

Why good social workers do bad things:

An institutional ethnography of social work

with children and families

Jessica Louise Langston

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociological Studies

August 2021

**Dedication**

**Rosemary “Val” Mulvany 1945-2020**

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful Aunty Val who sadly died weeks before its submission. Born in Waterford, Ireland, Val had an instrumental role in the lives of her ‘many’ siblings, both in Ireland and later in Birmingham where she settled down to start her own family. My father followed her here shortly afterwards, with just a rucksack of clothes he arrived unannounced to start his life in England. Just as she helped him, some 30 years later it would be me who turned up on her doorstep with nowhere to go. The combination of her unconditional love and no-nonsense approach enabled me to build my life and have a safety net to try (and fail), never doubting her love for me.

Abstract

This thesis explores how the activities of social workers in a children and families department of a UK local authority are organised, to understand the contradictions and tensions in the social work role, specifically in relation to the work undertaken that results in care proceedings.

Taking an institutional ethnographic frame, the study adopted the standpoint of social workers, illuminating through observation and conversation the actualities of their day-to-day activities. This framework enabled the study to explicate the vast web of ruling relations that organised and coordinated their activities across various locations and points in time, and to situate the findings in relation to the underlying ideologies shaping the construction of “normal” childhood and “good” parenting.

The research findings identified a bifurcation of consciousness, a dissonance between social work as it was imagined and social work as it was performed. In communicating an understanding of their everyday activities social workers drew on authoritative accounts, framed by theorised concepts of social work as it appears in literature. However, the study found that the activities undertaken by social workers in their day-to-day role bore little resemblance to the theorised notions of social work they had communicated. Social workers’ daily activities were organised as a series of disconnected tasks designed to serve the organisation’s need to demonstrate compliance with targets. The study identified that the opportunities in which social workers have to exercise professional discretion are reducing as a result of the near-constant surveillance of their activities along with a range of mechanisms of control and compliance deployed by the local authority to restrict professional judgement.

This study shows that an exploration of social work activities through an institutional ethnography can highlight the systemic and multifaceted ways in which good social workers are compelled to do bad things.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the staff at Middleshire. I was in awe on a daily basis at how eager social workers were in sharing the highs and lows of their practice, engaging enthusiastically with what were at times some difficult questions, and their commitment; with many keeping in touch once the fieldwork had been completed. And to the children and families who allowed me to observe their interactions with social workers at what I appreciate was a challenging time.

I consider myself fortunate to have been supervised by Professors Sue White and Kate Morris. I recognise that supervising PhD students requires a significant commitment; the time and patience required to nurture and guide a student through not only the process of their research but in the journey of becoming a researcher, is no small undertaking. Their patience, commitment, and intellectual generosity has been invaluable, and I cannot thank them enough.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to study with Professor Dorothy Smith at the University of Toronto, alongside her colleague Dr Susan Turner. I am forever grateful not only for the learning and tutelage during this time, but for the warmth of their welcome.

To my colleagues in the sociology department at Sheffield, thank you so much for welcoming me and making me feel part of the department despite the 100 miles between us. In particular, Calum Webb whose intellectual conversation, feedback, and warm friendship have been invaluable, despite his love of numbers!

I’d like to thank everyone who supported, encouraged, and listened to me moan (but not those who kept asking me if my thesis was finished yet, that was really unhelpful!); there is such a long list of people I can’t possibly thank everyone by name, but a special word of thanks to Brian (the dog), and my friends Gareth, Lucy, Allie, Hels, Paul, and Szandra for their unwavering support and faith in me. To Amy, whose presence in our lives has been a wonderful addition. And to my “mummy” Nicki Ward. For over a decade now our friendship has been an anchor, her endless patience and listening skills have been central to everything I have achieved. Whilst her adoption as mummy and grandma was initially a joke, she has fulfilled those roles in our lives and some; our family is stronger, wiser, and certainly a lot funnier with her as part of it. This PhD would not be getting submitted if it weren’t for Nicki, her knowledge and experience, alongside the provision of Haribo sweets, cigarettes, and diet coke.

And finally, my children Bertie and Rufus, without whom this thesis would have been finished much sooner! Their almost unwavering faith in me has kept me going. The determination they both show to overcome the barriers and difficulties in their own life has been inspiring and I have learned so very much from them. They have grown into the most incredible young men and I can’t wait to spend some more time with them now Peter the PhD is submitted.

Over the course of this PhD I have been hospitalised with pneumonia, experienced a car accident, two surgeries, a new job, an ADHD diagnosis, a global pandemic, and the devastating loss of one of a loved one. No PhD journey is an easy one, and each of these bumps have been overcome through the love and support of those mentioned, and many more besides.

The research contained within my thesis was funded by an ESRC scholarship.

Table of Contents

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Chapter Number** | **Title** | **Section Heading** | **Page Number** |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Preliminaries** | Abstract |  | ii |
| Acknowledgements |  | iii |
| Preface |  | viii |
| Introduction | Introduction | 1 |
|  | Thesis Outline | 7 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Chapter One** | Moralising Parenting |  | 11 |
|  |  | The Protection of Children | 13 |
|  |  | A Welfare State | 22 |
|  |  | Social Exclusion | 29 |
|  |  | Conclusions | 46 |
| **Chapter Two** | Here and Now |  | 51 |
|  |  | The Legal Framework | 51 |
|  |  | Concerns about the Length of proceedings | 54 |
|  |  | Family Justice Review | 63 |
|  |  | Poverty, child abuse and neglect. Correlation or Causation? | 71 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Chapter Three** | Methodology |  | 78 |
|  |  | Construction of Knowledge | 81 |
|  |  | Institutional Ethnography: a sociology for people not of them | 90 |
|  |  | The Problematic | 92 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Chapter Four** | Methods |  | 96 |
|  |  | Recruitment | 100 |
|  |  | Ideological Circle | 105 |
|  |  | Fieldnotes | 110 |
|  |  | Ethics Beyond the committee | 111 |
|  |  | (De)conceptualising Reflexivity | 114 |
|  |  | Process of Analysis  Limitations | 117  121 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Chapter Five** | Overview of Findings | The Problematic: Social Work as Imagined, Social Work as Performed | 123  123 |
| **Chapter Six** | Professional Discretion and Control |  | 133 |
|  |  | Control | 134 |
|  |  | Beyond the Screen | 138 |
|  |  | Layers and Layers of Auditing | 148 |
|  |  | Resistance and Subversion | 154 |
| **Chapter Seven** | Accountability Work and Organisational Risk |  | 165 |
|  |  | Risky Business | 165 |
|  |  | Court Statements and Accountability | 169 |
|  |  | Don’t Lay the Blame at my Door | 177 |
|  |  | Resource Defence or Moral Judgement | 194 |
| **Chapter Eight** | Discussion |  | 207 |
|  |  | Structural | 210 |
|  |  | Organisational | 213 |
|  |  | Activities | 218 |
|  |  | Work as Imagined, Work as Performed | 219 |
| **Chapter Nine** | Conclusion |  | 227 |
|  |  | Addressing the Problematic | 231 |
|  |  | Researcher Reflections | 233 |
|  |  | Recommendations | 236 |
|  |  | Concluding Statement | 238 |
| **References** |  |  | 240 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Appendices** |  |  |  |
|  | Appendix One | Child’s weight chart |  |
| Appendix Two | The “normal” child |  |
| Appendix Three | Adoption trends 1994 to 2019 |  |
| Appendix Four | Fieldwork drawing ruling relations |  |
| Appendix Five | Fieldwork drawing of activities |  |
| Appendix Six | Example of fieldnotes |  |
| Appendix Seven | Fieldwork process drawing |  |
| Appendix Eight | Drawing of Middleshire computer |  |
| Appendix Nine | Direct work book with children |  |
|  | Appendix Ten | Disguised compliance photo |  |
| Appendix Eleven | Photograph of performance |  |
| Appendix Twelve | Johnson case review |  |
| Appendix Thirteen | Record with care poster |  |
| Appendix Fourteen | Ethical approval, participant information sheet, and consent form |  |

List of Figures

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Figure Number | Title | Page Number |
| Fig. 1. | Middleshire Children’s Services Research Site |  |
| Fig. 2. | Evidence “Based” Practice |  |
| Fig. 3. | The Ideological Circle |  |
| Fig. 4. | Social Work as Imagined to as Performed |  |
| Fig. 5. | Mapping the Ruling Relations |  |

Preface

“…come to understand that the researcher, the world, and the researcher’s experience of the world are intertwined…”

(Finlay, 2002)

It's the 16th May 2017 and I am sitting in my car crying. I’m parked in a public carpark at the intersection of the two main roads in a town called Middleshire. Obviously that’s not its name. It’s the pseudonym I’ve given the council who agreed to be my research site. I’ve been observing social work practice with children and families at the authority, watching social workers and asking them questions. I used to be a social worker and I wanted to know more about how my work was organised when the activities I was undertaking appeared to bear little relation to the ethics and values that I was taught underpinned the role. It was a change in legislation that prompted this desire to know more so I applied for a scholarship to do a PhD. And that is how I find myself here, on a car park in a town centre, sitting in my car, crying.

It’s been a typical fieldwork day; I left the house early having felt like I was organising a military operation. Packed lunches for the kids, homework diaries signed, water bottles filled, my notebooks, pens, and the cakes I’ve baked for the team all packed up. I drop the boys at before school club, reminding their father he has agreed to pick them up, and make my way to Middleshire, an hour’s drive from my home. I’m nearing the end of my fieldwork and am in the office building where a number of the long-term teams are situated. My fieldnotes for that day state that the team liked the cakes I baked (raspberry and white chocolate), I’ve made cups of tea, and repeated the phrases “can you tell me a little bit more about what you are doing” and “why” so much I feel like I’m channeling my friend’s 4-year-old daughter.

The following are taken from entries in my fieldnotes and reflective diary, some written whilst in the field, others over the weekend as I processed the observations and interactions of the week. It stands alone because its relevance to my research is beyond that of research findings. It is more than social workers’ compliance with procedures and its impact is greater than the demonstration of moral judgements, blame, and risk. This observation, two years later, has had such a profound effect upon me; on my positionality as a researcher, my compassion as a social worker, and on my confidence as a mother.

Jamie has a case and is offloading about the mother to another worker. Simon is a little boy who has a diagnosis of autism. He is non-verbal. He has recently been brought into local authority care under section 20 – nursery had noted bruises, Mum couldn’t explain them, child has medical examination and it concludes that they are bruises with no explanation.

In contact mother noticed bruises to his elbow, torso and ankle. She has taken photographs. Previously, she noticed since being in care Simon has red flaky skin and the doctor has put this down to excessive bathing on the part of the foster carer. Jamie is frustrated (angry?) that the mother is spending time examining her son and taking photos. I asked if the bruises would lead to a medical (as was the case when the unexplained bruises were when the child was in the care of the mother). “No, they’re just a few bruises”.

Jamie tells me that this mother cannot cope with her child, she has “mental health” and this means she doesn’t have the capacity to care for him, that’s why he’s in care. “She just can’t cope”. Jamie tells me that they are waiting on a more specialist placement to meet his needs as his current foster carer has given notice to request an alternative placement because she cannot meet his needs. I am interested in the contrast between the response to the mother and that to the foster carer. Both are women struggling to manage the complex needs of a child with additional needs. The mother is framed as not having the capacity to care, not being able to cope. The foster carer is seen as not skilled or specialised enough. I ask Jamie what the difference is and she hands me the court statement and the accompanying chronology.

The case was originally referred by a GP who requested additional support for the mother as she was struggling with “the challenges of special needs parenting”. The referral didn’t meet the threshold of need for the children with disabilities team and so has been open to early help and transferred to the long-term team under the categorisation of “child in need”.

Additional enquiries to other professionals found that the mother has said she was embarrassed about Simon’s behaviour in public and that she had admitted to some days just wanting to let go of him (at the roadside) or of squeezing his hand a little too tightly in frustration. This was analysed within the chronology of “evidence of mother being unable to respond appropriately”. The nursery placement fed back that they had noted that mother was “finding it hard to cope” and that this was Simon’s third nursery placement, during the diagnosis she moved him from a nursery “said they weren’t right for him”. Nursery noted that his behaviour is in line with his age and diagnosis, but that mother appears to be struggling and on occasions is distressed. This was analysed in the chronology as “mother cannot prioritise Simon’s needs… destabilising… disruptive”.

Mother is noted as having “mental health” and has admitted to feeling suicidal. Simon was in hospital with an infection and she missed an appointment with the mental health team. This is analysed as not accepting or engaging with support. Mother’s self-harming behaviour is analysed as “attention seeking and prioritising her own needs above those of Simon’s”. Mother is noted as having a possible diagnosis of ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder, but that a diagnosis and support for this would require a commissioned service and funding. No analysis.

Mother made a complaint about Children’s Services. This is analysed as “non-compliance”.

“Fragmented access and engagement with services will have a detrimental effect and Simon is unlikely to thrive”.

The risk factors are identified within the court paperwork as, the mother’s “mental health… lack of compliance” and a statement that she is “dysfunctional and isolated from family”. I ask Jamie about the mother’s family. She’s a care leaver, Jamie tells me, she experienced sexual abuse as a child and has no family. I note that this is not in the court statement.

I write down the following excerpt from the paperwork “As a result of the above, the local authority initially seeks an Interim Care Order with Simon remaining in foster care to protect him from harm and to provide a period of stability to allow plans to be made for his future”.

Jamie tells me that the mother has been researching cures for autism and has put Simon on a wheat free diet. The foster carer is sticking to this but continues to bathe him daily despite the advice from the doctor about the impact on his skin.

Rose is newly qualified and in post two months, she was allocated the case whilst she was away on holiday and the day of her return coincided with the referral from the nursery about the bruises. Rose tells me that the first time she met the mother was at the hospital. Rose will be co-working the case with Jamie. Rose described the mother as fraught and in no fit state to care for a child. “The police were there, I was there, the doctors and a nurse… it was very chaotic”. Rose explains that the police said that it did not meet the threshold for a police protection order [police powers], Mum had suggested a friend for Simon to go and stay with but this did not pass the police checks. “The child wasn’t going home with her” states Rose. I ask Rose if there was an assessment, or process, which she used to ascertain the mother’s capacity to sign section 20, given that the recordings note her capacity to care for Simon was impaired:

Rose - “She had no choice but to sign, that child wasn’t going home with her”

Me – “So was it voluntary accommodation?”

Rose - “Yes, she chose to sign it”

I read the statement and noted that my skin was on fire, my chest was tight and there was no air to breathe. I too suffer from ‘mental health’, I have done since I was an adolescent, anxiety and depression to be precise. In my fieldnotes there is a little note to myself, I do that a lot, write notes for myself. This note says: ‘FOCUS JESS’. I’m trying to encourage myself to focus on the fieldwork and the job at hand. But I’m struggling. The parallels between myself and this mother are too similar to ignore. I have two children with autism, something I was unprepared for as a young mother and still find difficult despite the decade since their diagnosis. In the early days, when the word autism had first been said, I spent hours searching for the reasons. Had I done something wrong in pregnancy, was it because I wasn’t sure this parenting thing was for me and it had impacted on their development, I remember querying whether I had slept the wrong way when pregnant, I once exclaimed “but I breastfed!” to a professional. All irrational, but I have been told were all perfectly normal responses to a life-changing diagnosis of your child. And cures, I searched for cures, certain we could “fix” this. Shortly after my eldest was diagnosed, I experienced a “period of mental instability” (a breakdown), and did (and still do) say that I can’t cope and wasn’t cut out for the extra complications that have come with parenting children with additional needs. I’ll be honest, I have had intrusive thoughts of suicide, wondering if they’d be better with another parent, one who didn’t get frustrated at having to explain the simplest of instructions.

I have missed appointments, forgotten them in the deluge of assessments and groups or just not had the emotional strength to sit in a room with a professional and list all the things “wrong” with my sons. My default coping strategy has always been to “baton the hatches”, close my little family off from an unpredictable world. I have “failed to engage” with services, not ready to sit in a group with other parents and listen to their stories, or refusing to attend the fourth parenting class offered this year, compounding the underlying fear that their difficulties are my fault.

My fieldnotes contain the following scribbled notes and questions to myself: “I can’t be objective – too close to home”; “Should my children have been taken away?”; “Am I a crap mum?”; “FOCUS JESS FOCUS”. I have clearly attempted one last time to try and look at the case recordings. My fieldnotes denote a tracing of the events and corresponding actions.

The doctor has stated that he cannot confirm or refute that the bruises were caused by the mother, but it is this event that instigates the actions of the social workers. The doctor did say that the flaky skin was caused by the foster carer, but this has not triggered a response from the social workers. Moving a child to a different nursery setting is analysed as disruptive and a failure to prioritise the child’s needs, but moving the child between placements because his needs are complex is the local authority meeting his needs.

The last entry for the day says: “can’t do this”. The ink has run – I must have cried onto my fieldnotes. I don’t remember this. What if someone saw? I do remember sitting in my parked car and crying. Wondering whether my children are only in my care because my failings have been missed. From my parked car I call my friend, she picks up because I never call, I only text. I cry down the phone and, not unusually for me, I list my failings as a parent, but this time I have evidence that my actions and responses are damaging and I am an unfit parent. She listens but then we formulate a plan. I can wallow and cry and be physically and emotionally exhausted today. Fieldwork is hard and that’s ok. Tomorrow I will critically reflect and think about the observations and case recordings in the context of my methodology: how are social workers’ activities organised in such a way that this is their approach and plan for Simon. And on Monday, my next day in the field, I am going to reengage with the observation and explore with staff how their work with Simon and his mother has come to be as it is.

I could list details of my wallowing, but would rather summarise that I arranged for the children to stay with their father, ate a lot of food, and hid under the covers. I then revisited my methodology. My personal experiences are a strength, I am not, nor have I ever claimed to be, an objective observer, nor an empty vessel with no previous experiences, feelings or emotions. My experiences are what led me to undertake this research, and I had focused on my experiences as a social worker and not those as a parent. But I am both. A woman with mental health difficulties, a fraught childhood and a battle with my sexuality that had altered the composition of my own family unit. I formulate my plan. I will return to the field site on Monday morning. I had a prearranged observation in another team first thing but that afternoon I will return to Jamie’s team.

Jamie enters the office and approaches me, she smiles at me and sits down, asking me what I thought about the case, and asks jokingly “what’s your judgement?”. I note that I tried to reassure her that I wasn’t there to evaluate but to try and understand how and why social workers’ work is organised in the way that it is. I move closer and I tell her that I too have children with autism and that on Friday I found it difficult to read as there were many similarities between this mother’s experiences and my own. Jamie softens and asks if I find “it” [parenting children with autism] hard. I admit to finding it the biggest challenge of my life, having many highs but some incredibly paralysing lows too. I show her a picture on my phone of my children and I giggling together on holiday. She says they look happy. I show her another photo, taken at a time when my son was not talking or engaging with the world, the photo shows a pale little boy with a vacant expression ignoring children around him at a birthday party. I tell her that he hasn’t always been happy, it hasn’t always been easy, and I have experienced significant mental health issues along the way. I have been angry about my children’s autism, looked for cures, and looked for reasons. Jamie asks whether the schools have been helpful. I explain that it seemed like a daily battle with changes to support workers without notice, along with telephone calls asking me to collect my son. I reflect that had the school had to write a report or give an opinion at a child protection conference I am sure it would have depicted a difficult, demanding parent, who didn’t engage.

Jamie asks if I complained. I laugh and tell her that I did nothing but complain but that I have stopped as there is little point. I recall the complaint I made about a teacher who told me “you wouldn’t know they’re autistic, they don’t look like it” or the one about the special needs coordinator who asked at a statement review whether “the mother’s lifestyle” had been considered as a reason for their needs. The list is endless, I tell Jamie, and my presentation during this time in our lives was very similar to Simon’s mother. Jamie tells me that this case has been open and shut over five times in early help and frames these as “missed chances”; that the time to affect change was then and the local authority have to step in now. Carly interjects: “do you know what, if this kid didn’t have autism we wouldn’t be involved, you know”. Jamie looks at the child’s date of birth and says to both Carly and I: “the support from midwifery and health visitors would have been cut by the time he was born; she’d being doing this alone”. We discuss the failings of corporate parenting; the local authority takes the role of parent when they remove a child but where is the ongoing support for the mother as a care leaver? I ask, if they were to undertake a parenting assessment on Middleshire in their role as corporate parent, putting them under the scrutiny they do “non-corporate” parents, would they pass? They both laugh: “What do you think!?”

I’m feeling brave. I ask if Jamie would explore with me the differences between the foster carer and mother; when the mother tells professionals she can’t cope, that’s analysed as having a detrimental impact on her child. But when the foster carer says she can’t cope, this is considered as evidence that the child requires a specialist placement. “As a mother she just has to cope.” Jamie tells me, “As a professional, the foster carer can end the placement, or ask for more support, she’s entitled to that support”.

Jamie asks me what support I have had. We explore the concept of social capital and the financial and familial support available to me and what that means practically: a cleaner, friends to step in when I am struggling, or to simply share the load with a co-parent. Carly asks about whether we have tried therapy for the kids, and I discuss the nature of autism and there being no single therapy. That and a lack of services beyond parenting classes, every different class or therapy has been privately paid for.

Jamie says that it sounds hard. I talk about my own experience of accessing mental health services, the lengthy NHS waiting lists and the decision to engage a private therapist. I also tell her about the importance of having time off with my friends, but that this was only made possible with a babysitter. And the input of friends, friends who are psychologists, social workers, and teachers who have been patient with my constant questions and requests for advice. I tell them that things are good right now, that we are all doing well, and I tell them about the dog I have bought and had trained to support my son. Carly ask to see a photo of the dog. I show them the locked screen on my phone. It shows a photo of my youngest son lying nose to nose with Brian, the dog. Jamie shows me a photograph of her dog and we talk dogs for a while.

Carly says, “it’s not right is it, that you’re ok because you have access to that stuff and she doesn’t and isn’t”. “You’re a professional too”. I don’t say anything, I think I’m hoping she’ll continue this train of thought, that she’ll make the connection to section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and the duty to provide resources for children to help with their health and development. But the conversation moves on. Jamie reflects that if something happens Middleshire would be accountable to their lack of action and the five missed chances with Simon. If anything happened to my children no one would ask any questions. Lindsey (a new team manager) comes over and says “but you have to remember what she was doing wasn’t good enough and that’s the crux of the matter. Four different social workers have signed off and agreed that this is the right course of action for the kid”. And that’s the end of the conversation.

There are so many things I wish I had said when I reflect on the conversations with Jamie and Carly. In particular, the idea of a moral judgement of parents underpinned by an unconscious blaming of those who do not have access to social capital and financial resources. What I didn’t tell them was that I haven’t always had access to these resources. My progression to the status of “professional”, as Carly described it, was not a straightforward route from school to college to university. At 19 I was housed in a block of council flats, having found myself on my aunt’s sofa. It was this access to familial support and social housing that enabled me to move forward, purchasing a house and later registering on a social work programme. I am so very conscious that the factors that shroud my parenting from the institutional gaze of Children’s Services were the provision of support, both from the state and within my family, that has simply not been available to Simon’s mother.

Introduction

This thesis is focused on understanding the activities conducted by social workers working with children and families, specifically where that work results in care proceedings. The study was underpinned by a pragmatic approach to enquiry, using institutional ethnography. I attended to the actualities of social workers’ activities rather than drawing data from discursive accounts of their work, as might have been the case had I used interviews or surveys to gather data. This approach was driven by a recognition that there is often a tension between the authoritative account born out of legislation and policy and the actual day-to-day activities conducted by social workers. In this chapter I will explain the circumstances which led to me undertake this study before outlining the structure of this thesis.

In 2010 a review of the family justice system considered the demand for and delay to public and private law proceedings. Private law cases refer to civil matters such as where a child should live after the breakdown of a relationship. Public law cases are those such as care proceedings requested by a local authority when there are concerns that a child cannot remain safely with their family of origin. The concerns raised were focused on the volume of such applications and the length of time cases were in front of the court (Family Justice Review, 2011).

The rise in applications had been attributed to a range of factors: consequences of high-profile child deaths; research linking the impact of child neglect to brain development (BBC, 2012) and its use in underpinning ‘early interventions’ and subsequent pressure on families to ‘improve quickly’ (Featherstone et al, 2013); against a backdrop of a global financial crisis resulting in significant cuts to public spending and thus the services available (Webb and Bywaters, 2018). When the 1989 Children Act was first implemented it was envisaged that care proceedings would take 12 weeks from application to final order (Plotnikoff, 1992; Cretney, 2003). However, at the point of the review in 2010 some cases were cited as taking over 79 weeks (Family Justice Review, 2011). The report considered a number of reasons for this, including the poor quality of local authority applications and the excessive use of expert witnesses. In my own experience as a social worker at the time it felt that authorities were relying upon the judge to settle matters between different parties and delaying making decisions about often expensive interventions such as residential assessments without being directed to do so by the courts. The review was highly critical of both social work services and the family judiciary for what it saw as a prioritisation of parent’s rights to a fair hearing over the need for securing permanent arrangements for the children (Family Justice Review, 2011). Despite evidence challenging the efficacy of the research pertaining to the impact of neglect and brain development — which subsequently brought into question the raft of policies which had been designed based on this — the delay in care proceedings was described as "unacceptable" and such delay was reported to result in a negative impact upon the development of children (Family Justice Review, 2011).

This study focuses on the concerns relating to public law cases, specifically care proceedings and the subsequent primary legislation that was passed giving powers to implement a time restriction upon care proceedings (Family Justice Review, 2011). Secondary legislation and guidance detailed a specific time restriction of 26 weeks in all but the most complex of cases, in which case extensions to the timescales would be made available, however, the grounds for extensions were narrow (Family Justice Review, 2011) and the process for was described as an “insurmountable barrier” (Nandy, 2013: 1). (See Chapter 2).

The review heard evidence suggesting that the time restrictions were “arbitrary... and likely to result in wrong decisions” (Gupta, quoted in Family Justice Review, 2011: 106) and concerns regarding the outcomes for children were expressed by various stakeholders (Baksi, 2013; Family Rights Group & The College of Social Work, 2013; Family Justice Review, 2011). This included fears regarding the impact of the legislation on final placements (Family Rights Group and The College of Social Work, 2013) and concern that children who would have previously been rehabilitated to the care of their parents would be adopted under the new timescales (Judge Crichton cited in Baksi, 2013).

The review concluded that the delays to proceedings were primarily procedural; that a lack of cooperation between local authority social workers and staff within the family courts, alongside a prioritisation of parent’s rights over children’s, was causing delays which were in turn harmful to children (Family Justice Review, 2011). Evidence was submitted to the review that suggested delays were the result of a lack of resources available to children's services departments (Family Justice Review, 2011; Ministry of Justice, 2013). There has been no increase in available funding or decrease in application fees for local authorities (Family Justice Review, 2011) and the Children and Families Act received royal ascent in 2014.

As noted above, during the review period I was working as a social worker in a long-term team, working with children and families whose involvement with Children’s Services went beyond an initial assessment period, which included work within the family court system. I began to attend regional training events on the proposed changes detailed within the Children and Families Act 2014 and the upcoming implementation of the time restrictions in care proceedings. Initially the events were dominated by concerns regarding the impact of such a time restriction on the children and families with whom we worked, with anecdotal narratives of children and their families who had been subject to care proceedings which had taken significantly longer than 26 weeks but for whom this period had enabled court-directed support and had seen children remain within their family of origin. A universal declaration that 26 weeks would have a detrimental impact for “our” families was deafening; it was unethical, draconian, and oppressive. These concerns were not just the concerns of social workers, but managers and heads of service alongside regional local authority legal teams and Independent Reviewing Officers (social workers responsible for monitoring children’s care plans). The ripple effect of the event could be seen in the conversations within the teams for days afterwards. Discussions were had at team meetings, staff lunches, and informal chats presenting hypothetical outcomes for families we were currently working with, should they be subject to such a time restriction.

Further training events were held and the focus of concern shifted to the impact for “our” children and families, and conversations were dominated by concerns relating to the consequences for local authority resources and social workers’ workloads, alongside the practical concerns relating to the implementation of timescales. At the time, it felt to me as though a subtle but important shift was taking place in which the problem was no longer the imposition of an unrealistic timeframe towards the blame lying with the parents for not being able or willing to change their parenting practices quickly enough. In informal discussions this was justified with comments such as “well if you loved your child you would make the changes” or “I would do anything for my child”.

I was becoming increasingly frustrated that discussions regarding the impact of the upcoming timescales for “our” families were no longer being discussed. Rather, conversations were dominated by concerns for work processes and pressure. When the topic of the impact for families was raised, the conversation was redirected to problem-solving the practical issues the time restrictions would create. In hindsight, I can acknowledge that there was little other choice for the local authority, the legislation was being implemented and staff needed to become familiar with the changes, but at the time I was frustrated and disappointed in how quickly these changes were being absorbed.

My response was to begin to explore other spaces within which concerns regarding time restrictions were being discussed, this included social media and staff at the university department where I completed my social work training. As a consequence, in 2013 I submitted a research proposal seeking funding from the Economic & Social Research Council to undertake doctoral research to explore social workers’ experiences of working with children and families in the context of the time restrictions in care proceedings. My proposal was successful, and I obtained funding for a Masters in Social Research, as well as a PhD. As I explored a range of methodological approaches, I kept returning to just how quickly the changes on time restrictions had been absorbed, without challenge, into the social worker’s consciousness, how for my colleagues the vocal concern had shifted from ethical concerns towards a narrative of parents not addressing social workers’ concerns quickly enough. In this context it no longer felt that a focus solely on the experiences of social workers, understood from their subjective experience, would give me the answers to these questions. My initial proposal had envisaged a mixed methods approach where data was to be gathered via interviews and surveys with social workers, but I began to feel uncertain that this would fully elucidate the processes by which the timescales narrative had been so quickly inculcated into practice.

As part of my Masters in Social Research I attended a range of teaching, seminars, and research events designed to introduce students to a variety of methodologies and methods, and as a result began reading a variety of ethnographies and texts about the method. It was through this additional reading that I came across the work of the sociologist Dorothy Smith and her frame of enquiry, institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987). As a sociologist she had become aware of the tension between her own experiences as a woman and the representation of women presented within sociological texts (Smith, 2005). Smith developed a framework of enquiry not simply to capture the actualities of the everyday life of women but to understand how the authoritative account had come to be. The approach, whilst grounded within the activities of the research participants, also enables links to be made beyond the site of investigation, connecting the activities of the individual with the broader socio-cultural and structural processes which control and regulate their understanding (Smith, 2005). This resulted in a realisation that my research could do both, not only could it capture social workers’ experiences and how their work was organised but it could consider just how significant changes, such as changes to legislation, are transmitted and subsumed into the everyday lives of social workers. Fieldwork was conducted over a six-month period within a busy children and families’ department of a Midlands Local Authority in England, which is henceforth referred to as Middleshire.

Institutional ethnography, whilst not allied theoretically to grounded theory, does share a number of key tenets. Both require the immersion of the researcher within the research site, and reject the notion of a formal literature review completed prior to fieldwork, as is found traditionally in research studies. Rather, both grounded theory and institutional ethnography frame existing literature as an accompaniment to the findings, only accessible once the fieldwork has commenced, with the findings used to indicate what additional literature is relevant (Morse and Field, 1995; Campbell, 2006; Rankin, 2017). However, unlike grounded theory, institutional ethnography does not propose that the researcher is an unbiased empty vessel, rather, prior knowledge and experiences are a strength within institutional ethnography; just as Smith recognised the inconsistencies in the authoritative accounts of women in sociology literature, this study was born from my own knowledge of the contradictions and tensions within social work.

As outlined above, institutional ethnography begins with the data and has three primary stages. The researcher enters the field to capture the day-to-day activities of those being studied, attending to the actualities of their activities and not relying on a conscious understanding of them. The threads of these interactions are traced, making links between the activities of the participants and the broader context of the organisation, before finally contextualising them within the wider world through an exploration of the historical and research literature (Smith, 1986). For ease of reading, this thesis is not presented in the order in which the research was conducted, and in the section which follows I outline the structure and content of the thesis.

Thesis Outline

**Chapter One – Moralising Parenting**

This chapter considers the narrative construction of children and families who require and are in receipt of additional support from the state and the way that successive governments have introduced legislative frameworks presented as supporting families and mediating against the abuse of children. As such, it traces the relationship between children, families and the state, from pre-industrial Britain through to the developments and initiatives of the 2010 Coalition government highlighting how government intervention has disproportionately affected families living in poverty. In the context of the institutional ethnography conducted within this study, this chapter traces the threads identified during fieldwork to the wider social and historical context within which they are located.

Chapter Two – Here and Now

This is the second of the background chapters which considers the most recent developments in social work with children and families, specifically their involvement in care proceedings. I consider how these debates have developed and evolved and what has influenced the rising numbers of children who are living away from their families of origin, set within the context of the latest research which indicates that children living in poverty are disproportionately likely to be in contact with Children’s Services.

Chapter Three – Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological underpinnings upon which the research methods are built. It explores the foundations of pragmatism upon which Smith developed institutional ethnography which itself is a synthesis of Marxism, feminist standpoint theory and Foucault’s theories surrounding ideology and power (Smith, 1986, 1987, 2005). The chapter considers and details the three key elements of institutional ethnography which are: the standpoint, the problematic and the ruling relations.

Chapter Four – Methods

The methods chapter builds upon the methodology to give details of the data collection phase of the study, the methods employed, detailing observations, interviews, and documentary analysis. It provides the reader with an understanding of the participants who contributed to the research and the structure of the organisation within which they were working. The ethics process is also discussed in two parts, the procedural institutional requirements and the ethical approach in action during field work. A key aspect of this is the concept of reflexivity and how this has been approached within the context of my study. Finally, the chapter provides a description of the analytical tool within institutional ethnography, ‘the ideological circle’.

Chapter Five - An Overview of the Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of the study, clearly identifying the problematic for social work in Middleshire; social work as imagined, social work as performed. This uses the ideological circle to give an overview of the findings before the following chapters explicate in more detail the threads identified within a number of core themes.

Chapter Six - Professional Discretion and Organisational Control

One of two key findings chapters, this chapter focuses on the procedural, process-driven systems embedded in Middleshire as a form of organisational control, absorbed by workers into their work with children and families. The chapter also considers and explores the activities of resistance and subversion that some social workers in Middleshire undertook. Key here is the finding that the processes implemented in Middleshire, as mediated through the computer and organisational systems, constrain social workers, drawing their activities closer to the way that the organisation imagines it should be.

Chapter Seven - Accountability Work and Organisational Risk

This chapter builds on the key findings of Chapter Seven about the role of computer systems in the organisation and the way in which these systems direct social workers’ activities and, in turn, influence their understanding of their role. The chapter explores the significance of accountability work driven by the various anxieties of workers and maintained through the culture of the organisation. This chapter also considers the way that broader public and political narratives about financial austerity are reflected in the moral judgements workers make when making decisions about work with families.

Chapter Eight - Discussion

As outlined above and in the methodology chapter, this research did not seek to answer a specific research question or address a single issue but to explore a set of problems; the tensions and problems present in the everyday activities of social workers particularly in respect of their work with children and families during care proceedings. This chapter draws the context, background, and the findings together, to consider Middleshire as subversive, tightening the control over social workers’ activities and reducing the structural space in which they can exercise professional discretion. It explores this from a variety of theoretical perspectives including Dworkin’s thesis about the ‘belt of restrictions’ (1967) and Smith’s work on the role of consciousness raising in institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987). A central argument is developed which suggests that whilst social workers are trained to have professional discretion, and indeed that is the expectation of the regulator, the processes developed in Middleshire serve to constrain the space within which such discretion can be exercised.

Chapter Nine – Conclusion

This chapter reflects on the success of the research. It considers the extent to which the research has illuminated the problematic, and based on this a ‘call to action’ outlines the recommendations for practice. Further reflection on the process of the research, and on my development as a researcher, results in recommendations for future research and development.

Chapter One - Moralising Parenting

“It is impossible to understand an institution adequately without an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced”

(Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 72)

Nothing occurs in isolation, everything and everyone is connected to something and someone else, across vast periods of time, we exist within the context of others and will be the future context of those to come. We are only conscious of a small section of those connections, the majority originate in periods of time and in physical space that we have no awareness of (Smith, 1987). In studying the activities of social workers I became aware from my privileged position as a researcher of just some of those connections and how the day-to-day activities of social workers in Middleshire were situated within wider understandings of childhood, parenting, and the expectations of individuals in respect of their relations with the state and the welfare institution spanning centuries.

As briefly discussed in the introduction, the stages of institutional ethnography begin not in the existing literature but at the standpoint of those whose activities are the focus of exploration, it is not until the researcher illuminates the day-to-day activities can they begin to consider how they sit within a wider history of which they are the product (Smith, 1986). For the purposes of this thesis and for ease of the reader, the backdrop against which social workers’ activities exist is presented first as two background chapters; the first of which outlines historical changes in policy and conceptualisations of the relationship between the family and the state, and their transfer to social work practice and systems. The second background chapter goes on to consider the most recent developments in social work with children and families and discusses the current debates.

Institutional ethnography’s pragmatic foundations reject the idea of an absolute truth, rather it recognises that there are a number of different perspectives from which the object of study, and its context, can be considered (James, 2000; Dewey; 2007; Rorty, 1982). Therefore, it is important to be transparent about the way in which the historical context of this study has been identified. In the second findings chapter I detail an interaction with a children’s team manager in a locality team in Middleshire, when discussing the provision of food for a parent she refers to her role as a gatekeeper of local authority resources, part of this role is to identify the “undeserving” parents to ensure that they do not receive financial support they are not entitled to. This interaction sparked the faintest of memories of secondary school history lessons studying the Poor Laws and so, in the midst of fieldwork, I began to read about 18th and 19th century welfare provision. An informal comment made in jest by a social worker about enforced sterilisation led me to consider the eugenics movement of the 20th century. The standardised form to which each family in Middleshire is contorted into fitting was reminiscent of the child maltreatment movement of the same period and the introduction of a standardised childhood. In my privileged position as a researcher I was able to illuminate a vast web of connections between the activities of social workers in Middleshire on a day-to-day basis to the wider institution of state provision in which they were situated, and the historical context in which that institution was created. It is not possible to explore the activities of social workers with children and families without considering not only the immediate context within which is sits but to scratch at the historical layers that underpin the current climate.

Conceptions of childhood and the understanding of the parent’s role have shifted and the role the state should have in that relationship has been a contentious one, characterised by policy which has seen significant swings between punishment and encouragement, big government and a reduced state, care and control, the ideology underpinning the different approaches varying very little between party political affiliation (Featherstone et al, 2018). Not an easy one to unpick, historically there has been an ever shifting and changing response from the government regarding how it considers its relationship with families and what role it should actively perform.

This chapter reviews historical literature and the developing conceptions of childhood, and in response notions of good and bad parenting, were constructed along with the state’s changing relationship with family life. For ease of reading this is done in a chronological order starting with pre-industrialised Britain and the start of ideologies and legislative and policy frameworks affecting children and families, how they appear in narratives, standardised forms and now computer systems, before tracing those ideologies and legislative and policy frameworks through to the current climate.

The Protection of Children

The introduction of social work as we understand it today is often assumed to originate with the individual case work of the Charity Organisation Society of 1869 (Ferguson, 2004) or Jane Addams’ development of the settlement movement in 1889 (Shields, 2017) however, the historical trajectory on which they both sit can be traced back to changing conceptions of childhood and parenting prior to the 18th century. Shadows of this genesis can be seen in the legislative framework and social history of the period and are important in understanding how contemporary social work narratives have developed.

Historically the United Kingdom’s legislative framework has disproportionately cast its gaze upon those living in poverty (Foucault, 1979; Wacquant, 2009). The growing apparatus seeking to monitor and regulate the poorest in society has seen a shift in focus from the control of the body to the mind (Foucault, 1979). This has mirrored changing conceptions of children and childhood, particularly throughout the 19th century, with initial concerns for the child’s physical safety extended to their soul and later mental wellbeing.

Whilst children have participated in work activities for centuries, it was the industrial revolution that saw the state respond to concerns, regarding the physical risk to children associated with labour practices, with a raft of legislation (Kohlke and Gutleben, 2011); The Parish and Apprentices Act 1802, The Health and Morals Apprentices Act 1803 and The Factory Act 1833 were all framed as interventions into working life and not into the privacy of the family (Piper, 2013). Alongside the attention given to the dangerous and exploitative practices of factory owners, a counter argument was present; a narrative concerning poor families, having excessive numbers of children in order to increase the household income by sending them to work in unsafe environments (Rose, 1987; Donzelot, 1979; Kohlke and Gutleben, 2011). Whilst broadly focused on labour practices, to address the growing concerns regarding the physical risk to the child workforce, the legislative framework disproportionately restricted the activities of the poor, legislation not concerned with the protection of children in general but the justification and positioning of intervention as being targeted and justifiable within the lives of the poor to address the risk they posed to the rest of society.

The series of legislation regarding the regulation of practices in factories came at a time when there were wider discussions regarding society’s response to those living in poverty and the start of a series of reforms seeking to update Elizabethan legislation which institutionalised able-bodied working age individuals in workhouses and outlined the provision available for the non-able-bodied (Spicker, 2014). The literature reflects growing concerns regarding what we now understand as ‘welfare dependency’, that an entire section of society was so encouraged by subsidised living within the workhouse that they were choosing not to work. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 detailed the principle of ‘less eligibility’, that if conditions within the workhouse were so basic then only the genuine would be prepared to suffer them, ‘less eligibility’ or ‘the workhouse test’ was self-regulating, designed that only the most desperate of people would come forward (Harris, 2008) to combat welfare dependency. During this time there were large numbers of children requiring assistance; high levels of adult mortality resulting in large numbers of orphans, children left by their fathers, along with families experiencing poverty resulted in children spending time with extended family: they could enter the workhouse, or live on the streets (Parton, 2014; Ferguson, 2004; Humphries, 2013; Kay-Shuttleworth, 1839). An annual report published by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1839 written by James Kay-Shuttleworth, a noted public health and education reformist of the period, proclaimed: “The pauper children maintained in Union workhouses are dependent, not as a consequence of their errors, but of their misfortunes. They are orphans, or deserted children, or bastards, or children of idiots, or of cripples, or felons, or they are resident with the workhouse with their parents, who seek a brief refuge there.” (Kay-Shuttleworth, 1839: 3).

The emerging narrative of good, or bad, parenting, seen in the commentary surrounding factory reforms, was further developed by Kay-Shuttleworth. His work for the Poor Law Commission offered detailed accounts of the characteristics and duties a good working class parent would perform in order to mitigate against what he considered a hereditary disease of poverty and in the absence of the “moral and industrial training” of children by their parents then the state, namely the workhouse, should adopt such a role (Kay-Shuttleworth, 1839: 13). The widespread transmission of narratives surrounding notions of good and bad parenting were further promoted by the Irish Physician Dr Thomas Barnardo. In 1866 he founded the children’s charity Barnardo’s, still in operation today. He oversaw the first formal fostering system in the UK, ‘boarding-out’ children previously homeless or residing in the workhouse, to live with volunteer families in rural England where they provided additional family labour (Hendrick, 2003; Gillies et al, 2017) and in 1870 he opened the first children’s home for boys (Gibson, 2016b). A devout Christian, Barnardo not only argued that to save a child’s soul their body would need saving first (Murdoch, 2007), but that in doing so the nation would also be saved from the consequences of bad parenting, consequences that risked reducing the country’s productivity and destabilise the British empire (Beckingham, 2013). Gibson (2016b) argues that Barnardo opportunistically hooked into wider public concern surrounding rising levels of poverty to transmit his child rescue discourse. Through the production of promotional literature and public speaking events Barnardo argued for the middle classes moral and financial support of the charity. Writing in one of the charity’s periodicals, Night and Day, Barnardo proclaimed: “rescue a child early enough, lift them out of their present surroundings, place them in a pure, favourable and healthy environment… and the result will be men or women such as one who would hardly imagine possible.” (Barnardo, quoted in Gibson, 2016b: 146). The formation of Barnardo’s was arguably the first institutionalised approach embedding the child rescue mentality, an approach that is littered throughout history and is present today (Swain et al, 2010).

As demonstrated, the role of charity and religion was vital during this period in offering local level support for particular families and children. For many families requiring assistance, the workhouse was viewed with great suspicion and the role of charities was central in offering local level outdoor relief (Hendrick, 1994). A range of individual charities and outreach programmes by the church could be found across the country, however, their support was seen as indiscriminate and thus guilty of encouraging those living in poverty to become reliant. The formation of the Charity Organisation Society in 1869 saw an organised and coordinated approach to the dissemination of financial support to the poor, and the society introduced the concept of individual casework to investigate and monitor those families seeking support to ascertain their moral entitlement (Parton, 2014). The screening of families living in poverty was not introduced by the Society, extensive records were already kept by each parish, but the organised surveillance of families seeking support was certainly formalised by the processes of the Charity Organisation Society, the traces of which can be seen in the welfare system today.

The plight of the ‘at risk’ child was given prominence in 1883 with the formation of what is now known as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Whilst initially formed as a result of awareness of physical violence towards a young child in New York (Ferguson, 2004) the focus of the Society shifted away from violence toward neglect, malnutrition, and moral decline (Hendrick, 2003). Violence toward children was, and still is, a difficult issue to unpick, transcending class boundaries, sparking debates regarding the difference between cruelty and discipline, and raising questions regarding the privacy of family life. A noted reformer of the period, Whatley Cooke-Taylor was quoted in 1874: "I would far rather see even a higher rate of infant mortality prevailing... than intrude one iota on the sanctity of the domestic hearth.” (Piper, 2013: 86). Detailed records from both the (now National) Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Charity Organisation Society saw families’ difficulties as categorised as either deserving or undeserving, their records depicting a primary focus of both organisations on issues of neglect, not acts of violence against children (Garrett, 2005; Ferguson, 2004).

As demonstrated, the concept of a neglected child was seen as a product of their family, namely the consequence of the lazy mother and absent father; parents content with their “lack of drive, resilience and self-respect” (Gillies et al, 2017:23) who, if left, risked the safety of society as a whole and whose behaviour needed regulating (Turmel, 2008). The modification of the behaviour of parents through direct work undertaken by both aforementioned societies, and through the campaigning for wider-reaching legislative and policy reforms at government level, child protection, as we understand it today, was constructed (Hendrick, 2003; Garrett, 2005; Donzelot, 1979; Ferguson, 2004). Jacque Donzelot (1979) argues that the introduction of compulsory education in 1870 was a further tool of control, rather than care, an institutionalised attempt to recondition the children of the lower classes into the mould of their middle-class counterparts. Legislating compulsory education enabled concerns relating to the risks posed by the behaviour of the lower classes to be addressed without policing of the lazy mother’s or absent father’s actions, whilst simultaneously producing a future labour force better able to respond to growing developments in industry (Donzelot, 1979; Gilles et al, 2017).

Whilst the introduction of child protection activities―as we understand them today―may be associated with the philanthropic work of groups such as Barnardo’s, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the Charity Organisation Society, these emerged through the legacies of labour reforms intended to exert social control on parents. At the same time, childhood began to emerge as a morally characterised part of the life course, with children now understood to be deserving of protection from exploitative labour practices, abuse, and poverty. As a result of the shifting conception of childhood, notions of good and bad parenting were constructed to account for the rising numbers of children in need of financial assistance.

Levels of Poverty

The role of philanthropists in understanding poverty was gaining momentum around the world and in 1889 Jane Addams, the daughter of an American businessman and politician, sought to understand people’s experiences of poverty in Chicago and set up the Hull House Settlement project, where direct support was offered to raise their standard of living. Considered the first social worker (Shields, 2017) Addams kept detailed diaries which were later published to lobby for a different approach to those in poverty (Addams, 1911). In the Midlands, the first settlement was established in 1899, though a women’s settlement the focus was beyond provision of financial aid for women and their children: the settlement offered advice, savings schemes, and recreational activities (Glasby, 1999).

Simultaneously, in London, businessman Charles Booth also sought proximity to those living in poverty. Concerns relating to the causes and extent of poverty were widely reported in a range of newspapers, pamphlets and periodicals, reflecting the rising concern that the wealth generated through industrial progress disproportionately belonged to the middle and upper classes, leaving large proportions of the working class destitute (Abbott, 1917; Gilles et al, 2017). However, Booth was not convinced, his involvement in the statistical analysis of the 1891 census and the subsequent inquiry into poverty by the Social Democratic Federation (Vaughan, 2018) led to his claim that the breadth and depth of poverty in the country had been exaggerated (Abbot, 1917; Spicker, 1990). Confident that his statistical knowledge could uncover the truth, he set about quantifying both the scale and concentration of poverty in London (Abbot, 1917; Spicker, 1990; Vaughan, 2018). His work, Life and Labour of the People was first published in 1889 and drew not only on the statistical methods he had first envisaged but developed into a rich multimethod enquiry using observations, interviews, and surveys (Vaughan, 2018).

Whilst Addam’s work in Hull House focused on the direct provision of support, Booth’s approach in the UK was vital to an increased understanding of how an individual’s material circumstances and social position were directly linked to poverty and his statistical findings, alongside that of other philanthropist researchers such as Seebohm Rowntree, were vital if solutions were to be found. In 1906 Booth lobbied for free school meals to be provided to all children, and in 1908 legislation providing pensions was passed (Fraser, 2009). These were the first examples of a universal benefit, challenging notions of conditionality associated with means tested and selective welfare, but the free school meals initiative was not met with widespread support. Interestingly the Charity Organisation Society opposed the initiative, stating that the provision of universal resources to the poor would encourage parents to default on their practical and moral parental duties; “practically invited parents… to spend in idleness or drink the time and money which should have been given to making provision for their families” (Loch, as quoted in Fraser, 2009: 178). The Charity Organisation Society proposed that children residing with such morally inferior parents should be rescued, and quickly, in order to limit exposure to such corrupt behaviour, preventing future risk to society.

At the turn of the 20th century, discourse surrounding the role of the state in discouraging poor parenting led to increased support for the eugenics movement (Alcock, 2003). The eugenicists believed, like the Charity Organisation Society, that just as property or race could be inherited, so could employment-resistant personality characteristics (Brabrook, 1910). Reformers at the time, such as the Fabian Society, argued that a preventative approach was required and sought to police not just the behaviour of parents but their bodies; encouraging families who possessed desirable characteristics to reproduce was simply not enough, families who were deemed undesirable should be prevented from procreating through the enforcement of sterilisation (Ray, 1983).

The idea of welfare dependency has been central to British social policy since the turn of the century, shaped through the privileged perspective of even the most progressive of reformers. The response of the state through the formation of social work and child protection, as we understand it today, was developed as a result of pressure from philanthropic individuals and organisations, carrying with it the tensions that continue to be evident between state versus personal responsibility, dominated by a narrative constructed from a privileged position.

Child Guidance

The pervasive narrative that poverty was the consequence of a flaw in character was firmly embedded as the state, reformers, and the medical profession sought to find a solution to increasing levels of poverty. The child guidance theories of the early 20th century posited that whilst such personality traits were genetic (Keir, 1952), it was children’s relationships and early experiences that produced the maladjusted child (Stewart, 2012). The formation of the Child Guidance Council and a dedicated children’s department of the Maudsley Hospital, London, in 1928 saw advice offered and medical treatments dispensed under the rapidly developing field of child psychiatry (Evans et al, 2008).

Whilst most references to John Bowlby’s theories emerge from his empirical work and the publication of his 1960s trilogy Attachment and Loss, his interest in this area and research, alongside clinical work, commenced much earlier (Dijkin et al, 1998). Bowlby himself acknowledged that his personal experiences of loss as a child were highly influential (White et al, 2020) as was the period he spent in the 1920s as a teacher in two progressive schools for maladjusted children (Kraemer et al, 2007) but it was during his employment at the Maudsley Hospital in 1933 that his research and clinical work on the links between early experiences and mental health began (Dijken et al, 1998). It is worth noting that the early influences on what would become Bowlby’s internationally renowned Attachment Theory originated in the observations and narratives of pupils and patients from the professional and upper classes. Bowlby himself recalled interactions with a boy at the Priory Gate School who had a history of stealing. From the upper classes, the child had been raised by a nanny and was now resident at the school as a result of being expelled from the prestigious London school Eton (Bowlby, 1981 as cited in Kraemer et al, 2007). Analysis of the socioeconomic demographics of the patients accessing the Maudsley Hospital depict a patient population primarily from the professional and upper classes (Jones and Rahman, 2008) not unlike Bowlby himself (White et al, 2020).

Initially the seemingly universal risk the child guidance movement highlighted resulted in an interest across society in respect of all children, not just those living in poverty, as having the potential to be adversely impacted upon by parental treatment (Stewart, 2012). This resulted in the justification for parents, more specifically mothers, as a legitimate focus of surveillance and intervention (Stewart, 2012). Unlike the 19th century legislative framework for the protection of the child’s body, the 20th century child guidance movement’s concern for the child’s mind had significant financial backing to implement its objectives. Philanthropists and charities along with the Board of Education were forthcoming with sufficient funding to establish a network of clinics nationally to address child maladjustment, which many saw as simultaneously the cause and potential solution to society’s ills (Stewart, 2012; Tisdall, 2017). Child Guidance Clinics were established across the country, where children and their families, would encounter social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists such as John Bowlby who worked at the London Child Guidance Clinic in 1936 until the outbreak of the Second World War (Dijken et al,1998).

The child guidance movement continued after the second World War with an increased emphasis on parental education and a renewed focus on how mothers should alter their behaviour. The second World War had seen many women fulfil a number of employed positions that men who had been deployed in the war had left vacant. The child guidance movement’s emphasis on the importance of mothers argued that women should vacate their paid employment to return to the family home in order to perform their civic duty with good parenting, a position also reflected in government policy (see discussion on the welfare state below). Parenting manuals, groups, and classes focused on mothers, with talks disseminated via the radio and school parent groups resulting in an increased public scrutiny on parenting skills and thus bolstering support for intervention within family life (Tisdall, 2017). As a result, taxonomies of good and bad childhood became standardised; behaviour became categorised as normal and abnormal, mother and child relationships secure or insecure, developmental milestones were either reached or not, and children’s needs were either met or unmet (Stewart, 2012; Turmel, 2008).

Whilst surveys recording the statistical measurements of the population had been present internationally throughout the 19th century, it was not until the child guidance movement that the use of use of charts to document all children’s development became widespread (Turmel, 2008). The clinics encouraged the routine recording not just of weight and height; informed by developmental psychologists such as Arnold Gesell and Helen Thompson (1934) and Jean Piaget (1936), but of sleep patterns, mother-child interactions, and feeding routines many of which were monitored on a range of charts still in use today (see appendix 1 and 2) (Turmel, 2008). The use of such charts transformed what had previously been abstract theories of good and bad parenting to monitoring systems which were operationalised by nurses, midwives, social workers and doctors in their everyday activities with children and families.

Throughout this period, childhood—as a vulnerable stage for the mind and not just the body―was established. Although the shift toward the universal risk suggested by such theories gained interest from the middle and upper classes in respect of their own children, the access parents had to the information, treatments, and general recourse proposed by the child guidance movement was still heavily regulated, and shrouded, by the social position the parents held. Had the child, a noted thief expelled from Eton, as discussed above been from a family experiencing poverty, he would have most likely been subject to the punitive criminal justice system of the time (See Shore, 2008, for discussions surrounding approaches to juvenile crime in Victorian and Edwardian Britain).

A Welfare State

The first half of the 20th century saw a vast programme of legislation introducing universal benefits such as free school meals, the first universal pension and further welfare measures covering housing, and health (Fraser, 2009). However, the difficulties facing the country during and after the second World War highlighted gaps in the provision and William Beveridge, an economist and peer in the House of Lords, was commissioned to write a series of reports (Fraser, 2009). Published in 1942 his report on social insurance proposed a comprehensive range of policies to address the five giants of social issues; Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness (Beveridge, 1942). His reforms saw a more organised, blanket approach to welfare, social insurance designed to create a partnership between the state and the individual: all working adults would make a contribution to the state and in return an allowance would be paid should they become unemployed, sick, or of an age to no longer work (Beveridge, 1942).

Within the welfare state, Beveridge, a member of the British Eugenics Society, embedded the promotion of what he saw as the ideal characteristics of the middle class through professional knowledge and state provision; enabling all members of society to actively participate socially and economically rather than punish them for their material position in society (Ray, 1983). Whilst support for the eugenics movement wavered, as a result of the mass execution of approximately 6 million Jews in Europe, the movement’s founding principles, namely the hereditary nature of characteristics and the perception of individuals living in poverty, can be seen in the welfare state’s aim of addressing idleness.

Universalism

Lambert’s 2017 analysis of family services case files in the north of England pertaining to the period 1943-1974, found little had changed since Booth’s survey of the poor. The files detailed the lives of families living in poverty, families that had come to the attention of services not because of a deficit in moral or physical parenting skills but because of the material effects of poverty (Lambert, 2017). A Home Office Report in 1944 proclaimed that “it is manifestly wrong that poverty alone should lead to separation of the child from his normal home” (as quoted in Lynch, 2019:5). This reflected what was, at the time, a change in attitudes from a harsh institutional containment of the problem which sought to discourage those needing help, towards education and support primarily focused on altering the behaviours of those living in poverty but with a significant ideological shift toward a seemingly more compassionate response which sought to not just keep children physically contained, but also to attend to their emotional needs (Parton, 2006).

The needs and conditions of children who were accommodated by the state away from their family of origin were given media attention in 1944, when the Daily Mail published a number of articles and letters calling for an enquiry into the state of residential care (Lynch, 2019) and again in 1945 with coverage of the murder of 12yr old Dennis O’Neill by his foster carer (O’Neill, 2000). Dennis O’Neill and his brothers were not in the care of the foster carers because of cruelty but because their mother had been deemed ‘unfit’ to care for them (O’Neill, 2000). The child rescue narrative had been disrupted; Dennis and his brothers had been rescued from their mother only to experience starvation and physical abuse from those tasked with their care. Attention was drawn to the fact that the majority of children were accommodated away from their family of origin because their parents were either ill, poor or both, and debates surrounding how best to support parents—specifically the mothers of problem families―continued (Bamford, 2015; Parton, 2014).

