**TANGLED NARRATIVES OF POVERTY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD – OTHERING, WORK, WELFARE AND ‘CURVEBALLS’**

**Abstract:**

Early years practitioners are integral to government policy on addressing child poverty in the UK. Drawing on findings from a qualitative study this paper seeks to contribute new understandings about how practitioners’ narratives are shaped by discourses of poverty. Overall practitioners’ understandings of poverty reflected a moral discourse of deserving and undeserving poor. However, the complexity of interconnections between morality, gender and motherhood (and fatherhood) reveals how understandings were also broad, nuanced and at times contradictory. The study highlights the need for further research into how understandings of poverty are formed together with the need for new narratives of poverty.

**Introduction**

Despite the UK being the fifth largest economy in the world, 30% of children live in relative low-income poverty (DWP, 2019). Under current government policies child poverty is predicted to rise to 40% by 2022 (Hood and Waters, 2017). Research about poverty in early childhood in the UK has largely focused on the impact on children and families. Ridge (2011) concludes that poverty is pervasive and affects every aspect of children’s lives causing isolation and exclusion from society. Children living in areas of disadvantage have an increased risk of health issues and a shorter life expectancy (ONS, 2014). By the age of five there is a significant gap in children’s educational attainments - with children living in less affluent areasunderperforming compared to those living in other areas (DfE, 2014). Research demonstrates that quality early years education has a positive impact on children’s life chances, therefore the role of the early years practitioner is integral to improving the lives of children in poverty (HCEC, 2019). In contrast to studies that have focused on the impact of poverty this paper reports findings from a narrative study which explored how early years practitioners in England understand poverty in early childhood.

*Government policy and child poverty*

In 1999 Tony Blair, then prime minister, laid out plans about how child poverty would be eradicated in the UK by 2020. His approach was known as the ‘third way’, one which addressed both individual and social responsibility (Gillies, 2014). Welfare would be a ‘hand up not a hand out’, with help going to those who were most in need (Blair, 1999, p. 1). The aim was ‘social justice’, ‘the basis for a community where everyone has the chance to succeed’ (Blair, 1999, p. 2). Part of the strategy to address poverty was supporting families in work – particularly mothers – through providing good quality and affordable childcare (Simpson, 2013). Part of Labour’s flag ship policy was Sure Start - integrated high-quality services including health, early learning and family support and free childcare – with the core purpose being to ‘improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities’ (DfE, 2013, p.7). In 2004 ‘Choice for parents, the best start for children’ (HM Treasury, 2004) marked a change in Sure Start policy, it was no longer aimed solely at areas of deprivation, instead the focus shifted to providing a children’s centre in every community. The change in policy was supported by the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education [EPPE] study (Sylva, et al., 2004) which found that children from lower income families had better outcomes in settings with a mix of social backgrounds. Universal free childcare was provided for all children aged three and four years-old and targeted free childcare for two-year-olds from low income families (West and Noden, 2016). To further support families, Working Families Tax Credit were introduced in 1999 and the New Deal for Lone Parents was introduced in the late 1990s - both policies had a significant impact on the numbers of lone parents who entered work (Brewer et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2003). By the end of Labour’s term of office in 2010 the number of children in workless families in poverty had decreased by almost one million (Aldridge et al., 2012). However, children in working families in poverty had risen significantly because many families were working too few hours to get their income sufficiently above the poverty line (Aldridge et al., 2012).

Following a change of government in 2010, the Coalition government’s and media criticism of Labour’s ‘over spending’ was used as a rationale for the introduction of austerity measures (Jones, 2015).Austerity measures and a discourse of neoliberalism worked closely together in deconstructing the welfare state through a series of spending cuts and privatisation of public services (Mendoza, 2015). The discourse of ‘welfare to work’ shifted to a discourse of ‘work pays’ with attention focused on the most disadvantaged and trying to ‘push’ families into the labour market (Simpson, 2013). Overall those in poverty became more stigmatised, as Lansley and Mack (2015, p.121) point out the ‘old distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor[[1]](#footnote-1) was dressed up in a new language: “workers and strivers” versus “shirkers and skivers”. Penalties for benefit claimants were increased with those who were unemployed or disabled particularly penalised (Lansley and Mack, 2015). Overall, policy was pervaded by a moral imperative with sanctions and reductions in benefits targeted at the poorest in society (Bamfield, 2012).

