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**'We've got a file on you': problematising families in poverty in
four periods of austerity**

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The Governance of Poor Families: A Case Exploration of the Genealogy of Problematisation in Four Periods of Austerity in Britain

Abstract: This article considers a genealogy of the governing by data of poor families; a case study of the codification of disadvantaged families and problematisation of their difficulties over the course of a century and a half. Influenced by Bacchi's 'what the problem is represented to be' approach, we explore a genealogy of the micro acts of ruling that reveal the practice of constructing and governing of disadvantaged families. We draw on a case study analysis of materials recorded and collected by the Charity Organisation Society and its subsequent guises, during four major periods of recession in Britain, from the late 19th century to the early 21st century. We outline the 'problematisation' approach to governance that underpins our discussion before describing the administrative records that we worked with. We argue that the genealogy of the construction, positioning and governance of poor families over time in this case may be observed in terms of three key shifts in problematisation: (i) from the identification of deservingness towards the assessment of risk; (ii) from a gendered concentration of parents to the perceived needs of children; and (iii) from consultation of authority figures to a reliance on increasingly 'professionalised' data capture tools.

Keywords: British welfare state, Charity Organisation Society, Disadvantaged families, Dividing practices, Economic recession, Governance, Problematisation, poverty analytics

Introduction

This article considers the governing by data of poor families; a case study of the codification of disadvantaged families and problematisation of their difficulties over the course of a century and a half. Families have long been regarded as signalling and determining the state of nation, so it is seen as important to collect information on those who pose problems. The practice of offering assistance to struggling families is accompanied by the production of problematised 'data doubles' (Haggerty and Ericson 2000), via which poor families may be subject to the governance of poverty analytics: the digital regulation of the poor (Eubanks 2018a).

We explore the micro acts of ruling that reveal the practice of constructing and governing of disadvantaged families by drawing on an analysis of materials collected by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and its subsequent agencies. We examine the detailed records kept by this charity for four major periods of recession in Britain, from the late 19th century to the early 21st century. Worsening material and social precarity can leave struggling families unable to meet financial commitments such as rent, or even basic living costs of food and clothing. The calls on voluntary sector and public services increase in response to this dire need (Hall and Perry

2013; Loopstra 2015; Lupton et al. 2015). By focusing on the case notes produced by this charity during times of national constraint we demonstrate how data collection goes beyond neutral description to reveal the orientations (Bernstein 1973) that construct such families as problems.

We begin by outlining the ‘problematism’ approach to governance that underpins our discussion before describing, our method and the data that we worked with – from ledgers to filing cabinets to electronic databases, and considering in detail the format and nature of the information that was collected on families. We argue that the genealogy of the construction, positioning and governance of poor families by COS can be observed in terms of three key shifts in problematisation: (i) from the identification of deservingness towards the assessment of risk; (ii) from a gendered concentration on parents to the perceived needs of children; and (iii) from consultation of authority figures to a reliance on increasingly ‘professionalised’ data capture tools. Importantly, what remains consistent across these micro acts of ruling is the political act of identifying, codifying, and disciplining the socially marginalised.

Governance Through Problematism

The genealogy of the specific problematisation of poor families that we are concerned with here, the temporal attention to how their categorisation and codification is made under specific circumstances, is influenced by Carol Bacchi’s Foucauldian-influenced approach to gaining insight into how governing takes place. She calls for a critical interrogation of how institutions conceive of and present the social problems that they purport to address in policy documents and administrative records, the presumptions that underlie them, and how governing takes place through these problematisations (e.g. 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016) – in sum, a concern with ‘what the problem is represented to be’.

Bacchi argues that to govern it is necessary to know, and that the stratification of people, such as through the data collected in administrative records, creates knowledge of a particular kind that significantly affects modes of governance. She uses Foucault’s genealogical theory, which points to the importance of following the twists and turns of problematisations in the historical, social, political and economic conjunctures from which they emerged. Asking what the problem is represented to be over time can enable a tracking of its contingency to reveal the process of manufacturing taken-for-granted propositions; and to reveal that the same issue can be constructed in different ways. There are implications for how the needs of poor families are able to be thought about, how wider society understands their existence and how families may understand their disadvantage, and their governance through the ‘solutions’ offered. Indeed, the case management approach that produced the records that we draw on below in itself produces the problem and solution as located in the families themselves.