The media’s support for change was instrumental in the government’s response (Lynch, 2019) and the Curtis Report of 1946, heavily influenced by Bowlby and the child guidance movement, saw the recognition of the children’s individual emotional needs over their physical containment cemented by the 1948 Children Act. The Act established children’s departments in local authorities staffed by trained staff paralleling the clinics of the child guidance movement, along with details of staff duties toward children, the need for a training council and the formation of an inspectorate of out of home care (Lynch, 2019; Parton, 2006; Ferguson 2004). Whilst the Curtis Report acknowledged the need for the support of children within their family of origin, the Children Act 1948 and the protection it afforded children did not extend to children living with their families, only to those accommodated by the local authority. It wasn’t until the 1963 Children and Young Person’s Act that local authorities were authorised to spend funds on preventative services within the family (Parton, 2006, 2016; Lynch, 2019).

The Seebohm Report 1968 was commissioned as a result of these concerns and the growing consensus that the remit of the Children’s Services Department was too narrow and did not undertake preventative work. The report clearly outlined what Lord Frederic Seebohm saw as both the causes of the problems and the remedies (Featherstone et al, 2018), recommending the formation of a universal family service with local authorities alongside the introduction of a training certificate in social work (Dickens, 2011; Parton, 2014; Rogoswki, 2010). However, in contrast to these recommendations, the 1969 Children and Young Persons Act detailed very limited provision for preventative work, rather, the emphasis was on the wider powers of intervention, focusing on child protection, crisis, and risk (Morris et al, 2009). This continued to polarise the divide between preventative and reactive, family support and child rescue; the profession and the Seebohm Report positioning the former as central to the social work role, but the government embedding the latter within legislation.

The 1970s marked a high point in confidence in the role of social work, a certainty that the profession could fulfil the aims of the Welfare State and meet the basic needs of society (Rogowski, 2010). An emerging radical social work movement of the period saw the production of journals such as Case Con transmit a critique of the individualising narratives that had blamed and stigmatised those in poverty (Lymbery, 2005). The movement presented an alternative; a social work profession that acknowledged, highlighted, and challenged structural inequalities as the cause of family’s difficulties (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009; Lymbery, 2005). This approach to social work, developed through community teams, drew heavily on the principles of the settlement movement of the 19th century, social workers were embedded within local communities with the aim of activating collective social action to address problems faced by individuals and communities (Rogowski, 2010; Lymbery, 2005).

Whilst Dennis O’Neill’s death shone a spotlight on the standards of care within the fostering system, it was the 1973 murder of 7-year-old Maria Colwell which would redirect that light onto social work, but this time on to the work undertaken with children and their families of origin. Maria had been subject to a care order and placed with her uncle and aunt, she was returned to the care of her mother and stepfather and subsequently killed at her stepfather’s hands, having suffered physical abuse and neglect (Ferguson, 2004). The press coverage of Maria’s murder placed the blame for her death on the newly-formed social service departments and the social work profession (Warner, 2014; Butler and Drakeford, 2011) suggesting that their remit was too broad, their optimism too high (Lymbery, 2005).

Despite Seebohm’s emphasis on preventative, community-based social work and the emerging voice of the radical social work movement, the legislative response had been an expansion of the state’s powers of intervention into individual’s lives, and perceptions of the profession had somewhat reached a crisis. The press and public had judged social workers to be lacking in what was seen as their primary role—to prevent individual’s harming children―whilst the profession was seeking to emphasise a more preventative perspective based on wider understandings of structural harm and community-based practice. Contemporary debates regarding social work history are critical of the idealisation of the profession during this period (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012), whilst the radical social work movement did, albeit briefly, seek to reframe social work’s role in the challenging of structural inequality, the profession’s history of individualism and surveillance, alongside notions of deserving and undeserving are firmly seared into its origins.

Individualism

In the late 1970s, against a backdrop of economic instability and global economic crisis resulting in high levels of unemployment, low wages, industrial action, and power outages; the post-war consensus for a communal approach to need was beginning to break down and the role of the state in family life continued to litter political debates. Margaret Thatcher, the leader of the Conservative party, campaigned and won the 1979 general election on criticism of the high levels of public spending, promising reductions in not only personal taxes and spending, but a reduction in the role of the state in family life so as to discourage a dependency culture which invited individuals to take advantage of a welfare provision that was too generous in nature (Rogoswki, 2010). Shifting constructions of family were framed by Thatcher as the source of social problems, suggesting that the changing attitudes and accessibility of divorce were a promotion of undesirable characteristics subsidised by the state, in which social work was understood to be complicit (Rogowski, 2010).

Previous debates surrounding eugenics returned to the political fore with Thatcher’s increasing use of American sociologist Charles Murray’s theory regarding a subsection of society, an ‘underclass’. Murray’s theory suggested the poor were poor because of their genetics and not as a result of historical or structural disadvantage, and that the welfare state simply encouraged problem families to have problem children (Murray, 1994).

The debate regarding the role of social work in these issues reached something of a crossroads, and in 1980 Thatcher ordered a public enquiry into the roles and responsibilities of social work. The Barclay Report, published in 1982, explored the tension between whether social work was an agent of the state seeking to control behaviour or a profession able to support the community’s potential to activate change through the use of psychological theories (Rogowski, 2010; Jones, 2014). The Barclay Report recommended that social work should take a broader role, building on the successes of the previously seen community social work approach, with social workers situated within local communities working together with local organisations to strengthen resources, offering a greater level of autonomy in creating local responses to the problems affecting people locally (Rogowski, 2010; Simpson, 1981). Despite the report’s clear recommendations for preventative community social work there were those within the committee who did not support such an approach, Robert Pinker wrote an appendix to the report titled ‘An Alternative View’ in which he stated, “Social work should be explicitly selective rather than universalist in focus, reactive rather than preventative in approach and modest in its objectives” (as quoted in Bamford, 2015: 31). The Barclay Report was largely ignored by the Thatcher government, despite its recommendation that the state support local resources which communities could draw on, and in 1984 Robert Pinker was commissioned to write a further report. The report went on to recommend that social work reframe their intervention in family life, from child welfare to child protection, and from universal support to risk management, with the state’s intervention in family life, through social workers, being focused on their legal duties and statutory powers (Rogoswki, 2010; Jones, 2014). Following a number of inquiries in which social workers were criticised for failing to recognise and prevent the deaths of children across nine different local authorities, the Social Services Inspectorate identified that the assessment and long-term planning of social workers’ activities with children and their families was lacking and in need of new guidance in order to assist in their work with dangerous families to prevent any further harm coming to children (DoH, 1988; Featherstone et al, 2018). In 1988 practice guidance was issued by the Department of Health, informally known as the orange book due to its colour. The guidance detailed standardised timescales for investigations and assessments, standardised questions and checklists containing language “more reminiscent of law enforcement than a caring profession” (Rogowski, 2010: 74). The guidance was heavily influenced by the work of the child guidance movement, not just in the promotion of standardised parenting and childhood experience quantified through checklists and charts, but in the prioritisation of attachment-based questions seeking to distinguish the attentive mother from the disinterested one and thus identify the dangerous family. The appendices of the guidance contained flow charts for support workers to use in assessing a child’s attachment, charts detailing the developmental stages of babies and children, and a chart to support social workers in the observation of the behavioural consequences in the children of separated and divorced parents (DoH, 1988). Checklists included questions such as whether a pregnancy was planned, the type of school the parent attended, and the potential length of the parent’s current relationship (DoH, 1988). The focus on objective and measurable standards by which parenting could be assessed sought to confine social workers’ judgements to those based within scientific knowledge, a clear push back against the relational theories championed within community-based models. This rigid and formulaic approach to childhood, parenting, and social work practice was driven by an increasing demand for accountability in the face of the growing coverage of child deaths (Buckley, 2017). Society was no longer accepting that such events were at the hands of God’s will; rather every death, illness, and accident could be considered as the consequence of an individual’s actions (Parton, 2017; Douglas, 1992). The rafts of guidance and procedures were tasked with making the state’s involvement in family life transparent and offering a guarantee that social workers would be held accountable for their practice; thus, ensuring that any negative outcomes could be defended with evidence of compliance to procedure (Parton, 2017; Kemshall, 1998). The emphasis on accountability and blame avoidance saw the focus of social work interventions shift, from making the right decision for children to making a defensible one (Parton, 2017).

Whilst practice guidance and procedures sought to focus social workers’ attention toward child protection and risk management, the introduction of the 1989 Children Act clearly positioned the state’s role in family life as one of support; a partnership with parents in the task of raising their child(ren) in all but the most serious of cases, with a recognition that children were best looked after within their own families; echoing the ideology of the commitment of the Thatcher government to reducing the level of state involvement (Rogoswki, 2010; Parton, 2015; Bamford, 2015). The legislation detailed preventative duties in the form of the provision of family support, commonly referred to as section 17 or child in need, to provide resources to children to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development (Children Act, 1989). There is very little evidence to suggest that the potential of this section of the Children Act 1989 has ever been fulfilled, the resource implications for financially restrained local authorities resulted in few families receiving such support, rather, the focus remained fixed where the practice guidance and procedures had positioned it, in the activities where there was a greater risk of blame namely the local authority’s child protection duties, under section 47 of the act (Featherstone et al, 2018). Section 47 placed a duty on local authorities to investigate should they suspect a child was being harmed, or was at risk of harm (Children Act, 1989). The duties and responsibilities in relation to family support were not the only causalities, the anxious nature of the focus on child protection resulted in what Rogoswki describes as “an authoritarian and controlling attitude towards families and often alienates them in the process” rendering working in partnership a near on impossible task (Rogowski, 2010:76). Connolly (2017) suggests that proclamations of partnership working and family engagement were hollow, that far from being considered as collaborators in the safeguarding of their own children, families were almost always framed as the source of risk.

This period saw a shift in both the state’s and the public’s position in respect of responsibility, from communal welfarism, to individual responsibility. This was enforced within the relationship between the state and family life through the operationalisation of social work resulting in a greater emphasis on accountability and risk management (Douglas, 1992).

Social Exclusion

The narrative of the ‘dangerous family’ continued gaining political traction when, in 1993, two-year-old James Bulger was murdered in the north of England by two ten-year-old children. The press highlighted the socioeconomic circumstances and family composition of the perpetrators and the then Shadow Home Secretary, Tony Blair weighed in on the coverage stating that “the ten year olds were, needless to say, from broken families… [the] families seemed separated from the mainstream” (Blair, 2010:57). Blair denounced the government’s failure to respond to rising levels of crime, poor standards in education, and antisocial behaviour of which the murder of James Bulger was just one consequence (Parton, 2014).

“You don't need a PhD in sociology, merely a degree of common sense, to understand that if kids are growing up without hope or opportunity, with poor education, poor housing, family breakdown, whilst it doesn't excuse it in any way you are more likely to have problems of criminal behaviour.” (Blair quoted by Macintyre 1993).

1997 saw New Labour[[1]](#footnote-1) campaign in and win the general election on the promise of far-reaching welfare reforms, positioning the state as no longer being in the business of financial handouts, but as the provider of opportunities, opportunities which individuals simply needed to take responsibility for grasping (Gilles et al, 2017; Tyler, 2013). Addressing concerns regarding the interference of the state in the privacy of family life, Blair offered the assurance that “no one is talking about interfering in normal family life” (as quoted in Jensen, 2018). The previous government’s interest in the ‘underclass’ remained throughout the New Labour government, with shadows of the eugenics movement cast again on the deserving and undeserving poor and the future risk of ineffective parenting positioned as central to New Labour’s modernisation agenda; children exposed to poor parenting would be destined to reproduce the inadequacies of their parents and risk the future success of the country (Jensen, 2018; Gilles et al, 2017). The Social Exclusion Unit was established and tasked with identifying how best the government could address issues such as “poor education, poor housing, [and] family breakdown” (Blair quoted by Macintyre, 1993). The unit went on to produce rafts of reports, leading to vast legislative and policy frameworks, seeking “joined up solutions to joined up problems” (Blair, 1997: para. 9) and saw the government take a more holistic approach to risk beyond the family home and into the structural environment (Buckley, 2017). Whilst the discourse surrounding social inclusion considered the risk posed to children in respect of poor housing and poor education, the introduction of key performance indicators and measurable targets ensured the continued focus within social work on existing individualised notions of risk (Parton, 2017; Connolly, 2017). Framed as offering assurances regarding the transparency and efficiency of departments who would be held publicly accountable for reducing the likelihood of poor outcomes associated with areas such as teenage pregnancy rates, school attendance, antisocial behaviour, and unemployment (Adams, 2002; Parton, 2017).

As outlined in the previous section, the standardisation of social work was operationalised through the publication of the Practice Guidance Manual, the orange book, but it was through the key performance indicators and measurable targets that New Labour embedded the systems of accountability that would soon drive social work practice and render a more holistic approach to risk impossible to actualise.

Modernising Children’s Services

Despite the short-lived success of the organised radical social work movement of the 1970s concerns regarding the profession’s political criticism and its emphasis on relational based theories continued (Lavalette and Penketh, 2016). New Labour refocused the efforts of the previous Conservative government to standardise social work practice, placing an even greater emphasis on procedural guidelines to predict future outcomes and offering a false sense of security that harm to children could be eradicated through compliance (Parton, 2017; Devine, 2015).

Central to New Labour’s reform of public services was an increased emphasis on New Public Management, an approach seeking to adopt models of business practice to drive accountability and cost efficiency. Legislation implemented under the previous Conservative Governments, such as the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, had already taken steps to marketise public services. Local authorities were no longer providing direct services, rather they were the coordinator of a range of services delivered by third party agencies, private companies, and the voluntary sector. This approach was not just adopted under New Labour, but enhanced, with Children’s Services departments outsourcing much of the family support requirements of the Children Act 1989; in 2001 over 2000 different private and voluntary sector organisations were providing family support interventions, 40% of whom had been established since 1996 (Price Waterhouse Cooper; 2006)[[2]](#footnote-2). The shift away from provision provided by Children’s Services departments can be seen in the publicly funded Sure Start initiative, a community-based preventative service offering family support and parenting classes which was established nation-wide but outside of the purview of social workers in the local authority (Rogowski, 2010). The integration of the private sector into public services went beyond the commissioning of services, with management models implemented across departments. New Public Management reforms were characterised by a centrally-defined, top-down organisational structure which saw day-to-day activities micromanaged through the standardisation of work processes, measured through the use of targets and outcomes, and monitored with regimes of inspection, key performance indicators, and performance management (Prior, 2009). Within Children’s Services centrally devised standardised frameworks and timescales were introduced with the implicit objective of eradicating risk through the implementation of procedures, audits, and quality assurance (Buckley, 2017). Renewed practice guidance was issued in the form of the Framework for the Assessment of Children and their Families, a direct descendant of the orange book published in 1988 which contained flow charts, diagrams, and a script for social workers to use when talking with families about assessments (DoH, 2000). The pervasive focus on time scales continued, reinforced through a reinvigorated inspection regime with departments being inspected against these standardised time targets (Rogowski, 2010).

As social workers were subject to New Public Management reforms, these principles were also reflected in direct work with parents, with the government centrally prescribing a set of skills to standardise parenting, against which parents’ day-to-day activities were to be judged (Gilles et al, 2017; Featherstone et al, 2013, 2018). As part of a wider Home Office initiative, the Respect Task Force allocated £52 million in funding for local authorities to provide parenting intervention from three parenting programmes: Incredible Years, Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities, and the Triple P: Positive Parenting Programme (Cullen, 2011). All three programmes followed a clear, centrally formulated schedule within a specific allocated timescale, the fidelity to which was seen as vital to successful outcomes, targeting generic issues, teaching specific skills for parents to learn with clear goals and targets against which they were measured. Whilst attendance was voluntary, many parents were referred to the programmes by Children’s Services, which in itself added to a degree of compulsion, the outcomes of their attendance and success in reaching goals were recorded in case files and in evidence submitted to court within care proceedings. Just as government departments and local authorities were set targets against which they were monitored and inspected, so was parenting, however, for parents, the indication of poor performance was grounded in an individualising approach to issues relating to structural inequalities. For example, issues pertaining to antisocial behaviour, a clear target for the New Labour government and the parenting intervention programmes, focused on the individual behaviour of residents and not on the overcrowding or unsuitability of housing.

The sustained abuse and subsequent murder of Victoria Climbié an 8yr old girl living with extended family in London, in 2000 resulted in widespread media coverage and a public inquiry. The Laming Report was published in 2003 within which Lord Laming noted that Victoria had been “abandoned, unheard and unnoticed” in her short life, concluding that the tell-tale signs of abuse had been missed not just by social workers, but by the police, a children’s centre, and hospital staff (Laming, 2003: 3). Laming concluded that the errors within Children’s Services were committed not just on an individual level by social workers and their managers but that the systems, or lack thereof, for information sharing and multiagency working were a systemic failure and urgent reform was needed (Laming, 2003). Whilst the report acknowledges that the conditions in which the agencies were working were “underfunded, inadequately staffed and poorly led” (Laming, 2003: 3) the report failed to acknowledge the “human and social factors” that contributed to Victoria’s death (Featherstone et al, 2018: 40). In his recommendations, Laming stressed the need for greater accountability and managerial oversight which could be achieved with stronger emphasis on procedural processes, and improved multiagency working and information sharing between professionals, framing developments in information technology as being central in the forthcoming reforms (Laming, 2003).

A central component to the drive for accountability in social work, and part of the wider drive to modernise public services, was the introduction of the General Social Care Council in 2002; a regulatory body responsible for governing the conduct and practice among social workers, and in promoting standards in training (McLaughlin, 2007; Frost and Parton, 2009). The establishment of the GSCC saw the social work role become a regulated profession, with registrants required to adhere to “standards of conduct and practice” including commitments to protect the rights and promote the interests of service users, and in line with the Laming recommendations, an explicit duty to be accountable for the quality of social work practice (GSCC, 2010).

The Laming Report was followed by the ‘Every Child Matters’ Green Paper (Every Child Matters, 2003) and subsequent legislative framework, The Children Act 2004. This placed a focus on support, increasing accountability, information sharing, universal ‘safeguarding’ training for all professionals, not just social workers, and an emphasis on the need for earlier identification and intervention in children’s lives (Every Child Matters, 2003). Building on a broader more holistic approach, the ‘Every Child Matters’ policy identified five target outcomes for children: health, safety, achievement, a positive contribution in the community and society, and achieving economic wellbeing (Every Child Matters, 2003). The restructuring of local authority services to facilitate greater multiagency working and information sharing was central to the long-term preventative strategy of improving children’s outcomes through earlier identification of those in need of targeted support (Munro, 2007). However, the combination of short-term funding and a continued emphasis on performance measures undermined the long-term preventative strategy rendering the focus of local responses to wider structural inequalities ineffective (Morris et al, 2009).

Laming envisaged a National Children’s Database, upon which a professional’s contact with a child, would enable greater information sharing across departments (Laming, 2003). With it came a significant shift from social workers undertaking child protection, to all professionals engaging in safeguarding. The introduction of a universal standardised tool, The Common Assessment Framework, was introduced in 2006 and saw professionals from a range of services, such as health, criminal justice, drug and alcohol services, schools and immigration trained in the universal language of child need, early identification, and targeted support (Garrett, 2005; White et al, 2009). Professionals from a range of disciplines were shown how to record a child’s needs against a checklist of 40 areas which were deemed indicators of concern, the checklist included items such as missed medical appointments, teenage pregnancy, and housing issues (Children’s Workforce Development Council, 2009). A centrally held database, the e-CAF, would enable workers across departments and locations to monitor children with whom they came into contact with. Widespread concerns regarding the levels of surveillance of the state on family life were raised once again, with the Joint Committee on Human Rights expressing serious doubts that the approach was either proportionate, justified, or congruent with the European Commission of Human Rights (Garrett, 2005).

The welfare reforms introduced as a result of New Labour’s victory in 1997 saw not only the continuation of the preceding Conservative government’s ideological stance on individual responsibility, but when consolidated through their modernisation agenda became transmitted and embedded within all aspects of national and local government. The standardisation of childhood, parenting and social work was embedded through the justification of accountability, with key performance indicators and monitoring regimes entrenched within the provision of additional funding. No longer were Labour to be synonymous with welfare handouts, the conditionality of welfare provision provided not only demonstration of financial prudence but the vehicle within which the state could extend their reach into the lives of those requiring assistance. Driven by a growing global economy, the period saw children framed as future economic contributors, worthy of investment, of whom the parents were caretakers; their performance also subject to operationalised notions of accountability. Concerns regarding the reach of the state into private life were allayed through divisive narratives of “normal families”, a direct descendant of the deserving and undeserving discourse threaded throughout the 19th and 20th century.

The Electronic Child

Central not only to Laming’s reforms but also to the government’s modernisation agenda, the Integrated Children’s System, a computer database promising greater efficiency in screening and targeting support to those children and families who were most at risk, was rolled out nationally in 2007. Whilst the basic template of information that the series of digital forms would contain was devised by central government, individual local authorities were free to commission different systems from a range of private sector companies. Just as the series of charts and tables from the orange and purple books were heavily influenced by particular ideologies, so were the series of forms digitised on the computer screen, at this time the ideology underpinning New Labour’s reforms littered the database both in respect of social exclusion and modernisation (Garrett, 2005).

The categorisation and screening of children and their families enabled the government to focus on what Blair had identified as not “normal” family lives, but the ones who posed the most risk to individual children and ultimately to collective society. The emphasis on early identification and intervention continued with the commission of a report, written by two Members of Parliament, Graham Allen and Iain Duncan Smith, who collated evidence outlining the pressing need for the state to steer the course of children’s lives as soon as possible. The report, titled “Early Intervention: Good parents, great kids, better citizens” was published in 2008 and highlighted the physical and emotional consequences of inattentive parenting drawing on brain images to support their findings (Allen and Duncan Smith, 2008a). The filtering of the lives of children and their families into simplified categories, screening for ‘need’ and ‘risk’ was not a new phenomenon. As previously discussed the Charity Organisation Society as well as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, kept extensive records on their interactions with families and screened for ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ or ‘neglect’ or ‘cruelty’, however, such recordings were narrative in nature, which captured the information leading to the categorisation. Within the Integrated Children’s System information was collated from a range of sources, reconstructing children’s lives into sterilised quantitative versions that could be counted and monitored, with very little narrative capturing the realities of children’s lives (Garrett, 2005; Morris et al, 2009).

The Integrated Children’s System not only acted as a receptacle for the information generated by increased surveillance by a range of professionals engaging with the new safeguarding activities but was a central part of the New Public Management agenda enforced by an increasingly pervasive inspection regime. Whilst previous iterations of social care inspections had focused on the assessment and monitoring of local authority departments (Social Services Inspectorate, 2004) the merging of Children’s Services into the existing Office for Standards in Education, now the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) saw their remit reframed from inspection and surveillance to an active driving force for improvement (OFSTED, 2007). Through the inspection framework OFSTED communicated to local authorities the areas of social work practice to be prioritised; performance management, management oversight, quality assurance, effectiveness of supervision, and workforce development, alongside the “child-level data” required which is quantative figures relating to referrals, timescales, and outcomes (OFSTED, 2017).

The centrally mandated activities and timescales were not only monitored but compliance

was actively pursued under an increasingly dominant inspection regime (Garrett, 2005; White

et al, 2010). Research undertaken at this time highlighted that the “faulty design” of the computer systems used in Children’s Services resulted in attendance to the requirements of the system and not the children and families with whom social workers worked (Broadhurst et al, 2009: 352). The shift in attention to those tasks which were to be measured, monitored, and performance-managed, had an impact on the decision-making process and ultimately increased the chances of wrong decisions being made (Broadhurst et al, 2009). The false premise that the drive for improvements, and ultimately the eradication of risk, could be achieved through continual performance management had led to the development of a computer system designed to meet the needs of the inspectorate and not the children and families with whom Children’s Services are tasked with working. The dominant ideologies of this, and preceding governments, were now embedded within a computer system that was changing the practice of social workers within children’s departments.

Baby P

In 2007 Peter Connelly, a 17-month-old toddler, was murdered in London. Peter’s case, known in the press as ‘Baby P’, did not come to public attention until the 2008 convictions of Peter’s mother, her partner, and his friend for causing or allowing his death. Intensive press coverage detailed Peter’s interactions with Children’s Services, the same department responsible for Victoria Climbié’s social work intervention, including the names and photographs of social workers who had case responsibility for Peter, as well as the Head of Children’s Services (Warner, 2014). Intense and ‘irrational’ press coverage drove demand for instant change to pacify the outrage created, a petition demanding the resignation of staff within the department was published and after weeks of coverage the then Secretary of State for Children, Schools, and Families, Ed Balls, announced on live television that he was dismissing the head of service from her role (Warner, 2014). The consequences of the unprecedented media coverage were felt throughout social work departments, instilling fear as a result of the culture of blame cultivated by the press (Warner, 2014, 2015; Social Work Task Force, 2009a; Shoesmith, 2016). The coverage led to the recommissioning of Lord Laming to evaluate the recommendations of his 2003 report and subsequent reforms along with the establishment of the Social Work Task Force chaired by Moira Gibb. The Social Work Task Force published their final report in 2009, detailing a profession restrained by bureaucracy, high caseloads, and poor staff retention (Social Work Task Force, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). It is of particular interest that the task force highlighted concerns with regards to ineffective performance management systems operating with Children’s Services, with systems prioritising the measuring of statistical information over the quality of social work interactions (Social Work Task Force, 2009a).

The focus of media coverage, and the subsequent reaction from politicians, situated the blame for Peter’s death not at the hands of those convicted of his murder, but at the door of social services and the failure of social workers to follow procedure (Kemshall, 2010). Whilst the focus on compliance to procedure, enforced through the inspection regime, had continued to focus social workers’ activities on individualising risk, prior to Peter’s murder there had been a shift in the discourse that broadened risk and encouraged a more holistic approach (Parton, 2017). However, the media’s curation of a narrative that positioned child death’s as the result of a failure to follow procedures, saw a return to narrow individualised understandings of risk that gained public support for unprecedented reforms to social work with children and families (Petley, 2014; Parton, 2017; Warner 2015).

The Coalition Government

Amidst the increased focus on social work, and criticism of the profession’s apparent inability to eradicate risk to children, a global financial crisis resulted in a UK-wide recession and saw rises in levels of government borrowing and unemployment. The Conservatives, in opposition, declared that the financial crisis was the result of the New Labour government’s ideological commitment to a Big Government which had purposefully cultivated a society of welfare dependency. The scrutiny of the press turned to New Labour, and the then prime minister Gordon Brown, who were accused of overreaching, not only in their spending but in their interactions with the privacy of family life leaving no choice but for the size of government to reduce to address the national debt and for the state to only intervene in family life if absolutely necessary. The general election in 2010 saw all major parties, including New Labour themselves as well as smaller parties such as the Liberal Democrats, campaign on two major issues: greater control over public spending and the need for immigration controls.[[3]](#footnote-3)

With no party winning an overall majority, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government and within 5 weeks of taking office had produced an emergency ‘austerity’ budget, entitled ‘Responsibility, Freedom, Fairness: a five-year plan’ detailing cuts of £11 billion from the welfare budget and cuts to central government public service spending with departments such as the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice targeted (MT Treasury, 2010; Osborne, 2010). The budget was designed not only to repay the national debt but to break, what was seen as, the cycle of welfare dependency encouraged by the excessively generous benefits of the previous government (HM Treasury, 2010; Osborne 2010). Concerns raised regarding the disproportionate impact of the cuts on the poorest households by The Institute for Fiscal Studies (Chote, 2010), were met with assurances from the government that the burden of repaying the national debt was to be shared across all sections of society (HM Treasury, 2010; Osborne 2010).

The Government’s Welfare Reform Act 2012, overseen by the then Secretary of State, Iain Duncan Smith, author of the report on parenting programmes discussed above, saw significant reductions to welfare provision including deductions for benefit claimants who had a spare bedroom, a cap to fix the total amount of benefits a household could receive, along with the introduction of a single benefit payment, Universal Credit, and introducing Personal Independence Payment to replace the existing Disability Living Allowance. The government, more specifically Duncan Smith, was accused of purposefully attempting to circumvent parliamentary scrutiny by introducing secondary legislation which would make the process of applying for disability benefits more difficult, including making those with life limiting and terminal illnesses transfer to employment with increased surveillance to ensure their compliance (Malik, 2013).

With a discourse focusing public and political attention on the narrative of welfare dependency and its association with children’, rising living costs alongside cuts to household benefits created conditions within households where the risk of poverty could increase irrespective of employment status (Padley and Stone, 2020). As established, social work as an arm of the welfare state, had always had a strong and implicit link with managing the consequences of poverty, yet at a time where resources were being restricted, the pool of people at risk of poverty was increasing dramatically.

Local authorities were not immune to cuts from the central government budget, it has been estimated that in the 5 years following their election, the coalition government reduced central government funding to local authorities by 40% (Sparks, 2014). Research exploring the impact of the cuts has highlighted that these reductions did not occur evenly, that local authorities with higher levels of deprivation experienced greater cuts (Webb and Bywaters, 2018). Two further general elections took place in 2015 and 2017, both of which the Conservatives won with a working majority and mandate to continue their welfare reforms. Discourse surrounding welfare dependency, which had been present through the Poor Law, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative policies, and within New Labour’s approach to social inclusion, gained significant momentum within the Coalition and Conservative government’s austerity agenda. Notions of less eligibility and welfare conditionality were once again present, with claimants being offered an absolute minimum in benefits to ensure they did not seek to claim excessive amounts from the public purse combined with increasing levels of surveillance in respect of those seeking employment through the introduction of a harsh sanctioning regime.

Dangerous, Problem, and Troubled Families

The continued focus on welfare provision, and those accessing it, as the source of the country’s economic crisis, maintained a focus on social work and its role in mitigating the space between the state and family life. In 2010 a further review of social work was launched. The Munro Review of Child Protection was tasked with the role of reforming child protection systems within the UK (Munro, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). The review highlighted the practical consequences of what was now an inescapable bureaucratic regime (Munro, 2011b). Public and political appetite for a “zero tolerance of risk” (Warner, 2015;19) maintained the false premise that uncertainty could be eradicated through strict compliance to procedure (Munro, 2011b). The previously heralded benefits of the Integrated Children’s System in producing “simple solutions to national problems” (Garrett, 2005: 543) was heavily criticised for standardising social work beyond the point where social workers could adapt and respond to the variety of challenges children and their families were facing (Munro, 2011b). The system was noted as ensuring adherence to an overly prescriptive work process which focused social workers’ activities not on interactions with children and families, but on the completion of computer forms which demonstrated the completion of responsibilities and thus enabled the performance management of social workers and local authorities (Munro, 2011b; White et al, 2010; Broadhurst et al, 2010).

The “targets and terror regime” restricted social workers’ activities to those activities that were measured (Bevan and Hood, 2006: 532) resulting in the refocusing of interactions and interventions with children and their families toward such activities. Bevan and Hood (2006) described the process of ‘gaming’ in health and social care, where professional’s activities were focused on those with measurable outcomes, limiting the time spent on those that weren’t. Bevan and Hood (2006) suggest that this was “hitting the target but missing the point” (521); the ‘target’ in social work with children and families being the timely completion of visits, assessments, and recordings, in contrast to the ‘point’ as outlined in the Children Act 1989 being a partnership with parents to support and improve the lives of children. Munro’s recommendations included changes to supervision, training, and staff development, alongside an emphasis on the need for social workers to have space to exercise professional judgement and professional discretion in conjunction with a reduction in the administrative tasks associated with the Integrated Children’s System (Munro, 2011b).

A month after winning the election, Prime minister David Cameron convened The Early Intervention Review Team, headed by Labour Member of Parliament Graham Allen, the author of the 2008 report ‘Early Interventions: Good parents, great kids, better citizens’. The review’s remit was to explore the evidence available in respect of the potential early intervention programmes on offer and their ability to tackle what Allen positioned as the cross-generational transmission of family dysfunction (Allen, 2011a). Allen had previously claimed that early intervention programmes were the answer to averting social collapse, urging that without action “to transform parenting skills and revitalise the upbringing of poor children on the worst council estates, Britain will be saddled with a new generation of disturbed aggressive young people doomed to repeat and amplify the social breakdown disfiguring their lives and others around them” (Allen and Duncan Smith, 2008b).

The Early Intervention Review Team published two reports, the covers of both adorned with the images of two children’s brains, one much smaller than the other, depicting what was labelled as the consequence of extreme neglect (Allen, 2011a, 2011b). The first report claimed to gather the best, most rigorous scientific evidence, to demonstrate a link between the first three years of life and outcomes in later life such as education and criminal activity, diminishing any structural challenges and positioning the focus on “the worst and deepest damage” poor parenting can have on the first three years of a child’s life (Allen, 2011a: 15). The second report focused on the financial savings that cementing early intervention throughout health, education, and welfare services would have (Allen, 2011b). The brain scan images had a profound effect on professionals, just as the child development charts of the child guidance movement rendered child development visible, the brain scan images offered a visible depiction of what had been an abstract moral debate regarding the consequences of poor parenting (Allen, 2011a, 2011b). Despite the report’s proclamations regarding the quality of the research the first report drew upon, concerns regarding the research behind the images were voiced almost immediately with regards to not only the report’s lack of critical analysis but also the infancy of the neuroscientific evidence cited (see Wastell and White, 2012; White and Wastell, 2017a, 2017b for analysis and discussion).

In 2011 riots broke out across the United Kingdom. Whilst they began as a result of racial tensions between community members and the police in London, the events were soon reconstructed by Cameron as an example of ‘Broken Britain’ (Travis and Stratton, 2011). Cameron cited the cause of the civil unrest as a minority of society; families with three generations who had not worked, unrepresentative of normal society, engaging in criminal activity and seeking to “drag us down” (Cameron, 2010). The following quotes were all taken from a speech given by Cameron at the time:

“Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences.

Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort.

Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control.

Some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged - sometimes even incentivised - by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally de-moralised.” (Cameron, 2010: no page).

To tackle this issue, Cameron announced a £400 million initiative titled ‘Troubled Families’, a programme of intervention proclaiming to consider the family unit’s needs rather than the apparently historical approach of individual intervention. Despite this, the programme’s payment-by-results approach was linked to targets for individual problems experienced by individual family members (DCLG, 2017). Local authorities could claim up to £4000 per family, made up of payments such as £800 for a family member moving from unemployment benefit for 3 months (DCLG, 2017). Other indicators of ‘Broken Britain’ were teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, mental and physical health difficulties, debt, and criminal activity. Cameron proclaimed that the approach would address the long-held knowledge “that a relatively small number of troubled families are responsible for a large proportion of the problems in society” (Cameron, 2010: no page). Offering similar assurances to Blair, Cameron proclaimed that Troubled Families was not focused on breaching the privacy of ordinary family life but on those families who were experiencing problems and risking the future for hard working “ordinary people” (Cameron: 2010). The Troubled Families teams were positioned within local authorities, separate to social work teams, not staffed by social workers but by key workers who held small caseloads and undertook intensive work families with the discretion to use resources creatively to achieve the list of measurable outcomes (DCLG, 2012).

Throughout this period, the themes first instituted through the New Public Management initiatives of the Conservative and New Labour Governments of the 20th century continued. Local authorities, and other providers, were offered “payment-by-results” funding streams to ensure compliance to the narrow set of key performance indicators outlined by the government, and dedicated computer systems were developed to secure funding by demonstrating compliance.

Just as the New Labour’s enactment of the New Public Management approach to governance sought regulation of the social work profession, so too did the coalition government. In 2012 the regulatory responsibilities for social work were transferred to the already established Health Profession’s Council which was renamed to incorporate the social work profession; Health and Care Profession’s Council (HCPC) (Furness, 2015). The HCPC were now responsible for the competences against which the social work profession and the qualifying programmes were now to be judged (Taylor and Bogo, 2014). Criticism at the time raised concerns regarding the health-based knowledge of the new regulator (McLaughlin et al, 2016), alongside “competency inventories reducing practice to lengthy lists of discrete, concrete behaviours” (Taylor and Bogo, 2014: 1407). Subsequent analysis of the conduct hearings held by the regulator, at which social workers’ “fitness to practice” had been brought into question, identified that organisational failures, poor supervision, high caseloads, and inadequate resources, had little bearing on the outcomes that resulted in significant numbers of social workers “struck off” the register and barred from working as social workers (Leigh et al, 2017).

Press and public support for welfare reforms gained momentum when in 2013 Michael and Mairead Philpott, along with their friend Paul Mosley were convicted of the manslaughter of the Philpotts’ six children, Duwayne, Jade, John, Jack, Jesse, and Jayden (Jensen, 2018). The media coverage was extensive, not only because of the nature of the crime but because of what was seen as a link between the excesses of the benefits system and the behaviour of the parents, national newspapers ran headlines surrounding the “evil born out of welfare dependency” (Wilson, 2013) and “the vile product of welfare UK” (Dolan and Bentley, 2013). The Chancellor, George Osborne explicitly linked the case with the need for welfare reforms, stating that Michael Philpott was responsible for the children’s deaths, the judge for his sentence, but government and society had questions to ask about the welfare state “subsidising lifestyles” (Osborne quoted in Wintour, 2013). Such was public appetite for this narrative that the details of the physical and emotional abuse Mairead Philpott experienced went widely unreported (Neate, 2013).

Whilst the names given to families seen as posing a risk to society have changed, the underlying notions of genetically predisposed individuals categorised as either deserving or undeserving have not, nor has the distinctly different approach encouraged by central government. The media coverage and subsequent political response to the murder of Peter Connelly renewed criticism of the social work profession and reinvigorated the child rescue narrative, seeking further focus of social workers’ activities towards the protection of children within risky undeserving families. The isolation of initiatives such as Sure Start from the mainstream activities of social workers continued under the Troubled Families Initiative, demarcating the support offered to those deemed deserving. Public support for such an approach was ensured through the careful curation of narratives, underpinned by existing ideologies, attached to key events such as the 2011 riots.

The highlighting of particular events in order to transmit existing ideologies concerning the deserving and undeserving poor, as seen with Peter Connelly’s murder, and the murder of the Philpott children, is not new. As this chapter demonstrates, the periodicals from the Barnardo’s charity saw increased public support for the child rescue narrative of the 19th century, however, widespread access to a growing media industry, particularly the use of reality television during this period, has seen mounting support for both supportive and punitive interventions, with social work clearly positioned within the latter (see Skeggs, 2008 for discussion relating to print, television, and social media portrayals of people living in poverty). The reconstruction of the riots in 2011 to depict a caricature of a family who had not worked for three generations was particularly powerful, with reforms to address such welfare dependency seen as much needed and broadly supported by the public, despite their far-reaching punitive consequences. Research undertaken on the Troubled Families Initiative was unable to identify families who had been out of work for three generations (Shildrik, 2016). However, the funding streams and computer systems developed to monitor and performance-manage the Troubled Families teams were already embedded within local authorities. The truth of the originating narrative was no longer relevant, it had been an effective vehicle with which to further individualise and obscure discussions surrounding structural inequalities.

Rising Levels of Poverty

Poverty is a contested concept, from the time of Booth’s studies in the 19th Century, debates about absolute and relative poverty have been re-rehearsed throughout history (Townsend, 2010). More recent research has clearly demonstrated the connection between rising levels of poverty and an increase in the need for social work support (CWIP, 2017). There have been a number of approaches to measuring poverty, partly as a result of its contested nature but also due to differing political and ideological perspectives; over the last decade, measures used include income in relation to the population median average, disposable income after housing and utilities, or a measure of living standards (Stewart and Roberts, 2016). The coalition government scrapped the child poverty measures introduced by the New Labour government and replaced them with indicators pertaining to the number of children living in workless households (Stewart and Roberts, 2016), despite evidence that one third of children living in poverty were in households where one adult was working (Cribb et al, 2017). The changes made to the way that poverty is measured can make it difficult to trace the impact of the government’s welfare reforms and the underlying austerity agenda. However, even without a consistent measurement of poverty, the figures pertaining to levels of homelessness and the use of foodbanks offer a clear picture of individuals and families unable to eat or to live in safe adequate housing. Such were the concerns regarding the levels of poverty in the UK that the United Nations made consideration of the extent to which the government’s welfare reforms were congruent with citizens’ human rights during a 2018 visit to the UK to explore “extreme poverty” (Alston, 2018: 1). Findings from the report suggest that in the UK one fifth of the population is living in poverty, with one tenth unable to afford the most basic of essentials. Figures relating to the increase in foodbanks are widely cited as evidence of rising levels of poverty (See Trussell Trust, 2013, 2018, 2019), however, with an increasingly wide range of sources of emergency food aid emerging such as churches, community organisations and schools, as well as informal support within neighbourhoods and families (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014; UN Report, 2019) the number of people unable to afford food is far greater than widely reported.

Whilst the historical consideration presented to date suggests that the philosophy underpinning the British Welfare system had been becoming ever more constrained by conditionality and measures of performance, the period since 2010 has been particularly marked. The UN Report noted that “Official denials notwithstanding, it is obvious to anyone who opens their eyes” (Alston, 2018: 3), going on to note that “In the area of poverty-related policy, the evidence points to the conclusion that the driving force has not been economic but rather a commitment to achieving radical social re-engineering” (Alston, 2018: 14). The report identified a multiplicity of strategies utilised by the government to not only reduce welfare benefits but also to dehumanise and stigmatise those in receipt of benefits, imposing “ever more demanding conditions, harsher penalties … and virtually eliminating the option of using the legal system to vindicate rights” (Alston, 2018: 20).

Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the historical literature and traced the threads of discourse relating to childhood and good parenting, along with the state’s responses to this and their relationship with family life. It has been demonstrated that this is a discourse disproportionality focused on the lives of those living in poverty. Whilst the sediments of history were identified within the fieldwork stage through my observations of and interactions with the social workers in Middleshire, the work of explicating them within the process of this research took place after the fieldwork had been conducted and alongside the analysis in order to assist my understanding of the social work practice being observed. For the purposes of this thesis and for ease of the reader they have been presented chronologically. I will now draw out from this what I perceive to be the core themes apparent throughout this history which continue to regulate and control social work practice today.

The construction of childhood as a morally distinct part of the life course saw society’s expectations regarding the role of parents develop considerably. Whilst initial concerns in the 18th century were focused on children’s immediate physical safety, the growth in the human sciences alongside the states concerns with societal contribution and individual responsibility has placed increasing emphasis on the responsibility of parents to ‘parent well’. As advances in child development produced notions of a standardised “normal” childhood, there was a corresponding focus on what it meant to be a “good” parent, judged not only in terms of the welfare of the child but also the wider public good. As such these constructions of childhood and parenting have not been immune to, nor separate from, the underlying socio-political ideologies. Irrespective of political affiliation successive governments have founded legislative and policy frameworks on individualised notions of poverty within which destitution and worklessness are viewed as character flaws likely to be repeated through generations rather than being driven by the structural inequalities apparent within our society.

Alongside this the notion of risk becomes complicated. Whilst there is a clear emotional response to children at risk of harm which highlights the importance of child protection, the risk of harm is also to wider society and, within the historical developments that have influenced social work, it is the concerns relating to long term harms, which have become dominant. Whilst the developments in psychology and neuroscience have highlighted a universal risk, their application, having been influenced by the ideological position of successive governments and focusing on cycles of deprivation and individualised responsibility, has fallen disproportionately on the lives of children, and of the parents of those children, whose material circumstances have subject them to an institutional gaze.

The construction of such families as falling outside of the norm, as ‘feckless’, ‘welfare dependent’, ‘socially excluded’ or ‘troubled’ and as being a risk not only to their vulnerable children but also to wider society has been carefully curated in order to generate broader public support and consent for increasing levels of surveillance and intervention into family life (Skeggs, 2008; Jensen, 2018). In this context other developments in society, particularly widespread and increasing public access to the media, have facilitated the generation and acceptance of this discourse. The intense and often sensational reporting of child deaths has resulted in significant changes to society’s expectations that the state pre-empt and prevent all occurrences of harm, particularly in relation to children (Petley, 2014; Warner, 2015). Within the coverage of child deaths, the media gave increasing emphasis to the social work profession, in illuminating the often hidden decision making process, social workers were found by the press to be incompetent and incapable (Jones, 2012). Whilst once attributable to God’s will; accidents, illnesses, and deaths were increasingly understood in relation to the dominant ideology that emphasised personal responsibility and individual action (Douglas, 1992).

The increasing focus on risk, as opposed to harm or danger, particularly when viewed through a scientific rational lens, brings with it an implied ability to predict future outcomes and to intervene in order to change them, being associated as it is with mathematical calculations of probability (Douglas, 1992). This, alongside the psychological and neuroscientific developments in child development, have subsequently contributed to the introduction of increasingly complex guidance and formulaic procedures that have sought to confine social work to a set of standardising processes that would predict outcomes, prevent “worst case scenarios”, and render social work transparent and accountable (Parton, 2008).

A further important theme is the growth of technology as a tool through which to proceduralise and monitor social work practice within the broader neo-liberal developments of New Public Management, transparency and efficiency. Howe (1992) argued that technology was not the driving force for such significant changes to the nature of how family’s lives were understood and recorded, but the vehicle within which the increased focus on risk management was now delivered. The increasing importance placed on computer systems to facilitate multi agency working as well as, more recently, to ensure that social workers are recording risk factors and responding (or not) accordingly have been significant. Parton (2008) makes the distinction in social work between ‘information’ and ‘knowledge’; arguing that this represents a shift away from narrative social work towards a data base way of thinking. The ‘information’ is seen as ‘objective’ facts captured about families entered into a complex computer system constructed in relation to the new public management need for measurements. Knowledge, on the other hand, Parton describes, as the combination of the materially experienced realities of individual’s lives and the theoretical frameworks which social worker’s draw on to understand. The contextual knowledge leading to an understanding of why a child and their family found themselves in a particular set of circumstances was discarded in favour of information that would classify clients for the purpose of judging the nature and level of risk and for allocating resources.

In this context it can be suggested that technology, and the way that it has been harnessed in social work, has distracted social workers from their core task of working with children and families and it has been suggested that the impact of this is that social workers become ‘unable to exercise their professional judgement in order to safeguard children and promote their welfare’ (Parton, 2017). Whilst a slight departure from the social work literature the following example from aviation research illustrates this point effectively. Here research exploring the links between technology and safety, has highlighted that increased levels of automation has resulted in pilots experiencing cognitive skill degradation (Volz et al, 2016; Hill and Schneider, 2006). The use of autopilot requires procedural and technical information; pilots know that they have to click a series of buttons to instigate a particular action, such as take off, but during system malfunctions pilots are unable to recall the practice knowledge and skills required to manually undertake that action resulting in a loss of the cognitive skills associated with the practice knowledge (Volz et al, 2016; Hill and Schneider, 2006). The loss of practice knowledge and skills pertaining to the reasoning behind the sequencing has been identified as the cause of a number of major incidents (Volz et al, 2016; Hill and Schneider, 2006; Helmreich et al, 1999; Parasuraman et al, 2000). Whilst aviation authorities across the globe have raised concerns in relation to public safety (Wood, 2004; FAA, 2013), rather than calls for further procedure and standardisation as has been seen in social work, the focus has been on releasing the belt of restrictions to enable pilots to draw on the practice knowledge required to undertake their role (Petitt, 2019).

Presented as the solution to the unobtainable goal of preventing harm to children, the rafts of complicated procedures have been acknowledged as a barrier to effective social work limiting the space in which social workers can exercise professional judgement or discretion. Ronald Dworkin has described professional discretion as being akin to the hole in a doughnut, its existence is entirely dependent upon the “belt of restrictions” surrounding it (Dworkin, 1968: 30). The raft of legislation, policy and practice guidance seen in the last 50 years have tightened the belt of restrictions in social work, rendering the profession unable to adapt and respond to the changing needs of the children and families with whom they work (Munro, 2011b).

When seeking to understand why good social workers do bad things, the historical context within which the current research sits is vital in exploring how the organisation of social workers’ activities was linked to the historical development of notions of childhood and parenting. Whilst social work’s participation in the enactment of discourses which seek to control and regulate the behaviour of society’s poorest sits uncomfortably with the idealised notions of the profession rooted in the community-based social work of the 1970’s, the profession’s history is undeniably littered with the administration of wider ideologies pertaining to the moral entitlement of the most vulnerable in society.

As this chapter demonstrates, social work has long been understood to sit at the boundary between care and control. However, the developments highlighted above have led to a tightening of the belt of restrictions such that the control elements of the role, those aspects which are driven by broader socio-political concerns, have for become the primary focus. The increasing focus on the demons of welfare dependency and the use of technology to rationalise and monitor the social work practice have made it increasingly difficult for social workers to execute the caring elements of the role whilst also making the ‘defensible decisions’ (Parton 2017: 6) required of them.

Chapter Two - Here and Now

“Let me be really clear, the rhetoric of the timetable for the child is a difficult one to dispute, but I argue that these changes are principally designed to reduce costs and court time”

(Holt, 2014)

The previous chapter traced the threads of history, the ends of which were identified through observations of social workers’ activities in Middleshire. It elucidated how underlying ideology had been administered through constructed notions of childhood and parenting, enabling denial of the structural causes of inequality. As explored in the introductory chapter, the research contained within this thesis was conceived as a result of my own experiences as a social worker, particularly during the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the implementation of time restrictions in care proceedings. The introduction of timescales and pre-proceedings aimed at reducing the length of time in court proceedings introduced a fundamental change in the nature of social work when cases were deemed to have the potential to progress to court. This change was characterised by the legal codification found in preparations for the family justice system, and an expansion of surveillance of families in order to create the kind of evidence needed for expeditious trials. This chapter situates the research within this context, it explores the debates surrounding care proceedings, the emphasis on time and adoption, alongside the latest research regarding the disproportionate institutional gaze of social work on families living in poverty (CWIP, 2017).

The Legal Framework

As explored in the previous chapter, shifting conceptions of childhood and parenting have been met with corresponding changes in the legislative and policy responses of successive governments. The development of laws pertaining to children, and their families, for whom there are concerns relating to the child(ren)’s safety has seen increased attention. This section tracks the legislative changes to explore more recent developments, namely the Family Justice Review in 2011 and the time restrictions in care proceedings introduced in 2014.

Prior to the 1889 Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act there was very little legislation that was enacted in respect of the removal of children from their families of origin. Theoretically, existing 16th century wardship laws enabled the government to assume responsibility for children who were orphaned or deserted, however in reality, most children cared for away from their family of origin were accommodated through informal private arrangements (Cretney, 2003; Turmel, 2008; Butler-Sloss and Neil, 1990) or through admittance to the workhouse (Hendrick, 2003). The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act 1889 gave the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children ‘Inspectors’ the powers to remove a child and place them under the care of a guardian (Ferguson, 2004) but with no provision for the transference of parental rights, any parent could remove their child from any such arrangement (Turmel, 2008). The 1926 Adoption Act saw the introduction of non-consensual adoption, the legal severing of parental rights in spite of parent’s objections if found to be in the best interest of the child(ren); whilst other European countries have introduced similar legal instruments, there are few countries which use these powers with the same frequency as the English courts (Fenton-Glynn, 2016).

Throughout the 20th century, a legislative framework was constructed to respond to the changing needs of children and their families; the Matrimonial Proceedings (Children) Act of 1926 gave the courts powers to direct the care of a child to a specific individual or to the local authority rather than automatically to the father; the 1969 Children and Young Persons Act implemented supervision orders and care orders; the Child Care Act of 1980 updated provision for orphans and deserted children.

As part of the Thatcher government’s range of public enquiries into the roles and responsibilities of social workers, and against the backdrop of the Barclay and Pinker reports as discussed in chapter one, a review of the disjointed legislative framework concerning children was commissioned. In 1985 an interdepartmental working party produced a report titled The Review of Child Care Law, seeking to outline prospective legislation which would offer a “clearer and more consistent body of law” in respect of children who came into contact with the family courts (DHSS, 1986). The recommendations of the review led to the Children Act 1989, which outlined a framework for the provision of support for children in need, and procedures for the protection of children. The act also contained, under part 4, a clear process for the progression of public law hearings in front of the family courts. Whilst the High Court can still exercise 16th century wardship protocols, it was within the 1989 Children Act that the provision of supervision, emergency, interim and full care orders were detailed, rendering wardship hearings redundant for anything but the most urgent of cases (Butler-Sloss and Neill, 1990; Masson and Morton, 1989). Debates concerning the length of time such proceedings would take were considered by The Review of Child Care Law, with evidence collated regarding the potential cost of lengthy hearings in the proposed care proceedings processes (DHSS, 1986). The review considered the implementation of a pre-proceeding process, as well a restriction to the length of proceedings. A pilot study exploring the potential benefits of implementing restrictions was commissioned and saw two family courts adopt a timetable of 12 weeks from initial hearing to final order. Involving just 14 cases, the study tracked their progress through the courts, conducting interviews and questionnaires, alongside observations in court (Plotnikoff, 1992). The study found that only two of the 14 cases were completed in 12 weeks. The delays occurring in the remaining 12 cases at all stages and for a range of causes included; the delayed submission of reports, availability of the courts, and concerns in relation to “the timeliness and quality of legal representation for parents” (Plotnikoff, 1992: 30). The study highlighted that the rigidity and compliance required of a prescriptive timeframe resulted in undue pressure for social workers to comply, irrespective of the circumstances of the children and family, with the immediacy of deadlines creating additional workload pressure (Plotnikoff, 1992). One responding social worker commented that; “…without the necessary resources, time and supervision, it [timetabling] has caused enormous mayhem”, whilst another worker commented that the pressure to comply with the timetable of the pilot resulted in an inappropriate decision in respect of a child involved (Plotnikoff, 1992: 19). The recommendations of this small pilot study suggested the use of pre-hearing reviews in order to “front end” the work associated with care proceedings, alongside a cultural shift with regards to the acknowledgement of social workers’ expertise within hearings (Plotnikoff, 1992: 26). Despite the conclusion that a fixed timetabling for the completion of proceedings was both helpful and positive, the Department of Health and Social Security concluded that the implementation of such rigid timescales would have significant implications for resources and time respectively; “even a well-managed court with resources to hear cases speedily will take time to resolve disputes” (DHSS, 1986: 9). To mitigate concerns relating to the impact of lengthy proceedings, a number of mechanisms were identified to assist the courts in prioritising the impact of any delay on the welfare of the child such as the principle of delay, and the need for clear timetabling of proceedings (McKeigue and Beckett, 2004; Beckett, 2001). Despite these provisions, care proceedings were soon taking longer than the 12 weeks the Child Care Review had initially anticipated (Plotnikoff, 1992; Cretney, 2003).

Concerns About the Length of Proceedings

By the mid-1990s, concerns in respect of the length of proceedings were gaining political attention and successive governments, across political parties, ordered a range of inquiries, reviews and reports into the family courts and the subsequent delays experienced by children (Booth, 1996; Cretney, 2003). Each inquiry offered different solutions in respect of legal processes and in social work practice (Booth, 1996; Great Britain, Lord Chancellor’s Department, 2002; Finch, 2004; DfES and DCA, 2006; Family Justice Review, 2011). Whilst this research is primarily concerned with the changes implemented as a result of the 2011 Family Justice Review, it is of interest to briefly outline the previous inquiries and consider their findings to contextualise and plot the development of the legislative response to children and families involved with the family judiciary as it is today.

In 1997, former High Court Judge, Margaret Booth, published the report ‘Avoiding Delay in Children Act Cases’ detailing concerns which would later be echoed in the Family Justice Review in 2011: namely the poor preparation and management of cases; excessive expert witnesses; and the detrimental effect of inadequate resourcing upon the workings of the family court and thus upon children (Booth, 1996). The subsequent practice handbook detailing clearer procedural directions issued alongside government guidance did little to reduce delay (Beckett, 2001) and within two years further concerns were being raised regarding the “state of limbo” experienced by children subject to public court proceedings (Frean, 1999: para. 3). In 1999, a new Home Secretary, Jack Straw, was appointed and, unlike his predecessor, he did not agree with Booth’s findings that the delays were a consequence of poor procedural compliance alongside a lack of resources; rather Straw cited the delays as being the result of “well meaning, but misguided” social workers who were overly optimistic with regards to the parenting capacity of those who were not meeting their children’s needs, specifically teenage mothers (Frean, 1999: para. 1). Straw’s comments were part of the wider ideological position employed by the New Labour government and a clear demonstration of the political and ideological work being performed. Highlighting the perceived deficits of not just mothers but social workers, his comments individualised the concerns relating to delay, enabling a denial of the structural issues present. Hooking into existing narratives present within wider society of feckless single mothers and ineffective social workers who were too parent-focused ensured support for the wider modernisation agenda, a modernisation agenda seeking further standardisation of social work, positioning family support outside of statutory social work, alongside performance measures ensuring compliance (Devine, 2015).

As part of the modernisation agenda, as discussed in chapter one, wider judicial reforms saw the creation of the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service in 2001, combining the family court welfare officers of the Probation Service and the senior social workers of the Guardian ad Litem Services into one single department. Whilst the primary role of the Guardian ad Litem, in partnership with the children’s solicitor, was, and continues to be, the representation of the child’s rights and interests in court (as outlined in the Children Act 1989) it was envisaged that from within the newly-formed department they would affect change within care proceedings; supporting the courts to make “timely” decisions in the provision of their professional knowledge submitted through reports (Great Britain, Criminal Justice and Court Services Act, 2000; Great Britain. Lord Chancellor’s Department, 1999).

However, this was not the case, and by 2002 care proceedings were estimated to be taking in excess of 47 weeks to complete (McKeigue and Beckett, 2004). A further review, specifically in respect of concerns pertaining to CAFCAS, was commissioned (Great Britain, House of Commons, 2003). The review noted that procedural failures within CAFCAS alongside excessive report-writing requirements and increasing numbers of public law applications had resulted in the newly-formed department increasing delays in both public and private law (Masson et al, 2008; Great Britain, House of Commons, 2003). The solution, in line with the modernisation agenda of the New Labour government, was the introduction of a new simplified process for care proceedings against which the performance of the courts and CAFCAS could be measured and held accountable to. The Protocol for Judicial Case Management in Public Law Children Act Cases was introduced in 2003 outlining a recommended, but not legislated, length of proceedings set at 40 weeks (FLR, 2003).

