**Developing ethical, supportive and effective practice with children, parents and families subject to state intervention due to child welfare concerns**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by published work

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Abstract

This PhD by publication submission comprises eleven peer reviewed journal articles and a commentary outlining the coherence and significance of the published work. Ten of the publications explore different aspects of practice related to children and families receiving state involvement due to, or following, child welfare concerns. The other explores the use of a teaching method which provides opportunity for social work students to engage more meaningfully with knowledge from people who have experience of social work services.

The publications’ significance and coherence is illustrated through the discussion of five thematic subject areas which are mapped on to four, broader, domains. It is argued that the published work makes a coherent and significant contribution to child welfare studies and practice, and the field of social work, through: developing the empirical knowledge base for practice via qualitative and quantitative research; supporting the critical assembly of knowledge for child welfare practice through both empirical study and literature review; developing the use of methods in child welfare research through the utilisation of a range of data collection methods, including mixed methods, purposively and coherently to suit the exploration of varied practice contexts and to meet particular research aims; and, developing theory in child welfare studies through the application of particular social theories to empirical data and through charting a path which reconciles commitments to both social constructionism and realism. Underpinning all of the work has been a commitment to improving the experiences of children and families receiving the services of child welfare practitioners. Given the involuntary context of much of this practice the work also charts a path which seeks to recognise and, to some extent, reconcile the aims of empowerment and progressive social change within the context of compulsory state intervention into family life. This represents a further contribution of the work.

# Acknowledgements

The road here has been a long one and I am thankful for Paul’s love, support and company during the travels/travails.

Thank you to Sue White for agreeing to act as my academic advisor and for cajoling the commentary out of me.

I have benefited and developed during my time in university settings through engagement with many colleagues, people with experience of services and students. In particular I would like to record my gratitude for the challenge, collegiality and friendship that Harrie Churchill, Liam Foster, Malcolm Hill, Bev Jowett, Gillian MacIntyre, Nora McClelland, Kate Morris, Berni Murphy and Joe Smeeton have provided, and which has sustained me on the journey to date.

# 1. List of published work comprising submission

1. Sen, R., Kendrick, A., Milligan, I. and Hawthorn, M. (2008). Lessons learnt? Abuse in residential child care in Scotland. *Child & Family Social Work.* **38**(4), 411-422.
2. Sen, R. (2010). Managing contact in Scotland for children in non-permanent placement. *Child Abuse Review*. **19**(6), 423-437.
3. Sen, R. and McCormack, J. (2011). Foster carers involvement in contact: other professionals' views. *Practice*. **23**(5), 279-292.
4. Sen, R. and Broadhurst, K. (2011). Contact between children in out-of-home placements and their family and friends networks: a research review. *Child & Family Social Work.* **16**(3), 298–309.
5. Sen, R., Green Lister, P., Rigby, P. and Kendrick, A. (2014). Grading the Graded Care Profile. *Child Abuse Review*. **23**(5), 361–373.
6. Sen, R. (2015). Not all that is solid melts into air – care experienced young people, friendship and relationships in ‘the digital age’. *British Journal of Social Work.* **46**(4), 1059–1075.
7. