

# Pressure drop: Securitising and de-securitising safeguarding

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** This article explores how securitisation theory is mobilised in contemporary social work discourse, policy and practice. We draw on recent child protection research to support our claim that a new practice issue, described previously as securitised safeguarding, has emerged.

**APPROACH:** We demonstrate its emergence using securitisation theory as a conceptual mode of analysis to describe how a securitised safeguarding response depicts particular families as an existential threat which, in turn, prompts a response characterised by forms of muscular liberalism.

**CONCLUSIONS:** We argue that this emerging practice issue requires critical consideration and suggest it will have a significant impact on social work – one that is unlikely to be beneficial for the profession and, more importantly, families being worked with. By describing a process of de-securitisation, we offer an alternative and more nuanced approach that perceives families holistically, and mobilises a welfare safeguarding model. This more closely resembles traditional social work values of emancipation, liberation and empowerment within social work practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Securitisation theory; safeguarding; discourse; social work; de-securitisation

It's a song about revenge, but in the form of karma: if you do bad things to innocent people, then bad things will happen to you. The title was a phrase I used to say. If someone done me wrong, rather than fight them like a warrior, I'd say: "The pressure's going to drop on you". (Frederick 'Toots' Hibbert, *The Guardian*)

Social work, in the UK and in many other countries, has always operated at the borders of the state and the populace; a position often described as the care and control functions of social work (Maclean & Harrison, 2012; Pitts, 2011). In this discussion, we develop a further dimension to this position, and explore emerging tensions between liberty and security in

social work practice in statutory contexts charged with responsibility for safeguarding and de-radicalisation. Whilst this article concerns itself with safeguarding children and the advance of the "investigative turn" (Bilson, Featherstone, & Martin, 2017) in safeguarding, we would contend that the same analysis could equally be applied to safeguarding within the adult practice arena. We deploy theory more commonly used in the discipline of international relations and apply it to social work, to explore this liberty–security tension. Indeed, we feel that such a theoretical framework has much offer social work policy and practice.

We contend that apparatuses of security as described by Foucault (2009) are increasingly

AOTEAROA  
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WORK 32(1), 61–72.

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becoming mobilised within contemporary UK child protection practice. This involves the state imposing a form of discipline for some individuals and families whom it perceives to be risky (Parton, 2006). We make the claim that these apparatuses of security are increasingly pervasive and act as ideological cover for advancing the securitising elements of the austerity agenda (Massey, 2015). We argue further that such apparatuses can limit privacy and security. Additionally, depicting some families as in need of securitised approaches, has the potential to take social work in directions that may be in conflict with the profession's liberal and emancipatory constructs. We argue that developing a more politically conscious form of practice that is academically imaginative and focused on structural issues aligns more closely with the profession's liberatory and emancipatory origins. The discussion begins with a brief overview of securitisation theory.

### Securitisation theory

We have previously argued that securitisation theory offers an imaginative, innovative and critical lens through which to critically explore contemporary social work policy and practice in the UK and elsewhere (Finch & McKendrick, 2019). Securitisation theory, whilst not traditionally applied in social work policy and practice, provides an illuminative account of the underpinning ideology and processes of risk formation and amplification which, we suggest, are becoming increasingly dominant in the current UK policy climate.

Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde (1998), collectively known as the Copenhagen School, developed the concept of securitisation theory for application in the discipline of international relations. Securitisation theory, unlike traditional international relations theory which focuses on security threats with attention paid to military capacity, comes from a social constructivist position and deploys a process-oriented approach to the idea

of security. The theory describes the process inherent in threat formation and the subsequent maintenance of the threat. The theory provides an account of how the populace in one nation can perceive the actions of other nations as existential threats.

From this perspective, security is a discursive process whereby politicians, using speech acts, construct a threat, which usually leads to the enactment of emergency or special measures to deal with the threat (Wodak & Boukala, 2014). The theory proposes that the response to these existential threats, sees the legitimisation of exceptional actions that are out of alignment with the international community's normal diplomatic and democratic spheres of conduct. The concept of existential threat is therefore a justification for actions that would not be considered in normal circumstances.

Importantly, the actions of countries need not actually be taken in response to an existential threat; they only need to be manufactured to appear as though they are, or alternatively, be perceived as being such, therefore rendering the concept entirely subjective and open to potential manipulation. The application of securitisation by states is likely to promote greater public awareness of the securitising issue with greater public attention being paid, resulting in increased resource allocation dedicated to the issue. The severity of the threat engenders public support for the securitisation act(ions) due to the nature of the existential threat. As Balzacq (2005) argues, securitisation is thus a:

...rule-governed practice, the success of which does not necessarily depend on the existence of a real threat, but on the discursive ability to effectively endow a development with such a specific complexion. (Balzacq, 2005, p. 179)

In other words, this is a circular and self-reinforcing phenomenon in operation. The Copenhagen school describe "speech acts" as a central element of the theory; the

securitisation act occurs when a “designated audience” overhears something that is portrayed as an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998). For securitisation to occur (and for apparatuses of security to be subsequently developed, mobilised and imposed), several conditions are required:

- A securitizing actor/agent: an entity that makes the securitizing move/ statement;
- An existential threat: an object (or ideal) that has been identified as potentially harmful;
- A referent object: an object (or ideal) that is being threatened and needs to be protected;
- An audience: the target of the securitization act that needs to be persuaded and accept the issue as a security threat. (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 36)

### Securitisation and social work

As we explored in the previous section, the securitisation act occurs, therefore, when a designated audience becomes aware of something that is perceived as an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998). We argue that statutory and regulated professions respond to the speech acts of others, both downward speech acts from politicians and policy makers, and upward speech acts, particularly from the general public, when crises occur. As is all too clear in the UK child protection context, such downwards and upwards speech acts arise intensively at particular moments, for example, when a child dies at their hands of their parents or carers, and social workers are blamed, or in response to other publicly perceived failures of social workers. Indeed, Warner (2015) has previously explored similar themes, arguing that there is an intersection between public demand and political reaction following such publicised deaths of children. Inevitably, such tragedies are

viewed as acts of failure by individual social workers. As Cooper and Lousada (2005) argue further, the public outcry at such tragic deaths of children, is not so much that the child has died, but rather that there has been a failure by the social work profession to keep such knowledge about what parents can do, hidden, out of sight, and out of the public domain. In other words, troublesome knowledge, of the like proposed by Meyer and Land (2005), has escaped into the public domain.

Returning to securitisation theory. It develops and retains a focus on action rather than causality and is concerned with the provision of ontological security (Giddens, 1991) for the greatest number. In the example of a highly publicised death, i.e., a murder of a child at the hands of their parents, for many people their sense of ontological security is disrupted, resulting in the emergence of concern over the role of professionals involved with the child and greater focus is brought to bear on the actions of social workers. There is an accompanying need for the public to feel reassured that the agency with responsibility for child protection is able to discharge this responsibility. This is regardless of resource constraints or other pertinent issues, not least the unpalatable truth that no system of child protection could ever stop children being harmed by parents.

The associated loss of this trust between the public and social workers creates insecurity and a sense of disruption for the public who are then left seeking reassurances that social workers are trustworthy, but are, in fact responsible for child deaths at the hands of their parents. Indeed, the huge political, public and media outcry at the death of Baby Peter, who died in the London Borough of Haringey in 2007, exemplifies this concern, with the *Sun* newspaper suggesting that, in addition to the parents who killed Baby Peter, the social workers involved, and the chief executive of Haringey Council, Sharon Shoesmith, had “Blood on their Hands” (Nicholls, 2016).

The securitisation act is instrumental in that it seeks to reduce or eliminate threat in the immediate moment without considering its wider social causes. For example, in social work this can be seen in rapid changes in legislation, or social work policies and practice which increasingly focus on risk aversion, bureaucracy and proceduralisation. This response removes the focus on social causation, obscures structural factors and will inevitably diminish critical and reflective practice. We argue that securitisation theory is therefore reactive and does not relate well to the emancipatory values of social work which seek to develop holistic understandings of the ecology of the environment in which it operates. Securitisation theory, and the practice approaches that it values and promotes, fits well with the burgeoning neoliberal project that typifies the existing social and political environment – not only in the UK, but in other Western welfare states.

