

## **‘Everyday’ Scottish and Finnish child protection work in an age of austerity: A practitioner perspective**

### **‘Arjen’ skotlantilainen ja suomalainen lastensuojelutyö talouskurin aikana: ammattilaisen näkökulma**

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines the accounts given by child protection practitioners of how the current economic climate has impacted on their practice. We build our discussion on empirical findings emerging from a small but rigorous qualitative research project conducted by one of the authors. This original study examined Scottish and Finnish social workers’ perceptions of their abilities to engage effectively with children and families in what many have described as an ‘age of austerity’. It set out to explore challenges encountered in daily practice through a cross-national comparative thematic analysis. The paper illuminates practitioners’ shared reality of frontline practice in Scottish and Finnish contexts. Despite differing socio-political environments, participating practitioners found austerity measures to impact negatively on both their professional resources and on the communities they work with. Significantly, practitioners regarded themselves as the key resource, taking individual responsibility to ensure families received a quality service. For many, austerity had resulted in greater empathy for families and awareness of the wider economic and structural impact on their lives. The increased centrality of social justice was pivotal to everyday practice.

Keywords: austerity, effective engagement, social justice

## **Abstrakti**

Artikkeli tarkastelee lastensuojelun ammattilaisten näkemyksiä nykyisen taloustilanteen vaikutuksesta heidän työhönsä. Kirjoituksemme pohjautuu artikkelin toisen kirjoittajan laatiman laadullisen pientutkimuksen tuloksiin. Alkuperäistutkimus tarkasteli skotlantilaisten ja suomalaisten sosiaalityöntekijöiden käsityksiä heidän mahdollisuuksistaan käyttää vaikuttavaa vuorovaikutusta asiakasperheiden kanssa talouskurin aikana. Pyrkimyksenä oli tarkastella arjen työssä kohdattuja haasteita ylikansallisen vertailevan aineistolähtöisen sisällönanalyysin kautta. Artikkelin kuvailee skotlantilaisen ja suomalaisen lastensuojelutyön arjen jaettua todellisuutta. Maiden eriävistä sosiaalipoliittisista ympäristöistä huolimatta osallistujat kokivat talouskurin heikentävän sekä heidän omia ammatillisia resurssejaan, sekä perheiden käytettävissä olevia resursseja. Merkittävää on, että sosiaalityöntekijät pitivät itseään tärkeänä resurssina ja ottivat henkilökohtaisesti vastuuta perheiden saaman palvelun laadusta. Monet vastaajista kokivat aiempaa suurempaa empatiaa perheitä kohtaan ja tietoisuutta siitä, kuinka yhteiskunnan taloudelliset ja rakenteelliset tekijät vaikuttavat perheiden arkeen. Sosiaalisen oikeudenmukaisuuden merkitys näyttöäytyi keskeisenä arjen työssä.

Avainsanat: sosiaalinen oikeudenmukaisuus, talouskuri, vaikuttava vuorovaikutus

## **Introduction**

Scotland and Finland are examples of countries in which increasing income inequalities and child poverty rates have been attributed to the austerity measures and welfare reforms imposed over recent decades (Kurttila, 2015; Mooney, 2014; Scottish Government, 2015). In both countries, the number of children receiving child welfare services has escalated at a time when budgetary cuts and demands for efficiency have resulted in mounting pressures on practitioners (Alhanen, 2014; Jütte et al., 2015; National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2015). Arguably, austerity is evident across Europe (Cavero and Poinasamy, 2013) which in turn has generated growing interest in examining austerity's effects on welfare services (e.g. Bywaters et al. 2018; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015). Despite this emerging research base, the way austerity affects everyday frontline child protection practice, particularly relating to communication and engagement, has received limited attention.

This paper presents data generated as part of a qualitative research project which aimed to examine Scottish and Finnish child protection practitioners' perceptions of the impact of spending cuts on their experiences of effective engagement with service users. This unusual comparison generated surprising data around the ways in which political and strategic level

austerity appears to have filtered into day to day practice. Emerging from the data was a central theme concerning the impact of economic and political change on everyday practice and it is to this that the paper turns. The research design was underpinned by the notion that while effective engagement (*vaikuttava vuorovaikutus*) is acknowledged as a precondition to effective practice in both countries, research suggests that scarce resources hinder practitioners' abilities to engage effectively with children and families (Alhanen, 2014).