Families’ Case Records

The data that we draw on for this paper come from the archives of a voluntary agency with a long history of being involved in various ways in categorising and governing disadvantaged and needy families: the Charity Organisation Society (COS) founded in 1869, through its renaming as the Family Welfare Association (FWA) in 1946, to its current incarnation as Family Action (FA) from 2008. This charity is unique in the longevity of its family focused work, the significant influence it has wielded on policy making through time, and the quality and depth of its archived case papers (Rooff 1072). These rich and detailed resources allowed us to draw out and explore the particular challenges faced by families and support workers during times of severe hardship and to compare these across timeframes. The files for analysis were taken from four key periods of economic recession:

Period 1	The Long Depression	1873 – 1896
Period 2	The Great Depression	1930 – 1934
Period 3	The Oil Crisis	1973 – 1975
Period 4	The Global Financial Crisis	2008 – 2012

Material from the first three periods were taken from the Family Action collection at London Metropolitan Archives and at the Special Collections and Archives at the University of Liverpool, which are hand- and type-written paper-based records. Case files from the fourth period were accessed directly from local authority electronic databases. Cases were selected on the basis that they concerned families with dependent children, were London based and involved multiple agencies. In relation to the archive material the five largest case files for each period were selected. The same number of the more recent files were randomly selected. Analysis was undertaken through individual documentation of cases, grouping by time periods and longitudinal and comparative analysis across the different time periods to draw out continuities and changes in constructions of families and their needs.

Family members and case workers from periods 3 and 4 are anonymised in this paper with pseudonyms applied and all identifying material removed. Material from the earlier periods (1 and 2) are treated as historical documents and have been left unamended. We sought informed consent from families and staff involved in the contemporary cases, but this was impossible for historical cases in terms of tracing those involved. Such tracing could also be considered unethical in its own right, dredging up family troubles that may have been buried in the past. We aimed to treat all our family cases sensitively, with care and respect.

Governing by Data

Britain's welfare state has a complex history. Over the period that we are concerned with, from the late Victorian era on, it has undergone a trajectory from individualism to collectivism and back again, with a mixed economy of welfare that has included public, private and voluntary sectors (Lewis 1995; Powell 2007; Hills 2011). In the nineteenth century, the voluntary sector was ensconced in national welfare provision as 'buffer institutions' that mediated the relationship between citizens and the state (Thane 1990, p.1). There was a co-operative division of (welfare) labour on the basis of categories of client group between the state, in the form of the locally administered Poor Law, and voluntary action. Voluntary action was there to assist

those judged to be on the verge of destitution but capable of self-improvement with some judicious charitable help, while the locally administered state Poor Law acted as a deterrent provider of last resort for irredeemable paupers. Philanthropy had become almost an industry in its own right however, with a huge multiplication of unco-ordinated and often overlapping private charity and relief agencies. Significant from the perspective of many of the political establishment at the time was the moral impact of what they viewed as the resulting indiscriminate giving. Concern centred on the potential for 'clever paupers' to secure more from the wages of mendicity than from the wages of labour (Stedman Jones 1971). It was this perception that drove some of the great and the good of the time to found The Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity (COS). Their philosophy was summed up in a paper given by one of their more prominent members, Octavia Hill, in 1869, titled 'The importance of aiding the poor without almsgiving'. COS advocated what was termed a 'scientific' approach to allocating relief, involving the judgement and classification of family circumstances through methodical, interrogatory case work and (a practice that was eventually to evolve into modern day social work). The organisation put much effort into constructing local district data bases on their 'deserving' and 'undeserving' populations (Woodroffe 1962; Roof 1972). The hard-faced representation of the problem of poor families adopted by COS was rejected by many other charities at the time (Humphreys 1995; 2001); and by the early 20th century it had become clear that the organisation was 'swimming against, rather than with, the tide of public and charitable opinion' (Harris 2004, p. 74). By the mid-1930s, revelation of the extent of poverty and need, and the experience of mass unemployment, along with acceptance that it was not necessarily self-inflicted, led to a softening and expansion of state provision. The voluntary sector's role shifted towards complementing state provision, with COS attempting to distinguish itself from other charities through its practice of professionalised case work assessing family circumstances and needs, evidenced by detailed case notes (Lewis 1995). Voluntary sector complementarity was firmly embedded in the comprehensive welfare state in Britain post World War II, with COS and other family charities now seeking to attract local government funding for their particular services. While there was still considerable variability, the collection and reporting of information about families as part of casework was becoming more standardised across localities and sectors with the statutory social care obligations enacted. By the early 1970s voluntary organisations such as the Family Welfare Association (as COS was now called) were no longer autonomous from an expanded public sector; the FWA was responding to and collecting data about social needs that the state identified and funded interventions into. As Jane Lewis describes, charities had become incorporated as 'instruments of the state' (1995, p. 20). This was followed, however, by a retrenchment of the classic British welfare state under the Conservative government in the 1980s.