### Securitised safeguarding?

We previously developed the term “securitised safeguarding” (Finch & McKendrick, 2019; McKendrick & Finch, 2017) in the exploration and critique of relatively new duties in the UK (but not Northern Ireland) which require social workers and other frontline professionals to have due regard to, and work within, the government’s counter-terrorism strategy known as PREVENT. Securitised forms of safeguarding might look and sound like traditional welfare safeguarding practice, but they have some key differences that require critical examination. Such differences include: a shift in how we view a child or young person from *being at risk*, to one potentially *posing a risk*; a shift in how we view Muslim communities as being oppressed and discriminated against, to being suspect communities, and by safeguarding practices being unproblematically expanded to include assessment of pre-crime and propensity for terrorism.

Additionally, securitised safeguarding places a form of ontological security at the heart of social work practice that sees social workers mired in a series of bureaucratic activities which offer little in the way of direct contact with families and instead serve an organisational culture preoccupied with a discourse of risk and threat (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris, & Warner, 2016.) We build on our understanding of securitised safeguarding within the counter-terrorism domain to explore the extent to which we may see such securitised approaches dominating traditional child protection practices which have tended to focus on parents and/or close caregivers that may pose a risk for children.

### Risk aversion, securitisation and surveillance

There is a lack of critical recognition within the profession of the ease with which the development of securitised safeguarding approaches legitimises and enhances the neoliberal political and social narrative. Ragazzi (2016), for example, describes how, in public policy, ideas about security are preferred over notions of welfare, and the work of Bilson and Martin (2016), Bilson et al. (2017) and Featherstone et al. (2016) provide support for this assertion. Webb (2006) argues that neoliberalism produces a discourse of personal responsibility by emphasising personal over structural causation. As we go on to explore, practice approaches consistent with this analysis are mobilised through securitised safeguarding. This focus provides a vehicle for the promotion of a series of instrumental technical-rational methods of intervention (Wastell et al., 2010) which emphasise actuarial risk assessment and risk management practices (Webb, 2010). While practices such as these might well avoid greater risk and prevent harm in the short term, they are unlikely to support the creation of a set of circumstances where such changes are enduring. Rather, the practice of risk management (in itself a product of the securitisation processes we discussed

earlier), is essentially a temporary fix which, unless married with a more robust set of changes to the economic and political system, will result in *see-saw* families who engage, disengage and re-engage with services over time. There is also a risk of over-notification, with families being unnecessarily drawn into welfare services, which is potentially damaging in and of itself, as will be explored later.

This practice culture is further complicated by a regime of hyper-regulation that sees local authorities and social work services subject to intense and potentially deleterious scrutiny which is often focused on issues of performance and targets. A further arena for scrutiny exists in the professional regulation of social workers (Worsley, McLaughlin, & Leigh, 2017). This panoptic focus on scrutiny, alongside ontological insecurity created by a professional fear of getting it wrong in concert with global ontological insecurities and fear caused by the very real threat of terrorism, may create the conditions for unthinking decision making using oversimplified 'common sense' (McKendrick & Finch, 2016) explanations. Consequently, social workers may act with undue haste to remove a child or adult from an unsafe situation by placing them in a secure environment. More generally, social workers might rely on thin narratives to understand complex social phenomena, such as cases of children and young people becoming radicalised to commit terrorist acts. The discussion now moves on to consider recent child protection research, which we use to further illustrate concern with securitised safeguarding.