A number of key concepts were employed to both order and synthesise the extensive literature around child welfare and protection and to support the data analysis. The contested notion of 'austerity' (*talouskuri*) is used here to refer to government-initiated measures which aim to reduce budget deficits in response to an inauspicious economic climate through cuts in public expenditure, welfare services and benefits (McKendrick et al., 2016; Mooney, 2014). The term 'child protection' (*lastensuojelu*) is employed to describe statutory social work with children and families under the Scottish local authority and Finnish municipal duties to safeguard the welfare of children (Lastensuojelulaki 13.4.2007/417, s. 11(1); Children (Scotland) Act 1995, s. 22).

### **Scottish and Finnish child protection policy in an age of austerity**

Scottish child welfare, along with the rest of the UK, has adopted a broadly liberal welfare state model in which a considerable portion of welfare services are provided by the market and civil society. Scottish child protection legislation and policy draws upon lessons learned from significant case reviews conducted in the UK since the 1970s and applies the concept of 'significant harm' as a threshold to child protection interventions underpinned by principles of promoting parental responsibilities and children's rights (Guthrie, 2011). Unlike other countries in the UK, Scotland employs a unique system of lay panel members (The Children's Hearing System) under the guidance of a legally trained solicitor (the Reporter) to determine many of

its child welfare and protection decisions. This model places emphasis on a societal rather than purely legal response to need and risk.

Finland applies a social democratic Nordic welfare model where the state is primarily responsible for citizens' welfare. Child welfare in Finland has traditionally focused on structural prevention of social problems (Forsberg & Kröger, 2009) through comprehensive preventive and family-oriented services (Hearn, Pösö, Smith, White & Korpinen, 2004). Current policy and practice aims to promote children and families' social inclusion (Halme, Vuorisalmi & Perälä, 2014).

Recent policy developments suggest that Scottish and Finnish child welfare practices are shifting closer to one another. For example, child-centred approaches that have been promoted in the UK for decades have made their way into Finnish child welfare (Lavikainen, Puustinen-Korhonen & Ruuskanen, 2014). The Scottish Government early intervention initiative *Getting it Right for Every Child* (2012) which promotes inter-agency collaboration and a holistic view of child welfare is underpinned by similar family-oriented principles as the latest Finnish child welfare legislation (Lastensuojelulaki 13.4.2007/417). A specific shared practice principle identified as a precondition to comprehensive assessments and successful interventions in both countries is effective engagement, i.e. the meaningful interaction a practitioner establishes with children and families in order to develop a cooperative working relationship based on respect, empathy, and effective communication (Lavikainen et al., 2014; Scottish Government, 2014). Engagement is a significant skill at the initial stages of child welfare involvement where the depth and quality of an assessment depends upon the level of trust established with the family (Harris & White, 2013; Munro, 2011). Effective engagement is closely linked to the concept of partnership and the children's right to participate and have their views considered, which are key principles in Scottish and Finnish child protection practice (Lavikainen et al., 2014; Scottish Government, 2014).

Scotland and Finland, as affluent Western countries, face common challenges linked to post-industrialist pressures to restructure and modernise a post-war social contract and collectivist approach to social welfare (Kananen, 2016; Wren, 2001). This current era, often referred to as 'an age of austerity', is a complex manifestation of continuing and interrelated changes in the economic, social, and political climate that have shaped Western welfare states since the 1970s. It is regarded as connected to pressures to limit public spending in order to sustain social welfare (Mooney, 2014; Veilahti, 2016). The relationship between the state and its citizens is being renegotiated through neoliberal welfare reforms such as privatisation of welfare services, and arguably these may be considered as political choices seeking to generate profits to a rich minority while limiting opportunities available to the generally less well-off welfare recipients (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Helminen 2009). Thus, it is the cumulative impact of spending cuts, the economic crisis, and welfare reforms, rather than austerity alone, that present a challenge to social welfare where economic growth is promoted at income equality's expense (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Mooney & Scott, 2012).

