focus of our sociological imagination to one type of 'case' (a family, for example) and risk foreclosing on the opportunity to see similarities across other types of cases. The households we studied were understood as cases of families experiencing poverty, located in particular places (communities and cities) and in particular societies (national policies, cultures and institutions) at a particular time (post 2008 financial crisis).

This approach permits explanations of food poverty that are specific to a set of social conditions for a specific person or household in a particular context and location that may not be ‘ideal typical’ for a country pattern (Brannen, 2005). The aim was not to extrapolate from the individual or household to the country or nation. Instead, cases were treated as ‘emblematic’ of particular social characteristics, conditions and structural contexts (Thomson, 2009). In the qualitative part of the study, we tried therefore to understand how place (the meso level) made a difference and how particular types of low-income households in particular countries managed to feed themselves adequately given their access to different types of resources – income, social networks, local services – and their household management strategies and experiences.

Collaborations across countries involve engaging with different intellectual traditions and require openness to these differences, including methodologies. Team members need to be comfortable and skilled at working at the edge of their own traditions. Given that the coordinator writes the proposal and sets the parameters of the project, those who join the team after funding is granted are at a disadvantage in influencing key research-design decisions. It is important therefore that some flexibility is written into the research proposal to allow for subsequent changes. In developing the project’s core concepts, there is a need to ‘bridge’ (Layder, 1998) any divides and hierarchies in traditions and disciplines. Some ‘interdisciplinary scholars’ have called for ‘super concepts’ (Wilson, 2022) that refer to the meta level, contrasting with the middle range and grounded concepts of much social-science research.

FFHT was a collaboration across the cognate disciplines of sociology, anthropology, statistics, and social policy, a particular feature of TCRU’s legacy to the project. In addition, the project was at the intersection of several fields of specialised knowledge: family studies, childhood studies and food studies. While family and childhood studies primarily bring together the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, food studies span a wider range of disciplines such as geography, social policy, nutrition and public health. While the inclusion of researchers from cognate disciplines was important to the team’s successful collaboration, food studies was not only topical but had a wide appeal to a range of stakeholders, which was undoubtedly important in securing ERC funding.

Collaboration and leadership

Bids for and the directorship of international projects in particular place great emphasis on leadership, with less emphasis on teamworking. This is because the ‘academic entrepreneur’ has been historically dominant in universities. Formerly, tenured academics (typically men) were employed by the university principally to teach, with research conducted largely as a solo activity (Weber, 1919/2012). As universities became more dependent for their funding on research, teaching academics took on the role of research leaders whose task was to apply for funding and direct the research for part of their time, while delegating much of the work to ‘hired hands’ (Roth, 1966), often women.

Today, as universities are expected to follow the business model with a managerialist structure and entrepreneurial culture, this means recruiting ‘the best’ and the highest performers (Manville et al., 2015). Given that universities raise most of their funding through student fees, academics are expected both to teach and to be research leaders. Moreover, the purpose of the ‘stellar researcher’ is to enhance their personal profile as well as institutional prestige and income. The emphasis on leadership and entrepreneurial spirit is also present in funding schemes that allocate grants on the basis of personal performance and outstanding scholarship. Moreover, the outputs from many such grants are evaluated largely as the work of the individual grant holder and not the collective contributions of the research team.

The tension between these two models of research – the academic entrepreneur and the team model – is epitomised in the criticism that has been mounted of the Nobel Prize science committees, suggesting that the individualisation of prize giving ignores the ways in which such research depends upon team effort:

the Nobel committees force a category error: they insist on awarding the prize to a few individuals while, in reality, the nature of the scientific enterprise has changed. Teams now perform the bulk of the highest-impact work. Whereas a century ago a patent clerk famously divined the theory of relativity in his spare time, the discovery of the Higgs boson requires decades of planning and the efforts of 6,000 researchers. No one person – no troika, even – can claim all the credit (Scientific American, 2012: 12).

While social science is unlikely to match the scale of such endeavours as CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, the work of research teams is central to the success of social-science research and especially to international research that, as noted, is increasingly multidisciplinary. In research aimed to identify the characteristics of high-performing research units, Manville, Hinrichs, Parks, Kamenetzky, Gunashekar, Wilkinson and Grant (2015) stress the importance of *high-performing people* as the main prerequisite, supported by culture, values and leadership. By contrast, former Chief Executive of the Alan Turing Institute, Alan Wilson, writes that collaboration is essential to successful research projects and the genesis of new research. He also notes that collaboration is sustained through informal as well as formal collegiality. ‘The ideal of collaboration is crucial for a national institute. Researchers ... meet in workshops and seminars, and perhaps almost significantly over coffee and lunch in the Institute’s kitchen area; new projects, new collaborations emerge from such encounters’ (Wilson, 2022: 115).

In meeting the project’s aims, teamworking fulfils another purpose. Research is a craft that is learned alongside more experienced researchers and not only through the multitude of training courses and methodology textbooks that are increasingly available (Brannen, 2021). From its inception TCRU was a site of teamworking. The founder of TCRU, Jack Tizard, created a space for a strong collaborative culture to develop (Brannen, 2021). In the first thirty or so years of TCRU’s life few research staff had PhDs. They were employed full-time in research and therefore had no teaching responsibilities. The disadvantage was that they were contract researchers because funding was limited to the duration of projects. Researchers were largely apprenticed in the craft of research by working alongside and learning from more experienced researchers. They were encouraged to extend and develop their skills and experiment with different research practices, techniques and technologies. TCRU’s early history demonstrates how ‘research based on strong “communities of practice” helps weather upheavals in the wider university contexts that surround research’ (Brannen, 2021: 35) (see also Chapter 16 in this volume).

Unlike many other research settings, TCRU carried over some of its researchers from one project to another so that a corpus of research expertise was built up over time, creating a critical mass that enhanced the quality of the unit’s work as well as its capacity to attract funds. This made for smooth working relationships (Brannen, 2021) and for many years was facilitated by TCRU’s core funding base from the Department of Health and Social Security (later the Department of Health).

The forging of successful international research teams depends to some extent on tried-and-tested relationships: collaborations with previous collaborators or with those known to be reliable and conducive researchers to work with. FFHT was notable for its collaborative structure and culture in its design, execution and dissemination. Its UK team were all members of TCRU who had previously worked together very successfully, including one member who had experience of EU-funded research and methodological discussions relating to international research. The institutions in Norway and Portugal were known to one of us who had worked with colleagues in both countries for many years. The Portuguese team were members of a similar type of research unit to TCRU and were accustomed to international research collaboration. The Norwegian researcher similarly worked in a research institute and was familiar with the conditions of external research funding.

Each team contributed to the project's methodological development. This was facilitated by whole-project international meetings at which we developed common research tools and discussed important decisions. The research tools were tested in each country prior to fieldwork and we exchanged and discussed the initial framework for analysis of the qualitative interviews. We wrote up the parent and child interviews in summary form in English as we lacked funding for translation and the UK team did not speak either Portuguese or Norwegian. We were able to discuss these summaries online and at international meetings and thereby assist in their interpretation in the data analysis, including by asking 'probing questions' designed to elicit information about social contexts. Each country team was open to and/or experienced in working across different methodological traditions including quantitative and qualitative datasets. This experience made for a constructive and productive working relationship in the international team.

FFHT's PI needed to ensure that the project was sensitive to hierarchies of power and status within the team. International teams benefit when work tasks are shared fairly and decent equitable pay and employment contracts are awarded irrespective of status. Although funding bodies encourage postdoctoral and postgraduate students to work on international projects, a 'top-down model' of exploiting people in such positions is to be discouraged. Best practice would require that the holders of these positions should be properly apprenticed and employed in as many aspects of the work as possible and rewarded for the whole duration of the project. In FFHT they and all the other project researchers were given full access to the data and due recognition for their work, including authorship of publications to which they contributed. The more

experienced researchers took responsibility for training those with less experience. Such sharing of research expertise and experience was particularly important given the sensitivity of the research topic, food poverty. The qualitative interviews involved asking very delicate questions of both children and parents. It was therefore decided to conduct all fieldwork involving a less experienced researcher in the company of a more senior researcher who was either present at the less senior researcher's interview or interviewing the parent or child at the same time in the same research location.

Discussions of research collaboration stress the importance of mentorship (Sorkness et al., 2017), defined as the provision of emotional support and feedback to a less experienced staff member and acting as role models (Rhodes, 2002). FFHT was, as noted, a starting grant scheme; these grants were principally intended to offer their PIs experience of directing and collaborating with a relatively large group of researchers, gave them control over substantial budgets and imposed relatively few constraints. While the PI was mentored by a senior researcher on the UK team, the mentor was also a full participant in the team. However, mentorship is only one way in which successful teams are forged. Mentoring is not enough especially when applied to early-career researchers. They also require sponsorship, that is, the leveraging of the senior person's power and influence to advance the career of their protégés (O'Connor et al., 2020). Because the FFHT project was funded under a particular scheme of the ERC there were limited possibilities within the timetable of the project to produce publications that involved the contributions of all three teams. Some publications involving members of each team have since been produced (for example, O'Connell et al., 2021; O'Connell et al., 2022).

International collaboration requires transparency and effective communication (Hantrais and Brannen, 2022). International meetings were organised in each country although funding limited their frequency. All team members were kept updated with minutes of meetings and listings of agreed actions. Time at these meetings was made for socialising, including sharing food, the topic of the research. Germane to the work of these meetings was the exchange of material including fieldwork notes and the discussion of research instruments. In addition, the meetings included an international advisory group which played an important role in relation to promoting the targeting of the research to different policy contexts.