### Messages from research

Bilson and Martin's (2016) research in England provides an example of the impact of these developments. They demonstrate an 80% increase in child protection investigations over a five-year period (2010–2015) with a 118% rise in findings of "no abuse". For us, this is a powerful example of securitised safeguarding driven by a

neoliberal political agenda, which sees a shift in the mode of professional engagement with families from a non-judgemental attitude to an attitude characterised by suspicion and disbelief (Morrison, 2006). Instead of social workers working *with* families and developing relationships, a new dynamic has emerged. Social workers increasingly employ actuarial methods informed by a subjective instrumentality which does not demonstrate adequate consideration of other mitigating factors. Instead, they may engage based on the assumption that families are subversive, risky, and full of threat. A veneer of suspicion is added to the professional relationship that sees social workers as constantly concerned over the possibility of what families might do as opposed to what has been done to them through government policy, austerity measures and the neoliberal environment.

Rose (2000) characterises likely users of social work services, as "excluded sub populations" who are constructed as having "refused the bonds of civility and self-responsibility" and are living outside the "circuits of inclusion" (p. 331) in geographically isolated locations, employed on precarious zero hours contracts, removed from the centres of decision making and perceived by a distant, muscular state as risky, dangerous and capable of acts of violence and aggression against their own children or other vulnerable relatives. For Rose (2000), social workers operate as state actors involved in "the administration of the marginalia" (p. 331). Social workers are therefore participants in the apparatuses of security serving to control, constrain and manage sections of the population, working uncritically within oppressive new legislative measures and policy environments.

Bilson and Martin's (2016) research provides compelling supporting evidence for Rose's (2000) claims. Bilson and Martin demonstrate a clear relationship between exposure to child protection activity and deprivation, with children living in the most deprived areas of the country being 11 times more

likely to be on a child protection plan or in care compared to those in the least deprived areas. Using freedom of information requests, Bilson and Martin (2016) explored responses from 75% of English local authorities showing that 115,735 children, 22.5% of the over half million children born between 2009 and 2010 in these authorities, had been referred to children's services before their fifth birthday in 2015. Half of those referred, one in every nine children, were at some time suspected of having suffered abuse or neglect. Child protection investigations were carried out into the circumstances of 5.4% of all children born between 2009 and 2010.

Bilson, Cant, Harries, and Thorpe (2013) also explored statistics in Australia, gathered between 1996 and 2009. Parallel to the UK context, there was also an increase in child protection activity with investigations, referrals and reports gradually rising before rapidly increasing following the introduction of well-being indicators from mid-2005. In the period between 2006 and 2009 there was a 100% increase in referrals and reports of child protection concern.

### Unnecessary state intervention?

This phenomenon appears to echo the spirit of securitisation theory where (possibly manufactured or exaggerated) concerns are perceived by the state as an existential threat, permitting state actions not commensurate with existing democratic conduct. For example, Bilson states:

An increasing proportion of investigations do not find children to be significantly harmed. These inconclusive investigations have more than doubled from 45,000 to 98,000 in the last five years leading to many more families being unnecessarily put through the trauma of an accusation that they are harming their child. By 2014-15 less than two in every five child protection investigations found significant harm leading to a child protection plan. There is little or

no evidence that this growing culture of high levels of suspicion of abuse provides better protection for children and some evidence that unfounded investigations are in themselves harmful. (Bilson, 2016, paragraph 6)

It is worth emphasising the last sentence of this quote, namely, the potential of harm being increased in vulnerable families by unnecessary and intrusive state/social service investigations. We note alarming similarities with recent statistics about referrals to Channel panels. Channel panels, in the UK, are one aspect of the anti-terrorism PREVENT policy. Where there are concerns about an individual being drawn into extremism or being radicalised, local authorities, using existing collaborative arrangements between health, social care, youth offending and the police, convene panels with the aim of:

- identifying individuals at risk of being drawn into terrorism
- assessing the nature and extent of that risk
- developing the most appropriate support plan for the individuals concerned
- safeguarding children and adults being drawn into terrorism by intervening early before illegality occurs. (HM Government, 2012)