In 2013, a new benefit system, Universal Credit was introduced - it was hoped that amalgamating several previous benefits into one would provide a stronger incentive for work whilst at the same time tackling poverty and welfare dependency.The system aimed to ‘make work pay’ by combatting ‘worklessness and poverty’ (DWP, 2010, p. 2). The approach reflected a discourse of deserving and undeserving poor – with tougher sanctions for claimants who did not meet their responsibilities. Alston (2018, p. 5), UN special rapporteur, described the policy as ‘Universal Discredit’ - suggesting that the government has been ‘more concerned with making economic savings and sending messages about lifestyles than responding to the multiple needs’ of those living in poverty. The policy has been beset with many issues, such as unreasonable waiting times for payment, difficulties with online application and benefit freezes, which have resulted in increased debt, rent arrears and increased use of foodbanks for many (HCCPA, 2018; Alston, 2018). CPAG (2017) argues that the policy has particularly disadvantaged lone parents and families with young children. As a direct result of the policy it is predicated that one and a half million more children are likely to fall into poverty, suggesting that for many families the government’s pledge to ‘make work pay’ is unlikely to be delivered (Portes and Reed, 2018, p.15).

In regard to Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] the focus of Sure Start children’s centres has shifted from universal services for all families to targeted services for those in greatest need (DfE, 2013). Baldock et al. (2013) argue that the change reflects cuts to both public services and local authority budgets rather than addressing the needs of families. As a result, numbers of children’s centres have fallen and services have been significantly reduced. Although government figures state the drop in centre numbers is 14%, Smith et al. (2018) suggest that realistically the figure is nearer 30% due to a confusion over what is ‘counted’ as a children’s centre.

Private, voluntary and independent [PVI] ECEC settings have also been affected by funding shortfalls and the rising costs of childcare. In 2013 free entitlement was extended to include 15 hours for all disadvantaged two-year-olds and in 2017 thirty-hours free entitlement was introduced for three-four years-old with working parents (DfE, 2011; Gov.UK, 2019). Both policies have been hampered by a lack of providers who are able to make the offer due to the lack of financial viability of the schemes and the insecurity around staff retention and recruitment (Paull et al., 2017). Recent findings from Ceeda (2019) indicate that rising operating costs have resulted in many ECEC settings resorting to cost cutting measures and some anticipating closure within the next year. In summary despite the government ‘s pledge to ‘make work pay’, policies are difficult to deliver and have made little overall difference to families lives. As a consequence, levels of in-work poverty remain high - with 69% of all children in poverty living in families where at least one person is in work (DWP, 2019).

In addition to policies which have focused on providing childcare, others, such as the Troubled Families Programme [TFP], have focused on changing the behavior of those in poverty – reflecting an individualised discourse of poverty. The TFP, introduced in 2012, was aimed at ‘turning around’ families with ‘multiple problems, including crime, anti-social behaviour, truancy, unemployment, mental health problems and domestic abuse’ (Bate, 2017, p. 3). The government reported that TFP was successful and ‘turned around’ 99% of families, however, critics argue that figures were compromised by a payment by results policy and reflected short term targets rather than long term change (Bate, 2017). The policy has been further criticized by Levitas (2012, p. 5) who suggests that the policy reflected a shift in political discourse - ‘from families that have troubles, through families that are “troubled”, to families that are or cause trouble’ – arguing that structural factors associated with ill health, poor housing and low income were ignored and ‘vindictive attitudes to the poor’ were sustained through the individualisation and moralisation of behavior. In addition, Boddy et al. (2016, p. 276) argue that the programme singled ‘out parents in particular as the (ir)responsible individual’ perpetuating poverty through a ‘cycle of deprivation’. So far there is little evidence that the TFP has had an impact on its core objects and instead has a fed a pathologizing discourse focused on parental deficit (Lambert, 2019). As Lister (2015) points out the discourse of ‘troubled families’ reflects a process of ‘othering’, where policy, political rhetoric and the media has served to stigmatise, shame and blame poor families for their own and society’s problems.

