Gender and Child Welfare in Society

Edited by

Brid Featherstone
Carol-Ann Hooper
Jonathan Scourfield
Julie Taylor
Gender and Child Welfare in Society

‘In this book, a group of impressive authors bring a wealth of policy, practice and theoretical knowledge to the often ignored connections between gender and child protection. The book contains an excellent range of topics, written in accessible, practical prose. It will be indispensable reading for practitioners, as well as students of child welfare and their professors.’

Professor Karen Swift, School of Social Work, York University, Canada

‘This timely and innovative collection brings gender issues to the fore across a wide range of fields relevant to child welfare. The editors and authors are to be congratulated in encompassing many contemporary debates through an informative, rigorous and thought-provoking lens. This book will be vital reading for all working with children, young people and families.’

Dr Jane McCarthy, Reader in Family Studies, Department of Social Policy, Open University
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Contents

Notes on Contributors vii

1 Gender and Child Welfare in Society: Introduction to Some Key Concepts 1
   Jonathan Scourfield

2 Exploring the Relationship between Gender and Child Health: A Comparative Analysis of High and Low Economic Resource Countries 27
   Lorraine Green and Julie Taylor

3 Gender, Child Maltreatment and Young People’s Offending 61
   Carol-Ann Hooper

4 Gender and Schooling 95
   Shereen Benjamin

5 Are Abused Women ‘Neglectful’ Mothers? A Critical Reflection Based on Women’s Experiences 121
   Simon Lapierre
vi Contents

6 The Clock Starts Now: Feminism, Mothering and
Attachment Theory in Child Protection Practice 149
Julia Krane, Linda Davies, Rosemary Carlton and
Meghan Mulcahy

7 Engaging Fathers – Promoting Gender Equality? 173
Brid Featherstone

8 Working with Violent Male Carers (Fathers and
Stepfathers) 195
Mark Rivett

9 The Family Group Conference in Child Welfare:
A View from New Zealand 223
Margaret McKenzie

10 Gender in Residential Childcare 247
Mark Smith

11 Therapeutic Options in Child Protection and
Gendered Practices 273
Trish Walsh

Index 301
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All the contributors are members of The Gender and Child Welfare Network. The network was formed in 2003 by a group of academics and consultants from all four countries in the UK with the main aim of creating a community of researchers, practitioners, policy makers and lobby groups interested in gender and child welfare issues. Since then the network has expanded to include members from the USA, Australia, Canada, the Republic of Ireland and New Zealand. Details of the Network's activities are given at www.brad.ac.uk/acad/socsci/research/genchilnet.

Gender and Child Welfare in Society: Introduction to Some Key Concepts

Jonathan Scourfield

A father beating his wife because he thinks she has been looking at another man while they were out in the pub; a girl being regularly kept off school to babysit her younger siblings; a mother who acknowledges ambivalent feelings towards her children being negatively judged by professionals because she is not all-giving and ever available; a teenage boy drinking daily because, in part, of his poor emotional literacy; a lesbian teenager suffering homophobic bullying in school and neighbourhood; a black boy struggling to achieve in school because he is surrounded by people expecting him not to. I could go on, of course, in listing reasons why the topic of gender and child welfare deserves a book. It does not only deserve a book; it deserves complex analysis, and therefore we have put together a collection of chapters on various different dimensions of the topic by authors from different locations and with different theoretical orientations.
Gender and Child Welfare in Society

The book’s terrain is the ways in which both relationships within families and interactions between family members and professionals are influenced by gender in interaction with other social divisions – for example, ethnicity or socio-economic status – and with other factors – for example, individual biography or professional training. The social meanings attached to being male or female are variable, contested and changing, yet they continue to influence the identities and practices of children, parents and the practitioners who work with them, and assumptions about gender (for instance, about appropriate behaviour for boys or girls, or the responsibilities of men and women as parents) often permeate interventions. Certain outcomes for children are significantly associated with gender – for example, there are higher rates of school exclusion, offending and suicide amongst boys, and higher rates of depression amongst girls, although the extent of such differences varies in different contexts and over time. Practitioners who intervene in families continue to work predominantly with mothers, reflecting traditional assumptions about gendered responsibilities for children’s welfare as well as the reality that in the vast majority of families women are still the primary caregivers. However, there is a growing interest in the roles of men both as fathers and as practitioners, and interventions can either reinforce or destabilize existing gender divisions.