The Home Office reports that, in 2017/18, 7,318 individuals were referred to PREVENT. Of those, 40% were signposted to alternative support, 42% required no further action and 18% were discussed at Channel panels. Of the 394 individuals who received Channel support in 2017/18, 179 (45%) were referred for concerns related to Islamist extremism and 174 (44%) were referred for concerns related to right-wing extremism (Home Office, 2018). In other words, 82% of referrals to Channel panels result in no further action or support

other than de-radicalisation services. This amounts to 6,924 people between 2017 and 2018 who were clearly involved in a securitised safeguarding process where it was concluded that there was no identifiable extremist activity

### **Well-being and child protection: A marriage made in hell?**

This dramatic increase in state intervention in terms of increased referrals for alleged child abuse and referrals because of suspected radicalisation, raises additional concerns for the writers around the conflation of well-being and safeguarding which we see as an extension of the issue of securitised safeguarding. Indeed, Webb (2010) explored the concept of well-being, which he insightfully framed as being:

A warmly pervasive concept it is likely that well-being will become more and more embedded in both public policy and everyday talk. (2010, p. 959)

Webb (2010) locates well-being as a contemporary feature of post-materialist societies that sees the “ongoing transformation of individual values in society which gradually frees them from the stress of basic acquisitive or materialistic needs” (2010, p. 964). Webb (2010) positions well-being as a subjective instrument for framing an activity or set of needs and wants. Well-being is a product therefore, of postmodern societies and operates as a replacement for traditional models of society that were built on occupational specialisation, urbanisation and bureaucratisation.

The inherent subjectivity of well-being allied to the stated desires relating to quality of life and individual self-expression allows for a continuous and rapid expansion and definition of the term. The Scottish Government, vocal champions of the notion, do not even offer a definition; instead they have produced a series of eight well-being indicators that represent the “Getting It

Right for Every Child” policy that forms the national framework policy for Children and Families (Scottish Government, n.d.).

Webb (2010) identifies two problems with notions of well-being. One is the anticipatory and elasticity of the concept; even if you have a degree of well-being there is always more to achieve. Secondly, well-being promotes a trend in social individualism that shifts society away from notions of collectivism and unity. These factors may go some way in explaining the increase in referrals recorded by Bilson and Martin (2016). The safety and protection or the avoidance of serious harm or injury to the person has been replaced by vague notions of self and the pursuit of social individualism. This shift is described in greater depth by Deleuze (1990) as a shift from “disciplinary societies” to “societies of control”. As Finch and McKendrick (2019) have previously argued, societies were organised on predictable lines associated with mass employment and a social and personal life organised around the workplace. The decline in industry and its replacement with patterns of occupation based on call-centre-type models encourages a new society mediated by technology that encourages shifts in socialisation and leisure activities.

In this context, emerging social work practices which are driven by a desire to keep pace with societal changes involve a directional shift which runs contrary to the fundamental principles of the profession which understand structural factors and lived experience as playing a significant part in capacity to manage challenges (Corrigan & Leonard, 1984). The influence that gender, race, and social class have in child protection work is rendered invisible by the securitisation process. Instead, the pursuit of ontological security as proposed by Giddens (1991), is favoured through a series of technical-rational practice approaches. As long ago, as 1991, Castel was concerned about the process of the de-skilling of social workers, through the

over-emphasis on managerialist actuarial regimes. As Castel (1991) notes:

The specialist find themselves now cast in a subordinate role, while managerial policy formation is allowed to develop into a more completely autonomous force, totally beyond the surveillance of the operative on the ground who is now reduced to a mere executant. (Castel, 1991, p. 281)

### Exploring a practice of de-securitisation

In considering how best to move to a de-securitised method of practice, it is important to recognise the embedded nature of neoliberalism as a political and economic doctrine and the impact it has had on public services in general and social work in particular. As Ferguson and Lavalette (2017) remind us, neoliberalism can no longer be considered a new phenomenon.

It has been with us for 40 years and is based on the mantra of “private good, public bad”. In relating neoliberalism to today’s safeguarding practices, it is important to recognise that the past 40 years has seen a significant overhaul of all public services with the result that the language, policy, practices and approaches have been co-opted to support a hegemony which aims to ensure that responsibility for social issues and problems is transferred decisively from the state to the individual.

