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Resisting the caricature to embrace diversity and “the hard bit” of engaging with parents in poverty

**Dr. Donald Simpson (Teesside University), Dr. Eunice
Lumsden (University of Northampton) & Rory McDowall
Clark (University of Worcester)**

**Information about the project:
donald.simpson@tees.ac.uk**





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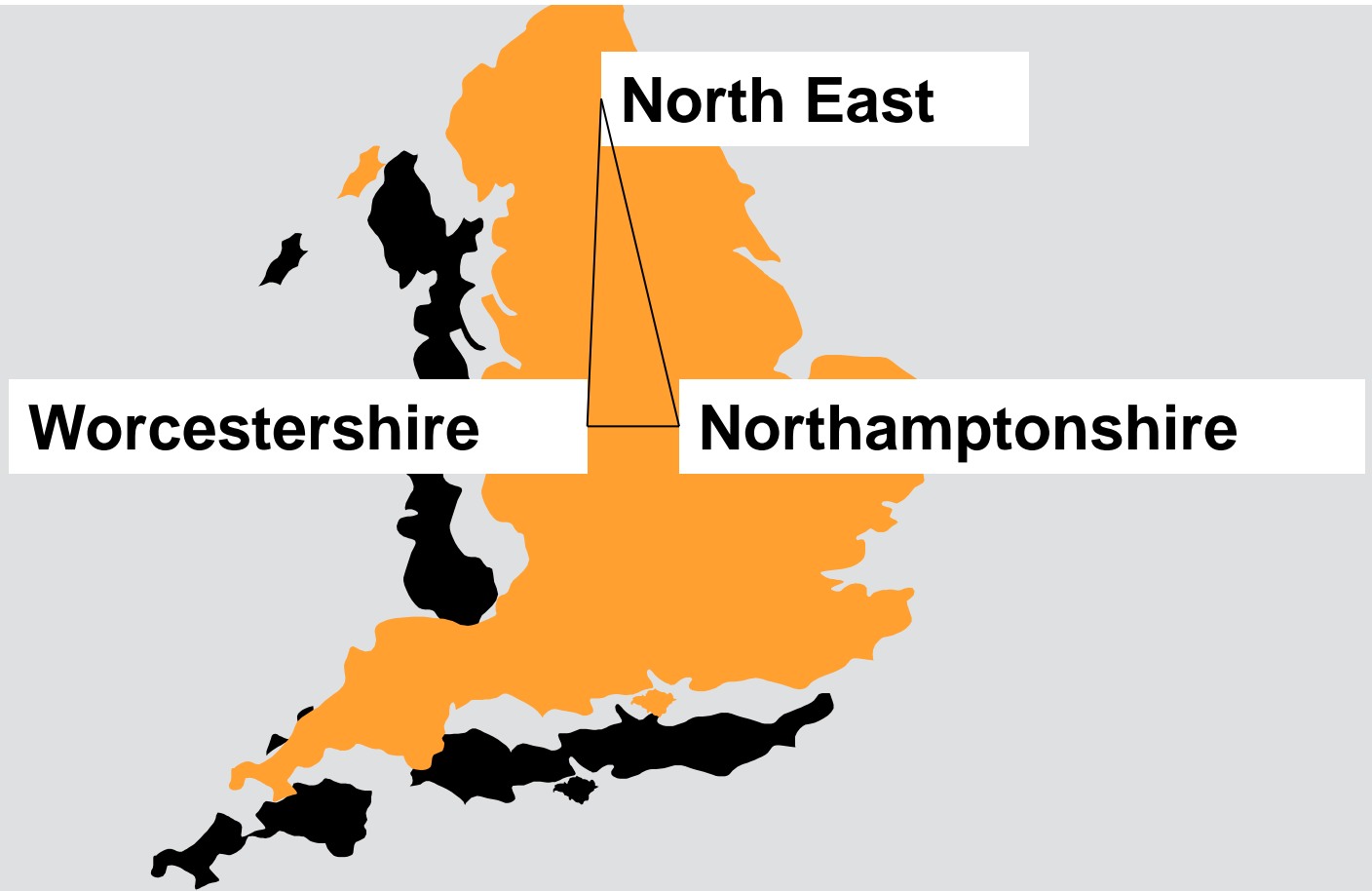