Arguably, the austerity currently experienced in Scotland stems from decisions made by the UK Conservative-led and coalition governments in response to the global economic crisis that developed in 2008 (Mooney, 2014; Scottish Government, 2013). Scottish local authorities are experiencing the financial squeeze because of budget cuts received by the Scottish Government from the UK parliament (Unison Scotland, 2016). In the UK there are real time concerns about the impact leaving the European Union will have on the country's economy. An analysis published by the Centre of European Reform (Springford, 2018) suggests that the UK economy is 2.5 per cent smaller than it would be if the UK had voted to remain in the European Union and the damage to economic growth has already had a significant negative impact on public finances.

In Finland, austerity measures appear to have been at a lower level than the spending cuts implemented in the UK (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015). Nonetheless, similarities have been drawn between the current economic situation and that of the early 1990s where a financial depression hit Finland particularly hard compared to other European countries, resulting in prolonged mass unemployment, and triggering a radical reorganisation of the Finnish welfare state (Julkunen, 2013; Kananen, 2016). The cuts have particularly affected the most vulnerable; according to a recent report by the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (2019) cuts in basic social security benefits implemented in 2015-2019 have increased both poverty rates and the significance of the means tested last resort social assistance.

### ***Austerity and Child Protection: messages from research***

In previous Scottish and Finnish social work research, spending cuts have often emerged as a side note rather than the central focus (e.g. Alhanen, 2014; Gallagher et al., 2011), although there are some contrasting examples (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015; McKendrick et al., 2016). Spending cuts appear to be linked to increased pressures on child protection practitioners who report facing heavy workloads and diminishing opportunities to deliver effective interventions within the context of sound ethical decision making (Alhanen, 2014; Francis, McGhee & Mordaunt, 2006; Kananoja, Lavikainen, & Oranen, 2013; Saarinen, Blomberg & Kroll, 2012). Resource limitations have been noted to present a challenge to social workers' ability to establish trusting relationships with service users (Alhanen, 2014; Pitkälä, 2012). Other barriers to engagement have been identified as proceduralism and rigid timescales (Gallagher et al., 2011), practitioners' lack of communication skills (Munro, 2011) or their unhelpful assumptions about service users' capacity to change (Jokinen & Nousiainen, 2014) as well as service users' own resistance to social work involvement (Scottish Government, 2014).

A recent study examining the relationship between austerity policies and child protection practice in England (Bywaters et al., 2018) evidences a strong relationship between the social and economic deprivation of communities and child protection intervention rates. Public expenditure and deprivation appear to have an impact on the quality of children's services. Local authorities with low deprivation score significantly better than high deprivation local authorities in performance inspections. High deprivation local authorities that achieved better outcomes spent significantly more money per child over all.

In this age of welfare reforms and increasingly stringent budgets, the role of social work is to mediate between the state and citizens who may feel themselves increasingly excluded and powerless (Davis & Wainwright, 2006; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013). Recent Finnish research shows that social workers experience moral distress resulting from the discrepancy between practice demands and the resources available to them (Blomgren et al., 2016; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2016). Similarly, a Swedish research found that a lack of resources forces social workers into adopting coping strategies that either endanger their own health or threaten service quality (Astvik, Melin & Allvin, 2014). Several Finnish social work studies highlight inadequate resources and note them to have adverse effects on practitioners' work-related wellbeing (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2016; Saarinen et al., 2012) or on service they are able to provide (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015).

### **Research design**

A qualitative methodology was employed in this project to generate new insights and increase understanding in relation to the everyday experiences of social workers engagement with families. The aim was to gather sufficient data for rigorous small-scale cross-national analysis. In order to ensure data comparability one Scottish local authority and one Finnish municipality were chosen for this study based on their demographic similarities. The research design was

underpinned by the British Sociological Society's Ethical Guidance, emphasising as it does the importance of informed consent and clear statements concerning the limits of confidentiality. Information about the project was provided verbally and in writing and informed consent was checked prior to data collection. We felt it important to make made clear that the project was not concerned with evaluating or assessing individual practice but rather then experience of engagement with families in a child protection context. Following ethical approval being granted by both a University ethics committee and Scottish and Finnish local authorities, participants were identified in collaboration with social work departments in accordance with their research access procedures. The participants, four Scottish and four Finnish qualified children and families statutory social workers positioned in intake teams with practice experience in child protection ranging from 4 to 17 years (average 8.75 years), were recruited with the assistance of child protection team leaders and service managers.

