# GENDER and CHILD WELFARE in Society

Edited by Brid Featherstone, Carol-Ann Hooper, han Scourfield and Julie Taylor

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# Gender and Child Welfare in Society

'In this book, a group of impressive authors bring a wealth of policy, practice and theoretical knowledge to the often ignored connections between gender and child protection. The book contains an excellent range of topics, written in accessible, practical prose. It will be indispensable reading for practitioners, as well as students of child welfare and their professors.'

**Professor Karen Swift, School of Social Work, York University, Canada**

'This timely and innovative collection brings gender issues to the fore across a wide range of fields relevant to child welfare. The editors and authors are to be congratulated in encompassing many contemporary debates through an informative, rigorous and thought-provoking lens. This book will be vital reading for all working with children, young people and families.'

**Dr Jane McCarthy, Reader in Family Studies, Department of Social Policy, Open University**

# Notes on Contributors

**Shereen Benjamin** is a senior lecturer in primary education at the University of Edinburgh. After teaching in mainstream and special schools for many years she now teaches and researches in the field of sociology of education, with a particular interest in the intersection of gender and disability in schooling. Her books include *The Micropolitics of Inclusive Education* (Open University Press, 2002), and she is co-editor, with Suki Ali and Melanie Mauthner, of *The Politics of Gender and Education* (Palgrave, 2003).

**Rosemary Carlton** is a PhD candidate at the School of Social Work, McGill University. With substantial front-line practice experiences in child protection as well as a hospital-based clinic for sexually abused children, Rosemary is pursuing doctoral research that centres on the varied experiences of mothers and teenaged daughters in the aftermath of sexual abuse disclosures. With particular interest in social work practice that is reflective of and responsive to diversity, Rosemary approaches practice, teaching and research with a commitment to both feminist and anti-oppressive perspectives.

**Linda Davies** is Full Professor in the School of Social Work, McGill University, where she teaches in the area of clinical practice and qualitative research.

**Brid Featherstone** is a professor of social work and social policy at the University of Bradford. She has a particular interest in gender and child welfare issues. In recent years she has researched the issues for child welfare services in engaging fathers. Her latest book, *Contemporary Fathering: Theory, Policy and Practice*, was published by Policy Press in 2009.

**Lorraine Green** is a lecturer in social work and sociology at the University of Manchester. Her research and writing interests centre on and around children and child welfare, child abuse, gender, child health, sexuality, resilience and various combinations thereof. Lorraine's most recent journal articles have been written on deaf children and resilience, same sex partnership bereavement, and challenges to and opportunities for health and social care integration in the UK.

**Carol-Ann Hooper** is a senior lecturer in Social Policy at the University of York. Her research and teaching focus on the overlapping fields of child abuse, child protection and family support, and gender and crime. She is the author of *Mothers Surviving Child Sexual Abuse* (Routledge, 1992), co-editor with Una McCluskey of *Psychodynamic Perspectives on Abuse* (Jessica Kingsley, 2000) and co-author with Sarah Gorin, Christie Cabral and Claire Dyson of *Living with Hardship 24/7: The Diverse Experiences of Families in Poverty in England* (The Frank Buttle Trust, 2007).

**Julia Krane** is an associate professor in the School of Social Work, McGill University. Her teaching, practice and research endeavours centre on child welfare and violence against women in intimate relationships. Her publications engage in feminist analyses of mainstream and community child welfare practices, examinations of child protection practices that unwittingly reproduce maternal blame and responsibility for protection in cases of child sexual abuse, critical analyses of services to battered women and their children, and cautious reflections on the intersection of domestic violence and child protection interventions.

**Simon Lapierre** is currently a postdoctoral research fellow in the School of Social Work, McGill University. His work has focused on women's experiences of mothering in the context of domestic violence, and has provided a critical perspective on the ways child

welfare policies and practices address this issue in both Canada and the United Kingdom.

**Margaret McKenzie** is a senior lecturer and Head of Department of Social Work and Community Development, University of Otago, New Zealand. She has extensive practice experience in child and family mental health services. Her teaching and research interests focus on family and family practice intersections with child welfare policy. She has published on family group conferences in child protection, researching with vulnerable clients and supervised contact services for fathers and is currently working on a research project to examine strengths approaches in child welfare services.

**Meghan Mulcahy** is a MSW candidate in the School of Social Work at McGill University researching qualitatively how mothers make meaning of a child protection encounter. Meghan has worked as an outreach worker in rural and urban Canadian communities providing strength and harm-reduction based advocacy, information and counselling support to women and adolescent girls.

