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**Constructing risk and avoiding need: Findings from interviews with social workers
and police officers involved in safeguarding work with migrant children**

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Running Headline:

Social workers and police officers safeguarding work with migrant children

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Abstract

Previous research illustrates the lack of services and provision for the needs of migrant children; assessments of needs in the early stage of their arrival into the UK have previously been advocated. This paper reports on a qualitative study with officials in agencies working with children at a UK port of entry. Along with a sense of isolation and fragmentation between those agencies involved in this work, there were clear tensions between the safeguarding agendas and practices of the agencies involved. Analysis of interviews with social workers and police officers suggests that there was a lack of confidence and trust between agencies and multiagency approaches to safeguarding children entering the UK. Assessment approaches tend to be risk orientated at the expense of being culturally attuned and children's rights focussed. These findings are discussed together with recommendations for further research.

Key words: Migrant children, assessment, risk, multi –agency safeguarding.

This paper discusses safeguarding and welfare issues related to migrant children which includes children coming to the UK, alone (unaccompanied, separated, asylum seeking, and as refugees). The research discussed has a particular emphasis on children who arrive without parents at a UK port of entry. These children raise a host of issues for public welfare and particularly child safeguarding agencies in the UK and there is a growing body of research which suggests that the rights of such children are often marginalized in policy and disregarded in practice (Ayotte 2000; Cemlyn and Briskman 2003; Derluyn and Broekaert 2005; Crawley 2006; Kohli 2006; Crawley 2007; Hopkins and Hill 2008). This paper begins with an summary of the existing literature related to the welfare and support needs of different groups of migrant children coming to the UK, followed by analysis and discussion of interviews conducted with social workers and police officers working with unaccompanied children.

The welfare of unaccompanied, separated and asylum seeking/refugee children.

Children coming to the UK do so for a variety of reasons, including escaping violence or the threat of violence. The *Children Act* (UK Government 2004) includes a commitment to ensuring better outcomes for children, although there is a continuing emphasis on

immigration controls at the expense of the welfare of migrant children [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] (Crawley 2006; Sales 2007) even when the majority of children travel to escape conflict (Sutton and Smith 2005). Dottridge (2004) is critical of the way in which government policies have clamped down on children’s migrations at the expense of their rights because of the suspicious nature of their arrival and concerns about their being the victims of trafficking; when in reality many of the agents are obliged to use clandestine routes as legal ones have been closed off.

Childhood sociological perspectives have however challenged presumptions in policy that children’s migratory movements are always forced (Liebel 2004; Fass 2005; Hashim 2006). These authors argue that employment and education are key drivers for child migration, despite the risks involved. In some cultures child migrations are viewed as important *rites de passage* (Busza *et al.* 2004; De Lange 2005) whilst in others there are traditions and customs of child rearing where children are placed in other countries to be cared for by members of their wider family or kinship networks (Bastia 2005; Manzo 2005). It is clear that there are a range of needs amongst children who come to the UK and given the emphasis in UK policies towards controlling migration, it is important to understand how ports’ safeguarding work is conducted with children when they arrive into the UK.

Previous research has identified that a range of issues which services and policy makers need to address, specifically health and welfare needs stemming from conditions in

countries of origin, or when *en route* (Ayotte 2000; 2004; Bastia 2005; Derluyn and Broekaert 2005; Hopkins and Hill 2008). Children report anxiety due to only being granted leave to remain in the UK until they are 18, and having to apply for status as an adult, or be returned to their country of origin. In a report for the Scottish Refugee Council (2006) Hopkins and Hill found that language, feelings of loneliness, and safety were the three important issues children face when they arrive. Research studies have highlighted Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other psychological conditions, in samples of refugee and asylum seeking children (Thomas *et al.* 2003; Kohli 2006) and sexual and reproductive health provision (Pregnancy/HIV/AIDS) are advocated for migrant children, particularly those children coming from areas with high incidence of HIV/AIDS (Thomas *et al.* 2003; Zimmerman 2006). There is a lack of mainstream health provision, fragmentation and poor information for arrivals to the UK which also compromises the health of refugees and asylum seekers (Crawley 2006).