The research set out to identify barriers to effective engagement at the initial stages of a child protection assessment, and to examine the extent to which participants perceived the barriers to be linked to austerity measures. All participating practitioners were given an option to take part in a face to face a semi-structured interview or to submit written responses to the interview questions and prompts. All Scottish participants chose a face to face interview. One Finnish participant was interviewed and the rest chose to answer the interview questions in writing. Practitioners were asked questions around three key themes; their experience of effective engagement in their direct practice with service users, and the barriers to this. English and Finnish data was analysed in parallel and interpreted through descriptive and comparative thematic cross-national analysis (Hantrais, 2009). Six distinct categories of engagement barriers emerged from the data: limited resources, power imbalance between social workers and service users, proceduralism and bureaucracy, time restrictions, and service user- and practitioner-related factors. A closer data examination revealed a temporal perspective to austerity, which



highlighted practitioners' professional resilience, their enhanced sense of empathy and concerns for the future. We were struck by the ways in which practitioners drew on the concept of austerity as a means of making sense of their experiences. For them, there appeared to be strong links between child welfare concerns and poverty and that, in turn, this poverty was created or exacerbated by what they regarded as austerity measures.

## **Findings**

### ***Challenges to effective engagement in an age of austerity***

Scottish and Finnish practitioners regarded effective engagement with families as a vital part of their everyday practice. Although they were generally confident in their engagement abilities, they identified several factors hindering this critical aspect. Perhaps unsurprisingly, limited resources were identified by many as the most significant barrier to effective engagement. Participants viewed the social worker as the key resource with limitations resulting from increased workload and inadequate staffing. They described having significantly less time to devote to working directly with families than they had previously, and many talked about this in line with the detrimental bearing such resource limitations has on child protection practice (Alhanen, 2014; Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2016). For most, it meant that their resources or that of their team were focused on immediate risk minimisation which they believed limited preventative work being undertaken (Bywaters et al., 2018).

It was clear from the data that participants viewed growing workloads as linked to the adverse impact austerity had exerted on vulnerable children and families (Diaz & Aylward, 2018; Diaz et al., 2019; Lehtelä et al. 2016), which resulted in increased child protection referrals.

*We've had people whose circumstances have changed because of austerity. ... In terms of parental mental health ... the poverty and deprivation [that has been exacerbated by austerity can] have quite a knock-on effect in terms of their capacity to meet the needs of their children. (Scottish Practitioner 1)*

*Growing unemployment and increasingly deficient mental health, drug and alcohol services are apparent in increased child welfare concern reports. (Finnish Practitioner 2)*

Participants also argued that service users' negative preconceptions and mistrust undermined their ability to engage effectively with families avoiding social work involvement. Austerity was seen as playing its part in this with some participants attributing these challenges to the negative public discourse around poverty and child protection (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009) exacerbating families' reluctance to engage with social services. Some considered austerity as indirectly underpinning families' feelings of shame. They suggested shame was associated with poverty arising from families' perceived failure to fulfil social expectations imposed by media and government (Gibson, 2019; Walker et al., 2013).

*[Austerity potentially contributes to negative preconceptions on child protection] in a way that service users might experience a change in the societal set of values, and because of that they may wonder what kind of service they will get, or whether they will get the kind of service they hope. (Finnish Practitioner 3)*

*[When you make an initial assessment] you are the face of the authority, which has promoted people being in this [difficult] position. So, [you are the face of] our local authority, who is essentially the government, who has imposed these austerity cuts. ... And I think that is part of the whole narrative around about austerity, which is ... 'you are in this position because [of] the choices you have made and that is your fault'. (Scottish Practitioner 2)*

These extracts from the data appear to demonstrate that many of the participants supported the notion that current political discourse blames citizens for their own woes and is used to justify spending cuts stemming from both austerity and neoliberal approaches to welfare (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler & Westmarland, 2007; Dorling, 2014).