The book draws on current developments in thinking about gender relations to consider ways in which raising questions about gender can help researchers and practitioners better understand family relationships and issues in children’s development, and both challenge and enhance interventions in the field of health and social care for children and families. We use the term ‘child welfare’ to locate the book’s contribution within a long-standing tradition of policy and practice concern with children in the fields of health and social care, rather than as part of the more recent and definitionally circumscribed debate over ‘children’s well-being’. We see the book as relevant to a range of professionals who work in child welfare – social workers, health visitors and children’s nurses, early years staff – as well as people studying aspects of childhood or gender relations for their own sake.

As services in the United Kingdom reorganize to reflect higher aspirations for children’s well-being they also have new obligations to eliminate discrimination and promote gender equality which apply to
Introduction to Some Key Concepts

children, parents and practitioners. We hope the book will contribute to ongoing attempts to turn these visions into reality in a variety of contexts. It will offer an overview of sociological, psychological and developmental perspectives on family relationships, child welfare outcomes and the practice/policy realities of professional interventions with families. Exploring the issues for children, mothers and fathers, as well as specific types of interventions, specific chapters will address the range of service settings, including family support, child health, education, child protection, domestic violence, ‘looked after’ children and youth justice.

The book will address the following questions:

- How is gender being integrated into the child welfare agenda today?
- How can children’s views and experiences inform such developments?
- What are the new challenges facing women and men as parents in the context of family and societal change and diversity that policy makers and practitioners need to be aware of?
- How does gender intersect with ethnicity, religion, class, disability, age and sexuality in families?
- How are other policies such as youth justice promoting or undermining child welfare goals?
- What theoretical and practice developments are most promising in promoting both child well-being and gender equity?
- How can health and social care practitioners use information about gender to engage more meaningfully with families?
- How can the ‘gender agenda’ improve child safeguarding practice?

We seek to demonstrate that gender sensitivity is crucial to informed intervention across the field of child welfare, and to illustrate with examples its relevance and implications in the current context. Whereas previous books on the topic of gender and child welfare have looked at sub-themes such as family support (Featherstone, 2004) or child protection (Scourfield, 2003), or a specific group such as fathers (Daniel and Taylor, 1999), we aim for greater breadth here. This book explores contemporary childhood, mothering and fathering in the context of social policy and social interventions in several countries.
This introductory chapter aims to provide an overview of some key concepts. The overview is unavoidably partial as it reflects its author’s knowledge and interests. Whilst, inevitably, many complex issues will be skated over and some even omitted altogether because of the need to be brief, I hope I can provide an accessible introduction both to the book and to the broader topic of the gendered dimension of child welfare. Note that at times the first person singular ‘I’ is used, referring to the single author of this introductory chapter. At other times, and especially when summarizing the book’s content, the plural ‘we’ is used, with reference to the book’s four editors.

Understanding gender relations

What’s meant by ‘gender’?

There has been a flourishing of critical writings about gender and sexuality (and the links between the two) perhaps especially in the last forty years or so, since the writings of the 1960s and 1970s, often referred to as ‘second wave feminism’ (the first wave being the writings and activism concerning the emancipation of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the suffragette movement being the most famous example). The term ‘gender’ is generally used to refer to ‘social interpretation of reproductive biological distinctions’ (Beasley, 2005: 12). That is, it refers to socially constructed identities, behaviour and institutions rather than to biological sex differences between men and women. This definition is far from being uncontested, however. Chris Beasley – the Australian academic, not the Chief Nursing Officer for England with the same name – in her very helpful overview of gender/sexuality theories, notes that there have been three principle debates about the term ‘gender’ within social and cultural theory (Beasley, 2005).

