



The landscape of UK child protection research between 2010 and 2014: Disciplines, topics, and types of maltreatment



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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the results of a commissioned systematic map of UK child protection empirical research published between 2010 and 2014. It analyses current patterns in child protection research in relation to three variables – disciplinary background of authors, types of maltreatment examined, and focus of the research – and considers the relationship between these. It finds first authors' disciplines to be reliable indicators of both the focus and topic of the research, with the dominant fields of psychology, medicine, and social work addressing respectively the long term outcomes of sexual abuse, the short term outcomes of physical abuse, and the care system's response to child maltreatment. The proportion of research dedicated to specific types of maltreatment appears to depend on factors other than their real-world prevalence. Instead, definitional issues and ease of access to research participants appearing to be more influential in determining the topic of the research. UK child protection research appears to show narrow multidisciplinary interaction and little focus on preventative or ameliorative interventions. The development of a coordinated national strategy adopting an interdisciplinary approach in the design and commissioning of child protection research could help maximise research efforts by reducing duplication and potentially facilitating the emergence of more innovative directions.

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1. Introduction

Child protection research encompasses a great variety of contributions from different sectors and disciplinary fields, which create a diverse landscape of priorities, aims, and approaches. The heterogeneity of child protection research plays an essential role in capturing the real world complexity of child maltreatment. At the same time, it makes it increasingly challenging to gain a holistic understanding of the state of the evidence and to assess how research efforts can be optimised by facilitating cooperation and minimising duplication between different fields. A useful way to make sense of this complexity is to carry out a systematic search and mapping review of child protection research which categorises existing literature and analyses its patterns to identify gaps and direct future research (Grant & Booth, 2009). A mapping exercise can be useful to: funders of child protection research wanting to get a sense of the field and set their research priorities, inform strategic planning, and influence funding decisions; researchers seeking to

understand the dominant approaches to child protection research within their discipline, identify less researched areas, or seek collaborations outside their own field; and practitioners wanting to understand their field's contribution to the evidence base, identify potential gaps in the evidence, and evaluate the alignment of the dominating research focus with their more immediate practice needs and priorities.

This paper draws on research conducted for the project 'The Landscape of Child Protection Research in the UK' (henceforth referred to as Landscape) in 2014–2015. Commissioned by the NSPCC to the University of Edinburgh/NSPCC Child Protection Research Centre, the project created a comprehensive dataset of codified research outputs which allows the identification and classification of research activity across sectors and academic disciplines in the UK, providing valuable information for the planning and commissioning of future research. The focus of this paper is a secondary analysis of selected categories from the Landscape dataset in order to investigate the relationship between the disciplines of first authors, the types of child maltreatment examined, and the focus of the research.

2. Background: mapping child protection research

Landscape is a systematic search and mapping review of UK child protection empirical research in which we sought to collect and categorise child protection research published between 2010 and 2014 in the four nations of the United Kingdom. The aim of Landscape was twofold:

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first to provide an overview of what research has been done, by whom, and how; second to identify gaps in the evidence and how these may be addressed. This paper focuses on the analysis of authors' disciplines in relation to the topics and types of maltreatment addressed by the research, and it follows a previous and separate report on substantive topics and research methods (Jones, Taylor, Mackay, Soliman, Clayton, Gadda, Anderson, & Jones, 2016). Landscape's design was aligned with Grant and Booth's (2009) typology of a mapping review, which aims "to map out and categorize existing literature on a particular topic, identifying gaps in research literature from which to commission further reviews and/or primary research" (p.97), and it follows the guidelines for systematic mapping developed by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) at the UCL Institute of Education (EPPI-Centre, 2007). Whilst not performing a quality assessment, mapping reviews adopt a systematic approach to describe the "scope, nature and content of empirical research" (Dickson, Vigurs, & Newman, 2013: p.4) on a specific subject, allowing for a detailed representation of the landscape of available evidence.

Reviews mapping the research conducted in a specific field may adopt different methods according to their purpose. For example, Allen, Jacobs, and Levy's (2006) mapping of nursing literature from 1996 to 2000 analysed the citation patterns of nursing literature published in academic journals, but did not examine individual papers' topics or assess their evidence. Shaw and Norton (2007), on the other hand, looked at the types and quality of social work research carried out in UK universities up to 2006. Their review analysed the focus and aim of social work research, who carried out the research, what methods were used, and the quality of the research. They designed a bespoke classification framework in order to capture appropriately the great variety of topics and themes identifiable within the research.