Comparative methods

International research is not always comparative. Comparative research designs allow us ‘to compare systematically the manifestations of phenomena in more than one temporal or spatial socio-cultural setting’ (Hantrais, 2009: 15). Such comparisons made by international teams depend for their success not only on the research designs of projects but also on the practices of collaboration. In the analysing data it is important that the nation as a unit of analysis is differentiated from the nation as a context of study (Kohn, 1987: 714). Case comparison requires the selection of cases according to similar characteristics, while bearing in mind that this does not necessarily guard against ‘methodological nationalism’. Here we refer to the risk of overemphasising aspects of culture in interpreting data from one context. There is, furthermore, a second danger that, in comparing the same phenomenon in different contexts, we fail to realise that questions or concepts that seem self-evident may have an entirely different meaning in other contexts (Quilgars et al., 2009; Wendt, 2019). International collaborative research teams can help mitigate these dangers.

In all research, the researcher is required to move back and forth between the study’s research questions and the data, taking into account how different types of data are produced and what they mean. This iterative process is particularly difficult when working comparatively in international contexts. In order to interpret the specificities of one’s own society it is important to see these data through a stranger’s eyes (Schütz, 1964). An international team offers an excellent opportunity for this. In addition, in order to interpret the data about other societies, it is necessary to ask questions of those who collected the data who may not have made explicit the taken-for-granted aspects of their own cultures and contexts. We need also to avoid the syndrome of seeing ‘otherness’ in the material generated in different societies by also holding on to the possibility of similarity (Geertz, 1973). In effect, in making sense of the data, an international team can disrupt and critically evaluate their members’ preconceptions and blind spots. This is no mean achievement.

The design of FFHT provided us with several opportunities for comparative analysis. Its first phases gave useful background material, especially on the national contexts concerning poverty, food poverty and families, based on lengthy national reports written by each country team concerning the countries’ political systems, welfare states, poverty and inequality, food and nutrition policies including in schools and children’s food intake. Quantitative secondary analysis of international datasets

addressed the question concerning which types of families were most at risk of poverty and food insecurity in each of the three countries, providing a basis with which to compare the in-depth findings of the qualitative study. In the qualitative research, the fieldwork notes that each team prepared were critical to making comparisons between cases (households) and to understanding the social contexts. These described the ways the families were recruited, the areas in which they lived, their housing and the researchers' encounters with parents and the children.

The core of the household case comparison were the qualitative interviews with parents and children. A quantitative tool was used to compare household food budgets of the families in the qualitative study.⁵ In addition, a subsample of families in each country was invited to take part in a follow-up interview that involved photography. During a tour, with a parent, of the family kitchen and its food storage areas, photos were taken and parents asked to discuss them. The children were invited at a second interview to discuss the photos they had taken of the different settings where they had eaten, including the home and the neighbourhood (O'Connell, Knight and Brannen, 2019). Such evidence increased our understanding of the materiality, context and meanings associated with food in the different societies (Tinkler, 2013): what was eaten in a particular context and its meaning and cultural significance to the person consuming it. Photography has the advantage of obviating the need to 'explain'; it avoided asking participants questions that may have seemed too obvious. It also had the potential to reveal taken-for-granted features of everyday life in particular contexts, avoiding a major methodological hazard of interviewing that may overlook practices and habits that are not consciously reflected upon. Furthermore, photographs brought findings alive for different audiences and, in some cases, provided stark visual illustrations of comparative findings (O'Connell, Brannen and Knight, 2019).

Concluding reflections

We have suggested that international research is required to understand and address the contemporary social problems of a global world. As we pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, this has led to the scaling up of research facilitated by the advances of digital technology. Inevitably, research increasingly involves large teams consisting of several disciplines and in many cases working in interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary ways. However, this does not mean that all international research needs to be on a grand scale. As the FFHT study illustrates, the study was designed to

address a public issue of growing significance, namely the continuation of poverty and the re-emergence of food insecurity in the Global North through the focus on three European countries.

To do this, the international team sought to keep uppermost ‘the problem at hand’ (Mills, 1983: 135). We examined the evidence that already existed in the three countries but also sought to understand ‘public issues’ as they manifested themselves as ‘private troubles’ (Mills, 1959) in the everyday lives of low-income families, through primary research. We sought to see how the macro level of societal trends and policies intersected with the meso level, the local provision of services and communities, and with the micro level, the households of low-income parents and their children, in relation to the provision of and access to food, income and resources in kind. And by comparing matched cases (including parents and children) in similar contexts in each country, the international team was able to identify conditions that made a difference (or not) to how families managed to feed themselves adequately. In order to work comparatively in an international team, the research question had to be reformulated in relation to different levels of reality and to take account of other dimensions not only to do with absence of adequate food. As Mills (1983: 143) suggests, ‘Controversy over different views of “methodology” and “theory” is probably carried on in close and continuous relation with substantive problems’. The overturning of research results is not the fate of research but its goal. ‘Every scientific “fulfillment” gives birth to new “questions” and cries out to be surpassed and rendered obsolete’ (Weber, 1919/2012).

In discussing an international research project, we have sought to illustrate how its methodology constituted ‘practice’ and ‘praxis’, that is a set of iterative processes that integrated theory and method, and was based on working with researchers whose intellectual traditions and research experience varied. Through teamworking and the use of different research methods and data, we tried to avoid being driven by a priori philosophical assumptions that can lead an individual researcher into error. As Hammersley suggests, our task as social researchers is to ‘pursue knowledge and respect truth’ (Hammersley, 2015: 443). Agreement in science, albeit temporary, comes about on the basis of much debate and discussion (Wilson, 2022). We have also sought to show that international collaboration depends on achieving a shared understanding of what the project and research community are about. Only through a sense of joint enterprise in the practices of research, social interaction and the endorsement of norms and relationships of mutuality that reflect these interactions, will the kinds of communities (Wenger, 2000: 229) be created that can create excellent research.

Further reading

For further understanding of the international project we refer the reader to our book, *Families and Food in Hard Times: European comparative research*, available free online at www.uclpress.co.uk/products/126956. Other writing from this project demonstrates how we have analysed the international comparative data, written by members of all three research teams, including an article, 'School meals as a resource for low-income families in three European countries: A comparative case approach' at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2078498>. There are few books on international collaboration in the social sciences and on team research in general, as we have suggested in the chapter. We recommend the reader to consult *International Comparative Research: Theory, methods, and practice* by Linda Hantrais (2009), a general guide to international social-science research; and for a practical guide to doing international multidisciplinary research we recommend her more recent edited book, *How to Manage International Multidisciplinary Research Projects* (Hantrais, 2022).

Notes

- 1 Alain Beretz, President of COST, talk given at the UCL European Institute May 2022.
- 2 ERC grant agreement no. 337977.
- 3 The research team comprised, in the UK: Rebecca O'Connell, Julia Brannen, Laura Hamilton, Abigail Knight, Charlie Owen, Antonia Simon (Thomas Coram Research Unit); Portugal: Fábio Augusto, Sonia Cardoso, Vasco Ramos, Mónica Truninger, Karin Wall (Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa); Norway: Silje Skuland, Anine Frisland (Consumption Research Norway, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway). Penny Mellor and Cécile Brémont provided administrative support.
- 4 The collaboration involved a book, a launch in the House of Commons, media, social media, brief, press release, and collaboration on recommendations.
- 5 A food budget was calculated for each household: the actual reported expenditure for each family compared with the 'food basket' for a particular family type according to the reference budget for each country. This measure gave an idea of the spending of a particular family compared to the amount deemed necessary for a household of the same type and size to meet health recommendations and the cultural norms in the society in which the family lives.

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Participatory childhood research: histories, presents and reflections

Veena Meeto, Hanan Hauari and Ann Phoenix

Introduction

Participatory research is an umbrella term that encompasses several approaches and methods. Bishop (2014) writes that participatory research signifies the active involvement of participants, beyond providing data. Participatory methods are now seen as central to approaches that include children in knowledge production and treat them with respect as people who have ideas and feelings about things that happen to them and in which they are involved (Bengry-Howell et al., 2011; Tisdall, 2015). While children's agency is limited by their social positioning and the adults around them, it is widely accepted that collaboratively including them in the generation of knowledge about them produces research that is more ethical and more convincing (Clark and Richards, 2017).

This chapter showcases the ways in which Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) has contributed to understandings of children's lives that are informed by children's perspectives. It engages with the dynamism of the field by situating the contemporary participatory research with children in TCRU's 50-year history of centring children and producing understandings of children's cultures and their situatedness in families, the institutions they attend, and in their neighbourhoods. Over that period, a major shift in theorising and researching children has been stimulated by the growth of the sociology of childhood and critiques from developmental psychology which disrupted predominant notions of

children as either developing in naturally occurring biological pathways or as passively socialised by parents and teachers (James and Prout, 1990; Burman, 1994). From this perspective, constructions of children and childhood are viewed as interlinked with political constructions of society, the place of families and the responsibilities of the state.