*Background to the study*

Early years practitioners are part of a government approach to alleviate child poverty, however, paradoxically they are also part of a workforce which is highly gendered and characterised by low pay, poor working conditions and low status (Payler and Locke, 2013; Low Pay Commission, 2016). Therefore, many practitioners are likely to be experiencing similar issues relating to poverty to the families they support. Despite the importance which has been attributed to ECEC in terms of ameliorating poverty research about how early years practitioners understand poverty in early childhood is rare with Simpson et al. (2015) having conducted the only other study in England which has explored how practitioners have engaged with policy about child poverty. Consistent with a discourse of troubled families, Simpson et al. (2015, p. 329) found that the majority of practitioners ‘normalised’ child poverty by constructing the poor as ‘troubled’ and a ‘problem’ reflecting a cycle of deprivation and culture of poverty. In contrast a minority of practitioners suggested structural explanations, such insecure work and a lack of jobs, however, there was little recognition of low wages and how the majority of children in poverty were living in households which were in-work. Thus practitioners’ explanations of poverty were rooted in a moral discourse about parents whose behaviours were ‘wrong’ and ‘deficit’. In addition, a focus on children’s academic progress and the early years curriculum (DfE, 2017) resulted in downplaying children’s immediate needs (Simpson, et al., 2015). These findings are similar to related research with student teachers by Thompson et al. (2016) who found that many teachers held deficit views about causes of poverty and attributed a lack of educational success to problems located within the children. Although it is not possible to generalize from such limited evidence, it could be argued that research so far suggests practitioners in ECEC settings have a tendency to ‘other’ parents in poverty. Arguably the ‘othering’ of the parents does two things: firstly, it supports an underclass discourse of ‘troubled families’ - in that the poor are not capable of being good parents or managing their money; and secondly, it renders structural inequalities invisible. The present study builds on the findings of Simpson’s work and aims to explore how early year practitioners understand poverty in early childhood and how this might be shaped by dominant discourses of poverty.

**Research methodology**

The over-arching aim of the study was to explore how early years practitioners understand poverty in early childhood, which was underpinned by two sub-questions - ‘How do dominant discourses of poverty shape early years practitioners’ narratives of poverty?’ and ‘How does the personal and professional shape early years practitioners’ narratives of poverty?’ This paper attends to the findings associated with the first sub-question.

Using a case study approach two similar maintained nursery schools and Sure Start children’s centres with onsite daycare provision were chosen. Drawing on Thomas’ (2013) conceptualization of case study, the early years practitioners were the ‘subject’ (the people that were studied) and the ‘narratives of poverty in early childhood’ were the ‘object’ (how narratives of poverty in early childhood were analysed and theorised). In contrast to Simpson et al’s (2015) study which had focused on the Midlands and North-East of England, this study explored practitioners’ understandings of poverty in the south-east of England. Although the south-east is a predominantly affluent area of England and offers some of the highest skilled and paid jobs, the percentage of children in relative poverty (below 60% of the median income after housing costs) varies widely (Social Mobility Commission, 2017; End Child Poverty, 2014). The two settings were in areas of overall relative affluence, however, they both served areas of high relative poverty (at least 30%).

All practitioners from both settings were invited at staff meetings to take part in the research. In total 38 practitioners agreed to take part - all participated in one of six focus groups and 16 agreed to take part in individual follow-up interviews. All participants described themselves as female and all apart from one described themselves as white British. In England 77% of early years practitioners hold at least a level 3 qualification and 29% have at least a Level 6 qualification (DfE, 2017). The participants in this study were more highly qualified than the national average with 35 (97%) holding at least a level 3 qualification and 16 (44%) holding a level 6 qualification or above. A wide range of roles were represented which were consistent with the types of provision and included 6 teachers (with qualified teacher status), 9 nursery nurses, 10 nursery assistants, 8 family support/outreach workers and 5 managers. In contrast to a national trend of high workforce turnover (NDNA, 2016) – most participants, thirty in total (79%) had worked in the ECEC sector for at least six years or more and sixteen (42%) had worked in their current setting for over six years. It should be noted that the majority of ECEC settings are from the PVI sector, in contrast the settings in this study were government funded and were therefore not typical of the ECEC sector.