The first debate is about whether or not a focus on specific identities is helpful. So some commentators have argued that a conceptual focus on ‘gender’ draws attention away from the continuing oppression of women. Others have argued that the concept of gender prescribes rather than describes a binary social construction with ‘male’ and
Introduction to Some Key Concepts

‘female’ as opposite poles. The second debate is about the relationship between what is social and what is natural/bodily. Some have argued that the conventional understanding of gender sets up an artificial divide between social and natural/bodily, as if biological phenomena were fixed, when in fact ideas about biology vary across time and cultural context. Others have observed that the term is quite specific to English language literature, with French feminist writings, for example, tending to write about ‘sex’ and ‘sexed identities’ instead. Beasley herself makes pragmatic use of the term gender insofar as it is still the most commonly used in English language writings and we do the same in this book. The third debate noted by Beasley is about the links between gender and sexuality, with some seeing gender as preceding sexuality and others seeing sexuality as preceding gender. Most contemporary theorists recognize that there are at least significant conceptual overlaps between sexuality and gender. Ideas about male and female as ‘opposite’ characteristics are implicated in the social and cultural dominance of heterosexuality, for example, and homophobia is often about adverse reactions to transgression of gendered behaviour as much as it is about sexuality. We should acknowledge, however, that whilst we the book’s editors regard sexuality and gender as strongly connected, sexuality is not to the fore in the book.

To give an overview of gender theories is a daunting task within a whole book, let alone part of one chapter. There are many possible ways of cutting the cake. One would be to organize theories according to whether they aim to treat ‘male’ and ‘female’ constructs on equal terms or emphasize the need to acknowledge differences between them – what might be called a distinction between equality feminism and difference feminism. Another possible organizing principle would be around theorists’ orientations to modernism or postmodernism (see Beasley, 2005). So even within a potential single category of theories, such as radical feminism, there is a continuum of more or less modernist versions. I have decided to run with categorizing some well-recognized traditions within feminism in the full knowledge that each of these is a very broad category. Most of the following categories apply to theorizing about masculinities and femininities, but the field of masculinity theory is rather more recent than feminist theory, which primarily addresses itself to understanding the position of women. In recognition of this, I have included a separate sub-heading ‘men’s studies’ at the end of this section.
Gender and Child Welfare in Society

Radical feminism

Well known radical feminist academics include Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich. Better known still, at least in the United Kingdom, are the writings of Andrea Dworkin. As I have already noted, however, a range of different stances can be found within the broad categories of theory used in this chapter. To summarize very briefly some of the most obvious characteristics of radical feminism, there is a concern with stark inequality between men and women and central to this concern would be the control of women’s bodies and women’s bodily integrity. So concern about domestic violence, rape and pornography would typical within radical feminism. These phenomena would be seen as rooted in patriarchy, the historical and ongoing social structural oppression of women by men. Heterosexuality would be seen as an institution based on the oppression of women by men. For most radical feminists, gender inequality is about real embodied men and real women, and there is little interest in fluidity of identities. There is generally an emphasis on women’s common experience of oppression rather than on diversity between women.

In relation to child welfare, radical feminist concerns would include, for example, the (hetero)sexualization of girls, the impact of domestic abuse on women and children, men’s sexual abuse of children – both within the family and outside – and female genital mutilation. Interventions might include supporting women to leave abusive men and education of men about the roots of abuse of women in patriarchy. An example of the latter would be the group work with violent men used within the Duluth model (see Pence and Paymar, 1993). This work is ‘pro-feminist’, with the prefix indicating that men who are supportive can help to run groups. In this programme there is an explicit message that men’s abuse of women is based on a desire to control them and patriarchal views about intimate relationships. The dominant mode of engagement is educating men to accept this interpretation and to modify their behaviour via cognitive-behavioural methods. The chapter in this collection by Rivett, is critical of what he sees as the ‘doctrinaire’ approach of this kind of intervention with violent men. The chapter by Lapierre, however, is squarely in the tradition of radical (pro-)feminist research on domestic violence.
Introduction to Some Key Concepts

