



‘Making trouble’: a Bourdieusian analysis of the UK Government’s Troubled Families Programme

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Introduction

The aim of this summary is to provide an accessible introduction to the PhD research carried out by Stephen Crossley, and the thesis that was produced following the research. It has been produced primarily for participants who took part in the research, but it is hoped that it may be of interest and use to other people, especially practitioners and policy-makers involved with the delivery and implementation of the Troubled Families Programme, and/or other similar programmes.

The full thesis can be accessed at: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/12271/>

Background & research approach

Following riots that took place in towns and cities across England in 2011, the UK government launched the Troubled Families Programme (TFP) in England, with the aim of ‘turning around’ 120,000 ‘troubled families’ by May 2015. These families were characterised as being anti-social, criminal, ‘workless’, with children not attending school on a regular basis, and were linked with a wide range of other social ills. The government argued that ‘troubled families’ required ‘family intervention’, which would see a keyworker working with all family members to address their problems. Such keyworkers or ‘family workers’ were allegedly characterised by their ‘persistent, assertive and challenging’ approach and their ability to challenge families when necessary. The workers would act as a single point of contact for the families and would help to co-ordinate - or ‘grip’, in the government’s language - the activities of other services involved with the families as well.

The programme was launched during a time of austerity, wide-ranging welfare reforms and cuts to public services. It was subsequently expanded to include 400,000 more ‘troubled families’ in a second phase which ran from May 2015, whilst austerity measures and welfare reforms were still being implemented. In June 2015, the government announced that the programme had successfully ‘turned around’ 99 per cent of the ‘troubled families’ it had worked with.

There is a lost history to the 'underclass' thesis – the idea that there is a group of individuals or families that are somehow cut-off from the mainstream population and that have a different 'culture' to the majority - that stretches back to Victorian times, at least. Social historians have traced various constructions, from concerns about a 'social residuum' in the late 1800s, through, for example, a belief in 'problem families' during and following the Second World War, to concerns about a 'cycle of deprivation' in the 1970s and a belief in an 'underclass' in the 1980s and 1990s. There is, however, little or no evidence that such distinct and discrete groups exist.

Social research has often focused on marginalised groups or disadvantaged populations such as 'troubled families'. It has also been argued that research that focuses on such groups risks ratifying the 'social problems' or 'problem groups' identified by powerful individuals and institutions. Sociologists such as Howard Becker have urged researchers to clarify whose side they are on and to think carefully about who they study and, just as importantly, who they write for. This research project was not focused on any families, and instead focused on the state's construction of 'troubled families' as a social problem. In doing so, it adopted a 'street-level lens' to examine the daily conduct of the TFP, interviewing local authority practitioners and managers involved in the delivery of the programme, in an attempt to understand the 'reality' of the programme on the ground.

Theoretical perspective

The research drew on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, arguably the most influential sociologist of the last fifty years. Bourdieu's work has been extensively used by researchers studying disciplines and areas such as education, health, race, class, language, and culture, to name but a few, but, to date, his work has not been used widely by social work or social policy researchers outside of France. Bourdieu argued that social spaces (not physical spaces) were made up of *fields*. He often used the analogy of a sports field to highlight how within social spaces, people occupied different positions, which carried different expectations for how they played 'the game', and had different backgrounds and experiences which also influenced their playing of the game. Individuals, as well as taking part in the wider game were also involved in micro-struggles where they sought advantage over other 'players' they were directly competing against. This research study viewed the TFP as a policy *field*, with different people occupying different positions in the field, and attempting to play the game, or direct the game itself, in different ways.

The research also draws on work by Michael Lipsky, an American public policy scholar who coined the phrase 'street-level bureaucrats' to describe frontline workers, such as youth workers, social workers, police officers, teachers etc. These workers are able to exercise discretion in their work, to the extent that they become policy-makers in their own right, deciding how members of the public receive and experience public and social policies.