TCRU research was in the vanguard of research that both treated children as agents and recognised that their agency was necessarily constrained by their socioeconomic conditions, intersectional positioning and family circumstances. An early member of TCRU, Berry Mayall (1994; 2013), became a leading figure in the sociology of childhood. Other members of TCRU focused on children's lives and cultures in ways that took seriously their positioning and devised methods to engage them in research and elicit their perspectives (for example, Blatchford, Cresser and Mooney, 1990; Petrie, 1994). As theories of childhood, children, families and societies have changed, so too has the theorisation, focus and methods of TCRU research. This chapter addresses three issues central to considerations of children's participation in research: social justice, power relations in research, and children's perspectives. The chapter first explores how children have been listened to and engaged, by briefly considering some of the past projects that have been conducted at TCRU. Since it would be impossible to be exhaustive in covering all the relevant work, it takes particular projects as signifiers of methodological and substantive approaches in work with children and young people, as well as the epistemological, ontological and axiological perspectives they took.

The second part of the chapter stages an interaction between Hanan Hauari and Veena Meeto, two long-standing researchers at TCRU who have conducted recent studies in which participatory research methods have been used with children and young people who are socially marginalised. It explores how their experience of participatory approaches democratises power relations in research, and elicits children's voices and enables analysis of childhoods. We offer our reflections on the process of doing participatory research with children and young people over the course of the research projects, from setting the research agenda through to analysis and dissemination.

Examples of TCRU's research with children and families

TCRU was established in 1973 by Jack Tizard with the aim of producing rigorous, policy-oriented research that focused on the health, welfare and education of children, their families, and the services and institutions

that work with them (Brannen et al., 2022; Chapter 1, this volume). TCRU researchers frequently observed preverbal children, in work on preschool services, children with disabilities, young children's play and residential nurseries – work that led to Barbara Tizard's longitudinal study of adoption (Hodges and Tizard, 1989; Tizard, 1977). Even with preverbal children, TCRU researchers would attempt to present children's perspectives by observing what they did, how they spent their time and how others interacted with them. For example, the study of childminding made in the 1970s by Berry Mayall and Pat Petrie (1977) included chapters on how the children spent their days, and their relationships with their minders. From their joint work on childminders and day nurseries, Mayall and Petrie went on to do a range of studies that enshrined their concern with analysing children's perspectives and taking seriously their participation in research. Mayall, for example, described a study that she conducted in a popular inner-city primary school:

I spent two terms in 1991 in this school, two days a week, mainly as a helper in the reception class (5–6-year-olds), and in class 5 (9–10-year-olds). I collected data as fieldnotes from observation, through informal and more focussed conversations with children (in twos and threes), through whole class discussions and, with the older children, through some writing ... The data collected are therefore useful for considering how children make their way as agents in relation to adults: how far they interact and negotiate, how far the social norms of the setting are fixed or mutable in response to child and adult action and how far the actors – child and adult – work within and in tension with intergenerational relations and contracts (Mayall, 1994: 119–20).

Methodologically, Mayall drew on participant observations and attempted to get children's perspectives in a variety of ways and by focusing on their everyday lives in different contexts. She helped to move forward the emphasis on children as agents that had become widely accepted in the sociology of childhood, by pointing out from her research that 'whilst children undoubtedly view themselves and may be viewed as actors in both settings, their ability to negotiate an acceptable daily experience is heavily dependent on the adults' understanding of childhood and of appropriate activities by and for children in the two settings' (Mayall, 1994: 114). She also set up a national Childhood Study Group from 1991 which germinated many of the ideas on the sociology of childhood that became popular in the 1990s (Mayall, 2013).

After her joint research with Berry Mayall, Pat Petrie conducted four research projects at TCRU on children's out-of-school lives. In the first, Petrie and Logan (1986) found that boys aged six to ten years were more likely than girls to be allowed earlier and greater freedom to explore the worlds outside their households. Research of this kind, that foregrounded children's everyday lives and practices, paved the way for research that drew on both the sociology of childhood and on internal critiques of developmental psychology (for example, Richards and Light, 1986; Burman, 1994). Petrie and her colleagues explained concerns that fit with sociology of childhood theorisation:

It must be rare that children are actually involved in the setting up of out-of-school children's services. These are provided, as are other children's services, to meet adults' needs and preoccupations with regard to children. As adult researchers, our concern was to try to understand how services might be developed on the basis of the child's point of view ... The exploration of children's perspectives is not a simple matter (Petrie et al., 2000: 105).

Petrie and her colleagues were concerned to study children's cultures as well as capturing children's perspectives in ways including interviews, participant observations, drawings, conversations and getting them to rate scales ranging from smiling to frowning faces. From the patient accretion of their studies of children's cultures, they were able to make policy recommendations about how children's out-of-school services should be improved, taking the views of young people and their parents into account. It is striking that, while Petrie and her colleagues do not use the term intersectionality, they took pains to ensure that they included boys and girls and children from different racialised groups, particularly Asian, Black and White, as well as attending to working-class children's perspectives.

Many TCRU researchers included a diversity of samples and analysed findings by social categories such as class, ethnicity and gender. For example, a now classic study conducted by Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes at the beginning of the 1980s (Tizard and Hughes, 2002) developed methods that allowed them to address the much-discussed issue at the time, of whether working-class children speak in less elaborated and complex ways than middle-class children (Bernstein, 1971). They employed a method, devised in developmental psychology, of getting children to wear radio microphones so that everything they said could be recorded. They recorded four-year-old girls, since girls have frequently been found to become more fluent earlier than boys and to talk

more (Haas, 1979). They recorded middle-class and working-class girls who were at home with their mothers in the morning and at nursery-school in the afternoon. In foregrounding children and their everyday lives and cultures, they not only presented innovative findings, but opened analyses to other readings and theoretical and policy debates. This was particularly the case since their methodology did not impose particular ways of constructing childhood in advance of the analysis.

Several later pieces of research at, or inspired by, TCRU illustrate the ways in which the unit's research has continued to take forward situated understandings of children and childhood and devised novel methods to do so. For example, Julia Brannen and her colleagues focused on 10–12-year-olds' understandings of what constitutes care and their views of different family lives. Brannen started from recognition that the care of children had generally not been investigated from children's perspectives and jointly conducted a mixed-methods study that centred children's views of care (Bhopal, Brannen and Heptinstall, 2000).

Two further TCRU studies that have generated programmes of work on childhood are the longitudinal Infant School project (Tizard et al., 1988/2017) which followed Black and White preschool girls and boys of different social classes making the transition to school through to the end of primary school in 33 London schools. A member of the research team began a programme of work designed to take seriously children's views about, and experiences of, playtime with a view to improving their experiences (Blatchford, 2012). This impetus was also the fuel for Alison Clark's programme of work on the Mosaic method, which is discussed in Chapter 16 (see, for example, Clark, 2005).

While most of the above studies were conducted before participatory approaches with children gained sway, they fit with the tenets of participatory approaches, positioning children as social actors (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Papadopoulous and Sidorenko, 2022) and as capable of interpreting, acting and constructing their own world and the world of others around them (Christensen and James, 2008). As this field has developed, more recent TCRU work has gone beyond the initial aim of including children's perspectives to actively consult children and young people as co-researchers (that is, participants who collaborate with and become part of the research team as investigators), where children have been consulted about what should be studied, how it should be studied and analysed (Papadopoulous and Sidorenko, 2022). The two projects described below, one solely involving TCRU colleagues and the other a cross-departmental and cross-university collaboration, show how TCRU research has contributed to building and reflecting on participatory approaches with children and young people.

Participatory research with children and young people: reflections on two projects

The two projects under discussion, involving TCRU researchers Hanan Hauari and Veena Meetoo, sought to understand marginalised childhoods through the coproduced perspectives of participants, co-researchers and the university researchers. By involving children and young people as actors in the research process, centring their lived experience, and positioning them as experts in their lives, they sought to move towards research as a collaborative endeavour. Building on the history of listening to children at TCRU, these projects conduct research *with*, rather than *on*, children and young people, positioning them as protagonists in research practice, and involving them throughout or at different stages of the research process, including the design phase, data generation, analysis and dissemination (Holland et al., 2010).

Commissioned by the UCL Access and Widening Participation office, Hanan reflects on her work with the Care Experienced Students in Higher Education (CESHE) study, which investigated how students in Higher Education (HE) with a background of having lived in local-authority care as children, experienced higher education. The CESHE project ran from March to December 2018 and the research team were Hanan Hauari, Katie Hollingworth and Professor Claire Cameron, all at TCRU. While rates of access to HE have improved for some groups across the sector, care-experienced students remain much less likely to access HE than their peers without care experience (Harrison, 2020; Department for Education, 2018). The aim of the study was to explore what happens at university, from the perspective of both institutional arrangements and current students' experience, and to understand how young people navigate higher education and what everyday life on campus is like. The study also sought to explore barriers to succeeding at university, how students locate their social networks and feel a sense of belonging (or not) and explore the everyday by placing the students and their locality, the university campus, at the centre of the research process. In total, seven walking interviews were conducted lasting between one-and-a-half to three hours and six young people participated in a data analysis workshop and co-created multimedia outputs from the research.¹

Veena Meetoo reflects on Children Caring on the Move (CCoM), which investigates how child migrants separated from their parents/families, also known as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and those involved in their care, make sense of, value, and take part in care

relationships and caring practices within the immigration–welfare nexus in England (Rosen, 2021). CCoM is a cross-departmental and cross-university collaboration led by Professor Sarah Crafter (Principal Investigator) at the Open University and previously TCRU, and Dr Rachel Rosen (Co-Principal Investigator) at the Social Research Institute, UCL.² This discussion focuses on the part of CCoM’s work which was centred around co-researching *with* young migrant researchers,³ themselves unaccompanied young people, to explore separated child migrants’ experiences of care and caring for others in London and the West Midlands. In total, 62 interviews were conducted with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, using a mixture of an object activity where participants were invited to bring two or three objects to the interview that symbolised ‘care’ to them, photo elicitation, walking interviews, paired interviews and focus groups.