Liberal feminism

This approach dates back to the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft in the late nineteenth century and would in more recent times include the popular writer Naomi Wolf. The liberal feminist approach is to seek equality for women within the mainstream institutions of society. Unlike radical feminism, there is not a fundamental questioning of gender relations. Rather, liberal feminism would see society as amenable to modification so that women have a better deal from employment and education, for example. Heterosexual relationships would be seen as reformable, with the domestic division of labour addressed but heterosexual desire remaining unchallenged. This is in essence the popular face of feminism, what most people think feminism is – namely ameliorative politics to improve the lot of women within existing structures. This liberal feminist approach is by and large the face of feminism in mainstream party politics. Unlike radical feminism, liberal feminism does not involve an explicit analysis of patriarchal social structures. Also unlike radical feminism, it does not question mainstream terms of engagement in any fundamental way.

In relation to child welfare, an example of a liberal feminist approach would be to challenge an unfair focus on mothers within the child protection system. This critique would not necessarily involve fundamental questioning of the heterosexual family, but would simply point out that in very many child protection cases attention moves from initial concern about an abusive man to scrutiny of mothering (Farmer and Owen, 1998). Another example would be a concern with how girls are responded to within the youth justice system, given that they are a small minority of the client base and could therefore be rather marginalized within services which are geared towards young men. Yet another example, following the same logic, would be the marginalization of fathers from family support services. Although this concern might come from a men’s rights perspective rather than a feminist one, the logic of equal opportunities for men and women within the mainstream would be the same. Whilst none of the chapters in this volume is straightforwardly written from a liberal feminist perspective, it has to be acknowledged that its version of equality does underpin many of the concerns expressed in the book about the
unequal treatment of boys and girls, mothers and fathers, in the child welfare system.

**An emphasis on differences between women**

Under this broad umbrella I include some very diverse theories. The socialist feminist tradition prioritises class alongside gender (Hartmann, 1978). So rather than promoting women’s opportunities to negotiate the inequalities required by capitalism (as it could be said that liberal feminism does), the emphasis is on social class inequalities and the ways in which working-class women are doubly disadvantaged by the labour market, for example, because of their sex and class status. Lesbian feminism was, in the 1970s and 1980s rather more associated with radical feminist critiques of heterosexuality. More recently, however, there has been a rapid development of ‘queer’ theory (see below under poststructuralist and postmodernist accounts), and contemporary lesbian perspectives are rather concentrated within this literature. Whatever the theoretical orientation, lesbian feminist theorizing does, again, emphasize differences between women rather than commonality. Also, approaches which emphasize both gender and ethnicity have been very influential. Beasley (2005) groups these approaches together as ‘race/ethnicity/imperialism’ perspectives, to give a flavour of the diversity – some emphasizing the experience of colour racism, others cultural difference and yet others a post-colonial perspective. Even this broad grouping does not necessarily include Muslim feminists, who may see their difference in perspective from Western feminism as more about religion than race, ethnicity or imperialism.

To give some illustrations in relation to the book’s topic of gender and child welfare, socialist feminism would certainly be concerned with mothers in poverty and with policy and practice measures to structurally improve their situation. Lesbian feminists would be concerned with the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) young people, for example in relation to self-harm which has been found to be elevated in LGBT youth and associated with experience of homophobia (Rivers, 2000). An example of a child welfare issue for feminists concerned with race/ethnicity/imperialism
would be the way that children are constructed as gendered and also racialized. This has been well documented in research on boys (for instance, Connolly, 1998) where, for example, South Asian boys are often found to be feminized within peer group and school cultures. Another child welfare issue where difference between women is stark is the response to young Muslim women who choose to cover their heads. We know from research such as that by Emma Tarlo that there are many different reasons why young women cover their heads (wear hijab), including a version of feminism which depends on a monotheistic world view and looks very different from a liberal (or radical) Western one:

To the claim put forward by the French government that the hijab puts unacceptable pressure on young girls to conform to oppressive religious norms, hijab-wearing women are quick to point out the pressures placed on young girls in the West to conform to the unrealistic body images pedalled in the media, and the low self-esteem and proliferation of eating disorders they see as a result. To them, the veil is lived as a form of resistance to these pressures even if, in the process, they willingly submit to another set of discourses and disciplinary regimes concerning the female body. (Tarlo, 2007: 153)

To varying extents, all the chapters in this collection deal with differences between women and between men, including class, sexuality and ethnicity. In particular, the chapters by Benjamin, Green and Taylor and McKenzie emphasize questions of diversity, Benjamin’s in considering ‘special needs’ (as well as class and ethnicity), Green and Taylor’s in reviewing evidence about global health inequalities and McKenzie’s in discussing the intersection of the politics of gender and ‘race’ in child welfare policy.