**Mark Rivett** is Senior Lecturer in Family Therapy and Systemic Practice at the School for Policy Studies, Bristol University and a family therapist in South Wales. As well as having extensive experience in children's mental health, he has managed a domestic violence service for the NSPCC which lead him to develop an expertise in working with abusive men and also with children who have witnessed domestic violence. His publications span these specialties as well as more mainstream family therapy practice. He is the current editor of the *Journal of Family Therapy.*

**Jonathan Scourfield** is a Reader in Cardiff School of Social Sciences. His books include *Gender and Child Protection* (Palgrave, 2003) and *Working with Men in Health and Social Care* (Sage 2007, with Brid Featherstone and Mark Rivett). He is currently running a research project on Muslim families under the joint research council programme 'Religion and Society'.

**Mark Smith** is a lecturer in social work in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh. Formerly he was a practitioner and manager in residential childcare settings for almost 20 years. He has published widely on residential childcare and his first

book, *Rethinking Residential Child Care* (2009), is published by Policy Press. He is working towards a PhD exploring changing discourses of care in Scottish residential schools.

**Julie Taylor** is Professor of Family Health and Head of Division, Research and Postgraduate Studies, School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Dundee. A nurse by profession, Julie's research focuses on optimal service delivery conditions in child-care and protection practice. With Brigid Daniel, she is co-author of *Engaging with Fathers: Practice Issues for Health and Social Care* (Jessica Kingsley, 2001) and co-editor of *Child Neglect: Issues for Health and Social Care* (Jessica Kingsley, 2004). With Markus Themessl-Huber she is co-editor of *Safeguarding Children in Primary Health Care* (Jessica Kingsley, 2009).

**Trish Walsh** is a lecturer in social work in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. She practiced in child welfare and mental health social work in Dublin and London for 18 years and still takes occasional work carrying out independent court assessments in child welfare cases. Her research and teaching focus on social work education, critical discourses in social work and therapeutic interventions in mental health and family work. Her PhD (2002), a case study of the introduction of solution-focused therapy to Irish social workers, examined the diffusion of innovation in social work.

All the contributors are members of The Gender and Child Welfare Network. The network was formed in 2003 by a group of academics and consultants from all four countries in the UK with the main aim of creating a community of researchers, practitioners, policy makers and lobby groups interested in gender and child welfare issues. Since then the network has expanded to include members from the USA, Australia, Canada, the Republic of Ireland and New Zealand. Details of the Network's activities are given at www.brad.ac.uk/acad/socsci/research/genchilnet.

A Canadian branch of the Gender and Child Welfare Network was launched as a sister network in 2008. Further details are given at www.mcgill.ca/gender-child-welfare.

# Contents

# 1

# Gender and Child Welfare in Society: Introduction to Some Key Concepts

Jonathan Scourfield

A father beating his wife because he thinks she has been looking at another man while they were out in the pub; a girl being regularly kept off school to babysit her younger siblings; a mother who acknowledges ambivalent feelings towards her children being negatively judged by professionals because she is not all-giving and ever available; a teenage boy drinking daily because, in part, of his poor emotional literacy; a lesbian teenager suffering homophobic bullying in school and neighbourhood; a black boy struggling to achieve in school because he is surrounded by people expecting him not to. I could go on, of course, in listing reasons why the topic of gender and child welfare deserves a book. It does not only deserve a book; it deserves complex analysis, and therefore we have put together a collection of chapters on various different dimensions of the topic by authors from different locations and with different theoretical orientations.

*Gender and Child Welfare in Society* Edited by Brid Featherstone, Carol-Ann Hooper, Jonathan Scourfield, and Julie Taylor. 

The book's terrain is the ways in which both relationships within families and interactions between family members and professionals are influenced by gender in interaction with other social divisions – for example, ethnicity or socio-economic status – and with other factors – for example, individual biography or professional training. The social meanings attached to being male or female are variable, contested and changing, yet they continue to influence the identities and practices of children, parents and the practitioners who work with them, and assumptions about gender (for instance, about appropriate behaviour for boys or girls, or the responsibilities of men and women as parents) often permeate interventions. Certain outcomes for children are significantly associated with gender – for example, there are higher rates of school exclusion, offending and suicide amongst boys, and higher rates of depression amongst girls, although the extent of such differences varies in different contexts and over time. Practitioners who intervene in families continue to work predominantly with mothers, reflecting traditional assumptions about gendered responsibilities for children's welfare as well as the reality that in the vast majority of families women are still the primary caregivers. However, there is a growing interest in the roles of men both as fathers and as practitioners, and interventions can either reinforce or destabilize existing gender divisions.