Practitioners identified increased proceduralism, time restrictions, the power imbalance between social workers and service users, and practitioners' ineffective or unsympathetic use of their core engagement skills as also having an impact on everyday practice with families (Alhanen, 2014; Jokinen & Nousiainen, 2014). With the exception of time restrictions, neither

Scottish nor Finnish practitioners regarded these challenges as resulting from spending cuts but rather viewed them as a manifestation of complex socio-political developments or as a part of the innate nature of statutory social work.

*I think getting that real relationship and rapport can be lost when things have escalated to—when they are forced to engage with you. (Scottish Practitioner 1)*

*If my employer could not afford to hire social workers that would have an impact on everyday practice ... a totally different matter is if there are not enough qualified applicants to fill the positions. That is not because of austerity. (Finnish Practitioner 1)*

*[In terms of human resources] we have been limited. And in a sense it has affected that we are meeting families fewer times than before ... So if we aim to establish that good relationship ... one meeting is not necessarily enough for that. I think that if we had more resources then maybe we could have more appointments, and in this way our practice could be more effective. (Finnish Practitioner 4)*

The biggest difference between Scottish and Finnish participants' perceptions was that the latter identified fewer engagement barriers and regarded austerity as making a less significant contribution to these challenges. This may be as a result of the less drastic austerity measures implemented in Finland compared to those introduced in the UK and the language of 'austerity' being adopted in Finnish usage only recently.

Some responses reflected differences in participants' socio-political context. For example, Scottish participants regarded themselves as being affected by cuts in voluntary sector support services more than their Finnish colleagues. The following quotation highlights the way the Scottish liberal welfare state relies on a strong civil society in service provision (Esping-Andersen, 1990):

*There are less places to signpost the families to. There are a lot of [cases where] the initial assessment is: 'actually, this isn't something necessarily for social work, and maybe there is something that another service could take forward' ... There is less scope for that as there's less services around for that. (Scottish Practitioner 4)*

Furthermore, Finnish participants, perhaps because they operated within what is regarded as a more equitable Nordic welfare state (Dorling, 2014; Kananen 2016) appeared less concerned about the power imbalance between them and service users, and emphasized effective engagement as requiring 'real' collaboration more often than their Scottish contemporaries. By contrast, Scottish participants mentioned more challenges in relation to the uneven power relationship, which may reflect their role in a liberal welfare state where class-political dualism persists (Dorling, 2014; Esping-Andersen, 1990) and public powers involvement represents more of an intrusion into family life (Clarke et al., 2007).

*Whether we like to acknowledge it or not -- there is a power imbalance between me as a practitioner, and the client ... and as much as we try to balance that out in the relationship ... I think that is another barrier [to effective engagement].*  
(Scottish Practitioner 2)

Overall, participants did not perceive any connection between austerity and the skills and values that underpinned their direct practice with children and families. Instead, all practitioners demonstrated significant confidence in their abilities to engage effectively with service users. Professional resilience and capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances were evident in the way some participants acknowledged that limited resources did not necessarily need to become a barrier to effective engagement:

*If facilities are inappropriate or resources are scarce because of a staff shortage, it may be evident in a meeting [with a family], but you can work around that. You do not need to show the service user that you are in haste, and you can make tight/inappropriate spaces more welcoming.* (Finnish Practitioner 1)

### ***A temporal perspective: past, current and future engagement opportunities***

Participants acknowledged that in an age of welfare reforms and austerity, both their role, and the reality of frontline child protection practice, were changing. In line with existing literature, they described resources as having become more scarce over time (Hearn et al., 2004; Saarinen

et al., 2012). All Scottish and half of the Finnish participants regarded preventive and supportive services as having been more readily available before austerity:

*We might [have] had services locally ... two years ago that we might be thinking, 'that meets the child's needs or ... that service would be very helpful in terms of ... working with the mother', and that service is not available anymore. And that would be due to cuts and austerity. (Scottish Practitioner 1)*

Scottish practitioners argued that when social work departments had been exposed to less financial scrutiny, they had had greater professional freedom to make discretionary payments to families, seeing economic, financial support as crucial to the support offered. They suggested that change had resulted from both austerity measures and broader neoliberal welfare reforms.