Social work with unaccompanied, separated and asylum seeking/refugee children.

Mitchell (2003) in an overview of the way in which social services respond to the needs of unaccompanied children coming to the UK argues that whilst there is substantial body of evidence related to guidance for practitioners working with unaccompanied children in the UK, research does not provide a full understanding of how the needs of unaccompanied minors are assessed. Research undertaken by Kohli (2006) and Hopkins and Hill (2008) have begun to make some promising contributions to inform the way in

which social workers support and assess such children. Along with assessment of their health and welfare, the needs of unaccompanied separated asylum seeking and refugee children also include access to education, court work, commissioning therapeutic or social support services in the community. However, at the stage when they enter the UK, the chaos which surrounds their arrival means that children may not have a full assessment of needs undertaken, and there is variability in the way local authorities interpret their duties (Mitchell 2003). There have been criticisms of social work acting as an arm of immigration control, and yet social workers play a key role in supporting unaccompanied children to establish themselves as citizens with entitlements rather than as victims. Social workers are thus well placed to develop ways of working which incorporate rights, justice and cross cultural principles (Cemlyn and Briskman 2003; Sales 2007).

Social workers along with other safeguarding partners also undertake age assessments of children and young people whose age is uncertain or disputed by immigration officers at the port of entry. The methods used in age assessments have been disputed and challenged as they offer no guarantee of accuracy, and may serve to exclude older looking children from the welfare resources children are entitled to, and affect their claim for asylum (Crawley 2006; Crawley 2007).

Ports safeguarding

The safeguarding of migrant children coming into the UK is a relatively new area of work. Although there are studies related to the way in which port authorities work with adult economic migrants (Duval and Jordan 2003) to date there has been limited research and analysis of the ways in which port authorities and officials work with children at UK ports in terms of how they assess or respond to their needs. In Norway, Engebrigtsen (2003) identified disparities between the way in which the national child welfare legislation was applied in practice in relation to child migrants and their rights. In a study in Belgium, Derluyn and Broekaert (2005) conducted interviews with children during the interception process at the port and analysed data from the case files. They maintain that many children travelling to the UK were doing so to meet another family member and were migrating primarily to improve their life opportunities. In this study, the control and surveillance agenda of immigration officials predominated at the expense of a welfare approach and the authors suggested the need for appropriate training on how to deal with intercepted unaccompanied minors in a respectful way. [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] In terms of language and communication, the authors report that their study found the failure to use interpreters or translators made communication with children difficult, and this extends from research to practice in this field. They suggest that social workers could play a greater part in the interception processes supporting and advocating on behalf of children and in relation to being available for the children who felt they needed to talk to someone and tell them about their experiences (Derluyn and Broekaert 2005). A multi agency study of migrant children coming to the UK (Metropolitan Police 2004) also

recommended that social workers should be based at the port of entry in safeguarding teams.

An important issue for social work practice relates to the way in which unaccompanied children arrive without parents/caregivers and the emphasis on assessment practice which limits analysis of the differences in parent/child relationships between cultures where a range of childrearing strategies are employed. These include: parenting by extended family members and the wider community; and circumstances and situations where children are reared outside of their countries of origin (Owusu-Bempah 2007). This perspective has some bearing on the way in which social workers practice with unaccompanied children and ensuring that kinship networks persist as it is these which hold global families together, and which engender responsibility and duty towards family and community. Bernard and Gupta (2008) argue that along with language and interpretation there are a number of tensions in social work practice with African families including: reconciling different beliefs and behaviours in child-rearing practices; valuing parenting practices of these families in the initial engagement process; and the need to take a strengths-based perspective in assessment work. In their survey of language services in voluntary and statutory social services agencies, Pugh and Williamson (2005) also found a lack of language provision for minority language speakers and agencies were not well prepared to meet their communication needs. Chand, (2005) argues that there is a lack of training of social workers in the use of interpreters. This point was also evident in an earlier study by Humphreys, Atkar and Baldwin (1999) who found limited attention paid to the interpretation requirements of children and their families has an

impact on communication between the agency and the family/child, and greater likelihood of mutual misunderstanding due to cultural/language differences.