In the recent period, voluntary agencies have been in competition with one another to gain local authority service provision contracts (Alcock 2017), with Family Action's activities now supplementing the austerity-reduced state services. This includes the collection of pre-defined indicator data about families and its provision to central government. Notably there is set of problem criteria by which local authorities and

contracted service providers identify families in need of intervention under the British government's 'Troubled Families Programme' (Crossley 2018). The defining markers of a troubled family include unemployment, truancy, criminal behaviour and chronic health problems, and it is against these criteria that the service's success is judged (with little success according to an independent evaluation: Day et al. 2016).

Access to the detailed case notes collected by COS and its later incarnations across a century and a half allowed us to track shifts in data collection practices, which illuminate the problematisation of families and their governance.

The Long Depression 1873-96: Establishing Deservingness

Triggered by a stock market crash and banking failures The Long Depression took hold in 1878 and lasted a full 17 years. While the effects of this global downturn were relatively mild in England, competition for casual labour increased and wages were driven down, affecting unskilled female labourers in particular (Stedman-Jones 2013). As noted above, the COS pursued 'scientific' investigation of the circumstances and character of those seeking relief to assess their eligibility for support. A reliable account of the characters and circumstances that comprised a case was fundamental to the organisation's commitment to identifying deservingness, selecting and discriminating as to whether and how to help an applicant (Rooff 1972). COS's commitment to the pursuit of self-dependency was based on an ideology that did not consider the contribution of systemic social factors to poverty and hardship. As Kathleen Woodroffe notes 'character, not circumstance, was the explanation of failure' (1962, p. 34) – in other words, the problematisation.

COS was committed to helping the 'deserving' poor, but maintained a distinction from 'undeserving' paupers who were dealt with by the local state through the Poor Law – with such 'dividing practices' being a feature of problematisation and governance (Bacchi 2009). Cases were therefore investigated for indications of 'wilful thriftlessness' (Woodroffe 1962, p. 36). In pursuit of its scientific methods of investigation, COS drew up a range of forms to capture systematically the data that was expected to contribute to the investigation of cases, including application forms, visitors' reports, employer reference requests, decision books and the record books in which all of this information was represented as the case file (Woodroffe 1962: 42).

INSERT FIGURE A1 HERE

In order to detail all the information required to assess eligibility, cases from the period covered by the Long Depression were recorded on at least two pages of a ledger, which provided the format for data collection, by a local branch COS relieving officer who took the details. The information assembled was to enable the officer to profile and categorise what type of family had applied to COS, and had a strong focus on material that indicated the character of the applicant and their family. As the example in Figure 1 shows, each case was assigned a record number and the date of application noted. The subsequent data recorded was that which enabled the local COS Committee to judge which cases met their 'deserving' criteria for

assistance and what that assistance should be, as against those cases that were to be referred to the Poor Law.

The case report contained details of the applicant's name, address and church district, as well as who had referred the applicant to the organisation. This was typically a person or organisation of standing and authority, such as the local vicar or school board. The applicant's length of residence in the local area, their birthplace and previous addresses were recorded. The assistance requested was noted. This was followed by the documentation of the 'Christian' names of the family: father, mother and all children living with them. Adults had their status as married/single/widowed recorded (and a marriage certificate needed to be verified). Each family member was profiled in terms of age, occupation/children's school, name and address of present (or last) employer, time out of last employment, time out of employment during the last 12 months, cause of leaving employment, and weekly income (present, and when in full-time work). The family's circumstances were then probed including their weekly rent, debts such as pawn and rent arrears, and likely other sources who they could call on for relief and support (such as relatives). Potential providers of objective character references were logged such as employers, landlords, neighbours, and vicars. The potential referees section was followed by a record of the applicant's statement about the nature of their difficulties, which was taken down by the COS officer in the third person and is typically no more than a few lines. The applicant was assumed to be the husband although in some cases the statement is of the 'applicant's wife'. Investigations in each case were therefore expected to adhere to a rigid structure of enquiry before the final decision, for which space was provided at the end of the second page.