The study employed a narrative approach and small stories (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008) and I-positions (Buitelaar, 2006) were used to explore how practitioners’ narratives of poverty might (dis)connect with dominant discourses. ‘Small stories’ were conceptualised as ‘interactive engagements’ where participants ‘construct a sense of who they are’, enabling a focus on how characters and the narrator are positioned (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 385). This enabled an exploration of how understandings of poverty are socially constructed in time and space through practitioners’ narratives – thus addressing both the local context, the ‘doing’ of the narrative, as well as the wider context. Buitelaar’s (2006) concept of I-positions was used to explore the intersection between practitioners’ personal and professional lives – for example, how a practitioner might talk from both the position of a mother and a worker. The analytical approach developed for the study was termed ‘circles within circles’ and consisted of six circles of analysis: transcription; free annotation; levels of positioning; illuminations; mapping to research questions; and co-analysis. The approach afforded a ‘to-ing and fro-ing’ between the different circles providing an in-depth, flexible and rigorous process of analysis - for further explanation please see Lyndon (2018). The dominant narratives which emerged from the analysis have formed the subheadings for the findings section below. All names which are used in the discussion are pseudonyms and individual roles have not been disclosed in order to protect the identity of participants.

**Findings**

Practitioners’ narratives about poverty were complex and nuanced revealing a complexity of interconnections between morality, motherhood (and fatherhood), parenting, work, welfare and ‘curve balls’ (unexpected events). The findings are presented in three sections: othering; work and welfare; and ‘curveballs’. ‘Othering’ refers to narratives about moral discourses which served to other parents in poverty through practices of stigmatisation, surveillance and shaming. ‘Work and welfare’ refers to narratives about the complex intersections between work, welfare, parenting, childcare, gender and migration. ‘Curveballs’ refers to narratives about unexpected disruptive events which cause families ‘trouble’, through no fault of their own. The small stories below have been carefully chosen to reflect both the majority views of participants as well as minority views which served to challenge dominant narratives.

*Othering*

Many practitioners drew on moral discourses of poverty which served to other parents in poverty through practices of stigmatisation, surveillance and shaming. Parents who were welfare dependent were especially ‘othered’ feeding into a discourse of the underclass. Many practitioners commented on the attributes of those in poverty relating to behaviour, physical appearance and materialism. For example, Heather, talked about how some families prioritise status goods over basic necessities.

Heather: But I think for some lifestyle choice, it’s like they – a lot of parents live beyond their means. […] And it’s like actually, is that a necessity? […] ‘Is it a priority to have Sky?’ ‘Well yes, I want to watch all my programmes.’ ‘But have you got enough food – enough money to pay your rent?’ ‘Er – no.’ […] It’s materialistic, isn’t it? […] Actually, is it needed? Do you need it? No. […] But they don’t see it like that. […] They see it as their priority.

Heather constructs the parent as an excessive consumer of goods and services (for example, having Sky TV) rather than prioritising absolute needs (such as food and paying rent). At the end of the small story, Heather uses the third person to refer to the parent ‘they don’t see it like that’, suggesting an ‘othering’ of the parent who prioritises the wrong things.

Other small stories referred to the idea that that poverty is intergenerational and transmitted to children via poor parenting, lifestyles and values. For example, Grace tells a small story which is cognisant of this idea:

Grace: If mum’s expectations are quite low i.e. it’s okay not to work and then that then gets passed onto the children it’s like dominoes it goes on and on and that vicious circle […]

Her reference to a ‘vicious circle’ lends support to a stigmatising discourse of a ‘cycle of deprivation’ and parental deficit, whilst issues associated with disadvantage, such as low earnings, poor housing, health and a lack of educational opportunities go unrecognised.