We perceive the emergence of “securitised safeguarding” as an endgame in this project. Neoliberal policies act as tools for discrimination, oppression and securitising a class of people as dangerous rather than as victims of a system that is designed to ensure that the advantaged not only retain that advantage, but are recipients of further advantage. We argue that this is a necessary requirement in the development of an unrestricted neoliberalism which allows a more complete transfer of responsibility away from the state to the individual,

requiring the state to only provide services that safeguard rather than support, and to do so in a securitised manner.

In developing a response to this developing practice, we are conscious of the need to critically consider the extent to which neoliberalism has permeated all aspects of public service, including social work. To this end, concepts that have been widely accepted to date require critical review. We suggest that certain words and phrases are worthy of consideration as keywords in the neoliberal project, hence our earlier exploration of “safeguarding” and “well-being”. As an alternative, we suggest that we give more thorough and detailed consideration to concepts such as discrimination, poverty and oppression. Further, rather than perceiving those who receive services from social work as risky and dangerous, we should conceptualise them as victims of a pervasive political order that applies discrimination and oppression as a coercive form of social control.

### The liberty–security balance

Neocleous (2007) considers the challenges in what he describes as the “liberty security balance”. He relies on a well-known quote from Benjamin Franklin who stated, “they that cannot give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither”. For Neocleous (2007), the challenge lies in the belief that we live in an essentially liberal society which, on occasion, enacts securitised measures as a means of preserving that liberty. This is done reluctantly but the populace gives its consent to it occurring to prevent the deleterious consequences that would occur if it was not applied. Neocleous’s (2007) argument is that we do not, in fact, live in a society where liberalism is dominant but rather one in which we have a fundamental and ingrained disposition to security, he argues:

I want to suggest that in encouraging an essentially liberal mode of thought, the myth of “balance” between security and liberty opens the (back)door to an



acceptance of all sorts of authoritarian security measures; measures which are then justified on liberal grounds. (2007, p. 133)

When related to social work, this can be seen to be reflected in the perversion of safeguarding practices which, in their current form, have done little to uphold the liberal traditions of the profession. Instead, such practices have embedded and encouraged the development of securitised approaches which are justified on liberal grounds, thereby ensuring securitisation enjoys hegemonic status in this area of activity. Perhaps most concerning is the way in which threat is perceived through a series of subjective concepts and the manner in which these concepts are seen to be evidenced through the speech acts of a marginalised, oppressed and precarious section of the population. The dominant mode of thought is one of suspicion and concern. Despite attempts to prevent this becoming rigidly fixed in the social imagination, social work finds itself subsumed within the powers that are promoting such securitised approaches and attitudes (Jensen, 2014; Slater, 2012; Tyler, 2013).

### Welfare safeguarding

Wæver (1997) provides one model that could effectively be used to challenge this hegemony. He suggests three strategies to achieve de-securitisation:

1. Not speaking about the issue as a threat at all;
2. Managing securitisation in a way that prevents it from spiralling;
3. Moving the securitised issue back into normal politics.

We refer to these actions as a form of “welfare safeguarding”. In order to reclaim practice for a more welfare-centred orientation we see a key role for sociological literature and research. Crossley

(2017) explores the notion of imagined geographies of poverty. He describes how the mobilisation of neoliberal policies causes harm to individuals and families and how these harms are subsequently labelled by hegemonic powers as the responsibility of those individuals. He reminds us that the problems experienced by specific regions or people are not the problems of those regions or people. Lansey and Mack (2015) describe the impact of austerity policies on vulnerable children and families thus:

The policies were designed to hit the incomes and housing security of families who already had a hand to mouth existence, missing out on the most basic of contemporary needs. (p. 85)

Crossley (2017) and Lansey and Mack (2015) all demonstrate the significance of structural, social, political and economic decisions made by government and their impact on the most vulnerable of families. We go further and suggest that the policies enacted by government create circumstances where families exposed to the austerity agenda experience greater surveillance and increased exposure to securitised safeguarding because verbal expression of frustration, exhaustion and anger at being marginalised could be perceived as the utterances of intention to do harm or to engage in practices that are perceived as risky. In turn, this renders those families more vulnerable, not as a result of their own actions but rather as a deliberate consequence of hegemonic power. Indeed, Jensen (2018) argues that individualising and pathologising discourses of so-called dysfunctional and feral families are created by the media and public debate, which, in turn legitimises state discipline of parents. Jensen (2018) argues, therefore, that such imagery is used to justify punitive family policies.