*When I first started in social work we had discretionary payments -- But they changed this so the [emergency funding] is all sort of localised, which means -- it is now run by the council. -- It becomes more [about] bureaucracy rather than anything else. (Scottish Practitioner 3)*

*Centralisation of welfare services may have an impact [on the effectiveness of engagement in case] clients are annoyed when they need to travel a longer distance to an appointment and they are unable to get a service from their hometown. Centralisation does not always happen because of austerity, it may be about know-how as well. (Finnish Practitioner 2)*

Most Scottish and half of the Finnish participants described their current practice as being affected by increased pressures due to growing demand and diminishing resources (Jütte et al., 2015; Paasivirta, 2012). Some participants in both countries voiced concerns that emphasising economic efficiency did not fit with the overall aim of child protection and that service cuts had resulted in ill-timed interventions in search of short-term financial savings undermining what was seen as the traditional social work value base (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009). Some spoke of the sense of powerlessness they experienced when their opportunities to support families were increasingly circumscribed:

*I think that there are limited resources on the side of the practitioner as well as on the side of the client. And actually, how helpless does everybody feel in that? Because, 'we would want to help you, but actually, do we have what you need?*

*And if what you need is access to community resources, if what you need is access to better housing—actually we do not have any ability to do anything about that’. So there is helplessness on our part, which I think is probably exacerbating the helplessness on theirs. (Scottish Practitioner 2)*

Most participants acknowledged that families in difficult circumstances find their decision-making abilities become restricted by ‘... unequal distribution of the social and cultural resources that enable and empower choice’ (Clarke et al., 2007, p. 107).

Most significantly, some participants reframed austerity as a positive contributor to their enhanced sense of empathy towards families struggling to cope with its adverse accumulated effect. It seemed such practitioners tapped into their sense of social justice to find ways to continue to empower and enable social change. The quote below serves as an example of the way social workers may be aware of the way deprivation increases the chance of families being subject to children's services interventions (Bywaters et al., 2018):

*I think [social workers] are increasingly motivated or impassioned to be more socially just in our response to the austerity ... So my response perhaps, as a result of austerity, is to be more responsive than inactive in so far as being conscious that people perhaps ... are put in a position, where they have little choice and [I] want to be someone who can help them to establish more choice. (Scottish Practitioner 2)*

Evidencing their abilities to adapt and endure austerity-related challenges, participants asserted that whilst opportunities to effectively engage with families were more limited compared to those in the past, their ability to do so effectively remained unaffected:

*I think what we do is come to terms with [limited resources] and move on ... I hope it doesn't affect my efforts engaging with people. ... I think if it just becomes normal, so whatever that caseload or whatever that resource cut is that you just make do, you say ‘okay, that is our new normal’ and you get on [with it]. (Scottish Practitioner 2)*

*There are ways [you can work] around [austerity-related challenges] if you are creative as a social worker. (Scottish Practitioner 4)*

*I have not noticed austerity to affect my practice. (Finnish Practitioner 1)*

Practitioners' confidence in making the most of what they considered to be limited opportunities to engage with children and families suggest that they felt a degree of control over the way in which they prioritised their time within the organisational and statutory framework (Davis & Wainwright, 2006). The effectiveness of their engagement with families appeared less affected by economic restraints than other aspects of their practice, such as their opportunities to sign-post families to support services, might have been. This is in line with the notion that that social workers' ability to build trusting relationships with service users is not as easily hindered by scarce financial resources as are their ability to keep within statutory timelines or provide wholesome support (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015).

*When I qualified 11 years ago ... I was always told 'you've done all this training ... If you cannot find the resource, you [need to] be the resource'. ... I think, going forward ... we need to start bringing these skills back to the forefront, practice them, and use them. If we are not able to get a service that works for families ... then we need to be using our skills and knowledge and research and providing that info and intervention. (Scottish Practitioner 1)*

However, Scottish and Finnish practitioners shared a concern that their ability to engage effectively with families might be undermined in the future should austerity persist. Most were concerned that resources might become further limited to the extent that timely interventions are jeopardised.