In contrast, a minority of practitioners told stories which contested an individualised discourse and reframed materiality and consumerism as parents ‘trying to fit in’ to avoid the shame and stigma of poverty. Audrey talks about why some parents might prioritise buying a smart phone for their child as a way of ‘fitting in’:

Audrey: And it’s not ‘cause, you know, they’re on the fiddle or because benefits is the life of... […] It’s because they feel the need to fit in with everybody else. Because people talk to them like they’re crap and people look down on them. It’s almost that having the need to have things to represent their family. ‘Well look, my child’s not gonna be left out. My child’s going to school with an iPhone.’ […] No-one can say I’m not a good mum’ […] ‘But that fam- that mum might go without food to pay that bill.

In a different way to small stories which find the parent at fault for making a ‘life style choice’, Audrey challenges the misconception that parents who buy status goods are on the ‘fiddle’ and instead suggests that this is a way of addressing the shame associated with poverty. Here the parent goes without food so she can buy her child an iPhone in order to be a ‘good mum,’. At the end of the story, Audrey points out that, despite her attempts to avoid judgement the parents’ efforts are in vain:

Audrey: But it’s about how they think other people see them and judge them I think a lot of the time. […] That they think ‘well if I’ve got that then it’s gonna make me feel better. It’s gonna make me look better.’ And it becomes about that- that material want for things. And actually, they probably don’t feel any better and it doesn’t change anything apart from give them more debt and push them even further down into poverty. Which is quite sad.

Here the parent’s attempt to ‘keep up appearances’ and ‘fit in’ is considered to be counter-productive and results in further debt, stigma and judgement. However, rather than judging at this point, Audrey commiserates with how the parent’s misconceived actions leaves her open to stigmatisation rather than sympathy for her situation

In contrast to the stories where participants demonstrated empathy for families there were others which reflected how practitioners put families under ‘surveillance’, such as checking up on parents. Chloe and Christina, in their focus group, talked about how they are perceived by parents:

Chloe: One of my families, the parent […] brought in a bag of new clothes that she’d just been out and bought for her little girl and to **me** it .. because I did a home visit at that home so I’d seen where they live […] she didn’t need to bring them in and get them all out but […] just felt like look I am able to buy her clothes and these are new and […] I don’t need ..help you know […]

Christina: And we are perceived as sort of an authority type figure […]

Christina: I think they do […] need to almost justify themselves to us …and I suppose because we do talk to them about certain personal matters you know they do trust us and they share a lot but think there is always that little part of them that wants to make a good impression and doesn’t want us perceiving .. anything negative in the slightest … whether it’s unintentionally or not […]

Christina and Chloe allude to the tension between how, on the one hand, parents might perceive them as ‘authority figures’, whilst on the other hand, parents are expected to be open with them. Their comments reflect ideas of surveillance, in the sense that the parent feels she is being watched by the practitioners and that a judgement is being made. The parent attempts to maintain herself respect by subverting the gaze of the practitioner and presenting as if she was coping, for example, bringing in the bag of new clothes. However, Chloe makes it clear that she is not deceived, declaring that, ‘I’ve seen where they lived’.

*Work and welfare*

Other small stories illuminated the complex intersections between work, welfare, parenting, childcare, gender and migration. To a large extent practitioners challenged a discourse of ‘work always pays’ particularly issues related to in-work poverty, such as limited job opportunities, low wages, precarious work, high childcare and housing costs. Jackie and Iris commented on the challenges for parents in terms of ‘making work pay’:

Jackie: And the annoying thing is that politicians talk about getting parents back to work as though they’re all going to go into a lovely career on a good salary that they’re all professionals but most of them go into crap jobs with low pay and horrible hours you know and they just never mention that do they?

Iris: Things like zero hour contracts …but you can’t turn round to the nursery school and say, ‘Oh I know I’ve paid for daycare but actually McDonalds isn’t busy today so they’ve sent me home so actually I don’t want to pay you’, because the nursery school would say, ‘Terribly sorry you’ve got a contract with us and you’ve got to pay us’.