Whilst the new protocol did indeed introduce targets and monitoring, it did little to reduce the delays experienced within the court system and a 2005 review titled Review of the Child Care Proceedings System in England and Wales, sought to identify the causes of those delays (DfES and DCA, 2006). The review highlighted the causes as being the result of a low quality of applications, a lack of robust management once before the court, as well as a lack of resources within the judicial system resulting in parents lacking an understanding of the process and thus having difficulty engaging in proceedings. Recommendations refocused attention on the period prior to care proceedings and argued for new statutory guidance outlining a pre-proceedings process. As a result, The Public Law Outline was introduced in 2008 in an attempt to offer a period prior to court to ensure that parenting assessments and social work reports were completed prior to application rather than on direction of the court, thus improving the quality of applications, resulting in a reduction of decisions the court would need to oversee and thus lessen the time in which children and their families were before the courts (Ministry of Justice, 2008). Under the new guidance parents would be given a clear statement from the local authority detailing the nature of the concerns, a timetable of support and further assessments, alongside access to legal representation at pre-proceedings meetings undertaken with the local authority (Holt and Kelly, 2012).

The pre-proceedings period was framed as a single solution to a multitude of problems; by highlighting the concerns of the local authority prior to court, in addition to a detailed plan of support, it was proposed that families would now have an opportunity to make the required changes therefore reducing not only the number of applications but the length of time those applications were under the purview of the family court. The multiagency approach would scrutinise and strengthen the quality of social work assessments and applications; the need for additional assessments and expert witnesses would be considered and executed within this period, rather than waiting for court to direct their commission; and concerns regarding availability of resources within the family judiciary would no longer be of concern as the responsibility would now shift to the local authorities. However, with no additional funding made available to the local authorities alongside the multitude of conflicting expectations, it is questionable whether the pre-proceedings process was ever likely to effect significant change in any one of these areas.

Rising Numbers: The Baby P Effect

The implementation of the Public Law Outline occurred against the backdrop of increasing numbers of referrals, greater rates of child protection investigations and conferences, and ultimately a sharp rise in the number of children accommodated by the local authority (Macleod et al, 2010). These increases were directly linked to the murder of Peter Connelly, as discussed in the previous chapter, and within a year of the public awareness of Peter’s murder, the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), alongside local authorities, reported increasing numbers of applications for care orders (Hall and Guy, 2010). CAFCASS reported between 2008 and 2009 a 113% increase in applications, an average of 706 new applications a month (Hall and Guy, 2010) whilst the Association of Directors of Children’s Services cited significant increases across all areas of safeguarding activities including referrals, child protection enquiries, and care orders (ADCS; 2010). Whilst research suggested there was some evidence that improvements in information sharing and referral systems had led to the earlier identification of children at risk, there was a widespread consensus that the murder of Peter and the subsequent government and public scrutiny had raised professional anxiety, not just for social workers but also for other professionals working with children and families (Macleod et al, 2010). The shift from child protection as a role for social workers, to safeguarding as an activity for a broad range of professionals had distributed responsibility with other agencies; agencies who were now referring more children to Children’s Services and making direct reference to Peter’s murder in the process (Macleod et al, 2010).

For many the rise in the number of children entering the care of local authorities was concerning, querying whether the system was seeing a larger number of families that were unsafe for children alongside questions regarding changing constructions of good parenting, or whether we were seeing children and their families getting caught up unnecessarily in a risk-averse approach to families (Beckett, 2001; Morris et al, 2013, 2018). It is worth noting that not all commentators saw the increase in the number of children entering the care system as concerning. Former Barnardo’s CEO Martin Narey[[4]](#footnote-4) argued that outdated views placed “too much premium on keeping the birth family together” and that the calls to reduce the numbers of children in care were misplaced, that in fact numbers needed to rise to ensure children were protected (Ramesh, 2010: para. 3).

Prior to the implementation of the Children Act 1989 there had been concerns raised relating to the length of time public law cases remained under the purview of the family judiciary and have been a topic of inquiry for successive governments since. Each inquiry has led to a report within which common themes have been identified; the poor quality of the application, poor case management once in court; excessive reports and additional assessments; a lack of resources within the family judiciary; all alongside an ever-rising number of public law applications. Despite numerous considerations of an imposed time restriction on proceedings it had never been legislated, with a recognition that such complex issues with such significant consequences take time to resolve. Rather, each review resulted in changes to the processes surrounding care proceedings, as well as significantly changing the work undertaken with children and families during this time.

Common Themes of the Reviews

The common themes identified within successive reviews can broadly be understood as a consequence of the perception of the social work profession and the quality of the applications made in respect of children to the family judiciary. Applications for care proceedings had historically been made by the local authority with incomplete assessments and unclear care plans for the child (DCA, 2006), the “rushed and hurried” decisions and assessments seen as the consequence of chronic underfunding despite rising numbers of children being in contact with Children’s Services (BASW, 2013: 15). Whilst incomplete and poor-quality applications have been attributed in part to the delays in care proceedings, the underlying perception of the social work profession is one which cannot be addressed through mandatory requirements for an increased quality of paperwork. Rather it can be argued that the residual perceptions of social work as an illegitimate profession are long lasting, exacerbated by the intense media coverage of child deaths.

**Social work and Pre-Proceedings**

Understanding of, and support for, the work social workers undertake varies greatly, as presented by politicians clearly influenced by underlying ideologies the profession is often portrayed unfavourably. The Schrödinger’s social worker paradox is inescapable; social workers are simultaneously Dickensian child snatchers, keen to remove any child from even the safest of loving homes, and so incompetent they cannot be stirred to remove a child from the unsafest of environments. Lord Justice Wall of the Court of Appeal claimed social workers are unaware of the public’s perception of their role, stating:

What social workers do not appear to understand is that the public perception of their role in care proceedings is not a happy one. They are perceived by many as the arrogant and enthusiastic removers of children from their parents into an unsatisfactory care system, and as trampling on the rights of parents and children in the process. (EH v Greenwich, 2010: para. 109).

However, research considering the perception of social work from the perspective of social workers themselves has not only highlighted their awareness of the public’s views, citing the influence of the media as the driver of such views, but their understanding that such views are also held by professionals from other agencies (Legood et al, 2016). The narrative of the incompetent social worker within mainstream media has been purposefully curated, the ideological and political work clearly present, serving the interests of both the media and politicians (Galilee, 2006; Warner, 2014). Such narratives, part of the regulating discourse as discussed in the previous chapter, are pervasive; cultivating a general culture of fear and blame for social workers across the country (Warner, 2014; SWTF, 2009a; Shoesmith, 2016) with some concluding that the profession is “damned if they do and damned if they do not” (Bainham, 2011). It can be argued that the profession has done little to assist in its image (Galilee, 2006), historically social work has been criticised for its failure to dominate a specific knowledge base or claim any legitimate expertise in a distinct skillset (Brewer and Lait, 1980) rather it was, and still is, seen as the “jack of all trades, master of none” (Zufferey, 2011: 510).

As previously discussed earlier in this chapter the delay in care proceedings has, in part, been attributed to the poor quality of social work both in respect of their interactions with children and families (Frean, 2007) and of their work with the court (Booth, 1996; DfES and DCA, 2006). Research capturing social workers’ experiences of working with the family judiciary has identified that social workers have felt marginalised within the courts (Plotnioff, 1992), their professional standing deemed to have less value than that of others (Taylor, 2007) their views held in deference to that of experts and guardians and their working knowledge of particular families subjugated for that of others who had not met the children whom were subject to proceedings (Beckett et al, 2007).

The consistently negative coverage of social work within the media purposefully homogenises and focuses on particular deficits, enabling a profound denial of the structural issues present.

The enactment of the inconsistent narratives pertaining to social workers, particularly in respect of the removal of children from their families of origin, ensures that the profound lack of funding both within the family judiciary and in Children’s Services has remained within the shadows.

**Additional Assessments**

The aforementioned perception of social work has, historically, resulted in the commissioning of additional assessments from independent and / or specialist social workers, and psychologists, alongside additional interventions such as residential assessments; such little weight was given to the original social work assessment (Holt and Kelly, 2015). These additional assessments ranged from specific parenting assessments in respect of the additional learning needs of the family using the Parenting Assessment Manual (PAMs), psychological assessments pertaining to cognitive functioning or mental health difficulties, and wider assessments of adults connected to the children whom had the potential to care for them; the cost of which were historically split between the parties once proceedings in court had started. One of the many stated objectives of the pre-proceedings process was to address the delays such additional assessments were causing, with the need for further assessments identified and completed within the pre-proceedings process (Holt and Kelly, 2012). Local authorities, already experiencing significant reductions in funding from central government, redesigned their services and costly residential assessments were replaced by “in house” community assessment teams, leading to questions regarding the opportunities for meaningful assessment of parents (Larizadeh, 2008). Whilst concerns have also been raised regarding the lack of legal representation for the child throughout the pre-proceedings processes, whilst under the purview of the court children are represented through a guardian and a solicitor, within pre-proceedings only the parents are able to access legal advice (Welborne, 2014).

Concerns have been raised specifically raised in respect of the lack of access to psychological assessments, particularly for parents with identified and unidentified additional learning needs (Cox et al, 2015; Jones, 2013). Historically parents with learning difficulties have disproportionately been represented within care proceedings (Booth et al, 2005, 2006). With local authorities tasked under the pre-proceedings process with commissioning or completing “in house” specialist assessments, assessments vital to informing the work undertaken with the family in respect of the concerns, alongside concerns pertaining to the lengthy process involved in the appointment of official solicitors,[[5]](#footnote-5) there are significant questions being raised regarding whether parent’s learning needs were being identified or appropriately addressed (Cox et al, 2015). Similar concerns in relation to the lack of suitable assessments and interventions were raised in regards to parents with drug and/or alcohol use, and those experiencing mental health difficulties, highlighting the lack of time available for parents to make and sustain the required changes within the pre-proceedings process in order to divert the case away from the family judiciary (Harvey, 2014; Jessiman et al, 2009).

There is little evidence to suggest that the pre-proceedings process as detailed in the Public Law Outline instigated a reduction in the delays experienced by children, rather it shortened the length of time children and their families were under the purview of the court, shifting the time elsewhere in the process (Jessiman et al, 2009; Holt and Kelly, 2015). Research evaluating the implementation of the Public Law Outline found that the focus of social work intervention was now, more than ever, on the increased surveillance and monitoring of families, with socials workers’ activities directed toward the timely completion of assessments and reports in preparation for court and not in supporting families (Brophy, 2006; Broadhurst and Holt, 2010; Holt and Kelly, 2012; Holt, 2014). This has led to concerns that children at risk of harm were remaining within the home, experiencing greater delays in decision making, whilst social workers comply with the “front loading” requirements of the pre-proceedings process and ultimately leaving child(ren) holding the risk (Holt, 2014). This was supported by research undertaken with a group of family judges who identified similar concerns pertaining to the evidence gathering and preparation focus of the pre-proceedings process, rather than it being a preventative process in which the local authority provides family support in order to direct cases away from the family court (Dickens and Masson, 2016). A decade after the introduction of the Public Law Outline, research identified a significant regional variation with regards its application (CCR, 2018). Whilst some local authorities were engaging in the pre-proceedings processes in a meaningful way, supporting parents to make changes that enabled their children to remain within the home, many of the findings echoed those of the previous research, that the focus of the period prior to proceedings was an adherence to the processes, working with parents in a tokenistic manner using the time to gather further evidence before making an application to the courts for a care order (CCR, 2018; Thomas, 2018).

There is little evidence that the pre-proceedings process has accomplished the multiple aims claimed it would address, most significant of which was the claim it would reduce the lengthy delays experienced by children in decisions pertaining to their permanence. Rather that the period of interaction has shortened, at best it has shifted that time elsewhere in the process and at worst lengthened it, leaving some children at greater risk of harm. However, if as Holt (2014) has suggested, the aim of the pre-proceedings process was not to address concerns regarding the delays experienced by children, but a reduction in the costs to the court, then this has been achieved as a result of the transfer of responsibility for additional assessments and specialist reports now falling to the local authority. The representation of social workers’ incompetence presented within the above reviews would suggest that the pre-proceedings process would mitigate concerns regarding the timely completion and quality of social work reports in the court, thus repairing their professional reputation. Yet, as my findings will go on to explore, the experience of social workers in Middleshire during proceedings does little to recognise their expertise in relation to the families they work with. The perception of the profession with regards to their role in the assessment and removal of children may not be wholly without basis; the lack of expertise and meaningful assessment of parents, specifically parents with additional learning needs, within “in house” assessment teams raises some considerable concerns that the focus on timely completion rather than quality of engagement, results in some children being unnecessarily removed from their families.

Family Justice Review

Despite the significant changes made the concerns relating to the rising numbers and length of care proceedings continued, and in 2010 just two months after the coalition of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, a select committee was established to investigate the workings of the family courts (Parliament, 2010). The Family Justice Review heard a range of evidence from researchers, family groups, children’s charities, and professionals working within the system exploring the number rising number of applications and the delays resulting in the average length of care proceedings being 60 weeks (Family Justice Review, 2011). Evidence was submitted to the review suggesting that the financial restrictions as a result of the global economic crisis were resulting in significant issues for not only the court system and children’s departments in local authorities, but for families themselves who were experiencing increasing levels of poverty (Family Justice Review, 2011).

The factors identified by the review as contributing to delays in proceedings echoed previous reviews; delays were widespread, building at every stage and by all parties; the quality of the evidence presented was of poor quality resulting in a lack of trust and confidence in the local authority; social workers were purposefully delaying proceedings to enable a period long enough for parents, often mothers, to activate and maintain change (Family Justice Review, 2011). The review suggested that the courts were also complicit with a purposeful delay to proceedings; “We were told and we agree that the right of the parents to a fair hearing has come too often to override the paramount welfare of the child.” (Family Justice Review; 2011:92).

The language used in the report when discussing parents was highly critical and laden with value judgements, describing families as ‘difficult’ and children as ‘damaged’ as a result of “abusive relationships, neglect and deprivation” (Family Justice Review, 2011:91). The final report had concluded that for those parents who came to the attention of the family courts they had already failed; failed at being a family and at being parents, and the role of the family courts was to act quickly and decisively to improve the life chances of “already damaged children” (Family Justice Review, 2011: 5) reflecting a generally less tolerant attitude towards those families requiring assistance (Holt and Kelly, 2015; Tyler 2013; Jensen, 2018). Appetite for long-term support was gone (Featherstone et al 2018; Garrett, 2017) whilst often justified as financially unviable there is emerging evidence that the long-term support of parents with additional learning needs, for example, is more cost effective than foster care provision (Bauer, 2015).

A tangible sense of urgency was communicated throughout the report, with the consequences for children being explicitly linked to further damage and limits to their future life chances, such as “multiple problems in adolescence and later life” (Family Justice Review, 2011: 93). The review urged social workers, the family judiciary, and social work educators to increase their understanding of child development theories, including attachment theory and neuroscience, in order to end what the review considered as the profession’s active participation in damaging the life chances of the children for whom they were responsible (Family Justice Review: 2011). It is questionable whether the aforementioned professionals lacked an understanding of attachment theory or neuroscience or whether, given the concerns raised regarding such theories (as explored in the previous chapter), they were applying a professional scepticism.

The recommendations of the review sought to build on already existing processes; child in need and child protection as detailed in the 1989 Children Act and the associated guidance, followed by the pre-proceedings processes Public Law Outline as introduced in 2008. Any progression to court was now to be an exercise in making arrangements for the permanence of a child away from their family of origin, the time for support and change was no longer to be overseen by the family courts. Subsequent primary legislation, the Children and Families Act 2014, detailed powers available to government to set a time limit on care proceedings through secondary legislation, with the recommended time limit being 26 weeks in all but the most exceptional cases. Early reports exploring the pilots of the time restrictions identified that the new procedures were not speeding up the decision-making process; at best it was further shifting the delay to the period prior to court, in addition to the delays experienced as a result of the pre-proceedings process, and at worst, for some children and families, the emphasis on undertaking work prior to court was creating an additional delay (Holt, 2014).

With an increased focus on compliance to procedure, practitioners and researchers from within the social work discipline, alongside professionals from the family judiciary, questioned the motivation behind the changes given the realities of those working with children and families was far from the narrative produced by the government of reducing delay for the benefit of the child(ren) (Holt, 2014; Holt and Kelly, 2015; Baksi, 2013; Family Rights Group and The College of Social Work, 2013; Family Justice Review, 2011). Holt (2014) concluded that the drive to reduce delay was a “strategic measure to reduce the financial burden away from the courts and to place this elsewhere” (Holt, 2014:6). It is pertinent to understand how the drive to reduce costs could be linked to the time restrictions. The family judiciary are funded directly by central government via the Ministry of Justice. Social work undertaken by the local authority is allocated through local authority budgets, a combination of both local council tax revenue and central government funding. By shortening the length of time spent before the court the financial savings are made by the central government. With no additional funds being made available local authorities were now tasked with locating the additional monies required to fund longer periods holding cases as well as alternative assessments during pre-proceedings. Analysis has shown that this cost was met in part through the reduction in preventative services, such as family support and child in need (Webb and Bywaters, 2018)

The Family Justice Review and the Review of Early Intervention, as discussed in the previous chapter, were undertaken simultaneously and both premised from the same position; an urgency to intervene in order to rescue children form the irreparable physical brain damage occurring as a result of poor care giving (Family Justice Review, 2011; Allen, 2011a, 2011b). The Family Justice Review did not cite the neuroscience contained within the Allen reports, the science was no longer in question, the premise of child’s timescale was presented throughout the Family Justice Review as an irreversible truth with an urgency to secure permanence, particularly through adoption as the only viable solution.

The historical pattern of reviews and ineffective solutions has fertilised the ground upon which the legislated time restrictions in care proceedings could be implemented. The inescapable narrative of poor quality social work within the court system has seen a raft of measures implemented distancing the family judiciary from responsibility and positioned any subsequent concerns about the length of time decision making takes, firmly at the feet of local authorities. The existing circumstances regarding the lack of local authority resources has now been compounded through the less than flexible approach to decision making within the court. In rendering abstract notions of neglect into concrete visual representations through the employment of the neuroscience, has been a powerful tool in appealing to the rescue narrative seen through the genesis of social work.

The shift in specialist assessment and interventions to within the already stretched resources of local authorities coupled with a reduced scrutiny within the courts raises serious concerns regarding the impact of children and families. However, this was clearly not an unintended oversight. The historical battle to focus social work’s activities on the administration of the underlying ideology pertaining to the deserving and underserving poor has been somewhat silenced, for now. The culmination of the afore mentioned funding and legislative changes, alongside the enacted discourse surrounding the role, has left social work with little time or space to consider its role as anything but that of surveillance and risk management.

An Emphasis on Adoption

During the launch for the Family Justice Review, Michael Gove explicitly linked what he penned as his “crusade” to increase adoption numbers to the newly announced time restrictions in care proceedings (Gove, 2011: para 42). Writing for the Daily Mail, Gove outlined his expectations regarding the role of adoption in relation to children unable to live with their family of origin; not only did children need “rescuing” from “abusive and neglectful parenting… in dysfunctional families”, but also from a life “languishing” in foster care “without parents” (Gove, 2011: paras 19, 29).

Agnes Gault, adopted as a child and now a social worker, has written frankly about the role of adoption as a solution-focused approach to addressing the problem of rising numbers of children in care, and the answer to childless couples wishing to start families; “adoption solved two problems, but what about me?”, discussing the long lasting difficulties she has faced as a result of being presented as the solution to a childless couple’s infertility (Gault, 2018: 26). Gault’s interpretation of adoption as a solution to a problem is not an uncommon thread throughout history. In the 1970’s, adoption rates in the UK were at their highest with approximately 20,000 adoptions noted[[6]](#footnote-6) (Great Britain, Department of Health, 2000), rises in pregnancy outside of marriage and, as Thatcher would later go on to blame, the decline in the traditional family unit, saw many women coerced and encouraged by society’s unforgiving attitudes towards unmarried mothers to relinquish their new-born babies for adoption (Garrett, 2017). Whilst this may seem an outdated and somewhat draconian approach to unmarried mothers, the idea was revisited in 1999 by New Labour government MP Jack Straw as a potential answer to the rising teenage pregnancy numbers (Frean, 1999). And in 2011, in what I acknowledge is an extreme position, Nadine Dorries, a Conservative member of parliament, explicitly framed adoption using the market logic of supply and demand. Suggesting adoption reforms, including restrictions on abortions, would be good business sense in order to meet the demands from women who are infertile as a result of not starting a family when younger; “Many women now wait until their late 30s early 40s to start a family and then realise they can’t and turn to adoption but it just isn’t an available option anymore.” (Beckford, 2011: para 13).

Public policy and legislation pertaining to adoption took a prominent position under the New Labour welfare reforms, which positioned adoption as the ideal plan for child permanence (Great Britain. Department of Health, 2000). In their 2000 White Paper outlining a new approach to adoption, the proposals ranged from the introduction of targets for local authorities to increase the numbers of children adopted rather than in long-term foster care by 40%, a consultation on what would later become mandatory paid adoption leave, and a commitment to speeding up the process for prospective adopters as well as children (Great Britain. Department of Health, 2000).

The coalition government picked up the baton presented by the former New Labour government and Gove, along with government advisor Narey, presented the government’s position for adoption reforms. It would address the restrictions and assessments on prospective adopters in order to significantly reduce the length and depth of assessments, alongside schemes such as the “fostering to adopt” programme which would see children placed with potential adopters immediately upon removal with a view to later adopting them, thus reducing the number of moves between families’ children experienced (Butler, 2014).

Concerns regarding the compatibility of closed non-consensual adoptions within the UK have been raised in relation to the compatibility of adoption with the country’s legal, and social work’s ethical, commitment to human rights (Fenton-Glynn, 2016). A number of third sector organisations were amongst those raising some of the concerns outlined above and, in 2012, an inquiry was funded from within the voluntary sector to collate a range of evidence to explore whether the focus on adoption as a route for permanence for all children was appropriate. The Care Inquiry (2013) recognised that, within the context of rising levels of inequality alongside the government’s welfare reforms, families were experiencing a myriad of difficulties, which, coupled with the reduction in family support services, was resulting in adoption as the listed plan for permanence for many children who otherwise might not have been subject to removal and subsequent adoption.

The inquiry suggested a more flexible approach was required when considering permanence for children, drawing on attachment-based theories surrounding the importance of stable long-term relationships for children not only being found in adoption but through reunification with the family of origin, with long-term foster carers and within the wider family network (The Care Inquiry, 2013). There was very little government response to the inquiry. Narey questioned the conclusion regarding relationships, stating that it should not be about relations per se but on the quality of those relationships (DfE, 2018). His previous position being articulated in a report published by the Times, access to which was through a paid subscription, where he questioned why children would need contact with their families of origin, when their adoptive parents can and should be a child’s “real and only parents” (Narey, 2011: para 107).

The imagery of an idealised account of adoption has been a powerful tool in promoting the role of adoption in children’s permanence arrangements. Irrespective of the party politics, successive Prime Ministers and government officials have drawn heavily on accounts of formerly adopted children to promote what is, in reality, a severe severing of ties between a child and their family of origin. The New Labour government’s White Paper on Adoption quoted children who have been adopted, with quotations in bold lettering; such as “It may be hard, emotionally, being adopted but it’s worth it in the end” (Great Britain. Department of Health, 2000: 10). The coalition government drew heavily on Michael Gove, himself adopted at 4 months old, to talk about the “calmness, kindness, and love” of his [adoptive] parents and the debt he owes them for “rescuing” him (Gove, 2011: para 12). Narey has drawn on his own family experience, namely the adoptions of his five nephews, whose presence has “… made their [adoptive] fathers – my brothers – and their [adoptive] mothers extremely proud” an experience he hopes can be replicated “over and again” for numerous other adoptive parents (Narey, 2011: para 8).

Changes to the legislative and policy framework seeking to speed up decision making and prioritise adoption for children’s long-term plan away from their families of origin should be reflected in the figures returned by each local authority pertaining to the demographics of children subject to care proceedings, and for whom a plan of adoption had been identified. The most recent analysis of this data shows a significant increase in the number of children removed within the first week of their life, an increase of 135% in the period 2008 to 2016/2017 and despite over half of these children having a permanence plan of adoption (Bilson and Bywaters, 2020) the number of children adopted has not seen such a dramatic rise (ONS, 2019). Whilst there is no clear evidence as to why this might be, the tension between the government’s position on faster, less rigorous adoptions and the existing legal position has been, temporarily at least, concluded by Lady Hale’s succinct summary; “when nothing else will do”, reiterating the legal position that adoption should only be considered once all other options have been explored (Re B (a child) (FC), 2013: para 198). Whilst it is clear why this particular case has been seen as a potential cause for the drop in adoption rates an examination of the figures throughout recent history suggest that the cause may be less direct.

The historical data pertaining to the number of adoptions within England over the last 25 years shows that with government initiatives such as the 2000 White Paper and the subsequent adoption targets, along with the Conservative government’s adoption agenda, the number of adoptions has increased and subsequently fallen (see appendix three for annotated graph) (ONS, 2019).

The changes made to the legislative framework during this period provided the framework under which the teams included in this research were conducting their activities. Thus, alongside the government’s prioritisation of adoption their activities were framed by a theoretical and ideological agenda underpinned by questionable neuroscientific understandings of child development which sought earlier removals and faster adoptions. However, the incompatibility of the reforms in respect of the existing legislative framework along with concerns pertaining to such an agenda’s incongruence with human rights could offer some explanation as to why the number of children cared for away from their family of origin has risen but fewer children are being adopted.

Whilst the Family Justice Review acknowledged the concerns raised in respect of budgetary restrictions, they rejected calls for an increase in public funding, rather, the review emphasised the need for greater efficiency and more effective spending on the existing resources (Family Justice Review, 2011). The persuasive narrative about inefficient public sector workers enacted the underlying ideology that individualises both social workers and families. The lack of attention given to the findings of The Care Inquiry Review, as discussed above, within the discourse surrounding adoption cannot be understood as simply an oversight. Rather, the explicit omission of the links between structural causes of poverty, the reduced capacity of families to care for children, and the subsequent disproportionate number of children from poor families living in care, was further purposeful enactment of the underlying individualising ideology, with families living with the consequences of structural inequality framed as undeserving, whilst the adopting families considered deserving. Whilst the links between structural inequality and children residing outside of the family of origin were overlooked within the various reports pertaining to care proceedings and adoption, it has increasingly become a focus of research by social work academics seeking to explore the links between poverty and social work interventions.

Poverty, Child Abuse and Neglect. Correlation or Causation?

In the preceding chapter I considered the rising levels of poverty and social work’s rather uncomfortable role in administering successive governments’ ideological responses to those living in deprivation. The development of the dangerous, problem, and troubled families narratives, as explored in the previous chapter, has purposefully directed the gaze of society upon those living in poverty. In the context of social work intervention with families there are two significant pieces of research which explore the unequal and disproportionate levels of social work intervention with families who are living in areas categorised as deprived (based on the index of multiple deprivation) which are worthy of review: The Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP, 2017) and the Care Crisis Review (CCR, 2018). However, it seems pertinent to precede discussion of these studies with a brief exploration of the research regarding evidence of a link between poverty, and child abuse and neglect.

Much of the research drawn upon in the development of UK policy pertaining to the state’s involvement in family life originated in the United States (Houshyar, 2014; Paxon and Waldfogel, 1999; Jütte et al, 2014; Gillham et al, 1998). A number of the studies draw highly problematic conclusions conflating a correlation in findings with a causal link between poverty and child abuse, giving little to no consideration to the complexities of the social constructions of neglect or poverty, the structural causes, or a discussion surrounding the readiness to blame mothers in particular for the disadvantages experienced as a consequence of legislative and policy frameworks. The United States Department of Health and Human Services highlight research from 1999 that links a family’s socioeconomic circumstances and marital status with the likelihood of child protection concerns, proclaiming to have discovered evidence of “working single mothers being more neglectful or abusive” (Paxon and Waldfogel, 1999:18) whilst other studies promoted by the department have sought to identify a particular income level at which children become more likely to experience child abuse and neglect (Sedlak and Broadhurst, 1996).

Such studies have gone on to form not only the justification for policy frameworks, but have filtered down into social work practice materials, continually refocusing the profession’s gaze on those living in poverty, and away from the structural causes of poverty. Underpinned by neuroscience, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study linked experiences in childhood, including abuse, household changes, and neglect, to the long-term health of adults (Felitti et al, 1998). The list of ACEs includes incarceration of a household member, household mental illness, physical health, and parental separation, along with verbal, physical, and sexual abuse as well as neglect. It is of interest that whilst poverty is absent from the list, many of the experiences identified are disproportionally experienced by individuals living in poverty such as incarceration, poor physical health, and mental illness (Duque and McKnight, 2019; Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010; Hooper et al, 2007). The individualising narrative linking particular childhood experiences to long-term health complications has quickly been consumed and re-presented. Within a government select committee hearing evidence on ACEs to underpin early years intervention, quotations were presented from a 1998 American study which reframed the individual ACE events as “household dysfunction during childhood” and it’s potential use in the UK for addressing wider social issues such as education attainment and income levels (Great Britain. Science and Technology Committee, 2018: para 7).

A recent literature review commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation explored the evidence presented for the link between families living in poverty, and child abuse and neglect (Bywaters et al, 2016). The review highlighted that despite the significant attention in literature given to the link between poverty and child abuse and neglect there is no data routinely collected capturing the socioeconomic circumstances of children subject to child protection inquires or care proceedings. Whilst identifying a clear association, the review concluded that “…poverty is neither a necessary nor sufficient factor in the occurrence of child abuse and neglect” (Bywaters et al, 2016: 29). The interactions between poverty and family life were identified as multifaceted and complex, with children experiencing both the direct and indirect effects of poverty, such as material hardship and parental stress, with the role of Children’s Services active in the construction of what is considered child abuse and neglect. The review highlighted the distinctly different experiences of a family’s interactions with Children’s Services dependent upon their socioeconomic circumstances; parental substance use within a family experiencing poverty was more likely to result in social work intervention than in an affluent family (Bywaters et al, 2016).

The Child Welfare Inequalities Project

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the Child Welfare Inequalities Project explored the relationship between the rising levels of economic inequality and the increasing numbers of children coming into contact with Children’s Services (CWIP, 2017). Based on a mixed methods approach, the study drew not only on the data returned by local authorities recording their activities with children, such as the number of child protection plans, but also undertook fieldwork across eight UK social work departments exploring, through interviews and focus groups, the decision-making process when applied to a case study vignette (Mason et al, 2019). The findings demonstrated that increases in the number of children subject to child protection plans or accommodated away from their family of origin were not equally distributed across the country; children living in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods were ten times more likely to be accommodated by the local authority than those living in the 10% least deprived of areas (Bywaters et al, 2018). These findings are consistent with the results of a study in Wales examining the demographics of families involved in care proceedings from 2008 to 2014, which concluded there was a “systemic pattern… a concentration of intervention in the lives of children and their families in the most deprived areas” (Elliott, 2020: 591). The study concluded that social workers overlooked the structural circumstances in which families lived, rather they focused on the individualised consequences of poverty which resulted in the reconstruction of structural inequalities as personal deficits (Elliott, 2020). Social workers interviewed by the Child Welfare Inequalities Project rarely referred to issues relating to deprivation unless prompted, so familiar were they with the levels of poverty that they failed to link the individually experienced consequences to wider structural inequalities (CWIP, 2017). With poverty being seen as the wallpaper of practice “too big to tackle and too familiar to notice” (Morris et al, 2018: 370), individualising the consequences through a lens of risk (Featherstone et al, 2018) which in the Welsh study was seen through the blaming of parents as being ineffective and not activating change quickly enough to prevent children from becoming accommodated by the local authority (Elliot, 2020). In the Child Welfare Inequalities Project social workers working in areas of high deprivation verbalised an awareness that families were living in poverty, however, this was done through stigmatising narratives of “pockets of crime and poverty” and “low income and state benefits” (Morris et al, 2018; 8).

The statistical data presented as part of the Child Welfare Inequalities Project, when coupled with the number of referrals recorded in local authorities for the same period, depicts a ‘widening of the net’ whereby the increased number of children subject to a referral to Children’s Services and child protection investigation is not met with a similar increase in the number of children subject to a child protection plan (CWIP, 2017; DfE, 2018; Hood et al, 2020a, 2020b). Between 2009 and 2016 Children’s Services saw an increase in referrals of 10% (DfE, 2018), during the same period, the Child Welfare Inequalities Project noted a 79% increase in the number of referrals progressing to child protection enquiries, a 63% rise in the number of initial child protection conferences with only 43% of those presented at conference going on to be subject to a child protection plan (CWIP, 2017).

The death of Peter Connelly in 2007 was attributed, at least in part, to the increase in referrals to Children’s Services, see discussion on page 57, and can be understood in the shift from child abuse as a concern for social workers to safeguarding as the responsibility of all professionals. However the increased number of child protection investigations which do not progress to a child protection plan, depict a system of increased surveillance, subjecting families to involvement in what is often experienced as an adversarial intervention. Munro highlighted in 2011 that in its fallible quest to prevent further murders, such as Victoria Climbié’s and Peter Connelly’s, the child protection system has inadvertently subjected a number of children and their families to an unnecessary, and often traumatic, engagement with Children’s Services. The redirection of resources and attention toward such activities, alongside the remnants of short measureable interventions from the New Labour government, has resulted in a lack of desire for the activities of family support, especially within those families where extended levels of support may be needed (Featherstone et al, 2018).

Care Crisis Review

As the number of referrals and social work interventions with children and families has risen, so too has the number of children accommodated away from their birth family. The Care Crisis Review (2018) was formed in direct response to the question posed by the President of the Family Division, Sir James Munby, in respect of the rising number of care proceedings: “What is to be done?” (CCR, 2018). The study combined a review of the existing literature alongside a range of face-to-face and online consultations with staff and services users of the family judiciary, Children’s Services, and voluntary organisations, seeking to understand not only what had led to the rising levels of children looked after away from their family of origin, but what solutions could be found (CCR, 2018). Similar to the Child Welfare Inequalities Project, the findings demonstrated significant local variations in the numbers of children entering the care system, with those children and families living in the most deprived areas most likely to be subject to care proceedings and to be cared for away from their family of origin (CCR, 2018).

Contrary to the popular discourse citing those living in poverty as authors of their own circumstance, as previously explored in Chapter One, evidence submitted to the review highlighted the rising numbers of working households now living in poverty as a result of policy changes. The increase in insecure jobs on “zero hour” contracts, alongside falling levels of state support, have resulted in families who are unable to provide the most basic of provisions, often resulting in contact with Children’s Services. The reframing of family support as a precursor to child protection, rather than as a service delivering section 17 of the Children Act 1989, has resulted in families being processed through a progression of services ultimately resulting in the rise of children becoming looked after away from their families of origin (CCR, 2018).

Professionals and families alike reported a lack of opportunity to form and build working relationships, resulting in the basic underlying principle of partnership in the Children Act 1989 not being enacted, with a service design delivering protective interventions rather than preventative services (CCR, 2018). Finances were highlighted as a significant issue for both the practitioners and families; practitioners based in local authorities were conscious that the cuts from central government had resulted in significant losses in respect of the range of services they were able to provide families, including the provision of direct financial support. For families, national welfare reforms alongside reductions in the availability of community resources has seen the once state-provided safety net all but disappear. The combined effect of such factors was seen by participants to result in a universal understanding that neither the system, nor the families subject to it, could respond adequately; “There was a palpable sense of unease about how lack of resources, poverty and deprivation are making it harder for families and the system to cope.” (CCR, 2018: 4).

The review explored examples of good practice from around the country with reductions in the numbers of children entering the care system reported from authorities drawing on models of intervention such as Signs of Safety (Edwards and Turnell, 1999), Family Group Conferences (see Morris and Tunnard, 1996), and the Family Safeguarding Approach (see Forrester et al, 2017). All three models explored by the review are relationship and strengths-based approaches to working with families, situating the family at the centre of solution-focused planning to address concerns and move forward. The Family Safeguarding Approach is a multiagency approach to activating change within families for whom the local authority has concerns of a child protection nature. Drawing on therapeutic styles including motivational interviewing techniques, staff facilitate a structured approach to working with children and families to improve key outcomes (Forrester et al, 2017). In contrast, the Family Group Conference model situates families at the centre of the process whereby a coordinator supports the family to convene and chair their own family meeting, without a staff member present, in order to formulate a plan with allocated responsibilities shared amongst the family network (Ashley et al, 2006). The Signs of Safety approach prompts a solution-focused assessment based on three key questions; ‘What are we worried about? What’s working well? and What needs to happen?’ where families are encouraged to participate in the formulation of the assessment focused on future danger not past harm, progressing from the starting point that risk can never truly be eradicated asking social workers ‘what would need to change to close the case’ (Edwards and Turnell, 1999; Turnell, 2018). Whilst the review highlighted the models as examples of good practice there is very little data reported in respect of the efficacy of the approaches in reducing the number of children entering local authority care (Forrester et al, 2017; Turnell, 2018; Morris et al, 2018; Bunn, 2013), with many studies claiming there is little to no evidence of their success (Dijkstra et al, 2016; What Works Centre, 2018; Forrester et al, 2017). However, using quantitative data in respect of the numbers of children entering local authority care is a simplistic approach to evaluating such models, each of the studies and evaluations refers to the positive feedback from families involved in each of the three models, with many reporting parent’s positive comments in relation to respect, participation and authentic partnership working (Forrester et al, 2017; Morris et al, 2018, Bunn, 2013; What Works Centre, 2018).

This chapter has illustrated the increase in the numbers of children coming under the surveillance of Children’s Services and the links between austerity, poverty and this increase.

The changes outlined in these two background chapters, the increases in poverty, the role of technology and surveillance, the ideologies underpinning the principles of New Public Management and the modernisation agenda which serve to individualise responsibility and obfuscate the structural drivers of the needs of children, have been described as the ‘perfect storm’ (Featherstone et al, 2013). Alongside this, as acknowledged in the United Nations report discussed above, it has been suggested that the current welfare framework can be seen as an exercise in social engineering. For children coming into care it is suggested they become part of a “harsh, demoralising social recovery programme” (Butler, 2014; 421) and one which I would argue has its foundations within the eugenics movement of the 20th century. It is within this discursive framework that the social workers of Middleshire conduct their activities and negotiate these boundaries.

In the following chapter I will outline the methodological framework of this thesis before going on to detail the methods used to gather the data from which my findings and analysis derive.

Chapter Three - Methodology

“My ‘here’ is their ‘there’. My ‘now’ does not fully overlap with theirs... All the same, I know that I live with them in a common world… [and] that we share a common sense about its reality.’’

(Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 37)

The previous two chapters have outlined the backdrop against which the activities of social workers in Middleshire are set, and the introduction explored the development of my own interest in the area leading to the construction of the problematic of this study; why do good social workers do bad things? This chapter outlines the process of decision making undertaken in the development of the research alongside the rationale for those decisions. For the purposes of the thesis this is separated into two distinct sections. The first explores the philosophical world view I approach the study from and upon which the research is progressed. The second details the methods and data collection tools that are employed during the fieldwork process. Whilst they are presented as two distinct and separate sections, the reality of the process was anything but contained. As the research progressed, the methodological perspectives were continually revisited and were present in decisions made during fieldwork and through the writing process. The purpose of separating these two sections is to show you, the reader, clearly the research process; to be transparent and thus accountable enabling an understanding of how and why I have made the decisions I have made and reached the conclusions I have (Crotty, 1998).

Methodology

As briefly discussed within the introduction, this research progresses from a pragmatic position, drawing on Dorothy Smith’s institutional ethnography as a frame of enquiry. This section will offer a brief exploration of pragmatism and how, when coupled with Marx’s theories of social relations, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and Foucault’s approach to discourse and power, I came to understand Smith’s synthesis and the methodological foundations to her approach: institutional ethnography (Smith, 1986, 1987, 1999, 2005). The chapter will then go on to outline why institutional ethnography offers this research a unique frame of enquiry from which to explore how the day-to-day activities of social workers in Middleshire come to be organised in the ways that they are, exposing the tensions between the lived experiences and the authoritative account of the social work role, whilst connecting the activities of the individual with the broader socio-cultural and structural processes which guide their understanding (Smith, 2005).

In its most simplistic explanation research methodology can appear to be a linear process; a philosophical base upon which the researcher’s world view is established, how it is to be explored, and from which research questions are constructed and corresponding methods are built, data collection tools are invoked and fieldwork completed; each layer dependent upon the thorough construction of the one before it (Crotty, 1998). In reality, the process was anything but linear or one directional; an iterative process. At the proposal stage I started with a research question in mind: how are social workers experiencing and working with children and families in relation to the 26 weeks? My research proposal was constructed whilst I was still practicing as a social worker and oblivious to methodological perspectives and the various debates that I later became immersed in. However, unbeknownst to me at the time of the study’s conception, I was already indicating the world view upon which the study would progress. I had situated the focus of the study as being the material experiences of social workers and how those experiences are organised.

In preparation for my doctoral research I undertook a Masters in Social Research and completed a ‘Philosophy for Research’ taught module, examining the variety of world views from which research can be conducted. Having not explored philosophy prior to this, it was a difficult and at times frustrating topic, however, the module enabled me to interrogate the research decisions I had already, unwittingly, made. It also afforded me an opportunity to pause and consider the variety of other approaches to examining social work during care proceedings. During this time, it became apparent to me just how important the actionable outcomes of my research were to my motivation in undertaking my doctorate, hoping that it be more than a vessel within which I gained a qualification. I sought to illuminate and instigate conversations about social workers’ actual experiences of working with children and families during care proceedings, identifying in the draft proposal that whilst research was being conducted on this topic from the perspective of parents, court officials, and children, there was none focusing on the experiences of social workers (Nandy, 2013; The Child Protection All Party Parliamentary Groups, 2013; Baksi, 2013; Family Rights Group &The College of Social Work, 2013; Family Justice Review, 2011; Judge Crichton cited in Baksi, 2013).

Through teaching on the module, in supervision, and within my own reading I began to explore pragmatism (Dewey, 2007; James, 2000; Addams, 1911). I was drawn to the grounding of pragmatism in the materially-experienced tensions and problems occurring in everyday life; problems are problems because they create tensions and difficulties in the actualities of people’s lives, the acquisition of knowledge within a pragmatic frame is couple with a corresponding action. Whether the world is flat or round has no discernible consequences for my life as I am not experiencing any problems relating to this question. Whether the reforms to care proceedings have led to the social work profession’s unwitting involvement in a form of social engineering was causing a tension in my day-to-day experiences as a social worker and in order to move forward I needed to find out.

As part of my Masters course I completed my first piece of primary research undertaken in partnership with a group of peer researchers. From a pragmatic foundation the study was undertaken to consider whether the experiences of fathers who are incarcerated were improved through their participation in a parenting programme (Langston, 2016). Moving forward to my doctoral research I was keen to continue working from such a perspective, prioritising within this research both the actualities of participants’ lives, social workers working in children and families’ teams, alongside practical applications of research outcomes.

In considering how best to capture the actualities of participants’ experiences I began to read a variety of ethnographies (Patrick, 2013; Heilman, 2002; Satuamurti, 1981; Besky, 2014) each immersing the researcher within a range of material settings, carefully explicating the actualities of participants’ lives and reconstructing these on the page for the reader to experience. Amongst the variety of ethnographies and texts about the method I came across the work of British-born Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith and her frame of enquiry, institutional ethnography. Informed by critical theorists such as Marx, Foucault, Dewey, and Harding (Smith, 1987), she herself became increasingly aware of the gulf between her lived experiences as a woman, an academic, and as a lone parent, and the contrast in how these experiences were represented within sociological texts (Smith, 2005). Smith’s activities as an academic were understood by society as work, but the activities in relation to her other roles, such as parenting, were not framed by society as work given they had no economic value. Smith (1987, 2005) developed the notion of a “generous conception of work”, a focus on the actualities of the activities undertaken and not the authoritative account underpinned by economic ideology. The disconnection Smith described resonated with my experiences, not just as a woman and a mother, but as a social worker. That the activities of myself and my colleagues were not those depicted in the formal accounts of work with children and families, as outlined in the last chapter.

This section considers the foundations upon which Smith draws; a pragmatic approach to enquiry, Harding’s standpoint theory, Marx’s theories of social relations, and Foucault’s concept of discourse, before exploring institutional ethnography and the three key characteristics that come together to define the approach; the problematic, the standpoint and ruling relations. Alongside this, it explores the use of Smith’s analytical tool, the ideological circle, to consider how the underlying ideology is transmitted and how it unknowingly guides the day-to-day practice of social workers in Middleshire, translating the lived experiences of children and families and reconstructing them to align with the ideology. Finally, through the performance management and inspection regime, it records the presence of the reconstructed lives as support for the underlying ideology (Smith, 1990a, 1990b; Yan, 2015; Devine, 2015; Rankin, 2017).

Construction of Knowledge

Pragmatism

Within daily vocabulary, ‘pragmatic’ has become synonymous with no-nonsense practical solutions to materially-experienced problems. Its origins date back to nineteenth century America and to philosophers William James, John Dewey, and the less-acknowledged Jane Addams. Dewey in particular presented himself as the ‘anti-intellectual’, dismissing the preoccupation amongst philosophers with the foundationalist approach to an independent ‘reality’, a reality upon which everything else is abstractly related and which we merely observe (Dewey, 2007). Rather the pragmatists proposed that we each experience our reality as we live it, situated in its time and in our prior experiences; progressing forward when we have the answers, stagnating when we don’t (James, 2000). Pragmatism argues that there is an interdependence between knowledge and actions, that we understand our world through our actions and our actions inform our understanding of our world (Dewey, 2007). Traditional pragmatism proposes that enquiry starts at the point where there is a problem, a gap in knowledge and a realisation that our existing knowledge is no longer useful and we require alternative knowledge in order to progress (Dewey, 2007). Philosopher Julian Baggini uses the following example of Dewey’s involvement in the Pullman rail car strike of 1894 to illustrate the application of pragmatism (In Our Time, 2005).

Upon his appointment at the University of Chicago Dewey became aware of the ongoing debates regarding Pullman rail car workers strikes over pay and conditions (Westbrook, 1992)[[7]](#footnote-7). Having been troubled by the hostility toward the strike in press coverage which framed the strike as the result of greedy, lazy workers who needed to be shot or beaten for standing in the way of a business functioning (Westbrook, 1992), Dewey, on a train journey disrupted by the strikes, disembarked and spoke with workers and union officials, recounting his conversations in correspondence with his wife and children (Westbrook, 1992). Rather than situate himself in the authoritative account, as transmitted by the media, Dewey sought to understand the problem from the perspective of the workers. In letters written at the time Dewey commented that it was issues such as these that “thinkers” like him should be trying to address (In Our Time, 2005; Knight, 2015). Jane Addams was also heavily involved in attempting to mediate between the Pullman workers and the Pullman company, again having collated the lived experiences of the workers, corresponding with Dewey to discuss how such strikes could be prevented in future (Knight, 2015). Whilst ultimately the strike was seen as unsuccessful, there were a number of practical responses such as changes to the living conditions of the Pullman workers and the introduction of the Labor day weekend as a bank holiday (Reiff, 2000).

It is clear to see that a different approach would have yielded a different understanding of the Pullman strikes. Situating themselves in the lived experiences of the workers, Dewey and Addams were able to consider their lived experiences, whereas general public support for the use of force against the strikers was situated within the authoritative account of lazy workers trying to get something for nothing.

This resonated with my journey to undertaking this research, that my experiences as a social worker, my training and subsequent independent learning once qualified, were no longer answering the questions that I was raising; my internal conflict between the somewhat idealised version of social work situated within the radical social work movement of the 1970s (as discussed in Chapter One) and the actualities of the role I was performing daily as dictated by legislation and organisational policy. I had come to something of an impasse, not just in respect of my role as a social worker but in my wider understanding of how my profession subsumed the changes outlined in the legislation with such ease.

As I reflect on my practice I am reminded of my use of voluntary accommodation under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, the reliance upon voluntary accommodation as an exercise in delaying an application to court whilst also removing the child(ren) from the family home. I knew and had discussed in supervision with my team manager the problematic manner in which such arrangements were used, however, I facilitated a number of these arrangements in lieu of making an application. At the time I individualised the practice and was highly critical of myself, and my manager, for working in such a way. But on reflection, and as a result of considering different ways of knowing and understanding, I was able to consider that there were other ways to understand the issues rather than focusing on the individual practice of a manager or social worker. The duty and powers outlined in legislation are not automatically consumed into the activities of the social work profession. The responsibilities of local authorities in respect of partnership working and child in need are not enacted in the same way as those pertaining to child protection or care orders. Social workers’ activities are influenced by more than legislation, the attendance to particular parts of legislation over others is not at the discretion of managers, rather the work is organised in ways which aren’t always apparent from within the role.

Whilst pragmatists such as James, Dewey, and Addams did not prioritise any one particular method, they referred to the notion of “competent and controlled inquiry” (Dewey, 1938: 8). In the context of more recent social research methods literature, this would equate to the idea of a comprehensive research design (Thomas, 2013), whilst in a traditional approach the selection of research methods might seek to balance validity, that is the accurate representation of experiences, and reliability, the consistency and generalisability of findings. A pragmatic approach purports that the methods most effective in research design are those that will identify the knowledge necessary to effectively address the problem, or answer the research questions or topic. As Dewey demonstrated during his interactions with the striking Pullman workers, by situating himself within the material world of the problem he was seeking to address he was able to fully comprehend the actualities of not only his own delayed journey, but the lived experiences of those causing his delay. Competent inquiry is not simply derived from the process of seeing or listening, but a socially critical approach to observation and investigation. Whilst it may be argued that we all, in our day-to-day lives, construct our meaning through engagement in our environment; acting and observing, evaluating and understanding, observing the world and experiencing it (James, 2000), we are not all engaged in socially critiquing our own experiences or those of others (Stark, 2014; Rosiek and Pratt, 2013).

In the context of my own research I was not seeking to simply capture social workers’ activities but to explicate these activities and trace their links to the wider social context, understanding how they came to be. I began to explore the use of ethnography and was particularly appreciative of those that captured detailed experiences of the participants, often by giving voice to groups whose stories are yet to be captured (Patrick, 2013; Heilman, 2002; Satuamurti, 1981; Besky, 2014). I began to understand that research undertaken in the name of pragmatism without a social critique is anything but pragmatic research. To fulfil the requirement of being useful my research had to do more than that, it had to go beyond capturing social workers’ activities, beyond their immediate setting and needed to be considered within context; examining the wider conditions within which the everyday activities of social workers come to be organised and experienced in the ways that they are. Feinberg (2015) argues that to be socially critical we must first consider the consciousness of individuals in their awareness of problematic experiences; that social position determines access to information, information that is required in order to be fully aware of the problematic nature of their experiences. I shall return to concepts of consciousness later. However, when exploring the production and transmission of knowledge, Marx’s social commentary offers an illuminating lens from which to consider how those with resources generate the knowledge, control the thinking, and determine access to it (Marx, 1956).

Marxism

Whilst many consider Marxism and pragmatism to be uneasy bedfellows (see Schulenberg, 2019 and Phelps, 2005 for discussion) there are a number of similarities in the roots of their position; both focus on social activities and material actions, seeking to disrupt dominant beliefs and offer a socially critical perspective. So much so that they can be successfully drawn together to consider the everyday experiences of individuals (Bridge, 2014). Marx argued that our awareness of our world is formed and shaped by the transmission of ideas; ideas with the power to supersede our material experiences with an alternative version; a false consciousness that ensures the subordination (Marx and Engels, 1970). The vehicle of transmission is within social relations, a complex web of interactions across time and location connecting and coordinating our activities in relation to others, many of whom we are unaware of, so vast is the web (Marx and Engels, 1970). Marx argues that to be socially critical we must explicate how that false consciousness comes to be as it is (Marx, 1956). Marx framed these powerful ideas as dominant ideologies, contained within religious doctrines, news, laws, and research, and always connected to the economic process relating to the accumulation of capital (Marx, 1956). Ideologies become our culture, our faith, the assumptions we make, and structure our society, permeating our everyday lives and shaping our consciousness (Marx and Engels, 1970). Ideologies are constructed to maintain the status quo, to keep the structure of society as it is (Fisher, 2009). Dominant ideologies are accepted as truth; marginalising and oppressing members of society for whom access to power and knowledge is restricted due to their social position (Marx, 1956).

It is helpful in the context of this study to understand how ideologies that permeate social work, particularly with children and families, become part of the consciousness of the profession, consumed as fact. As outlined in the first background chapter, one of the most pervasive ideological discourses to transmit across time and location is the belief that the acquisition of wealth is related to the energy expended to create it, that your value in society is related to your economic participation and that those in poverty can be separated between deserving and undeserving. More recently constructed discourses surrounding children’s “timeframe” have been so widely accepted that legislation, policy, and practice is now guided by the concepts based in attachment theory and neuroscience. Whilst Marx’s commentary related to the factory workers of the 20th century, his exploration of ways in which the dominant ideological discourses of those with power ultimately go on to control and oppress those without. And offers an opportunity for this study to consider how the dominant ideologies in social work, such as time, risk, and responsibilities, permeate into the everyday world of social workers and the children and families with whom they work. Thus, the consideration of ideology became an important feature of my research framework as informed by Marx. When talking with social workers, exploring their experiences, I was conscious of the need to be mindful of the ways in which ideologies were present in their accounts, identifying and exploring the origins of the particulars of their accounts of their activities. As explored in the background chapter, we have seen a dominant ideological discourse surrounding families who are in need of support: undeserving, lazy, underclass, dangerous, problem, and troubled families. When talking with social workers my aim was, where possible, to explore this alongside and together with how they understood their worlds, attempting to locate where the particulars of their account originated: In the dominant ideological discourse, or in the actualities of their everyday experience. In the next chapter, I discuss further the approaches employed during fieldwork to explore discursive practices. However, the notion of discourse is one which, like pragmatism and Marxism, is founded in a deeper philosophical position pertinent to the methodological discussion within this chapter.

Foucauldian Approaches

Through their studies of institutions, both Marx and Foucault considered how relationships of power are fundamental mechanisms that structure society (Olssen, 2004). However, as previously discussed, Marx’s conception of social relations are the vehicles within which ideology is transmitted; a resource of power, controlled by the upper classes in a capitalist society, exercising material effects on those who are being controlled (Marx, 1956; Marx and Engels, 1970; Hunt, 2004). For Foucault power was not solely understood in respect of its link to a capitalist economy; rather he saw it as co-constructed with knowledge, produced and reproduced through discourse, to control and regulate population groups. For example, his studies on mental health, sexuality, and criminality sought to understand how the transmission of power was utilised through the construction of discourse that established the norms of human behaviour and development; not always related to a capitalist economy (Foucault, 2003; Hunt, 2004). So whilst there are clear differences, primarily in relation to whether discourse is grounded in the ideological struggle of the working classes against a capitalist society (Poster, 1987), they need not be considered as opposing theories (Hunt, 2004). Foucault distinguishes between two “technologies” of power; disciplinary power and bio power (Foucault, 2003). Disciplinary power is akin to that of Marx’s understanding as outlined above; a tool of control to subordinate and control with material effects. It is within Foucault’s bio power, that the processes by which the construction of controlling and regulating discourse of entire groups are constructed. Through the creation of discourses surrounding “normal”, child development, parenting, and behaviour, for example, a “deviant” category is automatically produced. As previously discussed the construction of the discourse surrounding infant brain development simultaneously produced an abnormal category of children, controlling and regulating the behaviour of parents. Whilst the example of bio power in relation to childhood and development can, in my opinion, be clearly linked to the capitalist economic structures in society, for Foucault, the controlling and regulating effects of bio power were not understood in relation to a capitalist economy (Hunt, 2004). Within this study, Marx’s conception of ideology and its transmission, combined with Foucault’s understanding of discourses as a means of control and regulation, offers institutional ethnography another tool by which to make visible the mechanisms of power and governance across time and location (Elia Satka and Skeful, 2012).

Where we situate competent enquiry determines the access to problematic situations, to undertake research from the position of the managers, or the families, we are not privy to the day-to-day experiences of social workers. To fully capture and understand the material world of those groups whose experiences are problematic, research must be conducted from within those experiences, conscious of the traces of power threaded through (Feinberg, 2014). By conducting research from the position of the dominant groups the ideological discourse perpetuates the pre-conceptualised categories of individual’s experiences, reinforces the ruling ideologies restricting the scope for capturing experiences of non-dominant groups (O’Neill, 1998). Smith (1987) purports that those participating in the administration of the underlying ideologies are not aware of their involvement. Smith describes the separation of self, the actualities of the lived experience and the dominant representation of it to which we must adapt. In her studies Smith (1987) describes how she did not recognise the representation of herself as a woman or mother in the authoritative account of those roles, however she had complied with notions of how women dress, reproductive responsibilities etc. She understands this as a separation of self, the coexisting experience of the material experiences in day-to-day life, and the dominant view to which she had adapted. This concept is pertinent to my study, the separation between social work’s idealised notions of the profession, based in the radical movement of the 1970s, and the participation in the enactment of a disproportionate institutional gaze on those living in poverty, can be understood as a bifurcation of social workers’ consciousness.

Feminist Standpoint

Smith draws upon feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004; Smith, 1987) to offer a framework from which to reposition enquiry on the foundation that ruling ideas restrict an individual’s consciousness and that to understand the experiences of marginalised groups enquiry must start from a position outside of authoritative ways of knowing (Bisaillon and Rankin, 2012; Harding, 1993). Within the women’s movement of the 1970’s standpoint theory gave to women what had been missing, a voice and a position; politically, intellectually and culturally (Harding, 1993). By explicating women’s actualities from the position of their experience it disrupted the cultural dominance of authoritative, abstract and official forms of knowledge that were not accurate representations of their experiences. Smith’s work surrounding the unseen labour of women in relation to their children’s education was a key contribution to the women’s movement (Harding, 2004).

Feminist standpoint theory is an epistemology; it identifies standpoints in terms of the social positioning of the subject of knowledge, the knower and the creator of knowledge (Harding, 1995). Contemporary standpoint feminism draws on a matrix of domination: racism, homophobia, classism etc. Harding (1995) insists that when research takes a standpoint it is not seeking to capture unquestioning perspectives of individual lives, but to utilise the position as a starting point from which to detect and expose what she labels the social order, known as the ruling relations in institutional ethnography (Smith, 1999). In explicating the social relations, Harding argues that the researcher assumes a unique position, party to all accounts and an overview of how they fit together; known within standpoint theory as strong objectivity (Harding, 1995). Initially I found the terminology of objectivity at odds with the study’s position to illuminate the lives as they are lived of the social workers participating in the research, but Harding rejects the conventional operationalisation of objectivity, she argues that the preposition of the neutrality of scientific objectivity does not explicate the privileged position of the researcher or the institution (Harding, 1995). In being explicit about my position, in locating myself throughout the research, I am able to claim a strong objectivity in relation to the social order my research illuminates.