Across the two sites, thirteen young people took part as co-researchers at various stages of the project. The reflections offered in this chapter are of Veena’s experiences of working predominantly with the London team, where there were initially eight young co-researchers aged 16 to 24 years. By the end of the three years, three co-researchers remained with the team. The co-researchers had differing immigration statuses (such as, indefinite leave to remain, asylum seeker) and migrated to the UK from countries including Pakistan, Albania, Eritrea, Guinea and Sudan. There were no ‘hard’ rules around involvement – rather, the notion of the research team was fluid and changeable, where young people could choose to take part in some stages, take breaks, and join at later stages of the research process (Rosen, 2021). The model was developed to enable voluntary participation in a three-year long project while reflecting the unpredictability and instability of asylum-seeking children’s lives (Chase and Allsopp, 2020; Rosen, 2021; Aissatou et al., 2022).

Young people in care and migrant unaccompanied young people have suffered systemic marginalisation and social exclusion (Stein, 2006). Their voices have often been left out of research and conversations around social change (Aldridge, 2012), and their perspectives are often not considered in child protection policy and practice (Van Bijleveld, Dedding and Bunders-Aelen, 2015). This has contributed to social policy that is often disconnected from the lived realities of the young people. Understanding of key concepts and priorities by marginalised youth is often different from those reported by adults such as caregivers, child protection practitioners and policymakers (Holland, 2009). Both CCoM and CESHE sought to address these disconnections between the perspectives of children and young people, and solely adult generated and driven research.

In the following sections, Hanan Hauari (HH) and Veena Meetoo (VM) reflect on their experiences of conducting participatory research, and how involving young people in research has arguably produced more reliable, trustworthy and ethically sound insights into marginalised children's lives. They address two main concerns of participatory research: social justice and eliciting marginalised childhood voices, also raising ontological and epistemological questions and tensions in participatory research with children.

Power in research

A key commonality across the two projects is the endeavour to counter the often top-down, paternalistic and colonialist approaches⁴ of the child protection system (Doucet et al., 2022) which most participants had contact with. We also sought to counter the power relations present in more 'traditional' methods in social research, and the adult-child power relations in research on children (Albon and Rosen, 2014), such as surveys and interviews, where young people are solely the objects of research, and where research is done *to* them, rather than with them. These conscious strides to not be extractive and position the young people in our research as knowledge bearers and as coproducers of the research, as experts in their own lives, and to elicit voices that are often absent from dominant narratives and discourses (Spiel et al., 2020), was a means to redress such power relations.

HH: The participatory approach in CESHE sought to challenge the traditional relationship between researcher and research participants and create a more participative, reciprocal and dialogic relationship where participants are actively involved in the co-construction, the analysis and representation of research data. To do this we adopted methods of data collection and analysis in which the young people could lead the research encounter and were able to steer the production of research knowledge. Inspired by mobile methods, we opted for a walking interview approach to situate the interview encounter in the everyday as lived in practice by the young people (Anderson, 2004), thereby enabling young people to shape their narratives and talk about their experiences in ways that were important to them. Our approach sought to generate richer accounts by using the interviewees' surrounding environment as a prompt for them

to recall memories and experiences. For the walking interviews, participants were invited to take a researcher on a walk around their university campus, given complete control of the route taken, and asked to replicate, as much as possible, their 'natural', everyday encounters. The method also allowed for the placing and telling of events, stories and experiences, past and present, in their spatial context, which provided the opportunities for young people to make sense and explore meaning. Overall, the *situated* interview generated richer insights into life on campus, by revealing engagement and alienation of spaces and places on campus and insights into how these are represented and interpreted by the young people.

The participatory approach to analysis placed young people at the centre of the analysis process. Individually, they analysed pen portraits of the interviews to identify key themes and then shared their reflections in a group discussion, drawing on their own experience and in doing so validated or challenged each other's and the researcher's inferences from the data. What struck us most during this process was the growing feeling of empowerment we sensed in the young people, as they reflected on each other's experiences and thought about how they could try to overcome the challenges they faced. This empowerment I think was felt more acutely through the multimode dissemination approach, where the young people could give *voice* to the key messages from the research. For example, young care-experienced actors from the Verbatim Formula⁵ performed verbatim extracts from the research to an audience of university staff and other professionals. Our approach sought to democratise the research process and methods and redress the power imbalance typically associated with conventional methods of research. We acknowledge the limits of our approach, given the lack of consultation with care-experienced young people about the research study at the start of the process and the need for increased levels of research participation, consultation, peer research and coproduction with young people throughout the entire research process.

VM: In CCoM we redistributed power in the production of research knowledge by engaging those with lived experience as experts on their own lives at various stages of the process. The co-researchers were part of early research sessions which consisted of university

researchers talking through stages of the research process, but were most importantly a space to learn from and alongside the co-researchers, about designing and carrying out research with unaccompanied young people. These discussions led to us endeavouring to make the interview setting as informal as possible to avoid making the encounter feel like a Home Office interview, by factoring in a number of pre-interview 'getting to know you sessions' and playing warm-up games. The co-researchers mostly led the interviews and steered conversations with participants in ways that were important to them. This meant that participants were mainly interviewed by a peer who had similar experiences as an unaccompanied young person, which also minimised the imbalance between adult-child power relations in the interview setting.⁶ We further utilised methods that were co-decided on with the young researchers, that were seen to be appropriate for talking to children and young people (Punch, 2002) and unaccompanied young people specifically, such as object-based interviews. The semi-structured interview schedules were developed with the co-researchers, allowing the co-researchers to probe about particular issues on areas they found important, to create spaces for knowledge generation that aligned to their interests and concerns.

The interviews were also a platform for dialogue and shared experiences between the young researchers and participants. Having co-researchers, who have themselves been through or are going through the asylum process, lead or take an active role in interviews generated important ethical considerations, such as ensuring privacy in shared accommodation, developing processes for checking in and supporting participants after the interview, and lengthy debriefings with co-researchers about the interview content and their feelings after hearing stories that may have resonated with their own. I sometimes reflected on the nuanced follow-up questions that the co-researchers asked participants, which were related to their experiential knowledge of the system, which also enabled them to offer advice and support to participants in the moment. I also often reflected on how I could not respond in the way that the young researchers did – such as not being in a position to be able to say 'stay strong', or 'you have to keep going', which felt much more comfortable coming from someone of a similar generation who has shared experience.

However, we also note that despite efforts to minimise power dynamics and democratise the research, across CESHE and CCoM, power relations were evident between adult university researchers and young co-researchers (such as being called ‘Miss’ by participants, co-researchers feeling more comfortable for university researchers to take the lead in decision making). We set out to employ methods to listen to marginalised children and young people, but we recognise that these methods are adult devised. For instance, walking and object-based interviews were a dominant part of the research designs, characterised by ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Mayall, 2008), but the idea for these methods came from the adult researchers. We also recognise that terms such as ‘peer-led’ should be used with caution, as it misleadingly constructs an image of co-researchers to be in the driving seat and is a misnomer for the complex interactions involved in co-researcher led activities. For instance, in CCoM, decisions about who would lead interviews were made collaboratively, with university researchers participating to a greater or lesser extent in the interviews, depending on the young researcher, the moment, and the wishes of the participant. Moving towards child-led devised methods and research practice therefore remains an epistemological challenge.

Eliciting young people’s ‘voices’ and experiences

The participation of those whose lives are the subject of research in the research process is seen as a way to address aspects of marginalisation and facilitate the voicing of marginalised lived experiences. Although we acknowledge the wider debates about ‘voice’ (Chappell et al., 2014), we agree with Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam that ‘research with rather than about children recognises that given appropriate opportunities, they have and can express their own views, and these are often different from those of proxies such as parents or professionals who might previously have answered for them’ (2014: 401). Whilst ‘voice’ in research is largely discussed in relation to methods, we extend our discussion to the latter phases of the two projects, and children’s and young people’s involvement in analysis and dissemination. Involving children and young people in the research process arguably provides more reliable data that is generated on issues that resonate with children’s lives and their concerns, and more so when children are involved in the analysis and interpretation of their own experiences.

HH: The analysis and dissemination approach in the CESHE study sought to ensure that the experiences of the young people were re-presented using a process where the young people were involved in making sense of the data and in ways that utilised their words and voice. In the analysis workshop young people engaged with the accounts of other young people to identify stories that needed telling and key insights into being a care-experienced student in HE. In discussing the different accounts and comparing them with their own, they revealed the nuances in their experiences, providing greater insight and understanding.

The collaborative dialogue also produced co-constructed messages from the research that represented the breadth of experience and resonated with all the young people. Whilst the use of different media formats ensured that the different voices and experiences were captured and made available for a wider audience.