There were then a significant number of data fields considered relevant to the routine relations of ruling of the profile constructed for each applicant family. Each family member was expected to be accounted for, their circumstances recorded, and trustworthy references provided – all considered relevant evidence towards an assessment of the applicant and their family's character, represented as the problem, and thus their eligibility and suitability for COS's help, or not. For example, the lived relations of governance can be seen in a contrast between two typical cases: the Bibbs and the Thorpes. The Bibb family approached their district COS office in 1881. The applicant's statement concerned the financial difficulties they had fallen into as a result of an episode of alcoholism experienced by Mr. Bibb, his testimony that he had reformed, and a request for the provision of a sailor suit to enable their son to go to sea as well as a loan of £5.00. The character references collected by COS include a reference from the Law Society, which confirmed that Mr. Bibb was a registered solicitor, and a report from a branch of COS in a district where the Bibb family had previously resided. This stated that although Mr Bibb was still drinking when the family had lived within its jurisdiction, Mrs Bibb was highly regarded. This evidence satisfied the local COS Committee of the family's ability to haul themselves out of their diminished circumstances and back to self-reliance if provided with a little help. COS thus acceded to the family's request for provision of a sailor suit and moreover, rather than the loan of £5.00 that they had applied for, approved a grant of that amount. The Thorpe family, who were sent to COS by a

magistrate in the same year as the Bibbs after a representative of the school board reported that the children were starving, form a contrast. The representative subsequently declined to give a reference as to the family's character and the case notes record a visit to the Thorpe's filthy, unfurnished two-roomed basement living space. In contrast to the Bibbs, the profile collected about the family was assessed as showing a lack of self-reliance and resilience in the family. COS thus placed the case in the hands of the Poor Law.

Overall, the list of required information is closely adhered to in the case notes, with little additional description of the family's circumstances that does not relate to categorising the problem as represented: the calibre of their moral fibre. The data collected is concerned with identifying the applicant family's eligibility and deservingness or ability to be helped, with a firm focus on the nature and disposition of the parents in the family. Authority figures who know the family are assumed to have trustworthy opinions, and Officers conducting the scientific case work investigations are trusted and depended upon to make objective and reliable assessments and recommendations.

The Great Depression 1930-34: Manifesting Respectability

The Great Depression or Great Slump in Britain followed on the Wall Street Crash in the USA that triggered a world-wide depression. While the effects of this downturn were more severe in the industrial heartlands of Britain, unemployment in London rose substantially, leading to increasing numbers suffering the effects of poverty (Constantine 1983). The reforms of the Liberal government earlier in the century, introducing a nascent welfare state, had marked some recognition of the economic and structural constraints faced by poor families, and the beginning of a greater role for state provision. COS had initially opposed these social policy reforms as providing incentives against labour and thrift, but by the time of the Great Depression were reconciled to the changes (Lewis 1995). Their local district committees started to work closely with the institutions of the welfare state, arguing that the organisation was best placed to apply the necessary principles of case work. The charity retained some concern for applicants' character but there was a shift in focus towards assessing respectability and appearance in the practices of data collection and representation. COS became more tolerant of the need for ongoing support for deprived families, adopting a more pragmatic approach based on needs and resources (Rooff 1972).

The style of recording cases from 1930 to 1934 was very similar to that of the end of the previous century. The components of the form were virtually identical to those of the end of the Long Depression, though a new section collected details of the newly introduced system of National Health Insurance (restricted mainly to men earning below the income tax threshold). The COS case report itself now also expected details of 'relations', 'home visit', and 'army and navy papers'. The latter represented a new manifestation of the problematisation of character – the expectation that men had fulfilled their duty to serve in the First World War.

INSERT FIGURE A2 HERE

While the report section of the file was much the same as in the previous period, a striking difference between case files from the Long Depression and the Great Depression is the length of case notes (see Figure 2). Whereas in the first period decisions tended to be recorded within the two standard pages of investigation, cases from the second period encompass a more comprehensive practice of home visits and include more detailed descriptions of the applicant and family's appearance and manner. Cleanliness, tidiness and responsible lifestyle became the implicit criteria on which dividing governance practices were based, resulting in decisions to help or turn away families, as is evident in the Baines and Cater families' case records.