Drawn together, the coupling knowledge and action, alongside understandings of ideology through the transmission of social relations, situated within the standpoint and the actualities of lives, identifying the transmission of power through discourse, we can begin to appreciate Smith’s synthesis. Smith draws on each of these theories in the construction of institutional ethnography, a frame of enquiry that offers this research the potential to position the actualities of social workers’ everyday lives within the wider context in which it operates, to understand just how good social workers do bad things.

Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology For People, Not Of Them

Campbell and Gregor (2008) argue that institutional ethnography is an ideal frame of enquiry for research within health and social care settings. Smith (2005) states that institutional ethnography appeals to practitioner researchers who experience their lives as problematic, who see the contradictions in how their activities are depicted in the authoritative accounts, or for those who recognise that the marginalised groups with whom they work are oppressed by the dominating forces that organise their lives. By tracing and exposing ruling relations, across a variety of locations and periods in time, people’s knowledge of their everyday lives is illuminated beyond what they can know locally (Smith, 2005). This enabled individuals and groups to identify and challenge oppressive ruling relations to activate change (Smith, 1987; Campbell and Gregor, 2008; Rankin, 2017). Institutional ethnography has been widely drawn upon, primarily in Canada and New Zealand, in a range of what are referred to as Human Services; institutional ethnographies have been completed in disciplines such as health care (Townsend, 1992; Limoges, 2010; Rankin and Campbell, 2009; Corman, 2017), land management (Turner, 2007; Brigid Te Ao McCallum, 2017), and to a lesser degree, social work (Parada 2004; Pence, 1997).

Standpoint

Smith builds on feminist standpoint theory within institutional ethnography but it differs in its rejection of standpoint as an epistemological position, rather Smith frames standpoint as a point of entry from which the actualities of people’s experiences in relation to the social order can be prioritised as an alternative to dominating forms of knowledge (2005). Smith contends that the provision of education, health care and social services is influenced by the values of dominant social groups (Smith, 1987), they dominate and shape lives outside of individuals’ consciousness, systematically oppressing members of marginalised groups (Smith, 1987; O’Neill, 1998). Unlike Harding’s feminist standpoint theory, which prioritises categories of women’s experiences, Smith rejects the predetermined categories and redevelops the standpoint of institutional ethnography to be open to any individual or group, regardless of predetermined positions in society (Smith, 2005). Whilst Smith’s initial adoption of the term remained within the women’s movement, she abated concerns regarding dualism and essentialism levelled at feminist standpoint theory and reframed institutional ethnography as ‘A Sociology for People’ recognising the many and varied forms of oppression and inequality that people experience (2005).

Within institutional ethnography, standpoint is embraced as an entry point into the social order; orientating the researcher to the actualities of the everyday (and, as Smith highlights, the everynight) experiences of the individual or groups with whom the study is focused (DeVault and McCoy, 2006; Smith, 1987). The standpoint is to be from those for whom their lives are unrecognisable in the official accounts of their experiences, whose lives are consumed by an authoritative way of knowing (Campbell and Gregor, 2008; Bisaillon and Rankin, 2017). By conducting research from their social location, a greater understanding is achieved (O’Neil, 1998) and can reveal aspects of the social world that are invisible from other locations (Smith, 1987, 2005). Previous institutional ethnographies have explored the experiences of nurses whose involvement in patient assessments did not align with the professional discourse surrounding their role (Townsend, 1992), the gay men whose attendance at a sauna was categorised during police raids as ‘indecent activity’ (Smith 1988), or the residents whose neighbourhood was redeveloped despite their protestations during the “consultation” period (Turner, 2007). Each of these studies prioritised the knowledge of the individual’s experiences, positioned the individuals as expert knowers, their accounts not considered as individual or an unquestioning truth, but partial, in that people only know the world from within their particular location in it (Smith, 2005; DeVault and McCoy, 2006). When attending to the material descriptions of their lives, the researcher is focused on how they are described, how they are lived, and how they are experienced (Baisllion and Rankin, 2012). Each description contains indications about the coordination of people’s lives and the workings of society, within those material descriptions the researcher critically examines how the everyday lives of participants are permeated with connections of power, invisible threads transmitting knowledge and coordinating people’s actions, leading to the presence of others across a variety of settings and in multiple periods of time (Smith, 2001; Smith 2005; Turner, 2007). The only boundary is what is relevant and achievable within the restrictions of practicalities such as funding, time, and access (Smith, 2017 conversations). As information transcends and is communicated across sites, so the researcher traces it, moving along the threads to examine and analyse how the wider forces control the activities of those with whom the study is concerned; the researcher enlarges the view but remains focused on the standpoint (Smith, 2005; DeVault and McCoy, 2006). This study progressed from the standpoint of social workers working with children and families, however I came into contact with a range of other individuals - administrators, cleaners, traffic wardens, children and their families, and directors. Whilst the study remained focused on explicating the actualities of social workers’ day-to-day lives, it was through the tracing of ruling relations that I became aware of how their activities were linked across time and location to others.

The Problematic

It is in the everyday actualities of people that we start to understand contradictions in their lives, the bifurcation of their consciousness and the disjuncture between people’s experience and official representations of them (Smith, 2005). For those without prior experiences in the standpoint, the initial periods of fieldwork are an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the tensions between the experiences of participants and more official accounts of their activities. Many researchers, like myself, are drawn to institutional ethnography as a frame of enquiry that enables them to further explore their own profession or work setting, having observed first-hand the incongruities between their lived experiences and the ideological accounts of that same experience (DeVault and McCoy, 2006; Parada, 2004). This struggle becomes ‘the problematic’ for investigation; not research questions or a single issue but a set of problems, tensions, and contradictions (Smith, 2005) that when explicated offer the opportunity to negotiate and to possibly circumvent (Smith, 1988). By viewing this everyday world as problematic it anchors and orientates the research toward people’s experiences rather than relying upon authoritative or theorised accounts of them; experiences that are vital in illuminating activities, activities that organise, regulate, and maintain things at the standpoint, activities that often do not support the interests of the people doing them (Rankin, 2017).

The problematic this study seeks to address was born from my experiences as a social worker working with children and families during care proceedings. The professional values and ethics upon which my professional role was regulated against appeared incongruent with the activities I was required to undertake. During training events on the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014, I observed and participated in a number of conversations with colleagues raising concerns over the impact on children and families of time restrictions in care proceedings, conscious of discussions about whether this was simply a reorganisation of the time children spent waiting for decisions rather than a reduction. However, these conversations became quieter and less frequent as the timescales were implemented, the critical voice of my colleagues replaced with the consumption of the language associated with the ideological discourse surrounding the 26 weeks; child’s timeframe, child’s voice, no need for expert assessments. Leading me to ask, why do good social workers do bad things?

Ruling Relations

In 1846, Marx wrote a short critique of the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach’s influential work on religion (Marx, 1969), Feuerbach argued, as a materialist, that human beings are grounded in nature, connected through the physical occupation of space, mental thought and consciousness, and are the result of material interactions (Diamond and Struik, 1937). However, Marx was highly critical of this position, stating that humans are connected beyond material presence, and in a multitude of ways beyond abstracted categories of ‘friend’ or ‘spouse’; that we have relationships with others whom we will never meet, our activities connecting us at different times and across different locations (Marx, 1969); that each activity is connected to another’s, creating a wider complex web of relationships all of which are ultimately related to the economic and thus political structure of society (Marx and Engels, 1970). Marx referred to these connections as social relations, within institutional ethnography Smith draws on social relations in her construction of ruling relations; differentiating between the two to emphasise institutional ethnography’s understanding of the power of ruling relations, demonstrated in initiating, organising, and regulating people’s activities (Smith, 2005). Ruling relations exert power and control as they require a response, a response that has already been determined to a certain degree. So rather than seeing activities as individual practices at disconnected local sites, Smith frames ruling relations as part of a wider institutional process socially organising the individual’s activities (Smith, 1990b). We are often unaware of how our activities link to others, rather we are only party to the ruling relations of those immediately connected to ours. When considered in conjunction with the concept of bifurcation of consciousness, as discussed on page 92, we can understand just how social workers participate in activities that go on to have unintended consequences; as there is a separation in what we are conscious of, the activities in our immediate connections, and what we are unconscious of, the activities that we connect to outside of our immediacy. In observing the actualities of people’s everyday lives, we can explicate how they are interconnected to the activities of others in a range of locations and across time. For example, when a social worker fills out a food bank voucher request form, that form was produced by another individual at another point in time, the information it seeks having been determined by another person’s activities at yet another location and time. The process of obtaining and entering the required information on the food bank voucher request form is only one set of activities in an extensive process, the start and end to which we may never be privy to. By tracing the activities prior to and proceeding, the ruling relations become exposed, illuminating the system of threads coordinating and controlling activities (Smith, 1995) examining individual accounts for the presence of different accounts; the sensuous activities and the standardised account (Smith, 2006).

Smith notes that the ruling relations are textually mediated, offering a wider understanding of text as being the replicable communication of instructions and knowledge; for example, videos, photographs, texts, media. The textually-mediated ruling relations transmit the coordination of people’s everyday activities across locations, replicating the actualities with a standardised way of knowing, objectifying and reducing people’s lives into authoritative ways of knowing (Smith, 1990b). For example, a social worker chatting to a child becomes “direct work” or “wishes and feelings”, the lived experience of the social worker and the child translated into the authoritative way of knowing in the categories determined by those in power. The ruling relations work to organise what we think in regards to social workers’ activities with children and young people.

Whilst it is clear to see the influence of Foucault’s Archaeology of Power (Foucault, 1969) on Smith’s understanding of the transmission of knowledge through communication, she is clear to make a distinction. For Smith, whilst Foucault’s discourse problematises the discursive practices, it abstracts them from the standpoint; “He [Foucault] doesn’t resolve discourse back into the actualities of people who are, talking, et cetera…” (Smith quoted in Carroll, 2010; 27). For Smith this is an important distinction, for in tracing the ruling relations “away” from the standpoint of those we are interested in we lose sight of the material consequences for the individual who is the focus of the study (Smith, 1987). Like Marx, Smith positions ruling relations as being directly related to the economic and political structure, an apparatus of the ruling group to transmit the dominant ideological account, subordinating minority and oppressed groups, legitimising and maintaining their dominance and ultimately exerting control, and having material effects on those who are the focus of study (Smith, 1990a, 1990b, 1995). For the purposes of this study a distinction between discourse, in particular the role of bio power, and ruling relations is made; discourse is understood as part of a wider apparatus of control, whereas ruling relations are understood in relation to the actualities of the social workers on whom this study is focused.

This chapter has outlined the philosophical foundation upon which institutional ethnography stands. In Smith’s synthesis the use of a pragmatic approach to enquiry, positioned within the standpoint of those who are the focus of the study, enables the material effects of the ruling relations to be traced to the wider ideological discourse within which they sit. In the next chapter the practical application of institutional ethnography will be discussed, exploring how “competent inquiry” has been achieved in the range of methods deployed to understand how social workers’ activities are coordinated, and why they do bad things.

Chapter Four - Methods

“Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask: ‘Is life a multiple choice test, or is it a true or false test?’ Then a voice comes to me out of the dark and says: ‘We hate to tell you this, but life is a thousand-word essay’.”

(Charlie Brown, 1999)

This chapter outlines the application of research methods used within this study; starting with a narrative account of gaining access to the research community, an overview of the organisation, and an explanation of the approaches used for the collection and analysis of data. The philosophical foundations, as outlined in the previous chapter, were considered throughout the construction of research methods, aligning with the pragmatic notion of “competent inquiry”; the best data collection tools would be those which enabled me to gain the information required to address the problematic of this study as outlined on page 92 of the previous chapter.

Setting

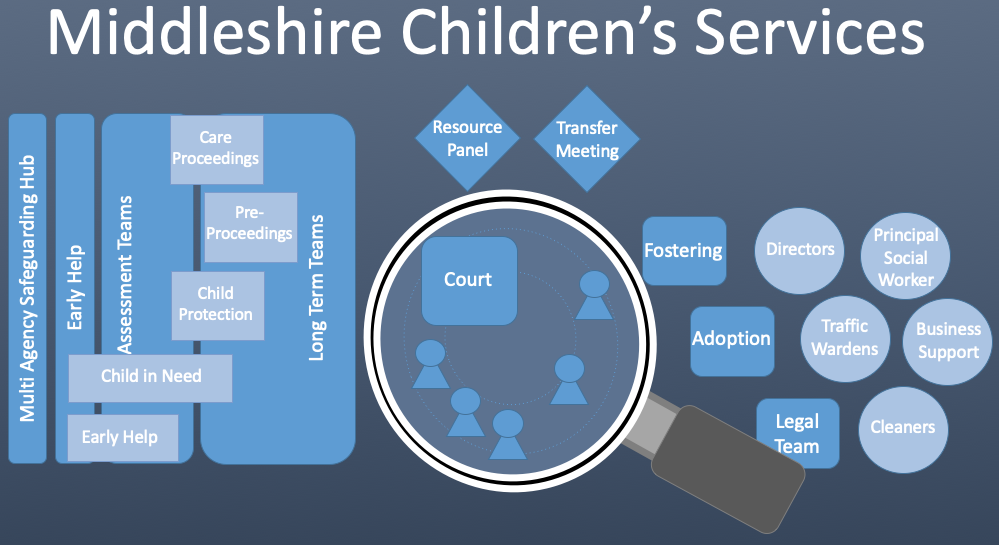
When considering possible sites for the study I initially restricted the area to that of the Midlands due to my residence in central England and the need for me to travel to the site daily. I had anticipated approaching a number of local authorities across the Midlands to request an opportunity to meet and discuss their potential involvement in the research, however, after discussing my research at a conference I was approached by a member of the children’s directorship of a Midlands local authority, herein known as Middleshire, inviting me to meet with their senior leadership team. The invitation to pursue Middleshire as a research site was accepted, and I progressed through the authority’s research governance procedure before meeting with the senior leadership team.

Literature provided by Middleshire depicted a high percentage of children receiving free school meals, more than the national average, and residents reportedly experiencing poorer physical health than similar local authorities in the region. Middleshire, like many other local authorities, reports considerable budget constraints as a result of continued cuts to funding by central government. Alongside a higher than national average number of dependant residents (likely to be economically inactive), the leader of the council acknowledged that this was a difficult time for the authority. During my fieldwork, I noted an email sent to all staff detailing the need for the authority to cut 90 million pounds from their budget, and became aware of conversations had by heads of service with staff about the authority’s precarious financial situation.

Children’s services in Middleshire report considerable issues with staff retention, both with social workers and managers. This, alongside an increase in referrals and children who are accommodated by the local authority, places the authority under what they refer to as “considerable pressure”. The senior leadership team cite issues with high caseloads and inconsistent supervision, whilst children experience delays in assessment and drift in their long-term planning. A recent OFSTED inspection noted concerns about infrequent supervision, high caseloads, and a lack of evidence regarding decision making on children’s records. Middleshire was perceived by workers as a borough with high levels of poverty and increasing levels of neglect present within the community.

The institutional ethnography process is inductive; the actualities of participants’ everyday lives are considered within the context of an overall process, the boundaries of which are initially unknown and are developed in an iterative process as the research progresses. In Middleshire all referrals to Children’s Services are made via telephone or email through what is corporately known as “the front door”, the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH team), which consists of members of staff from the health service, education, probation, and police, as well as social workers, in a room secured through key pad entry. Each agency has access to their own database to undertake institutional checks instantly, access to the police database was cited as the reason I was unable to undertake observations within that team by a senior manager, therefore out of practicality the point of entry became the assessment teams that the children and families referred to MASH fed in to. Staff from the MASH team all agreed to participate in the research, locating me if they had identified a case they wanted to discuss or in some cases to explore the processes of the department with me. After approximately 3 weeks, a police sergeant gave me permission to enter the secure MASH room, whilst he was present, in order for me to observe a particular case that the social workers had highlighted.

As I followed the work processes, I visited a number of different teams and individual roles within the local authority as depicted within the diagram below. A total of seven departments were observed, three of which undertook direct work with children and families, and of those three two were primarily staffed by qualified social workers.[[8]](#footnote-8) Key personnel were also observed, although not within their departmental setting, this included members of the directorship, a traffic warden, and the principal social worker. The total number of hours spent within the field was 312, and this was completed over 22 weeks.



*Figure One, Middleshire Children’s Services Research Site*

The diagram above, figure one, depicts the research site. Whilst the focus of my interest was on how social workers’ activities, specifically in relation to their work during care proceedings, were organised (as indicated by the magnifying glass) the activities of others outside of this area were highly pertinent. The dark squares represent the specific departments or sites that I visited, the institutional categories identifying the particular types of work undertaken with Children and families have been positioned in relation to the departments who complete such work. For example, the category of “early help” is only allocated to workers within the early help team, or the assessment team. Whereas social workers in both the referral team and the long-term team engage in work with children and families categorised as child protection or care proceedings. The diamonds depicted meetings which fell outside of particular departments but whose activities were significant in the organisation of social workers’ activities.

The circles represent other people with whom I traced activities, who sat outside of the teams identified, for example; upon observing a social worker complete an expenses form, in particular claiming for a parking fine received outside of the department I became aware that Middleshire had withdrawn the allocation of free parking passes to social workers. Therefore, when this social worker had parked, illegally, outside the office in order to retrieve two car seats, she had left a note in her window identifying herself as a local authority worker and that she was retrieving something bulky from the office. Within this observation the social workers’ activities were only one part of a linked series of activities, which ultimately connected to the underlying ideology (see appendix four). Upon talking to a traffic warden I became aware of the other series of activities he was participating in; fines are issued, despite the notes social workers leave, because the wardens have a target number of fines to issue per day, this target is communicated to the workers through team meetings, set by a manager within the private company the local authority has subcontracted parking enforcement to. The decision to subcontract out parking enforcement would have led to another series of activities within the local authority’s council meetings, however I did not follow these given my interest was in the activities of the social worker. The series of decisions made within this interaction were all grounded in the ideology pertaining to finances; the withdrawal of parking passes to social workers, the manager ultimately denying the social worker’s expenses claim, the decision to subcontract out parking enforcement within Middleshire (see appendix five). They were all part of the authority’s “cost saving” exercise as a result of cuts to local authority budgets as discussed in Chapter One, cuts routed in an ideology pertaining to social engineering and not economics (Alston, 2018). Returning to the standpoint of the social worker, whilst she wasn’t party to the connected activities, they had material affects; physically in that she had to complete a number of forms and emails around her expenses, the cost of the parking ticket which she ultimately had to meet, but also the disruption to her work and satisfaction of working in Middleshire.

Recruitment

As can be seen in the example above, the recruitment of participants was very much dependent upon the activities that were being traced. Whilst initial recruitment was done at the institutional level, involvement was based on voluntary participation from individuals. This meant that not all social workers and social work teams within the institution were necessarily included in the study. During initial meetings with the senior leadership team I became concerned regarding my ability to ensure that staff did not feel any undue pressure to participate. When I discussed the need for informed consent, one manager responded that it would not be a problem and that they would ensure the team signed and returned the consent forms. Despite my protests I walked away feeling that the senior management team’s understanding of informed consent was not the same as mine. I addressed this by meeting separately with staff to emphasise the voluntary nature of the study, and to discuss any issues or concerns they may have prior to signing the consent form. Initially I had envisaged that all staff members from each office/team would be required to consent, however, the logistics of this became difficult due to the office being open plan. Teams were situated in clusters of desks, however, the activities of workers from all teams was observable from anywhere within the office although details could not be heard.

Of the assessment teams, all staff from two teams consented to be involved, of the other teams there were members that were hesitant and therefore were not pursued. As the fieldwork progressed, I was approached by a member of staff from one of the teams that had not consented who wished to participate and be interviewed regarding her experiences of social work within Middleshire. I learned that the teams were experiencing a high level of turnover, not only of social workers but of managers. This had led to a number of staff feeling under scrutiny and vulnerable about being observed, as my fieldwork progressed, the anxiety of some staff members reduced and I was approached by staff highlighting individual cases they thought may be of interest to the study. Given that not all staff in the team had agreed to participate, these individual cases were explored with workers during targeted observations away from team settings. As the study developed and I became aware of the ruling relations operating across Middleshire, I was able to distribute information about the study and arrange to attend team meetings to discuss participation in the study or email information regarding the study to key individuals.

Observations, Interviews, and Texts

The aim of data collection in institutional ethnography is to build a picture of how participants’ activities are organised by people’s actions in other settings (Smith, 1987). By explicating the actualities of social workers’ everyday work, I could focus on the activities social workers actually do rather than their understanding of them, and start to trace the forces external to their location driving them to undertake those activities. Early on in my fieldwork it became apparent that the acceptance my status as a qualified social worker had initially bought me later became a barrier when social workers talked about their activities beyond an assumed factual knowledge. On the first day, I was invited to observe a meeting, formally known as a strategy discussion, where the information and concerns regarding a child were discussed between a range of agencies and further actions agreed. When the meeting was completed I followed a social worker to her desk and asked her what she was now doing, she replied that she was “completing a section 47”, our shared professional status assumed that I knew what that meant—at its most basic, an assessment of the level of risk to that child―and had I not interrogated this further I would have evoked an already established professional discourse. But by asking the social worker to talk me through a complex series of computer processes, using the position that I was unfamiliar with their computer system, I was able to examine the actual work the social worker was undertaking, work which I will later go on to explore as “accountability work”, the social worker leaving evidence to show that they have done everything as they should or, as many put it, “covering my arse”.

To explore this single event, I observed, I listened, I talked, and I was attentive to texts. For the purpose of this thesis I will discuss observations, interviews and texts as three distinct techniques, however, in practice, they were not so neatly compartmentalised. All three techniques were deployed simultaneously and to differing degrees reflexively, depending upon the situation and the participant.

Watching as Observation

Observations are at the heart of pragmatic enquiry, to consider the problematic within its context (Dewey, 2007). Whilst the start of enquiry is taken from a particular site, the researcher is developing their knowledge of the wider institutional connections (Smith, 2005). Participants are not the focus of observations, it is the concrete activities and the accompanying responses on which I am focused. Participants were not passive objects, but regularly partners in explicating their work, constructing our understanding together.

During fieldwork, I systematically and reflexively moved between general and more targeted observations. The initial observations were broad and exploratory in nature, gaining an understanding of Middleshire; the local area, the council structure, and the office and staff, attending to their conversations, their mannerisms, and their responses to each other and outside forces. Emerson et al (2011) advise using these first moments in the research setting to capture the sensory stimuli that eventually the researcher becomes acclimatised to (see page 137 for first fieldnotes entry and appendix six for photograph of fieldnotes). Almost immediately I became aware of the ruling relations to which the social workers were responding; the telephone calls, the computer noises altering them to new messages, and the tapping of keyboards. I then began to target observations to individuals’ activities, identifying the actualities of what they were doing, such as completing forms on the computer system, participating in meetings, and attending court. Within hours of the first day, social workers began to invite me to observe particular activities they thought might be of interest. As a picture was building of workers responding to ruling relations, I began to seek out incidents of workers resisting ruling relations or of two similar cases being progressed through the same system to different outcomes.

Conversation as Interviews

Interviews evoke an imagery of recording equipment and at the least a topic guide, however, within institutional ethnography interviews are framed as talking, having conversations with the participants about the work activities they are undertaking, ranging from structured one-to-one interviews recorded and later transcribed, to asking a participant to narrate their activities whilst they are doing it (DeVault and McCoy, 2006). I had envisaged and prepared to record interviews with participants however I had not foreseen the depth of fear and distrust present regarding the use of recording equipment. Some nine months earlier, Channel Four had broadcast a social work exposé using covert footage of social workers.[[9]](#footnote-9) At least one participant in each team made reference to the programme; the topic was broached either through explicit questioning, directly asking whether I worked for Channel Four, or subtle references and jokes, laughing about me being undercover or my bag having a camera hidden in it.

Whilst I had considered the need to build relationships and earn trust within the context of a profession often the subject of hostile media coverage (Munro, 2011; Warner, 2014), I had not taken into account the impact of this hour-long television programme on my planned use of recording equipment. Initially I felt defensive about participants questioning whether I was using clandestine methods in my research, after all I had progressed through university ethics as well as Middleshire’s own research governance procedures, I had produced participant information sheets and made myself available to answer any questions participants may have had during team meetings. After reflecting upon the participants’ comments I reframed the focus of their line of questioning to explore the ruling relations driving their fear, rather than being defensive about whether I had recording equipment in my handbag I asked them what impact they felt the programme had. When asked if I worked for Channel Four I explored their opinions on media coverage of social work. I also made a point of offering reassurance regarding my observations by asking participants if my understanding was also theirs. Not only did this clarify my observations but offered reassurance to workers that I wasn’t misrepresenting my observations.

In the first 5 weeks, I conducted four recorded interviews; two were accompanying social workers whilst they were driving within the community, the other two were interviews in a side room at their respective offices. The latter two interviews were difficult, workers selected because of their verbal accounts of work processes later became hesitant and reluctant with recording equipment. Once the equipment had been turned off, both participants offered alternative answers to the questions posed in the interviews and commented that they did not want to say something on ‘tape’ but what they actually believed, rather than the given answer, was different. After the fourth interview, I made the decision to focus on more informal interviews, varying from asking participants to ‘tell me a bit more about that’ to in-depth queries regarding their activities.

The focus of conversations was on their experience of how they had come to be undertaking that particular task, what activities had come before to prompt them to engage in it, and what were the required actions of others once it was complete. Often this process involved an exchange of information, I would start with what I had observed, often utilising my drawings of the processes, and participants would correct or add to these. This created something of a dilemma at times, as having reflected some participants altered their actions. Approximately 18 weeks into fieldwork I was sitting with Mary, a social worker in the long-term team, and she was talking me through her activities on the computer, relating to a mother experiencing domestic violence. Mary’s descriptions were filled with discourse clearly from authoritative notions of the role as I probed; “the risk to the child”, “it’s damaging for children to see domestic violence”, “its significant harm”, “there’s research to show its harmful”, “failure to protect if she doesn’t leave”. Three days later Mary approached me and said that she’d been reading about domestic violence and was rethinking the ways in which she could support the mother, shocked to have learned through her reading that women, and children, were at most risk at the point they attempt to leave. Despite being toward the end of my research, my fieldnotes reflect that I was still uncomfortable when my interactions influenced social workers’ activities. The concept of bifurcation of consciousness, as discussed on page 92 refers to the splitting of our understandings (Smith, 1987). Within institutional ethnography the process by which the participant becomes aware of the disparity in their understandings, through questions and conversations with the researcher, is identified as “consciousness raising” (Smith, 1987). This is not undertaken as a purposeful act, my interactions with participants in Middleshire was not to emancipate them from the authoritative account of their role. Rather, for some workers, our interactions were often followed up with a further conversation as a result of their awareness of the disparity in their understanding. However, for many, our interactions were simply a transaction; I asked some questions, they answered them, I thanked them.

The Ideological Circle

People and their experiences are constantly processed through records, policies, emails, and photographs that construct individual experiences into objectified versions that transmit the ruling relations of the organisation (Smith 1990, 1999). The ideologies of the government are filtered down through the texts that social workers engage with, and through their activities social workers often unintentionally reinforce them, creating what Smith refers to as an ideological circle (Smith, 1987). The pressure upon social workers to eliminate risk and prevent harm coming to children has resulted in the construction of standardised recording systems that draw social workers’ attention to the presence of risk, this in turn focuses social workers’ activities toward the identification of potential risk. This results in a circuit from which the organisation then produces other texts to regulate and maintain, such as supervision and performance management procedures when practice deviates from risk-eliminating practice. I will go on to discuss the ideological circle in more depth later within this section.

Within the frame of institutional ethnographic inquiry, the document itself is not the focus but rather the associated actions alongside of it, referred to as the work-text-work sequence (Turner, 2007). These work-text-work sequences are the physical trace of the ruling relations, and by tracing them the researcher is able to explicate the threads organising social workers’ activities across locations and time.

As previously explored, Smith draws heavily on Foucault in exploring discourse, “texts” as the active transmitters of power and knowledge, and their use in the surveillance of the marginalised in seeking compliance (Smith, 1992, 1999). There has been recent press coverage regarding the use of a computer programme within a Children’s Services department to identify and target interventions toward those whose behaviour does not comply with the requirements of the government (Stevenson, 2018). The computer programme in this case is the “text”, transmitting the ideologies of parenting, drawing families into state interventions to create compliance.

Middleshire operated what is commonly known as a ‘paperless office’; records, policies, and communication between professionals were conducted electronically and access to a printer was restricted. Computer systems were observed, and processes outlined in fieldnotes. Physical copies of some documents were available as other departments had access to a printer and shared court evidence such as statements and assessments. To capture visual depictions of texts I took photographs, predominantly of the office walls where posters, newsletters, and targets were visual representations of the ideologies of the organisation. Below is a single photograph, figure two, I took of a participant’s desk as it visually represented the research’s position on the text’s dependence on the role of the reader in activating it; in this case, to raise the height of a computer monitor which, rather than an individual’s idiosyncrasy, can be considered as a consequence of the ruling relations (Smith, 1990).



*Figure Two, Evidence “Based” Practice*

The lack of physical documents had little impact on the research as the focus was not on the documents themselves but on the work-text-work sequence associated with it. As part of observations and interviews participants were asked, whilst sitting at their computers, to explain what was on the screen before them and how that fitted into the work process. Generally, I recorded what was on the screen by verbally writing an account of the process as described by the participants, on other occasions the process was drawn in collaboration with participants. As I traced the processes I was led to other participants in other locations, noting the juncture and how each participant knew when their work commenced and finished.

Work-Text-Work: The Ideological Circle

The ideological circle is an analytical tool within institutional ethnography, informed by Marx and Engels’ three tricks of ideological production (Marx with Engels, 1998; Smith, 1990a, 1990b) a frame through which to consider how dominant ideological discourse is distributed and ultimately used as a tool of control. The ideological circle is a textually-mediated circular process, through which ideology is filtered and transmitted as a result of the controlling and regulating effects of bio power. In the context of this study the work-text-work sequence of the ruling relations organised social workers’ activities in attending to the presence of risk, understood in relation to the “normal” development of children and “good” parenting. In focusing their activities on identifying “sub” normal or “bad” parenting, social workers’ unwittingly reinforce the presence, and prevalence, of risk as constructed within the bio power discourse. “Indeed, the social control function of social service practitioners is always intertwined with the ideological circle embedded in governmental policies.” (Yan, 2015; 128).

Smith depicts two elements to the ideological circle. Firstly, that the lived experiences of individuals’ lives are abstracted and translated into the authoritative way of knowing, informed by the dominant ideology. Secondly, these translated accounts are recorded as objectified forms of experiences, their presence understood as justification of the dominant ideology (Smith, 1990a, 1990b). Smith’s construction of the ideological circle initially began in the 1970s as she explored the authoritative account of “women” in relation to the reality of her own experiences as a woman, a mother, and a sociology lecturer. When exploring the ideological circle within my own research I reflected that Smith’s original two-part ideological circle no longer reflected the way in which I was observing the dominant ideology being transmitted. With technological advances, including 24-hour television and social media, combined with changes to the focus of broadcasts such as “poverty porn” and newspaper scandals (see Skeggs, 2004, 2005, 2011 for discussion on media and poverty), alongside the pervasive reach of such mediums, the dominant ideology is no longer contained within the authoritative account at the start of the circle. The dominant ideology is present surrounding the process and built in at every stage, not only constructing it but maintaining it. Advances in technology have also significantly changed the way in which ideology is present within the day-to-day activities of organisations. Whereas previously, case recordings, for example, were a blank sheet upon which a worker could organise and construct their account of interactions with a family, the dominant ideologies were still present and built into the structure of society and the organisation, but the worker had space in which to resist.

Dominant Ideological Discourse

*Figure Three, Ideological Circle*

The use of computer programmes, such as the Integrated Children’s System discussed on page 35, has the dominant ideology built in, shaping and guiding each piece of information a worker seeks to record, and continually refocusing their activities on the collection of information which will ultimately reinforce it. It is in the recording of these interactions that the everyday activities of families are translated into an authoritative account. For example, a child experiencing ill health and unable to attend school, becomes “poor school attendance” because the system restricts the options available to those that reflect the dominant ideology. We only know the lives of the children and families with whom social workers interact in the ways in which the discourses of bio power allow them to be framed. The ever-increasing surveillance and monitoring by central government demands the recording of such information (see discussion on page 40 regarding the troubled families project and payment by results), the presence of which is seen to justify and reinforce the dominant ideology. Smith notes that whilst the accuracy and objectivity of the information recorded is often a focus of discussion, a critical gaze is not applied to the origins or selection of the information required: “… for although questions of truth and falsity, accuracy and inaccuracy about the particulars may be certainly raised, the schema in itself is not called into question as a method of providing for the coherence of the collection of particulars as a whole” (Smith, 1990b; 139).

Fieldnotes

When I had envisaged writing fieldnotes I had visualised perching on toilets hurriedly scribbling notes in secret that I would later have difficulty in deciphering. In reality, the busy environment of an office afforded my activities a certain amount of camouflage, that is to say, another woman sitting at a desk undertaking ‘work’ was not a constant reminder of my role as a researcher, so much so that I was once asked by a manager about my capacity to have another case.

In preparation for fieldwork I consulted Emerson et al (2011) alongside examples of fieldnotes within published theses and those shared within the research community online. I was also conscious of my professional experience recording observations of contact between children and families, however, I soon found that this was not a transferable skill, that my training had been to objectify events and create a sterile record. My fieldnotes were to include my reflections, emotions, impressions of others, to transform passing events into accounts that were rich in detail.

I enjoy hand-writing notes and carry a fountain pen, paper diary, and a notebook on my person despite having numerous pieces of technology which make them redundant. Fieldnotes were recorded in two A5 soft bound notebooks using different coloured inks to differentiate between entries.

I was aware of the differing practices involved in taking fieldnotes; those arguments for delaying recordings to fully immerse oneself, to the position of immediately recording observations so as not to forget (Emerson et al, 2011). I soon became adaptable as to when and where I would take fieldnotes and found that by echoing the actions of participants I was able to prevent my notetaking from intruding and ultimately affecting my relationship with the research community. Whilst participants were undertaking activities at desks, then I too would write notes at a desk. When staff were sat in meetings not taking notes then notes were made at the first opportunity, often in the bathroom or the kitchen area. There were some occasions where it was not possible to take notes for a prolonged period, in these instances I made single word prompts on a piece of paper and before travelling home would write up the notes to the best of my recollection. As the fieldwork progressed and observations became more focused on individual work processes I would use a piece of paper to draw out how I understood the process with the research participant, this not only enabled me to check out my understanding, but created contemporaneous fieldnotes which I later used as prompts to reflect upon my observations, see appendix seven.

Ethics: Beyond the Committee

Research sought to encompass ethics beyond compliance with the procedural requirements of the institutions, and conduct research that is positioned ethically from design through to dissemination; differentiated as procedural ethics and ethics in practice (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). The example outlined in the participant section regarding the voluntary consent of participants clearly depicts the commitment to moving beyond merely gaining the consent of participants to ensuring that they were not coerced into engaging with the research.

Procedural Ethics

The research gained ethical approval from both the University of Birmingham’s ethics committee and Middleshire’s information governance team. During which recruitment, informed consent, data storage, and confidentiality were explored along with the potential risks associated with undertaking research on contentious and sensitive topics.

Concerns were raised by Middleshire regarding the anonymity afforded to families whose cases were referred to by social workers but whose consent was not directly sought, amendments were made to include the anonymisation of the details of any families to whom the participants referred. Ethical approval was given on the 10th January 2017 and recruitment commenced immediately, with information regarding the study along with consent forms distributed to Middleshire’s senior leadership team who invited me to give a presentation on the study to managers the following week. On the 6th February 2017, I began fieldwork. I initially kept full time hours so as to build relationships with staff, after two weeks this reduced to between two and three days depending upon the activities of the social workers. As the study identified other teams, whose work formed part of the processes of which I was focused, I started the recruitment process again, sending information sheets and consent forms to participants in other locations, attending team meetings to discuss the study, and answering any questions regarding their potential involvement. As already stated, staff retention in Middleshire was problematic, it became apparent quite early on in the fieldwork that the number of new members of staff joining the service meant that the system I had devised, a list in the front of my fieldnotes of the identifying code corresponding to a unique number on their consent form, was not sufficient as it was impossible for me to recall each participant. There were some for whom I could instantaneously recall their code, especially those participants whose interactions stretched across the span of the fieldwork, however, concerned that I may engage in an observation with someone who had not given consent I made the decision that for those who I had not interacted with regularly I would specifically ask them if they had read the participant information sheet and signed a consent form. Whilst informed consent began as a procedural requirement, as the example outlined demonstrates, a number of ethical decisions were made within practice.

In Practice

Ethical decisions are present in the selection of the topic, the research design, through researcher conduct within fieldwork, to the ways in which findings are written up and disseminated.

At the heart of pragmatist enquiry is the proximity of the enquirer to the environment (Knight, 2015). This is understood to be more than simply physical proximity, rather it is the relationships between the environment, the individual, and the situation and the interdependence between knowledge and action (Reybold, 2002; Joas, 2015). Research design must correlate to the nature of the problem it seeks to understand (Dewey, 2007; Rosiek and Pratt, 2013; Stark, 2014). The argument has been further developed when discussing research pertaining to social work practice, that the research should be informed by the profession’s values and ultimately produce knowledge accessible and applicable to practice (Floersch et al, 2014; O’Neill, 1998). Social work at its foundation is focused on people, their everyday lived experiences, a profession committed to human rights and social justice (The Policy, Ethics, and Human Rights Committee, 2014), therefore I sought to design research from the standpoint of the everyday experiences of social workers. Illuminating just how social workers’ day-to-day activities are organised enables social workers, and ultimately families, an opportunity to navigate the process. Institutional Ethnography, which at its core is focused on the experiences of marginalised groups, offers a frame of enquiry pursuant with pragmatic methodology and in accordance with the ethical commitments of social work (O’Neill, 1998).

Within fieldwork it was my conduct as a researcher that transmitted the research’s ethics in practice; drawing on social work skills such as active listening, respect, and ultimately reflexivity, which will be explored further below. Positioning participants as experts on their own experiences not only demonstrated respect for their knowledge but also enabled me to demonstrate that my focus was not to scrutinise and evaluate practice but to capture it.

Whilst the procedural ethics had focused my attention on the possibility of observing poor practice, I was not prepared for the daily challenges of conducting myself in accordance with my professional values and ethics. I had considered the boundary to be individuals at risk of harm, that is to say if an individual was at risk I would intervene, but other than that I would explore such issues with participants and utilise supervision to discuss any observations I felt were problematic. I found such a position difficult to maintain when I observed a social work student on placement in considerable distress after an interaction with her manager and I concluded that to ultimately observe such distress, recording it as a piece of data, was not in accordance with the ethical position of the research. On other occasions social workers informed me of practice that was unethical and possibly illegal, but after the event, these issues were explored further with participants balancing my desire to trace the ruling relations with not critiquing and labelling practice.

As explored, the ethical positioning of research is present in the research design and in the conduct of the researcher during fieldwork, the study’s continued commitment to ethics can be demonstrated in the writing of the thesis as well as the construction of a dissemination strategy. As previously discussed, institutional ethnography frames texts as transmitters of knowledge and ultimately power, in constructing my thesis I too am seeking to generate knowledge and ultimately power to social workers and the families with whom they work. Already aware of best practices for effective written communication such as avoiding technical language and writing concisely, on Smith’s recommendation I began to explore how sociological writing can render participants powerless through the use of passive sentences. The study has taken the standpoint of social workers, therefore writing about their activities must convey their agency alongside attending to the people the research serves (Billig, 2013): myself as an early career researcher seeking future employment or the social workers whose activities they so generously shared with me.

When considering a dissemination strategy, I was conscious of my experiences as a practicing social worker; one of the first expenditures my employing local authority cut was access to research articles and training courses. When previously conducting research, I have been mindful of such restrictions and endeavoured to ensure that dissemination be organised to reach beyond the academic community and to include families alongside professionals. (Family Potential, 2016).

(De) Conceptualising Reflexivity

Methodologically the study rejects the presence of an objectifiable single truth to be preserved through experimental procedures, knowledge is not static from which a snapshot can be extracted. The study recognises that the experiences of the research community are multiple and ever-changing, and crafted through engagements and interactions between the researcher and the research community (Coffey, 1999). No researcher exists without a background or history, a background and history that inform each and every research decision. We cannot deny the researcher as part of the setting, however there is a balance to be sought between recognising the presence of the researcher, and the researcher’s perspective overwriting that of the research community (Coffey, 1999). Reflexivity as a strategy that acknowledges the researcher’s background, their history, standpoint, values and interests, and enables the researcher to critically examine the interdependent relationship between themselves and the research community, not just to produce rigorous research that attends to the presence of the researcher, but ensuring that the research is ethical.

Reflexivity is not a research strategy that once applied has been enacted, it is an ongoing process both across the depth and breadth of the research from proposal, through the thesis and beyond. There is a vast amount of literature on reflexivity in the research process (Dewey, 2007; Allen 2003; Coffey 1999; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Haggerty, 2003; Sanchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson, 2010) and within institutional ethnography (Smith, 1986, 1987, 1999, 2005, 2017; Campbell and Gregor, 2008; Walby, 2007). There’s an often-polarised argument debating the space between the researcher and the research community, often discussed in terms of ‘insider/outsider’ (Walby, 2007; Allen, 2003). Does creating a distance between the two eliminate bias or does it create a distance that disables the access of the researcher within the community? Does becoming an insider enable a greater level of access or does it risk the researcher becoming too close to the community thus rendering the research self-serving?

This research takes the position that it doesn’t have to be differing ends of a spectrum, reflexivity in itself is about being adaptive and responsive. Walby (2007) argues for degrees of reflexivity, Coffey (1999) talks of a progression, transitioning from outsider to insider through the passage of time. This study takes the position that reflexivity is a process across a continuum, the researcher moving forwards and backwards, gaining distance and becoming close, with a variety of different members of the research community entering the research. Throughout, as a researcher I was adapting to the community, mindful that over-reflexivity prioritised myself and not the community (Coffey, 1999) and risked misrepresenting the researched community. As my confidence grew whilst in the field, I felt able to consciously attend and explore with the research community what perspectives I was bringing to particular observations, why I had chosen them and how I understood them. For some participants, this then opened up discussions regarding their own perspectives. This is discussed and explored alongside the findings. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue that to conduct ethical research reflexivity is central, that through reflexivity the researcher can attend to the research community in an ever-developing attentive manner. The study believes that reflexivity is not restricted to the field; it requires continually re-examining my position from the construction of the research proposal through to the thesis and beyond (Haggerty, 2003; Rosiek and Pratt 2013).

Through the thesis I have attempted to be transparent regarding the presence of myself in the decisions I have made, recording the continuous negotiating and renegotiating as the research journey develops (Allen, 2003) and continually examining the basis for my interpretation (Whitehead, 2004). Dewey (2007) referred to the need to be reflective, to adapt and change as we encounter new knowledge. My research has grown and changed, adapting as I read, as I learned, and as I encountered new situations.

Smith (1986, 1987, 2005) argues that institutional ethnography rejects the objectified version of knowledge present within traditional sociology, that the everyday realities of the research community are explicated through reflexive exploration of the ways in which those realities are organised. Walby (2007) argues that there is no method available to achieve a completely non-objectified piece of research, that paradoxically the very thing that Smith claims makes institutional ethnography objective, reflexivity, is entirely dependent upon objectified knowledge. In choosing which parts of myself to make explicit within this thesis I am objectifying myself, categorising elements of my biography and exposing which parts I believe are of importance to the reader, which I am prepared to expose, and those which I recognise. Sanchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson (2010) describe the characteristics which are regularly discussed by ethnographers; the gender, sexuality, physical description, and the social status and standpoint of the researcher but they go on to discuss whether other factors that influence the choice of observations and questions should be discussed more explicitly. In the prefix I position myself, acknowledge the life experiences and motivations that have certainly influenced my fieldwork. Throughout the findings I aim to be as transparent as possible regarding the factors that have influenced what I attend to within the research site.

A Mutual Journey

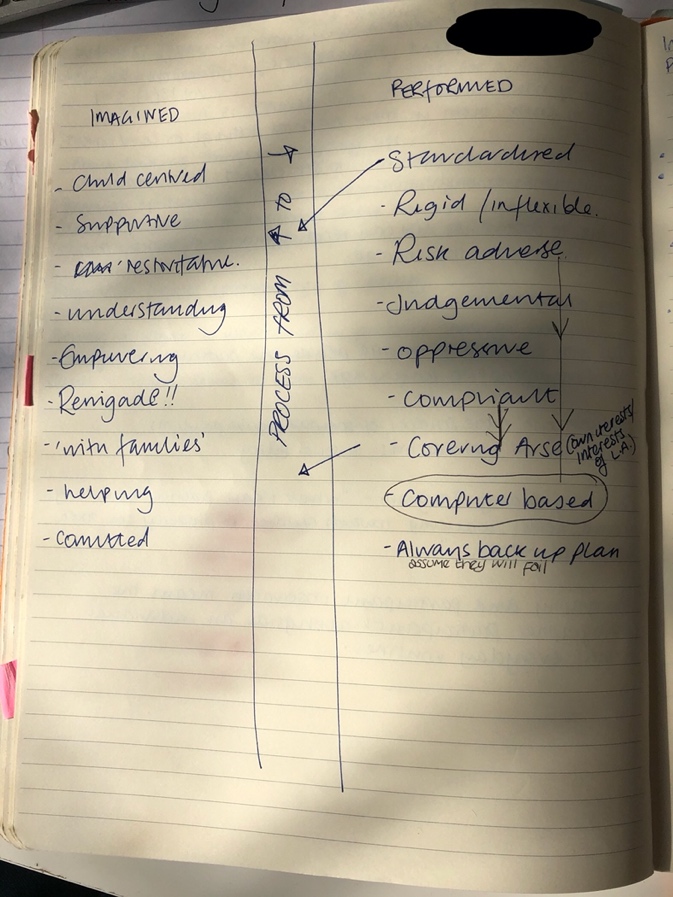
When preparing for fieldwork, I contemplated and explored the impact of self on the research site but not the impact of the research site upon myself. I considered fieldwork to be akin to my return to a former life having previously worked in similar teams throughout my career. Unexpectedly I found myself fractured, the perceived expert, the ignorant enquirer, and at times my most vulnerable self. The preface to this thesis explores the ongoing relationship between the research and me. The observation of practice, and interactions with the social workers profoundly resonated with my own experiences, not just as a social worker but as a mother, a mental health service user, and parent of children with additional needs. There were times when I found fieldwork incredibly difficult, when I was observing workers navigating experiences with families with which I could identify from within my own life, and I was not prepared for the impact of these experiences beyond the physical research space. Aware of the debate concerning, and criticisms of, ‘going native’ (May, 2011; Thomas, 2013; Bernard, 2006) I reflected at the time that my failure to sanitise parts of my identity had compromised the research site, that my personal self was too present. I had initially tried to remove myself, both physically and metaphorically, from these case discussions however, utilising formal supervision, informal conversations with peers, and revisiting the wealth of literature regarding reflexivity in ethnographic research (Coffey, 1999; Sanchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson, 2010; Allen, 2003; Walby, 2007) enabled me to critically reflect and return to my research design; rather than try and compartmentalise myself, remembering that my “self” in its entirety was a strength to the research. Utilising these periods of disruption as opportunities to re-examine, highlighting these moments of discomfort to bring tensions in to view (Dewey, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Garfinkel, 1967; Allen 2003).

Allen (2003) warns of the danger of being introspective, of immersing oneself in thoughts and feelings, rather the reflective researcher should be attentive to the disruption and critically examine the factors affecting the situation. As the fieldwork progressed so did my confidence; I was able to separate the feelings of nervousness relating to my newly acquired status as a researcher from those that were embedded in the disruptions I was experiencing as a result of observations. As my confidence grew so did my ability to attend to and explore my perspectives with participants, sharing aspects of my life pertaining to my own experiences as a social worker and as a parent. Coffey describes a lasting impact that goes beyond the “temporal and spatial boundaries of fieldwork” (1999; 26). Twelve months after I finished the fieldwork for this study I wrote the following; “It’s a year since I completed the fieldwork, I remain ever-changed by the experience, in particular a stark awareness regarding the luck of my circumstances and just how these mitigate perceptions of my capabilities as a parent.”.

Process of Analysis

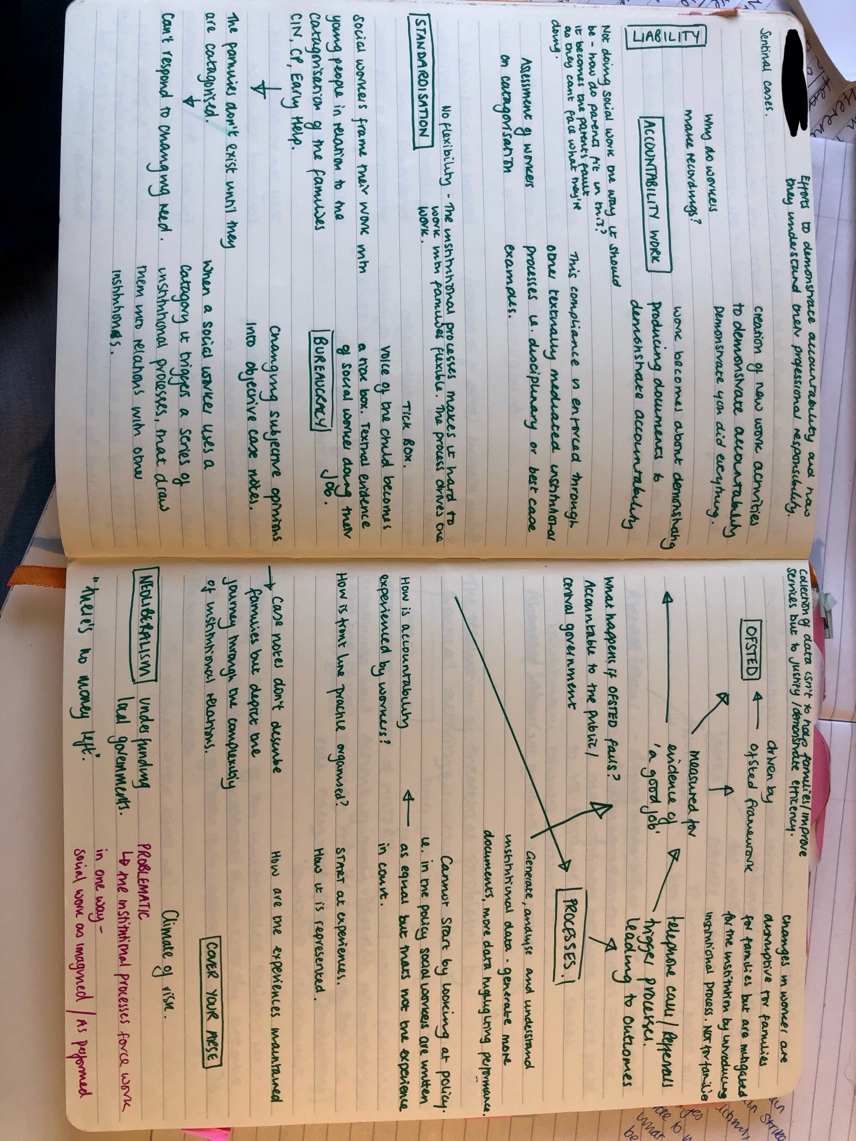
The institutional ethnographer does not complete fieldwork with a set of data ready to start the analysis process; rather the analysis is present within each stage of the research process. As previously explored, institutional ethnography appeals as a frame of enquiry to those who have experience in particular health and social care settings and who have identified the disjuncture between the authoritative account of their activities and the actualities of their everyday lives. The identification of the problematic, borne from these experiences, is a key component of analysis, it is consistently referred to within the fieldwork, and provides ongoing focus for the researcher. Figure Four is the first iteration of the notion of social work as it is imagined, social work as it is performed, developed from my original problematic constructed whilst practicing as a social worker. Drawn within the first 4 weeks of fieldwork to assist communication with participants about the tensions they were describing in their role, it was initially used to explain what I meant by the process by which they are organised into undertaking activities relating to somewhat opposing understandings of their role.

Throughout my fieldwork I would keep notes to myself, reminding me to “FOCUS JESS. What are they doing?” or “Excuse me, how do you participate in your institutional processes?”, clearly the latter was not one of the prompts I used with participants, but rather a reminder that I was seeking more than a description of their activities. The ruling relations cannot be traced purely through capturing the activities of social workers, rather every document read, observation undertaken, and conversation had, requires an ongoing analysis of what is being communicated. On page 125 an interaction with a social worker called Ellie is described, Ellie is undertaking activities she articulates as working with a mum to improve her poor home conditions. The analysis of this observation did not take place after the fieldwork was completed, rather it was an ongoing part of the observation. In considering what she was saying, how it related to the activities she was undertaking, and how they connected to the institutional process; both in relation to the ruling relations and the discursive practices of bio power. The use of the ideological circle was a consistent tool in analysis throughout my fieldwork, assisting me to locate the observations and interactions within the wider institutional processes.



*Figure Four: Social work as Imagined to as Performed. Week three.*

As discussed previously within this chapter, through our interactions there were some participants who became aware of the disparities between their role and the activities they organised to undertake. On these occasions analysis was a collaborative process, with scribbled drawings often coupled with excitement as together we deepened our understanding of the ways in which social workers’ activities were organised against their own conceptions of the role. Figure Five shows one of the more legible drawings of my analysis, the purpose of which was to depict the web of relations in order to clarify my understandings with participants. The themes of accountability work, liability, and risk clearly being explicated.



*Figure Five: Mapping the Ruling Relations*

As previously discussed, the role of literature within an institutional ethnography differs to that of other research methods. Traditionally literature reviews are undertaken prior to commencing fieldwork. Smith (2006) argues that in consulting the literature prior to entering the research field the concepts and themes are drawn from the discursive account constructed in line with the underlying ideology, in which the actualities of people’s lives are subjugated for the authoritative account. This in turn inhibits your ability within fieldwork as you are positioned not at the standpoint of those whose activities you are focused on but within the structure of the existing concepts and themes already identified (Rankin, 2017). As explored in Chapter One, I consulted a large range of literature alongside fieldwork, to assist in understanding the transmission through bio power of the underlying ideology. Once the fieldwork had been completed and I began to write this thesis, I found that whilst the tenets of the underling ideology and the discursive constructions of it had not changed, I sought a more in-depth consultation with the literature. For example, the ideology of the deserving and undeserving poor had been identified within fieldwork, and literature searches were undertaken pertaining to the British Poor Laws whilst still in the field. However, once I began to write my thesis, I sought a greater understanding of how such notions have continued to be transmitted through the 20th century and began to consider understandings of stigma and the role of the media. At which point I returned to my fieldnotes, had further conversations with a number of participants with whom I had stayed in touch and, as Smith describes, resolved the discourse back to the standpoint of those I was interested in.

As outlined, the analysis process was iterative, it built at every stage, and was an ongoing back and forth between observations, understandings, and a grounding in the actualities of social workers’ every day activities and not from within the discursive constructions from which their role was organised. The following three chapters detail my findings. The data collection process generated a wealth of data and it is not possible within this thesis to discuss it all. Therefore, I selected activities which represented typicality within the service, that were representative of other observations from my fieldnotes. As a result, child abuse, such as physical and sexual abuse, is conspicuous by its absence within the examples drawn on. This was not a purposeful exclusion, rather as a result of the scrutiny of other professionals referring into the service families requiring support as a result of the material effects of poverty as explored in the background chapters. However, there are a number of observations that have been included because of their single occurrence, where this happens it is explicitly stated within the findings. All of the names, characteristics, and details pertaining to participants, children, and families have been changed to protect anonymity. Chapter Four offers an overview of the findings and returns to the problematic as outlined on page 92. The fifth chapter focuses on the way that social workers’ activities were mediated and controlled, often by the computer system and the culture within the office, alongside explicating the ways in which professional discretion were present. Chapter Six explores the concept of “cover my arse”, or for the purposes of the thesis, accountability work. Exploring the often-palpable anxiety for workers and the various ways in which their activities were organised to focus on evidence attempts to eliminate risk. These three chapters are descriptive, in that they are grounded in the actualities of social workers’ day-to-day lives. Precise transcription of my fieldnotes grounds the focus of the findings within the standpoint of the participants. The chapter that follows these findings, Chapter Seven, draws the preceding six chapter together in order to explain why, in Middleshire, good social workers do bad things.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations in the employment of institutional ethnography; the lack of other theories present within the framework (Tummons, 2018), the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher (Allen, 2003; Walby, 2007), the reliability of the findings (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982) and the manner in which the small sample size can speak to the broader picture (Bryman, 2012; LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). In designing my research, I incorporated a number of compatible theoretical and methodological perspectives, considering the sometimes-conflicting tenets of such positions. And whilst I have philosophically rejected the existence of a single observable truth, in explicating my own positionality and the transparency of the process in which the problematic of the study was constructed, I have gone some way to addressing concerns regarding the implications of researcher bias on the reliability of the findings.

Of the concerns regarding the sample size of ethnographies being non-generalisable this study is guilty; despite the in-depth nature of the findings this research can only claim to represent the practices of Middleshire social workers. However, in presenting the findings of this research I have elicited feedback that would indicate that themes of control and compliance, and conflicting iterations of professional roles, that speak beyond the site in Middleshire. As part of a local social work training partnership event I presented my findings to social workers from a range of authorities. I was struck by how social workers recognised the actualities of their own practice in the findings, despite the range of practice settings adopting different approaches to working, such as Signs of Safety and Family Safeguarding models. Increasing levels of surveillance, restrictions in professional discretion, alongside tensions in care and control, appear to be a wide-reaching consequence of the New Public Management approach to governing rather than specific to Middleshire. These findings are congruent with a range of international studies exploring social work and more generally public service professions; ethnographies on social work practice have identified conflicting activities present in the role of social workers within children and families teams across the UK (Gibson, 2016a; Pepper, 2016; Satyamurti, 1981; White et al, 2010; Ferguson, 2014), and in Canada institutional ethnographies of social work practice yielded significant similarities in the way in which organisational structures draw together such conflicting notions of the social work role (De Montigny, 1995; Parada, 2004). International ethnographies of public service professions in general have yielded similar results (Townsend, 1992; Limoges, 2010; Rankin and Campbell, 2006; Corman, 2017). Within my own employment in a large university setting I have been interested in how the findings of my study, in relation to the mechanisms of control and compliance and the increasing lack of discretionary space, have been observable in the ruling relations organising my own work processes. However, in the context of the problematic of this study and the experiences of social workers in Middleshire, and despite some of the limitations of the study; I have been successfully able to answer the questions contained within the problematic.