VM: In CCoM, we also ran analysis sessions with co-researchers,⁷ during which there were sometimes disagreements and tensions in the way that data were understood. These moments reflected various ‘voices’, rather than objective ‘truths’ of children’s experiences, which came into being in the moments of discussion. For instance, while some co-researchers understood waiting for asylum decisions to be due to the serendipity of the asylum system and based on ‘luck’, which can take months for some and years for others, the emerging consensus through ongoing debate and dialogue led the group to view this as ‘planned chaos’ by the Home Office, to reinforce the ‘hostile environment’ (Yeo, 2020). The co-researchers sometimes disagreed with each other. While they agreed that waithood was a ‘fact’ of being an asylum-seeking young person in the UK, they disagreed on how young people should respond to professionals who were seen to not be doing their job (for example, solicitors not chasing up the Home Office). This collaborative approach to analysis generated insights into these multiple perspectives on social-justice issues, and how ‘voices’ are generated in moments of discussion, depending on who is present and the dynamics in the team. It created a platform to hear what young people thought about data that resonated (or not) with their lives, therefore becoming a way to hear ‘voices’. It also acted as a reminder that researchers work within power dynamics between young people themselves and the generational order, and that ‘voices’ are coproduced within these relations.

We note that listening to children and ‘hearing’ their voices is complex, as ‘voice’ from a constructionist standpoint is produced in the context of the research and coproduced between researchers and participants. This may be dependent on the conditions of the research, such as who is present during the research encounter, who leads the interview, the rapport between actors in the research encounter, the questions asked, and where the interview takes place.

Concluding reflections

TCRU’s rich history of involving children in research continues through contemporary studies such as CESHE and CCoM. Research in TCRU continues to seek ways to minimise power relations whilst recognising the context and conditions of children and young people’s participation, which can never be independent and separated from adults and the wider structures that children inhabit (Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). As researchers, we are in the process of co-constructing knowledge with children and young people, about marginalised childhoods in ever-changing times, requiring creative methods, which can, and should where possible, be done through participatory approaches. Children on the margins continue to experience childhood in precarious times, in the context of austerity, rising poverty, an increasingly hostile environment and deepening cuts to public spending. Future socially just research with children and young people on the margins will be key to understanding marginalised childhoods and privileging their knowledge, and participatory approaches remain essential to push boundaries on future knowledge production, for children to be actively involved in research about their lives, and challenge the reproduction of unequal childhoods.

Further reading

For a text on participatory research more broadly, we suggest Schubotz’s (2019) book on understanding and applying participatory methods to research projects. For those interested in participatory research with children specifically, Spyrou’s (2018) book offers a critical and reflexive exploration of key concepts of Childhood Studies and methodological innovation designed to match the ‘messiness’ of children’s lives (see Chapter 6, which is specifically on participatory methods with children).

Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008) article also offers a rich and critical discussion on participatory approaches in research with children, raising interesting suggestions about researchers working with children benefitting from an attitude of 'methodological immaturity'.

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Notes

- 1 Media outputs from the CESHE study can be found at www.ucl.ac.uk/widening-participation/about-us/research-and-evaluation/research-publications/getting-it-right-care-experienced-students.
- 2 The wider team comprises Dr Eva Prokopiou (Northampton), Lucy Leon (Oxford), Professor Ravi Kohli (Bedford), Professor Elaine Chase (UCL), Professor Helen Stalford (Liverpool), Dr Ellie Ott (Centre for Evidence and Implementation), Kamena Dorling (Article 39), and Dr Sayani Mitra (Open University). The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council 2019–23.
- 3 The second part of the project focused on adult stakeholders' perspectives on care of unaccompanied young people and the third on the political economy of care. See www.ccomstudy.com for further details.
- 4 Important calls have been made to decolonise research (Smith, 2013) and to decolonise childhoods specifically (Liebel, 2020) to counter conceptualisations of the child in research as not solely modelled on the Western version of childhood, and that methods employed do not replicate adult-led, Western 'ways of knowing'.
- 5 The Verbatim Formula is a participatory research project for care-experienced young people. It uses verbatim theatre techniques, listening and dialogue to work with young people, care leavers, social workers, and universities. <https://theverbatimformula.org.uk/>.
- 6 Although our interviews were predominantly 'peer-led', a university researcher was present for ethical reasons, to support the younger co-researchers by stepping in and taking over whenever necessary (for example, to jointly respond to difficult conversations and offer support to participants).
- 7 The analysis sessions were run as a wider team, where co-researchers from London and the West Midlands were brought together to discuss data generated from across the two sites.

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TCRU at 50: conclusion

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Introduction

Over our first 50 years, the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) has researched a wide spread of subjects with great depth, drawing on a diversity and richness of methods and enhanced by working locally, nationally and internationally. Above all, we have shown the potential for a university-based social-research unit to develop the study of important subjects through having time and opportunity for sustained endeavour, and both how we can research and understand these subjects and seek to inform policy about them. In this concluding chapter, we attempt to derive some ‘lessons learnt’ about being a long-lived research unit in a changing world, which may be of interest to other institutions seeking their own longevity. We reflect on our history and how we have navigated changes in policymaking concerns, and how we have been (and continue to be) strategic, tactical and theoretical in our policy-oriented work (see [Chapter 1](#)) – reflections which may be of interest to any researcher or policy worker thinking about how to fund, conduct and use policy-oriented research. Finally, we look to the future and the challenges that face us ahead of the next milestones and celebrate what it means to ‘be’ TCRU, for our own interest and the interest of our fellow travellers in twenty-first-century research.

Reflecting on the Thomas Coram Research Unit: lessons learnt

In [Chapter 1](#), we reflected that the foundations and keystone concepts laid by Jack Tizard in the 1970s have continued to shape and frame the work of TCRU up to the present day ([Tizard, 2003](#); [Brannen, 2019](#)). The process of proposing, writing, reviewing and consolidating this volume has offered participants and wider members of the TCRU community the opportunity to reflect on how TCRU has connected us as colleagues and researchers. From a more institutional perspective, it has prompted us to ask ourselves what it ‘means’ to be TCRU at this 50-year interval.

Tizard’s original, founding concerns ([Chapters 1](#) and [2](#)) persist, weathering the changes of political and economic environment, and prove perennially relevant throughout the shifting sands of academic interest and institutional transformation. TCRU has survived in recognisable form in part because the core motivating concern about children, children’s services, families and relationships has proven enduring, and expansive enough to draw in new colleagues. Simultaneously, these core concerns have not been didactic to the point of not allowing for new threads of relevance to emerge: the increased presence of migration scholars in TCRU speaks to the rising awareness of the interconnectedness of migrant experience, family life and children’s wellbeing and role in society. Likewise, TCRU’s growth in expertise around gender, sexuality and intimacies dates back to the early 1980s and reflects shifts in inter- and multidisciplinary theorising around families and relationships. Institutionally, we have integrated into a large university and must now attend to the administrative and additional duties this security brings us: ‘being’ TCRU is no longer a purely research-dedicated affair in an environment of comparatively generous research funding. These are new challenges and opportunities that exceed Tizard’s original vision and demand continual attention and leadership in order to integrate them coherently into who we are and how we account for what we do.

While we have changed internally in structure, the world has also changed around us. In [Chapter 1](#), we write that Tizard ‘represents the postwar “social democratic” era, with its emphasis on active local authorities and government-funded solutions to social problems through the welfare state’, but that we now exist in a time of neoliberalism, austerity and financialisation. Our unit remains convinced of the utility of government-led solutions (see [Chapters 2, 4, 5](#) and [7](#)) though not in all

cases, and not to the exclusion of other actors (see [Chapters 8 and 14](#) for non-government partnership-funded interventions). The reduced reciprocity of interest we find from government audiences does lead to consequences for policy-oriented research (see [Chapters 6 and 13](#)), with a greater emphasis on tactical, rather than strategic research programmes prevailing at times. It has also pushed us to think about how our more theoretical discussions (see, for example, [Chapters 10 and 15](#)) connect back to more policy-oriented discussions and inform the wider debates around pressing social questions, for example, same-sex and transgender parenting ([Chapter 17](#)). As discussed, researching with an eye to inform policy is not a straightforward, causal relationship: what is found, what is published and what is read, and what is taken up (and when) varies greatly, depending on a huge range of factors (see particularly [Chapter 4](#)).

In relation to these two broader points of our growth and consistency in our own institutional identity, and shifts in the political and policy environment, there is a third theme, which has recurred throughout the book and has been evergreen in our discussions: research funding. The idea of a research unit receiving ‘rolling’ funding from the Department of Health is unimaginable in the current climate (see [Chapter 1](#) in this volume; [Brannen, 2019](#)). The impact of this changed approach, as many chapters contained herein show, is not just that funding for strategic and theoretical strands of work is harder to secure (for example, [Chapter 16](#)) but also that stable, long-term research posts (which have always been hard to find) have become scarcer (as reflected on in [Chapter 18](#)).

A big change for TCRU is that all academic staff in UCL on open-ended contracts are now on either standard academic contracts or on teaching contracts, both of which contain some dedicated workload allocation to (otherwise unfunded) research and scholarship. Those employed on contracts solely dedicated to research are usually early career and attached to a specific project anchored to a staff member on an open-ended contract. The huge benefits of continuity that TCRU has been able to inculcate have, in part, been based on the collaboration between longstanding members of staff (in both academic and professional services roles, here and in partner institutions) who have been able to build careers in relatively stable employment (see [Chapters 7, 16 and 18](#) in particular for relevant discussions), though few researchers have ever had permanent contracts. Along with sector-wide pressures, we have seen a much higher turnover in research staff in recent years. Essentially, TCRU staff must now either combine research with teaching, making TCRU more like a standard academic department, or rely on increasingly competitive and short-term research funding. On the upside, many more

staff are now eligible to apply for periodic sabbaticals for dedicated research that is not dependent on external funding or for grant proposal development. In theory, some research funding allows staff to ‘buy out’ of teaching, but in practice it is rare that research grants cover a hundred per cent of a researcher’s time. In recent years we find that very few, if any, funders cover the costs of research, expecting institutional co-funding.