Previous efforts to categorise child protection research have shown the field to be heterogeneous, with great diversity in disciplines, focus, and themes. Higgins, Adams, Bromfield, Richardson, and Aldana (2005) conducted an audit of Australian child protection research over 10 years, relying primarily on individual researchers and organisations responding to requests to volunteer information about their research. Social work was found to be the most prominent discipline in child protection research, producing 37% of the total output, followed by social policy (27%) and psychology (24%). Whilst circa 54% of studies focused on child maltreatment in general, specific types of maltreatment were often mentioned in the literature, with physical abuse being the most frequently researched type of maltreatment (84% of studies), closely followed by sexual abuse (82%) and psychological maltreatment (80%). Policy analysis and government reports were the most frequent types of research featuring amongst the inclusions, followed by evaluations of prevention programmes, and research on risk factors or attitudes towards child maltreatment. The audit employed a narrow definition of child protection, which excluded research on tertiary interventions for adult victims or on out-of-home care, with programme evaluations being included only if explicitly focused on child abuse and neglect.

By contrast, the audit of Scottish child protection research carried out by Tarara and Daniel (2007) employed an intentionally broad definition of child protection and of research in order to capture a larger body of work. Their audit found research to focus mostly on the child protection system or on proximal factors related to child maltreatment, followed by children's general wellbeing and distal factors related to maltreatment. Most research on the child protection system or proximal factors was again situated within the field of social work, followed by medicine, the children's hearing system, and the criminal justice sector. Medical research focused mainly on diagnosis of physical or sexual abuse, and research on looked after children mainly focused on their wellbeing and educational and health outcomes.

Similar trends were uncovered by Buckley, Corrigan, and Kerrins (2010), who in their audit of child protection research in Ireland found that research tended to focus mainly on the child protection

system and on sexual abuse, with policy/practice reviews/analysis constituting more than half of the identified literature. In particular, Buckley et al. found the attention given by research to individual types of maltreatment to not be proportionate to their reported prevalence, as suggested by the large amount of research on sexual abuse. Finally, whilst the field of child protection research was found to be greatly heterogeneous, a close relationship was evident between the discipline of the researchers, the focus of the research, and the types of maltreatment investigated, with different sectors tending to repeatedly focus their research efforts on discipline-specific issues rather than seeking to address gaps in the existing evidence.

These audits have provided useful information on the state of research in their respective jurisdictions, whilst at the same time raising important questions about the need to coordinate efforts more efficiently across different disciplines to improve collaboration, minimise unintended duplication of work, and address gaps in the evidence. However, their different geographical remits and methodological peculiarities mean that their findings cannot be applied or generalised to the UK as a whole. Using data from the comprehensive database of published child protection research collected by the Landscape project this paper will present an in-depth analysis of how different disciplinary fields have approached the study of child maltreatment in the four nations of the UK.

3. Methods

Child protection research is multidisciplinary in nature, so we expected great variance in the focus and approaches adopted in the literature. Designing a highly specific and detailed coding framework allowed us to appropriately capture the heterogeneity of the studies included in the mapping review, thus decreasing the risk of oversimplification (Grant & Booth, 2009).

The mapping review resulted in three sets of data, collecting academic literature, grey literature, and funding information on completed and ongoing research projects. This paper reports on findings from the academic data only, as the disciplinary background of authors was often indeterminable in the grey literature, and addresses the following research questions:

- ✓ In which academic disciplines is child protection research undertaken in the UK?
- ✓ On what aspects of child protection does the academic research focus?

3.1. Search strategy

Academic literature was identified using the University of Edinburgh's search engine *Searcher*, which allowed for the concurrent search of over 94 databases. The ASSIA database, which was not included in *Searcher* at the time, was searched separately. Search parameters included papers published in English in peer-reviewed academic journals between 1st January 2010 and 31st December 2014. Over 40 different search terms were tested in various combinations, with search results being cross-checked with manual searches of 14 academic journals known to be prolific publishers of child protection research, in order to develop a search strategy which would strike the right balance between sensitivity and specificity. The following search string was used:

(child* or infant or baby or babies or teenage* or young) AND (abuse or neglect or maltreat* or exploit* or bull* or bully or "child protection" or adopt* or foster*) AND (Britain or British or Kingdom or Scot* or Welsh or Wales or Ireland or Irish)

The final database search yielded 10,308 results over a five year period (see Fig. 1).

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