

Gender based Barriers to Effective Collaboration: A Case Study on Children's Safeguard Partnerships

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Abstract—This paper explores gender related barriers to interagency collaboration in statutory children safeguard partnerships against a theoretical framework that considers individuals, professions and organisations interacting as part of a complex adaptive system. We argue that gender-framed obstacles to effective communication between culturally discrepant agencies can ultimately impact on the effectiveness of policy delivery. We focused our research on three partnership structures in Sefton Metropolitan Borough in order to observe how interactions occur, whether the agencies involved perceive their occupational environment as being gender affected and whether they believe this can hinder effective collaboration with other biased organisations. Our principal empirical findings indicate that there is a general awareness amongst professionals of the role that gender plays in each of the agencies reviewed, that gender may well constitute a barrier to effective communication, but there is a sense in which there is little scope for change in the short term. We aim to signal here, however, the need to change against the risk of service failure.

Keywords—Children's safeguard, gender, gendered professions, inter-agency collaboration, partnerships.

I. FOREWORD

"While people are fairly young and the musical composition of their lives is still in its opening bars, they can go about writing it together and exchange motifs, but if they meet when they are older (...) their musical compositions are more or less complete, and every motif, every object, every word means something different to each of them." [1]

LIKE people, institutions grow into their rules and their beliefs, strengthening their boundaries over time. Age confers people, professions and organizations sets of lenses through which they perceive reality and, according to the social constructivist school of thought [2], the reality that they construct becomes the only truth they know. Sometimes, the realities of different organizations are dissonant (for example culturally, structurally, organisationally), which makes communication between them difficult. In a context in which complex policy-making requires interagency collaboration in both designing and delivering public services, this problem is worthy exploring further. In the children's safeguard sub-context, the problem is especially alarming, for two main reasons. First, the organisations involved in child care partnership are traditionally established around long-standing professions and are therefore heirs of long organisational memories which confers upon them a "thick" lens of perception, in the spirit of our opening quote from Kundera. Second, poor delivery of welfare services can easily mean no

delivery at all in this sector; failing to effectively safeguard children may ultimately lead to injury or death.

This paper originates from a study of communication barriers within statutory partnerships centred on children's safeguard. Our investigations have revealed that gender plays a role in hindering good communication by reinforcing the boundaries between organisations, professions, and ultimately amongst the individuals involved in the process of service delivery. Since the older the organisation is, the more likely it is that its cultural profile is firmly established, when their ethos has been shaped by gender factors, it can be inferred that older organisations can incubate conditions for gender segregation. By means of illustration, whilst at a macro-politics level, Westminster politics struggles to achieve anything approaching gender balance, major advances in this areas have been achieved by the much younger National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament.

Under the Children's Act 2004, effective child care service delivery ultimately depends on effective communication between female-dominated (nurses, social workers, teachers) and male-dominated (doctors, policemen) professions. Furthermore, social problems and social issues are very often gender biased, too [3], the ones involving nurturing being – somehow disparagingly- labelled as 'women's issues' [4] (as is the case with child care). Thus, this paper aims to examine issues connected with collaboration between gender-bounded professions in a gender-bounded policy area.

In the network society paradigm [5] and set against New Labour's enthusiasm for network governance, multidisciplinary working is part of the key processes through which public services are delivered in the UK [6]. At the heart of effective multi-organisational settings is the need for effective communication among partners [7]. This, at its turn, can be influenced by a number of factors, some at an inter-organisational level [8]-[9], some at an inter-personal level [10], and some at an inter-professional level [10]-[11]-[12]. Gender is one dimension that, in certain policy domains, can be found to be essential in shaping interactions at all the three levels: the organisation, the profession and the individual. This article aims to explore gender-based barriers to effective collaboration within children safeguard partnerships. It will do that by setting a context for inter-professional communication and for gendered professions, and then examining the occupational segregation in the organisations involved in the delivery of children services, against a framework of analysis of the inter-personal, inter-professional and inter-

organisational obstacles to effective collaboration amongst agencies.

II. BACKGROUND

Within the context of an increased concern for efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector, theorists have agreed that inter-agency networking among public organisations can enhance the effectiveness of public service delivery [8]-[13]-[14]. Nonetheless, given the complex interactions that take place in almost all policy domains, most policy problems need to be tackled through the simultaneous involvement of multiple agencies. According to Löffler, “*wicked policy problems (...) make coordination and joint working a key for all agencies (...) in the public domain*” (pp.163) [15]. Thus, multi-agency cooperation is not only a strategy, it is a necessity. The rhetoric of the British Labour Government’s *Third Way* supports this reaction to the complexity of policy problems [6]-[8]-[15] creating a shift in paradigm: from government to governance [16], and from competition to collaboration. Neither is this a uniquely British development; rather it is the consequence of a whole series of societal transformations at a global level.

