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Researching Family Interventions: Methodological Reflections on the Family Case Study Approach

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Intensive family support and family interventions

- * Expanding form of provision in the UK and many other OECD countries e.g.
 - * Family Preservation Programmes
 - * Intensive Home Visiting
 - * Dundee Family Project
 - * Family Intervention Projects
 - * Family Recovery Programmes
 - * Integrated Family Support Services
 - * Family Nurse Partnerships
 - * Troubled Families Initiative

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Intensive family support and family interventions

- * Multiple drivers for reform:
 - Inadequate level and range of family support provision
 - Economic and social costs of uncoordinated and fragmented children's and family services
 - Addressing 'severe' problems and issues for children, young people, parents and families via more holistic, intensive and multi-dimensional approaches
 - 'High need, high cost, high risk' families require 'assertive', intensive, coordinated and multi-agency interventions (Churchill 2011; 2013)

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Methodological debates

- * *'There is compelling evidence intensive family interventions work' (Casey 2012)*
- * *"Monitoring reports show impressive outcomes for families. The most recent findings show that families were most likely to achieve success in the areas of family functioning, crime and anti-social behaviour. Similarly positive results were reported for young people and their families who completed an Intensive Intervention Project. Evaluations of related 'whole family' initiatives across the UK have also provided positive indicative findings.//..the evidence for family interventions is strong." (Lloyd et al 2011, p.)*

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Methodological challenges

- * *"Evidence for the effectiveness of family intervention projects is weak, being made up of small scale evaluations without external comparison groups./..obliging troubled families to accept a non-negotiable non-evidence-based intervention is unlikely to prevent future disorder and may well produce unintended harms." (Fletcher et al 2012, p. 1-2)*

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Methodological challenges

- * However, policy and practice needs to draw from inter-disciplinary research and multiple methodologies:
 - * Inter-disciplinary studies of social problems/ Inter-disciplinary studies of social, adult, child and family welfare/ Inter-disciplinary family and childhood studies
 - * Outcomes and Process evaluations
 - * Extensive and Intensive research
 - * Theory generating and Theory testing research
 - * Studies of lived experiences, service user experience and perspectives
 - * Studies of 'services in practice' and practitioner/practice perspectives
 - * Critical and comparative sociological, political, policy and practice research
- * Need wider-ranging policy and practice dialogue about 'evidence'
- * More critical reflection and dialogue about the aims, strengths, limitations and implications of methodological approaches
- * Researcher reflexivity important
- * Practical and ethical challenges for research in this area (Churchill 2011; Flint and Battv 2012; McCarthy et al 2013)

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Our study

- * Case study of practice, experiences and changes among nine case study families within an 'edge of care' family recovery programme
- * Carried out by Harriet Churchill and Robin Sen, University of Sheffield. Nov 2012-Aug 2014

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Case study research

- * *"Case studies are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other contexts or examples which are studied holistically using one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class or phenomena that is studied with particular analytical aims and frameworks."* (Thomas 2011, p.23)
- * Key issues include:
 - Analytical rationale for the study (describe, evaluate and theory generate)
 - The selection of case/s ('edge of care' FRP; family cases)
 - Use of mixed methods and varied data to examine cases 'from multiple angles' and 'in-depth'
 - Analyses of context/s

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Our study

- The local context:
 - The local authority and children's social care context (documentary analysis, attendance at Steering Group meeting, discussions with Senior Officers)
 - Socio-economic and demographic trends (local and area statistics)
- The FRP approach and programme:
 - Target group? Professionals and their backgrounds/training? Resources and capacity? Intervention aims, approach and key features? Theoretical and disciplinary influences? Theories of change? Similarities and differences to other family interventions? (documentary analysis, attendance at meetings and activities, interviews with staff, observations of practice)
- Analysis of routine programme data (referral data, support plan/indicator analysis, analysis of family indicator data overtime)
- The broader multi-agency environment (telephone interviews with partner agencies)

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Our study

- Practice, experiences and changes among nine case study families
 - Purposefully chosen (length of engagement, types and levels of need, family circumstances)
 - Case files analysis
 - Interviews with parents/main carers and young people, and follow up interviews
 - Observation of practice

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Methodological reflections

- * Methods/methodology generated rich and multi-faceted data about the FRP and families in context
- * Empirical and Theoretical developments focusing on:
 - * Evaluating the FRP as an 'edge of care' intervention (FRP-social care interface; child welfare concerns and changes)
 - * Changes and improvements in children's safety, welfare and well-being (how these are related to changes and support for parents and family relationships/circumstances more broadly; the aspects of the 'intervention' that facilitated change)
 - * Conceptualising the 'key worker role and relationship' (key competencies; 'assertive strengths-based approach ethos in practice'; its wider application)
 - * Conceptualising the complexity of family/individual situations and the processes/factors influencing engagement with the FRP overtime and 'change/stability' in families
 - * Conceptualising and evaluating the significance and nature of 'intensive support and interventions'

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Methodological reflections

- * **Four key areas:**
 - * Research practice, process and relationships
 - * Data collection
 - * Data analysis
 - * Case-context analysis

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Methodological reflections

- * Research practice, process and relationships
 - * The importance of thinking about relationships with research participants, users and settings
 - * Building collaborative practitioner-researcher relationships
 - * Promoting dialogue and critical reflection about 'evidence' and 'research'
 - * Reflecting on power dynamics in programmes, policy-practice and research-practice
 - * Ethos, ethics, power dynamics and relationships when doing in-depth qualitative research with and for families engaged with children's social care/ families in need/families in crisis/ struggling families that face multiple adversities

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Methodological reflections

- * **Data collection issues and challenges:**
 - * The adequacy of programme 'impact' data
 - * Improving opportunities for young people to participate in the research
 - * Critical issues in doing individual and/or couple interviews with parents/carers
 - * The value of longer-term and multi-faceted data collection
 - * Observation methods insightful but issues about researcher approach and role
 - * The value of more informal 'conversations' – status of data? ethical issues?

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Methodological reflections

- * **Data analysis considerations and challenges:**
 - * Within and across family case analysis (Flint and Batty 2012)
 - * Beyond literal analysis of the data – towards reflexive and contextual analysis of the data (Mason 2002)
 - * Interviews as co-constructed and moral narratives
 - * Case files as practitioner interpretation and structured in certain ways, resource and purpose dependent
 - * Observations as researcher interpretations
 - * Overarching analysis: how does the data fit together? Problematic issues with the notion of 'triangulation' (Bryman 2008)

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Methodological reflections

*** Case-context analysis:**

- * Programme, practice and policy context ever-changing
- * We also thought sociologically about 'context' – alternatively conceptualisations of 'individuals in context' and 'action in context' (social theory) informed our analysis (social identities, social networks/capital, gender and inter-sectionality, family discourses and cultural contexts/practices, etc)

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