Chapter Five - Overview of Findings

“Do you know what’s wrong with universities? They just don’t teach them [social workers] what actual social work is. They come out [of university] and they haven’t got a clue, they have this text book idea of what social work is and don’t even know how to fill out a child and family assessment”.

Chris, service manager

The Problematic; social work as imagined, social work as performed

As outlined previously, my own experiences as a social worker are where the problematic for this study was identified, the disjuncture between the day-to-day activities I was undertaking as a social worker, the construction of the role as I understood it from my social work education, and the professional values against which the role was regulated. From the onset it became clear that the disparities and tensions I experienced as a social worker were by no means isolated. The above quotation was from a senior member of Middleshire’s Children’s Services responding to reading the participant information sheet during a meeting to discuss working with the authority as a site for my research. Her understanding and expectations of newly qualified social workers was situated within the technical activities she expected of workers, namely the proficient completion of the assessment form on the computer system. By taking the everyday world as problematic it anchored and orientated the research toward people’s experiences rather than relying upon authoritative or theorised accounts. Some social workers were conscious of the distance between the social work as it was theorised and that they were trained for, and the social work they were required to perform on a day-to-day basis.

In hushed tones Fran told me; “Social work is the computer. The families are the info[rmation] that we put into the system. The computer is the work. Bet you no one else admits that.”

As Fran sat and reflected on her 22-year social work career, she described a journey that shifted over the years; from one focused on direct work with children and families, to her current role which she felt was akin to that of a data entry clerk. Fran recalled that historically the various systems for recording information were secondary and worked alongside the primary role of a social worker which was to work with children and their families, to her position currently where she feels her primary role is entering information onto the computer. Fran was not alone in identifying her current role as being computer-focused, but her reflection on the changing priorities in social work offered a level of critical awareness that many others did not. What Fran’s comments capture is the way that social work as currently performed differs from the social work that she was trained for, the social work of direct work with families. Other social workers made comments about being “chained to the desk”, their role being “all about the system” or that visits were “in, get the info, out, write it up”; but these workers still framed their primary role as “working with children and families” or “being here to help children” and interpreted what they were doing as “helping”. But not Fran. Fran was explicit that working with children and families was not her role anymore.

“No one cares if you’ve done a brilliant bit of direct work, it’s whether it’s [the computer system] up to date with the date of the visit and when the next one is due”.

Whilst Fran was critically reflective and clear about the distance between her role, as she imagined it, and the role that she undertook on a daily basis, not all social workers at Middleshire saw a disconnection between the two. However, most social workers neither had Fran’s length of service nor what I later discovered was an awareness of the role critical reflection has on how we come to understand social work practice. It struck me as I progressed through the fieldwork that I often got thanked by the participants for my support. As far as I was concerned, I had followed the principles of institutional ethnography, as outlined in the methods chapter, asking participants to “tell me a little more about that”, “why is that” or “how does that activity relate to…” in order to gather more information. But for the participants this was experienced as a form of informal supervision in which the questioning encouraged their critical reflection and prompted them to do this. Whilst all social workers thanked me for the cakes I baked, the tea I made, or the lifts I offered, many were grateful for what they described as support, listening or chatting. When I explored this further, keen to ensure that I was reflexive and negotiating my role as a researcher appropriately, for many the support was received by my listening, or simply asking how they were and what they were doing beyond the questions pertaining to task completion. Fran, however, was not the only person who acknowledged that the questions I asked, questions that were designed to illicit answers beyond the organisational description, had functioned as a form of reflective supervision. Ellie’s experience however was very different, as explicated in the example below.

Ellie has been in post 3 years, her first job since qualifying. She is sitting at a computer next to me and I ask her what she is doing;

Ellie – “I’m working with a family on a CP plan”

Jess – “Could you tell me a bit more about that?”

“We’re working to help Mum improve the poor home conditions”

“And this (signalling towards the computer) is that part of that work?”

“Well this bit here tells Mum that the home conditions aren’t good enough”

“Did she not know that they weren’t good enough?”

“Oh she knew, health has been telling her for ages and then she’s been with early help too. This bit, this says what it needs to look like.”

“Does the family struggle to understand what standard you want the home conditions to be?”

“Nah, she knows”

“And this bit, what’s this bit?”

“That’s the timescales and who will be monitoring it”

“So what role does this plan have?”

“To help Mum address the home conditions”

My notes contain a comment about being worried Ellie might have thought my questions were critical, that in communicating my failure to understand how this activity on the computer screen directly related to “working with a family” I may have appeared critical of the work she was undertaking. In this interaction with Ellie, and in response to her comment about working with ‘mum’ to help improve the poor home conditions, I was imagining social work as a direct intervention with the family, for me, I could not see how the actions Ellie was completing – the performance of completing the computer activities represented that imagined social work. I returned the next day to speak to Ellie and explored with her my difficulty in understanding how the child protection plan was linked to her description of helping a mother address the conditions within the home. Ellie smiled, my notes state she smiled a lot, and described with pride how this piece of work was vital in assisting the next social worker, in the long-term team, in understanding the work that had been undertaken to address the concerns in relation to the home conditions and that in turn this would help the mother as she would be aware of the department’s expectations of her. Ellie asked me if I wished to visit her when she went out to work with the family, sadly I was unable to attend due to attending court with another worker, but I spoke with Ellie about what working with the family would look like, what she would do. Ellie told me that she would be going through the plan and getting Mum to sign it, ensuring that the mother was aware of the expectations upon her and the consequences, her prediction being that “we’ll end up in court with this one”. Ellie clearly framed the completion of a child protection plan as being her primary role, evidencing that the short-term team had communicated clearly to the mother the need for improvements, the timescale and the consequences. When recording her interactions with the family on the computer system Ellie completed a “Record of a Statutory Child Protection Visit” and ticket a box that described her activities as “Direct work with parent/carer”.

The interaction with Ellie occurred within a week of my fieldwork commencing; at the end of my first week I wrote a reflective entry in my fieldnotes, pleased that I had chosen institutional ethnography as the focus on the activities social workers were undertaking was illuminating the problematic, the disparity between social work as imagined and social work as performed.

The disjuncture between how social work was imagined and how it was performed was evident across a broad range of roles in Middleshire. The resource panel was framed within Middleshire as an opportunity for social workers to present their case, having submitted a report in advance, and to make decisions in partnership particularly where case decisions had implications for resources, such as early help support or care proceedings. The panel was chaired by a service manager from within Middleshire’s Children’s Services and comprised of representatives from the fostering team, another from adoption, a solicitor to advise on legal matters, and an administrator to take notes. Up to 20 cases were presented at each meeting, and they convened at least every other week. Over the course of my fieldwork I observed three panel meetings over six weeks. On each occasion, prior to the social worker entering the meeting room, the chair would inform the meeting of her decision, often identifying to the other members of the panel which team a particular case originated from, by linking it to other memorable cases. Whilst the resource panel was consistently framed in discourse as a collaborative process in which social workers would present their case, in reality the purpose of the meeting was to ensure social workers’ compliance with the role of social work as constructed by Middleshire (see pages 148 and 172 for further observations and page 219 for discussion) and as a form of budgetary defence (see page 197).

Throughout the fieldwork the discursive account of particular roles or teams were consistently incongruent with the actualities of the activities performed. As discussed on page 140 the role of the ideological circle in institutional ethnography is to assist in understanding such disjuncture. Whilst I had originally foreseen the role of the ideological circle being related to how the actualities of children and families’ lives were translated into an authoritative account, it was helpful within fieldwork to analyse how the actualities of other individuals or teams were reconstructed in discourse. The following extract is from my observations of a panel meeting, and illustrates how in tracing the ruling relations alongside the use of the ideological circle, I was able to trace the consequences of the disjuncture between the authority’s account and the actualities of activities.

Case 9 – Chair [Bev] tells meeting the case is from the team that had “the mother and baby placement, you know, the one I said would go wrong and did”. [Nods and audible sounds of agreement from the other members of the panel]. The family are described as “CP. Difficult, hard to reach”. Had six episodes of early help intervention. Bev says “every opportunity and assistance to change” “it’s going to court.”.

The case referred to above was later present within one of the long-term team days I was observing, Anesu the allocated social worker was writing the statement for court. I sat and observed as she used the information from the computer system to construct an account of the family’s interactions with Children’s Services. Whilst narrative descriptions of interactions with children and their families were contained on the computer system, these were translated into an authoritative description, such as “visit undertaken to address concerns with Mum” or “Mum continues to expose Daniel to domestic violence” with a description of the significance alongside. Within the analysis of the parenting capacity details of interventions were recounted; “six episodes of early help to support family” and “period of child protection to support parent”, were detailed in the statement by Anesu as evidence of the mother’s failure to actively change despite the support of the local authority. I had already observed a number of activities under the categories of child in need and child protection, such as Ellie’s, as detailed above, and noted the translation of activities into the discursive practices of the authoritative account. I was, however, unaware of the activities described as “episodes of early help” and so re-sited myself within the early help team at Middleshire. Gaz, a support worker within the office-based early help team, helpfully went through the computer system with me, entering each episode displayed on the child’s record. My observations noted that the first episode of early help was a telephone call from a call centre, five days after the referral had been processed within the MASH team and was focused on signposting the family to other agencies and charities operating within the area. Gaz observed that, whilst he didn’t make this particular telephone call, he finds the first call after the first referral difficult.

“They’ve had this referral and have had to consent to the MASH team for me to call. And they’ve agreed. Then when I get round to calling they’re all defensive. It’s a week sometimes. Don’t consent anymore and are angry saying they thought they had to say yes.”

The delay between the MASH team and the early help telephone call is one that I trace to be as a result of the RAG rating system as described on page 134, if it is prioritised as green then it is not seen as urgent and waits until the next available family support worker from within the office-based team can make the telephone call. Gaz alludes to the family’s defensiveness in relation to a period of reflection; he believes that often the family have internalised and understood the delay as being representative of the level of concern and once the shock of a telephone call from a social worker regarding a referral has dissipated they no longer wish to engage. But this response is also translated into an authoritative account, with terms such as “failure to engage” or “withdrew consent” littering a child’s case file. Gaz goes on to describe what he believes has happened in the case referred to above. The second episode (generally as a result of a further referral) will again go to the early help office-based team where staff will give families lists of telephone numbers of local agencies and charities that could offer them support. Depending on the identified needs this list of numbers could be ten or more.[[10]](#footnote-10) On further occasions early help “broker” with other agencies such as education or health for them to be the lead professional and to undertake direct work with the children and families. This results in a further delay as the arrangements are made for the lead professional to be allocated case responsibility. Again, families withdrawing consent or agencies not undertaking direct work is not uncommon according to Gaz. In the case above, of the six episodes of early “help” only the last involved a physical visit from a member of the early help locality team to engage with one of a pre-set list of interventions the service offers.

How these episodes were experienced by families was not part of my research, I remained within the standpoint of the social workers and as a result I was only party to how notions of “help” and “intervention” were translated into the authority’s account. Therefore, I am unable to talk about any observations made of how supportive families find the telephone calls and the “brokering” out to other professionals. However, when speaking to staff there appeared to be a tension present regarding the work undertaken by other agencies. Some staff believed that education, for example, were “too” focused on school attendance and behaviour rather than home conditions or parental alcohol consumption. Demonstrating that the disjuncture between how roles are imagined and performed extends beyond those of social workers in Middleshire.

I have chosen to start my findings with these examples as I believe that they illustrate not only the problematic explored by the study but also demonstrate clearly the application of institutional ethnography within fieldwork; the conversations, the observations, and the focus on the activities undertaken and how such an approach illuminates the tensions between differing accounts of social workers’ activities. They also demonstrate, as a researcher, the difficulty in the assumption that as a qualified social worker I would share an understanding of the authoritative accounts of activities, and demonstrates the practical day-to-day work I undertook during fieldwork, interrogating the assumed shared understandings and illuminating the acceptance of the discourse associated with time restrictions in care proceedings. The following chapters go on to explore the key underlying themes that emerged within my research; the first of which explicates the process-driven nature of social work in Middleshire before exploring the space, or lack of, social workers had to exercise discretion. Ellie’s work processes as outlined above provided the first of what would be a consistently regular activity for the social workers’ at Middleshire, the need to complete the work activities as required by the computer, which were subsequently checked by three layers of management oversight, that demonstrated adherence to the process outlined by the system. The computer system reflected the threads of the 26 weeks through from the first log. Within the Children and Families Act 2014, section 14 details the need for attention to “the impact which the timetable would have on the welfare of the child” (Great Britain, 2014). As with most legislation, the details of how this is operationalised is within the guidance and procedure rules issued by the Justice Department, it is on these documents that Middleshire base not only the local level policies and guidance, but the computer system requirements pertaining to what information social workers are required to input. The form completed by Middleshire’s legal team in their application for a care order requires specific information regarding the permanency arrangements for the child(ren), including an explicit question about adoption (Great Britain, 2016). The procedure rules issued in respect of care orders have specific lists of particular documents required by the court at the time of application including a detailed chronology, completed assessments, a family genogram, and the completed assessment of any family or friend proposed as carer (Great Britain, 2019). As well as a secondary list which, whilst not lodged with the court at the time of application, Middleshire have to confirm are present within their files (Great Britain, 2019). This includes details of discussions with families, minutes from meetings, the child’s record, and any existing plans such as child in need or child protection (Great Britain, 2019). These requirements are clearly reflected in the information sought by Middleshire’s computer system. The need to identify alternative carers early on in the authority’s involvement, to maintain a chronology, and evidence of the “help” Middleshire have given to families detailing specific measureable characteristics; such as the child protection plan Ellie was completing, as detailed above. This is not to suggest that the workers necessarily see the connection between the system requirements and the 26-week process, as will be demonstrated below, many of them did not.

The second of the findings chapters explores the work which many described as “covering my arse”, the accountability work social workers undertook to demonstrate their adherence to the processes in Middleshire, before considering the underlying concerns of staff in relation to risk, not to the children they worked with, but to their careers and professional standing. Whilst Ellie did not explicitly communicate a fear of reprisal, her account, drawn out through the process of field work, clearly identifies accountability activities, activities that she undertook, guided by the information required, in order to fulfil the organisation’s expectations. The primary focus of a child protection plan was to communicate the concerns, the expectations and the consequences of not following the plan, and to evidence this, a clear requirement of the procedure rules issued by the Justice Department. Whilst Ellie says that what she is doing is helping the family, when exploring the details of the plan with her, her responses make it clear that there is nothing actually recorded in the plan that the mother does not already know. She does, however, explicitly note the need to ensure that the information is up to date for the next social worker. In the context of Ellie’s role, as part of the assessment team, the next social worker would be part of the long-term team whose role is to ensure that the statutory requirements are met and evidenced. Help, in terms of direct support for the family, comes from other services such as the early help team or outside organisations and does not involve the social worker. Ellie was not alone in framing the accountability work she undertook, such as completing a child protection plan, as “helping a family” or “working with a mother”.

In the background chapters I discussed the way that thresholds for child protection policy were framed in legislative and policy terms at a national level. This includes the Children Act 1989 which indicates the threshold for interventions relating to care orders, child protection, and child in need. At a local level these requirements are interpreted and enacted by the authority through a series of local level thresholds, which outline the required response of workers to particular circumstances, within specified timescales. In order to contextualise the findings which follow, I will begin here by indicating how these national legislative and policy requirements were captured locally. Middleshire had one threshold document which covered child in need and safeguarding. This had been developed giving regard to both legislation and statutory guidance. The document was quite dense to read, with many tables, charts and flow diagrams and I recall it feeling like a very long document to read. Having subsequently explored similar documents from other authorities it seems that Middleshire’s is actually significantly shorter than many.

For each of the circumstances broadly outlined in the legislation, such as the child’s essential needs which are referred to but not specifically identified, Middleshire attempt to detail these as specific issues. For example, the table on essential needs includes: suitable housing, access to positive activities, and secure early attachment. This was then further elucidated in another table so that the suitable housing section had a number of points including: parents not prioritising their own finances to fulfil their own need and not the child’s, living in extreme poverty and chaotic family life.

Chapter Six - Professional Discretion and Organisational Control: exploring control and resistance

“My entire job revolves around this bastard thing [computer], I might as well work at a call centre, everything stops when it doesn’t work.”

Dessi, social worker

Following on from the overview of findings presented above, this chapter considers the ways in which professional discretion and control were evident within the activities of social workers in Middleshire. It begins by considering the theme of control; the way that the social workers’ day-to-day activities were mediated and monitored and how this influenced the activities undertaken. In analysing the data, examples of control were denoted by exploring how and where progression decisions were made, and the reasoning behind the completion of particular activities. I was interested in whether this stemmed from the worker, how their judgements related to broader understandings of social work practice, such as social work values, ethics and skills or whether they were being guided by specific actions and requirements of the organisation and thus the system. An example of this is illustrated above with reference to Ellie and the child protection plan, Ellie understood her activities as “working with a family on CP” and to “help Mum address the home conditions” despite her acknowledgement that the purpose of the plan was actually to provide a sediment of evidence that a social worker within the assessment team had communicated to the family the concerns and the timeframe within which they should be addressed. In the words of Fran, when she notes, “social work is the computer and the families are the info[rmation] that we put into the system”. Fran is able to express what Ellie is not conscious of, that the role of the social worker is primarily focused on the data entry elements required by the system, and is able to identify that the children and families with whom she comes into contact are the source of information required by the system, explicitly, they are the data. This chapter will further explore how and in what ways the social workers of Middleshire were able to exercise control in their day-to-day activities.

Control

The findings below demonstrate that the computer systems were a central component to the way in which social workers’ activities were regulated and controlled. As outlined in Chapter One, the technological advances in Children’s Services as part of the New Labour government’s modernisation agenda has seen technology, namely the use of computer systems, dominate social work practice. Middleshire was no different, their computer system, a complex database detailing the department’s interactions with children and their families within the borough, was seen by some as the primary focus of their role.

When workers logged on to the system, they were greeted with a home screen (see appendix eight). The home screen consisted of a number of “panels” separating work into different categories of “Recent” and “Unfinished”, to the left of the screen was the “workflow”, navigated through a drop-down menu. The options in the workflow menu were “Incoming”, “Requests”, “Incomplete” and “Future”, and at the side of each was a number identifying how many cases there were in those sections. When the workflow options were expanded a list appeared detailing the title of the work, for example “Please complete Child and Family Assessment”, the child’s name and identifying number, the status indicated through a RAG rating system,[[11]](#footnote-11) then a due date, before finally a free text notes section where the manager could leave instructions or comments for the worker.

In order to complete a task, the worker would click on the item and a new screen would appear with a menu on the left denoting sections of the task at hand. Once clicked, the majority of the screen was filled with the computer form which needed to be completed. These either required the worker to add narrative information or to tick a box, particular questions needed to be completed before the worker could progress to the next screen. Social workers were still required to complete the free text boxes, only their completion was regulated as a result of the management oversight process as described below. A number of the tasks were completed automatically, for example, once the allocating manager set the required frequency of the visits, the computer system had been programmed to set the due date of the next visit. When a social worker completed a task, such as a statutory visit, this then appeared on the line manager’s work flow, the entry was then checked and the line manager identified what further activities were, in some teams this was then highlighted to a team manager to sign off before finally the new tasks appeared on the allocated social worker’s workflow.

There were some differences in the management structure within the teams that I visited in Middleshire, and within some this process could involve up to three levels of management scrutiny and involvement in organising the workflow of the individual workers. Finally, a service manager checked the visit or the plan to sign off and agree the “next steps” as identified by the line manager. For example, if a family allocated to the assessment team was identified as requiring longer term involvement with Children’s Services then the case would be recommended for transfer, the service manager would authorise, which would then prompt the case to be discussed at a resource panel or transfer meeting.[[12]](#footnote-12) The family would appear on the workflow of a long-term team manager as pending, prompting the review of the case file and the agreement or rejection of the request to transfer the case. Once the transfer had been agreed, a team manager would allocate the family to a social worker, and the case would appear on the social worker’s work flow the next time they logged in. When the social workers in the long-term team undertook activities relating to that particular child they recorded their interventions on the system, and the auditing process outlined above would begin again.

Across all teams the role of supervision was performed in conjunction with the processes outlined on the computer screen. The social worker would meet with the manager, sometimes in private but often interrupted by other workers or telephone calls. Together they would work through the list of cases allocated to each worker and record the agreed actions. Of the supervisions I observed neither the social workers nor managers made reference to the critically-reflective practice guides which I had been made aware of in the policy handbook. The use of critically-reflective supervision was not audited or measured by Middleshire, however the supervision recordings on the computer system were monitored and audited through the processes outlined above. When I compared the supervision as outlined on the computer and the supervision described in policy there was very little similarity. The supervision process as outlined on the computer was a task-based approach to case discussion, a transfer of information regarding visits, categories, outcomes and timescales.

Throughout the teams I visited, social workers were present within the office for significant portions of the week, some workers had very rigid working patterns where they organised their time by having one or two days out of the office to undertake visits before spending three or four days “writing them up”. Others undertook visits a few mornings or afternoons a week. There were some differences between the assessment and long-term teams. I reflected in my fieldnotes that workers in the long-term teams appeared to spend less time in the office, a reflection generated by the fact that I found it more difficult to find a desk at which to locate myself within the assessment teams. Provoked by this reflection I started to ask workers more consistently (not only when individuals had made a comment about the time spent at the computer) how much time they spent office-based as opposed to on visits. This indicated that workers in the long-term teams did spend a greater proportion of their time out of the office, but computer-based administrative work still accounted for more than half of their week. Interestingly, within the assessment team the primary consideration for how workers organised their presence within the office was car parking. Like many other local authorities, Middleshire made financial savings through ceasing schemes available to social workers such as car allowances and car parking passes, in Middleshire the retail related location of the assessment team offices resulted in high parking costs that the social workers had to pay themselves. The cheaper alternatives were located further away from the office, with free residential parking noted as being a 20 minute walk, this was cited by the majority of workers as the primary reason they spent three or four days solely based in the office; James, a social worker new to the assessment team was vocal about the parking charges when he referred to the public car park provided by Middleshire; “I’m not paying the council money to come and work for them, it’s a matter of principle”.

The dominance of the administrative work, filtered through the computer system, did not just influence the work within the office environment. Findings showed that the computer system in Middleshire guided workers’ activities beyond the office, for some social workers the processes outlined on the system unconsciously dictated their interactions with each other as well as with the children and families with whom they were working, other workers were conscious that the computer system was dominating their activities but felt powerless to subvert this. Whilst the computer system is one used throughout England it was adapted by Middleshire’s technology department to include particular information and to decide which questions were mandatory. It was through this process that progression was restricted until these tasks had been completed. Some of the information required by the system was a legal prerequisite driven by the OFSTED inspection regime, other adaptations were specifically driven by Middleshire’s senior management team.

On the first day of fieldwork I wrote an entry in my fieldnotes book, under a previous little note to myself, “what are they DOING Jess?”. I had underlined the deafening noise of the keyboards and the use of headsets when making telephone calls.

I’m sitting and watching workers from the desk where I’ve been put. Is this what call centres look like? The room is separated by a walkway which goes to the kitchen, toilets and the secure room containing the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub. Each side is a mirror of the other, five rows of desks, six computer stations to each row. Each desk has a laptop, keyboard and mouse, a telephone, lots of social workers wearing headsets attached to the telephone. Mainly women, wide range of ages and ethnicities. Two men, both white, middle aged and in a shirt and tie. There’s very little personalisation on the desks. No photos, no ornaments.

The collective sound of the tapping on the keyboard is deafening, it fills the room. There are a handful of hushed telephone conversations, but they are drowned out by the keyboards tap tapping. No one is interacting [with each other], focused only on the computer or the telephone. Is this because of me? Do they not feel they can talk?

There is a musty smell, no fresh air? The windows are sealed shut and covered with posters and print outs of emails detailing agency goals, new processes, or reminders of existing ones. Next to where I’m sitting the poster reads; “Reduce LAC Population Safely”, what does that mean?

Beyond the Screen

The domination of desk work in social work was not unexpected, previous studies had identified the increasing role of computers in social work (Forrester et al, 2013; Munro, 2011; Wastell et al, 2010). Very early in the research process, within the first two weeks of my field work, it became apparent from my observations that some workers seemed unable to progress their work without the guidance of the computer and needed to refer to their work flow and the processes outlined on the computer. My role here as a researcher, and how I explored these issues, was influenced by my own professional identity as a social worker. In my head I was asking different questions to those being posed by the workers. This influence extended beyond the relationship between the worker and the computer also influencing the interactions between colleagues and between workers and families.

It’s a Monday morning. I arrived in the assessment team’s offices, it was only 9.30am but it was already busy with very few spare desks available, I was beckoned over by a worker and told that her colleague was on leave and I could sit at the neighbouring desk. Most workers in the cluster were working on their computers, the only conversation was between Natasha, an assistant team manager, and Lottie, one of the social workers in the team. A child had been placed by police in foster care as the mother had been arrested for shoplifting. Natasha directed Lottie to undertake a visit. Lottie replied that she could not do the visit as it was not appearing on her ‘workflow’. Natasha asked her to just see the child regardless; “get eyes on the child”. Lottie made her query explicit “But is it a CP visit, a LAC visit?” Lottie appeared unable to complete the visit, she was fixed to the spot repeating the question to other workers “I need to know what I’m going for, is it CP or LAC?”

For Lottie, the computer system had become more than a receptacle within which her case notes were recorded, the categorisation of the case directed her interactions with the child. In line with the methodology employed in this research, I sought to understand the processes involved and how Lottie’s actions, and concerns, in conducting these activities were organised. I explored the two different work processes on the computer to understand if the information required for a CP referral was significantly different to that required for a Looked After Child visit. Both processes were similar, the screens virtually identical. On starting the process, the page filled with text outlining prompts for the visit. The CP visit screen and LAC visit screen were the same; word for word, font size, layout etc. apart from one line. In the CP visit there was the following addition: “ANY NEW RISKS. Consider any new concerns noted during the visit that might affect the overall risk analysis for the child.”. At the end of each visit there is a section indicating when the next visit is due, and another for the actions as a result. There appeared to be very little different in the screens. I reflected in my fieldnotes that the issues Lottie faced were greater than not knowing what questions to ask during the visit, that the processes outlined on the computer system guided her work outside of the office. Further analysis and reflection on this example raises a number of important issues. At the time I remember feeling somewhat dumbfounded by Lottie’s apparent inability to undertake what to me seemed to be the most important aspect of her work, engaging with the child and ensuring that they were okay following a potentially traumatic emergency placement with foster carers. I found it difficult to understand why she was unable to undertake this activity without its presence on her workflow indicating how the visit would be categorised. In this example, unlike many of those discussed below, it was the team manager who was prioritising the needs of the child over the system. However, it is also important to note the point above about the way the system worked, and how their allocated cases were presented to them on the screen. The person summary screen contained information such as the name and address of the child, but also detailed the categorisation or legal status, for example, subject to child protection, care order, early help etc.

This was not an isolated incident of the processes on the computer screen being internalised by social workers, the way in which they ordered information correlated to the order in which it was inputted into the system. I observed little variation in the unspoken order in which social workers approached their role, either through the direct observation of visits with children and their families, or in the construction of their notes to which they referred when completing the visit on screen. These indicated that they structured their visit based on the information that would be required and in the order it appeared; an almost invisible template guiding their interactions.

As indicated above, Lottie was not the only worker who verbalised frustration that the material world and its representation on the computer did not align.

Debbie is on the phone; she has slightly raised her voice which is what has drawn my attention to her. I swivel my chair round and make eye contact. She nods. “but I just need to know, yes or no… but that’s not very helpful… is there no one who can review the child… fine”. When Debbie is off the phone she explains that a child has been taken to hospital because of bruises noticed by the nursery, the doctor will not state whether the bruising is accidental or not, nor will the doctor confirm how old the bruising is. Debbie is frustrated as she does not feel able to progress the case without this information. If it is non-accidental the case will progress through child protection processes, if it is accidental the case will remain under child in need. Next to this account in my notebook I have scribbled that there is a palpable pressure for cases to align with the processes outlined in black and white and have drawn a little star next to the question ‘what about the grey?’.

Lottie had been a social worker for two years, I queried in my fieldnotes whether this was an issue of confidence brought about by length of service or of never knowing social work beyond a computer, however, as I observed social workers’ activities, and traced the threads of ruling relations to understand why they were doing what they were doing, it became clear that the computer systems directed work undertaken with each other and children and families for the most experienced of staff. The following is an extract from my fieldnotes written after the observation and was based on hastily written notes I had scribbled whilst with staff:

It is a Friday at 2pm and Ray, the manager of MASH, approaches Maria, a team manager, and asks Maria if she could come and have a chat about a ‘case’ - not a family, not a child, but a case. Maria went in and quickly came out and suggested I would find this interesting. They were discussing a child of infant school age, who had been referred in by school for the second time due to ‘sexualised behaviour’. As I entered the room there were two social workers and two managers sitting at a row of computer monitors. One of the monitors had a screen, which was prompting the user to pick an option, RAG. S47 (red), S17 (amber), or NFA/Early Help (green).

Section 47 is a child protection inquiry, the shorthand name known by most social workers denoting section 47 of the Children Act 1989. It details the threshold for which intervention under section 47 of the Children Act can be instigated; the local authority has reason to believe that a child is at risk of significant harm and requiring the local authority to undertake enquiries into the child’s safety and within certain timescales. Section 17, similarly drawn from the Children Act 1989, refers to a child in need. In law the local authority has a duty to provide services relating to health and development to a child assessed as being in need of support. Ostensibly the difference between the two is often drawn from a moral judgement about whether the child’s primary carers, usually the mother, are in any way responsible for the concerns.

Maria was arguing that the school was overreacting, that yes, the behaviour was not appropriate, but this was something that could and should be managed in school. Ray was concerned about the escalation in the second referral and was suggesting a strategy discussion was arranged.

A strategy discussion is part of a child protection inquiry in which information is shared by all agencies involved who jointly consider the risks and decide how it should progress. Essentially the members of the strategy discussion would be the members of the team who were present in the MASH team office that day.

Ray asked the police officer what she thought, the police officer gave Ray and Maria the information about the background checks, there was nothing on the names and addresses given, a relative on the paternal side was known to be a person who posed a risk but is not in the area and is stated as not being present in the child’s life. The nurse, unprompted, stated that there were no concerns from health; she qualified this by stating ‘vaccines up to date, no A&E visits’. Maria then asked education welfare what she thought of the school and for the child’s attendance. Attendance was “above national average” and she didn’t have any additional information about working with that particular head and that particular school. The discussion returned to whether it should be progressed to a strategy discussion or whether allocation for a child and family assessment was more appropriate.

Exploring my field notes during the process of analysis it is clear that I was becoming somewhat frustrated by this conversation. The next part of my field notes, written in capital letters and with a box drawn around it to emphasise the importance reads:

BUT THIS WAS BASICALLY A STRATEGY DISCUSSION: Information was being shared it just hadn’t been processed through the system in that way. Workers had shared information to look for what they knew to be red flags. Anna, a social worker in the team, said she felt it needed to be progressed as a strategy discussion as she felt the agencies needed to share information; have they not already done this?!?! Maria feels that even at a strategy discussion it would just be single agency so what’s the point, and the ‘case’ should ‘just’ be referred to a child and family assessment at this stage.

In analysing the data and actions of other social workers in their decision-making process, there was a clear pattern in which social workers had already begun formulating assessments driven by the material frameworks of their day-to-day practice embedded in their computer systems. Maria had, in actual fact, completed an assessment of the situation, she had mentally completed the underlying requirements of the prompts on the computer system but, because it had not been completed on the screen, Maria and the rest of the team, appeared stuck on how to progress.

At 2:40pm the conversations are ongoing, other staff in the MASH office join in then move back to their workstations to continue with their own work. I was observing the four workers focused, physically focused, on which focal button on the screen would be clicked. Maria felt that a child and family assessment was more appropriate as she had concluded that a strategy discussion would not lead anywhere. Ray felt that a strategy discussion was the best way forward and felt that the child may be experiencing or exposed to sexualised behaviour elsewhere, “The mother could be lying about the paternal family member not being in contact.”.

As noted above, I felt that Maria had already, perhaps unconsciously, made an assessment. The process through which the MASH team had been working for the past 45 minutes was in fact an assessment which considered all of the aspects which would need to be considered during an inquiry in order to decide how to proceed. However, it felt as though we were suspended in time, blocked by indecision about which option to press on the computer.

The social worker whose screen we were all looking at curtly said “Well… what are we going to do?”.

I hear a voice ask, “Is this a discussion as to whether the child should be seen tonight or next week?”. It’s my voice. Bugger, it was my voice! I watch workers become animated because of what I’ve said and fear I have overstepped my remit as a researcher, but no one talks to me.

Maria says, “obviously we need to see her before next week” and Ray says, “we’ll record this as the initial strategy, send someone out, and we’ll do a proper one on Monday”.

Maria leaves the room; Ray looks at the projectors on the wall with time counters beside family names and exclaims “What’s going on with the Petersons… you’re killing me…”. The worker whose computer we have all been huddled around is clicking away and has moved on, I didn’t see what button she pressed or what the following screens said. I am sat still and feel invisible. As I get up to leave the room I am facing a wall upon which is projected the lists of all referrals, I look for the Peterson’s and the line of information is highlighted red, the clock is showing there are 40 minutes left before a decision needs to be made.

This example illustrates that the role of the computer systems in influencing work patterns is not simply limited to those with less experience, or even more familiarity with working with technology. Unlike Lottie, Ray and Maria had over 40 years of experience between them, they had been social workers when there were no computer systems and everything was recorded in paper files, they had known social work beyond the current circumstances. Yet all of the workers during this observation were paralysed, focused entirely on the computer screen and the processes outlined on it. In both of these examples the workers needed to know how to progress the case and this was linked to the legislative framework, the decision was this a section 17 or section 47. The workers did not see their strategy discussion as such because they had not recorded it as such on the particular series of screens on the computer, I later observed that strategy discussions were undertaken in a meeting room booked in advance as prompted by the system; so on a Friday afternoon the next set of strategy discussions would not be taking place until Monday morning.

Whilst my methodology clearly rejects the idea of ‘going native’ I reflected with Maria the following week whether my interjection on Friday had been a problem, I was concerned that by asking questions I was altering the way in which they were working.

Maria laughed “you can’t see the wood for the trees in MASH… so many trees LOL [laugh out loud]. It’s like having reflective supervision every day. It’s making me think”. I asked Maria if she thought it was the volume of referrals that had resulted in them ‘streamlining’ the information required or whether she felt the processes outlined on the computer system had become habitual. Other members of the team interjected at this point, and staff concluded that it was both; “… you don’t collect information you don’t need because, well, where would you put it” “we just don’t have time”.

Sarah, the nurse from Friday’s observation gave no other information than that which was mandated by the computer; “immunisations up to date” and “no A&E visit”. Whilst theoretically it is difficult to see the links between these factors and the assessment of risk for children these issues become measurable categories of parenting, not having had their immunisations or having had visits to an Accident & Emergency department (A&E) become “red flags” to signify that the parent is not attending to the child’s needs and therefore there is a risk. Sarah had 25 years’ experience as a school nurse and when discussing my observation, the following week, she reflected that it was not unusual for children of that age to explore themselves physically, that it could be as a result of many different things and not necessarily sexual abuse. I queried that I had not heard that discussion at the time, “that information isn’t required” Sarah told me. Similar behaviour was observed amongst the social workers who participated in this study. It became apparent that their practice had adapted to focus on what information was required by the system, dismissing other information as irrelevant. The following example, drawn from a home visit in which I accompanied Priya to visit a family, and our subsequent discussion illustrates this. Priya is a social worker in her mid-twenties who is approximately 4 years post qualification and had been in her current post for three years.

Priya is undertaking a children and family assessment in respect of a mother and her three children. She has a list of questions she needs to ask.

Priya “So do you have any debts?”

Mother “Well yes… if my money doesn’t cover nappies and stuff, I have to borrow money…”

Priya “But no rent arrears, or council tax?”

Mother “Erm, I use payday loans and I owe my Mum a few hundred.”

Priya “But not rent? Anything that can affect your housing… you know?”

Mother “No. Not rent.”

I was struck at the time that Priya did not pick up on things that I would have done when I was in practice. To me, key information, for example, about the broader debt which the child’s mother was incurring, things that could be considered as being significant to the family’s situation, and therefore to the children, were being disregarded.

Later that day, sitting next to Priya at the computer, I was able to explore with her why she had asked those questions and how that information would be used. “Rent arrears could mean that family is homeless and not paying council tax could get Mum imprisoned so they are the risk factors, that’s why we need to know about those”. On the computer screen there is a free text box in which to record the information about household finances, this could be left blank, however Priya had mentally constructed her own restrictions regarding what was relevant.

This seemed to be a particularly pertinent example of the way that the computer system influenced the worker’s activities. In this instance it was not that the system did not enable you to enter the information, there certainly was space to put this “other” information about the mother’s finances. Priya provided a rationale for why she asked about rent arrears and council tax and how non-payment of these might impact the family. However, during our conversation she does mention the other forms of debt. It appeared that Priya had unconsciously altered her practice, creating a shorthand by which she identified the information required based on the local authority’s statutory duties.

The computer system was so pervasive that it guided workers’ interactions with each other and with children and families, whilst for some workers they acknowledged and understood that the system was shaping their work “the families are the info[rmation] we put into the system”, but were resigned to the restrictions of the system “this is social work”. For others they appeared unconsciously compliant with the procedure, demonstrating no awareness, nor resistance.

Layers and Layers of Auditing

As part of the drive to improve the standard of social work in respect of court applications, as discussed in Chapter Two, the Social Work Evidence Template was introduced in 2014 and is the document upon which a social worker submits evidence to the family courts in support of the local authority’s application for a care or supervision order. The template is completed in a word processing programme, separate to the main computer system, and prompts social workers to provide set information such as key events, analysis of harm, and consideration of realistic placement options. Within such statements I had expected social workers to be drawing upon their analytical skills and theory, and their knowledge of the children and families with whom they worked, unrestricted by computer processes and mandatory information however, in practice this process too was mediated, not by the computer system but through several levels of auditing and surveillance which prioritised the information the authority sought to provide and not that the social worker thought was relevant. For example, information regarding wider issues such as the benefits system was not present, rather the court statements focused on the impact on the child when there is not enough food present. The “quality control” procedure, three layers of management making changes to the statement, restricted workers’ activities in much a same manner as the computer system and ensured that “excessive information”, as one manager described it, was removed. Six different social workers across four different teams, spoke at some length and with concern regarding having had significant changes made to the content of their court statements by managers. Whilst all workers I spoke with had experienced changes to their grammar and spelling, these six workers spoke of significant changes that altered the meaning and direction of their statement and of their care plan in relation to the children they were working with. In these examples concerns included: managers removing more positive statements about the family, statements which were seen as superfluous or not part of the mandatory required knowledge. The following example is particularly illustrative of this point.

Samantha is a 14-month-old little girl who I became aware of in the first few weeks of the fieldwork whilst with the assessment team, and whose journey with Middleshire I traced. Sam was in hospital with a fractured skull, her family unable to identify what had happened; a smiley adventurous toddler, Sam had been learning to walk by holding onto furniture, even whilst in the hospital she wanted to stand in the cot and hoist her leg up onto the bars. She had two older brothers whom she lived with, along with her mother and father, there were no concerns from health, police, or the school in relation to the children. Her paternal grandparents lived on the same road, her maternal uncle and aunt on the adjoining road. Cole, the allocated social worker, along with Natasha the assistant team manager, formulated a safety plan; family members who were not present during the window in which the hospital think the injury occurred would take it in turns to stay with the family in shifts, the parents would not be left alone with the children, and the case progressed to an initial child protection conference for a full assessment to be completed. The case was progressed through the computer system, Cole completed his actions, Natasha signed these off, Jeanette [the team manager], audited and agreed, the case was recommended for transfer to the long-term team.

This process adopted here by Cole, Natasha, and Jeanette struck me as a very practical and child-centred response. As such it was in line with many current initiatives which seek to adopt a strengths-based approach to working with children and families, in particular the Signs of Safety model purchased by Middleshire. Such approaches seek to manage risk in a positive way and minimise the disruption experienced by the child and their family (see page 76). Sometime later, following the threads of this case, I became aware that some changes had been made to this original plan.

I am still unclear whether the case was discussed at the allocations meeting or whether Chris, the service manager, made the decision before the case progressed that far, but Cole had been directed to issue short-notice proceedings. Short-notice proceedings are when the local authority do not consider the child(ren) to be in immediate danger requiring an emergency order, but equally do not believe the child can wait for a standard listing in court as this can take a week or more.

It’s a Tuesday afternoon in the assessment team office and Cole is agitated, an agency worker with over 10 years’ experience, he has only been with Middleshire for 2 months; he is pacing the room, alternating between having hushed conversations with Natasha and Jeanette, and going outside to smoke. Keen to understand what is happening, but respectful to recognise that Cole is experiencing some difficulties, I wait. I really want to know what is causing such a reaction in what appeared to be such a confident worker. Hours later, I am making cups of tea for the team, Cole approaches me in the kitchen; “she’s changed my entire statement, taken entire paragraphs out and concluded that Sam and his brothers should be adopted. I don’t believe that for a minute but what can I do?”. I return to Cole’s desk, unable to find words other than “hmmm” and “sounds tough” and he shows me the two different statements side by side on the screen. There are significant changes, events like an estranged family member’s criminal activity - police had deemed irrelevant - is now a significant risk, the closeness of the extended family had once been considered as a protective factor is now a risk, the family’s cooperation with Children’s Services and with their older children’s education is framed as “disguised compliance”. The care plan was noted in the first statement as assessment and rehabilitation, in the second it had been changed to adoption. Cole, Natasha, and Jeanette all watch me read the statements, I reread them to allow me some time to formulate a response, I ask Cole “and how do you feel about that”, (this is what my children call “social work speak”). Cole says he is devastated for Sam and the older children, he lists the things he sees as protective factors, verbally undertaking an assessment, talking about how removing the children from the family would be a greater harm.

Looking at the two statements it was apparent that things had been added into the second statement which, in the assessment completed by Cole (an assessment I shared), had no bearing on the situation. They had been identified as “risk factors” associated with a number of common terms and phrases which are used within social work as “buzz words” which have meaning beyond the words. The systems of bio power regulating what is normal and what is deviant in the unspoken but associated discourse of phrases like “involvement with criminal justice” or “disguised compliance”. Middleshire actively engage in this discursive practice through more than their procedures and computer systems. On the wall in all of the offices I visited there were print outs of performance measured outcomes, flow charts outlining processes, and posters depicting slogans such as “Reduce LAC Population Safely”. One of these posters displayed a photograph of a little girl looking sad, in the background there are two adults fighting[[13]](#footnote-13) with the caption “My Mum and Dad said all the right things, but nothing changed for me. Watch out for disguised compliance” (see appendices ten and eleven).

I attend court with Cole two days later, present is a member of staff from the long-term team, another from the legal team, and a barrister Middleshire hired for the hearing at a cost of little under £1000. Various configurations of legal representatives have met to discuss things in hushed tones in whatever free spaces they can find. Cole says he hates “this bit” where he can’t talk to the family, reassure the visibly upset mother, “it’s all a game. Tomorrow she’s expected to work with me”.

The barrister returns from a conversation with the clerk of the court, clearly frustrated: “so… if you go up on that stand today, if you are asked ‘is that statement a true and accurate reflection of your professional position?’… you’d say no. And if we insist on carrying on today then you will be held in contempt of court.”. Coles hands are shaking. On the drive back to the office we say nothing, both of us understand the seriousness of being held in contempt of court and the consequences.

This is a detailed example of the way that the processes in Middleshire are mediated. Along with earlier examples this illustrates the way that particular options are available, or unavailable to workers, and the way that the levels of scrutiny and auditing can detract from professional discretion. At times it is the computer system that does part of this controlling work and where there is space for professional judgement and discretion the structures and processes in place elsewhere pull the workers’ activities closer toward Middleshire’s understanding of social work, social work as performed. It is not always possible to disaggregate these two systems, the computer and the culture are intertwined.

The post court discussions within the team were ones of jubilation, that the right thing had happened for the child. Natasha and Jeanette supported Cole and repeatedly told him that Sam is at home with his family tonight because of him. Some weeks later I sat with Chris, the service manager to discuss the service manager’s role in the auditing process, we come on to court statements. Chris is animated about the poor standard of written work the social workers produce, that this is why she has to change the statements “it’s about quality control and consistency… if x happens then y happens” a uniformed response to all cases, she positions her role in changing court statements as being part of that, the problem isn’t that Cole was sent to court with a statement he didn’t agree with, but that Cole didn’t agree with what Chris frames as the only appropriate response to Sam’s injury.

I had assumed that the computer system in Middleshire was a fixed system, bought off the shelf with no capacity to be adapted. When talking to one of the service managers and the principal social worker I was surprised to hear that the system could, and had been, adapted. Particular questions can be added, made mandatory, or removed at the request of a senior management. Geraldine, the principal social worker, explained:

“We need workers to consider if parents have any additional needs so I had a mandatory question put in right at the start of the intervention in early help, ‘does this family have learning needs?’, that way we know don’t we… workers have to stop and address that question before carrying on and working with that family”.

Geraldine had previously spoken of the role of additional assessments in the delays experienced by children in the family courts, we had spoken specifically about the delays caused by seeking specialist assessments when attending a first hearing in respect of parents with learning difficulties or disabilities. The alterations of the system by Geraldine were clearly seeking to avoid any such delay by highlighting the need for specialist assessments at the start of Middleshire’s relationship with a family.

Chris, a service manager, shows me the technology department’s request form for changes to the system, where she has requested the direct work with children element of the system become mandatory, that a child’s case can no longer be closed or transferred without direct work evidenced for each child.

The direct work Chris is referring to relates to the legal requirement—monitored and recorded by OFSTED―that the views of the child have been considered and recorded. For Chris, making this a mandatory requirement meant that there would be an evidence trail to demonstrate that the child’s views had been taken into account by working directly with them.

For many workers in the assessment team direct work was a cause of some debate, some workers reported feeling “uneasy” about undertaking “direct work” with children they were not in a position to build relationships with. Workers had been ignoring Chris’ email requests to undertake direct work with every child, justifying the omission in their recordings when they had judged it wasn’t appropriate, Yasmin was clear:

“For some kids it’s more damaging than it is helpful. I’m doing an assessment. I’ve seen them… but going to see them alone at school to draw what life is like at home, or what scares them... That takes time. Asking them to trust me and have a relationship with me, only to never see me again. Nah. Not ok”.

Workers were exercising their professional judgement and discretion, those workers who said they felt “uneasy” about direct work were animated and enthusiastic about particular children with whom they had considered it to be appropriate, they were not simply attempting to reduce their work load, rather they appeared to be individually assessing the impact of their interactions in accordance with the needs of each child. Through the computer system Middleshire was removing the opportunity for social workers to exercise professional discretion, attempting to create a uniformed response.

The options available for workers to exercise professional judgement and discretion were limited, with compliance to the processes outlined on the computer system prioritised through layers of auditing, the culture of the teams, and wider discourse surrounding risk. Subversion of these processes was observed however, this often came at great personal cost; some workers left the organisation or the profession, other workers were reported to the regulator for failure to follow policy or disciplined through Middleshire’s performance management system. Ultimately the organisation subverted the social workers’ attempts to adhere to the version of social work they sought to enact.

Resistance and Subversion

I am framing resistance as a vocal rejection of the dominant processes of work, and subversion as the prioritisation of their understanding of the role but still within the legislative framework. There are many forms of resistance, including job refusal (Barnes, 2009); over the course of my fieldwork 16 of my participants employed this strategy, informing me they were leaving Middleshire; these were the social workers that told me, and that wanted to tell me why. Middleshire acknowledge in their own literature that they are experiencing significant issues in the retention of social workers. Whilst this was clearly an interesting and significant approach to subverting the control Middleshire has on social work practice, I remained focused on the ways in which social workers constructed their role in responding to the processes prescribed by the local authority, whilst remaining in their role. This study is not seeking to frame resistance or subversion as a heroic act, but an interesting and important tool which social workers draw on to mitigate the incongruence of their role as they understand it and as it is expected by the organisation.

Joanne is in her thirties, qualified for around 12 years. Joanne is very assertive, she describes herself as “takin’ no prisoners”, and throughout the field work I had seen her challenge a number of managers including one who was known to be “difficult”. It is in this context that the following example seems particularly significant:

Joanne is alternating between twiddling her hair nervously and biting her nails, she makes eye contact and I ask if she’s ok.

“I’ve a case that is bothering me, I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“So, this Dad, he’s served 2 years for rape and been released, Mom sticking by him. Both say he’s innocent. Probation say that he’s not a risk. No licence or nothing. We’ve been working with the Mum and kids… they struggled after he went away like.”

“What’s bothering you?”

“I have to tell him he can’t return to the home but… the only risk I have is that he could pose an emotional risk should he rape another woman and go back to prison. I have no legal grounds to tell him he cannot go home. It’s child in need. We don’t have PR. It’s not in court.”

“And you don’t feel comfortable with that?”

“It’s just what I’ve been told to do. That because he claims his innocence, he is still a risk. It’s illegal innit? Oh god you won’t report me to the HCPC will you?”

I repeat the section of my participant information sheet word for word, if someone is at risk I will talk to my supervisors; but I don’t think anyone is at risk in this situation and I try and reassure her that I am not here to spy or to judge. But that I am interested to know why she does not feel able to challenge what she’s been directed to do, reflecting back to her that she strikes me as a confident person, I’ve seen her stand her ground and argue for children and their families as well as for other workers in similar circumstances.

“I’ve 40 cases, and… I just can’t… I haven’t got it in me...”.

“What would happen if you did challenge it or say your professional opinion?”

“I’d end up on a performance plan!”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because that’s what happens, it’s happened to other people and we know that’s what will happen. She [service manager] wants to cover her arse, if anything did happen to these kids… if we’d left a known sex offender home… imagine…”

Verbally, Joanne was clear about her assessment, the risk this person posed, her interactions with other agencies and the steps that she had taken in assessing the risk. She was able to confidently articulate her professional judgement and had a clear understanding of the legal framework. Nevertheless, she found it difficult to resist the enforced compliance within Middleshire. In this case, the fear of reprisal restricted her professional discretion ultimately leading her to a course of action she knew she had no legal grounds for. Not all of the participants were as reluctant to exercise their professional discretion and I did see examples where the processes in Middleshire supported individual workers to do this, as the example below illustrates.

Leah is a social worker who describes herself as ‘old school’, she’s in her late 50s and has been qualified for over 20 years. In this example, drawn from my field notes, Leah discusses a situation where, despite the pressure she felt from the 26-week process she resists the pressure from management to keep the children in their foster placement.

Discussion with Leah She removed children last night and the team are supporting her, telling her she did the right thing. I note it’s very supportive; underlining the words compassionate and concern. She turns her chair around and starts to talk to me. She starts immediately by categorising the family she was working with as “chronic neglect”, the children were initially removed voluntarily, and care proceedings started. Part way through proceedings Mum got a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. “I felt this changed things and there was a possibility with the right support that things could change. We had to try. Right?”. Leah goes on to explain her manager didn’t agree but they discussed it with legal “… and I told them… I’d tell the guardian and the court what I thought”. A robust plan was put in place and the children returned home on a care order. “It was all going so well”.

What was interesting in this situation, and what marked this out from other aspects of work that I had observed, was that despite the pressure presented by being “on the clock” in terms of the 26-week timescales it was not this which drove Leah’s work but her belief in what was right for the children and their family from within her construction of social work.

“…got a call from school, kids weren’t back today after the Easter holidays and when I got to the house… she was rocking in the corner!”

Another social worker explained as Leah was visibly upset: The family support worker had been off sick; Leah and the team had not been notified “and things just fell apart. She was too scared to tell us the worker was off.”

Leah continued: “But now… now she’s erratic and it’s all broken down. She wouldn’t even let me in the house”. Leah is tearful, several members of the team rub her back, Jerry the only male in the team, brings her a cup of tea.

“Should I really have fought for the kids to go back?” I’m not sure if she’s asking me. I stay quiet and Susanne comes up to Leah. Susanne’s presence is felt, is it because she is tall, or has a voice that carries without raising it? Susanne tells Leah “you did the right thing”. Susanne was the team manager at the time, the one who disagreed with Leah. Susanne resigned the managerial role to return to her original post as a social worker; “I may have disagreed with you, but you did the right thing, you fought for those kids. Who knows it could have been different and we have to try don’t we?” Leah turns to me “If we hadn’t been pushed to complete in 26 weeks you know… we asked for an extension, for more time, but it was rejected. If we could have taken a bit longer… but all anyone cared about was not going over, must finish… so we rushed the decision”.

Leah was one of the few workers to mention, unprompted, the “26 weeks” and the pressures that this placed upon herself and the team, the way that this had impacted on their ability to work productively and supportive with the family. In this scenario Leah has also tried to resist the timescales by asking for an extension to the 26 weeks, something which the guidance says can only happen in the most exceptional circumstances. During the fieldwork I learned of numerous instances where workers has requested an extension to timescale from the court and this request was either not agreed to by management, refused by Middleshire’s legal team, or denied by the courts. Throughout my fieldwork I was not aware of an extension being granted. Social workers consistently spoke of their experiences of attending court as “a battle”, “stressful”, and surprisingly, “pointless”. Thula, a social worker in a long-term team, is sitting with a group of social workers, and when I ask why court is pointless she becomes animated:

“We are irrelevant in the court processes. It don’t matter how much you know that family. The Guardian swans in. Never met the family. Yet their word is gospel. And judges… they just accept it. They are late filing and that’s fine. Us? It’s fed back to them up there [directorate]. We might as well not be there. It’s a pointless waste of time...”

A discussion ensues which I note as a “free for all” and I clearly have tried to scribble down as many of the comments as I could. Workers describe it as a game, competitive, that they feel demoralised, their professional role not respected, and their presence irrelevant. Each worker has a story, an experience, that is drawn upon to emphasise their point. I asked workers specifically about requesting extensions and was consistently, not just within this interaction, met with a sense of inevitability within the teams, that you wouldn’t get an extension, so why ask.

In Joanne’s case, as discussed above, the analysis suggested that team culture and management were contributing factors in explaining workers’ difficulty in resisting and subverting the risk-averse processes which dominated at Middleshire. However, Leah and Susanne’s experience are more complex and nuanced. Leah was initially able to exercise her professional judgement and argue for the children to return home.

That afternoon I speak to Susanne, interested to understand how she supported a member of staff whose decision she ultimately did not agree with. “I was anxious about it don’t get me wrong, but she [Leah] knew the family, she knew the case and you have to trust the worker”.

Susanne, despite being concerned about the potential implications of this, supported Leah in her assessment of the situation. Susanne was referred to by Rihanna, the current team manager, as having “balls of steel… that’s how she stands her ground”. However, ultimately Susanne felt that this position was untenable and her only route to subverting the expectations upon her as a manager in Middleshire was to resign and return to her former role as a social worker.

Susanne noted that she “…couldn’t do that in the long-term, like... be the anxious one whose neck is on the block but I wasn’t gonna be the manager who said I know best do it my way”. Rihanna chipped in “you can’t weight assessments and collect evidence to support a decision you’ve already made… you have to argue things by saying this is what the evidence says, this is my workers’ assessment”. I reflected out loud with the team whether social work requires balls of steel and if, ultimately, we are saying that good social work is reliant upon personality traits. A lively debate ensued, one which I recall feeling slightly uncomfortable about starting given how animated people became. The majority of workers within the team felt that to be a good social worker you need to have confidence; they did not however reach a conclusion about whether such confidence could be taught.

When I reflected back on my notes, once the fieldwork had been completed, I was frustrated with myself for not having picked up on what appears to be quite an obvious thread of ruling relations. The failure of Middleshire to provide the necessary support for the family had been translated into a failing of the parent. The fear of the parent was understood as a failure to engage with Leah. Whilst there was clearly frustration for the workers that they had not been notified by another member of Middleshire staff, the series of events had been reframed as a failing of the mother, evidence to suggest that she was not a good parent.

The resource panel was another process which appeared to be used to constrain the discretion of individual social workers whilst also serving to reinforce the culture of compliance to Middleshire’s institutional understanding of the social work role. Leah’s case was later referred to during resource panel meetings as an example of what happens when managers afford social workers the space to exercise professional judgement and discretion. I observed three panel sessions over six weeks and the case was referred to seven times as evidence of overly-optimistic social workers with naive managers, who together are too parent-focused. Other cases were referred to in a similar way, but I was not aware of the detail of these in the same way as I was with this case.

It was apparent in the fieldwork that despite the processes at Middleshire which served to constrain the workers’ discretion they still found ways to work around this in order to support the families they were working with.

It’s the end of the first week of the Easter holidays, I am observing the workers in the long-term teams, picking up the activities and processes I became aware of in the assessment teams, as well as becoming aware of altogether new issues. Jenny approaches Cathy, the team manager, and asks for her approval for a foodbank voucher. Jenny explains to me that she is the allocated worker for a family with a single mother who has fled domestic violence, that the ex-partner has contacted the benefits agency and her benefits have been stopped whilst they investigate benefit fraud. She shows me the form that they complete before handing it to Cathy. Cathy doesn’t sign the form; she states that this is the second food bank voucher and the family are only allowed three, asking if Jenny is sure she wants to use the second one today. Cathy asks Jenny what will happen when she needs more next week and instructs Jenny to support the mother to help her find her own solutions and not be dependent upon Children’s Services to feed her children. I ask what other alternative provisions there are in Middleshire. I am told that Jenny can get school to take responsibility for feeding the children. I ask what about Mum? “She’s not our responsibility”. Cathy signs Jenny’s form.

As Cathy leaves, Simon, who had his back to us during the conversation, wheels his office chair over to where I am now sitting, making something of a show of being furtive, looking around to see who is listening. In a hushed tone he says “there’s things we do, we don’t leave them starve. Find the right time or the right manager or ask for vouchers for another family and just hope they don’t later need the foodbank.”

