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More sinned against than sinbin? The forgetfulness of critical social policy?

In a recent article in this journal, Paul Garrett (2007) critiques intensive family support schemes as a ‘retrogressive development’, a ‘sinbin solution’ in-line with long-standing debates on the problem family. Furthermore, Garrett suggests that social policy researchers ‘need to retain a certain wariness and scepticism – a reflexive hesitancy – before providing research “products” which seem to largely endorse policy and practice “solutions” that the State . . . has formulated’ (Garrett, 2007: 204). He does so largely by drawing on two research reports (Dillane et al., 2001; Nixon et al., 2006), the first of which was co-authored by ourselves and consisted of an evaluation of the Dundee Families Project.

In response to such ‘critical’ social policy, and having had the advantage of reading Nixon’s eloquent reply to Garrett in this issue, we would like to offer a few observations of our own. Our starting position is as follows. Thought-provoking, critical social policy essays that challenge us to interrogate government agendas are to be encouraged. Indeed, they are the bedrock of the discipline. The power of such ‘critical’ pieces is heightened, however, when their authors engage in a reflexive hesitancy, retaining a certain wariness and scepticism of their own. Ideally, these pieces should also be constructive, offering alternatives.

We would contend that our research (reported in Dillane et al., 2001, and Hill et al., 2002) did not endorse government policy or practice solutions (implied by the way in which Garrett chooses to establish his argument). Indeed, as Garrett himself references, our

research predates the White Paper, *Respect and Responsibility* and the *Respect Action Plan* (published in 2003 and 2006 respectively), which formally established the government's position with regard to intensive family support schemes (Home Office, 2003; Respect Task Force, 2006). Moreover, the project itself was set up before the New Labour government came to power and was a joint initiative by a voluntary children's organization and local government. It would be correct, however, to state that the Dundee Families Project (and perhaps our evaluation of it) was influential in challenging the prevailing government policy and practice orthodoxy, which relied to a significant extent on the eviction and exclusion of families from an area as a solution to comparable problems. It would also be correct to state that there are significant distinctions between the expression of government policy in this arena and the message contained in our report. We can only assume that excavating such distinctions did not fit the narrative Garrett wished to create.

In this light, are intensive family schemes (as they exist) retrogressive? The answer to this question lies, at least in part, in relation to the time frame interrogated and the policy and practices with which you choose to engage in comparison. Indeed, Garrett encourages his audience to illuminate the current through taking a 'backward glance' and chides us for not doing so. This is slightly unfair as we do (albeit briefly) reference the historical roots of family interventions (though not those roots selected by Garrett), but we would contend that in-depth historical framing is not a primary function of an empirical evaluation report. Such framing is usually more suitable to a journal article or monograph. In this regard, we are surprised that Garrett chooses not to reference our own critical work on the Respect Agenda, anti-social behaviour, family interventions and so forth. After all, Garrett cites his own work 26 times in order to frame his position. But what of the historical framing of intensive family schemes? Here, we would contend that Garrett's selection of historical roots is partial (why not look before the 1930s and after the 1960s in addition to the time period selected?) and biased (an emotive comparison to National Socialism), serving a literary function in his narrative over and above the presentation of a critical and balanced account.

What of the Dundee Families Project (DFP) itself, as well as the lack of wariness, scepticism and reflexive hesitancy in our evaluation? The core unit was not 'located inside of perimeter fencing' (Garrett, 2007: 212) (what a ridiculous suggestion) and, as we made clear in

our evaluation, the great majority of families served by the Project did not go to the residential component. Garrett chooses to pass comment on the characteristics of the families (their multiple disadvantages as opposed to just their expression of challenging behaviours) in contact with the DFP, the problematic 'anti-social behaviour label' attached to the families, and the constraints and restrictions placed on those families living in the core block. Overall, the effectiveness of the DFP is questioned. In fact, these are all points that we made in our report. Put another way, Garrett was only able to make many of his critical points by citing comments and data in our report. We endeavoured to offer balance in our report (we were able to do so as a consequence of our methodological approach), and there is much material within it that can be construed negatively. However, this material is placed alongside much that might be construed positively, which Garrett largely ignores. Thus, in a large number of cases, those factors feeding conflict situations in the community were resolved, families were kept together, expensive and punitive alternative practices were avoided, and crucially, families (including children) voiced their appreciation of the interventions made by the DFP.

In conclusion, there is much of New Labour's approach (rhetoric and policy) toward families that demands critical interrogation. Perhaps, its portrayal of the DFP (in contrast to our own) is one such thing. This task would indeed benefit from a balanced historical perspective (inclusive of a consideration of our most recent policy and practice history). But, at the same time, didn't the DFP and our evaluation of it precede New Labour's policy? And shouldn't critical social policy endeavour to explore all the data available to it rather than cherry-picking others' work to serve a particular narrative, whatever its resonance to the world in which we live?

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'Sinbin' research and the 'lives of others': A rejoinder in an emerging and necessary debate

There is only short space here to respond to a few of the points in the above feedback. It is argued that my initial article is wayward because I concentrated on the 'sinbins' despite 'this form of intervention' being 'atypical of IFSPs' [Intensive Family Support Projects] practices' (Nixon, 2007: 547).¹ Why, it is asked, have I 'constructed the residential element as the defining feature of IFSPs?' (Nixon, 2007: 547). It is