


Editorial

Protecting Children, Empowering Birth Parents: New Approaches in Family Justice

Pamela Cox ^{1,*}, Susan McPherson ²  and Frances Blumenfeld ²

¹ Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK

² School of Health and Social Care, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK; smcpher@essex.ac.uk (S.M.); fblume@essex.ac.uk (F.B.)

* Correspondence: pamcox@essex.ac.uk

This Special Issue presents insights from new interdisciplinary research in the family justice field. The contributors work across a number of disciplines, drawing on theoretical perspectives from sociology, social work, law, politics, psychiatry and psychology. In addition, they all have experience with applied and action research in these fields in the United Kingdom.

The articles in the Special Issue address three broad themes. Firstly, parents' voices and decision-making; secondly, practitioners' voices and decision-making; and thirdly, the design and evaluation of innovative services involving parties in the family justice arena. The articles present data generated by a range of methodological approaches, including qualitative longitudinal interviews, clinical measures, surveys, administrative data analysis, and algorithmic techniques. They also draw on a range of theoretical frameworks, including trauma-informed and rights-based approaches.

The first theme—parents' voices and decision-making—is addressed by Boddy and Wheeler, who draw on interviews with mothers who have experienced the removal of one or more of their children through English family court public law care proceedings. The mothers interviewed had received support from PAUSE, an innovative social care programme for women at risk of repeated removals. The article explores how stigma can obscure the expression and interpretation of women's rights and needs. Drawing on frameworks developed by social theorists Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser on recognition and redistribution, Boddy and Wheeler [1] argue that support services such as PAUSE can act to enhance mothers' rights in a context of diminishing public welfare. The theme of parents' voices is explored further in the article by Philip and colleagues [2], who offer a rare analysis of the views of fathers experienced in, or living at the edge of, care proceedings. Combining administrative, survey, and interview data, they argue for a greater understanding of the past and present vulnerabilities of recurrent fathers, and for the need to challenge certain assumptions within child welfare and family justice practices about men's roles and identities as fathers. The theme of parents' decision-making is also explored in Mason, Taggart and Broadhurst's [3] article through the lens of parental "non-engagement" with child protection services. Applying emergent theoretical concepts of complex trauma and epistemic trust, they offer an alternative framing of the rationale for (non)engagement. The analysis is rooted in interviews with women who had experienced repeated care proceedings, with a focus on their developmental histories and accounts of their encounters with professionals over time.

The second theme—practitioners' voices and decision-making—is explored in Coulthard, Mallet and Taylor's article [4] on algorithmic decision-making in child protection in the United Kingdom. The authors explore the potential of big data technology to address practitioners' ground-level engagement with actuarial decision tools. They argue that, if available to and embraced by all parties in protection proceedings, these tools may greatly enhance the transparency of social work and judicial decisions. The theme is also addressed in the two further articles making up this Special Issue and discussed below.



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The third theme around service innovation is primarily addressed in the article by Cox, McPherson, Mason, Ryan, and Baxter [5], which presents findings from the evaluation of three local services in the north-west of England working with parents to reduce the risk of recurrent proceedings. The data were gathered using a common evaluation framework co-produced by the authors working with service leads, practitioners, and parents as service users. A key finding is that successful service development in this field is driven by trust in practitioners and by the humane but structured relationships they are able to establish with parents. The theme of service development is also addressed by Shaw's concept paper [6] documenting the journey of a pilot project to extend the United Kingdom's Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) service model by adapting it to meet the needs of parents on the edge of formal proceedings. Presented from Shaw's perspective as a clinical lead for FDAC and the resulting pilot, the article offers a candid view of the challenges of innovation in the family justice field.

Overall, the value of this Special Issue lies in its presentation of innovative approaches to gathering and interpreting research data in the family justice field, and in its creation of a vital interdisciplinary approach to such research. That interdisciplinarity is not born simply from conversations between academics grounded in different disciplinary traditions, but—more importantly—from the conversations between practitioners working across family justice and grounded in different modes of service delivery and the different knowledge bases underpinning them. Just as family justice innovation rests on effective multi-agency working, meaningful family justice research rests on multi-disciplinary dialogue of the kind presented here. The fact that many of these articles highlight the challenge of recurrent care proceedings suggests that innovation and new approaches are urgently needed to address systemic failings in the current and historic family justice system.

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