The move from markets to collaborative networks embodies a shift away from a contract culture to one where trust takes a paramount role along the statutory framework [8]. Since communication is essential for collaboration between different agents [7], it can be induced that trust-based communication is at the heart of effective joined-up service delivery. In some cases, however, this is impeded by strong organisational and professional boundaries, which sometimes reinforce each other (e.g.: the police service has boundaries as an organisation, but being dominated by police professionals, these frontiers bolster against other organisations).

Child protection is one area where many such organisations are brought together through statutory partnership despite fundamental cultural differences between them. The cultural discrepancies between organisations interacting in child care matters have been extensively explored in literature, albeit within different contexts than the one used here. Academics have traditionally focused on the communication hardships amongst health professionals [17], between nurses and medics [18], between social workers and nurses [19] and between social services, police and health occupations [7]. Their conclusions point at a lack of trust between professions and at specific agencies attempting to take ownership of a problem in as much as ignoring other organisations that believe they should play a role in the decision making process.

Then, cultural organisational boundaries have been examined by looking at gender-shaped beliefs, norms, and values [20]-[21]-[22]-[23]. They conclude that gender is being reproduced at both a cultural and a structural level: on the one hand, culturally-embedded gender stereotypes reinforce the gender role theory [21] according to which some jobs require “feminine” individual traits (such as nurturing in social care), whereas some others call for “masculine” attributes (such as law enforcement in police); on the other hand, organisational

procedures such as job descriptions can subtly imply that certain jobs are more suitable to people of one gender [23]. In the field of children’s safeguard, the 2004 Children’s Act has brought such gender-segregated occupations to the negotiation table.

Since 2006, police, social services, teachers, nurses and medics are required by law to collaborate effectively towards a common goal: children care, and are jointly evaluated against a Common Assessment Framework. It is timely, therefore, to explore whether the interactions between and amongst these gender-dominated professional organisations can represent a locus of vulnerability in the provision of effective child-care services in England.

This paper’s distinctiveness is that it departs from the existing literature in the fields of both child-protection partnerships and gender studies, arguing that gendered occupational boundaries within the organisations involved in child-care impact on the effectiveness of cooperation, hence incubating the risk of service failure.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our central argument will be illustrated by means of a theoretical framework around the interactions within partnership working. Gender-based barriers to effective cooperation are explored within this frame.

We start from the premise that, while there are individuals that sit in the statutory partnerships around safeguarding children, these are representatives of both their professions and their organisations. In consequence, the individuals embrace both professional and organisational values and beliefs, adding these to their own personalities and personal views. When the organisations that individuals represent are firmly structured around certain professions, the cultural heritage is usually strong, and this can impact on their openness and receptiveness to other and different cultures.

From a cultural standpoint, individuals, professions and organisations interact simultaneously. They create *complex wholes* that gravitate towards a common goal, aiming at effective cooperation. The fact that these *complex wholes* are strongly defined against each other can delay fruitful collaboration. We explore here how gender can shape each of the three dimensions of the ‘complex wholes’ (individual, professional and organisational) and if, indeed, gender can incubate failure of service delivery by affecting smooth communication. An empirical investigation was essential in supporting theoretical provisions and also in understanding how interaction occurs. Hence we used empirical observations of the patterns of interaction within three partnerships around children, in Sefton Metropolitan Borough, Merseyside, England, to further our understanding of these complex relations.

At the individual level, gender is only one personal trait, as are the race, the religion or the sexuality of a person. While individual traits should have little impact at an inter-organisational level, they can, however, make a big difference if the individuals appear to be loyal servants of their

organisations that, in turn, appear to be at odds with other organisational images. By means of illustration, a male policeman and a female social worker can have a history of disagreement about whether to imprison an abusive parent or to keep the family united. This disagreement may come from the different performance measures that their organisations impose, however it can become personal due to the very fact that the individuals that attempt to deal with the case seem loyal representatives of “masculine-type” organisational rules around punishment (the policeman) versus feminine-type nurturing of children’s welfare within united families (the female social worker). The solution to the tension in communication between individuals in child protection networks relies on the solution given on the other two levels that impact on the inter-personal interactions.