Jackie’s use of language, such as, ‘crap jobs’ and ‘horrible hours’, suggests she has little confidence in the political rhetoric about ‘making work pay’. Iris builds the narrative by highlighting the unfairness of work practices by telling a story about a parent on a ‘zero-hours contract’ who ends up paying needlessly for childcare. The experience of parents working in ‘crap jobs’ is contrasted with others who have ‘a lovely career on a good salary’. Here Jackie’s comments suggest her awareness of issues of structural inequalities relating to the experience of work.

Participants’ narratives reflected issues relating to how childcare costs and too few working hours impact on family poverty. For example, Diana talks about working and childcare:

Diana: I think there’s quite a lot of that that goes on children being passed around because people can’t afford to pay nursery fees … you have them one day […] auntie has them another day and do two days at nursery […] the continuity for the children isn’t great always […]

Diana: I think that they’re very confused little children who don’t quite know where what the rules […] one house you’re allowed to jump on the sofa one you’re not […] Get home to mum who’s tired […] she’s thinking ‘I’ve still got the washing to sort out’ […] puts child to bed then does everything else […] and mum’s parents are just burning out […] and then you’re worrying ‘Can we afford to do this can we afford to do that […] got to pay the nursery bill’ […]

Diana challenges stigmatised media representations of families in poverty who do not work, for example, the mother is constructed as hard working and trying to manage complicated childcare arrangements whilst the children are constructed as victims of their circumstances, confused by the different care arrangements. Her story reflects a moral discourse of the deserving poor and the hard-working family who are striving to make a living.

In contrast to practitioners who highlighted issues for working families, there were a small number who talked about tensions for families living on benefits and wanting to move into paid work. Audrey talks about the challenges of getting a job for families who are on benefits.

Audrey: I think the system can be quite disempowering because […] it doesn’t allow you […] a couple of months to get yourself straight money-wise. If you go to the Job Centre… and say ‘Okay, I’ve got a job now’… they go ‘Okay, we’ll stop your money.’[…] And then there’s no money for your kids. […]

But I think that it’s really difficult because […] they’re damned if they do and they’re damned if they don’t. Because if they do make it a […] generous system then people… won’t ever come off benefits because actually they’re doing okay. But then when they put sanctions on like they have… actually it just causes […] this panic and, you know, money’s dropped and then people feel really depressed and can’t meet their kids’ basic needs. And then it’s really difficult to think about going back to work […] when, you know, you’re faced with ‘Actually I’m not gonna get any money on Monday ’cause I’ve been hit by the benefit cap.’

Audrey highlights the difficulties faced by families making the transition to work by giving voice to a hypothetical conversation between the parent and the job centre worker. Rather than ‘othering’ the parent she ‘others’ the job centre worker, presenting them as showing a lack of concern for the parent who has her benefits stopped before she receives her wages. On the one hand, she empathises with the parent, highlighting the barriers of getting a job, contesting the discourse that work pays by highlighting issues of the lower benefit cap[[2]](#footnote-2). On the other hand, she engages with the government’s argument that over generous benefits are likely to trap parents in ‘a state of welfare dependency’, whilst at the same time contesting the government’s punitive measures, such as benefit caps.

Although not working was judged negatively by the participants, working too much was also judged negatively. For example, Rose in her individual interview talks about children who are in childcare for long hours:

Rose: But these children are gonna be in nursery care for thirty hours a week. […] How much of their parents are they going to see… If they’re going to be in nursery and the parents are going to have long days? […] but I just feel that family life […] – it’s not a priority. It just seems to be let’s get everybody back into work […] I just think … that a parent at home has just got such an important job […] and not a lot of emphasis is put on to that.

Rose criticises the government’s policy on work - suggesting that work is prioritised over family life and the importance of being a parent is not recognised.

Several participants told small stories about families from Eastern Europe, for example, Abi, talked about a family receiving childcare funding:

Abi: A lot of our two-year-old funded parents[[3]](#footnote-3) are, erm, sort of, erm, Eastern European. […] And, you know, you might get a few comments from the parents saying, ‘Well these children, you know, aren’t even from here and […] they receive all this funding and they don’t even work.’ […] but then you’ll have the ones, that say have come over from Poland for example … and they’re working full-time in KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken] to make ends meet. […] and actually, this funding is just there to support them while they need it. […] So some of our parents really do need it and benefit from [it.].