Method

This study was undertaken in order to determine how multiagency ports safeguarding work responds to the needs of migrant children coming to the UK. This paper reports on the findings of the study which consulted with social workers and police officers working at UK ports of entry to discuss their views about multiagency safeguarding/assessment practices with migrant children.

All participants provided written consent and at the conclusion of the field work period were given their post-interview transcript to ensure accuracy and agreement about what was reported during the interview. This also gave participants an opportunity to review, exclude or amend any data they did not want to be used in published work. Other issues related to consent included the possibility that participants would illustrate their work with case studies or examples of situations or events they had been involved in, and it was important to consider the potential impact on children of their situations being divulged in a research study. It was not possible or practical for the informants to gather consent from children whose situations the participants wished to discuss. Instead, anonymity of case study materials was required to protect the confidentiality of children

who were known to agencies working in the field. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the University of Central Lancashire Research Ethics Committee.

Interviews with key informants

Informants were accessed using snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). This method is useful for accessing hard to reach samples, and also in this study ensured that participants were situated at different levels of their organisation to generate data from their distinct vantage points (Kaskutas *et al.* 2000). The sixteen professionals who participated in the study all had some involvement in safeguarding migrant children in policy development, research, legal advocacy, law enforcement, or social work. Semi-structured interviews which were on average an hour in duration were conducted between August 2005 and November 2006. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. These interviews provided rich and varied accounts that illuminated situated and contextual data.

Participants

This paper discusses findings from semi-structured interviews which were held with six social workers with Children and Young People (SWCYP) and three Police Child Protection officers (PCP).

SWCYP: These participants worked in or managed social work agencies or teams in both the NGO and statutory sectors that focussed on the delivery of social work services to children and young people. Their duties include; assessments of children referred by the Home Office, the police, or NGO's. Day to day work also involved individual case management and reviews, court work, placement finding and advocacy. During the research study period one NGO social work participant was based at a port of entry whilst the remaining five were located in teams/agencies in the South East (n=2) the North West (n=1) the North of England (n=1) and the Midlands (n=1) .

PCP: Participants in this group were involved in police child protection work in the South East. Their day to day work included investigations at ports of entry, liaison with the Home Office, immigration officers, Customs and excise, national police forces, Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre (CEOP) and social workers particularly across Greater London. Two of the police participants were based at a UK port of entry, and worked at other ports of entry as required and the third was a senior police officer, who headed up a command unit.

Findings

Interview analysis themes

The interviews with social workers and police officers were analysed through reading of interview transcripts; focusing on the discussions around multiagency safeguarding practice. This initial analysis suggested that far from being a cooperative and supportive process, informants often struggled with the processes involved in multiagency working. Social workers in the NGO sectors were critical of statutory social work practice with unaccompanied children. The police welcomed social work support on the one hand, but were highly disparaging of social work assessments. Social workers in statutory teams and those in asylum seeking teams perceived the police to be authoritarian and dogmatic. Whilst respondents situated themselves as partners in safeguarding some were ill-informed about participatory and culturally informed practice approaches with children or parents/carers. In addition, there was a lack of common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of partner agencies. A lack of trust in social work assessments, and a lack of cooperation between police and social services led to tensions in multiagency port safeguarding work with unaccompanied children.

There was reluctance amongst the police to accept that social work assessments are valid and/or credible. This stemmed from key differences in how police officers assessed risk of harm, and the way this is interpreted and acted upon by social workers. The fast moving transitory environment at the port of entry where the police officers were based reinforced their perspective on the need for immediate response.

Multiagency work.