Given the generally broken funding model of higher education in the UK, this means that economically, research carried out at TCRU (and in other UK higher education institutions (HEIs) in general) is a lossmaking activity. Our research is now heavily cross-subsidised by the fees paid by international students at UCL. These are relatively recent developments in our 50-year history and TCRU’s response is still unfolding. We raise these challenges here to contextualise the successes we have won so far, and their contingency in the face of changes yet to come.

Against this backdrop, this conclusion seeks to underscore the successes the chapters in this book have illuminated in three themes: first, the maintenance of a coherent ‘TCRU identity’ over the course of 50 years of change; second, our ability to continue to contribute policy-oriented or policy-relevant research in a policy environment that is much-changed since 1973; and third, our ability to adapt and survive in increasingly constrained funding landscapes. The disparate findings of the chapters in this volume are drawn together, then, by tracing these three themes through the contributions made by TCRU researchers (past, present and affiliate) to this book. Having mapped out these thoughts, we return again to think about what we have learnt about what it means to be TCRU at this 50-year interval.

Being TCRU: maintaining coherence in growth

As a unit, would TCRU today still be recognisable to the Jack Tizard who set it up in 1973? We are now a community of 38 academics, 21 honorary and emeritus researchers, and 54 PhD students: far beyond the 21 researchers (plus an administrator, secretaries and tea lady) housed in Tizard’s TCRU. TCRU no longer has dedicated administrative support, which proves to be an ongoing challenge. Instead, professional services support is centralised, and so we share a too-small group of professional services staff with other units within our home department, or within the wider faculty. Over the last 30 years, TCRU has stayed in 27–28 Woburn Square, and it is now common for researchers to share formerly single-occupancy offices with two or three colleagues. The post-pandemic

landscape is such that many large institutions housed in central London seem tempted to disperse their staff via remote working, hot-desking and otherwise embracing the ‘densification’ of space in the name of cost-saving, environmental sustainability and supporting staff with flexible working. Increasingly, research-based activities are conducted online or in a hybrid way, which constitutes a big change to our ways of working. The nature of higher education and research working environments can be said to be in flux: the outcomes for academic communities such as ours are unknown.

Our growth has stemmed from teaching as well as research. Our multidisciplinary undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are lively, well-regarded and recruit well. We supervise an increased number of doctoral students, in addition to continuing the research that was TCRU’s original focus. Not only do we do more than research, but the research we do is now routinely ranked via national measures (the Research Excellence Framework) and contributes to the IOE’s wider claim of being ‘world leading’ in research – in contrast to Tizard’s ambitious goal of ‘simply’ informing policy and advancing programmes of positive, local social change. In short, we are much changed in the diversity of contracts we are on, research areas we cover and the spaces we occupy and this impacts on how we connect with each other. This section reviews how these changes are reflected in the contributions to this volume.

Culture, space and community

Directly and indirectly, several chapters here reflect on the importance of proximity, shared space and continued membership of TCRU as crucial to our success in building research that is rich, meaningful and able to speak to the long-term social issues as well as the short-term troubles ([Chapters 2, 4 and 18](#)). Our collective publication record, our enduring links with external domestic collaborators such as the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge ([Chapter 17](#)) and the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies at the University of Oxford (see Foreword, in this volume), and our internal connections map out the importance of space, place and shared time in the creation of a sense of ‘TCRUness’.

Our chapters celebrate connections and collaborations between long-serving TCRU members as senior academics with newer unit members who are earlier in their careers (see for example, [Chapter 13](#), with Brannen, Faircloth, Jones, O’Brien and Twamley; [Chapter 9](#), with Quy, Fridkin and Smith; and [Chapter 12](#), with Berg and Dickson). Indeed, the four editors of this volume represent four successive cohorts of

'Coramites'. The willingness of established colleagues to collaborate with junior researchers, and to spend time reading and giving feedback on drafts, presentations and bids, is an example of the routine practices which pass on the research expertise and sensibilities of TCRU.

Underpinning the work reflected in the chapters of the book is what might be called 'ethos' or particular 'workplace culture', generated in part by our shared space and collaborative working patterns. The generally very positive working milieu that has developed and been maintained here has been described elsewhere as both 'collegial' and 'democratic' (Brannen, 2019; Brannen et al., 2022), is very much part of the character of TCRU and something we are both proud of and work hard to maintain. There are long-held conventions that have facilitated practices that aim to mitigate the hierarchical culture of prestige endemic in UK academia: for example, since the early years of TCRU publications, the author order was usually alphabetical to avoid hierarchies of experience, unless agreed otherwise by authors; job titles avoided the word 'assistant' (preferring 'research officer') and more recently TCRU colleagues have been active in campaigning for UCL 'Teaching Fellows' to be granted the all-important marker of 'Lecturer' in their formal title; working hours have been flexible between home and office long before the COVID-19 pandemic, with this mode of working especially aimed at accommodating researchers with young children. While job security was never assured, opportunities to develop proposals for new funding have always been encouraged and so longer-term prospects of collaboration are actively created and supported by colleagues. These practices serve to promote collaboration over competition, and to bring on junior research staff in a form of intergenerational support that predates the language of mentoring, but very much embodies it (see also Brannen, 2019: 36ff). Recent trials of more formal mentoring mechanisms in our home department were led initially by TCRU colleague Rebecca O'Connell, as a way of adapting these longstanding but informal practices to the new pressures of a growing staff roll and higher levels of staff turnover.

Diversity

Our shared space has been challenged by our increase in numbers, which has partly been spurred on by teaching degrees which require expertise beyond our core specialisms in order to be well-rounded and attractive. This, in addition to an organic growth in our research interests, has widened our purview of expertise beyond children, families and services. We are joined now by a wider array of research interests than imagined in

TCRU's original incarnation. Notable in this expansion is the inclusion of migration, sexualities and intimacies – all issues which touch on the lives of children and their carers. These are also complementary fields across disciplines (as felt by reading [Chapter 9](#)'s psychological framing of UK children's experiences of stress and wellbeing alongside [Chapter 8](#)'s more sociological exploration of migrant youth's wellbeing) and illuminate new challenges faced by children in the twenty-first century (for example, reading [Chapter 5](#) reflecting on 40 years of education for children and young people in out-of-home care, alongside [Chapter 11](#), on becoming adult as an African man in the Italian migration system, or [Chapter 14](#)'s findings about the wellbeing of children of same-sex parents; [Chapter 13](#) also gives a good example of our multidisciplinary collaborations).

In addition, acknowledging how research with children and young people cuts across research areas and disciplines, we benefit from fresh methodological expertise (for example, read [Chapter 19](#) on participatory methods with young people, alongside [Chapter 15](#) on researcher positionalities in anthropological perspective, to see the wide range of these debates). Our mixed methods work is also represented here, which reflects an additional thread of diversity (for example, in [Chapters 9](#) and [18](#); [Chapter 7](#) also reflects how different colleagues approach the same field through qualitative or quantitative lenses).

This diversity also gives us the challenge of remaining coherent as 'a' unit and not a miscellany of interest housed in one space. The use of periodically refreshed internal interest groups or clusters intends to lend us internal clarity (one practical way of filtering email lists, for example) and to foster the kinds of ongoing collaborations between junior and senior, researcher-track and teacher-track colleagues, that have been identified in this volume as one of our institutional strengths. It is hoped that our current configuration of three clusters – 'Children and children's wellbeing, services and practices', 'Gender, families and work' and 'Migration' – will make the interests and thematic specialisms of TCRU as a whole (and TCRU researchers as individuals) more 'legible' to our external collaborators, both current and future.

Values

Shared space and selective diversity centred on shared, core concerns takes us only so far in maintaining an institutional identity. The bedrock of our sense of "TCRUness" however, is situated in a shared orientation of values of what research is, and what it should be for. Perhaps even more

than our shared interest in policy-oriented research, what has kept us relevant (to ourselves and others) is our 'value-orientation'.

At our core, as these chapters attest, we share a set of values, which differ little from those of our founder, whose 'strong sense of social justice and his egalitarian beliefs led him to work with, and respect, groups who were unjustly treated by society' (Tizard, 2003: 23). These values are expressed in the subjects researched, as well as the methods adopted. Part III's methodological reflections attest to this specifically in the championing of methods which can include children's perspectives in a range of ways, from visual methods (Chapter 14) to the multipronged 'Mosaic' approach (Chapter 16), as well as careful interview techniques (Chapter 17), and by including children and young people as active participants in building the whole of a research activity (Chapter 19). As discussed within each of these chapters in different ways, the underlying conviction that informs this shared approach is that children are protagonists in their own lives, and should thus be considered able to discuss and report on their own experiences.

This conviction houses within it a belief that research should aim to speak, as far as possible, in the interests of those who occupy the most marginal positions, and to speak for those who, like children, are given no voice in formal political processes. It is in these areas that the policy relevance of our research may seem more distant but, we argue, is in fact highly pertinent: finding methods which enable disempowered voices to 'filter up' in legitimate and respected formats such as research offer a potentially powerful avenue for the stories and accounts from marginalised groups to circulate in arenas from which they are routinely excluded. The knock-on effect of being able to account for children and young people's stories in 'respectable' research has been to assist in the promotion, for example, to help correct misguided fears around the effect of same-sex parenting on child outcomes (Chapter 17).