In 1934, Emily Baines called into the local COS office to ask for help while her husband is ill with blood poisoning. In the opening sentence of the Officer's report he records the respectable demeanour and appearance of the applicants, describing Mrs Baines as 'a very charming young woman'. Later in the notes Mrs Baines is referred to as 'attractive and pretty'. Esme, their little girl is described as 'delightful' in her red woollen coat and cap that her mother had knitted for her, while the baby wears 'pretty' yellow velveteen. The Officer visiting the Baines' home records that the two rooms are 'neat', 'tidy' and 'nicely furnished' with 'pretty curtains' and a 'wireless' and it is noted approvingly that a fire was kept burning. The investigating officer also visited a referee provided by the family who is recorded as affirming that they were 'very respectable people'. The importance of appearance to governance and decision-making is even applied to the referee herself, with the Officer stating that while he had no opportunity to 'see what kind of home she had', he was satisfied because the referee herself looked 'clean and tidy and seemed quite respectable'.

In the case of the Cater family, however, the information recorded about their appearance eventually counts against them. Harry Cater is recorded as making the initial application to the district COS office, because he was struggling to find regular employment since the War and was reliant on subsistence unemployment benefit. The notes document that Mrs Cater, Ethel, had been recommended by a doctor at 'the Welfare' to have her teeth extracted and dentures fitted. Harry's request to cover the cost of this sees him summoned to the COS district office as head of the family and asked to bring his army papers. Again appearance and demeanour are important profiling features recorded about the family. Mr. Cater initially is described as 'a very pleasant but poorly dressed man with a respectful manner'. The notes from the first of several home visits record that their kitchen is 'a small, crowded and rather untidy' one but 'not dirty'. It was remarked pointedly, however, that a 'fire was burning (at 3.30 pm) though it was not at all a cold day'. COS decide to help the family although it is felt that Mr Cater's prospects of finding work are poor. It is a different story nine months later when the Caters apply again for clothing. A COS Officer visits and inspects their home. His case report notes that:

... the room was in a filthy state, very dirty and everything torn. Rather smelly too. The bedroom was also very dirty, the bed unmade and black sheets. Their clothes were unmended and unwashed. The only clean thing about

either of them was a white silk scarf worn by him obviously put on at the last minute as an effort at cleanliness.

The COS secretary blocked the application at the Officer's suggestion on the basis that the family did not 'take care' of their clothes. The case notes record that the Caters are judged a 'dirty and rough' family – a problematisation that governs them out of COS help.

As these examples show, the practice of home visits and detailed observations recorded in the COS case notes go beyond the charity's earlier binary dividing practice classifications of deserving and undeserving during the Long Depression. The level of surveillance shifted from satisfaction that the threshold of 'good' character has been met to a closer focus on manifestations of respectability through parental demeanour, personal appearance, and the cleanliness and tidiness of the home; and the problematisation of their perceived absence.

The Oil Crisis 1973-75: Analysing Relational Dynamics

In 1973 embargo of oil imports to the West by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries triggered rising oil prices and another global recession. In Britain this coincided with a major industrial dispute with the mineworkers, with resulting fuel shortages leading to power cuts, rampant inflation and three-day working weeks (Beckett 2010). By this point COS had changed its name to the Family Welfare Association (FWA) and the voluntary sector had become entwined with a well-established state sector. Psychoanalytic ideas had become firmly embedded in work with families across a range of services, including the FWA and Family Services Units (FSU), a family casework organisation eventually amalgamated with the FWA. No FWA case records survive from this period but archived material from the FSU points to the embedding of a more relational approach in the style and content of the information held in files, and to the nature of the representation of the problem of poor families.

Family assessments were no longer approached as forms to be completed but had become detailed notes, typed, signed, and dated by the assigned case worker that addressed the competencies or otherwise of the family concerned in meeting its members' relational needs. Internal familial dynamics became the representation of the problem, their complexity acted as the dividing practice, and governance was through therapeutic intervention. While facts were collected about family members and their familial status (see Figure 3), the case files have an almost ethnographic style in their attempt to capture the intricacies of life for the families concerned. This less formulaic system of gathering information about families and their troubles contained strong presumption of families' problems as rooted in their dysfunctional relationships and requiring psychodynamic intervention. The detail of description in the notes reveals an orientation that governed families by reaching into the depths of the familial psyche.