Methodology and method

The research used a three-stage approach to study the 'troubled families' field. This included: examining the habitus (a Bourdieusian term roughly meaning a way of being and acting in the world) of research participants; examining their relations with other agents in the field; and examining the 'forces' that were applied in the field from powerful individuals and institutions.

The research included analysis of central government texts, including policy documents, press releases, speeches and interviews given by politicians and civil servants involved with the TFP. This analysis was undertaken to examine and understand the 'official' line about – or the *political construction* of - 'troubled families' and the TFP, and the forces that were exerted on people tasked with implementing the programme. Research was then carried out in three local authority areas, with 39 people involved in the delivery of the TFP interviewed across the three sites. There were a number of differences (political control, location, geography, demography, size etc.) between the three sites, although the intention was not to carry out a comparative study between the three areas. The majority of the interviews were with workers working directly with families on a daily basis but some managers and Heads of Service were also interviewed, along with the chief executive of one authority and an elected member of another. Participants were asked about their background and work history prior to becoming involved with the TFP, what they did in their day-to-day work, who they worked with regularly (horizontally and vertically), and their opinions and experiences of the families on the programme.

Findings

The national rhetoric surrounding the TFP suggests that the failures of other services to help 'troubled families' has led to the need for family workers and a robust family intervention approach. Just as the idea of 'troubled families' has been constructed by the government, so has the profession of 'family workers', who can 'turn around' these families. Many of the family workers that participated in the research had previously worked in services that the government accused of letting 'troubled families' down and many had worked with similar families before. In some cases, workers suggested that there was little difference between what they were doing under the TFP and much of their work in previous roles, or with other families or services users who did not fall under the TFP. There was little sign of a 'distinctive' family worker approach, with many participants continuing to use skills and knowledge and draw on experience that they had accrued from previous roles. For example, some workers stated that support with domestic work formed only a small part of their work, whereas others eschewed it altogether, despite this area being central to the government narrative of the type of support families require and receive. Family workers were often critical of the bureaucratic demands of their jobs. Monitoring and reporting requirements, often linked to the TFP evaluation or the Payment by Results mechanism, meant that large amounts of data on families was being recorded, which many workers thought interfered with their ability to support families more effectively.

Family workers were often involved in large amounts of stereotypically administrative work, such as liaising with other agencies, and many participants highlighted the support they received from colleagues in the same team and from other professionals in other departments and organisations. The idealistic image of a single family worker working intensively with a family – articulated by the government as ‘one family, one plan, one worker’ – rarely materialised. Workers sometimes co-worked cases, where they lacked the experience, knowledge or confidence to address issues on their own, and they continued to rely on support from colleagues in services that had allegedly failed members of ‘troubled families’ for many years. In many cases, workers advocated on behalf of families and, in some cases, tensions existed between workers on the TFP and other services, due to the political support and funding for the TFP at a time of widespread austerity and cuts to local services. However, services that were struggling to support family members and keep on top of caseloads were also grateful for the extra resources that family workers brought with them and the political capital they could draw on to ‘get things done’.

In all three fieldwork sites, the TFP was delivered by workers working in departments across the local authority, and sometimes by external voluntary sector organisations. Many of these workers also held caseloads with ‘non-troubled-families’ and had not changed job roles or job descriptions. Some of the families or individuals that they had previously been working with had been ‘identified’ as ‘troubled families’ but little else appeared to have changed. Some participants suggested that other departments and agencies might not necessarily be aware that it was ‘troubled families’ work that was taking place due to this continuity and the local authorities decision not to explicitly use the term ‘troubled families’. These findings cast doubt on the ‘service transformation’ that the government allege is taking place under the TFP, and participants suggested that other factors, such as cuts to local government and Ofsted inspections were potentially bigger drivers of change and restructuring in their authorities than the TFP.

