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BIRMINGHAM



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Project title: Understanding and Supporting Families with Complex Needs

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This international research exchange programme addressed a recognised deficit in family focused research by developing links between divergent disciplines and knowledge streams, both nationally and internationally. The project sought to enhance understandings of family-focused approaches in domains of social care, education, and health, through a partnership involving eight universities in Europe and Latin America.

Participant universities included: University of Birmingham (UK); Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Italy); Universitetet i Nordland (Norway); Umeå University (Sweden); Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (Argentina); Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile); Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (Mexico); University of Nottingham (UK).

The research addressed three key themes

(1) Theorising families within family support: Family forms are many and varied, reflecting a myriad of understandings and influencing factors. Despite this complexity and perpetual change, the importance of family for the experience of both interdependence and individual support and well-being remains. For family-focused services to deliver effectively, the complexity of family roles, functions and compositions therefore need to be examined and understood. The project will therefore consider how 'families with complex needs' form and experience contemporary life, and how such understandings might inform policy and practice responses. The project compared the theorisation of families in the context of service provision and policy, examining how the notion of 'complex needs' is constructed and considered within participating countries, and which families or family forms subsequently became a 'public concern'.

(2) Models and approaches in family-focused policy and practice: There is evidence that existing service provision finds 'thinking family' both challenging and controversial, and that this has implications for professional knowledge and frameworks. The project will therefore explore the models and approaches to family-based service provision evident internationally. The comparative strengths and challenges of various models and approaches were considered, drawing on evaluation and research evidence as to the effectiveness of such approaches; in particular, 'whole family approaches' will be compared to other forms of provision.

(3) Researching family-focused policy and practice: There are a range of challenges associated with researching family-focused policy and practice. Whilst there is evidence of localised developments in research practices there is limited evidence of international

learning in this area. Through the sharing of approaches and expertise from various partner universities, we considered methods through which to capture the lived experiences of families and explore the extent to which services/professionals are working together in meeting the needs of a family.

The project involved two distinct strands: an initial review of existing research and knowledge in each country, followed by a series of case studies undertaken by researchers visiting partner universities during exchange visits of up to three months. These case studies examined services, programmes or initiatives selected so as to represent specific theories, models and approaches to family-focused provision, and to support international comparative analysis of different approaches to the same service user group.

The array of publications illustrates the range of findings and reflections emerging from the project, ranging from analyses of political and social contexts to reflections on specific policies, interventions and practices. These include comparative analyses of policy and practice in multiple countries regarding topics such as restorative justice, migrant families, child protection and care systems, and single country analyses of issues such as youth participation, lesbian and gay relationships, and disability. Such analyses highlight key theoretical frameworks employed in particular policy regimes, service frameworks and practice approaches. They also consider specific models of responding to particular families or family issues, with several case studies highlighting innovative 'whole family' approaches. All such analyses have supported critical reflection in relation to the approaches of the country visited and the country from which the researcher originated – a clear and consistent benefit of comparative social policy research.

The project has led to case studies employing a wide range of methods and methodologies, from literature-based methods examining policy documents and professional frameworks to qualitative interviews and focus groups with practitioners and service users to observations of practice. Some case studies reflect particularly innovative methods, including ethnographic research carried out whilst living in an institutional child protection setting, and development of a vignette robust enough to support comparative examination of social worker perspectives on family practice in numerous countries and contexts.

Project members have also engaged with a wide range of policy and partner stakeholders, including through case study research, professional development and training, and advice to government agencies and committees.

The key achievement of the project has been to develop a network of universities with expertise in family-minded policy, practice and research, including partnerships beyond the initial project team, with institutions in Brazil, Australia, Canada, USA, South Africa, Spain, Cuba, Iceland, Russia, and Finland.

The success in establishing a collaboration with recognised expertise is evident in the success in applications for further research funding. Following success in obtaining funding from a range of bodies, including the British Academy, British Council, NORFACE, CONICYT, and FAPESP, the work of the network will be continued through a series of specific collaborative research projects and in the activity of the Family Potentials research centre and network. Further information on our ongoing work can be found on the website: www.familypotential.bham.ac.uk

For further information:

Email: Dr Nathan Hughes, University of Birmingham, n.i.hughes@bham.ac.uk

Web: www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/social-policy/families-policy-practice/research/supporting-families.aspx