As noted above, our values inform our own working practices as well as the interests of our research fields. Right from the start, TCRU has unequivocally supported women with young children who wanted to be employed, even in its early days when 'working mothers' were widely frowned upon (Chapter 2). We have continued to support gender equality both in employment and caring and continue to raise the profile of women in workforces which are routinely underpaid and undervalued, such as care workers (Chapter 3), and promote futures which would, we anticipate, lead to their improved conditions (Chapter 4). Our conviction that it is possible for men to care (and care well: Chapter 13) and for women to work (and for their work to be paid), held in connection with

our support for the recognition of children's rights, leads us to hold that there is no intrinsic opposition between gender equality and children's rights. The framework of social democracy that undergirds much of our thinking shines through here: with proper investment, with sustained social support, and with political will, we collectively argue that it is possible for all lives to be supported and for the worst excesses of market-driven deprivations to be ameliorated.

The conviction in the value of collecting the stories and experiences of those voices left most unheard also informs our work in migration (for example, [Chapters 8, 11 and 12](#)), gender ([Chapters 3 and 13](#)), and minority sexualities ([Chapters 8, 10 and 17](#)). It forms part of the understanding of maintaining a programme of strategic research which seeks emerging issues and problems faced by people hidden from sight from mainstream policy discussions by the very nature of their marginalised position. Patiently documenting and rigorously accounting for these stories gives one avenue for voices to be heard in circles that marginalised groups are by their nature excluded from; but it also helps to shift our overall view of the social world to include more than the hegemonic, and to challenge mainstream accounts of social reality and how things like policy 'really' work. Thus in [Chapter 5](#) we see how commonplace class prejudice routinely limited care-leavers' access to HEIs; and in [Chapter 19](#) we see how, by facilitating young care leavers to speak through the medium of research findings to HEI providers, these young people are enabled to feel a sense of empowerment. The threads that weave through formally unconnected pieces of research housed under the TCRU umbrella can come together because of our shared concern and persistent attention to areas and people neglected by policy, but whose lives government-funded policies could most positively transform.

Our values, therefore, inform an abiding and clear-eyed conviction in the role of social research in advancing social-justice goals, from decrying poor 'scientific' practice ([Tizard, 2003: 22ff.](#)) to advancing research projects which identify underexplored sites of inequality and methods which enable the voices of those most marginalised in society to be heard.

Being TCRU: understanding and 'doing' policy relevance

We have already framed the tension between the short-term, tactical demands of policymakers with the longer term, strategic interests of TCRU. This section considers ways in which we have navigated these

tricky waters. What enables us to speak to policy while still being strategic? In other words, what can others in research units learn from this volume and the TCRU experience? In short, we can pick out two approaches which we have found to be successful: to collaborate directly, and to seek to inform the environment, as much as specific policy concerns.

Collaboration

Particularly for those researchers at TCRU who have worked closely with government officials ([Chapters 4 and 6](#)), there has been a practical form of collaboration between researcher and funder, where government funders have opened doors, providing access and resources for example, and researchers have brought methodological skill and theoretical knowledge to bear on a social issue of mutual interest. The outputs of this kind of work become twofold, representing the two dimensions of this form of research: written and verbal contributions to government consultations, the publication of working papers and briefs, and articles in *Nursery World* and other professional magazines, all form ways in which this work is communicated back to policy audiences. The more academic-leaning insights from these collaborative enterprises appear in academic articles and books which speak back to a research audience and help to advance the literature in the relevant fields of publication. This two-pronged approach also opens up scope for researchers to remain at a critical distance from government, without losing respect from government-based colleagues.

Collaboration always requires pragmatic compromise and ‘coming into’ the world of policymaker concerns, which face a particular set of political, environmental and financial constraints not shared by the researcher; without being able to engage in this mode, we are unable to communicate directly with those who interact with policy most directly. Yet this mode is not to be considered as a compromise on academic independence, in that our value-orientation towards social justice and equity guides the projects we propose and respond to, and the findings we contribute. Even where policy has prevaricated or U-turned (for example, [Chapters 3 and 4](#)), our formal independence from government as marked by being a university-based research unit enables criticality and necessary distance.

Informing policy environments

Increasingly, we have made use of different ways to communicate our research findings with an understanding that policy-oriented research

does not have a clear and direct causal relationship with policy outcomes, no matter how closely one works with policymakers. This mode of practice embraces the notion that we must seek to inform the policy-environment, and communicate our findings not just to other researchers and government, but to those most affected by the issues, and to the wider population. This more democratic mode of dissemination is now also increasingly recognised as ‘impact’ and ‘knowledge exchange’ by funders, which makes additional resources available to make this form of policy-orientation viable. Examples from our work include video documentaries and summaries (for example, [Chapter 11](#), Franceschelli’s documentary on migrant experiences in Italy; [Chapter 19](#), Hauari’s documentary reporting back to universities about care-leavers’ experience of being in higher education); podcasts (our ‘TCRU at 50’ celebratory roundtables are freely available podcasts, featuring Coramites like Ann Phoenix, in conversation with other leaders in their field); radio documentaries (Humera Iqbal’s work on child language brokers, discussed in [Chapter 14](#), was the subject of a BBC Radio 4 documentary, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0005mg0); and our researchers have often been interviewed by various media in the last 50 years. Particularly in a time of asynchronous media consumption, self-publishing and social-media platforms, these routes connect us with constituents, as well as commissioners, of policy research.

Being TCRU: navigating funding landscapes

At the time of writing, a period of prolonged economic uncertainty is upon us (perhaps not unlike the conditions in which Tizard founded TCRU in 1973) and a marked reduction of support in central government for funding universities, with talk about caps on UK student numbers and fees, and reduced national pots of funding being made available. These are pressures facing all universities nationally and, to differing degrees and in different guises, internationally.

More locally, TCRU joined with other research units to become the Department of Social Sciences in 2014 (now the Social Research Institute) and at around the same time, the IOE merged with UCL. These shifts enabled viability in difficult economic times for the unit itself but have exposed TCRU to different institutional imperatives, particularly concerning teaching as a growing revenue stream. It has also resulted in considerable governance shifts, including the removal of local budget responsibility from TCRU to the Social Research Institute (see also

Brannen, 2019: 28ff). These impacts are felt differently across different streams of work. As outlined in [Chapter 1](#), Tizard wrote of ‘strategic’ research which sought to identify new or emerging social issues that required policy attention; ‘tactical’ research which responded to immediate concerns of the day’s policymakers; and ‘theoretical’ work which underpinned the soundness of the research conducted. These three streams are all represented in contemporary work at TCRU and shifting sands of funding security has affected all three.

Funding strategic and theoretical research

In regard to strategic research, we find the continuity of collaborations with non-government funders has been effective in keeping marginalised issues such as pay for the care workforce ([Chapter 3](#)) in view, and that this kind of work has also been fundable, until Brexit, by large European Union bids. In terms of looking ahead to policy solutions for issues not currently at the forefront of politics, mixed funding opportunities have arisen. For example, research into creating a social pedagogic approach or role in the UK ([Chapter 4](#)), was initially funded by the Department of Health and later through NGOs such as the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

There are practical difficulties in winning large bids, particularly in highly competitive European or international schemes and, as [Chapter 18](#) plainly states, institutional support from well-experienced and well-resourced professional services staff working in research offices are vital in facilitating the finding, applying and winning of these funds – and then being able to comply with their often complex requirements for transparency in the spending of the awarded money. Contributors have also reflected on how strategic work, particularly in areas which build on sometimes controversial issues like listening to children’s views seriously (for example, [Chapters 16](#) and [17](#)) requires patient building up of experience over a series of smaller funding opportunities. The role of small internal grants to develop ideas, test methods, publish papers is therefore of growing importance, and at least in theory allows a researcher to build up experience in order to compete for large competitive grants, often in collaboration with other HEIs, and from non-social-science funders, such as public-health research.

[Chapter 7](#) explores the development of parental leave as a research field, and opens up another way of looking at the funding of strategic research. The lack of direct funding for the International Network on Leave Policies and Research has been one way for the network to develop a field of strategic research interest without facing the pressures of

constrained ‘outputs’. It does, however, depend on the continued presence of departmental research budgets across the university sector and protected research time within researcher roles in order to sustain the network’s ongoing work (not to mention, as is so often the case, the willingness of researchers to undertake work in their own time without payment). This is true, too, of the more theoretical and reflective work (for example, [Chapter 15](#)) which emerges as unfunded but important, reflecting on the how and why of research. Access to periods of sabbatical leave enable strategic, theoretical and more explorative research to be undertaken: as just two examples, Berg’s work in [Chapter 12](#) largely took place during her sabbatical; and Faircloth’s (2021) book, cited in [Chapter 13](#), was written up during a sabbatical. The consequence is that for this work to be possible, teaching must make sufficient profit to subsidise research activity and posts.

Funding tactical research

Tactical research, understood as shorter pieces of ‘problem-solving’ research can be regarded as putting researchers in the role of expert or consultant; as such, it benefits greatly from researchers drawing on foundational strategic research. In the early 2000s, the Department of Education and Skills funded TCRU to respond to immediate policy-research questions, in a very successful programme run by Professor June Statham. This model was incorporated into the Child Wellbeing programme that ran under Ann Phoenix’s directorship. Currently Jenny Woodman is directing a similar programme focused on child health as part of an NIHR policy-responsive stream of work. Perhaps this is closest to what policymakers might expect of the concept of policy-oriented research, but it is not the only way in which tactical research takes place. TCRU researchers have also carried out tactical work for charities, such as the SOS Children’s Villages UK ([Cameron, 2016](#)), international agencies, such as the European Institute for Gender Equality (2020), and local authorities (for example, [Munro et al., 2014](#)).