**Poststructuralist and postmodernist feminisms**

Although linking poststructuralist and postmodernist feminisms means skating over large bodies of theory and differences between various concepts, these two important developments in feminism do have some points of commonality for the purposes of this very brief overview. Both require a significant move away from the grand
narratives on which earlier feminisms were based. So gone are certainties about social structure and fixed identities. Instead, the emphasis is on fluidity and complexity. In postmodernist feminism, any notion of seeking to establish truth is disavowed. Poststructuralism is very much concerned with language, and feminists influenced by Foucault use his notion of discourse as a regime of truth which circumscribes what can be known about a given issue. Poststructuralist feminists tend to talk of multiple gendered discourses operating simultaneously with sometimes contradictory effects. The separation of sexuality and gender is questioned, especially by queer theory, which is profoundly influenced by postmodernism. So, as noted earlier, the idea of socially constructed binaries of male and female is regarded as unhelpfully limiting theoretical possibilities and setting heterosexuality in stone. Postmodernist feminism and queer theory question any kind of identity categorization and are profoundly anti-essentialist.

Examples of applying such approaches to gender issues in child welfare might include questioning some feminist orthodoxies. So Brid Featherstone has, for example, drawn our attention to the potential for women to physically abuse children and has argued that violence in the home is not so monolithically about male power as it is often thought to be (Featherstone, 1997; Featherstone and Trinder, 1997). Parton (1998) acknowledges the inevitable uncertainty in child welfare and argues that practitioners should embrace uncertainty as a positive aspect of practice rather than vainly attempting to eliminate it by using actuarial risk measures. We also see the influence of poststructuralism in research attention to professional discourses in relation to men and women clients (Scourfield, 2003). As you would expect, poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches to gender relations have their critics. Ann Oakley has made the point that postmodernist theorizing tends to be rather distant from ‘the situation of women out there in a world that definitely does exist, and that remains obdurately structured by a dualistic, power-driven gender system’ (Oakley, 1998: 143).

Several contributions to this collection are influenced by poststructuralist and postmodernist ideas. An example would be Smith’s chapter, insofar as he finds theories of patriarchy to be unwieldy in making sense of gender issues in residential care and instead is seeking to capture the ‘complexity and contingency’ of gender in practice, with power being ‘multi-layered and multi-directional’.
Introduction to Some Key Concepts

Psychoanalytic approaches to gender

Psychoanalytic ideas with their roots in such theorists as Freud and Klein have been very influential on some feminist thinkers. To summarize very briefly, there is an important emphasis in this body of theory on the role of the unconscious and the shaping of this by early childhood experiences. Important authors who have theorized sex/gender in psychoanalytic terms include Irigaray, Kristeva and Benjamin. An example of a feminist theorist who uses both sociological and psychoanalytic ideas is Nancy Chodorow (1978). She explains the social construction of gender with reference to the infant’s relationship with mother and father: dyadic (mother–child) for boys and tryadic (child–mother–father) for girls. The fact that women are largely responsible for the care of very young children helps to explain gendered identities and behaviour. Girls grow up more relationally-oriented because they retain an intense identification with their mothers. Boys repress identification with their mothers (and therefore feminine qualities) in order to become successfully masculine, making them less relational and more autonomous.

Psychoanalytic feminist ideas could be seen to be relevant to child welfare in a number of ways. Various commentators have argued the importance of the unconscious to both parenting and child development. Perhaps especially relevant in the child welfare field is the application of these ideas to understanding gendered reactions to childhood trauma and the development of abusive behaviours. The chapter in this collection by Hooper takes up this theme.