The book draws on current developments in thinking about gender relations to consider ways in which raising questions about gender can help researchers and practitioners better understand family relationships and issues in children's development, and both challenge and enhance interventions in the field of health and social care for children and families. We use the term 'child welfare' to locate the book's contribution within a long-standing tradition of policy and practice concern with children in the fields of health and social care, rather than as part of the more recent and definitionally circumscribed debate over 'children's well-being'. We see the book as relevant to a range of professionals who work in child welfare – social workers, health visitors and children's nurses, early years staff – as well as people studying aspects of childhood or gender relations for their own sake.

As services in the United Kingdom reorganize to reflect higher aspirations for children's well-being they also have new obligations to eliminate discrimination and promote gender equality which apply to

children, parents and practitioners. We hope the book will contribute to ongoing attempts to turn these visions into reality in a variety of contexts. It will offer an overview of sociological, psychological and developmental perspectives on family relationships, child welfare outcomes and the practice/policy realities of professional interventions with families. Exploring the issues for children, mothers and fathers, as well as specific types of interventions, specific chapters will address the range of service settings, including family support, child health, education, child protection, domestic violence, 'looked after' children and youth justice.

The book will address the following questions:

- How is gender being integrated into the child welfare agenda today?
- How can children's views and experiences inform such developments?
- What are the new challenges facing women and men as parents in the context of family and societal change and diversity that policy makers and practitioners need to be aware of?
- How does gender intersect with ethnicity, religion, class, disability, age and sexuality in families?
- How are other policies such as youth justice promoting or undermining child welfare goals?
- What theoretical and practice developments are most promising in promoting both child well-being and gender equity?
- How can health and social care practitioners use information about gender to engage more meaningfully with families?
- How can the 'gender agenda' improve child safeguarding practice?

We seek to demonstrate that gender sensitivity is crucial to informed intervention across the field of child welfare, and to illustrate with examples its relevance and implications in the current context. Whereas previous books on the topic of gender and child welfare have looked at sub-themes such as family support (Featherstone, 2004) or child protection (Scourfield, 2003), or a specific group such as fathers (Daniel and Taylor, 1999), we aim for greater breadth here. This book explores contemporary childhood, mothering and fathering in the context of social policy and social interventions in several countries.

This introductory chapter aims to provide an overview of some key concepts. The overview is unavoidably partial as it reflects its author's knowledge and interests. Whilst, inevitably, many complex issues will be skated over and some even omitted altogether because of the need to be brief, I hope I can provide an *accessible* introduction both to the book and to the broader topic of the gendered dimension of child welfare. Note that at times the first person singular 'I' is used, referring to the single author of this introductory chapter. At other times, and especially when summarizing the book's content, the plural 'we' is used, with reference to the book's four editors.

## Understanding gender relations

### What's meant by 'gender'?

There has been a flourishing of critical writings about gender and sexuality (and the links between the two) perhaps especially in the last forty years or so, since the writings of the 1960s and 1970s, often referred to as 'second wave feminism' (the first wave being the writings and activism concerning the emancipation of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the suffragette movement being the most famous example). The term 'gender' is generally used to refer to 'social interpretation of reproductive biological distinctions' (Beasley, 2005: 12). That is, it refers to socially constructed identities, behaviour and institutions rather than to biological sex differences between men and women. This definition is far from being uncontested, however. Chris Beasley – the Australian academic, not the Chief Nursing Officer for England with the same name – in her very helpful overview of gender/sexuality theories, notes that there have been three principle debates about the term 'gender' within social and cultural theory (Beasley, 2005).

The first debate is about whether or not a focus on specific identities is helpful. So some commentators have argued that a conceptual focus on 'gender' draws attention away from the continuing oppression of women. Others have argued that the concept of gender prescribes rather than describes a binary social construction with 'male' and

'female' as opposite poles. The second debate is about the relationship between what is social and what is natural/bodily. Some have argued that the conventional understanding of gender sets up an artificial divide between social and natural/bodily, as if biological phenomena were fixed, when in fact ideas about biology vary across time and cultural context. Others have observed that the term is quite specific to English language literature, with French feminist writings, for example, tending to write about 'sex' and 'sexed identities' instead. Beasley herself makes pragmatic use of the term gender insofar as it is still the most commonly used in English language writings and we do the same in this book. The third debate noted by Beasley is about the links between gender and sexuality, with some seeing gender as preceding sexuality and others seeing sexuality as preceding gender. Most contemporary theorists recognize that there are at least significant conceptual overlaps between sexuality and gender. Ideas about male and female as 'opposite' characteristics are implicated in the social and cultural dominance of heterosexuality, for example, and homophobia is often about adverse reactions to transgression of gendered behaviour as much as it is about sexuality. We should acknowledge, however, that whilst we the book's editors regard sexuality and gender as strongly connected, sexuality is not to the fore in the book.