In short, tactical work is funded by a patchwork of sources in a patchwork of ways, giving rise to the challenge of working with unfamiliar funding structures and partners in a more ad hoc mode of collaboration. This nevertheless opens up new pathways for us to communicate our research to a wider range of policy actors and pressure groups, and enables the longer, strategic kind of insights we have developed in other work to be communicated to new audiences and in targeted, relevant places.

Where next for TCRU?

The reflections above showcase TCRU's strengths and have emerged out of collaborative discussions with the contributors to the volume, and wider discussions in the unit. However, there are challenges ahead for all research units in all regions of the United Kingdom. We are no exception to these, and we are not complacent about our survival. For TCRU, we identify two crucial challenges, the first being felt universally and the second experienced more locally to us: these are first, funding, and second, maintaining our identity.

Navigating a changing funding landscape

As highlighted here and elsewhere, the challenges of being cut off from our European neighbours, the reduction in national funding resources, and the threat of student caps in a system which funds universities through stagnated student fees, pose multiple and complex challenges to the sustainability of research. Over the years TCRU has been pragmatic, working with changes in government funding approaches first, and later, moving deeper into the university sector through mergers ([Chapter 1](#); [Tizard, B., 2003](#)). Nevertheless, we have faced the loss of funding as an existential threat at times, particularly in the post-2010 landscape, until the new undergraduate programmes took off and provided a new form of income. We still experience the loss of core funding, such as we once had from the Department of Health ([Chapter 1](#)), as a continuing challenge.

The tasks ahead are to sustain our high level of research awards by building on our expertise; fighting to support and maintain (with a hope to expand) our professional services staff and auxiliary staff, including cleaners and security; retaining experienced staff and recruiting new researchers into long-term, stable posts which provide both teaching and research opportunities. Within research funding in the UK, there are also challenges that extend beyond our home institution: we are now at the point that some major funder schemes are no longer available to TCRU researchers because they are considered too costly by our faculty, owing to their funder's requirement for the university to 'match' funding for researcher time. Funders need to consider that they are squeezing HEIs to the point where HEIs feel unable to participate, due to financial constraints. If this trend continues, then 'match'-funded research will become the preserve of only those few HEIs with large endowments and who undertake extreme private-fundraising activity.

Despite these constraints, TCRU researchers have remained successful in securing research funding. Institutional support from internal programmes with small pots of funding, such as UCL Grand Challenges and IOE seed funding, have been very helpful in generating partnerships, questions, methods and networks that inform external applications. We have also become more dynamic about our knowledge exchange practices, investing in academic and practice networks, training and infrastructure programmes, and multimedia outputs such as podcasts and videos, that help translational knowledge become more widely accessible. This nexus of knowledge, networks and enterprising capitalisation on opportunities will be even more necessary in the years to come, particularly as, post-Brexit, European funding sources are uncertain and there are fewer ways to establish new European research partnerships. One of the ways we have diversified, and in some respects returned to our roots, is to engage with health research funding. As social science funding becomes scarcer, public health research has become more interested in social science contributions to health oriented research questions. We must be flexible and collaborate across boundaries. This brings its own complexities, not least, how to mesh different world views about the nature of ‘science’, but it also builds new connections around shared fundamental values.

Maintaining clarity in our institutional identity

There are no easy answers and no magic bullets available for the funding situation. However, from our experience it seems that being able to articulate a clear institutional identity has enabled us to attract and retain a body of researchers who are able to work together, and with outside partners, to build a flexible and responsive research community. This sustains a clear, visible unit for the wider university to support at an institutional level, justified by a proven track record of success in funding awards, even during difficult times. Good levels of internal communication and organisation, along with pragmatic approaches combined with a strong core of social justice, have helped us to protect some institutional roles from degradation. Continual and farsighted negotiations about the structural position of TCRU within the wider infrastructure of the university is a less visible but vital part of the ongoing labour of survival: the department to which we belong, the contributions we make to teaching, and the presence of our work on particular UCL websites are examples of institutional work, led by our Director, that keep us alive and active within a huge bureaucracy.

In the face of higher research and administrative staff turnover, a push towards 'densification' of space, and increasing precarity in researcher careers across the sector, maintaining a strong institutional identity is never a given. We know from experience, as much as from organisational research, that institutions can be remarkably enduring and difficult to change, but also alarmingly fragile. As an institution, we have adapted to significant changes already by cultivating a clear sense of who we are, and what it means to be a TCRU researcher.

Some long-standing practices still stand us in good stead: the weekly TCRU seminar series (www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/thomas-coram-research-unit/tcru-seminar-series) continues to be a popular way to bring our researchers together in term time to connections within and beyond our walls. We have been variously organised internally over the years, and the cluster model being used currently has emerged from ongoing, proactive consultation at the grassroots from current members: this kind of rejuvenation at intervals is vital for our internal structural coherence, making sure we can accommodate comfortably the members we currently have, and that we are comprehensible to those who wish to engage with us. Coherence is formed through ongoing conversations, facilitated by away days (resumed now, after being paused during the COVID-19 lockdown years) which bring all of us together across all strands of work, to reflect on progress and future directions, and the TCRU Annual Lecture, which reflects our shared interests back to us.

More regular discussions of university- or department-wide issues between TCRU team leaders and grassroots members further inform a local understanding of our place in our home institution and help us to take advantage of windows of opportunity as they arise. These kinds of internal conversations take place away from public view and are part of the mundane working of TCRU (and indeed, of any institution), but they are important to mention here: when neglected, even well-established mechanisms rust and fail. Yet when well-attended to, routine consultation and persistent communication enable positive outcomes: for us, most recently it sees us anticipating the launch of a TCRU-specific webpage within the wider Social Research Institute website. This will afford us the opportunity to be seen and found more readily and presents a collective, united face to the outside world, linking up our various research projects and activities in one distinct location. In short, the work of identity building and maintenance is often mundane and routine, but vital and ongoing. As the chapters here testify, longevity is only achieved by continual renewal and collaboration.

In the face of funding and existential challenges, we maintain a foundational belief in the continued relevance of dedicated, university-based social research units engaged with policy, given the sustained funding and a degree of autonomy such units imply. Indeed, as argued in [Chapter 1](#), there is perhaps a renewed urgency for units such as ours to be ‘spaces for possibility’, as contemporary politics and policy seems so thoroughly divisive and often not progressive. Through sustained and focused research emerges both practical and utopian policy thinking that can inform not only specific, engaged policymakers but also the wider ‘policy sphere’ and circulation of ideas. In the ‘response mode’ of tactical research, there is little space for this kind of future-oriented policy relevance: the researcher-as-consultant has not the time to assemble, test and disseminate blueprints of a better future built on decades of national and international experience. University-based research units, however, can offer longer-term time horizons in which to build a long, deep engagement with research topics which, in turn, makes our short-term, targeted policy engagements far richer and (we hope) more useful to policymakers with specific questions in mind. It is therefore worth, we contend, governments funding and supporting research units, even when we may challenge and contest, rather than simply act as handmaidens to, existing policy goals.

Being TCRU at 50

From a 1970s vision of universal Children’s Centres to contemporary experiences of migrant youth; from experimental interventions in policy to direct responses to policymaker inquiries; from a conviction to ‘listen’ to children through to including children and young people in the act of designing the research itself: TCRU has grown and continues to thrive. We are, in all our various ways, concerned with families’ and children’s experience of life and relationships, their identities and their place in the world. We are creative and proactive in developing not only theoretical but also methodological interventions in the established canon of social research. We are clear-eyed about the role of research in policy, and so we orient ourselves to informing a policy environment in the knowledge that not everything we put out now will be heard now (if at all) – but we hold that it is necessary to do the work, to investigate the realities, and to think through the implications and possibilities.

In other words, we abide by Jack Tizard’s conviction that tactical work without strategic work, underpinned by theoretical work, is

insufficient: we must be holistic. Above all, we are held together by a conviction that research must serve the greater needs of society, and we must seek to make positive interventions in how the social world is formed and how the political environment serves those most at need. This conviction has led us to expand our purview from children and children's services alone, and it continues to hold us together in our diversity, and to direct us with a clarity of purpose going forward.

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For 50 years, researchers at UCL's Thomas Coram Research Unit have been undertaking ground-breaking policy-relevant social research. Their main focus has been social issues affecting children, young people and families, and the services provided for them. *Social Research for our Times* brings together different generations of researchers from the Unit to share some of the most important results of their studies. Two sections focus on the main findings and conclusions from research into children and children services, and on family life, minoritised groups and gender. A third is then devoted to the innovative methods that have been developed and used to undertake research in these complex areas. Running through the book is a key strategic question: what should the relationship be between research and policy? Or put another way, what does 'policy relevant research' mean? This perennial question has gained new importance in the post-Covid, post-Brexit world that we have entered, making this text a timely intervention for sharing decades of experience. Taking a unique opportunity to reflect on research context as well as research findings, this book will be of interest to researchers, teachers, students and those involved in policy making both in and beyond dedicated research units, and can be read as a whole or sampled for individual standalone chapters.

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