Aims for the presentation

- To introduce our research project exploring a sample of practitioners' perspectives about child poverty
- To outline the context in which the research took place
- To identify practitioners' views on the causes of child poverty policy
- To highlight a link between these views, underpinning morality and engagement with parents



Scope of the Research





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Context – ‘New Politics of Parenting’

- Neo-liberal political project – parenting politicized globally
- Welfare problems – rooted in the ‘problem’ behaviours of parents (Gillies, 2008: 1079; Edwards et al, 2014))
- Parenting constructed as the source of, and solution to, a number of social problems – pathologising and biologising
- Caricature (‘skivers’ & ‘shirkers’ lacking social & emotional capacities and ability to foster empathy in their children)





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- [since the Thatcher era] ‘it was no longer enough for parents to feed, clothe and send their children to school’. [Rather they were also expected to] ‘turn their children into model citizens, self-supporting and self-motivating, behaving themselves appropriately... and ready to enter the workforce at the correct time’ (Montgomery, 2013: 22).





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UK Context – Policy & Practice

- Caricature allows for child poverty to be made amenable to a particular diagnosis and treatment via ECEC
- Child Poverty Act 2010 (Labour); Child Poverty Strategy 2011 (Coalition) (DWP & DfE. 2011);
- ECEC services - supporting 1) 'strong parenting', 2) 'positive home learning environments' and 3) 'narrowing the gap in children's early years';
- 'Essentially minimalist' approach (Levitas, 2012: 456) – economic inequality downplayed;
- Discursive formation (caricature) of parents in poverty foregrounded – conflation of the poor and 'problem'



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Research Methodology

- Interpretive
- Qualitative
- Sampling
- Semi-structured Interviews
- Theme analysis
- Expansion of project – in England and USA





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Practitioners' views on causes of child poverty

- Majority view – in all areas
- Minority view – examples in N & W in particular
- General - in-work poverty not recognised





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Majority View

- **Majority view** - child poverty rooted in parents' subjectivities
- 'Normalisation of child poverty' – inevitable because parents have 'wrong' behaviours and 'incorrect' values etc.
- Child poverty related to 'cycle' of deprivation and 'poverty trap' – **but because poor allow it**





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- *NE2 – Anne – Pre-School Manager - it's the choice of the parents of why they're living in poverty. I don't think it's anybody else's fault apart from them... I think it's about how they use the money that they get and the poverty stems from if they're not using the money in the appropriate way then that's how they become poor. ['blameworthy' – their 'lifestyle choice']*





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Minority View

- **Minority view** - poor as 'victims' of the 'cycle' and 'trap' – **beyond their immediate control**
- Limited conditions of choice – life a 'struggle'
- Bounded agency – restricted access to capital
- Parents in poverty lack autonomy and greater scope for reaction
- Can't just 'get themselves out of poverty'





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- *N9 – Karena - the Government are making it a bit harder. Because it's the Conservatives, they favour the working aspect of it and getting people working **but they aren't putting in the infrastructure to get them into jobs. They're making it not nice to be on benefits but they're not giving opportunities to get out** ['victim' of limited opportunities and conditions of choice important]*





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Morality and engagement with parents

- Relationships with parents in poverty important but a challenge - 'the hard part' – despite initial connection
- Morality important to success of engagements – linked to views on causes of child poverty and pervading morality
- **Condemnatory morality** – expectations about 'good' and 'bad' – who don't accept need for change (one way process)
- **Humanistic morality** – trust, communication and knowledge of parents important – 'small steps' – two way process ('building reciprocity' and 'bridging social capital' important)





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Summary

- Parents as cause of, and solution to, social ills such as child poverty
- Discursive pathologising of parents in poverty shared by majority of ECEC practitioners interviewed
- Condemnatory morality works as barrier to engagement and diversity – homogenizes
- Potential need for poverty sensitivity and proofing toolkit in ECEC (the poor a significant minority)?





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