Whilst informants based in the statutory social work sector discussed cases and experiences of working with unaccompanied minors going back sometimes decades, safeguarding work at ports of entry was deemed to be new areas of work for the police. Joint working sometimes led to swift and speedy outcomes but was dependant upon the relationships between the police and social workers. The police adopted a victim centered/harm reduction approach whilst social workers operated from a person centered and rights perspective. Work at the port focussed on meeting the basic needs of children when they arrived unaccompanied, and informing them of their rights. A social worker, who was based in an NGO, provided advocacy services for unaccompanied children. Although there was not a co-located social worker from a statutory social work team based at the port, there were plans for this to happen and optimism about the joined up approach from the agencies involved.

It was acknowledged by the police officers that a social work presence at the ports was beneficial in terms of their being able to safeguard children who were potentially at risk, where, for example, they arrived without clear plans for their stay in the UK. Conversely whilst social workers accepted that they played a role in the assessment and support of children who were deemed by agencies working at the port to be “at risk” this was usually carried out in the community once the child had left the port of entry. There are joint working procedures in place to assess children’s age between immigration and socials services. These procedures caused some consternation for social workers in this study who recognized that whilst age assessments were fallible there was nevertheless a high level of demand for these to be undertaken.

Garrett (2004) in a study of police and social workers in joined up teams also reported tensions in working together. He identified that there was a tendency for the police to view themselves as the lead agency and there was a blurring of the social work role. Garrett also stated that there was a lack of confidence in the social work role and limits to how well the police and social work agencies worked together; social work practice in cases was annexed to the police task. Other agencies having confidence in the social work role was also deemed crucial to effective multi-disciplinary working (Garrett 2004; Frost and Robinson 2007). This lack of confidence was articulated in various ways in the present study, and was not limited to social work assessments and practice. Social workers too were critical of the way in which immigration services and the police identified risks to children coming into the UK.

Discussion

Early thematic analysis of the interviews suggests that working relationships between the agencies involved in multiagency ports safeguarding were characterized by criticism and mistrust. Perceptions of the risks unaccompanied children are exposed to was understood and responded to differently by the police officers and social workers. The themes below relate to multi agency ports safeguarding work and are discussed in terms of: *establishing credibility, criticizing others* and *constructing risks*.

Establishing credibility

The findings from this study suggest that certain narrative strategies i.e. the use of “atrocious stories” were employed by the participants in this study. This was evidenced in their criticism of other agencies, and safeguarding partners that served to bolster their own professional credibility. The way in which respondents promoted their agenda and discussed their roles was often in contrast to the way in which other agencies were described. Ineptitude, lack of a professional approach, limited resources and incompetence were the key criticisms applied by participants about other agencies involved in ports safeguarding work. Drawing on these “atrocious stories”, professionals imbue a sense of crisis, catastrophe and incompetence (Taylor and White 2000). These findings are important as they illustrate the ways in which complexity and uncertainty with regards to multi agency safeguarding work are played out in practice. For example, the way in which this police officer criticized social services whilst promoting their own actions as beneficial and decisive in relation the Lord Laming (2003) recommendations:

“... we are very sort of can do, that’s the type of people we are, we get on and do things, whereas other agencies do a bit of sort of handwringing, and let the dust settle” (PCP 1).

White and Featherstone (2005) examined integrated working between health and social welfare professionals. They discuss the rhetoric which characterizes the ways in which other professionals refused to accept referrals or were tardy with responses. In their analysis White and Featherstone found that professionals tell elaborate stories about

clients and particularly the incompetent response of other professionals or agencies, termed “atrocious stories” that serve to bolster their own credibility.

Social workers in this study reported, for the most part, that safeguarding was working well particularly where social workers liaised closely with police in following up reports about where children have been placed once they arrive. Social workers assisted in gathering evidence as part of the assessment and case management process. Whilst social workers tended to be pragmatic and balanced in their perceptions of other agencies, there was some tension particularly with the police and immigration officials. For example there was acknowledgement from within social services that some cases would not require assessment, and a corresponding recognition that this caused friction between the immigration services, police and social services departments:

“...they may present us with information having interviewed children and adults, but particularly children, and they sort of say, well they're definitely hiding something, they were very nervous, they were cagey...” (SWCYP 1).