To give an overview of gender theories is a daunting task within a whole book, let alone part of one chapter. There are many possible ways of cutting the cake. One would be to organize theories according to whether they aim to treat 'male' and 'female' constructs on equal terms or emphasize the need to acknowledge differences between them – what might be called a distinction between equality feminism and difference feminism. Another possible organizing principle would be around theorists' orientations to modernism or postmodernism (see Beasley, 2005). So even within a potential single category of theories, such as radical feminism, there is a continuum of more or less modernist versions. I have decided to run with categorizing some well-recognized traditions within feminism in the full knowledge that each of these is a very broad category. Most of the following categories apply to theorizing about masculinities and femininities, but the field of masculinity theory is rather more recent than feminist theory, which primarily addresses itself to understanding the position of women. In recognition of this, I have included a separate sub-heading 'men's studies' at the end of this section.

## Radical feminism

Well known radical feminist academics include Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich. Better known still, at least in the United Kingdom, are the writings of Andrea Dworkin. As I have already noted, however, a range of different stances can be found within the broad categories of theory used in this chapter. To summarize very briefly some of the most obvious characteristics of radical feminism, there is a concern with stark inequality between men and women and central to this concern would be the control of women's bodies and women's bodily integrity. So concern about domestic violence, rape and pornography would typical within radical feminism. These phenomena would be seen as rooted in patriarchy, the historical and ongoing social structural oppression of women by men. Heterosexuality would be seen as an institution based on the oppression of women by men. For most radical feminists, gender inequality is about real embodied men and real women, and there is little interest in fluidity of identities. There is generally an emphasis on women's common experience of oppression rather than on diversity between women.

In relation to child welfare, radical feminist concerns would include, for example, the (hetero)sexualization of girls, the impact of domestic abuse on women and children, men's sexual abuse of children – both within the family and outside – and female genital mutilation. Interventions might include supporting women to leave abusive men and education of men about the roots of abuse of women in patriarchy. An example of the latter would be the group work with violent men used within the Duluth model (see Pence and Paymar, 1993). This work is 'pro-feminist', with the prefix indicating that men who are supportive can help to run groups. In this programme there is an explicit message that men's abuse of women is based on a desire to control them and patriarchal views about intimate relationships. The dominant mode of engagement is educating men to accept this interpretation and to modify their behaviour via cognitive-behavioural methods. The chapter in this collection by Rivett, is critical of what he sees as the 'doctrinaire' approach of this kind of intervention with violent men. The chapter by Lapierre, however, is squarely in the tradition of radical (pro-)feminist research on domestic violence.

## Liberal feminism

This approach dates back to the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft in the late nineteenth century and would in more recent times include the popular writer Naomi Wolf. The liberal feminist approach is to seek equality for women within the mainstream institutions of society. Unlike radical feminism, there is not a fundamental questioning of gender relations. Rather, liberal feminism would see society as amenable to modification so that women have a better deal from employment and education, for example. Heterosexual relationships would be seen as reformable, with the domestic division of labour addressed but heterosexual desire remaining unchallenged. This is in essence the popular face of feminism, what most people think feminism is – namely ameliorative politics to improve the lot of women within existing structures. This liberal feminist approach is by and large the face of feminism in mainstream party politics. Unlike radical feminism, liberal feminism does not involve an explicit analysis of patriarchal social structures. Also unlike radical feminism, it does not question mainstream terms of engagement in any fundamental way.

In relation to child welfare, an example of a liberal feminist approach would be to challenge an unfair focus on mothers within the child protection system. This critique would not necessarily involve fundamental questioning of the heterosexual family, but would simply point out that in very many child protection cases attention moves from initial concern about an abusive man to scrutiny of mothering (Farmer and Owen, 1998). Another example would be a concern with how girls are responded to within the youth justice system, given that they are a small minority of the client base and could therefore be rather marginalized within services which are geared towards young men. Yet another example, following the same logic, would be the marginalization of fathers from family support services. Although this concern might come from a men's rights perspective rather than a feminist one, the logic of equal opportunities for men and women within the mainstream would be the same. Whilst none of the chapters in this volume is straightforwardly written from a liberal feminist perspective, it has to be acknowledged that its version of equality does underpin many of the concerns expressed in the book about the