INSERT FIGURE A3 HERE

The FSU case notes documented home visits from the case worker's perspective. Family members' explanations and concerns were recorded and engaged with and the case workers' attempted to govern through gaining trust and working in partnership with families. Home visits were not described as opportunities for the surveillance of families in the terms used in 1930s cases, rather, reporting on the state of housing is distinct from earlier COS summations of home visits. Often the state of family accommodation seems to have been assessed for the purpose of ascertaining whether the family's accommodation needs were being met, with the case worker then reporting issues to the appropriate housing agency. This is a change from the use of such enquiry as a dividing practice to categorise a family's character or respectability in order to approve or deny assistance, and appears to be driven by both reference to the responsibilities of the welfare state and a concern for psychological needs.

Although a father's employment status was still enquired into, his ability to support his family financially was considered alongside his psychological role in the family's emotional relations. Reflecting the predominant focus on the cycles and patterns that underpinned the familial circumstances, each parent's personality was appraised, taking account of 'patterns' of behaviour, aspirations, the 'influence of past experiences' and their awareness of the significance of these. The case notes make it clear, though, that it was mothers who were targeted for case workers' intensive interventions, rather than fathers. The problematisation continues to be gendered; but now the representation of the nature of the problem is mothers. The focus was on evaluating the effect of the mother's personality on domestic harmony and familial relationships, with the mother's dominance appearing as a common theme in case workers' assessment of 'marital' relationship. For example, the Potter family had a long history of contact with a variety of social work agencies, both statutory and voluntary, due to financial difficulties, and truanting and delinquent behaviour on the part of various of their 13 children. The FSU case worker felt that it was important to record in the case note file:

[Mrs Potter is] the dominant partner and I get the impression that Mr Potter often agrees with her for the sake of a quiet life. However, on several occasions it seems that on issues they view as important Mr Potter acts as the family spokesman and leader. He is the one that usually explains the situation in a quieter and more articulate way than his wife. On such occasions Mrs Potter seems to accept his leadership.

Case workers also reported conversations with their clients as they investigated other potential needs that were yet to be disclosed. This contrasts with the COS applicant statement, with its presumption of a bounded problem and specific cause, and the organisation's commitment to resolving the difficulty in an expedient manner. Chronic issues were seen as the norm for FSU case workers, with the complexity of families' problems signalling their need for intervention, rather than counting against evidence of a single-issue deservingness or fundamental respectability by which they might otherwise qualify for relief and support.

The information taken down in case files and used to denote problems faced by families and govern them through intervention demonstrates a move beyond parental strength of character or physical and material appearance, to the inner core of the entire family's emotions and behaviours in which the mother was pivotal. Children's psychological needs were beginning to be considered as part of the focus on relational dynamics.

The Global Financial Crisis 2008-12: Prioritising Risk

Deregulation of the banking sector and risky lending and borrowing practice led to a global financial crisis and a deep recession in Britain. This was followed by a Government-imposed period of austerity impacting heavily on disadvantaged families (Farnsworth and Irving 2011; Innes and Tetlow 2015). By this point the FWA had changed their name to Family Action on the grounds that the term 'welfare' was stigmatising. Family Action were assuming a role in delivering the Government's programme of targeted intervention for families with 'multiple problems', listed as: crime, anti-social behaviour, truancy, unemployment, mental health problems and domestic abuse. Consequently Family Action was embedded in the local authority's structure of formal welfare services, and their case files were saved directly onto and networked to the local authority's central recording system (with those records subsequently provided to central government). The resulting database and its categories reflects a contemporary preoccupation with children's needs and risks to children, and the nature of problematisation (Featherstone et al. 2014). The family as a whole and parental needs are envisioned in service of the measurement of children's progress, which is represented as the problem. The database is structured around an 'index child' for each family: a minor whose welfare is significantly at risk to justify opening the case (typically the youngest child; when a further child is born they are usually substituted as the index child). Crucially, placing an index child at the centre of the case is a move that symbolises how a child protection agenda has come to act as the dividing practice that dominates engagement with family welfare. Moreover the amount of information collected for the database has increased exponentially in relation to the COS, FWA and FSU case notes, with multiple forms and many duplications of information.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Family Action case notes list up to 10 standardised assessment tools that they can use with the families they work with (<https://www.family-action.org.uk/measuring-evaluation/>)¹ and it is through these that families are governed. This includes a Family Assessment form that fulfils the requirements of the mandatory Common Assessment Framework (CAF). As Sue White and colleagues explain, the introduction of CAF was: 'hailed as a needs-led, evidence-based tool which will promote uniformity' (2009: 1). Further, every instance of contact with a family was logged not only in the detailed case notes but on the Contact Record form,

¹ This page has also been archived via Wayback Machine at https://web.archive.org/web/2018*/https://www.family-action.org.uk/measuring-evaluation/

prescribing that for each instance there should be a note of family details, information received in this contact, and recommendations and decisions.