At the occupational level, the main professionals that sit in children’s safeguard partnerships are social workers, policemen, nurses, medics, and teachers. The numerical gender imbalance is more distinct in the case of the first three of these, but still present in the last two. In all cases, however, these professions represent the cores of their organisations. Thus, the overwhelming majority of the people that work for the social services are social workers, most of the police service’s employees are police officers, most of the NHS workers are doctors and nurses, while the majority of those employed in education are teachers. In the light of more recent developments, positive or affirmative action has been directed at improving the numbers of minority genders in such professions. This aims at rebalancing the representation of the sexes in professions and politics especially. The argument behind the so-called “politics of presence” [24]-[25]-[26] and creating a level of numerical or “descriptive” representation is that it is a preliminary step towards “substantive” representation. For the purpose of this paper this is taken to mean that the professions and the professional norms cease to be gender-biased and become gender-neutral. Norris and Lovenduski (2003) argue that the ‘critical mass’ of minority gendered professionals determine whether they are playing by the existing rules of the game or have a say in changing the rules. Since in traditional gendered careers the attributes that indicate success potential are gender biased, it takes a critical number of professionals from the minority background to turn the occupation from gender bound to into gender-neutral.

At the organisational level, gender has been found to shape norms and culture [20]. This occurs through both cultural and structural determinants [27]-[28]. Our choice of these two layers of analysis originates from the fact that in the policy arena which is the focus of this paper is the scene of interactions amongst organisations that are highly characteristic of the professionals that form their core employment. Cultural heritage influences the individual career choices by framing what sort of jobs are specifically “suitable” for boys and girls at an early age. For example, social services professions are dominated by female workers because their cultural and structural character corresponds to “desired” personal attributes of care associated with females. Structural determinants manipulate organisational structures and

mechanisms in place to ensure higher benefits to members of one gender. Thus, organisational priorities can be gender-induced. To illustrate, child protection sits rather low in the police priorities’ hierarchy [20].

The inter-agency collaboration within the statutory partnerships around children represents a *complex evolving system* made up of individuals, of the professions that they represent and of the parent agencies which employ them. None of these elements act independently of the others and any change at any of these levels reverberates on others and can ultimately be felt in of the service delivery outcomes.

IV. EMPIRICAL FOCUS

The empirical basis for this paper is through a case study that presents an analysis of the patterns of collaboration amongst the agencies in partnership to safeguard children in Sefton Metropolitan Borough in Merseyside, England. The partnership bodies are the *Children Services*, the *Local Safeguarding Children’s Board* and the *Children and Young People Thematic Group*. *Children Services* bring together professionals of the local authority, social services and education, while the other two bodies gather representatives of local authority, social services, education, health bodies (NHS Trusts, Primary Care Trusts, General Practitioners), police, and other organizations relevant to particular cases under review. These agencies sit in partnerships around children’s safeguard, but also in other collaborative structures centred on different goals; nevertheless, they are developing internal ‘core’ activities and projects. They are therefore evaluated against various sets of standards that, at times, can be at odds with each other; they have different organizational cultures that incubate sometimes antagonistic beliefs that inform their behaviour in multi-agency settings; nonetheless, they incorporate professionals of strong professional traditions (doctors, social workers, nurses, policemen) that are often find it hard to work with each other.

The research methods used were documentary research, non-participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. Documentary research centred on government legislation, policy documents and guidance, and internal documents. The non-participant observation involved sitting in regular meetings, observing a number of both formal and informal interactions, and taking part in two training events for the relevant organisations involved in children safeguard partnerships (one to support good collaboration amongst the Children Services Authority professionals and the other, amongst the agencies in the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board). Interviews were held with both male and female professionals in Social Services, Ormskirk NHS Trust, Royal Liverpool University Hospital, Sefton Metropolitan Borough Local Authority, and Merseyside Police.

The principal areas of our empirical findings included measuring awareness among all professionals involved in child-care partnerships that their organisations are gender-dominated and that this may be due to the centrality of gender-dominated professions within such organisations. Some

professionals recognize the difficulty of working within such segregated context, especially since the focus of their collaboration (children safeguard) is also labelled as being gender bounded [29]. Although some professionals recognize the need for gender-equality within organisations to facilitate inter-professional collaboration and multi-agency working, all but one (a policewoman) respondent thought that this was an improbable goal to aim at in the short term.

V. CONCLUSION

The fact that the practice of cooperation amongst professionals in the area of child care has become statutory this year [30] can represent a good indication that the organisations engaged in child-care activities have an inherent difficulty in working collaboratively. The principal findings of our investigations suggest that gender is an important dimension of this, due to the fact that the organisations in question are gender-dominated. They also suggest that professionals do not expect this 'deceptive' segregation to come to an end due to rigid structures of the long-established agencies involved in partnerships.

It is important to draw a clear link between, on the one hand, occupational segregation in welfare domains and, on the other hand, the need for effective inter-professional and inter-organisational collaboration to ensure effective service delivery. This link helps signal the fact that maintaining occupational segregation adds vulnerability to the system of child-care provision in England.

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