Men’s studies

In truth it is rather artificial to separate out men’s studies, as the same range of approaches to understanding men can be found that we can see above in relation to feminist theorizing. Indeed, there are examples given in the subsections above which relate to men and masculinities. However, there is a rather separate (and later) literature, so I briefly mention this here.

Because the range of approaches to theorizing masculinity is broad, some theorists (for example, Robert Bly) have been criticised by some
feminists for being insufficiently critical of men’s practices or for being essentialist about gender identities. Authors such as Connell, Hearn and Kimmel (2005) mark out a territory they call ‘critical men’s studies’ to emphasize that they are alert to questions of power and that they are influenced by feminist critiques of masculinity. Some of these critical studies of men are focused on privilege, so they are very different from feminist research which comes from a tradition of studying the marginalized. That said, there is also considerable attention to inequalities between men, including those of race, class and sexuality. The recognition that there is more than one way of being a man has led to the plural term ‘masculinities’ becoming de rigueur.

Applications of men’s studies to child welfare would include acknowledgement of the diversity of fathers and the various pressures both of tradition and change that fathers are experiencing (Featherstone, 2003). Intersectional analyses of boys’ masculinities, which include an appreciation of class, race and sexuality, are important for practitioners. Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman’s (2002) book provides a complex account and includes a psychoanalytic dimension. Various practitioners have sought to somehow ‘make masculinity explicit’ in their work with boys and men. A wide range of approaches have been used and many of these are summarized in Featherstone, Rivett and Scourfield’s (2007) overview. Several chapters in the current edited collection touch on the masculinities literature. An example is the chapter by Featherstone, which draws on research evidence about the practical reality of contemporary fathering.

To round off this section on understanding gender, I shall describe Connell’s (2002; 2005) sophisticated account of gender relations. It is relevant in this subsection as Connell has especially addressed herself to masculinities, but her account also, in my view, draws on the most useful aspects from a number of different feminist traditions so is more generally relevant to an understanding of gender relations. Connell does not shy away from using the concept of patriarchy. For example, she is clear that even men who oppose patriarchal beliefs and practices can gain certain social privileges simply by virtue of being men. This is the ‘patriarchal dividend’. Hers is not a crude, monolithic version of patriarchy, however. She insists on the poststructuralist plurality of the term ‘masculinities’. So there are multiple possible ways of being a man, and men’s practices vary according to culture, class,
Introduction to Some Key Concepts

ethnicity and sexuality as well as other mediating factors. Becoming a man is not a passive process of socialization but an active construction of an identity. Identities and practices are not freely acquired, however, but there are social structural constraints, and power relations are crucial. Gendered discursive practices configure into a hierarchy. There are multiple gendered discourses, but some are more powerful than others. So, for example, compulsory heterosexuality is an important aspect of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and gay sexual identity therefore represents ‘subordinated masculinity’, although individual gay men are not necessarily in a position of social subordination and can draw the ‘patriarchal dividend’. Men who aspire to the culturally authoritative hegemonic masculinity but cannot fulfil it because their aspirations are thwarted, perhaps because of the class system or racism, can be seen as falling into the category of ‘marginalized masculinity’.

At this point I move away from gender to give an equally brief (if not briefer) overview of different ways of conceptualizing children and families, given their centrality to the book.

Understanding childhood and family life

There are other bodies of literature that could be relevant here, such as, for example, anthropological research on childhood and care, but because of space and the limitations of my own knowledge I have limited this section to three fields: developmental psychology, the sociology of childhood and the sociology of the family.

Developmental psychology

Much of child welfare practice and policy is based on a body of evidence from within the developmental psychology tradition (White, 1998). This is the biggest body of research evidence about anything to do with children. The dominant approach is to measure various aspects of children’s functioning and to analyse this in terms of expected developmental pathways. There is a wealth of evidence
covering a wide range of issues, from a baby’s awareness of their environment to ideas about spirituality in middle childhood. The empirical basis of the science includes experimentation, observation and questionnaire-based studies. Attachment theory, based on children’s attachment to primary carers, comes within the umbrella of developmental psychology. Big names in the developmental psychology field include Piaget, Kohlberg, Bowlby and Vygotsky. Developmentalism has been criticized, especially by those of a more sociological or qualitative persuasion, for seeing children as passive, for generalizing across cultures from research with white Western samples and for traditionally basing findings about family life exclusively on mothers.