*Further down the line, the more cuts [they make] ... in terms of austerity ... two and three ... years down the line [they might] make cuts in terms of resources [that affect the] availability of social workers. So, I think that may have an impact on engagement and I mean that there is not enough workers to actually engage [with families]. (Scottish Practitioner 1)*

*Because this is so exhausting [job] for us remaining [in the intake team], even we will not last long. In this sense, it could be sensible economically as well if there would be practitioners to do [the job] here. I think it is a risk in a way as well if you do not have enough practitioners to do the work in time. (Finnish Practitioner 4)*

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Both Scottish and Finnish practitioners identified the complex impact austerity measures are having on their resources and the families they are working with. The most significant challenges in everyday practice were identified as accumulated scarce resources and service users' negative preconceptions and mistrust towards child protection services enhanced by the 'shaming' of families in difficulty promoted in the discourses implicit in austerity. The relationship between austerity and barriers to engagement appeared as multi-faceted. Indeed, participants viewed the everyday impact of austerity measures to be intertwined with that of broader neoliberal efficiency-promoting policy developments. This supports the notion that spending cuts, economic climate, and welfare reforms have cumulative adverse impacts on the frontline experience of the delivery of social welfare (Mooney & Scott, 2012).

The overall similarities in Scottish and Finnish participants' responses were more striking than the differences, highlighting the shared reality of daily child protection practice in Western welfare states in an age of austerity. However, Scottish participants appeared to be more affected by cuts in support services than their Finnish colleagues were, whilst the Finns attributed engagement challenges more often to factors other than austerity compared to their Scottish colleagues.

The findings suggest that both child protection practitioners and families are facing increasing pressures in an age of austerity (McKendrick et al., 2016). Early interventions are seen as a cost-efficient short-term solution for governments (Jütte et al., 2015), but challenging to deliver in an age of austerity (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015) when child welfare services are becoming more reactive instead of preventive (Saarinen et al., 2012). Data supported Welbourne's (2011) suggestion that it is increasingly difficult for social work to view itself as an empowering profession when its role is becoming more circumscribed. Most significantly, it appeared that the unexpected impact of austerity was a greater sense of empathy and alignment to service



users. The data suggested that participants considered the social and economic origins of the difficulties that their families were facing and, most strikingly, their perceived responsibilities to challenges such as social injustice.

Participants demonstrated significant professional resilience by, in the face of significant cuts, regarding their own 'self' as the key 'helping resource'. However, the resultant individualisation of practitioner responsibility for the wellbeing and protection of the children and families with whom they work must be seen within the context of their own wellbeing (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2015). This was reflected in the Scottish and Finnish participants' shared concern about their ability to sustain their efforts to promote effective engagement with children and families in the future if austerity persists and their resources become even more scarce. Their concern also reflects the notion that social work is not able to fulfil its societal role if resources simply aim to allow sustaining families' survival within their current circumstances (Blomgren et al., 2016).

Austerity is a complex concept and an attempt to grasp and compare its implications across two socio-political contexts is challenging. However, this paper has argued that Scottish and Finnish child protection systems are similar enough for credible cross-national comparison in terms of underpinning practice principles and adversities brought about by contemporary policy developments and the European economic climate.

The study's originality lies in the light the findings throw onto the everyday practice in two different European welfare states where welfare reforms and spending cuts present a challenge to promoting the welfare of vulnerable children. The findings suggest that social workers consider austerity and welfare reforms in their practice. Most importantly, this study has suggested that austerity has resulted in social workers beginning to reframe their understanding of the families that they work with, resulting in greater empathy and cognisance of poverty as

a key challenge. Our paper has suggested that examining the practitioners' perspective cross nationally provides an interesting way to make sense of the everyday experiences of frontline practitioners who strive to continue to have a clear vision of their role within society and to make the most of their opportunities to empower and enable change in families.

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### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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