Abi gives voice to the parents in the setting who shame and distance the parent from Eastern Europe, for example, ‘[they] aren’t even from here’ and ‘don’t even work’. Whilst the parents in the setting construct the parents from Eastern Europe as ‘undeserving’, Abi constructs them as ‘deserving’, challenging the abjection of migrants – pointing out that the working parent has the entitlement ‘while they need it’.

*‘Curveballs’*

In contrast to a discourse of ‘troubled families’, practitioners told numerous small stories about how unexpected disruptive events cause families ‘trouble’, through no fault of their own. The term ‘curveball’ has been used to refer to an unexpected disruptive event, a phrase used by Betty, in her individual interview. In her individual interview, she tells a small story about how having a child with a medical condition can make families to be particularly vulnerable to poverty:

Betty: Recently the family have been thrown another serious curveball […] and their second child was born with a serious medical condition. [… ] [Dad] had to leave from his job […] and they were trying to manage the care of the older child here and at the same time try and see their very poorly new born baby [who was in hospital many miles away] […] Transportation, things like that, costs were huge. […] This family have had to come in for local area network loans […] support for gas and electricity […] getting foodbank vouchers […] But my gosh they did their best […] they’re a young family […] and your heart goes out to them because […] this family is doing the absolute utmost that they can.

In Betty’s small story the ‘curveball’ of having a baby with a serious illness compounds with other ‘curveballs’ resulting in the family struggling to meet their basic needs. The father is constructed as struggling to meet the impossible demands of caring for his ill child as well as providing financially for the family. Betty empathises with the family, recounting how they were doing the ‘absolute utmost they can’. Overall the small story contests the discourse of ‘troubled families’ - this family are not judged, shamed or held responsible for their poverty instead they are constructed as ‘deserving’ despite their ‘troubles’.

Other small stories demonstrate the complexity of practitioners’ narratives and how discourses of ‘curve balls’ co-exist with other discourses. For example, Chloe tells a small story about a father who had to give up studying medicine when his partner left:

Chloe: He was a single dad, it just suddenly happened, he dropped out of uni […] he was suddenly just a full-time dad and that was what he had to do […] so he used the funding […] he deserved it .. he needed it .. and he was looking for work whilst they were here so that he then had money to get them a better place which was when he got this flat […]

In a similar way to Betty’s story, Chloe also constructs the father as ‘deserving’ of the funding[[4]](#footnote-4) because he was ‘looking for work’ and putting his children first. Later in the story Chloe introduces the father’s new partner:

Chloe: And I said to her about working .. *[she said]* ‘I don’t need to work I’m getting six hundred pound to pay towards the flat’ […] she’s so laid back about it she’s not panicking about everything, the child’s always in brand new Adidas clothes .. she’s always in brand new clothes […] they are they are not .. hard up in the slightest […] he, bless him, he looks exactly the same, the same trainers that he was wearing four years ago when his first child came here […] and he’s going to work and […] he can never pick them up because he’s always at work.

In contrast to the father, the partner is shamed for preferring to live on benefits rather than get a job, perhaps suggesting that mothers who choose not to work are more likely to be stigmatised than fathers. Chloe ends the story by contrasting the father’s physical appearance and behaviour with that of the mother, for example, wearing the same clothes and ‘always at work’. Overall the story reveals how simple discourses of ‘deserving’ or ‘underserving’ are limited in helping to understand the complexity of ‘in-family’ life.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Underlying the complexity of practitioners’ narratives was a moral discourse relating to how poverty was construed. Moral comparisons were drawn between parents who did not work and lived on benefits and parents who were hard working and on low wages reflecting discourses of the undeserving and deserving poor. On the one hand parents, particularly mothers, were ‘othered’ via a process of stigmatisation, especially those who were welfare dependent, for prioritising life style choices, inability to manage money and inadequate parenting, feeding into a discourses of an underclass, troubled families and a ‘cycle of deprivation’. The construction of these mothers were reminiscent of Tyler’s (2008) analysis of the ‘chav mum’, how young white working-class mothers have been dehumanised and constructed in the media as representative of an underclass - identified as welfare dependent; poor at parenting; a consumer of branded goods; and embodying ‘bad or vulgar’ taste. In contrast a minority of participants told small stories which challenged dominant pathologising discourses by revealing how parents try to avoid stigma and shame through practices, such as ‘fitting in’ or presenting as if they are coping. These demonstrated awareness of the importance that those in poverty attribute to ‘keeping up appearances’, as discussed by Chase and Walker (2012), and the shame that parents might feel for not being able to provide for their children.