As Bilson and Martin’s research demonstrates, such punitive incursions into the private life of the family are not only unwarranted but are actively harmful and reductive. Seeing expressions of

exasperation for what they are, a method of relieving pressure and strain, represents the beginnings of a welfare safeguarding model. Demonstrating empathy and understanding within a relationship that can contain the day-to-day frustrations of a marginalised and oppressed group, becomes a political act – an act which moves decisively away from a threat-based engagement to one of understanding, support and effective challenge. Actively listening to speech acts and demonstrating an ability to interpret them relative to the circumstances in which they are made represents a proportionate and empathic response. Understanding *normal* expressions of frustration and setting these against expressions that require a securitised intervention becomes a central element of welfare safeguarding practice. Finally, the ability to move beyond the initial speech act and locate this in the lived experience of the family or the individual represents a shift back to the normal politics of social work relationships.

If social workers are to adequately protect children, a professional requirement arises for social workers to challenge the existing structure of inequality that promotes the notion of increased individual responsibility. We argue that processes of securitisation act decisively to move, not only responsibility to families, but to compel social workers to see these families as beyond help and in need of securitisation.

We argue that welfare safeguarding comes with a requirement for socially aware social workers who are conscious of the political climate they operate in and are able to recognise the pernicious impact that austerity policies have on those least able to resist them. We encourage social workers to defy simplified common sense, thin narratives that emphasise the actions of individuals as being of greater significance than the actions of governments and political elites and we support efforts to encourage a more socially conscious and politically active social work – one which de-securitises rather than contributes to securitisation policies and

practices. We acknowledge that operating in a de-securitising manner is challenging for individual social workers, who may also be suffering from marginalisation themselves, not least because of their close proximity to individuals and families perceived as dangerous or “other” (McKendrick & Finch, 2017). There is a need, therefore, for more collective action by those in caring professions to ensure those at risk in a neoliberal society do not become further marginalised.

Leonard (1975) describes socially active and politicised social work, involving a need to understand the difference between the *description* of the current activities of social workers and the *prescription* of future activities that seek a more radical resolution to the issues faced by families. He explores this tension using the example of a move from an individual pathology to a collective perspective, seeing the problems experienced by an individual as experienced in similar ways with perhaps different emphasis by a group. In a later text, Corrigan and Leonard (1984) use the example of a single parent struggling with the challenges of bringing up her children. In an individualised case work pathology, there is a greater emphasis on risk to the children arising through a lack of parental capacity while in a group setting the common struggles of one-parent families are exposed through the lens of gender discrimination and oppression. Leonard (1975) argues that this sort of re-framing provides an entirely different and richer understanding of the causes and effects of social problems. Whilst these texts are over 40 years old, they clearly illuminate the possibility of de-securitising approaches in social work.

## Conclusion

We have argued that the gradual and surreptitious development of securitised safeguarding has largely taken place under the radar. From our dissemination activities of other related work, it is clear that a sense of disquiet exists amongst practitioners

over what we term here as *securitisation creep*, represented in a gradual hardening of attitudes towards users of social work services, coupled with a greater emphasis on social control and coercive forms of practice. Practitioners have not, as yet, been able to rally around a particular theoretical approach that gathers these concerns up coherently while offering a potential alternative. In some regards, existing social work theory does not adequately provide the vehicle for this, and our attempt here has been to explore other areas of academia and to provide insights from there in the hope that we encourage more imaginative thinking around this set of issues, not only in social work, but for a wide range of social care professionals working with vulnerable communities at risk from securitising welfare practices.

Accepted: 4 March 2020

Published: 14 April 2020

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