Simon is talking about finding work-arounds, he is aware of the ways in which the managers’ and his role is organised by forms and layers of scrutiny and locates ways to manage the conflict of his manager’s position against that of the family and his own position. He is conscious that there is a disparity between the line the manager takes, that the mother is not the authority’s responsibility, and his own understanding that as a social worker he cannot let a mother go without food. I become aware that a prerequisite to resistance, and thus subversion, is consciousness; workers need to be aware that the actualities of what they are doing do not align with their verbal account. Reflecting back to Ellie’s verbal account of “working with a family on a CP plan”; it was not conscious to Ellie that the child protection plan she was producing was not in fact “…working to help Mum improve the home conditions”. For many the resistance was present but not toward Middleshire, aimed at the children and families with whom they were working, mothers were “too needy” “difficult” or “hard to reach” and children “too complex” or “out of borough”, on some occasions it was other professionals who were “obstructive” or “colluding with parents”.

When given space to exercise professional discretion I observed social workers drawing on their professional judgement to do just that. As discussed above, workers in the assessment team were clear about the potential negative impact of undertaking formal direct work with each child they were allocated, because the computer system initially did not deem this mandatory they were able, across all teams with a range of different managers, to make professional judgements drawing on their knowledge of the children and the potential consequences. Each of the examples above demonstrate this in different ways. When an email directing workers to undertake direct work with all children failed to elicit the required response and workers voiced their resistance to this, direct work was introduced as a mandatory requirement on the system. Workers could not progress beyond this point on the system until they evidenced direct work. When Leah’s fight to keep the children with their mother, and to support the family, failed, this was used within panel meetings as an example of what happens when social workers are permitted to exercise discretion. Workers became resigned to having to adhere to the 26-week timescale believing that applying for extensions was futile.

The discourse in panel meetings, referring to particular workers or particular families, created a clear indication to social workers about the expectations of them in order to restrict profession discretion and ensure compliance. Thus, attempts by social workers to resist and subvert were met with tighter restrictions undertaken on behalf of Middleshire by managers and senior staff. Social workers were no longer doing the subverting, rather their attempts to perform social work as they imagined it should be, through professional judgement and discretion, were being subverted by Middleshire.

In attending to the actualities of social workers’ activities this study has explicated the disparity between the role of social work as imagined by the social workers who saw themselves as supporting families, and the role they are in fact performing. This chapter has detailed how Middleshire regulate social workers’ activities in accordance to the organisation’s construction of the social work role. Through the deployment of discursive practices, alongside the near-constant surveillance of social workers’ activities, Middleshire ensure that the role performed by social workers is aligned to that as understood by the organisation. As discussed within this chapter, the use of the computer system, alongside other processes such as the construction of court statements, regulates social workers’ activities. For some workers this has altered their interactions with children and families, adopting the authoritative construction of their role into their everyday activities. Other workers attempted to resist the control Middleshire exerted, and attempted to enact their understanding of social work, however their practice was ultimately regulated through the recording requirements, as outlined on the computer system and within documents such as court statements, and through practice directions. Discussions pertaining to particular personality types or length of experience were explored in relation to enactment of the role of social work as imagined, however, there was little evidence to suggest that this was a consistent factor in the incidents of social workers’ subverting Middleshire’s control. Social workers’ compliance to the organisation’s construction of the role was ensured through the systems and processes within the organisation. The excessive layers of auditing, not just in respect of the computer system, but in relation to resource panels, transfer meetings, and quality control of documents such as court evidence, ensured that social workers complied with Middleshire’s construction of the social work role.

The next chapter goes on to consider social workers’ activities in relation to fear and blame, and the almost universally expressed desire by participants to “cover my arse”. Notions of risk and blame are explored, expressed through anxieties not relating to the child but in respect of their jobs, and the ways in which this is mitigated through the role of accountability work. The chapter ends with an exploration of the moral judgements present within the work processes and in the discourse of social workers.

Chapter Seven - Accountability Work and Organisational Risk

“You can’t win in this job, but you can make sure you aren’t blamed.”

Jan, social worker

This chapter builds on the key findings regarding the mechanisms of control used by Middleshire to regulate social workers’ activities, alongside the institutional processes developed to ensure compliance through the surveillance of social workers. This chapter looks at the significance of the accountability work which social workers undertake. Underlying workers’ compliance with the processes and policies of Middleshire was the universal theme of “covering arse”. This appeared to be largely driven by the anxiety of the workers, not that a child had been harmed, but that they would get into trouble and their performance would be called into question. In various ways all of the participants in the research discussed this notion and the importance of evidencing that they had been compliant, or in the case of undertaking activities they felt were unethical, that they had documented why they had done this.

Risky Business

The management of risk is a core task for social workers, and certainly one which is seen as the primary role of those working in children and families social work. When risk is discussed it draws on an authoritative account of risk, such as that captured in the legislative framework. However, within Middleshire the research participants talked about a variety of aspects of risk which they negotiated in their roles, much of which focused not on the risk to the child, as I had expected, but more commonly of risks to the organisation and to themselves.

One of the central principals in the assessment of children is that the assessment for each child will be individual and personalised to each family. The threshold document for Middleshire, discussed on page 132, also captures this as a central theme of the work of the department. However, in practice it became clear that for many workers they were not guided solely by this principle. Each assessment was framed by the organisational and cultural discourse of the organisation and of the individual teams within which they were working. Nor were the workers conversant with the policies of the authority. Approximately 12 weeks into my fieldwork I was observing an informal conversation with one of the teams. They had received an email from the divisional manager about appropriate dress for the workplace which noted that they should always be dressed ready for court. During the conversation one worker noted that they did not think this was the official policy to which another replied, “I haven’t read Middleshire’s policies since I joined the local authority 4 years ago”.

Rather than national legislation or local authority policy driving the discursive practices in Middleshire, social workers’ activities were guided through emails, such as the one above, and through the culture of referring to sentinel cases; not those nationally renowned such as that of Peter Connelly, but local cases which held similar notoriety within the teams. The example which follows demonstrates how such cases were used, not only to influence the assessment made of children who had been referred to the authority, but also the impact that this had on workers’ management of their work both with families and with each other.

I first became aware of the Johnston family when staff were notified at a team meeting that a new three-visit rule was to be implemented. This was not a formal Middleshire policy which was outlined in their local policy documents, but an instruction via the divisional manager that because of the “Johnston case” all children must be seen multiple times, alone, and have direct work undertaken, evidence of which was to uploaded upon the system before the case can be closed. The instruction was sent via email, the subject of which was a “Review of the Johnston Case”, detailing date-by-date the visits undertaken alongside comments critiquing the case. Appendix twelve is a photograph of the “learning required” from the review.

A group of workers were discussing the issue immediately after the meeting and Yasmin tells me that this was her case. A young girl had told school that there was no food in the house, Yasmin visited the house and observed a fridge full of food, the explanation of the father was that the daughter was given food she didn’t like and that Mum was away with work and the child was unsettled. The school had confirmed that the child’s mother worked away and that the father was the primary carer and they had no other concerns. The child was seen, and whilst noted as being shy and quiet she said that she was being fed. Several weeks later it transpired that the father had murdered the mother.

Yasmin says that she could have done 30 visits and the daughter wouldn’t have said anything, that it took months for her to talk to her foster carers about what life at home was like. Yasmin states that at court it was made explicit that there was nothing that Children’s Services could have done differently; Rose interjects and reminds Yasmin that her work was commended by the judge and the authority was directed to keep the case open to Yasmin rather than transfer to another worker in the long-term team.

It is interesting in this context that this is the case that has been highlighted by the divisional manager to encourage potentially intrusive additional work. Particularly as the subsequent discussion suggests this is a misuse of this particular case. Nevertheless, it is clear that social workers did draw heavily on such sentinel cases and throughout the field work I heard the Johnston family referred to on several other occasions. Senior managers would use this as an example of the need for more thorough home visits whilst the social workers would indicate what a positive case it was in the way it had been viewed by the courts and, in demonstrating the importance of building relationships, it was a good piece of work.

Between social workers, sentinel cases were referred to as reasons to take particular types of actions based on previous outcomes. The same case could be referred to in order to constrict and concert social workers to act in differing ways depending upon the point they want to make. It is drawn in as supporting evidence depending upon the needs of the individual and can be used to support any claim. Leah’s case as outlined in the previous chapter can be seen as such a sentinel case in the way that it was used in panel to compel workers to avoid being overly optimistic and taking undue risk in being “too parent-focused”. Concerns on the part of the manager about undue risk were also apparent in the case which follows.

The assistant team manager of one of the assessment teams identifies a case of a toddler who had a skull fracture where the explanation of the injury could have occurred on two separate occasions, the child was made subject to a child protection plan and returned to the joint care of the mother and maternal grandmother. Within the assessment teams, and later on in court, it is referred to as “good safety planning”. However, two months later in one of the long-term teams, a manager tells me that the intake team are “dangerous and too risky”, that they do not react quickly enough. Talking about the same family she tells me about a case they received from the assessment team where a little girl had a fractured skull and the parent doesn’t know if it was because the pushchair tipped over or if the kid fell over “and you’d know when your kid fractured their skull, come on”. Another worker joins in and says she heard about that case, “they are really risky over there”.

Both this case, and other such sentinel cases referred to within Middleshire during my fieldwork, served to create a narrative within the teams of the expected course of action which is then applied to other situations. In such cases it is not the official policy as derived from legislation that is guiding the practice, it is the selective use of cases and examples as dominant narratives. This is clearly illustrated in the example above, the work later defined as risky, and as being representative of the riskiness of all work conducted by the assessment team was actually in line with the principles of the Children Act 1989 and associated statutory guidance and praised by the courts as good practice. On a day-to-day basis workers are pulled in the direction of this informal policy as mediated through the narratives associated with sentinel cases and the evocation of these at key points in the work processes. In institutional ethnography the official status given to the text isn’t the priority, it is the consequences of the textually-mediated ruling relations which are of interest and sentinel cases were an illustration of this, a process which will be elucidated further in the discussion chapter.

Court Statements and Accountability Work

As discussed in the previous chapter, I explored with a member of the senior management team just how court statements produced by social workers were monitored. It is clear that each statement goes through a number of layers which involve being checked by the workers’ immediate supervisor, their manager and finally the divisional manager. Some assistant team managers and managers say that there are some staff for whom they don’t have to make any changes “I know who can write a good statement and who can’t”. However, both divisional managers refer to needing to make changes to social workers’ statements. I explore with Tia, a divisional manager, about her role in making amendments to statements. Tia tells me that “half of these social workers can’t write a grammatically correct sentence to save their life, it’s like being a teacher, you couldn’t submit it to court”. I ask about content and she says that she does have to make changes as the social workers don’t analyse the information properly, or they just come up with a care plan without thinking it through. Tia refers to this work as “quality control”, ensuring that the quality of the work submitted to the court is of a good enough standard. I explore the amendments she suggests on three different statements. The changes Tia makes are a form of accountability work, as well as regulatory, as detailed in the previous chapter; demonstrating that the department have framed any information that could be retrospectively seen as a “missed opportunity” as a risk and that they have “believed nothing and no one until verified”. When talking about parents engaging positively with staff the word “appeared” has been added, thus raising questions about the parents’ positive working relationship with the social worker.

The ruling relations, discussed above in relation to sentinel cases, serve to maintain the fear and anxiety about “what if something goes wrong” which in turn influence and in some cases regulate the social workers’ activities by drawing them towards Middleshire’s understanding of the social work role. The ruling relations of the management style, the threats of referrals to the regulator, of performance management, or being shouted at, maintains the social workers position of needing to undertake what is discussed here as accountability work.

Bev, the divisional manager, has not noticed me today; I’ve been sat in a different part of the office. Members of the team have joked that they wished I could be in everyday as she is different when I’m there, “it’s not as angry round here when you’re here”. Her voice can be heard from one end of the office to another, “remember I’m not scared to refer you to the HCPC, and you know what happened to Felicity”. I ask a member of staff what happened to Felicity. She says she didn’t work here at the time, but that Felicity was a well-liked manager who was reported to the HCPC and struck off. “She reminds us of it all the time. No one wants to be a Felicity.” I feel sorry for Felicity, that she is used against the staff that liked her and for the staff who are threatened in such a way.

When discussing with a group of social workers who had known Felicity, they expressed their concerns about the vulnerability of the role in Middleshire. Their anxiety related to what they understood was the nature of the complaint against Felicity, namely her failure to comply with policy. This led to these social workers feeling vulnerable, convinced they too had not followed Middleshire policy at some point. My fieldnotes contain a reflection made later that evening; so few of the ruling relations originate in the formal policies in Middleshire, they are present in a variety of other communications, such as emails, conversations, and sentinel cases just like Felicity’s. Such narratives were deployed to control and coerce the social workers into complying with the construction of the role as envisaged by the organisation.

Accountability work is inextricably linked to risk and blame. As explored in Chapter One, there is considerable blame attributed to social workers when a child is hurt, even when children are not known to Children’s Services the questions is asked “well why not?”. When they are known but the case has not been progressed, social workers are told they could do more. Social workers are expected, by the public and media, their employers, and themselves, to be able to prevent any child getting injured or killed. This is rescue ideology, filtered down through ruling relations and permeating across society and into the social work offices through the culture, the processes, and the systems in place.

Maria and Ray are in the assessment team talking about similarities in cases and concerns about how they manage a referral. The case they are looking at is similar to the situation of the child they had worked with previously, Samantha. Ray raises her eyebrows and says, “we don’t want a repeat of that, you know how much trouble we got in”, Maria looks at me and says, “she went mental”.

They do not say who it is but it’s clear they are concerned about the divisional manager. Even though she is not present in the office the fear of having a case reviewed is guiding both Maria and Ray’s practice. This is the same manager who regularly referred to Felicity as an example of what could happen to workers. Samantha is also referred to on other occasions.

After a discussion in MASH I return to the main room and to Maria’s cluster of desks, Yasmin is present, as is Natasha and Clive. They are on their computers looking at the case notes. Each one notes something. Yasmin says that there is no proof that mother is telling the truth about the paternal family not having had any contact it could be ‘disguised compliance’. Clive and Maria say that they feel it’s a reactive decision motivated by fear of management and the need to ‘cover my arse’. Maria is frustrated, she says that she doesn’t want her practice to be guided by this. She repeats about Samantha, the previous child that they didn’t go out and see quick enough and whose file was subject to review as a result. “I need to cover my arse, it shouldn’t be… but that’s how it is”. Natasha is still working through the case files; she raises her head and tells Yasmin that she’s been allocated the case and she should go out tonight. Maria interjects “just reiterate to Mum that no one else can look after her. Eyes on the child and then out. Next week try and build a relationship and find out what’s going on”. Everyone has an opinion, and it’s all different. Clive thinks that mother could be colluding with the father’s family. Helen, a worker on a different team swivels her chair and says that Yasmin needs to find out from Mum where she’s learned to touch herself from, Yasmin raises her eyebrows and says, ‘if Mum isn’t disguised compliance’.

What was apparent here is that the fear of blame and censure along with the need to be accountable drives the social workers’ responses to their cases right at the point of referral. Their fear of having a case reviewed, their decisions questioned, and the threat of performance management was at the forefront of their minds and was another tool of compliance. As such, threats of being performance-managed guide and regulate social workers’ activities.

Performance management is the first stage of action taken by a divisional manager when there are concerns about a social workers’ conduct. In the two cases of performance management shared with me by the social workers’ subject to them, the evidence demonstrating their incompetence referred to the worker’s failure to follow Middleshire’s formal policies. Natasha, the assistant team manager who signed off the safety plan in respect of Samantha, the toddler with a fractured skull as discussed on page 148, was subject to a performance plan for failing to complete a second child protection strategy discussion within the timescale outlined in Middleshire policy. However, the divisional manager instigating Natasha’s performance plan, and the divisional manager who had directed Cole to issue short-notice proceedings, was critical not of Natasha’s failure to adhere to timescales but of her decision in allowing Samantha to go home; framing the decision as a “missed opportunity to remove her”. There was a clear frustration in the assessment team about what they saw as the use of a technicality to discipline Natasha, with discussions occurring openly amongst different teams, with several workers commenting that the performance plan was “punishment for disagreeing”. Throughout my fieldwork I was party to a variety of communication from managers and the directorate to social workers, such as departmental emails, meetings, minutes, panel discussions, and “good practice” celebration leaflets. After discussing Natasha’s performance management plan, I reflected within my own notes that I had not recalled any communication which drew attention to departmental policy. As the fieldwork progressed, and I moved around other teams, I was attentive to such correspondence ultimately noting that when a reason for compliance was given, the example was a sentinel case.

Middleshire’s “good practice” celebration leaflet was another example of how departmental communication explicitly framed and used certain cases to shape social workers’ activities. The cases used within the leaflets were nominated by team managers and identified for inclusion by divisional managers or the principal social worker. Whilst the distribution of the leaflets was often received with a humorous take on which social workers in which teams were “the teacher’s pet” I noted that the leaflets highlighted compliance to a rescue culture and not to policy. My fieldnotes comprise of a number of comments underlined and in capital letters about the “good practice” leaflets, in particular my desire to further explore the process of how cases were nominated and chosen for inclusion. My notes also contain a message to myself; “JESS do not get side-tracked” as further exploration would have taken me to a different site and away from the social workers I had made arrangements to observe. Whilst I was able to discuss their production with the principal social worker, and a social worker whose case featured, due to the restriction of time I was unable to follow the processes involved further.

Sasha talks about her court statement, she shows me. She doesn’t agree with what the statement says and what she has signed to say is a true and accurate representation of her professional views. I ask her to explain. She starts at the point where she has assessed the concerns regarding the unexplained injury and has formed her professional opinion based upon her observations and understandings of the situation. To mitigate for any potential issues Sasha believes progressing the case through child protection procedures is the most appropriate way to manage potential risk.

Sasha is later directed, at a resource panel, to start care proceedings; in Middleshire the process of making an application to court in respect of care proceedings is instigated once approval at the resource panel is given. As previously discussed on page 127 the resource panel is a framed as an opportunity for social workers to present a case and in partnership they agree on the course of action to be taken by the social worker. At the end of the panel meeting the social worker is told what course of action is required, and this is then put in an email to the other divisional managers, the team manager, assistant team manager, and the social worker. The tasks on the computer system are then altered to reflect the new instructions. In Sasha’s case her action was to complete the SWET document; the Social Work Evidence Template upon which the social workers’ evidence is submitted to court.

Sasha completes the SWET, filling in all the gaps on the form. Summary includes dates, descriptions, and outcomes of work. There’s a box asking for the potential reasons certain options have been discounted. Factors in favour. Factors Against. “capacity gap and whether/how this can be bridged in the child’s timescale”. Sasha says that this is difficult. “My opinion? My analysis? This should be an assessment at home.”.

Throughout the interaction Sasha describes herself as being reluctant, however, I observe her constructing an argument for the removal of the children and a rehabilitation plan to return to the mother’s care. As previously outlined the process for “quality control” in Middleshire of such documents is to send the document to the assistant team manager, who suggests changes, then once those changes have been completed it is sent to the team manager, who also requests edits. I am still sitting at the cluster of desks with Sasha when the statement is returned from the team manager:

Some things need removing as the argument does not make sense. “It’s ‘too positive’ to argue for removal.”

Sasha is frustrated and says she feels ‘uneasy’. But she makes the changes and sends it back to the team manager. Sasha says the team manager will send it on to Tia the divisional manager.

Hours later Sasha’s presentation alters, she is shocked, her eyes widen. We make eye contact and she directs me to the email on the screen and raises her eyebrows whilst shaking her head. She swivels her chair back towards the computer screen.

The care plan sought by the local authority is now one of adoption. Justification. Unexplained injury and non-compliance.

There is a further layer of scrutiny, not framed as part of the “quality control” process but nevertheless it performs this role; the legal team are sent statements prior to their submission to the court. I understand that Sasha’s statement was returned from the legal team with a number of amendments to “shore up” the argument. I noted in my field notes the way that panel talked of social workers needing a dose of reality and to remove “their rose-tinted glasses”, Tia’s input into the statement is a layer of scepticism, which is healthy. But it’s all done electronically without a discussion, so what could be an opportunity for critical reflection about a parent or a child becomes amendments to a court document.

As discussed on page 131, as part of the court application process the local authority must produce a detailed chronology to the court outlining their interactions with the family along with any events. Middleshire have formulated an analytical chronology; three columns, the date, the significant event, and an analysis of the impact on the child and the workers’ understanding of the impact on the case in general. The email comes from Bev, the divisional manager, and instructs social workers that this is the format upon which chronologies must be maintained. An accumulative document, regularly maintained to reflect the progression of the case. Social workers report them to be a time-intensive document that are rarely up to date as a result of other pressures. The section of the court statement containing analytical chronologies goes through the same process as the statement, various layers of management, and the legal team, making amendments that support the proposed care plan put forward elsewhere in the statement.

“They’re scratching for stuff to justify their decision and removing stuff that doesn’t”, Simran explained entries detailing positive engagement or achievements by the family that he had noted as significant had been removed. He’s frustrated. Talks of his balanced approach – both positive and negative. Changed to solely negative significant events.

‘What might a child think is significant in their chronology?’ [this is a note to myself and not a question asked of Simran.]

How does Simran decide what is significant? He tells me that if it is information he has drawn on to make a decision, evidence of a particular conclusion he has made, then it is significant.

Three weeks later I ask Tia about how she decides which significant events should be included or excluded from the chronology and she explains; “they write every little thing down, whether it’s relevant to the care plan or not. And then they complain they’re stuck at the computer.” She goes on to explain that the significant events should be short and only contain those that support the application of the local authority, referring to anything less as “having holes”. I note that Simran and Tia have different understandings of what constitutes a significant event. When considering this difference, I am struck that Simran’s position is that of social work as he imagines it to be, whereas Tia’s is from within the organisation’s understanding of how social work should be performed.

Middleshire’s policy does not define what the term significant event means in the creation of the analytical chronologies. My fieldnotes contain additional annotations made at a later date in different coloured inks, stating that when the chronologies were discussed at a team meeting and within two emails, the focus was on their ongoing completion and no guidance regarding the understanding of significance is given. Everyone’s understanding of the word significant is dependent upon the relations that are organising their work. Social workers are at the intersection where the interests of the child meet the interests of the organisation. The tension between the differing understandings of the social work role in Middleshire is clearly apparent in the production of the case a social worker will present to the family court. Ultimately it is the organisation’s prioritisation of accountability work that overrides the social workers’ attempts to present a balanced view. Middleshire want to present the strongest case possible to the courts, to demonstrate that their application and care plan is the right decision for the child leaving, as Tia would say, “no holes” in the argument. Whilst not all social workers in Middleshire had such significant amendments made to their court statements as those outlined above, the process of alterations went beyond the actions of a single manager or within a single team, the auditing actions undertaken within the “quality control” processes occurred across teams, different managers, and within the legal department. These amendments were openly referred to as “strengthening arguments”.

Don’t Lay the Blame at my Door

Throughout the research, participants were conscious of the importance of “covering my arse” or “covering my tracks”. In some instances, this was about ensuring that they do not have to take the blame if something goes wrong, leaving documentary sediments within the case recordings demonstrating this. However, it is also about avoiding scrutiny from managers, making sure that they do not become subject to performance management, ensuring that the activities actively monitored through the auditing trails demonstrate compliance. Finally, there were a number of participants that demonstrated the idea of not being to blame when they were forced to take decisions that they felt were ethically inappropriate. This section of the findings explores these aspects of the research in more depth.

Jayne is described as fretful by other workers in her team, they tell me she is behind on her case recordings but has some difficult cases at the moment and she is “old school”, this is explained to me as prioritising spending time with the families and not in the office. But it is having consequences, her visits are shown as outstanding on her workflow. Rihanna, her manager, tells her this needs to be a priority, she knows she’s been to see the families but that’s not what counts; Rhianna notes that “if it’s not written up, it didn’t happen”.

There are a number of similar notions which are reflective of this idea of covering your tracks and they occur across all of the teams. But this idea that if something is not recorded then there is no evidence, no audit trail, is the most common. During the course of the field work I witnessed several occasions where workers would return from working with children and their families in the community, enthusiastically relaying these experiences to their colleagues. My field notes reflect a number of responses from members of the management team, including: “if it’s not recorded…”; “if it’s not on the system it didn’t happen”; and “don’t forget to record it or how do I know it happened?”. Witnessing these interactions, I noted that there was almost always a collective laugh about these comments but often an audible sigh recognising the reality of such a response. This was also reflected in the posters on the wall of the office, one of which is about good record keeping and states “It is not recorded it didn’t happen!” (see appendix thirteen for a photograph of the poster). Whilst the argument for good recording practices in this poster is framed in relation to the possibility of a child reading their file later in life to understand the decisions social workers made, the sentiment is the same as the set phrases used by managers to ensure timely compliance to record keeping.

I explored with two different service managers the need for the timely recordings, they too are undertaking accountability work on behalf of their service and on behalf of Middleshire, evidencing to OFSTED that the organisation has complied with the processes and procedures outlined. Both service managers talked about the judgements on what can be measured, that timely recordings can be recorded, and it is that which they are judged on.

Naomi, a senior manager in one of the assessment teams, sits at her computer and reads a long email thread. A child has died of natural causes, a child, she tells me, that was referred eight months ago by the community paediatrician looking for additional support from the children with disabilities team for the family.

The child did not meet the threshold for the disabilities team so was allocated to Naomi’s team for a child and family assessment. When I later read the assessment, it concludes that the threshold was not met, there was no role for Children’s Services as there were no concerns.

Naomi: “Look at this, this is what we have to deal with, this is all they are bothered about, we were the team that had the case. I made the decision to shut the referral, we knew the child, it’s my workers who worked with the child, but they don’t care”. Naomi pushes her chair away from the computer and gestures for me to read her emails.

My notes state that I scrolled through various emails, the first a director asking why the case was not open to the service. I note the email signatures of directors, heads of service, divisional managers, and team managers, all defending what they did or did not do and suggesting how another service should have offered help.

Naomi sighs, “no one has mentioned the child nor asked whether my worker who did the assessment is ok”. Naomi reflects that in an ideal world one of the teams would have been able to offer them some support, “they obviously needed it”, but that is not how Naomi sees the role of Children’s Services, “we assess, reassess and scrutinise; we don’t help”. I watch as Naomi hits reply all and adds her defence to the email thread defending the work of her team. “Visits were undertaken on time, recordings were up to date, no safeguarding concerns noted, assessment signed off in timescales”.

Where Naomi refers to timescales, she is indicating both the legislative timescales but also the monitoring systems within Middleshire which reflect their policies. In the MASH team there are large projection screens on a single wall which list the cases open to the referral team, these detail the names of both the child and the allocated work, alongside is a clock counting down hours and minutes. Whilst the clock represents the timescales as outlined in legislation and policy, for the workers the pressure of potential public shaming performs the role of compliance. I made the following note in my fieldnotes: “It’s the screen that organises social workers’ activities re: timescales, not the legislation or guidance”.

Despite having expressed dismay that no one has enquired about the worker, Naomi does not mention this in her email response. Naomi discusses this, noting that part of her role is to provide a buffer between the worker and the department. I noted here in my field notes that this was not something that was commonly acknowledged by the managers. Throughout the research I have only one other explicit example of a manager purposefully enacting the role of buffer. I overheard a conversation where Melrose, a manager, was castigated by her manager for her team missing key timescales. Rather than pass this message on verbatim, including any emphasis, which was the practice in many teams, Melrose came out of the meeting, saying to the team that she would go and get the coffees and suggested that they didn’t answer emails for a while but took some time out to get on top of the recording.

The tension of the role of manager was clear, balancing not being the person responsible for the team to blame but also gatekeeping recourses. The manager in Middleshire is pulled in various different conflicting ways; they are responsible for the day-to-day activities of the social workers in their team, monitoring and auditing the process-driven activities through face-to-face interactions but also they control the workers’ work flow within the system. Within team meetings they are directed from their manager to share information regarding more theoretical practice-related matters, such as research briefings or case law. However, the overriding pressure for the managers in Middleshire was the constant compliance to targets. The overwhelming majority of emails team managers brought to my attention were from senior managers highlighting a team’s performance in relation to departmental targets, the most common being in relation to the timely completion of records and assessments, however they also contained reminders about budget adherence, individual and team caseloads, as well as the number of agency workers employed within a particular team. The regular reminders served not only to remind team managers to ensure they achieved the outlined targets but communicated a clear ideological message that these were the activities that were important for Middleshire. Just as social workers had commented that the team managers did not appear to care when they had completed “good” work with children and families, the senior management team did not communicate to the team managers that their efforts to guide and support good social work practice were relevant.

Naomi is able to deflect any criticism from her team by demonstrating compliance to procedure and to timescale, knocking the blame of a blameless child death onto another team who she is hoping did miss a process or a timescale. Naomi acknowledges that this is an awful situation, where everyone is “having to play the same game”, explaining that the game is evidencing that they have done all that they could within the rules and passing it on to the next team “because then it will be their fault, not ours …we’re all in the business of batting it back to each other”

The suggestion of it being another team’s responsibility was never more evident than in the transfer meetings between the short- and long-term teams.

It’s the end of February, I’ve been with the assessment team a few weeks. On the Monday morning Izzy, a manager, is telling me that she had to spend her Friday evening reviewing cases. During the intake meeting, which considers which cases are to be transferred between the assessment and long terms teams, Izzy has been challenged about the cases she has sent over, categorised as ‘child in need’, which the long-term teams believe should be ‘child protection’. She tells me that there is pushback from the long-term teams, that cases are going over as child in need when they should be child protection, she tells me that ten out of 111 cases transferred in February have had their category changed which is presented to her as evidence that her team is too dangerous, “so I am spending my Friday reviewing the cases to see”. Izzy notes, “I want to see whether there are lessons to be learned and what we have missed as a team”. Izzy identifies one case which she believes could have been categorised differently but says that she thinks the others, on the information contained within the assessment period, were “good calls”.

I made a note in my reflections that day “if only ten out of 111 cases change their categorisation, does this mean that cases are set on a particular track when they are in the assessment team and just don’t move”. It is not clear why it is such a bad thing if the cases do transfer and change categorisation; given the relationship-based nature of the work undertaken and the theoretical commitment of the social work profession to empower and activate change, it seems reasonable to me that the formal categorisation of the case would also reflect this change. The internal rejection of cases from the long-term teams to the assessment teams results in children being reallocated to social workers, and often not to the same worker as the case allocated is fast paced in the assessment teams and spaces in case load capacity are allocated to other families. Within my field notes I reflect that I am left with the overriding question does it really matter what the case is categorised as if the child is safe? Whatever the internal categorisation Middleshire assign and whichever team are allocated responsibility, the experiences of the child remain the same, and whilst the teams are debating who takes responsibility no one is actually working with the family to support them.

In the long-term teams, the work of the assessment teams is openly criticised for the wrong categorisation:

It’s nearly April and Ammy, a manager in the long-term team, is talking about cases which are being transferred from the assessment team, giving descriptions to workers of what’s coming. She has refused a case. A baby with an unexplained skull fracture (I ask to listen because I am thinking of Samantha, the toddler with the skull fracture, but this is a different one). Mum has put forward two different explanations, either when a pushchair toppled backwards or when the little girl fell. Ammy raises her voice “They were only trying to transfer it as a child protection case”, [long pause]. Other workers fill the silence: “they are so risky over there”, “Oh my god you’d know when your kid fractured their skull, come on”, “Child protection? You have to be kidding me”.

I later explored the case file, reading the recordings and the assessment undertaken by the social worker transferring the case. The mother and child had gone to live with the maternal grandmother who is noted as a protective factor and not present during the two potential explanations, and the plan contains the recommendation for further assessment and support for both the mother and grandmother minimising the impact on the child whilst the case progresses.

A week later, I am in the assessment team offices again. Anne, an agency social worker walks in accompanied by an assistant team manager, other workers go up to them and they look happy, other workers look at each other and I note that eyebrows are raised, and nods are exchanged. A little while later I ask Natasha what it was all about, she tells me they were made to go to court on a baby with a fractured skull – “no, not the one from February, a different one” - a pushchair tumbled or the kid fell, no one knows which, but Anne the social worker didn’t want to go to court. The long-term team wouldn’t have the case, so they had to issue [care proceedings]. Anne is happy because the judge suggested to Middleshire that the authority withdraw [their application] as the child was safe and further assessments could be conducted without removing the child: “which is what was bloody suggested in the first place”.

There were a number of cases rejected from the long-term teams. Some of these were discussed in a panel, others were examples offered by the long-term managers to demonstrate what they saw as poor practice in the assessment team. Examples given by the assessment team were used to illustrate what they saw as the overly interventionist approach of the long-term teams. I drew on the above observations to illustrate the tensions within Middleshire, tensions I reflect were not due to the difficult nature of the social work role, but because of the internal processes alongside the culture of blame, that prioritised attention to concerns relating to the potential blame should something happen. I also believe this is a particularly helpful example to illustrate how, in institutional ethnography, the threads are traced across locations and time, to build a picture of how Middleshire organise the work of social workers. Whilst ordinarily this relied upon asking participants to recall or demonstrate their part in a particular process, I just happened to be on site when Anne returned from court and was able to piece this conversation together with the previous conversation in the long-term team.

The examples outlined above look at the ways that managers and individual workers demonstrate that they have done their job and the way that records are used as proof of this. In the section which follows I explore the way that workers used recording when required to take decisions they did not necessarily agree were best for the children and their families as a way of maintaining their role and avoiding scrutiny whilst also adhering to their own values. Both forms of accountability work were about providing evidence to mitigate their anxieties surrounding risks to the institution, functioning as a form of regulation, helping them manage uncertainty.

I haven’t seen Joanne for a couple of days, not since our conversation about the assessment she completed with one of her families, the one with the father who was convicted of rape, “rape dad” as he is referred to by staff. She appears more relaxed; she’s smiling and not twisting her hair. I ask her what she decided to do; “I did it, I told him we didn’t want him to return to the family. But… I recorded that this what I’d been told to do so… if they complain or get a solicitor... someone else is allocated it… well it’s clear that I was told to do this”.

In a similar instance, Sally, a social work student, was told to go to a maternity ward where a mother gave birth earlier that day, she was instructed to get the mother’s house keys. The case had previously been open to the early help team in respect of an older, 3-year-old child and concerns raised by health visitors about poor home conditions. The latest referral was from the midwife again citing poor home conditions. Sally says that on the first visit the home was messy and a little dirty in places, on prompting she defines this as “dirty dishes, nappies not in the bin, and mountains of washing”, but as the mother was pregnant and the family were all recovering from a stomach bug, Sally believed that this was understandable as two home visits since had not raised any concerns for Sally. She had spoken with the midwife who had also undertaken a follow-up visit and she no longer had any concerns.

Within a larger piece of research, I would have liked to have spoken with the midwife, who was also undertaking a form of accountability work, to consider the way in which their activities with Children’s Services are organised. Had the midwife been present within the office or a meeting I would have sought consent to talk with her, but sadly the constraints of time and resources meant it was not possible for me to approach the health team. I explored the referral from the midwife, it referred to her existing knowledge that the family were “known to Children’s Services” and Sally believed that it was this that motivated the midwife to complete a second referral in relation to the unborn child. Sally recalls her follow-up telephone call with the midwife, noting that she did not actually seem concerned about the family and that they had agreed that there was nothing significant about a pregnant mother with a toddler who has let home conditions slip when they were experiencing illness within the household. I ask Sally if she believed whether these circumstances would have resulted in a new case being opened if the family had not already been known to Middleshire’s Children’s Services. Sally did not think that the midwife felt the concerns were significant enough to have raised a first referral but because the family is known to Children’s Services she felt compelled to do so, “she has to cover her arse”.

Sally has been directed by a team manager, to visit the home and, given that the mother is in hospital, she is to go to the maternity ward and get the house keys. If the mother refuses Sally is to call the police as the baby cannot go home until the home conditions are seen.

Sally talks to one of the other social workers, Margaret, in hushed tones about how uneasy she feels about this task. Sally explores the practice arguments for not undertaking such a task, “it’s unethical, illegal and just wrong to visit a mother, hours after giving birth, demand her keys and threaten her with the police” and Margaret agrees with her.

Sally then draws on her own experiences as a mother, recalling periods of illness during pregnancy and the period post-birth as one that should not be interjected by a social worker or police. Both Sally and Margaret agree that this is not something they should be doing. Margret tells Sally to record it, “record everything you’ve been told to do and that you’ve challenged this but have been told you have to do it”.

When I talk to Sally, she tells me that she is doing this because she is “just a student”. Sally is alluding to the power dynamics she feels as a student, despite over a decade’s experience working in a similar field, she feels that it is her status as a student that is preventing her from practicing in the way she wants. But through my observations with senior workers, workers still find themselves pulled into line through performance plans and threats of being reported to the HCPC, irrespective of their qualification status, their length of service or their position within Middleshire.

I ask Margret what she would do; she says that she would ultimately do what she has been directed to do because there is no choice, she doesn’t want to be performance-managed nor does she wish to be referred to the HCPC should something go wrong. However, she would do everything she could to soften the impact on the mother and on both children, she would ask if there is a family member that can go to the home with her, or even offer to go and pick some things up for them from the house. But Margaret’s tone changes as she says she would ultimately have to do what she’s told.

I reflected in my fieldnotes that Joanne’s presentation had changed significantly once she had undertaken accountability work, nothing had changed for the children or the family, her anxieties were not related to the risk this father posed to the children but to the risk of her as a professional. I had anticipated that concerns relating to risk were going to be focused on the risk to children and young people, as identified in existing literature surrounding defensive practice and the discourse surrounding the murder of Peter Connelly (as explored in Chapter One); what if something happens to the child. However, in Middleshire when exploring with workers, children, and the potential risk to them, were absent from their concerns. Workers’ anxiety was focused primarily on the risk within the organisation that they would get into trouble, be referred to the professional regulator, or be put on a performance management plan, as such the risk was to their employment. The drive to reduce risk was not in relation to reducing the risk for the child, but in reducing the risk of being the social worker being blamed. As Lu, a worker in the long-term team told me: “if something goes wrong will it come back on me?”.

It’s April and I’ve spent time in both the short-term and long-term teams, I reflect that social workers, particularly agency workers, talk a lot about not understanding the thresholds here in Middleshire “the thresholds are all over the place” (agency social worker). Initially I had drawn upon the shared understanding of what thresholds were, I’d seen Middleshire’s threshold document, but failed to interrogate just what they were in practice. I must stop, ask questions, try and work out just what they are talking about when they talk about thresholds. [In my field notes I have recorded a number of statements made by the social workers relating to thresholds.]

“When it just feels too risky.”

“When you just can’t justify not removing.”

“It’s the point in retrospect when we should have stepped in.”

“When you can wave goodbye to your career.”.

I was sat with a group of workers in the kitchen, workers I had had these conversations with, and reflected back to them that the common theme was anxiety, that they were worried about missing something; “Yeah! It’s the threshold of blame”. Whilst this was said in jest and was met with laughs it was also met with nods of agreement and proclamations that that’s exactly what it was “at what point you cop it”. We talked about defensive practice, they were all aware of the concept, that fear about something happening to the child is so great it drives the decision making.

But these conversations did not contain references to children and their families, like many of the conversations with workers the families were dehumanised as a case and this was never more evident than in discussions regarding thresholds, any potential risk to the child had been removed with the discussion focusing on the risk to the organisation and thus ultimately the worker; one social worker identified that “it’s not about the kids, you can’t think like that or you’d never sleep”.

Charles is new to the area; he has moved to be with his partner having previously been a social worker in London for over 15 years. He doesn’t say much, unlike many workers Charles hasn’t approached me with a case he thinks is interesting or joined in on discussions within his team. But today we are sitting on the same cluster of desks and he asks how the research is going. I tell him it’s interesting to be putting the parts together to understand why social workers do what they do. He smiles. “It’s all about deflecting blame... stopping families from taking risks, not because it’s risky for them… but because I don’t want to be blamed if it all goes wrong. You need a strong manager to back you – not one that will sell their own grandmother to avoid responsibility”.

I make a note to think about this further, not just because of what he has said, but referencing that Charles had actually spoken to me, although I’m not sure which manager would sell their grandmother.

As the fieldwork progresses, I spend time in different departments of the authority, about eight weeks into the process I spend a couple of days with the early help team. Early help in Middleshire can be understood as the “family support” provision as discussed within the background chapters (see Chapters One and Two). In Middleshire it consists of one central team who are office based, and a number of small locality teams centred within the community. The staff within the central team are support staff not social workers, their primary role is to redirect families to other services such as citizen’s advice, budgeting information, or toddler groups or to negotiate with other organisations such as schools to provide the interventions and be designated lead professional, thus closing the case to Children’s Services. The locality teams consist of family support workers, however, each team does have a qualified social worker. Families are allocated to the early help locality teams through the resource panel, where the remit of intervention is agreed before families can access what is primarily a range of targeted parenting programmes focused on topics such as healthy parental relationships, autism workshops, and keeping children safe online.

Viv is a support worker in the office-based team, she “signposts” and “brokers”, and her contact with families and other professionals is over the telephone and not face-to-face. Viv comments that she doesn’t understand the decisions that are made in terms of “stepping up” and “stepping down" of cases. What Viv is referring to is common terminology for the intersection between different processes and categorisations as outlined in the Children Act 1989, in Middleshire’s threshold document, and the source for Geraldine: the computer system that has an option regarding “Step down to Early Help”. She understands the process as it is imagined, and intended, but the inconsistency of the transitions leave her confused. She went on to explain:

As Viv talks me through a case, she shows me the recordings on the system. There is a case whereby a young girl was found on video chatting with a man and being encouraged to take her clothes off. The parents had told the social worker during the child protection enquiries that the child had her laptop alone in her bedroom with no restrictions on internet use, no content blockers or usage limits. This case had been recommended for signposting and closure, that there was no role for the local authority. Viv described herself as being confused; she opens the recordings of what she describes as an almost identical case. A child of the same age, with unsupervised and unlimited access to the internet was receiving sexually explicit communication from an older man she’d met online. However, the outcome of the assessment in this case was a progression to an initial child protection conference, and a subsequent plan which noted the parent’s failure to monitor and regulate their daughter’s internet use analysed as a “failure to protect”.

My reflections note my confusion, not just with regards to the cases Viv has highlighted, but in respect of how to move forward with the problematic she has illuminated. I had observed activities, I had traced the threads connecting the activities across locations and time, and yet I could not answer explain what was driving the very different responses to two similar cases. I write a reminder to myself to return to my methodology to see if there are any answers in there. I also scribble a suggestion that this could be me getting side-tracked, as interesting as it is; “Focus on the activities Jess” I write to future me.

Two months later I am back in the assessment teams, I’ve come to chat to Tyrone, a manager that contacted me to say he is leaving and wanted to chat. I bump into a number of staff in the breakout area after speaking to Tyrone, Pat calls me over and asks how I’ve liked the long-term teams. [Pat is an agency worker who had previously commented that she thought the thresholds were inconsistent in Middleshire, “all over the place”.] I tell Pat it’s going well; I’ve been observing practice and having interesting conversations, I talk about the already forming findings, in particular the role of accountability activities and blame avoiding activities. I asked Pat if she had thought it made more sense to think about the thresholds in respect of the risk to Middleshire, recounting another worker’s comment that it is a “threshold of blame”. Pat nods. I comment that I’m still not sure and recall the details of the two cases Viv, [as outlined above], had mentioned, highlighting that the risk of blame was the same in both cases, but both had different responses. Maria, who had been sitting quietly at the same table, becomes animated, she tells me that she knows both cases, she signed them off.

In my fieldnotes I use the words “scurry” and “huddle” to describe the transfer of people from the breakout area to Maria’s desk.

Maria brings the case files up, one on each screen and reads them, she looks up, gets up out of her seat, making eye contact with Pat, Pat sits down in her seat and starts reading. I am standing there watching. Timothy, who has been hammering away on the computer up until now asks to have a look, he wheels his own chair over to Maria’s desk and goes through the screens with me whilst Pat and Maria are talking. The most significant difference Timothy tells me is their location in Middleshire, they live in different areas: one in a more affluent area, the other area, Timothy informs me, is “rough as…”. A red marker for “parental criminal activity”’ is present, Timothy traces this information on the system, clicking furiously, so fast I have half drawn computer screens on a scrap of paper and have been unable to make notes about who this marker refers to or where this information comes from. I later find out it is related to the troubled families data base which in turn is connected to the funding for the early help team. He finds what he is looking for; the father has a historical conviction for shoplifting when he was younger. “It makes no sense” Maria tells me “I signed those cases off, I should have seen… we need to reopen it, now…”. I find myself apologising to Maria, trying to reassure her that I wasn’t judging or criticising, but that I was trying to understand. “Can’t see the wood, Jess, you literally are just signing off cases one after another and… well… I dropped the ball”. I question whether she has dropped the ball or whether the systems and processes, along with culture of the team and society means that actually the family with “criminal activity” in one of the most deprived areas in Middleshire, are seen as riskier for the authority, and that they just aren’t conscious of it. Amber turns her chair around “I think you’re on to it, I’ve just looked at the case I’m writing up and… well I’ll say it… I am thinking about the what ifs for me, not the kid but I wouldn’t have thought about that without hearing this convo”.

For Maria, there was a part of her that did not frame a parent’s historical criminal conviction as a risk factor and understood her practice to be in line with notions of social work routed in relationship-based practice. However, the other part of her, of which she was not conscious, was constructed in the dominant ideological account of a social worker’s role and organised her activities accordingly. In being prompted to consider the activities of her team, in respect of the differing outcomes of two similar cases, she had become aware of the line of fault between the two conceptions of her role (Smith, 1987).

There are a number of elements to this interaction that I reflect upon warmly. Firstly, the commitment of the staff to the research project, that they continued to keep in touch through emails or face-to-face, and dipped in and out of the research eager to hear about my little map of how things worked in Middleshire. Secondly, the coproduction with myself and each other to understand just what, in this particular instance, was the threshold of risk in Middleshire. Their desire to understand Viv’s, and my, confusion led to a collective moment of clarity, one which they referred to during my later visits to their team. The above interaction could easily, and understandably, have been experienced by Maria as a criticism of her professional judgement but her reaction was one of inquisitiveness and a desire to understand just how an unrelated conviction in a parent’s history alongside the difference in the families’ location, had been interpreted and influenced the decision-making process.

The computer system did not prompt workers to draw on their informal knowledge regarding the difference in socioeconomic circumstances, nor did the conviction automatically lead on the computer system to the decision to progress the case to a child protection case conference. Rather these factors were unconsciously interpreted by the social worker, and Maria who signed off the decisions, as potentially being “missed opportunities” should something happen, and the case be reviewed at a later date. The ruling relation organising the workers’ activities during this assessment was one associated with risk, not to the child, but to the social worker. Amber’s interjection, toward the end of the observation outlined above, had brought her unconscious thinking to the foreground, the “consciousness raising” as Smith (1987) describes it. Her activities were also organised by the risk she associated with her career in relation to making the wrong decision. The procedural nature of the focus on compliance to processes dehumanises children and their families, as Fran described, “the families are the info[mation] we put in the system”, resulting in children not being present in the conversations surrounding thresholds and risk.

Resource Defence or Moral Judgement?

Against the backdrop of global financial instability, workers at Middleshire are not immune to the ideologies of wider society perpetuating that there is a lack of money and the need to guard resources against those who are dependent upon state support.

Lena is sitting at a computer googling hostels, a family presented to the local authority as homeless and having no recourse to public funds, so Lena is telephoning various hostels asking for their costs. There are two children, both at schools in Middleshire. She finds a hostel that is £40 a night cheaper but it’s out of the area, a 45-minute drive away, which means the children will not be able to go to school but Lena has a solution, she will ask the school to gather school work together and get “duty” [social worker] to take it to the children in a few days then she will continue to call cheaper hostels in the area who are currently full. Informal discussions amongst staff reinforce that Lena is doing the right thing, ‘sounds like a plan’ and ‘make sure you record all the different costs you got’. Rose looks at me and says, “it’s all about budgets”. Lena joins in “we have it drilled into us, need to save money”. Rose tells me that at a recent award ceremony celebrating social work practice in Middleshire the director of the service put a spreadsheet of required budget savings on the screen. Rose succinctly concludes that this act alone tells staff that Middleshire’s priorities aren’t with good practice but are focused on money. I ask how that fits with social work values and ethics. Lena says that you have to get those out of your mind and not think about how wrong what you’re doing is.

In the example above Lena details how she purposefully keeps the conflict between the social work role she imagines and that which she performs “out of mind”. As previously discussed in Chapter Four, the idea of “consciousness raising” is significant to institutional ethnography, and an unintended consequence of the interactions between the researcher and participants (Smith, 1987). Of the participants there were a number who, when prompted, would refer to wider sociological and political discussions surrounding welfare reforms or the impact of unnecessary internal bureaucracy on children and their families. Neil was one of those workers, he actively participated when I asked questions of his colleagues that were designed to prompt a consideration of wider structural issues. I have included this excerpt to illustrate that even the most critically-aware of the social workers in my study can sleepwalk into participating in the very structural conditions to which he has rallied against.

It’s 9.15am and Neil (social worker) appears from the MASH team, two parents were arrested last night in Middleshire as they were intoxicated whilst with their son. Police used their powers to place him in foster care in Middleshire. The family reside in a neighbouring local authority. Natasha (assistant team manager), Neil and Chandice (social workers) are having an explicit discussion about money, “who will pay for it and who is going to complete the paperwork?” Lottie joins in “why should we?”. They are all focused on the geographical boundaries of the differing local authorities, guarding the resources of this local authority.

Within the fieldwork this was perhaps one of the most explicit examples of resource defence. However, as indicated above, it was a consistent theme in other decisions such as in the issuing of food vouchers. I pick up here the continuation of the previous discussion on page 161 regarding a workers’ request for a food bank voucher. Jenny, the social worker, has asked her manager Cathy, to sign for a voucher in relation to a mother whose benefits have been stopped. Cathy has suggested Jenny support the mother to find alternative solutions, such as budgeting classes for the mother, or the school providing meals for the children.

I ask what about Mum? “She’s not our responsibility”. Cathy signs Jenny’s form. I pose a question to Cathy and Jenny, “I wonder what way hunger affects how people parent?”. Cathy responds, whilst Jenny smiles at me (does she know I am being obtuse?) “she should have thought about that before she got her benefits stopped”. I asked if they used section 17 funds for families in such circumstances. Cathy tells me Middleshire is a cashless authority and that isn’t what section 17 is for, it may have previously been used for food, carpets, beds, furniture…

Cathy - “Maybe if we’d have kept it for the deserving families, we’d still have funds left. Now it’s about identifying those who are undeserving and out to scam the local authority. They have big TVs.”

Me – “What about the children, are they in on the scam?”

Cathy – “No. But look. If parents cannot prioritise their money and provide adequately for their children, then should they [the children] really be at home?”

Whilst Cathy does cite the financial constraints experienced by Middleshire, her defence of the resources goes beyond that of the prudent financial management expected of her in the role as team manager. Her primarily concern is that of a moral judgement and centres on a distinction between those parents who are in genuine need and those who are fraudulently seeking financial assistance. The only indication Cathy gives of how such fraud is to be identified relates to the size of a family’s television. This was not the only reference made by social workers in Middleshire about the presence of technology within family homes, for some workers the presence of mobile phones, tablets, and televisions was similar to Cathy, an indication that parents were deficient in their budgeting skills, unable to prioritise the household finances. However, I was struck by Cathy’s question about the children of such parents, “should they really be at home?”. The imagery of ‘big TVs’ is an explicit moral judgement, one drawn from a wider discourse surrounding people living in poverty doing so because of poor choices. I make a note within my fieldnotes highlighting my recollection of history classes at senior school and the use of the terminology ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ within the Poor Law.

The panel discussion was the place where many of the discussions about resource defence were apparent and these discussions were regularly imbued with an element of moral judgement towards the family.

I’m two thirds of the way through my fieldwork and am observing a panel discussion about a family, the chair summarises the information about the family, mother noted as a nurse with mental health problems, lone parent. Three children one father, one child different father. The father to one child has been taking all four children to his house when she is intoxicated and when she sobers up, he takes them back. There is a significant discussion between the chair and legal about Reg 24.

This relates to the legal responsibilities around the regulation of placements under The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (Great Britain, 2010). Under regulation 24 the placement of a child with a family or friends entitles them to the support of the local authority, including financial. The discussion in panel is regarding the interpretation of the legislation, namely that if the local authority is involved in arranging or making the placement then it is not deemed a private arrangement, therefore the local authority are legally responsible under the aforementioned regulations (Great Britain, 2010).

The legal worker says that there has been an increase in concern about how the local authority are involved in private agreements, that there is a reduction in free legal advice and when families call to ask advice, social workers offer advice and open a referral. “As soon as we’ve been part of that decision, it’s Reg 24”.

The social worker wants to do work with the children to understand how things are for them. The Chair is clear that this cannot happen as then Children’s Services are definitely involved; she tells the social worker to ‘get [family charity] agency to do it’. She tells the social worker to let the father ‘put the kids back and let it go wrong, get Dad to call us then.’ That way, she explains, they will not have a ‘Reg 24’ and the associated costs. At this point the legal advisor interjects: “we can’t be in the position where we avoid telling him to keep the kids just so we don’t have a regulated placement … it isn’t safe, or justifiable, for us to place them back with Mum just to avoid this regulated placement”. The Chair replies “easy for you to say, you don’t have to have the conversation with X [member of the directorship], and what a great conversation that’s going to be”.

This example shocked me, like many of the examples presented in my findings it indicates the way that workers at Middleshire have their work controlled by accountability, by mediation by the manager and by the organisational culture. The social worker wanted to do positive work with the family but the chair, a figure of some authority within Middleshire, was blatant in telling her to let it go wrong. I recall at the time wondering what it was that allowed the chair to make such a judgement, was it her distance from the family who were, to her, just part of a list of names on the page. Or was she just doing her job, after all this was the resource panel. Nevertheless, the whole discussion was imbued with a tone of moral judgement.

I had a number of conversations with members of the directorate throughout my fieldwork, including an observation of a meeting about “performance”. Within my conversations it was clear that the directors were also undertaking forms of accountability work, but not in the same way as the social workers and managers. Notions of risk and accountability were constructed as part of discourse surrounding the “reputation of the service”, in respect of the public, within the family judiciary, council meetings, and in terms of OFSTED. The pressure communicated to staff regarding budget constraints was accountability work undertaken by the members of the directorate in respect of “in house” budgets and larger council meetings, at which adult and Children’s Services were deemed to be “big spenders”. Meetings with a senior member of the local family judiciary were undertaken to address comments made in respect of the authority’s recent applications, whilst issues had been communicated with a senior manager, the directorate’s role is this interaction was to “smooth over” and prevent “reputational” damage. The emails I observed in respect of the child’s death on page 157, were a form of accountability work by the directors on behalf of Children’s Services to garner all the information before feeding back higher up in the hierarchy of the organisation. I understand from conversations that a statement was to be drafted should there be any press enquiries about the child’s death, another form of accountability work undertaken by the press department in relation to the reputation of the authority within the local media. I was struck by the nuanced difference regarding the way in which accountability work was framed. Social workers constructed their accountability in terms of themselves, “covering my arse”; some managers framed theirs’ in terms of “my team” and were personally invested. Whereas the directorship spoke about the “authority’s reputation”, completing accountability work on behalf of Children’s Services, not themselves as was the case with social workers and managers, but of Middleshire’s Children’s Services.

In the panel discussion above, the moral judgements made at the meeting were subtle and implied. In other cases, such judgements were more explicit, sometimes related to broader socio-cultural discourses and others related to the culture at Middleshire. In one example I have made a note in my fieldwork diary about a conversation with Lena. Lena is telling me about a family with no recourse to public funds, as she outlines their circumstances, she emphasises that the family have been here 10 years, worked in care homes and never asked for a penny. I write in my field notes “wonder why this is so important for Lena to tell me this”. Querying whether she is trying to convince me that it is not their fault or is she used to having to rebut racist assumptions about families in similar situations?

Above, I referred to the case which Joanne was managing where the father had been convicted of rape. During our discussions I was struck by the comments made by Lesley, one of the support workers. Joanne and I are talking about how she was going to talk to the mother in the case about not allowing the father to return to the family home. Lesley, who was seated behind us leans over and interjects:

“it’s not about Dad is it, I mean, it’s Mum… she has to choose the dad or the kids. She’s not protecting them kids if she lets him see them. No woman should stay with a man after he’s been convicted of rape. It’s just wrong. What about the kids when they are older, will he rape them?”

I ask if this is what she thinks the risk is, Dad’s potential to commit further sexual assaults on adults? She says it is. I ask what about Mum, is she at risk? Lesley gasps “I’d not thought of that”. Joanne says “we’re only allowed to think about the kids, not the adults … I’ve done as I was told, I’ve recorded what I was told to do and that I’ve done it. I’ve covered my arse”.

Lesley was clear in her judgement here that it was up to the woman to prioritise her children over her relationship with their father, despite the fact that there was not concern that the father was a risk to the children (see discussion above on page 155).

About halfway through my fieldwork I am spending time with the long-term team. I am sitting at the desk observing what is happening in the office, as yet no one has approached me to discuss anything in particular. I then become aware of a conversation to the left of me on the same cluster of desks. Rosemary, a social worker is talking to her colleague about one of the young people she has been working with. She has received a telephone call from the foster carer that the young person had come back from a night out and told her that she had been raped by three males: two unknown and one her boyfriend. They are talking about the need to arrange an examination for the girl and I become alert when they mention the SARC (Sexual Assault Referral Centre). During this stage of my PhD I was working for a local SARC and had a shift booked with them later that day. The extract from my fieldnotes below captures the conversation between Rosemary’s and her colleague, Sara;

Sara: “oh the poor girl”

Rosemary: “why poor girl?”

Sara: “she was raped”

Rosemary “it’s CSE”

Sara – “oh”

I did not follow up their conversation with questions, acutely aware that my team at the SARC would be responsible for supporting the young person should an appointment be arranged for that evening. However, reflecting on this discussion in the context of moral judgements, it raises a number of interesting points. At no point in their conversation did Rosemary indicate on what basis she was making the distinction between Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) rather than rape. It was not apparent that she knew about the young person’s boyfriend or any further details about him. At the same time, I was also struck by the change in Sara’s response when this was posed as CSE rather than rape. There is something about the language of abuse that makes it less traumatic and threatening than rape.

