

**'When sorrows come they come not single
spies but in battalions':
the troubles of/ with 'Troubled Families'**

Robert MacDonald
SoFI, Teesside University, R.MacDonald@tees.ac.uk

Tracy Shildrick
School of Sociology & Social Policy, University of Leeds,
T.Shildrick@leeds.ac.uk

Lancaster University/ SPA 5th March, 2015

'Troubled Families' Programme: the growing critique...

- Multi-dimensional, multi-perspective, e.g.
 - Overly punitive, individualising approach to problems of people in poverty
 - Troubled families as troublesome families
 - Over-emphasising homogeneity of families
 - Measurement/ costs/ net-widening/ weakness of policy-practice interventions (e.g. PBR)
 - Ignorance of policy history (and failures)



But relatively limited critical, *empirical* engagement with 'troubled families'



- '...policy and service streams...have raised the profile ...[but] the voices of the families are largely absent' (Morris, 2012).
- '...doubtless families with backgrounds and circumstances as difficult as Casey documents exist [but]...there might be quite other ways of telling their stories' (Levitas, 2012).

Listening to Troubled Families (Casey, 2012)

- Subject to criticism... (ethics, atypically large families, anecdotal, not 'real research')
- Interviews with 16 'families'
- Graphic detail on the **severe & multiple difficulties** that *can* affect 'troubled families': **abuse and violence prominent**
- Many similarities in 'her' and 'our' families' stories
- 'Troubles' as: '**long-term**', '**entrenched**', '**complex**' & '**cumulative**'



So, what was our research?

Shildrick et al (2012) *Are Cultures of Worklessness Passed down the Generations?* (JRF)

- Very deprived neighbourhoods of Glasgow & Middlesbrough...
- ...led us to interview families similar to those labelled by government as 'Troubled Families'...
- 20 families (47 people)
 - with *at least one parent with long-term worklessness* (+5 years) in middle generation (age 35+)
 - and in younger generation *at least one unemployed child* (age 16+)



'In battalions...'

Or, 'poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks'

- **Multiplicity & severity of combined & long-term 'troubles'**

- 'Failed' schooling (pre/ post 16): low/ no qualifications
- Long-term worklessness
- 'Anti-social behaviour'/ offending & victimisation
- Problematic drug & alcohol use
- Physical/ sexual/ emotional abuse
- Violence/ domestic violence
- **Mental & physical ill-health**
- **Poverty**



- **...complex web of hardships & traumas** associated with deep, long-term poverty

- Most families faced many issues

Casey (2012): some problems/ comparisons

- Emphasis on *families & intergenerational* processes BUT only interviews with 1 family member (15/16 = mothers)
 - Can't grasp complexities without family/ cross-generational perspective
 - Overestimating **continuity/ reproduction** across generations rather than **change/ resistance**?
- 'abuse the most striking common theme' across families?
 - **Physical and mental ill-health** was the 'most common theme' in ours
 - 'intergenerational transmission', 'large families', 'dysfunctional relationships', 'abuse', 'violence', 'drugs and alcohol' etc = Casey's chapter headings...
 - BUT '**poverty**' & '**unemployment**' = absent. This is odd!

General findings: summary

- For middle-generation, long-term, complex, entrenched, cumulative, **spiralling 'troubles'** (often stemming from childhood): **'it just keeps going like this - *stack, stack, stack*', said Amanda Duncan, 50**
- Poverty as uniform, long-term experience - extremely precarious lives
- No/ unsuccessful 'interventions': **'they didn't see the complexity behind what they screened'**
 - **Parent/ middle generation:** dire impacts on physical/ psychological well-being (distanced from labour market); but desperate for children to do better
 - **Younger generation:** heavily disadvantaged but striving for 'conventionality', desperate to do better than parents... but unemployed & on cusp of hopelessness

5 troubles with the 'Troubled Families' programme/ approach

1. ? **Atypicality** of these as 'poor families' – unusual/ extreme cases, even in locales of v high deprivation
 - Majority experience = 'low-pay, no-pay cycle'
 - Strong potential to 'misrepresent the poor'
2. ? **Overly individualised/ agentic view of poverty** as personal failing and/or family dysfunction?
 - Confusion of cause-effect?
 - e.g. most 'Problematic Drug Users' (heroin) are 'poor' over 90% on out-of-work benefits aren't PDU
 - Impact of heroin markets in Glasgow & Middlesbrough: 80s then 90s. Poverty as the context for heroin use; not heroin as the cause of poverty.

5 troubles with the 'Troubled Families' programme/ approach

3. ? 'Structure of opportunities' missing

- e.g. quality of schooling & training/ housing provision/ mass de-industrialisation & progressive closing down of opportunities



4. ? Socio-spatial concentration of health inequalities

- ill-health/ ill-being predominates



5. ? Not 'repeating the cycle' : resistance to 'inheritance', desire for change

- The Duncans (**Amanda**, 50, and **Diane**, 23) each told long, gruelling stories (3hrs+) - not wholly dissimilar to Casey's '*Listening to Troubled Families*' (2012)
- (*APOLOGIES*)
- **Amanda**: long-term workless (1 job in 25+ years), poverty, depression, history of being abused as child/ later abuse, domestic violence, problematic alcoholic use, repeated partnerships with violent men, all children in care.
- **Diane**: physically abused (by Amanda), brought up in care, teenage offending, mother at 16, son on 'at risk' register, intensive social work intervention, 1 short-lived job, attempts to take son into care...

5. ? Not 'repeating the cycle': final words from Diane Duncan...

'I proved everyone wrong...I was being labelled. Just because I'd been in care doesn't mean that what had happened to me I'm going to do the same thing. Just because my Mum used to batter me doesn't mean I'm going to batter my kids.... I think it *is* true - *sometimes...*

but maybe [other] people, they wouldn't do it because it's been done to them. *They know how it feels to be left out and abused by people - so they wouldn't do it.* They'd make the child's life different, to make them feel better and have a happy childhood and not to have the same as them.

Hopefully when I get a job, I'll keep my job, and I'll *show* him. He won't end up in care and he won't end up having a kid at sixteen. He won't end up doing the things that I done... *I want it to change'.*

Thank you for listening!