From a social services perspective, they will only accommodate children or implement safeguarding procedures if there is an assessed risk. Although this is standard practice, governed by Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance (HM Government 2006; 2010), sometimes it means that other partners in safeguarding work with migrant children are left feeling that their concerns are not taken seriously, or ignored. These responses relate specifically to suspected cases of child trafficking:

“...sometimes we're dealing with trafficking and Social Services have been dealing with a child...they haven't recognised that they need the resources and the will to treat these children the same as they would any other child...there's not enough done and when the dangers are identified to them, they avoid the issues” (PCP 2).

“a lot of my work is convincing social services that actually this is a child that actually needs to be treated, you know the child's in danger...” (SWCYP 5).

There was a pronounced view from the police that social services do not make proper assessments, and are failing to protect vulnerable migrant children:

“...they're not being treated the same as the indigenous population and that's a resource problem” (PCP 2).

Furthermore, the social worker based in an NGO at the port shared this perspective:

“...they haven't investigated something that one would think they might have because there hasn't been any documentary, written evidence to suggest that anything untoward has happened...you know... that to me is ludicrous” (SWCYP 6).

Critiquing others

When discussing their roles and responsibilities, the police respondents often felt that they were doing better than others because they were at the frontline and were seeing

what they perceived to be vulnerable migrant children on a regular basis. Other partners in the safeguarding work were criticized by the police officers as their practice was not perceived to be meeting the same standards. The police respondents operated in what they perceived to be a risky fast moving transient environment; the port of entry, where speed was of the essence and, their practice orientated towards investigation, the use of intelligence gathering systems and an emphasis on harm reduction. It was of concern to social worker and police officer respondents that unless systems were in place, vulnerable children would never be identified:

“...unless you register them ... take some sort of biometric data how do you know where they are?” (PCP 1).

From a social work perspective, referrals from the port are becoming clearer and more appropriate. The social worker based in a statutory team which handled cases referred by the police stated that within a couple of days when checks were made, the child often went with the adult who came to collect them.

Professionals ‘talk’ about each other establishes expectations and maintains disciplinary boundaries (Taylor and White 2000) and is evident when professionals comment upon incompetent responses by professionals to what are ostensibly clear cut cases and routine occurrences (p.137). In the extract below the police officer drew on the case of Victoria Climbié as a typical example of a clear child death resulting from negligence which could have been prevented:

“...Victoria Climbié...I do mention her name sometimes...the Social Workers do take offence at that” (PCP 3).

There was also some scepticism from social workers and the police about working with legal services and interpreters. This respondent based in an NGO delivering services to asylum seekers and refugees was used to working with interpreters and took steps to prepare them if they were working with a child:

“...we would want to be sure that the interpreter we were dealing with was aware obviously of the age of child and what sometimes happens is we’ll speak to the interpreter in advance” (SWCYP 3).

For the social worker who managed a young persons unaccompanied children’s team, there was a lack of trust that an interpreter would not try to exert some influence over the child, particularly if they were from the same community. This concern was founded on the basis that cultural norms and expectations of cultures might be brought to bear on the child by the interpreter:

“...interpreters are meant to have a code of ethics but there are one or two who we think might misuse the information ...so we have to be very careful about that” (SWCYP 2).

Constructing risk

In addition to criticizing the practice of others professionals involved in ports safeguarding work with children, participants also expressed their opinions about certain ethnic communities in the UK. In some cases participants made sweeping generalized statements based upon what can only be described as suspect cultural stereotypes. There was certainly a lack of acceptance that parents/caregivers in the UK or in a child's country of origin were partners in the safeguarding process. These views were particularly evident within the police officers responses, and also the social workers in this study. Generally there was a lack of understanding of cultural child rearing practices and the motives of adults who arrived to collect unaccompanied children came under close scrutiny. The child rearing cultures and practices of black and ethnic minority communities were also discussed by informants in the wider context of migration to the UK: "*we've got a whole set of new people here whipping, beating, drugging kids*" (PCP 1). This characterisation of traditional practices as well as spiritual beliefs of other cultural groups was also evident in this response from a social worker based in a young people's asylum team:

"...often girls who've been involved, who were brought here who have been subjected to the voodoo...parents will pay for them to go to voodoo to make sure the child is obedient" (SWCYP 2).