In this example I consider a situation in which one of the social workers was talking about the impact that the work culture at Middleshire was having on her.

I overhear Rachel talking to one of her colleagues in the long-term team, I hear her saying: “he’s alone for 5 hours every night, it’s not right, he’s only 11”. At first, I think she is talking about a child at work but as the conversation progresses it become clear that she is talking about her own son, ‘it’s Friday he is 11 years old and he has had to walk home and let himself in every afternoon this week after school. I just don’t get to see him’. As the conversation continues, she notes that money is tight at home, she refers to car allowances going and the limits that have been placed on ‘time off in lieu’ (TOIL), “more out of me but for less and less money”.

She explains to me that she and her husband had to get rid of one of their two cars as they could not afford to run both, so she drops her husband at work before coming to the office. However, she goes on to explain that the consequence of her role as a social worker means that she can be called away on a crisis or have a visit run over, this results in her husband unable to get home to their son.

Rachel continues “I’ve not done the shopping, there’s no food, yesterday I had to tell him to get money out of his money box and go and get a pot noodle”.

There are two interesting point of analysis in this example. Firstly, what this illustrates is the impact that the cuts in services were having on the workers at Middleshire. During my fieldwork the social workers had had a number of additional benefits removed, including a reduction in the mileage rate refunded to workers for each mile they travel, the flat rate car allowance given to workers was removed, and Middleshire’s decision to cease the provision of free car parking passes to social work staff. When resources were being defended the impact fell not only on families and other services, as in some of the examples illustrated earlier in this section, but also on the social workers themselves. In relation to TOIL, any time had to be agreed in advance and signed off by a member of the senior management team. Where workers were deemed to have built up too much TOIL, they were subject to discussions about why they were not managing their workload effectively.

The second point to make here is about how this example links to the different moral judgements made when the child is the child of a professional compared to when it is one of a family subject to a referral. I reflected at the time that for families involved with Middleshire Children’s Services issues such as this would have been constructed within analysis as a failure to prioritise the needs of the child, a failure to provide food, and a failure to protect. I made a note in my fieldnotes that there must be a degree of dissonance for the social workers to be able to judge families in this way but not to see the parallels between this and their own everyday struggles. The next entry drawn from my fieldnotes offers an explicit example of this:

There’s nothing much been happening this afternoon, workers are frustrated that they are being asked to work weekends, for which they will be paid, but they have to be present in the office or not be paid; “Like I don’t already work weekends” - Helen. Discussions have occurred about other professionals they don’t seem to like. A head teacher who thinks the social worker is being too critical, someone else has worked with that head teacher and agrees they are too friendly with parents. A drug and alcohol worker who doesn’t think a can of cider a night is a problem. “If they can’t go without it or they are using it to self-medicate then it’s a problem” declares Keri.

This is an example of the pages of fieldnotes I had recorded, desperate to ensure that I did not miss something which could later assist me in making links with other observations, they are just snippets of conversations or activities observed and span three notebooks. I include this section of notes because of what happens shortly after what appears to be innocuous conversations about other professionals. Jaci enters the room, presumably having been in the town centre.

Jaci – “Ladies Ladies Ladies, Blossom Hill [wine], 3 bottles for a tenner up the Lidl in town”

Sally-Anne – “Ooo, I’ll pop in on the way home. We’ve been getting through a bottle [of wine] a night since I got to court with that Smith case”

Andy – “I hadn’t used to drink until I became a social worker”

Everyone laughs.

Whilst I am unaware of the circumstances of the parent to whom the social worker above was referring, nor was I party to the assessment indicating the impact of that parent’s single can of cider each evening, I was, and still am, struck by the apparent ease in which the judgement made regarding the problematic nature of habitual drinking are missing from their own, self-confessed, dependent relationships with alcohol. In hindsight I wished I had explored this with the workers further, but in truth I was not confident in highlighting what at the time struck me as an unjust critique of a parent, a critique they were not applying to themselves.

During my fieldwork it was clear that the workers were under pressure to save money, and to justify spending and resource allocation. In some examples this was quantifiable, workers were clear about how much had to be shaved from the local budgets and it impacted on their daily activities such as gaining approval for minor interventions, being forced to refer on to other agencies rather than engage in direct work themselves and the direct impact on their own work life balance and on their income through removal of work-based benefits. However, perhaps more importantly in many ways, I was struck by the way that such resource defence was often a misnomer for moral judgements whether that be on the families who failed to budget and prioritise the needs of their children or a worker who failed to complete their workload in a timely way. In many instances the initial minor savings that could be made by refusing food vouchers for example, would be lost within the ultimate cost of accommodating children by the local authority, a suggestion made by one manager as a solution to parents who were unable to provide food for their children. In spending hours sourcing cheap accommodation, the transporting of schoolwork, and the visits that would have to take place, it is unlikely that Lena technically reduced the financial cost to Middleshire. It is a far more demanding use of resources in the longer term not to mention the impact on the children and their families. If decision making in Middleshire were truly influenced by the need to reduce spending then regular home help for those struggling with home conditions, the funding of habitable accommodation, or the provision of a basic income, would be cheaper financially than the accumulating cost of social work intervention, care proceedings and foster care.

Following the threads of the last chapter, which explicated the ways in which Middleshire organised social workers’ activities to ensure compliance, iterations of risk were identified as being a further ruling relation organising social workers’ activities. This chapter has explored the discursive practices surrounding risk which were woven throughout all of the observations. They were present in the referrals received from other professionals, the case recordings left by social workers, the contribution to meetings by the legal team recorded in minutes of meetings, directions given by managers via the computer system and in correspondence within the service, and in the emails sent by members of the directorate. All undertaking what I refer to as accountability work.

Some forms of accountability work were retrospective, in that the event had already happened. Most however, were pre-emptive; predicting a potential future requirement to provide evidence regarding an activity they were undertaking. All forms of accountability work discussed within this chapter were centred on the provision of a textual sediment of proof, a trace left behind to demonstrate compliance or to justify actions, organised in some part by the discursive practice of mantras such as “if it’s not written down it didn’t happen”. The web of ruling relations in respect of accountability work was extensive; for social workers, their activities were primarily organised as a result of other individuals. Social workers such as direct colleagues, those within the management structure, and in other teams across the authority. Manager’s accountability activities were organised as a result of other managers, and members of Middleshire’s directorate. For the directorate, their activities appeared to be constructed around notions of reputational risk and undertaken on behalf of “Middleshire” as a being that needed protecting. There was little reference to direct risk to children noted within the accountability work; the discussions with participants surrounding inconsistent thresholds highlighted for some that the primary ruling relation was in fact the threshold of risk to themselves as professionals and not the child.

Of the different forms of accountability work observed the most striking from my position as a researcher was the activities undertaken by workers when they had been directed to undertake an activity they disagreed with. In order to disagree with an activity, social workers needed some level of awareness of the disjuncture in their role, as outlined in Chapter Five. The levels of awareness appeared to have no link to particular characteristics of individuals or teams, the general lack of awareness can clearly be attributed to the demand for compliance by Middleshire.

The preceding findings chapters have illuminated the everyday actualities of social workers in Middleshire, explicating the ways in which their activities were controlled and regulated by the organisation. The following chapter is a discussion of these findings, drawn together with the two background chapters, to discuss how social workers’ activities are so tightly controlled and regulated in Middleshire, leaving little room for professional discretion. The discussion explicates the bridge between the structural and the organisational, examining the mechanisms which mediate between.

Chapter Eight - Discussion

While the ordinary man takes the setting of his life and the importance of his personal experiences and petty struggles for granted, it is said that the social scientist or philosopher has to survey things from a higher plane.

(Popper, 1966: 3).

Karl Popper was highly critical of Marx’s prioritisation of an ideological approach to economics and history, proclaiming that his theories were overly structural and idealistic, failing to take into account the agency of individuals to shape their own future (Popper, 1966; Feaver, 1971). I believe that both Marx and Popper highlight vital components in understanding how society is both experienced and shaped but that Smith’s institutional ethnography can provide a framework to bridge the gap between the structural and the individual to examine the mechanisms which mediate between the two. The macro-meso-micro theoretical model of social analysis is commonly used in sociology (Giddens, 1971; Layder, 1997) and can be reconciled within institutional ethnography and understood as the structural—such as legislative frameworks and ideological discourse―as the macro level, the everyday activities of social workers as the micro level, and the organisational processes as the meso level.

The background chapters have examined and analysed the structural framework within which pervasive discourses surrounding individuals and families requiring support from the state flourish (see Chapters One and Two). Whilst understanding and tracing the discourse and its ideological origin is central to unpicking how the social work profession has participated in disproportionate intervention in the lives of families living in poverty, a study focused entirely at this level would be unable to address the problematic, nor would it assist in understanding how social workers come to undertake the activities they do. How it becomes accepted, their own construction of the role subjugated, and their awareness dulled.

The findings chapters have explicated and illuminated the actualities of the everyday activities of social workers, exploring their interconnected work processes to illuminate an overall picture of how social work with children and families is conducted in Middleshire. Focusing this study entirely at the individual level fails to consider the role of the organisation of social workers’ activities alongside concerns that such a focus would perpetuate the scapegoating of social workers in an already pervasive culture of blame. As explored in Chapter One, the discourse individualising structural consequences as personal failures is dominant throughout society and has extended to within the social work profession. The identification and vilification of individual professionals involved with high-profile cases, such as Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly, is misplaced and unhelpful. Whilst there may be incidents where individual practitioner failure contributes to the failings of the child protection system, this thesis does not seek to individualise or blame social workers in Middleshire. Rather it seeks to explicate how, through the regulation of social workers’ day-to-day activities, Middleshire provides little room for social workers to subvert or resist and enact a version of social work in line with professional values and ethics.

This chapter explores the construction and regulation of the space afforded to professionals to exercise professional discretion before considering the ways in which Middleshire regulate and control social workers’ activities, before finally considering the stark contrast in how social work is imagined and how it is performed.

As introduced in chapter 1, Ronald Dworkin described professional discretion as being akin to the hole in a doughnut, its existence is entirely dependent upon the “belt of restrictions” surrounding it (Dworkin, 1968: 30) and I suggested that as the legislative and policy framework for social work had developed the space for professional discretion has decreased. Wallander and Molander’s (2014) critique of Dworkin’s doughnut analogy suggests that discretion is made up of two elements: structural and epistemic. Whilst Dworkin provided an explanation as to how structural space for decision making is constructed, it is Wallander and Molander (2014) who provide a methodological framework to consider the “discretionary reasoning” that takes place within the “discretionary space”. Conducting focus groups, their research presented professionals with a vignette and tracked the way in which they exercised their professional judgement (2014:1).

Within Dworkin’s (1967) doughnut analogy the space for discretion in the centre is unrestricted. However, my findings suggest that in relation to social work there is a road map through the centre of the doughnut. The activities of social workers are so heavily regulated through the computer system, the auditing layers, and the discursive practices deployed in Middleshire, each prescribing the different options available, restricting discretionary reasoning to a limited number of potential options. As explored in the findings, the enforced compliance to processes leaves little room for resistance and subversion on the part of social workers.

It has been suggested that social workers, because of their values and ethics, will seek to subvert an organisation’s attempts to exert control over their activities. As discussed in Chapter One, social work’s history is somewhat idealised in the shadows of the 1970’s radical social work movement and the relationship-based community work of this time. When discussing the electronic turn in social work, Garrett (2005) argues that social workers will not go quietly, whilst both McAteer (2004) and Shifrin (2004) suggest that social workers are neither passive nor compliant. These notions of resistance, particularly in public service professions are also captured in the theoretical literature. Foucault (1976) suggests that where there is power exercised by one party there is resistance by another, something which in Lipsky’s concept of Street Level Bureaucracy had enabled workers to perform their role in accordance with their conception of it (Lipsky, 2010). However in Middleshire, where social workers do find an opportunity to exert their professional discretion, a part of the doughnut without a road, the organisation responds with the construction of a new road designed to prescribe the decisions available to social workers, restricting their professional reasoning and thus their overall discretion (see the example of direct work outlined on page 153, the implementation of a three-visit rule on page 166, and the use of performance plans as discussed on page 156 and 172).

Whilst the traditional ethnographic methods utilised within this research prioritised the everyday activities of social workers, the overall aim of analysis within institutional ethnography is not to remain focused upon the participants, but to illuminate how the work activities feed into wider discursive constructions from their standpoint. This study traces the work-text-work process to illuminate the web of ruling relations organising social workers’ activities, the process outlined in Chapter Two, connecting them to the structural context within which they operate through the use of the ideological circle, see page 105 for further details. Within the context of this research, the focus was not the social workers themselves but the tasks which they were completing and how these were mediated by both the organisational and broader governmental discourses. The background chapters provided the backdrop against which this research, and the participants’ activities, were connected. Whilst the findings chapters illuminated the everyday activities of social workers. My discussion will purposefully avoid the individualisation and blame of social workers, rather, the focus is situated on the way in which Middleshire mediate between the structural and the individual,

how the construction of processes and procedures within the authority organise social workers’ activities and the mechanisms they employ to ensure compliance.

Structural

I had assumed that the legislation and policy structurally acting as the belt of restrictions would be apparent in the computer system but, as outlined in the background chapter, the databases introduced during the modernisation agenda under New Labour were designed not to support social workers’ activities with children and families but driven by public and government demand for transparency and accountability, driven primarily in Children’s Services by OFSTED. Whilst the structure of the organisation and the systems could be linked to parts of the legislative and policy frameworks, for example the need to see children in particular timescales or record the “voice of the child”, the presence of only selected elements of legislation and policy leads me to believe that this wasn’t the ruling relation driving their inclusion. Munro (2011), in her report on the review of child protection, suggests that prescribed timescales are unhelpful as they “distort practice” (Munro, 2011: 7) with an emphasis on the collecting of information and making of plans, rather than the conscious cognitive elements of working with children and families. In a similar vein, Parton, writing about Every Child Matters (see page 33) suggests that: “priority is given to the accumulation, monitoring, and exchanging of information” (Parton, 2006: 966).

The Children Act 1989 places partnership working and preventative services at the heart of social work practice, however, the systems and processes in Middleshire did not represent these principles, rather what was clearly a priority for the organisation was the measurable targets driven by the inspection regime of OFSTED. Whilst discussions surrounding OFSTED were present within the fieldwork, they were restricted to conversations in relation to a potential inspection, and generally occurred in meetings with members of the senior management team. The day-to-day activities of social workers were clearly organised in relation to the areas OFSTED would inspect but social workers did not appear to be conscious of the underlying requirements in their day-to-day activities. The primary focus of social workers’ activities was the computer system, a detailed series of forms demanding completion. However, even the provision of free text boxes, within which theoretically social workers could write what they wished, their activities were regulated by the discursive practices relating to the conception of social work Middleshire required social workers to comply with. Built in to the structure of the organisation was a never-ending layer of auditing, not simply contained within the formal auditing process; it was evident in the divisions between teams often mediated through transfer meetings, alongside meetings such as the resource panel, every stage and process was designed to offer minimal options thus regulating and ensuring compliance. The complex system of discursive practice deployed within Middleshire added additional roads of regulation through Dworkin’s doughnut analogy; not only in regard to the activities undertaken on the computer system, but in respect of imposed language and action transmitted through sentinel cases, posters and emails.

Interestingly, legislation rarely featured in social workers’ accounts, in the 6 months of fieldwork there was very little discussion of the legislation that was not prompted by me. As noted above, Leah was one of the few workers to mention the legislation unprompted by me (see page 158). This enabled me to understand how the processes and the computer system have such influence on how social workers’ activities are organised and undertaken (see below 274).

It is easy to assume that the rise of technology is itself the driving force for the increasing role of the computer in social work practice. However, as Howe (1992) argued, the introduction of this systematic approach, the focus on information, the sharing, analysing, and storing, were the result of high-profile child deaths and unlinked to advances in technology. As outlined in Chapter One, the focus on creating less uncertainty was met with rules and procedures attempting to construct a response for every potential scenario. As the technology increases, it is assumed that the indeterminacy decreases (Howe, 1992: 492) and therefore there is less risk. The shift in focus from knowledge based social work to information based practice (Parton, 2008) (See Chapter 1) was apparent in many examples within the findings but is perhaps most explicitly acknowledged by Fran when she stated that: “Families are the info[rmation] we put into the system”, considering her role as more aligned to that of a data entry clerk. I was shocked to find that whilst the computer system in Middleshire is a standard system present in local authorities across the country, the programme was far more malleable to local change than I had suspected (see page 153).

A further change that can be noted as significant here is the rise of New Public Management and particularly the focus on auditing, monitoring and performance management. As Howe (1992) suggests, there has been an increased emphasis on the role of the manager, whose focus is on defining and measuring performance and outcome. Within this the manager seeks to establish routines, standardised practice, and predictable task environments. The establishment of arm’s length quality assurance bodies such as OFSTED providing monitoring of national services to ensure quality and standardised services. As a result, social work has become ever more focused on routine and procedure changing the type of knowledge social work is concerned with and thus changing social work itself (Parton, 2008). It is within this context that Chris, the service manager noted that social workers were coming out of universities not understanding the technical aspects of the role (see page 123).

As explored in Chapter One, social work has always undertaken activities such as gathering, sharing, and monitoring information, along with records of accountability, however, the shift in the technological age resulted in these activities gaining significance (Parton, 2008). A similar phenomenon is discussed by White et al, who explore not only the rise in technology but also other aspects of the modernisation agenda suggesting that: “The pace of modernisation has continued unabated; performance management has taken a stronger hold” (White et al, 2009: 318). Within this context it is noted that discretion disappears in a culture of auditing and “procedural control embodied in mandatory ICT systems” (White et al, 2009:313). Within the following sections of this chapter I will consider the way that this procedural control was embedded and strengthened at an organisational level before moving on to consider the impact of these structural and organisational controls on the activities of the social workers within Middleshire.

Organisational

In concluding the discussion on structural changes above I note the importance of both database ways of thinking (Parton, 2008) and those aspects of the modernisation agenda which focus on performance management and auditing (White et al, 2009). Research conducted by Wilkins et al (2017) analysed the recording of supervision notes and concluded that case discussions were primarily focused on managerial administration and performance management, focusing practice on “what and when things happen and not enough on how and why” (Wilkins et al: 2017: 942.). It can be seen that the focus here is on information rather than professional knowledge (Parton, 2008) and has been suggested that this is a form of surveillance of social workers which, it is argued, is a form of defensive practice (Whittaker and Harvard, 2015). Within the process of supervision, Wilkins et al (2017) note that the manager is involved in providing a solution to a problem presented by the social worker. As demonstrated in the findings chapters and is discussed below, this was absolutely how the process of supervision operated in Middleshire.

Tracing the ruling relations, it is apparent that the activities of social workers in Middleshire are not directly organised by the requirements of the court. Rather in the process of tracing and analysing the ways in which accountability work is undertaken the distinct layers of the structural, organisational, and individual are clear. The social workers’ activities in relation to court are controlled by the requirements of the managers, whose activities in turn are regulated by the directorate. The accountability work performed by members of the directorate was driven with regards to the “reputation of the service”. Whilst the court organised social workers’ activities at the point of application or attendance, there was no evidence of a direct ruling relation between the court and the social worker outside of this; the court’s primary presence was through the structure of Children’s Services in Middleshire. The structure of Middleshire’s Children’s Services reflects the government’s envisaged progression as detailed in legislation; families entering the system through the “front door”, the MASH team, being assigned to early help, and “stepping up” through the system should concerns continue or escalate, the stages being early help, child in need, child protection, pre-proceedings, care proceedings, fostering, adoption. This resulted in a fragmented service, designed and delivered in compartmentalised sections with social workers having little to no understanding of the actualities of activities prior to their interactions, or any day-to-day overall awareness of how it all fitted together.

Within a court statement the authoritative account of the activities of the previous social workers are pulled together automatically as a result of the computer system, the system identifies the dates and activities of social workers in other teams, and the court statement and chronology is constructed using this information. At each stage social workers were drawing on their authoritative account of what each of the interventions looked like. So, whilst a statement concludes a family has had two episodes of child protection, the realities of what those episodes of child protection are can be significantly different to the authoritative account used within the statement. The example of Ellie on page 125 is pertinent here. Whilst Ellie presented her work with the family as “… working to help Mum improve the poor home conditions”, in reality the observed activities were focused on undertaking accountability work, making sure that the work she had completed progressed through the layers of auditing and in reality her activities with the mother had very little to do with supporting and addressing the professional’s concerns relating to the home conditions. However, within the court statement an episode of child protection is often presented with the reoccurring phrase “extensive multiagency support to address the concerns of the core group”. In the example given on page 128, the authoritative account of “episodes of early help” was significantly different to the actualities of the assistance offered by the team. However, throughout the organisation families were assessed based on social workers’ understanding, and not on the actualities. Bev’s proclamation in the resource panel, the ruling relation organising Anesu’s completion of the court statement, was that the family had been given “every opportunity and assistance to change”. Authoritative accounts of activities were littered throughout Middleshire, in the sediments in records, in the language used to talk about and with parents, and in the processes built into the department. These authoritative accounts translated lived experiences into concrete understandings derived from the overall discursive practices related to the underlying ideology.

It is in the grey that social work operates, where there are very few black and white definitive answers, theories and skills are drawn upon to exercise professional judgement and professional discretion. However, within Middleshire the space within which such discretion could take place had been narrowed through the processes, many of which were enacted and controlled through the computer system, and in the almost constant surveillance of activities.

Research conducted by Satyamurti in 1980 adopted a similar ethnographic approach to explore the activities of a social work teams within a children’s department during the restructuring as a result of the Seebohm recommendations, as discussed in Chapter One (Satyamurti, 1981). At the time which Satyamurti completed her study, the ambiguity of policies and lack of sanctions for failure to comply enabled social workers to resist the organisation’s efforts to bring their activities in line with the organisation’s objectives. For example, in the authority where Satyamurti conducted her study there was no enforced policy regarding supervision, the frequency nor the agenda. This enabled social work teams to construct their own form of supervision that attended to the issues they wished; generally informal case-based discussion between colleagues and managers. This is in stark contrast to the recent criticism of supervision which has highlighted the prescriptive case management discussions that monitor the adherence to organisational objectives (Wilkins et al, 2017) and the experiences of the workers in Middleshire as outlined above and below.

The social workers in Satyamurti’s study had constructed social work as being focused on ‘the client’ and administration tasks were not included in their understanding of the role. “It was in general the case that paperwork of all kinds had low priority and low prestige: (Satyamurti, 1981: 39). It was in the ambiguity of policy and the lack of sanctions that the social workers had the space to openly resist what they saw as restrictions on them undertaking their conception of social work. In Middleshire any ambiguity in policy was soon addressed, as discussed above in the expansion of Dworkin’s doughnut analogy, realigning social workers’ activities to the priorities of the organisation.

In the 1980s, Lipsky (2010) explored the resistance of public sector workers to the increasing use of standardised processes, whilst the conflict between the differing conceptions of work roles remained, organisations were employing more effective ways of controlling the activities of public sector workers bringing them more in line with the organisation’s objectives. Lipsky (2010) detailed the increase not only in policies attempting to restrict workers’ roles but also in the surveillance and monitoring of their adherence. The use of monitoring is two-fold, it guides workers toward the tasks which complete the organisation’s objectives, but also enables the use of sanctions for those that did not comply.

Across all of the teams in Middleshire there was a drive through the resource panel and the layers of auditing and scrutiny for consistency, by restricting social workers from making decisions (the decisions being made by team managers, service managers, and resource panels, which in turn were regulated by the directorate) there would be a standard response to individual circumstances. When Fran commented that the families were the data it did not seem that she saw this in the context of the broader organisational structure. However, as the researcher, I could see the threads that organised her work and that what felt like her entering data for the computer was her entering data for others to make the decisions. Her manager, through the computer, would make the decisions about the next set of actions she required, case reviews and the resource panel ensured the compliance of the manager. Whilst it was a human making those decisions behind the screen a change in manager would still leave the systems and processes in place, I have come to conclude that an entire staff change would not see any material changes in the activities of social workers in Middleshire. The organisation, its structures, processes, the computer system and ultimately the concerns about “reputation” from wider structural forces, would still result in decisions being made by someone other than the social worker who had been working with the family.

Taylor (2007) finds that practice environments are vital in providing a dialogue and safe climate in which practice decisions can be explored, focusing on facilitating practice conversations rather than dictating practice decisions. Taylor (2007) talks about the room, the space, for such discussions. “By supporting social workers in deliberating about practice issues, we foster a healthy tension that may well lead to more innovative practice and policy interventions.” (Taylor, 2007: 99). However, in Middleshire there did not appear to be the cognitive space to process these contradictions and tensions; the fast-paced nature and workload along with the culture of right and wrong practice judgements leading, or at least aiming to lead, to a standardisation of practice in Middleshire.

As highlighted within the findings the discursive practice deployed within Middleshire to guide social workers toward accountability work, with phrases such as “if it’s not written it didn’t happen” were used to reinforce to the social workers the importance of accountability work. However, some staff members didn’t seem conscious of their activities unless they were performed in sequence on the computer, so quite literally they were unable to acknowledge their activities until they had completed the procedure-led process. This is perhaps most tangible in the observations of the staff within the MASH team discussing whether to undertake an assessment or a strategy discussion when they had completed an assessment mentally, or had the multiagency strategy discussion verbally but until the processes were checked on the screen they were unable to acknowledge that they had, in actuality, completed these tasks.

Through the process of analysis, I traced the ruling relations to seek to understand why the focus within Middleshire was on compliance. I concluded that there were a range of practices deployed by Middleshire to ensure adherence to the role as the organisation had constructed it. This included invoking sentinel cases as tools of control, as discussed on page 169, everyone knew what was meant by comments about what had happened to Felicity, as well as the imagery within the offices, such as the countdown clock which was located on the wall of the MASH team office or the posters that were dotted around the offices (see appendices ten, eleven, and thirteen). Ultimately, workers learned that the priority was the system not the children and their families: “No one cares if you’ve done a brilliant bit of direct work, it’s whether it’s [the computer system] up to date.”.

Whilst there were no direct ruling relations between the legislative and policy frameworks and the everyday activities of social workers, through my position as a researcher, having the privilege of being able to see the vast web of ruling relations, it was clear that the influence of these frameworks were through the way in which the organisation structured the departments, teams, and processes of work. As explored in Chapter One, the centrally-defined performance targets of New Public Management (Prior, 2009) have, through the complex auditing systems, changed the focus of the social work role (Wilkins et al, 2017; Parton, 2008; Rogowski, 2010; White et al, 2010). Based on my findings this was clearly occurring in Middleshire. However, as explicated, the structures demanding compliance to the strictly compartmentalised activities, are so detached from the overall structural organisation of the role, that social workers are no longer aware of their connections to a wider process. This distance, achieved through the demarcation of structural and epistemic spaces, constrained professional discretion, and left very little space for constructions of social work other than those mandated by Middleshire. In the section which follows I will briefly consider how the research process illuminated the gap for discretion and the absence of the role of reflective supervision for the social workers who participated in this study, before drawing conclusions about the differences between social work as imagined by the workers at Middleshire and social work as performed.

Activities

Whilst this study has been undertaken from the standpoint of Middleshire’s social workers, I do not seek to individualise or critique the activities undertaken by them. The findings of this study have explicated clear evidence that social workers’ activities in Middleshire are highly regulated, through near-constant surveillance, with both formal and informal processes demanding compliance to the role that Middleshire construct. Not all social workers recognised a disparity between their role, as constructed by Middleshire, and the role as outlined in literature and guidance such as the HCPC for example. For those workers who did not experience a disjuncture, the need to leave sediments of evidence of the ways their activities had been organised against their own construction of the role was unnecessary. Their performance of the social work role was in line with both the institutional construction and their own. In the accounts of workers who undertook activities they themselves noted to be illegal, or at the least against social work ethics, a level of awareness regarding such conflict was required. The importance of critical awareness, or within institutional ethnography consciousness raising, can clearly be seen within the findings of this study. In my presence as researcher, through opportunities to “chat” and in asking questions like “tell me a bit more about that” and “so how does that link to…”, social workers were provided with a space that raised awareness to the many and conflicting tensions within their role. Whilst there is significant evidence surrounding the role of critically-reflective supervision in social work (Wilkins et al, 2017; Noble and Irwin, 2009; Davys and Beddoe, 2010) as well as its centrality to the effective enactment of the role (Munro, 2011; Social Work Task Force, 2009c; Laming, 2003) there was no evidence in Middleshire that this was occurring.

The construction of supervision in Middleshire was in relation to the requirements of OFSTED, see page 36 for discussion, and not in raising the consciousness of the staff. Whilst conversations amongst staff can provide informal supervision (Jeyasingham, 2014; Manthorpe et al, 2015; Turner-Daly and Jack, 2014; Helm, 2017), the findings suggest that the nature of such discussions is highly dependent upon the staff present. Workers like Cathy and Bev constructed their understanding of social work to be in relation to the compliance with procedures and wider ideological discourse linked to perceptions of those in need of support from the state and thus guided conversations toward such conclusions. Whilst Maria and Ray, for example, engaged in discourse situated within more ethics based notions of social work, they ultimately were regulated by the ruling relations organising their activities and demanded compliance to Middleshire’s undertakings; evident in the sometimes reluctant directions to staff.

This raises a number of areas of concern, notably, illegal activities such as breaches of human rights or misuse of section 20 may occur at a far greater frequency at the bequest of the local authority, with significant consequences for the children and families who are subjected to them. It also exposes social workers if they breach the standards of the official regulator, jeopardising their careers, as they unwittingly undertake activities oppressing the service users they are tasked with supporting.

Work as Imagined, Work as Performed

Within institutional ethnography the concept of bifurcated consciousness is an important one, see page 92 for overview. Bifurcation of consciousness highlights the division between the actualities of people’s lives and the authoritative account (Smith, 1987). As evidenced throughout this study, it was apparent that there was a significant difference between the social work task as verbalised by social workers, and the activities they performed. This reflects the wider conflicting notions of the role that have been evidenced throughout social work’s history (see Chapter One).

The interaction with Ellie, where she describes what she is doing as “working to help Mum improve the poor home conditions” explicates this difference. Ellie clearly understood the work task at hand as directly relating to the improvement of home conditions, even when I explored this further, explicitly asking how the child protection plan on the screen related to the child or the mother, she constructed her response based on a theoretical construction of her role. Ellie understood her activities as being directly connected to the regularly referred to explanation of social work as a role “working with” and “supporting” service users, but by being attentive to the actualities of Ellie’s activities it became apparent that the child protection plan Ellie was formulating had little to do with the family, that the purpose of this plan was accountability work, not only to demonstrate Ellie’s compliance to Middleshire’s processes, but in the organisation’s obligation to evidence that any failure to affect change was despite their support.

Such observations clearly support the use of approaches such as institutional ethnography. Reflecting on the small number of interviews I conducted away from the site of activity, I noted they often elicited very different responses (see page 103 for discussion on interviews). The development of the theoretical model discussed in the introduction to this chapter by Wallander and Molander (2014) was produced through the use of vignettes; the production of a fictional case study to a group of professionals in order to capture and explore their responses. In Wallander and Molander’s (2014) study responses captured the process of discretionary reasoning within the structural provision of discretionary space. However, in the analysis of my own findings I am struck that the use of vignettes, applied in focus groups, relies upon the participant’s verbal accounts of their activities. It is through the observation of participants in my own research that the disparity between their actions and their verbal account was illuminated. The use of vignettes has been popular in recent social work research where practice responses have been compared across the UK and internationally, I have been unable to identify any such research that progressed the vignette through the research site’s processes in attendance to the actualities of the activities undertaken. Rather the responses appear to have universally relied upon the participant’s verbal accounts of their professional decision making. When considered within the context of the findings of my own research I am left querying whether the responses elicited by participants truly reflected the actual activities social workers would undertake if working with the families represented in the vignette.

The attention on social workers’ activities has cast a spotlight on what social workers actually do, illuminating the disparity between social work as it is presented within the authoritative account and social work as it is performed in everyday activities. Ethnographic research by Gibson (2016a) has succinctly explored the differing tenets to the contemporary role of a social worker within a local authority children and families team; the role of social worker as it is traditionally understood, and the role of social administrator primarily focused on bureaucratic activities. Grounded in conceptual debates regarding the changes to the social work role, social workers and managers in Gibson’s research were able to articulate a difference between traditional forms of social work, drawing on theoretical knowledge, and the contemporary role of social administrators, a role focused primarily on performance management with the measurement of adherence to process (2016a).

It is certainly the case that workers at Middleshire acknowledged the importance of the social administration aspects of their task, however many did not distinguish differing underlying purposes; the role of social administrator was in relation to the needs of the organisation, the role of social worker to the children and families. Whilst Gibson (2016a) acknowledged the increase in social administration and codified procedures, his research did not interrogate those systems. The dominance of computerised systems has in some part been motivated by the impossible task of preventing harm coming to children underpinned by the long-standing child rescue mentality. The collection and reliance upon information that translates lived experiences into standardised authoritative ways of knowing, dehumanises individuals in the quest for a standardised response to complex and individual experiences. Recent developments in the use of technology in Children’s Services have seen the use of artificial intelligence screening tools in a number of UK local authorities (Stevenson, 2018). The computer algorithms are programmed to highlight patterns of behaviour, patterns of behaviour believed to identify children at risk of harm. Whilst on the surface this sounds like a worthy endeavour, who wouldn’t want to stop children being hurt, further interrogation of the way in which some systems are programmed highlight the assumptions made regarding the characteristics of those children supposedly at risk of harm. Eubanks’ (2017) work looking at the way in which inequality is programmed into a range of US public service systems raises a number of pertinent points relevant to the increased use of artificial intelligence in UK child protection, namely that the highlighted characteristics of those deemed at risk are disproportionately related to false assumptions regarding those living in poverty and that the institutional gaze thus falls solely on the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Within Middleshire it was evident that the computer systems highlighted “red flags”, drawing attention to particular characteristics, the system did not automatically allocate cases with such risk factors to the category of child protection. Rather, the fear of reputational scrutiny structured the activities of the Children’s Services department in Middleshire to organise social workers’ activities through the computer system, policies, performance plans, and sentinel cases, to respond to such information as risk.

In chapter 1 I introduced the work of Volt et al ?(2016) and Hill and Schneider (2006) which had demonstrated the way that the use of systems which prioritised technical and procedural information had led to what was termed ‘cognitive skill degradation’ amongst pilots. Whilst I’m not suggesting that pilots and social workers perform similar roles, nor am I suggesting this research digresses into a neuroscientific study into the brain functioning of social workers, the parallels and transferable knowledge is of interest when considering why, despite the new initiatives in social work attempting to prioritise relationship-based theoretical knowledge, social workers are still reproducing structural inequalities in their disproportionate intervention in the lives of families living in poverty (see Chapter Two for discussion).

Clearly the disconnection between how social work is imagined and how it is performed is not unique, asked what a commercial pilot does, the universal answer is ‘to fly aircraft’ despite the fact that 90% of pilots’ activities are data entry and the monitoring and auditing of information (Petitt, 2019). Similarly, when asked, the majority of social workers in Middleshire constructed their role as being related to the interaction with and support of families, despite the actualities of their activities being largely connected to the collection and recording of information. Parton (2008) has previously differentiated between technical information required as a result of “database culture” and more traditional forms of practice knowledge such as theoretical models. If in the prioritisation of technical information pilots are experiencing cognitive skill degradation, then can the same be said of social workers?

Through the prioritisation of computer systems, there is evidence in Middleshire of social workers prioritising technical information; when asked, social workers verbalised their activities in relation to the processes associated with the computer system, it was only when prompted that social workers drew out what Parton describes as practice knowledge. At times, participants appeared to experience a form of paralysis, unable to practice without the structure of the system. This is exemplified by Lottie who felt incapable of undertaking a visit to a child until she knew how it was to be categorised within the system. In order to move forward she had to be prompted to consider an alternative purpose to the visit not framed by the computer system. The knowledge that underpinned how and why was obscured by the focus on the system. There were some workers who prioritised theoretical knowledge during our discussions, but in the moment when focused on the computer the priority was the technical information required by the computer. Ray and Maria’s paralysis regarding whether to undertake a visit on a Friday or wait until Monday (see page 142) was interesting as both of these workers, unlike Ellie, had engaged in conversations that clearly communicated professional and theoretical knowledge and what, to me, were traditional notions of the role of social worker; conversations which were littered with empathy, understanding and focused on the experiences of children and their families. But when faced with a series of screens requiring information to be entered, both workers appeared paralysed and focused on the information they needed to enter into the database.

For Jenny, the practice knowledge pertaining to the implications of a child living in a home where nappies could not always be bought was not present. This information represented a deeper level of social work knowledge, the pervasive impact poverty has on an individual or family may not be immediately obvious. As previously noted, “Poverty is the wallpaper of practice: too big to tackle and too familiar to notice” (Morris et al, 2018: 370), but concerns relating to the potential urgency, and the legal duty of Middleshire, to house a child made homeless as a result of incarceration or eviction requires less practice knowledge, it is based in more technical information and, interestingly, a standardised response she had constructed to draw her attention to the “important” data from the family.

So, whilst I argue that the computer system impinges on the structural and cognitive space social workers have to exercise professional discretion, the prioritisation of information over knowledge extends beyond that outlined on the system. Jenny could have entered far more detail into the computer system about the mother’s financial circumstances, but as a worker told me: “you don’t collect information you don’t need”.

The computer system has told them what information is prioritised through the mandatory spaces which needed to be completed alongside the specific information the authority measures, a message reinforced through communications such as emails and ‘good practice’ celebration leaflets. This perhaps confirms and emphasises the points made by Munro (2011), that there is currently insufficient attention to which parts of practice are significant enough to record therefore resulting in substantial pertinent information omitted, not only from the child’s record but from future decision making.

Throughout the fieldwork I was interested in the way families, and their lived experiences, were dehumanised. Initially I attended to the use of shorthand names for individual families such as “rape dad”, but more widespread was the use of “cases” as opposed to a family or child’s name. As I listened to discussions amongst social workers, I became aware of how children and family’s lived experiences were translated into a different language, a technical, sanitised language, which was reflected in the categories used by the computer system. A young girl who had been raped by three men became ‘CSE’, a mother struggling with pregnancy and illness was understood as “poor home conditions”. I was struck by the realisation that the result of Middleshire prioritising activities based in the office was the distance this created between the social worker and the families with whom they were working. The computer created a physical and metaphorical barrier extending that distance and maintaining the bifurcation of consciousness.

Not one of the social workers involved in the research communicated a desire to oppress or harm children and families, quite the opposite, for many social workers their role was framed in relation to a wider professional commitment to support, help, and activate change with individuals and families. The regulation of the social work profession means that each and every social worker in Middleshire had committed to adherence to the profession’s values and ethics, however, references to these were conspicuous in their absence. Whilst Middleshire’s policies alluded to values such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘respect’ there was no presence of social work values and ethics within the systems and processes prioritised, and enforced, by the organisation. “Families are the info[rmation] we put into the system”.

When undertaking the analysis of my findings I considered the lack of social work ethics and values in accordance with the ideological circle, seeking to understand its lack of presence within local level processes. Yan (2015) argues that texts constructed at government level are often evident in the regulation of activities in a subordinate location, but this was not the case in respect of the HCPC values and ethics. Whilst the government are involved with the regulation of the profession, and thus the construction of social work’s values and ethics, the document is not underpinned by the dominant ideological discourse and therefore not present in the government’s required recording and monitoring processes that demand its existence in local level processes. Middleshire prioritised the information sought within the recording and monitoring systems, systems that translate the lived experiences of families into an authoritative account that is constructed by the dominating group in line with the underpinning ideology. The Troubled Families Programme is an example that resulted in the purposeful targeting of families deemed by the government, based on assumptions derived from ideology, as requiring local authority intervention (Crossley, 2018; Lambert, 2018). Whilst the programme is no longer in place, the database and associated ‘red flag’ characteristics are still embedded within the processes. Unwittingly, social workers are participating in the transmission and reinforcement of such dominant ideologies as the individualising of poverty, and the association of particular characteristics with child abuse and neglect and contributing to the stigmatisation process embedded within the systems throughout Middleshire. However, Yan (2015) argues, as autonomous professionals, social workers always have institutional space in the social policy process to modify policies to benefit service users. Devault (1996: 32) argues that the lived experiences of oppressed individuals need to be excavated, awakened, and illuminated to bring to the fore “what has been ignored, censored and suppressed”, an activity social workers are trained and ideally placed to perform. Such an optimistic view “is possible only if social workers can critically understand where they are located in the ideological circle dominated by governmental discourse.” (Yan, 2015; 143). Therefore, social workers need to be awakened to their role in the formulation of governmental ideological circles, which is tightly knit into the processes they perform. Conscious that the system not only restricts their opportunity for professional discretion but at the same time the repetitive systems become habitual, resulting in a failure to draw on professional knowledge. However, without prompts to consider structural issues such as poverty, the pervasive dominant ideology, which social workers are not immune to, seeps into the decision-making process. To break the circle, we need to understand it. As demonstrated in this study, with its emphasis on understanding textually-mediated social relations, institutional ethnography is an effective tool for social workers to understand, evaluate and emancipate social work from the web of ideological control.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

“Institutional ethnography as a project proposes to realise an alternative form of knowledge of the social in which people’s own knowledge of the world and their everyday practices is systematically extended to the social relations and institutional orders in which we participate.”

(Smith, 2005: 43)

Summary

Born from the problematic identified in my own experiences as a social worker, in attending to the actualities of social workers’ activities this thesis not only highlights the disparities between social work as imagined and social work as performed, but explicates just how these differing notions are constructed and reinforced, and the consequences for the profession, for social workers, and ultimately for the children and families they come into contact with.

There are two different constructions of social work; one grounded in notions of values and ethics and of help and support, the other an administrator of the government’s enactment of underlying ideology. In this thesis I argue it is at the local site, in the activities of social workers, where the consequences of such conflicting notions of social work, and of childhood, parenting, and the role of the state, ultimately play out in the profession’s interactions with children and families.

What I am suggesting is that the constructions of “normal” childhood and “good” parenting are clearly linked to the underlying ideologically-founded notion that parents are the temporal guardians of the next generation of economic participants. Throughout history characteristics of the “normal” child and “good” parent have been operationalised. This has been consistently associated with the economy, initially in respect of children’s immediate participation in the local economies, and more recently their potential future contribution to a global economy. Successive governments have produced details of deviant behaviours that jeopardise the future of society’s progress, transmitted through a range of discursive practices.

The position of social workers at the site of intersection between the government and the family has seen the role constructed as part of the regulatory mechanisms of parenting. And whilst the verbalised purpose of the role may well be grounded in notions of helping, and even preventing children’s deaths, the day-to-day activities of social workers have been constructed from within government to be focused on the deviant groups. Regulating the role of “parenting” and legitimising intrusive interventions at the site of family for anyone whose activities do not align with authoritative understandings of “good” parenting.

Whilst this study has been positioned at the standpoint of social workers, the exploration of the vast web of ruling relations has identified that Middleshire too are subject to mechanisms of control and compliance. The complex range of funding streams, databases, targets, and inspections has, alongside the pervasive expectations of society, ensured that authorities such as Middleshire organise and enforce social work in the role constructed by central government.

It is through the textually-mediated mechanisms of control in conjunction with the mechanisms of compliance, that Middleshire ensure the role of social work they have organised, on behalf of the government, is enacted. In the development of Dworkin’s (1968) doughnut analogy within the discussion, the gradual and pervasive control over social work can be seen. Whilst the belt of restrictions is ultimately the structural space in which legislative frameworks provide the legal justification for social workers’ activities, the epistemic space within the centre is the site where professional judgement and discretion should be enacted (Dworkin, 1968; Wallander and Molander, 2014). It is clear in Middleshire that the reach of the authority’s control has extended to within this space. Through the textually-mediated communication, expectations of activities and outcomes are provided, with every potential case formulation explicated and standardised. Social workers’ activities are controlled through systems of discourse within the computer system, emails, posters, “good practice” guides, and the evoking of sentinel cases. These create predetermined pathways through the epistemic space, restricting social workers’ available options for professional judgement.

Compliance with the prescribed professional judgements allowed by Middleshire is ensured through a range of mechanisms deployed in the near-constant surveillance of social workers’ activities. The structure of the service ensuring layers of management oversight through complex processes of auditing, the internal scrutiny in resource panels, meetings, and transfer discussions, alongside the use of performance plans and sentinel cases all seek to ensure compliance with clear mechanisms designed to address those who deviate through practices seeking to shame, or targeted interventions textually communicating the need to comply, such as performance plans.

Within my observations, workers that undertook activities they themselves noted to be illegal, or at the least against social work ethics, were not the ones subject to performance plans or the subject of sentinel case narratives. Rather it was social workers who were not compliant with Middleshire, whose activities were “too parent-focused” or who had “rose-tinted glasses” that were subject to additional pressure to comply.

This study has further illuminated the role of critical awareness in social work practice, that the opportunities and ability to resist and subvert the dominant construction of the role is intrinsically linked to the levels of awareness of the workers. For many workers their imagined role was aligned to that of Middleshire, they complied and completed their activities in line with the organisation’s requirements and saw no tension in their role. For many, their practice had consumed Middleshire’s construction, so much so that without the predetermined processes and acceptable outcomes, they were unable to progress with their activities. The transferable knowledge from the field of aviation offered an illuminating consideration of the notion of cognitive skill degradation, that in continually sleepwalking through the processes prescribed by the organisation the underlying practice knowledge and skills are lost (Volz et al, 2016. Hill and Schneider, 2006).

The importance of awareness was never more apparent than in the discussions with workers who were undertaking activities they knew to be illegal or at best oppressive, and whilst many ultimately complied with the activities prescribed by Middleshire, in being conscious of how their activities were incongruent with their legal and ethical obligations, they were able to mitigate the consequences for the children and families with whom they were engaging. Whilst the examples raised regarding the illegal or oppressive actives were stark and quite striking, the general failure of the authority to enact other legislative requirements such as notions of “partnership working”, or “family support”, went generally unnoticed. Whilst it could be argued that the role of supervision should be to provide a critically-reflective space in order to raise the awareness of social workers, the positioning of supervision both by Middleshire and OFSTED as a performative function linked to evidencing compliance is clearly a barrier to such an accomplishment.

This study found that whilst Middleshire have no control over the inspection regime or the funding streams made available from central government, they have far more opportunities to change the mechanisms of control than I had envisaged. Primarily I had expected to find a computer system which was ‘off the shelf’ and unable to be changed and had not anticipated the extent to which practice was mediated through sentinel cases, local practice guides and the organisational rhetoric as presented through email chains and posters. The fragmented and compartmentalised structure of the service, alongside the complex system of processes and procedures, is all locally designed. Whilst the computer system in Middleshire was a standard programme, it was malleable to alterations at a service level; changes to the requirements of supervision to a more critically-reflective requirement or the use of systems to highlight alternative approaches to considering the lived experiences of families were all within the control of Middleshire.

Through ongoing analysis whilst within the field and beyond I have concluded that it was not in Middleshire’s interests to change such systems, the organisation has purposefully constructed a service that ensures social workers’ compliance to the construction of social work Middleshire demand. A critically-aware social work staff group, with systems and processes that reflect alternative notions of social work, would be counter intuitive to the enactment of the social work role that Middleshire and ultimately the government demand.

Addressing the Problematic

The problematic addressed in this study was identified as a result of my own experiences as a social worker, the set of problems, tensions, and contradictions present in my own everyday world. It was through the implementation of the 2014 Children and Families Act that the disparities present in the role were illuminated. As the changes settled, and the new ways of working were absorbed into the organisation around me, I remained somewhat perplexed in understanding how they had come to settle so easily, with such short-lived resistance from the profession. This led to the overall problematic of my study: how do social workers experience their everyday lives working with children and families, particularly in the context of care proceedings? How do social workers who verbalise such a clear commitment to notions of social work originating in the values and ethics of relationship-based work come to undertake activities that have the opposite intention of the role we had committed to undertake? And in illuminating these issues could there be a way in which I could reconcile these tensions and continue to work as a social worker? In summary, how and why do good social workers do bad things?

The synthesis of methodological foundations with institutional ethnography has been fundamental in assisting me to explore these issues in this study. The pragmatic approach to the consideration of the problematic helped me to clearly define what the key issues were, the gaps in knowledge that were preventing me from continuing in my role as a social worker. In feminist theory’s standpoint I found an anchor, a consistent reminder that research is, and always was, positioned from the everyday world of social work. The Marxist theories surrounding social relations and the invisible webs of power coordinating and controlling activities beyond my material world gave me an understanding of how ideologies are transmitted and embedded to create a false consciousness. And it was within Foucault’s notions of power that I came to understand how ideologies are mediated, how knowledge and power were intrinsically linked and transmitted through discursive practices. Smith’s institutional ethnography, drawing all of these methodological approaches together, provided me with a framework of enquiry from which to approach seeking the answers to my problematic.

The study has clearly illuminated these issues and provided a wealth of answers which go some way to addressing those points raised in my problematic. In attending to the actualities of social workers’ day-to-day activities, alongside their verbalised accounts, I was able to clarify that the tensions I experienced in the role were not isolated; that they were in fact present for social workers in Middleshire. Where the study went further was in gaining a greater understanding of how the tensions originated in the conflict in the role as it was understood and verbalised by social workers, and the authoritative construction of the role by the organisation framed through the lens of policy and legislation.

I have been able to demonstrate that in tracing the activities of social work through the historical literature I was able to understand just how these competing notions of empowerment and oppression have been present throughout the development of social work. The values and ethics against which the profession is now regulated are grounded in the philanthropic and political history of social work, whilst the authoritative account of the role draws from the profession’s history of administering the ideologies of successive governments. In the more recent past social work has been afforded a space in which to exercise professional discretion and judgement, mediating between the two competing notions of the role. The latest developments in technology and New Public Management have facilitated the encroachment of the mechanisms of control and compliance to within that space. It is within this understanding that the answer to one element of the problematic can be answered. Social workers verbalise an account of social work they have been trained to undertake, and that they are regulated against, however Middleshire exercise the mechanisms of control and compliance to ensure that this role is performed within the construction of the wider ideological context. With little to no space for critical awareness, structurally or epistemically, social workers are unconscious of the conflicting notions of social work that they imagine and that they perform.

In the design of a fractured and compartmentalised service, Middleshire focus social workers’ attentions to the mandated tasks, affording no individual an overall view of the processes which culminate in care proceedings for some children and families. In the privileged position as a researcher by using the institutional ethnography methodological framework I was able to see how it was all fitted together; how it was built on false understandings of the activities at every stage, relying on the authoritative account which states that for these children, their parents have failed to address concerns despite the support of the local authority. When, in reality, each activity within the process, was focused not on the overall provision of support, but on the achievement of their mandated task. So, in answer to the first question within the problematic, social workers experience their everyday lives working with children and families as a series of isolated, highly regulated activities, to which the organisation demand compliance. Their overall understanding of the wider care proceedings process is hidden behind the fragmented and compartmentalised service design.

The last question my study seeks to attend to is that, now these issues have been illuminated, I have a greater understanding of how social workers’ activities are organised and regulated into administering the construction of the role as demanded by government, could these tensions be reconciled in a way that would enable me to return to social work practice? Sadly, the extent to which the organisation has extended its mechanisms of control and compliance, render the activities of the social work I imagine untenable with the role that is demanded. This study has shown that where there is subversion and resistance, Middleshire respond in constructing further restrictions and controls, until workers either submit or leave. This results in even the most critically-aware social workers undertaking activities which they know to be either illegal or oppressive. Whilst Smith suggests that institutional ethnography can provide a map within which practitioners can navigate, and ultimately circumvent, the ruling relations that organise their activities, I have come to conclude that the reach of the mechanisms of control and compliance are too great to navigate at the level of direct social work practice.

Researcher Reflections

The use of institutional ethnography has provided a framework of enquiry from which I have been able to address the research problematic of my study. Whilst already familiar with a pragmatic philosophical position from which to consider knowledge, and having attempted to read Marx in my adolescence, it was Smith’s institutional ethnography that introduced me to theorists such as Foucault and Harding, and as a result developed my knowledge as a researcher. Revisiting Marx, I had a number of moments of clarity in respect of my own understanding of knowledge and society, I considered these as light bulb moments, not just in respect of the sometimes physical glow in my eyes, but because they illuminated parts of the problematic I had yet to fully interrogate. It was in Marx’s theories surrounding ideology and notions of false consciousness that I began to fully understand how the awareness of individuals of the problematic nature of their lives is determined by their access to information. In the process of revisiting my methodology throughout the research process I came to understand the bifurcation of consciousness and its importance to my research.

As explored within my methodology, Smith’s ideological circle assisted in my understanding of how dominant ideologies come to be transmitted and permeate every aspect of the material world (Smith, 1990a, 1990b). However, through the research process I was able to consider how, within the context of social work, Smith’s circle did not represent the complexities of the ways in which I was observing the dominant ideology being transmitted. As my confidence as a researcher grew, I was able to consider other theories I had been exploring, and another light bulb moment came in the exploration of Dworkin’s doughnut analogy in respect of notions of discretionary space (Dworkin, 1968) and the subsequent critique by Wallander and Molander (2014). Whilst the additional consideration of both structural and epistemic spaces aided my understanding of the lack of professional judgement and discretion I was observing within Middleshire, it was my own addition of the roads through the epistemic spaces that enabled me to progress in the analysis of my observations. The visual depiction of a doughnut, and then the addition of lines through the centre, was a useful way of communicating my thoughts to participants, and prompted interesting conversations about the mechanisms of control and compliance exerted by Middleshire.

The range of different methods deployed within the fieldwork of an institutional ethnography enabled me to broaden my qualitative research skills. As explored in the methods chapter, I had envisaged my role as a researcher to involve a tape recorder and a note book and pen, when in actual fact I undertook documentary analysis, used visual methods to capture and communicate with participants, became attentive to discourse, as well as developing my observational skills which needed to look beyond the assumed account of the activities I was witnessing. My fieldnotes reflect this process, and as such developed to capture elements beyond the assumptive descriptions, for example “Sarah answered her phone to a parent” was soon understood as part of a wider series of activities which I needed to explicate: what activity did that telephone call relate to? What activity did Sarah complete once she had finished the telephone call? And whose work did Sarah’s activity now organise?

These developments in my research skills were vital in assisting me to attend to the actualities of social workers’ activities. I had assumed that my shared identity as a social worker would be a strength within the research, and whilst the knowledge of the systems and processes assisted in my orientation within the field, it became apparent that the discourse of the professional language we all shared drew on the authoritative accounts of the activities and I was in danger of assuming that the verbal descriptions of their activities were representative of the material actualities of them. Whilst at times I felt my rather simple questions of “can you tell me a bit more about that please?” and “how does that relate to…” resulted in the questioning of our shared professional status, it did enable me to constantly focus on the actualities of participants’ activities and not just on the unspoken assumption that I would know.

Whilst I had considered the professional identity I would share with the participants, I had not considered the somewhat difficult process of my developing understanding of the shared identity I had in relation to the service users they worked with and spoke of, specifically the mothers. The preface to this study served to situate my location in the research, explicate my positionality beyond the prescribed characteristics of white, female, and social worker, because my interactions with the research were beyond such easily compartmentalised notions of self. In its inclusion, the interactions contained within the preface extend to the reader the constant negotiating and renegotiating of my presence in the field and in the research. Offering a transparency of the research process and the ways in which I attended to the participants in an ever-developing approach.

I also believe that in sharing what were incredibly difficult experiences as a researcher, a mother, and as someone with “mental health” with participants it facilitated a conversation that would not have been possible otherwise. The results were an exploration of the very material effects of the individualised moral judgements made regarding parenting when no consideration of the structural circumstances is afforded. Social workers in Middleshire have their own lived experiences from which they can explicate the contrasting difference in how service users’ lives are constructed. The discussions from social workers about their own personal experiences, their child alone at home, or their reliance upon alcohol when under stress, could be the source of valuable insight within the context of critically-reflective supervision. However, the maintenance of the bifurcation of social workers’ consciousness as a result of Middleshire’s mechanisms of control and compliance prevents any such reflections.

Recommendations

As discussed, the actionable outcomes of my research were a key motivation throughout the process, however in taking the standpoint of social workers’ everyday lives I illuminated just how little opportunity they have to resist and subvert the mechanisms of control and compliance deployed by Middleshire. This brings into question the efficacy of recommendations directed at a practice level, such as restorative approaches or models such as Signs of Safety. There was evidence that for those workers aware of the sometimes illegal, at best unethical, activities they were undertaking they were able to mitigate the consequences for families despite ultimately enacting the directions of the authority. And whilst recommendations regarding critical supervision could be made at the practice level, there is already a wealth of literature explicating its importance, therefore I am reluctant to situate the emphasis on activating change at the standpoint of social workers.

I would like to make recommendations regarding the changes required at a structural level, to suggest alternative approaches to the enactment of a pervasive and punishing ideology that results in such inequality and deprivation as explicated within the background chapters of this study. However, this study is progressed from a pragmatic foundation and as such I recognise that the wealth of knowledge unsettling the false narratives surrounding interventions such as the Troubled Families Programme or the use of neuroscience in early interventions has done little to activate change. Therefore, my recommendations lie at the organisational level.

Just as my findings demonstrate the importance of consciousness raising for social workers, I believe that such notions have potential in respect of Middleshire’s directorate. I found no evidence to suggest that the directorate are conscious of their participation in the enactment of the underlying ideology, nor that the design of processes and systems have been purposefully constructed by Middleshire to achieve this. I recognise that, just like social workers, Middleshire are subject to the mechanisms of control and compliance of central government, however the systems and processes within the organisation are far more malleable to change than I had anticipated. But just as social workers are unable to subvert the mechanisms of control without first acquiring awareness, I suggest that the same is to be said of the directorate and the wider structure of the organisation as a whole.

Therefore, my recommendations to Middleshire are a:

* Critically-reflective exploration of the findings of this study.
* Purposeful reconsideration of the role Middleshire seek to construct as the mediators between the statutory requirements of central government and the position of families in need of support.
* Identification of the actual requirements of OFSTED in the context of the above, to render visible the space available in which Middleshire can exercise discretion.
* Exploration of the alternative changes to the structure of Children’s Services in light of the findings from the previous recommendations; with a particular emphasis on seeking to reduce the fragmented and compartmentalised departments currently in place.
* Consciously consider the levels of surveillance, control, and compliance deployed; specifically, in relation to the layers of auditing, the purpose of supervision, and meetings such as the resource panel, alongside the role emails, posters, and “good practice” guides have in organising social work practice.
* Redevelopment of the computer systems to reflect the above.