In contrast to discourses about an underclass, practitioners challenged the government discourse of ‘work pays’ by demonstrating empathy with parents experiencing in-work poverty, revealing how issues, such as high childcare costs, low wages and precarious work can disadvantage families with young children, especially for lone mothers. Understandings reflected awareness of how the impact of high childcare and housing costs and too few hours make it difficult for many families to move out of poverty (Aldridge et al., 2012). These stories reflected a sympathy with the ‘deserving poor’ - the hard-working family who are striving to make a living and the difficulties for lone mothers moving into work after living on benefits (Millar and Ridge, 2013). Overall these narratives contested government rhetoric around ‘work always pays’ (DWP, 2010, p. 1) demonstrating how taking a job can lead to more insecurity and little financial reward (Rabindrakumar (2018).

At a deeper level, practitioners’ narratives of poverty revealed paradoxes and contradictions. For example, the small story about the mother who ‘works too much’ neglecting her role as a carer highlights the complex intersections between work, gender and motherhood. Such stories were reminiscent of Vincent et al.’s (2010) study that judgements of being a ‘bad’ mother are not just levelled at those who are welfare dependent but also those who work too many hours or appear to put their career before their children. Arguably, mothers who might take up the government’s free 30-hour entitlement put themselves at further risk of judgement associated with being a ‘bad mother’.

On the other hand, paradoxes were highlighted in terms of small stories about ‘curveballs’ which challenged discourses of ‘work pays’ and ‘troubled families’. Practitioners constructed those beset by ‘curve balls’ as ‘deserving cases’ which intersected in complex ways with gender and migration. For example, fathers were reminiscent of Miller’s (2010) construct of the ‘good father’ – one who cares for his ill child as well as providing financially for the family – revealing how poverty intersects in complex ways with caring responsibilities for fathers as well as mothers. In contrast to the abjection of migrants in the media (see Tyler, 2013), families from Eastern Europe were also constructed as deserving cases.

Overall the findings make an important contribution to the limited literature about practitioners and their understanding of poverty in early childhood. In contrast to previous research, the practitioners in this study drew upon broader, contradictory and more nuanced discourses highlighting the complex intersections between work, gender, social class and motherhood (and fatherhood) and how those in poverty are ‘othered’ through a process of stigmatisation and shame. In line with the Frameworks Institute’s (2018, p. 3) report it is recommended that a new moral narrative is needed to shift thinking about poverty – one which helps ‘people interpret rising poverty levels as an indication that we are not living up to our moral obligations to support one another’. One way of challenging stigmatizing discourses of poverty is engagement with a counter discourse of human rights-based on recognition and respect, for example, by listening to the voice of people in poverty and recognising that the knowledge they bring is invaluable (Lister, 2015). Families who have experienced poverty could be involved in the development and training of practitioners working in the ECEC sector – such practice could help to strengthen a moral case for tackling poverty.

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1. The notion of deserving and undeserving poor is derived from the New Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 which made a moral distinction between fit, working age men who were able to work but unwilling and those who were too old, young or ill to work (Millar and Ridge, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The benefit cap is the amount of benefit and tax credit income that an out-of-work household can receive. The benefit cap was lowered in 2016 (Commons Select Committee, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Two-year-old funded parents’ refers the funding entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘funding’ refers to funding for disadvantaged two-year-olds [↑](#footnote-ref-4)