The relatives may be part of an extended family network, but effectively they are strangers who children barely know. As reflected within the following quote, there was a

perceived difference between how UK born and migrant children may be safeguarded in their own communities:

“...they are in a family that no-one has actually assessed as being suitable to foster them...people from these communities are adopting children, in a way that we couldn't do as residents in this country” (PCP 1).

Not being able to protect children caused police officers to feel anxious and worried about their work, and the possible consequences of not acting to safeguard: *“You know, God forbid if anything happened to that child that night, if I'm the last one to see him”* (PCP 3). This respondent described the referral process as a battle to get the other safeguarding partners to recognise that children need protection. In this instance, it was between the police and social services: *“I will fight tooth and nail to get them accommodated and supported by social services”* (PCP 3). Whereas the social work emphasis was on firstly making contact with the child at the port or once they had left, to ensure that their practical needs were met, followed by efforts to establish who had care and parental responsibility for the child.

Conclusions

Currently there are limited studies of safeguarding work with children at UK ports of entry. This study, through consultations with police and social workers has provided

some insights into the issues relevant to social work practice with unaccompanied children coming to the UK. The findings demonstrate that there are clear tensions in the relationships between the police and social workers understanding and assessment of risk in ports' safeguarding work, together with a lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities. Further research on the dynamics of multiagency ports safeguarding work including assessment process and systems in this context may help to identify ways in which the tensions and differences are resolved and addressed in practice. Given that multiagency child ports safeguarding is a relatively new practice development it appears timely that the work is evaluated and assessed in terms of its value in promoting better outcomes for children. This study did not include the views of health professionals or immigration officers. Further research should seek to include the participation of these officials.

In this study, the issues related to interpretation were evident when respondents discussed their attempts in communicating with children whose first language was not English. The difficulties were expressed in terms of trying to explain to children what was happening and in trying to elicit details about their journeys and families as part of the assessment process. The use of interpreters in this context is vital and crucial if children's own experiences are to be included in the assessment process as policy dictates. It is equally important that social work professionals either speak languages other than English, or have access to interpreters who are trained and experienced in working and interpreting with children. It is not acceptable that children have their stories surmised.

This study also suggests the need for the development of social workers' skills in understanding inter-cultural communication and being trained in the use of interpreters when undertaking assessments. Opportunities to include the expertise of migrant communities who can best educate social work students on cultural features of parenting would be useful. The use of interpreters in children's assessments is an under researched area, despite research findings which suggest that language and communication in the provision of health care services is a key barrier to access (Leavey 2004). It is also clear that for migrant children their access to welfare support is negotiated through language and cultural barriers, thus advocacy and interpretation provision is critical to their needs being identified.

Working with children and families in statutory social work requires a high degree of skill and expertise, particularly in assessment (Taylor 2004). Indeed, the critical issues raised by Laming (2003) and other authors relate to the capacity and the ability of professionals to assess risk, and make safeguarding and welfare decisions based on their assessments. In recent years the assessment and management of risk to children has become a defining feature of child welfare policy (Parton 2010), and of child care social work practice in the UK. In this vein, Broadhurst *et al.* (2010) argue that:

“A focus on risk is seen to increase the consistency and rigour of assessment and to enable practitioners to adopt a more focused approach to intervention; however, this focus can also conflate and indeed, obscure ‘needs’. The risk imperative may also serve

to constrain and undermine professional practice and discretion.” (Broadhurst et al. 2010 p. 8).

In this study police officers and social workers constructed risk through their focus on poor parenting in other cultures, and the perception that children coming to the UK were brought against their will. As such further exploration of the ways in which officials in this area of work, construct and assess risks pertaining to migrant children is also recommended as a future research trajectory.

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