As Scourfield, Dicks, Drakeford and Davies (2006) argue, some of these criticisms are rooted in caricatured versions of developmental psychology and do not take into account the sophistication of contemporary empirical and conceptual work. Critics need to accept that developmental psychology has to be part of the picture in promoting child welfare. It is essential to know what children are typically able to do at certain stages and how this might relate to child welfare, whether or not this has a gender justice angle. Just one example would be the poor developmental outcomes for children in situations of emotional neglect. There have been some interesting attempts to rescue developmental psychology from a feminist perspective. The chapter in this volume by Walsh notes that attempts to make attachment theory less exclusively focused on mothering go back several decades. Walsh points out the limitations of a traditional narrow take on attachment with reference to a specific child protection case. Chapter 6, by Krane, Davies, Carlton and Mulcahy, engages rather more positively with attachment theory, modifying it in the light of feminist criticisms.

The sociology of childhood

Within sociology there is an interest in the social construction of childhood. So the ways in which childhood is constructed within, for example, the institutions of education, health care, criminal justice and the family have been the subject of research by James and James (2004). King and Piper (1995) have written about how children are constructed in British law, using the categories of child as victim,
Introduction to Some Key Concepts

the child as witness, the child as a bundle of needs and the child as a bearer of rights. An emphasis on the socialization of children is traditional within the sociology of childhood. This has been rather ridiculed in more recent writings, as implying a passive model of social learning and not appreciating children as social agents in their own right. However, it could still be considered a broad enough term to encompass a wide range of approaches; it simply refers to the process by which children become social beings, and that need not be theoretically limiting. There has been a tendency in recent years towards ethnographic engagement with children’s everyday lives, as well as a theoretically-driven interest in this angle on childhood. An appreciation has developed of children’s own cultures and of cultural variation across and within national borders.

One example of the application of the sociology of childhood to gender and child welfare is Morrow’s (2006) argument that practice textbooks need wider conceptions of gender identities than are currently employed in books in which outmoded categorizations of ‘all girls’ and ‘all boys’ tend to be used instead of recognizing diversity and the contingency of identity. Another application is the research of Holland et al. (2008) on the everyday lives of children in care, focusing on the detail of how children see their own identities and social contexts. They recommend practitioners to engage in sustained listening to children’s stories and work with them to construct alternative narratives where appropriate to help them promote positive change in their lives.

The sociology of the family

There is a long tradition of sociological research on the family. Earlier in the twentieth century the dominant approach was that of functionalism – attempting to explain how the family socializes people to find their role in society. For some time, ‘functionalism’ has been a knee-jerk pejorative term for critical social scientists who have learned the lessons of second-wave feminism and are more interested in the power dynamics within families. In recent years, the predominant emphasis within the literature on the sociology of the family has been on making sense of rapid social change. There has been a large increase,
for example, in couple relationships breaking down and families reforming with new members. Recently, there has been attention to the contemporary tendency towards ‘families of choice’: the building up of strong ties with friends, with whom there is no biological link, and the establishment of lesbian and gay families (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001; Roseneil, 2004). One of the main messages of Fiona Williams’s important book *Rethinking Families* is the diversity of the contemporary family, and she argues that ‘policies need to be diverse and flexible enough to meet people’s varying options for their living arrangements and for combining work and care in the short term’ (Williams, 2004: 85).

Charles, Davies and Harris (2008), however, emphasize continuity over time in family life as well as change. They argue, on the basis of returning to research family life in Swansea, first studied in the 1960s, that considering the amount of social change in recent decades there is a surprising amount of continuity in how people ‘do’ family. This echoes debates about gender relations and how drastic and fundamental social change has been. Delamont (2001) addresses this question head on in her book *Changing Women, Unchanged Men?* and concludes that there is more continuity than change: ‘British men and women are behaving much like their great-grandparents in 1951 and even their great, great, great, great-grandparents in 1893’ (Delamont, 2001: 111).