I am also mindful of the potential of this research in respect of the current debates regarding social work education, specifically in relation to practice-based learning models such as the social work degree apprenticeship. The mechanisms of control and compliance deployed to ensure the activities of social workers are to the requirements of the organisation leave little room for the most experienced social workers to enact the role as it is taught and regulated against by the HCPC. In light of the findings of this study, situating students primarily within an organisation for up to 80% of their education, raises a number of questions not just of the potential efficacy of such programmes, but in highlighting the differing needs of such students. Whilst critical awareness and reflection are part of the curriculum across the range of qualifying programmes available, I would suggest that this study explicates a specific need for those students established within organisations such as Middleshire.

Conclusion - Contributions of This Study

The findings of my study offer an enlightening addition to the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP, 2017). Their study demonstrated that children living in the top 10% of deprived areas were ten times more likely to be accommodated by the local authority than children living in the 10% least deprived of areas (Bywaters et al, 2017, 2018; Webb and Bywaters, 2018). The study highlighted that the material consequences of structural poverty were rarely considered by social workers in their responses to families requiring support (Morris et al, 2018). Whilst CWIP (2017) was able to evidence the disproportionate state involvement with the country’s poorest families, they were unable to identify any discernible differences in the individual practices of social workers that accounted for their findings (Bywaters et al, 2017, 2018; Morris et al, 2018). It is within my findings that the mechanisms and structures creating and maintaining these responses are illuminated, and whilst the findings of the CWIP identified that social workers were, once prompted, able to articulate the structural context within which poverty is created, it is within my findings that their call for a more critically-reflective approach to practice is challenged (Morris et al, 2018). The unique approach of this study has been able to explicate why, despite practice level changes to models of intervention, the correlation between levels of deprivation and rates of social work intervention go unchanged (Bywaters et al, 2017, 2018). The original contribution of this study is in the provision of clear evidence of the need to refocus questions regarding social work practice way from the individual practitioner and onto the organisations that construct, control, and regulate their role.

The existing research surrounding social work practice is vast, and the findings of my study align with the general findings of a number of studies, as explored within the discussion chapter. Previous research has also highlighted concerns about the way that social workers are increasingly working to what is measured and the prioritisation of information over knowledge (Munro, 2011; Parton 2006; Parton 2008; White et al, 2009). Similarly, researchers have emphasised the dominant role of the computer in the social workers’ lives (White et al 2009; Parton 2008; Broadhurst et al, 2010). However, what is original about this thesis is the way that it demonstrates the integration of these factors and the way that they are embedded in such a way as to organise social workers’ activities to the point where some are unable to perform their role in isolation from these systems, the cognitive skill degradation that results from these practices.

Another common theme within the existing literature is the identification of the tensions between the care and control aspect of the profession (Gilles et al, 2017; Featherstone et al, 2018; Bevan and Hood, 2006; Jensen, 2018; Gibson, 2016a). This thesis has clearly explicated the processes of control and compliance which lead to this tension and the way in which the pervasiveness of the mechanisms of control and compliance move the emphasis from care to control and in doing so reduce the space for both structural and epistemic discretion. Through this analysis the thesis has developed the theory relating to Dworkin’s doughnut analogy, demonstrating how the increasing roadways through discretion restrict this practice in social workers’ day-to-day lives.

In tandem, it is the cognitive skill degradation experienced by social workers, alongside the reduction in spaces for critical reflection and the lack of opportunities available to resist and subvert which lead to social workers sleepwalking through the prescribed processes of the organisation. This generates a system which mediates against aware and critically engaged practice - the bifurcation of consciousness. It is this triumvirate, cognitive skill degradation, restriction of discretion and the bifurcation of consciousness which results in good social workers doing bad things.

References

Abbott, E. (1917) Charlies Booth, 1840-1916. *The Journal of Political Economy*. 25(2), 195-200

Adams, R. (2002) *Social Policy for Social Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave

ADCS (2010) *Safeguarding Pressures Project Phase 2: Exploring Reasons and Effect*. Manchester: Association of Directors of Children’s’ Services.

Addams, J. (1911) *Twenty Years at Hull House*. No Location: Pantianos Classics

Alcock, P. (2003) *Social Policy in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

Allen, D. (2003) Ethnomethodological insights into insider-outsider relationships in nursing ethnographies of healthcare settings. *Nursing Enquiry* 11(1), 14-24.

Allen, G. (2011a). Early Intervention: The Next Steps. An Independent Review. London: HM Government.

Allen, G. (2011b). Early intervention: Smart investment, massive savings. An Independent Review. London: HM Government.

Allen, G. and Duncan Smith, I. (2008b) ‘Senior MPs Launch Cross Party Bid to Avert Social Collapse’ Centre for Social Justice Press Release. [online] 16 September 2008. [Accessed 26 September 2018]. Available from: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/20080916EarlyIntervention.pdf>

Allen, G. and Smith, I. (2008a) *Early Intervention: Good Parents, great kids, better citizens*. London: The Centre for Social Justice

Alston, P. (2018) Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. [online] 16 November 2018. [Accessed 15 December 2018). Available from: https://www.ohchr.org/documents/issues/poverty/eom\_gb\_16nov2018.pdf

Ashley, C., Holton. L., Horan, H. and Wiffin, J. (2006) *The Family Group Conference Toolkit.* London: DfES

Authi, J. and Elkes, N. (2016) Call for city children protection chief to resign after demining Dispatches documentary. Business Live. [online]. 27 May 2016. [Viewed 12 April 2017]. Available from: https://www.business-live.co.uk/economic-development/call-city-children-protection-chief-11395964

Bainham, A. (2011) Damned if they do and damned if they do not: Holding social workers to account. *The Cambridge Law Journal*. 70(2), 321-314

Baksi, C (2013**)** Pioneering family court on the edge *The Law Society Gazette*[online] 4 November 2013 [Accessed 13 November 2013]. Available from: http://www.lawgazette.co.uk/practice/pioneering-family-court-on-the-edge/5038532.article

Bamford, T. (2015) A Contemporary History of Social Work: Learning from the past. Bristol: Policy Press

BASW. (2013) Inquiry into the State of Social Work. Birmingham: BASW

Bauer, A. (2015) *The economic case for early and personalised support for parents with learning difficulties*. Personal Social Services Research Unit. London: London School of Economics.

BBC (2012) *Councils refer record number of children into care*[online] 9th February 2012 [Accessed 10 January 2014]. Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16958373

Beckett, C. (2001) Children who Wait for Courts: Legal Delays in Care Proceedings. British Journal of Social Work. 31, 317-323

Beckett, C., McKeigue, B, and Taylor, H. (2007) Coming to conclusions: social workers’ perceptions of the decision-making process in care proceedings. *Child and Family Social Work.* 12, 54-63

Beckford, M. (2011) *Abortion ‘conveyor belt’ denies couples opportunity to adopt*. The Telegraph. [online] 29 March 2011. [Viewed 20 September 2018] Available from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/8414036/Abortion-conveyor-belt-denies-couples-opportunity-to-adopt.html

Beckingham, D. (2013) Scale and the moral geographies of Victorian and Edwardian child protection. *Journal of Historical Geography*. 42, 140-151

Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1966) The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the sociology of Knowledge. Middlesex: Penguin 1991

Bernard, H. R. (2006) *Research methods in anthropology.* Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.

Besky, S. (2014) The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fairtrade Tea Plantations in India. Berkely: University of California Press.

Bevan, G. and Hood, C. (2006) What’s measured is what matters: Targets and gaming in the English public health care system. *Public Administration* 84(3), 517-538.

Beveridge, W. (1942) Social Insurance and Allied Services. London: HMSO

Billig, M. (2013) Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Bilson, A. and Bywaters, P. (2020) Born into care: Evidence of a failed state. *Children and Youth Services Review.* 116, 1-7

Bisaillon, L. and Rankin, J. (2013) Navigating the Politics of Fieldwork Using Institutional Ethnography: *Strategies for Practice*. 14(1), 1-27

Blair, T. (1997) ‘*Bringing Britain Together’ London 1997* [online] 8 December 1997. [Accessed 20 September 2018] Available from: http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=320

Blair, T. (2010*) A Journey*. London: Hutchinson

Booth, M. (1996) *Avoiding delay in Children Act cases*. London: Lord Chancellor’s Department

Booth, T., Booth, W., and McConnel, D. (2005) The Prevalence and Outcomes of Care Proceedings Involving Parents with learning Difficulties in the Family Courts. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research.* 18, 7-17

Booth, T., Connell, D., and Booth, W. (2006) Temporal Discrimination and Parents with Learning Difficulties in the Children Protection System. *British Journal of Social Work*. 36, 997-1015

Brabrook, E. (1910) Eugenics and Pauperism. *The Eugenics Review*. 1(4), 229-241.

Brewer, C. and Lait, J. (1980) *Can social work survive?* London: Maurice Temple Smith

Bridge, G. (2014). On Marxism, Pragmatism and Critical Urban Studies. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. 38(5), 1644-1659

Brigid Te Ao McCallum, L. (2017) Planning to develop land returned under Treaty settlement in Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand: an institutional ethnography. PhD thesis, Massey University

Broadhurst, K. and Holt, K. (2010) Partnership and the limits of procedure: prospects for relationships between parents and professionals under the new Public Law Outline. *Child and Family Social Work.* 15(1), 97-106

Broadhurst, K., Wastell, D., White, S., Hall, C., Peckover, K., Thompson, K., Pithouse, A. and Davey, D. (2010) Performing ‘Initial Assessment’: Identifying the Latent Conditions for Error at the Front-Door of Local Authority Children’s Services. *British Journal of Social Work*. 40, 352-370.

Brophy, J. (2006) Research review: Child care proceedings under the Children Act 1989. DCA: HMSO

Bryman, A (2012) *Social Research Methods,* Oxford University Press: Oxford

Buckley, H. (2017). Service users as receivers of risk-dominated practice. In: Connolly, M, ed. Beyond the Risk Paradigm in Child Protection. London: Palgrave. 77-90

Bunn, A. (2013) Signs of Safety in England: An NSPCC commissioned report on the Signs of Safety model in child protection. London: NSPCC

Butler-Sloss LJ and Neill LJ *in Re W (Minors) (Wardship: Evidence*) [1990] 1 FLR 203

Butler, I. (2014) New families, new governance and old habits, *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law,* 36(4), 415-425

Butler, I. and Drakeford, M. (2011) Social Work on Trial: The Colwell Inquiry and the state of welfare. Bristol: Policy Press

Bywaters, P., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., Hanratty, J., Mason, W., McCartan. And Steils., N. (2016) *The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: an evidence review*. York: JRF

Bywaters, P., Scourfield, J., Jones, C., Sparks, T., Elliott, M., Hooper, J., McCartan, C., Shapira, M., Bunting, L. and Daniel, B. (2018) Children welfare inequalities in the four nations of the UK. *Journal of Social Work.* 20(2), 193-215

Cameron, D. (2010) Speech on families and relationships. [online] 10 December 2010. [Accessed 15 January 2019]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-on-families-and-relationships

Campbell, M. (2006) ‘Institutional Ethnography and Experience as Data’. In: Smith, D., (2006) ed. *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers

Campbell, M. and Gregor, F. (2008) *Mapping Social Relations: A primer in Doing Institutional Ethnography.* Toronto: Higher Education University of Toronto Press

Carroll, W. (2011). ‘You Are Here’: an interview with Dorothy E. Smith. Socialist Studies 6(2), 9-37

CCR. (2018) Care Crisis Review: options for change. London: Family Rights Group

Channel 4 Dispatches under cover in Birmingham’s Children’s Services (Dispatches 2016) [online]. Directed by Laura Balfour. London: Channel Four. [Viewed 24 May 2016] Available from: Four on Demand

Charlie Brown. (1999) Peanuts Comic Strip. Charles Schulz. Chicago: United Feature Syndicate

Children’s Workforce Development Council (2009) The Common Assessment Framework for children and young people. Leeds: CWDC

CMND 5860 (2003) *Every Child Matters* [Accessed 13 November 2013] Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/272064/5860.pdf

Coffey, A. (1999) *The Ethnographic Self*. London: Sage

Connolly, M. (2017). Concluding thoughts: informal and formal support for vulnerable children and families. In: Connolly, M, ed. Beyond the Risk Paradigm in Child Protection. London: Palgrave. 209-212

Corman, M. (2017) Paramedics on and off the streets: Emergency medical services in the age of technological governance. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press.

Cox, R., Kroese, B. and Evans, R. (2015) Solicitor’s experiences of representing parents with intellectual disabilities in care proceedings: attitudes, influence and legal processes. *Disability and Society*. 30(2), 284-298

Cretney, S. (2003) *Family Law in the Twentieth Century: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Crossley, S. (2018) Troublemakers. The Construction of ‘troubled families’ as a social problem. Bristol: Policy Press

Crotty, M. (1998) The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process. London: Sage

Cullen, S. (2011) *Rights and responsibilities; parenting support in England*. BERA Conference. [20th September 2016]. Available from: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/203870.pdf

CWIP. (2017) *Child Welfare Inequalities Project*. [online] [Accessed 10 January 2020]. Available from: https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2014/child-welfare-inequality-uk/

Davys, A. and Beddoe, L. (2010) Best practice in supervision: a guide for the helping professions, London: Jessica Kingsley.

DCLG (2012) *Working with Troubled Families.* [accessed 3 July 2017]. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/66113/121214\_Working\_with\_troubled\_families\_FINAL\_v2.pdf

DCLG (2017) *Troubled Families Financial Framework.* [Accessed 3 July 2017]. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/885207/Withdrawn\_Troubled\_Families\_Financial\_Framework.pdf

De Montigny, G. (1995) *Social Working: An ethnography of front-line practice*. Canada: University of Toronto Press

DeVault, M. (1996) Talking Back to Sociology: Distinctive Contributions of Feminist Methodology. *Annual Review of Sociology.* 22, 29-50

DeVault, M. and McCoy, L. (2006) Institutional ethnography: using interviews to investigate ruling relations’. In: Smith DE, editor. *Institutional ethnography as practice*. London: Rowman and Littlefield. p15–43.

Devine, L. (2015) Considering social work assessment of families. *Journal of Social Work Welfare and Family Law.* 37(1), 70-83

Dewey, J. (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. New York: Henry Holt and Company

Dewey, J. (2007*) How We Think*. Kansas: DigiReads

DfE. (2014) A*doption Reform Team Update January 2014*. London: Department for Education.

DfE. (2018) *Foster Care in England. A Review for the Department for Education.* [Accessed 14 January 2019]. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/679320/Foster\_Care\_in\_England\_Review.pdf

DfES and DCA, (2006) *Review of the Child Care Proceedings System in England and Wales.* [Accessed 12 July 2017]. Available from: https://www.familieslink.co.uk/download/june07/Review%20of%20child%20care.pdf

DHSS (1986) Review of child care law: report to ministers of an interdepartmental working party. London: HMSO

Diamond, S. and Struik, D. (1937) Marx’s “First Thesis” on Feuerbach. *Science and Society*. 1(4), 539-550

Dickens, J. (2011) Social Work in England at a Watershed – As Always: From the Seebohm Report to the Social Work Task Force. *British Journal of Social Work*. 41, 22-39

Dickens, J. and Masson, J. (2016) The courts and child protection in social work England: Tail wags dog? *The British Journal of Social Work*. 46(2), 355-371

Dijken, S., Veer, R., Ijendoorn, M., and Kuipers, H. (1998) Bowlby before Bowlby: The Sources of an Intellectual Departure in Psychoanalysis and Psychology*. Journal of the History of Behavioural Sciences.* 34(3), 247-269.

Dijkstra, S., Creemers, H., Asscher, J., Dekovic, M, and Stams, G. (2016) The effectiveness of family group conferencing in youth care: A meta-analysis. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 62, 100-110

DoH. (1988) Protecting Children: A Guide for Social Workers undertaking a Comprehensive Assessment. London: HMSO

DoH. (2000) Framework for the Assessment of Children and their Families. London: The Stationery Office.

Donzelot, J. (1979) The Policing of Families. Welfare versus the State. London: Hutchinson

Douglas, M. (1992). Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory. London: Routledge

Duque, M. and McKnight, A. (2019) Understanding the relationship between inequalities and poverty: mechanisms associated with crim, the legal system and punitive sanctions. London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion

Dworkin, R. (1967) *The Model of Rules*. Faculty Scholarship Series. Paper 3609. [Accessed 5 July 2017]. Available from: http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss\_papers/3609

Edwards, S. and Turnell, A. (1999) Signs of Safety: A solution and Safety Oriented Approach to Child Protection. New York: W. W. Norton & Company

EH v Greenwich, [2010] EWCA Civ 344, [2010*] Fam Law 577.* [Accessed 07 July 2020] Available from: https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWCA/Civ/2010/344.html

Eila Satka, M. and Skehill, C. (2012) ‘Michel Foucault and Dorothy Smith in case file research: Strange bed-fellows or complementary thinkers?’, *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(2), 191–205.

Elliott, M. (2020) Child Welfare Inequalities in a Time of Rising Numbers of Children Entering Out-of-Home Care. *British Journal of Social Work* 50, 581-597.

Emerson, R., Fretz, R. and Shaw, L. (2011) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. London: The University of Chicago Press

en/signs-of-safety-comprehensive-briefing-paper?

Eubanks, V. (2017) Automating Inequality. How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor. New York: St. Martin’s Press

Evans, B., Rahman, S., and Jones, E. (2008) Managing the ‘unmanageable’: Interwar child psychiatry and the Maudsley Hospital, London. *History of Psychiatry* 19(76), 454-475

Evans, T. and Harris, J. (2004) Street-Level Bureaucracy, Social Work and the (Exaggerated) Death of Discretion*. The British Journal of Social Work*. 34(6), 871-895

FAA. (2013). Fact Sheet – Report on the Operational Use of Flight Path Management Systems. Federal Aviation Administration [online] 21 November 2013. *[Accessed 11 March 2018]. Available from: https://www.faa.gov/news/fact\_sheets/news\_story.cfm?newsId=15434*

Family Justice Review (2011) *Final Report* [online] [Accessed 13 November 2013] Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/217343/family-justice-review-final-report.pdf

Family Potential. (2016) *Invisible Fathers Dissemination Event*. University of Birmingham. [Online] 21 April 2016 [Accessed 21 April 2016] Available from: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/research/family-potential/resources.aspx

Family Rights Group & The College of Social Work (2013) *Children and Families Bill Joint Briefing on clauses 1 & 14* [online] 14 May 2013 [Accessed 03 December 2013]. Available from: http://www.tcsw.org.uk/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/\_CollegeLibrary/Policy/TCSWFRGJointStatement.pdf

Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K., and White, S. (2018) *Protecting Children, a social model.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Featherstone, B., Morris, K., White, S. (2013) A Marriage Made in Hell: Early Intervention Meets Child Protection*. The British Journal of Social Work*. 44(7), 1735-1749.

Feaver, G. (1971) Popper and Marxism. *Studies in Comparative Communism*. 4(3), 3-24

Feinburg, W. (2015). Critical Pragmatism and the Appropriation of Ethnography by Philosophy of Education. Study of Philosophical Education, 34, 149-157

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998) Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine. 14*, 245-258.

Fenton-Glynn, C. (2016) *Adoption without consent update 2016*. Brussels: European Parliament

Ferguson, H. (2004) Protecting Children in Time. Child Abuse, Child Protection and the Consequences of Modernity London: Palgrave Macmillan

Ferguson, H. (2014) What social workers do in performing child protection work: evidence from research into face-to-face practice. *Child and Family Social Work*[online]. ‘Online First’ Published 21st March 2014 [Available from: DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12142].

Finch, E. (2004) Report on delay for the Minister for Children (unpublished) as quoted in Masson, JM., Pearce, JF., & Bader, KF. (2008). *Care Profiling Study (Ministry of Justice Research Series 4/08)*. (Ministry of Justice Research Report; 08(4). Ministry of Justice and Department of Children, Schools and Families.

Finlay, L. (2002) “Outing the researcher”: the provenance, process and practice of reflectivity*. Qualitative Health Research*. 12(4), 531-545

Fisher, M. (2009) Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative. Hants: O Books

Floersch, J., Longhofer, J. and Suskewica, J. (2014) The use of ethnography in social work research. *Qualitative Social Work*. 13(1), 3-7

FLR (2003) Protocol for Judicial Case Management in Public Law Children Act Cases [2003] 2 FLR 719

Forrester, D., Lynch, A., Bostock, L., Newlands, F., Preston, B. and Cary, A. (2017) *Family Safeguarding Hertfordshire: Evaluation Report*. London: DfE

Foucault, M. (1969), *Archaeology of Knowledge* (translated by A. M Sheridan Smith 1972) New York: Pantheon Books

Foucault, M. (1976) *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume* 1 (translated by R Hurley, 1998) London: Penguin

Foucault, M. (2003) ‘The subject and power’. In P. Rainbow & N. Rose (Eds.), *The essential Foucault.*(pp. 126-144). New York, NY: The New Press.

Fraser, D. (2009) *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*. 4th ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave

Frean. A. (1999) “Give Babies for Adoption" call by Straw. *The Times [online] 26 January 1999. [Accessed 28 September 2018]. Available from:* https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/give-babies-for-adoption-call-by-straw-wswrxqklp

Frost, N. and Parton, N. (2009) Understanding Children’s Social Care: Politics, Policy and Practice. London: Sage

Furness, S. (2015) Conduct Matters: The Regulation of Social Work in England. British Journal of Social Work. 45, 861-879

Galilee, J. (2006) L*iterature review on media representations of social work and social workers*. 21st Century Social Work Review Group: Scottish Executive. [Accessed 18 August 2018] Available from: https://www.socialworkscotland.org.uk/resources/pub/SocialWorkersandtheMedia.pdf

Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology.* Cambridge: Polity.

Garrett, P. (2005) Social work’s ‘electronic turn’: notes on the deployment of information and communication technologies in social work with children and families. *Critical Social Policy* 25(4), 529-553

Garrett, P. (2017) Ending the ‘Cruel Rationing of Human Love’? Adoption Politics and Neo-Liberal Rationality*. British Journal of Social Work*, 1-18

Gault, A. (2018) *The Third Space*. Worthing: Resolutions Consultancy

Gesell, A., and Thompson, H. (1934) *Infant Behaviour: Its Genesis and Growth.* New York: McGraw-Hill

Gibson, M. (2016a) The role of self-conscious emotions in child protection social work practice. A case study of a local authority safeguarding service. Thesis. University of Birmingham

Gibson, O. (2016b) Health, Environment and the Institutional Care of Children in Late Victorian London. Thesis. QMUL

Giddens, A. (1971) Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: an analysis of the writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Max Weber. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Gilles, V. Edwards, R. Horsley, N. (2017) Challenging the politics of early intervention, who’s ‘saving’ who and why. Bristol: Policy Press

Gillham, B., Tanner, G., Cheyne, B., Freeman, I., Rooney, M. and Lambie, A. (1998) Unemployment rates, single parent density, and indices of child poverty: Their relationship to different categories of child abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 22(2), 79-90

Glasby, J. (1999) Poverty and opportunity: 100 years of the Birmingham Settlement. Studley: Brewin Books

Gove, M (2011) *Saved by the love of strangers*. The Daily Mail. [online] 5 November 2011 [Accessed 20 September 2020]. Available from https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2057850/Michael-Gove-describes-adoption-transformed-life.html

Great Britain *Children Act 2004* [online] London: the Stationery Office [13th November 2013]. Available from: http://www.legislation.gov.uk

Great Britain, *Children Act 1989* [online] London: The Stationery Office [13th November 2013]. Available from: http://www.legislation.gov.uk

Great Britain, *Children and Families Act 2014* London: The Stationery Office [14th May 2015]. Available from: http://www.legislation.gov.uk

Great Britain, *Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000* London: The Stationery Office. Available from http://www.legislation.gov.uk

Great Britain. Department of Health. (2000) *Adoption: A new approach. A White Paper*. Cm5017. London: HMSO

Great Britain. House of Commons (2003) Committee on the Lord Chancellor’s Department – Third Report. London: LDC

Great Britain. Lord Chancellor’s Department. (1999) *Single Service to Safeguard Interests of Children in Family Courts*. London: LCD

Great Britain. Lord Chancellor’s Department. (2002) *Scoping Study on Delay in Children Act Cases*. London: LCD

Great Britain. Science and Technology Committee. (2018) *Evidence-based Early Intervention. The evidence behind early intervention. London: By the authority of the House of Commons.* [Accessed June 2019] Available from: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmsctech/506/50605.htm#\_idTextAnchor004

Great Britain. *The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations*. (2010) UK Statutory Instruments. 2010. No. 959. Part 4. Chapter 2. Regulation 24. [online]. London: The stationery Office. [Accessed 28 June 2017]. Available from: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/959/regulation/24/made

GSCC. (2010) *Codes of Practice for Social Care Workers*. London: General Social Care Council

Guillemin, M. and Gillam, L. (2004) Ethics, Reflexivity, and “Ethnically Important Moments” in Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 10(2), 261-280.

Haggerty, K. (2003) Ruminations on Reflexivity. *Current Sociology.* 51(2), 153-162

Hall, E. and Guy, J. (2010) The Baby Peter effect and the increase in s31 care order applications: Research summary. London: CAFCASS

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Routledge

Harding, S. (1993) “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” in Alcoff, L and Potter, E *Feminist Epistemologies*, New York: Routledge.

Harding, S. (1995) “‘Strong Objectivity’: A Response to the New Objectivity Question,” *Synthese*. (104)3, 331-349

Harding, S. (2004) The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies, London: Routledge.

Harris, J. (2008) Sate social work: constructing the present from moments in the past, *British Journal of Social Work*. 38, 662-679

Harvey, P. (2014) Action research to explore the implementation and early impacts of the revised Public Law Outline (PLO). Ministry of Justice: HMSO

Hasan, M. (2010) Election 2010: Silent on immigration? Hardly. London: *Guardian* [online] 18 April 2010. [accessed 12 December 2018]. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/18/general-election-2010-immigration

Heilman, S. (2002) *When a Jew Dies: The Ethnography of a Bereaved Son*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Helm, D. (2017) Can I have a word? Social worker interaction and sense making. *Child Abuse Review.* 26, 288-398

Helmreich, R. L., Merritt, A. C., & Wilhelm, J. A. (1999) The evolution of crew resource management training in commercial aviation. *The international journal of aviation psychology*, 9(1), 19-32.

Hendrick, (2003) Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate. Bristol: Policy Press

Hill, N. and Schneider, W. (2006) Brain Changes in the Development of Expertise: Neuroanatomical and Neurophysiological Evidence about Skill-Based Adaptations. In K. A. Ericsson, N. Charness, P. J. Feltovich, & R. R. Hoffman (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance* (p. 653–682). Cambridge University Press.

Holt, K and Kelly, N (2015) Factors that influence engagement in pre-proceedings practice: presenting the roles of professionals working within the family justice system through personal narratives, *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 38(1), 1-11

Holt, K. (2014) Exploring tensions in Public Law Care Proceedings: an analysis of the legislative boundaries of decision-making within pre-proceedings protocols and the role of advocacy in promoting justice for families. Thesis. University of Bradford.

Holt, K. and Kelly, N. (2012) Rhetoric and reality surrounding care proceedings: Family justice under strain. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*. 34(2), 155-166.

[Hood, R](https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/view/creators/16055.html), [Goldacre, A](https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/view/creators/24092.html), [Gorin, S](https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/view/creators/38543.html) and Bywaters, P (2020b) Screen, ration and churn : demand management and the crisis in children's social care. The British Journal of Social Work. 50(3), 868-889.

[Hood, R](https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/view/creators/16055.html), [Gorin, S](https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/view/creators/38543.html), [Goldacre, A](https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/view/creators/39260.html), [Muleya, W](https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/view/creators/67.html) and Bywaters, P (2020a) Exploring drivers of demand for child protection services in an English local authority. Child & Family Social Work. 25(3), 657-664

Hooper, C., Gorin, S., Cabral, C. and Dyson, C. (2007) *Living with hardship 24/7: the diverse experience of families in poverty in England*. London: Frank Buttle Trust

Houshyar, S. (2014) Poverty and child neglect. What we know and what we need to do. First Focus, [online] 27 January 2014 [Accessed 16 June 2020]. Available from: https://firstfocus.org/blog/poverty-and-child-neglect-what-we-know-and-what-we-need-to-do

Howe, D. (1992) Child abuse and the bureaucratisation of social work. *The Sociological Review*. 40(3), 491-508

Humphries, J. (2013) Childhood and child labour in the British industrial revolution. *The Economic History Review*. 66(2), 395-418

Hunt, A. (2004) Getting Marx and Foucault into Bed Together! *Journal of Law and Society*. 31(4), 592-609

In Our Time (2005) BBC Radio 4. 17th November. [Accessed 12 June 2016]. Available from iPlayer Radio.

James, W. (2000*) Pragmatism and Other Writings*. London: Penguin Classic

Jamieson, N., Tranah, T. and Sheldrick, E. (1999) The Impact of Expert Evidence on Care Proceedings. *Child Abuse Review*. 8, 183-192

Jensen, T. (2018) Parenting the Crisis. The cultural politics of parent-blame. Bristol: Policy Press

Jessiman, P., Keogh, P. and Brophy, J. (2009) An early process evaluation of the public law outline in family courts. Ministry of Justice: HMSO

Jeyasingham, D. (2014) Open spaces, supple bodies? Considering the impact of agile working on social work office practice. *Child and Family Social Work*. 21, 209-217

Joas, H. (2015) Pragmatist Social Thought, History of. *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences.* 2(18), 808-810

Jones, C. (2001) ‘Voices from the front line: State social workers and New Labour’, *British Journal of Social Work*, 31 (4), 547–62.

Jones, E. and Rahman, S. (2008) Framing Mental Illness, 1923-1939: The Maudsley Hospital and its Patients. *Social History of Medicine.* 21(1), 107-125

Jones, N. (2013) Good Enough Parents? Exploring Attitudes of Family Centre Workers Supporting and Assessing Parents with Learning Difficulties. *Practice Social Work in Action*. 25(3), 169-190

Jones, R. (2012). Child Protection, Social Work and the Media: Doing as Well as Being Done To. Research, Policy and Planning, 29(2), 83-94

Jones, R. (2014) British Journal of Social Work. The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: Social Work and Its Movement. *British Journal of Social Work*. 44, 485-502

Jones, R. (2016) Birmingham children’s services are again being churned up and set back. The Guardian. [online]. 25 May 2016. [Viewed 12 April 2017] Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2016/may/25/birmingham-childrens-services-dispatches-channel-4

Jütte, S., Bentley, H., Miller, P., and Jetha, N. (2014) *How Safe Are Our Children*?. London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)

Kay-Shuttleworth, J. (1839) The Training of Pauper Children. A Report Published by the Poor Law Commissioners in their Fourth Annual Report. London: William Clowes and Sons

Keir, G. (1952). A History of Child Guidance. Symposium on Psychologists and Psychiatrists in the Child Guidance Service. *British Journal of Educational psychology.* 22, 5-29

Kemshall, H. (1998). Defensible Decisions For Risk: Or ‘It’s The Doers Wot Get The Blame’. Probation Journal, 45(2), 67-72

Knight, L. (2015) Jane Adams and the Pullman Strike of 1894. *Social Welfare History Project*. [online] 5 October 2015 [Accessed 12 June 2016]. Available from: http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/labor/jane-addams-and-the-1894-pullman-strike/

Kohlke, M, and Gutleben, C. (2011) Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics. New York: Rodopi

Kraemer, S., Steele H., and Holmes, J. (2007) A tribute to the legacy of John Bowlby at the centenary of his birth *Attachment & Human Development* 9(4), 303 – 306

Lambert, M. (2017) Problem Families and the post war welfare state in the north west of England 1943-74. Thesis Lancaster University.

Lambert, M. (2018) Between “families in Trouble” and “Children at Risk”. Historicising “Trouble Family” Policy in England since 1945*. Children and Society*. 33(1), 82-91

Laming, Lord. (2003) The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: report of an inquiry by Lord Laming. London: HMSO

Langston, J. (2016) "Invisible fathers: Exploring an integrated approach to supporting fathers through the Mellow Dads Parenting Programme piloted in a UK prison*", Journal of Integrated Care*. 24(4), 176-187.

Larizadeh, C. (2008) Section 38(6) Assessments: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly. *Family Law Week* [online] [15 August 2016]. Available from: https://www.familylawweek.co.uk/site.aspx?i=ed79118

Lavalette, M. and Penketh, L. (2016) (eds). Race, Racism and Social Work: Contemporary issues and debates. In Lavalette, M and Penketh, L. (2016) (eds). *Anti-Racist Social Work Today* Bristol: Policy Press

Layder, D. (1997) Modern Social Theory: key debates and new directions. London: UCL Press

LeCompte, M.D. and Goetz, J.P. (1982) Problems of reliability and validity in ethnographic research. *Review of Educational Research,* 52(1), 31–60.

Legood, A., McGrath, M., Searle, R. and Lee, A. (2016) Exploring How Social Workers Experience and Cope with Public Perception of Their Profession. *The British Journal of Social Work.* 46(7), 1872-1889

Limoges, J. (2010) An exploration of ruling relations and how they organize and regulate nursing education in the high‐fidelity patient simulation laboratory. *Nursing Inquiry*. 17(1), 58-64

Lipsky, M. (2010) Street Level Bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services. New York: Russell Sage

Longhofer, J. and Floersch, J. (2012) The Coming Crisis in Social Work: Some Thoughts on Social Work and Science. *Research on Social Work Practice*. 22(5), 499-519

Lymbery, M. (2005) Social Work with Older People: Context, Policy and Practice. London: Sage

Lynch, G. (2019) Pathways to the 1946 Curtis Report and the post-war reconstruction of children’s out-of-home care. *Contemporary British History*. 34(1), 22-43

Macintyre, D. (1993) What’s gone wrong the left right and wrong Tony Blair tells Donald Macintyre. *The Independent*. 28 February 1993. [Accessed 17 January 2018]. Available from: https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/whats-gone-wrong-the-left-right-and-wrong-tony-blair-tells-donald-macintyre-why-labour-is-now-the-1475895.html

Macleod, S., Hart, R., Jeffes, J. and Wilkin, A. (2010) *The Impact of the Baby Peter Case on Applications for Care Orders* (LGA Research Report). Slough: NFER.

Malik, S. (2013) Minister looking at making it harder for sick and disabled to claim benefits. London*: The Guardian*. [online] 30 September 2013. [Accessed 16 January 2019]. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/sep/30/iain-duncan-smith-sick-disabled-benefits

Manthorpe, J., Moriarty, J., Hussein, S., Stevens, M. and Sharpe, E. (2015) Content and Purpose of Supervision in Social Work Practice in England: Views of Newly Qualified Social Workers, Managers, and Directors. *The British Journal of Social Work*. 45(1), 52-68

Marx, K. (1956) The Materialist Conception of History. In: Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy. Buckingham: Penguin

Marx, K. (1969) Theses on Feuerbach. Translated by Lough. In. Marx/Engels Selected Works, Volume 1, 13-15: Moscow: Progress Publishers

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1970) *The German Ideology*. New York, NY: International Publishers.

Mason, W., Morris, K., Webb, C., Daniels, B., Featherstone, B., Bywaters, P., Mirza, N., Hooper, J., Brady, G., Bunting, L., and Scourfield, J. (2019). Towards full integration of quantiative and qualitative methods in case study research: insights from investigating child welfare inequalities. Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 14(2), 164-183

Masson, J and Morton, S. (1989) The use of wardship by local authorities*. Modern Law Review* 52, 762-789

Masson, J., Pearce, J. and Bader, K. (2008) *Care Profiling Study. Ministry of Justice Research Series 4(8)*. London: Ministry of Justice and Department of Children, Schools and Families.

May, T. (2011) *Social research: Issues, Methods and Research*. Berkshire: Open University Press

McAteer, E. (2004) Social Workers Pushed to Strike. *Community Care.* [online] 30 October 2004. [Accessed 12 January 2020]. Available from: https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2004/10/12/social-workers-pushed-to-strike/

McKeigue, B. and Beckett, C. (2004) Care Proceedings under the 1989 Children Act: Rhetoric and Reality. *The British Journal of Social Work*. 34(6), 831-849

McLaughlin, K. (2007) Regulation and Risk in Social Work: The General Social Care Social Care Council and the Social Care Register in Context. *British Journal of Social Work*. 37, 1263-1277

McLaughlin, K., Leigh, J. and Worsley, A. (2016) The State of Regulation in England: From the General Social Care Council to the Health and Care Professions Council. British Journal of Social Work. 46(4), 825-838

McNicoll, A. (2016) Dispatches undercover social worker referred to HCPC over secret filming. Community Care. [online]. 7 June 2016. [Viewed 12 April 2017] Available from: https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/06/07/dispatches-undercover-social-worker-referred-hcpc-secret-filming/

Ministry of Justice (2008) The Public Law Outline. Guide to Case Management in Public Law Proceedings. London: The Stationery Office

Ministry of Justice (2013) *Lord McNally’s Local Family Justice Board Speech* [online] 24 April 2013 [accessed 7 January 2019] Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/lord-mcnallys-localfamily-

Morris, K. and Tunnard, J.(1996) Family Group Conferences: Messages from UK Practice and Research. London: Family Rights Group

Morris, K. Barnes, M. and Mason, P. (2009) Children, Families and Social Exclusion: New approaches to prevention. Bristol: Policy Press

Morris, K., White, S. and Featherstone, B. (2013) Introduction. *Families, Relationships and Societie*s. 2(3), 457-458

Morris, M., Mason, W., Bywaters, P., Daniel, B., Featherstone, B., Mirza, N., Brady, G., Bunting, L., Scourfield, J., Hooper, J. and Webb, C. (2018) Social work, poverty, and child welfare interventions. Child and Family Social Work, 23(3), 364-372.

Morse J.M. & Field P.A. (1995) *Qualitative Research Methods for Health Professionals* 2nd edn. Sage, London.

Munro, E. (2007) *Child Protection*. London: Sage

Munro, E. (2010). The Munro Review of Child Protection. Part One: A Systems Analysis. London: Department for Education

Munro, E. (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection*: Final Report. London: Department for Education

Munro, E. (2011a). The Munro Review of Child Protection. Part Two: The Child’s Journey. London: Department for Education

Murdoch, L. (2007) Imagined orphans: poor families, child welfare and contested citizenship in London. *The Economic History Review* 60(1), 197-199

Murray, C. (1994) The Bell Curve; Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life. New York: Free Press Paperbacks

Nandy, L (2013) *Briefing on Children and Families Bill Timescale Provisions.* The College of Social Work [online] 7 March 2013. [Accessed 03 December 2013]. Available from: http://www.tcsw.org.uk/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/\_CollegeLibrary/Policy/2013%2003%2007%20Lisa%20Nandy%20Bill%20Committee%20Amendments%20Submission%20Clause%2014.pdf

Narey, M. (2011) *The Narey Report on Adoption: Our blueprint for Britain’s lost children*. The Times. [online] 5 July 2011. [Accessed 20 September 2020]. Available from: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-narey-report-a-blueprint-for-the-nations-lost-children-7b2ktmcrf0w

Neate, P. (2013) Reports of Mick Philpott’s awful crime omit the phrase ‘domestic violence’ London: *The Guardian.*

Newman, C. (2013) To Punish or Protect: The New Poor Law and the English Workhouse. International *Journal of Historical Archaeology*. 18(1), 122-145

Noble, C. and Irwin, J. (2009) ‘Social work supervision: an exploration of the current challenges in a rapidly changing social, economic and political environment’, *Journal of Social Work*. 9(3), 345–358.

O’Neill, B. (1998) Institutional Ethnography: Studying Institutions from the Margins. The *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*. 25(4), 127-144

O’Neill, T (2000). *A place called Hope* (Second ed.) Blackburn: Educational Printing Services

OFSTED (2007) Ofsted Departmental Report 2006-2007. London: HMSO

OFSTED (2017) Inspective local authority children’s services. Framework and Guidance. London: HMSO

Olssen, M. (2004) Foucault and Marxism: rewriting the theory of historical materialism. *Policy Futures in Education*. 2(3), 454-482

ONS (2019) *Children looked after in England (including adoption), year ending 31 March 2019* [accessed December 2019]. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/850306/Children\_looked\_after\_in\_England\_2019\_Text.pdf 27222222222

Parada, H. (2004) Social Work Practices within the Restructured Child Welfare System in Ontario: An Institutional Ethnography. Ca*nadian Social Work Review*. 21(1), 67-86

Parasuraman, R., Sheridan, T.B., & Wickens, C.D. (2000) A model for types and levels of human interaction with automation. Systems, Man and Cybernetics, Part A: Systems and Humans, *IEEE Transactions on*, 30(3), 286-297.

Parliament. (2010) The Working of the Family Courts, 20 July 2010 [accessed June 2016]. Available from: https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/justice-committee/news/the-working-of-the-family-courts/

Parton, N. (2006) 'Every Child Matters': The shift to prevention whilst strengthening protection in children's services in England. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *28*(8), 976-992.

Parton, N. (2008) Changes in the Form of Knowledge in Social Work: From the ‘Social’ to the ‘Informational’? *British Journal of Social Work*. 38, 253-269

Parton, N. (2014) The Politics of Child Protection: Contemporary Developments and Future Directions. London: Palgrave

Parton, N. (2016). The Contemporary Politics of Child Protection: Part Two (the BASPCAN Founder’s Lecture 2015). Child Abuse Review. 25(1), 9-16

Parton, N. (2017). Concerns about risk as a major driver of professional practice. In: Connolly, M, ed. Beyond the Risk Paradigm in Child Protection. London: Palgrave. 3-14

Patrick, J. (2013) *A Glasgow Gang Observed.* Castle Douglas: Neil Wilson Publishing Limited

Paxon, C. and Waldfogel, J. (1999) *Work, Welfare, and Child Maltreatment.* Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research

Pence, E. (1997) Safety for Battered Women in a Textually Mediated Legal System. Thesis. University of Toronto.

Pepper, H (2016) The Burden of Accountability in Social Work with Children and Families, Thesis. University of Bristol.

Petitt, K. (2019) Safety Culture, Training, Understanding, Aviation Passion: The Impact on Manual Flight Operational Performance. Thesis. Embry-Riddle, Aeronautical University

Petley, J. (2014). ‘Kill a kid and get a house’: Rationality versus Retribution in the Case of Robert Thompson and Job Venables, 1993-2001. In: Wagg, S. and Pilcher, J. ed. Thatcher’s Grandchildren? Politics and Childhood in the Twenty First Century. Oxford: Palgrave Studies in the History of Childhood. 1-26

Phelps, C. (2005). Young Sidney Hook: Marxist & Pragmatist. United States of America: The University of Michigan Press

Piaget, J. (1936) *Origins of intelligence in the child.*London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Pickett, K. and Wilkinson, R. (2010) *The Spirit Level.* New York: Bloomsbury.

Piper, C. (2013) Investing in Children. Policy, law and practice in context. New York: Taylor and Francis

Plotnikoff, J. (1992) The Timetabling of Care Proceedings before the Implementation of the Children Act 1989 – Evaluation of a Pilot Project in a Magistrates’ Court. London: DoH

Popper, K. (1966) *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Volume 1*. The spell of Plato. London: Routledge

Poster, M (1987) Foucault, Marxism, and History: Mode of Production versus Mode of Information. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1984, (reprinted in 1987).

Price Waterhouse Cooper (2006) The Market for Parental and Family Support Services. London: DfES

Prior, D (2009) ‘Policy, Power and the Potential for Counter-agency’ in Barnes. M. and Prior, D. (eds). Subversive Citizens: Power, Agency and Resistance in Public Services. Bristol: Policy Press pp 17 - 32

Ramesh, R. (2010) Barnardo’s boss says more children need to be placed in care. *Guardian* online. [accessed June 2019]. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/jun/28/barnardos-boss-children-in-care

Rankin, J. (2017) Conducting Analysis in Institutional Ethnography: Analytical Work Prior to Commencing Data Collection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 16, 1-9

Rankin, J. and Campbell, M. (2009) Institutional Ethnography (IE), Nursing Work and Hospital Reform: IE’s Cautionary Analysis. *Qualitative Social Research.* 10(2), 1-20

Ray, L. (1983) Eugenics, Mental Deficiency and Fabian Socialism between the Wars. *Oxford Review of Education.* 9(3), 213-222

Re B (a child) (FC), (2013) UKSC 33: para 198 [accessed August 2019]. Available from https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2013-0022.html

References

Reiff, J. (2000) Rethinking Pullman: Urban Space and Working Class Activism. *Social Science History.* 24(1), 7-26

Reybold, L. (2002) Pragmatic epistemology: ways of knowing as ways of being. *International Journal of Lifelong Education.* 21(6), 537-550

Rogowski, S. (2010) Social Work; the rise and fall of a profession. Bristol: Policy Press

Rorty, R. (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Rose, M. R., (1987) ‘Social change and the industrial revolution', in R. Floud and D. McCloskey (eds), *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700. Volume I: 1700–1860*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 253–274.

Rosiek, J. and Pratt, S. (2013) Jane Addams as a Resource for Developing a Reflexively Realist Social Science Practice. *Qualitative Inquiry.* 19(8), 578-588

Sanchez Taylor, J. and O’Connell Davidson, J. (2010) Unknowable secrets and golden silence: reflexivity and research on sex tourism. In: Ryan-Flood, R. and Gill, R. (eds) (2010). *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: feminist reflections*. Oxon: Routledge

Satyamurti, C. (1981) Occupational Survival: The Case of the Local Authority Social Worker. Oxford: Blackwell

Schulenberg, U. (2019). Marxism, Pragmatism, and Postmetaphysics. Germany: Palgrave Macmillan

Sedlack, A. and Broadhurst, D. (1996) *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect.* Washington: US Department of Health and Human Services

Shields, P. (2017) Jane Addams: Progressive Pioneer of Peace, Philosophy, Sociology, Social Work and Public Administration. New York: Springer International Publishing

Shifrin, T. (2004) ‘Striking Differences’, The *Guardian*, Society Supplement. [online] 24 November 2004. [Accessed 12 January 2020]. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2004/nov/24/industrialaction.guardiansocietysupplement

Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R and Furlong, A (2016) Not single spies but in battalions: a critical, sociological engagement with the idea of so‐called ‘Troubled Families’, 17 October 2016 *The Sociological Review* 64(4), 821-836

Shoesmith, S. (2016) *Learning from Baby P: The politics of blame, fear, and denia*l. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Shore, H. (2008) Punishment, Reformation, or Welfare: Responses to ‘The Problem’ of Juvenile Crime in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. in Johnston, H. (ed) *Punishment and Control in Historical Perspective*. London: Palgrave

Simpson, R. (1981) 'Social services under stress', *New Society*, 12 November, 1981

Skeggs, B. (2004) *Class, Self, Culture*, London: Routledge.

Skeggs, B. (2005) ‘The making of class and gender through visualizing moral subject formation’, *Sociology,* 39(5), 965–982.

Skeggs, B. (2011) ‘Imagining personhood differently: person value and autonomist working class value practices’, *Sociological Review*, 59 (3), 579–594.

Smith, D. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Toronto. Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Smith, D. (1990a) (2nd Ed) The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Smith, D. (1990b) Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling*,* London: Routledge

Smith, D. (1999) Writing the Social: critique, theory and investigations, Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Smith, D. (2005). Institutional Ethnography: A sociology for People. Oxford: Alta Mira Press

Smith, D. (2017) *Conversations*. Recorded as part of supervision / training. 7th June 2017

Smith, G. (1988) Policing the gay community: An inquiry into textually-mediated social relations. *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*. 16(2), 163-183

Smith. D. (1986) Institutional ethnography: A feminist method. *Resources for Feminist Research*, 15(1), 6-13.

Social Exclusion Unit (2001) Preventing Social Exclusion: a report by the Social Exclusion Unit, [accessed September 2019]. Available from: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5218/1/preventing.pdf

Social Services Inspectorate (2004) The Social Services Inspectorate: A History. Origins, Impact and Legacy. London: HMSO

Social Work Task Force (2009a) *First report of the Social Work Task Force*. May 2009. London: Department of Health and the Department for Children, School and Families

Social Work Task Force (2009b) *Facing up to the Task: The interim report of the Social Work Task Force*. July 2009. London: Department of Health and the Department for Children, School and Families

Social Work Task Force (2009c*) Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force.* November 2009. London: Department of Health and the Department for Children, School and Families

Spicker, P, (1990) Charles Booth: the examination of poverty. *Social Policy and Administration,* 24 (1), 21-38.

Stark, J. (2014) The Potential of Deweyan-Inspired Action Research. *Education and Culture*. 30(2), 87-101

Stevenson, L. (2018) Artificial intelligence: how a council seeks to predict support needs for children and families. *Community Care Online.* [accessed December 2018]. Available from: https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/03/01/artificial-intelligence-council-seeks-predict-support-needs-children-families/

Stewart, J. (2012) The Dangerous Age of Childhood: guidance in Britain c 1918-1955, History and Policy, Policy Papers [accessed December 2018]. Available from: http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-dangerous-age-of-childhood-child-guidance-in-britain-c.1918-1955

Swain, S, Hillel, M, Starkey, P (2010) Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850-1915, Manchester: Manchester University Press

Taylor, H., Beckett, C. and McKeigue, B. (2007) Judgements of Solomon: anxieties and defences of social workers involved in care proceedings. *Child and Family Social Work*. 13(1), 23-31

Taylor, I. and Bogo, M. (2014) Perfect Opportunity - Perfect Storm? Raising the standards of social work education in England. British Journal of Social Work. 44, 1402-1418

Taylor, M. (2007). Professional Dissonance: A Promising Concept for Clinical Social Work. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*. 77(1), 88-99

The Child Protection All Party Parliamentary Group (2013) *Making Care Proceedings Better for Children* [online] [accessed 3rd December 2013]. Available from: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/policyandpublicaffairs/england/consultations/APPG-CP-report\_wdf94210.pdf

The Policy, Ethics and Human Rights Committee. (2014) The Code of Ethics for Social Work. Birmingham: British Association of Social Work

Thomas, C. (2018) Care Crisis Review: Factors contributing to national increases in numbers of looked after children and applications for care orders. London: Family Rights Group

Thomas, G. (2013) How to do your Research Project: A guide for students in education and applied social sciences. London: Sage

Tidsall, L. (2016) Education, parenting and concepts of childhood in England, c. 1945 to c. 1979. *Contemporary British History*. 31(1), 24-46

Timmins, N. (2001) The Five Giants: A biography of the welfare state. London: Fontana Press

Townsend, E. (1992) Institutional Ethnography: explicating the social organization of professional health practices intending client empowerment. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*. 83, 58-61

Travis, A. and Stratton, A. (2011) David Cameron’s solution for Broken Britain: tough love and tougher policing, [accessed June 2018]. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/aug/15/david-cameron-broken-britain-policing

Turmel, Andre (2008) A Historical Sociology of Childhood: Developmental Thinking, Categorization and Graphic Visualization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Turnell, A. (2018) *Signs of Safety Comprehensive Briefing Paper. Ed 4.* Signs of Safety Knowledge Bank [accessed September 2018]. Available from: https://knowledgebank.signsofsafety.net/resources/introduction-to-signs-of-safety/signs-of-safety-comprehensive-briefing-paper/signs-of-safety-comprehensive-briefing-paper-

Turner-Daly, B. and Jack, G. (2014) Rhetoric vs. reality in social work supervision: the experiences of a group of child care social workers in England. *Child and Family Social Work*. 22(1), 36-46

Turner, S. (2007) Texts and the institutions of municipal government: The power of texts in the public process of land development. *Studies in Cultures, Organisations and Societies*. 7(2), 297-325

Tyler, I (2013) Revolting subjects: social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain. London: Zed Books

Vaughan, L. (2018). Mapping Society: The Spatial Dimensions of Social Cartography. London: University College London Press

Volz, K., Yang, E., Dudley, R., Lynch, E., Dropps, M. and Dorneich, M. (2016) An Evaluation of Cognitive Skill Degradation in Information Automation. *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society*, 191-195

Wacquant, L. (2009). Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity. United States: Duke University Press

Walby, K. (2007) On the Social Relations of Research: A Critical Assessment of Institutional Ethnography*. Qualitative Research*. 13(7), 1008-1030

Wallander, L. and Molander, A. (2014) Disentangling Professional Discretion: A Conceptual and Methodological Approach. *Professions and Professionalism*. 4(3), 1-19

Warner, J. (2014) ‘Heads Must Roll’? Emotional Politics, the Press and the Death of Baby P. *British Journal of Social Work*. 44, 1637-1653.

Warner, J. (2015). The Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection. Bristol: Policy Press

Wastell & White (2012) Blinded by Neuroscience: Social policy, the family and the infant brain**,** *Families, Relationships and Society*,1(3), 397-414.

Webb, C. and Bywaters, P. (2018) Austerity, rationing and inequity: trends in children’s and young peoples’ services expenditure in England between 2010 and 2015. Local Government Studies. 44(3), 391-415

Welbourne, P. (2014) Time is of the Essence: Risk and the Public Law Outline, Judicial Discretion and the Determination of a Child’s Best Interests. *Social Sciences*. 3, 584-605

Westbrook, R. (1992) Schools for Industrial Democrats: The Social Origins of John Dewey’s Philosophy of Education. *American Journal of Education*. 100(4), 401-419

What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care (2018). Signs of Safety: findings from a mixed methods systematic focussed on reducing the need for children to be in care [accessed January 2020]. Available from: reviewhttps://assets.ctfassets.net/7swdj0fkojyi/2d9bU5LbiYQIUkiMy4MkMC/d1dd7ba5b7bc457880e3fdfed631570a/SoS\_systematic\_review\_GD\_Edit\_v3.pdf

White, S. and Wastell, D. (2017a) The rise and rise of prevention science in UK family welfare: surveillance gets under the skin. Families, Relationships and Societies, 6(3), 427-445

White, S. and Wastell, D. (2017b) Epigenetics Prematurely Born(e): Social Work and the Malleable Gene. British Journal of Social Work, 47(8), 2256-2272.

White, S., Gibson, M., Wastell, D. and Walsh, P. (2020) *Reassessing Attachment Theory in Child Welfare*. Bristol: Policy Press

White, S., Wastell, D., Broadhurst, K., Hall, C. (2010) When policy overleaps itself: The ‘tragic tale’ of the Integrated Children’s System. *Critical Social Policy* 30(3), 405-429

Whitehead, L. (2004) Enhancing the quality of hermeneutic research: decision trail. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 45(5), 512-518

Wilkins, D., Forrester, D., and Grant, L. (2017) What happens in child and family social work supervision? *Child and Family Social Work*. 22(2), 942-951

Williams, N. (2004) “Child Adoption in the Seventeenth Century: Vignettes from Defoe and Pepys.” Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine 97(1), 37–38.

Wood, E. (1999) *The Local Government Bill: Best Value and Council Tax Capping*. Research Paper 99/1. London: House of Commons Library

Yan, M. (2015) Antiracism Discourse: The ideological Circle in a Child World. *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*. 30(1), 127-144

Zufferey, C. (2011) Jack of all trades, mater of none? Social work identity and homelessness in Australian cities. *Families in Society*. 12(5), 510-527

1. The Labour Party was rebranded as New Labour in an attempt to distance themselves from perception that they were the party of welfare dependency. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 2006 the Department for Education and Skills commissioned an analysis of the market potential for the supply of parent and family support services (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Just as New Labour’s approach to public spending was cited by the press as being the cause of the recession in 2007, their policies pertaining to diversity and immigration were cited as the reason for a lack of social housing, rising unemployment, and excessive welfare costs. New Labour themselves campaigned in the 2010 election on the premise that the government had not been proactive in addressing rising immigration (Hasan, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Narey was the Chief Executive Officer of children’s charity Barnardo’s in 2005 having previously been the director general of the prison service. In 2011 he became special advisor to the education secretary Michael Gove and in 2014 chairman of the Adoption Leadership Board tasked with pursuing the adoption reforms, namely, to increase adoptions and shorten the time they took (DfE; 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For parents who are assessed as lacking capacity under the Mental Capacity Act 2005, in respect of their participation in care proceedings, are appointed an Official Solicitor who will make decisions in respect of the proceedings and instruct a solicitor to represent those decisions in court. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In comparison to 3570 in 2019 (ONS, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Pullman Car Works company owned the houses which were rented to rail workers, as well as the utilities, and amenities such as the bank, the church and the shops. In response to the National economic depression the Pullman company reduced wages and increased rent (Reiff, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The exact details of Middleshire’s structure have been obscured in order to achieve a level of anonymity for the research site and the participants. Detailing the exact number of teams within each department, the management structure, and the smaller specialist teams would render the site identifiable. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In May 2016 Channel Four aired an episode of *Dispatches*, a current affairs documentary featuring ‘Vicky’, an undercover social worker in a Children and Families Team at Birmingham City Council, covertly recording her colleagues with a hidden camera attached to her clothes (Channel 4 Dispatches under cover in Birmingham’s Children’s Services, 2016). Workers were recorded during what they believed to be informal peer conversations about feeling overwhelmed, unsupported, and concerned about children they felt were at risk (Jones, 2016). ‘Vicky’ has since been referred to social work regulator HCPC for breaching the code of standards and ethics (McNicholl, 2016) and criticised by Birmingham Children in Care Council for exploiting their lives as entertainment (Authi and Elkes, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Within institutional ethnography the concept of work is not related to economic participation, rather Smith developed the “generous conception of work” (Smith, 2005) see page 108. I was struck by the volume of work, i.e. telephone calls and meetings, families have to do to ensure their compliance with the requirements of children’s services. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The RAG rating system is based on traffic lights; the colours red, amber, and green visually represent stages of warning. Red being serious, amber due, green within scale. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The resource panel was framed as an opportunity for the social workers to discuss the cases and present the information as to why the family needed longer term involvement. In reality it was a gatekeeping exercise that ensured compliance to the organisation’s expectations. This is discussed further on page 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The two adults fighting were clearly male and female, and whilst the time restrictions of my fieldwork did not allow for further exploration, I had become aware of the heteronormative discourse present within a range of Middleshire’s literature, practice guides, and in the direct work literature used with children. See appendix nine for a photograph of a story book used with children to discuss the importance of “strong parental bonds” alongside a cartoon drawing of a man and woman on their wedding day. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)