Participants spoke of the pressure they were under to meet the targets set out by the government and to demonstrate they were making progress with the programme. They often rejected the national rhetoric surrounding ‘troubled families’ and the types of issues they were facing, with some keen to highlight structural issues such as poverty. Most participants acknowledged that the majority of families they were working with did not fit the ‘neighbours from hell’ stereotype of ‘troubled families’ and that, under the expanded second phase of the programme, almost any family could be made to fit the ‘troubled families’ criteria. Participants also rejected the idea that they were ‘turning around’ the lives of the families they were working with, with some suggesting that keeping them out of statutory services for 6 months represented a success. In all three areas, the processes for submitting a PbR claim for ‘turning around’ families were separate from decisions about when and how to withdraw support from families. In one area, a manager argued that the programme relied on ‘practitioner integrity’ to ensure that families received support after a PbR claim had been made, whilst in another area a manager suggested that the idea that families had been ‘turned around’ was ‘a load of bloody rubbish’.

Conclusions

Despite the TFP being a standalone programme and it being launched and expanded whilst other services and support for disadvantaged families were being withdrawn or scaled back, it should not be viewed in isolation. The thesis argues that the TFP, which is based and relies on duplicity from design to implementation, is a central plank in attempts to re-shape and restructure the welfare state. Support – both symbolic and financial - for universal services, such as libraries, children’s centres and youth projects, is reducing whilst direct financial support to marginalised groups is also being cut, with welfare reforms hitting many of the most disadvantaged groups hardest. These forms of support, and many other more specialist services, are being replaced, rhetorically at least, by an intensive form of generalist family intervention which allegedly sees a single key worker capable of working with all members of the family, able to ‘turn around’ their lives no matter what problems they may be facing or causing.

The simplistic central government narrative of the almost perfect implementation of the TFP was not to be found ‘on the ground’, where there were multiple frustrations and concerns about the depiction of the families and the programme, and numerous departures from the official version of events. Despite the rhetoric of ‘turning around’ the lives of ‘troubled families’, in the face of cuts in support and benefits to families, the thesis concludes that the TFP does little more than intervene to help struggling families to cope with their poverty better, despite the efforts of local practitioners. Put simply, the TFP does not attempt to address the structural issues that cause many of the problems faced by ‘troubled families’, but instead encourage them to ‘learn to be poor’.

About me

I am an ex-local authority employee, who has previously worked in a number of different roles with families who would now be called ‘troubled’ and who would be eligible for the TFP. I have also worked for voluntary sector housing organisations and, immediately prior to starting work on the PhD, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), I worked on a regional child poverty project at Durham University. It was during this time that I became particularly interested in the ‘underclass’ thesis and the gap between the academic research and the politics and policies in this area. That gap appears larger than ever now.

I now work as a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria University. I have written a number of other articles, reports and book chapters on ‘troubled families’, some of which can be found overleaf. I also have a contract with Policy Press to write a book on the TFP, which should hopefully be published in May 2018.

I would really welcome the opportunity to discuss or present my research findings with practitioners and policy-makers around the country. If you would like copies of any of the publications, would like me to come and speak at an event, or would just like to discuss my research further, please feel free to contact me.

Acknowledgements

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to acknowledge and thank the individuals who agreed to participate in this research, and those who agreed to provide institutional support for the study. At a time when local authorities and their employees were under lots of pressure, people supported my research and made themselves available to talk to me about a politically sensitive topic. I am extremely grateful to them for doing this, and for the insights into the day-to-day life of the programme that they provided me with. Quite simply, the research could not have taken place, or developed in the way it did, without the goodwill and support of these people. I do not doubt that some of the research participants may disagree with my interpretation and theorising of the discussions we had, and with my wider critical perspective on the implementation of the TFP. Where this is the case, I hope that I have not misrepresented their views, and that they can at least appreciate the positions I have taken.

In addition to those who participated formally, I was contacted by many people working on the TFP who shared information and interesting leads with me because of their concerns about the programme. I would also like to acknowledge their help and support in providing information that I was previously unaware of.

Other publications

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