As well as social scientific approaches to understanding gender, childhood and the family, the other important part of the book’s context is social policy on child welfare and on gender equity, so it to this that we turn next.

**International developments in social policy**

**Child welfare**

In many Western countries, the history of child welfare over the twentieth century was one of a gradual move towards the professionalization of staffing and a move from voluntary sector to state provision. Residential care for children who, for various reasons, cannot
be cared for by parents is an example of a service which has seen significant changes in these regards in many countries. It has struggled to shrug off a reputation for abuse of children and there has been a strong trend for moving children out of residential care and into foster families. The main English-speaking Western countries have had a common experience of a preoccupation with child abuse and child protection in the last few decades followed by attempts to refocus policy away from forensic concerns and towards effective preventative services (Lindsay, 1994; Parton, Thorpe and Wattam 1997). It should be noted that there are different trends in some European countries. Pringle (1998) characterizes the French and German child welfare systems as being much less focused on investigation of child abuse and more so on family support. In the poorest parts of the world the issues are starker: ensuring a basic primary education, especially for girls; ensuring the basic health of mothers; combating HIV; and attempting to prevent female genital mutilation in some countries (see Chapter 2 by Green and Taylor in this collection).

More recent policy moves, at least in the United Kingdom, have been based on the idea of investing in children as the workers of the future: what has been termed the 'social investment state' (Lister, 2003). Fawcett, Featherstone and Goddard (2004) have suggested there is a risk that this approach will allow some groups of children to be seen as more worthy than others. For example, there is a certain consensus that early intervention with young children, improving their opportunities for learning and play and supporting their parents, can boost health and welfare in the short term and also prevent social problems in adulthood. Older children, however, are much more likely to be demonized and criminalized. A focus of early intervention and an increasingly universal approach to safeguarding children are important aspects of child welfare policies in all the four nations of the United Kingdom. Parton (2006), with reference to English policy in particular, has characterized the New Labour approach as 'the preventive state'. Whilst there is much in this approach that could be welcomed, there is concern about excessive surveillance via extensive databases.

In relation to child health, a range of issues is of current concern in the United Kingdom, including child obesity and increasing alcohol and drug use. These are, of course, the concerns of an affluent society, although, paradoxically, the children most at risk are the most socially and economically disadvantaged. Recent education policy in
the United Kingdom has emphasized raising achievement though a variety of means, including, most controversially, testing of children at 7, 11, 14 and 16 in England. Schooling is an area of policy where devolution is making a significant impact in the United Kingdom, with Wales, for example, having abandoned school league tables and significantly de-emphasized testing of children under 16, as well as bringing in a Scandinavian-style play-based curriculum for under 7s. Gender equality is a controversial issue in education (see Benjamin, Chapter 4, in this book). Especially controversial amongst feminist commentators has been the emphasis in several Western countries on the so-called under-achievement of boys. Concern has been expressed by these commentators about what have been termed ‘recuperative masculinity politics’ (Lingard, 2003), namely an approach which assumes men should be able to re-gain the privilege that has been dented by feminism. The feminist critics of this approach point to the continuing high achievement of middle-class boys and the greater salience of ethnicity and social class than sex for educational achievement.

Gender equality

Summarizing trends in social policy that relate to gender equality is challenging, as there is a gender angle to every area of policy. Various authors have attempted to categorize different countries’ welfare states, following Esping-Andersen (1990), with reference to gender equality. Lewis (1992), for example, has grouped countries into the categories of strong, weak and modified breadwinner regimes. Hearn and Pringle (2006) have come up with the following categories for European countries.

1. The Nordic nations, which have good childcare provision, generous parental leave and make significant attempts to reconcile home and work.
2. The established EU-member nations (for example, Ireland, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom), whose day-care provision, parental leave and home–work reconciliation policies are variable.
3. The former Soviet Eastern bloc countries which have relatively low levels of day care provision, parental and paternity leave and less developed home–work reconciliation policies.