The various assessment tools tend to duplicate information over and again, especially in terms of demographics, risk assessment and charting progress, as if emphasising that these are the primary and significant codifications of disadvantaged families - and the comprehensive nature of the problematisation. The case file for the Napo family, for example, contains the CAF form, detailing: basic demographics of the whole household; the nature of the assessment; a brief description of the family's history; a profile of Mrs Napo (her health and economic well-being, her parenting, her support networks, her view of the problematic issues); a profile of each of her children (their health and economic well-being, their education, their support networks, their view of the issues); a description of relationships in the family; any identified risks; a summary of the professional's views on the assessment information, as well as any recommendations; and finally consent for data sharing. There is also an Adult Features Record, which asks whether Mrs Napo falls into any of a number of risk categories from involvement in anti-social behaviour to having been in care – with a notable focus on maternal mental health. Additionally there is a specific assessment of 'Areas of Risk', grading levels of risk and measures taken. The Napos' case notes also contain several forms using the Family Star Tool, which is 'for scoring parental effectiveness and measuring improvements in outcomes for families with multiple complex needs' (Family Action Media Release 2010). Completed by the case or key worker in consultation with the relevant parent, usually the mother, the Family Star rates children's development (learning and health), parenting capacity (meeting emotional needs, keeping child safe, setting boundaries and routines), and family and environment (home and money, social networks) on a scale of one to ten.

The formulaic approach both creates the categories of risks to children and their needs, and then verifies them as significant and in valid need of governance through intervention in parenting, which is constructed and represented as the problem. Mrs Napo had sought help with getting her family rehoused away from gang members who were threatening her son. Her son's predicament, however, becomes an action point for Mrs Napo to attend a 'Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities' training programme, with a timescale of three months for the required outcome of her learning 'about positive parenting and how to challenge her son's involvement in gang and knife crime'. This is despite the case notes recording that the son's involvement in gang activity was disputed by a police officer involved in the case. Further, the Napos' keyworker records advice from a housing officer that raising the issue of the domestic violence Mrs Napo faced from her estranged husband would lead to a faster rehousing of the family than referring to gang-related risks. Thus the recording of domestic violence becomes reframed as a vulnerability that would be prioritised by housing policy in the interests of placing Mrs Napo's son beyond gang violence rather than being related to Mrs Napo's own suffering and needs. This reframing is a lived effect of the nature of the problematisation. The profiling of adults, and the family's needs, in terms of their effects on the youngest child reflects the current over-riding concern with assessment and prevention of risk. Professional

expertise is no longer prioritised in assessing difficulties that families may face. Instead authoritative knowledge is assumed to lie within categorical tools themselves.

Conclusion

These case studies provide some historical context to a phenomenon that has been observed beyond the peculiarities of the Troubled Families Programme and societal preoccupations in Britain. Eubanks (2018b) describes a 'central faith' of 'poverty analytics' in the USA that 'poverty is primarily a systems engineering problem'.

We have been concerned here with the problematisation and governance of disadvantaged and socially marginalised families by one charity over the past century and a half. We have focused on the micro processes of the construction of categories of people through administrative records, which creates knowledge of a particular kind, significantly influencing the way in which governing takes place and affects poor families' lives. Through detailed attention to these practices we can discern the temporal shifts in social and political preoccupations about families. We have investigated the representation of the problem through a case study of how the needs of disadvantaged families have been constructed in one organisation's data practices, to ask how and why the organisation, in Stephen Walker's (2004) terms, 'applied and infused' families with its own vocabulary – in other words, problematisation and governance by data.

The dividing practices that form a key element of problematisation have moved from a concern with deservingness of help and support to ideas about protection from risk. In the late nineteenth century the focus was on the deservingness of applicant families to COS for relief from a bounded episode of a specific problem. The character and moral fibre of applicants and their families was the key to assessing eligibility. By the early twentieth century the signifiers of eligibility had shifted somewhat to a concern with visible respectability, and the details of appearance and manner of family members and their home as indicative of the capacity of a family in need to be helped. Later in the twentieth century the external and visible indicative codes of eligibility had been transported into the internal psychological realm. Families demonstrating disturbed parental and parenting relationships and complex intractable needs were deemed appropriate for specialist intensive psychodynamic intervention. Another major transformation was evident by the early twenty-first century, where families were assessed against an inventory of social problem behaviour viewed as placing children at risk of poor later life outcomes.

Particular family members were the central subjects of the charity's problematisation and thus the data collected in the case files, both in assessing eligibility for help and support but also as the focus of intervention. In the late nineteenth century the case records centre on the nature and disposition of parents, but especially fathers as breadwinners, as capable of help and the recipients of relief. Whether or not fathers fulfilled breadwinning and other duties and could be supported to do so continued into the early twentieth century but mothers also came under scrutiny with regards to

the condition and appearance of the family and home². The gendered focus on the behaviour of parents was sustained later into the twentieth century, with a psychological as well as material role attributed to fathers, while problems and interventions placed mothers centre stage in managing familial relationships. By the early twenty-first century children's needs are prioritised with a narrative of child protection determining features of data collection and intervention for poor families.

There is also evident a genealogy of the nature of whom and what is considered to be a source of definitive information and evidence about the eligibility and progress of families as a micro process of governance. This has shifted over time, from a focus on authority figures to a reliance on inventories, by way of professional judgements. During the late nineteenth century reliable evidence about the character and circumstances of applicants was regarded as provided by trustworthy authority figures in the community and the objective scientific casework assessment of the case officer. Applicants explained the circumstances that led them to apply for relief, but their words were reformulated in brief by the Officers into the terms that made them governable. The detail of recordings about families lengthened in the early twentieth century, with the Officer and their professional judgement gaining more prominence. Statements were still taken from applicants and 'translated' (Latour 1999) into governable terms, but the Officer's assessments of respectability through demeanour and appearance grew in importance. The case notes later on in the twentieth century held even longer accounts, and the expert case worker's detailed observations of family circumstances and needs were central. Family members were able to speak for themselves and express their needs, and this in turn provided data for the case worker to interpret using their professional skills. A major shift in the amount and standardisation of data collected through multiple formal assessment tools that provided de-differentiated, needs-led evidence occurred by the early twenty-first century. Definitive data did not lie with people -- neither case workers nor family members, let alone authoritative citizenry - but in technical tools that provide objective definitions of eligibility and monitoring of progress as a result of intervention (Gillies, Edwards and Horsley 2017).

Bacchi argues that a strength of a genealogical problematisation approach is that it can stimulate dialogue about 'where particular problem representations have led and are likely to lead' (2009, p. 43). We can envisage two scenarios ahead in the continuing genealogy of classifying, managing and governing poor and marginalised families through instruments of systematic data gathering that form the micro processes of governance framed by the problematisation of their needs. One is ever more relentless top-down identification and diagnosis of risks to and protection of children and the imposition of increasingly invasive and all-encompassing monitoring and evidence. Real-time administrative data are linked to identify families whose characteristics indicate they are in need of service intervention. The other is more optimistic. Challenges to the relentlessly child-centric orthodoxy in family support services, and calls for a more humane recognition of the interdependence and

² See Gubrium and Holstein (1990) on the continuing social work motif of reading off the state of a family from the state of their home.

wellbeing of members of families, are growing (e.g. Featherstone et al. 2014). Case files would then contain data constructing the difficulties and needs of families defined and evaluated by family members themselves.

Ways in which systemic, structural bias is built into the tools and practices of the big data era, hitherto viewed as detached and *objective*, are starting to be acknowledged. Along with accounts such as Eubanks' (2018a), this research elucidates a genealogy of problematisation that demonstrates its continuity through technological advancements. As sociologists, therefore, our concern is not whether one black box has been exchanged for another but what is fed in to surveillant technologies – and what results. Developments in machine learning have highlighted – perhaps epitomised – the Matthew Effect (Merton 1968). The feedback loop created when the only data collected about *poor parenting* is a representation of *parenting while poor* must be recognised and resisted.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX: FIGURES – see accompanying pdf file

Figure A1

Figure A2

Figure A3

Figure A4

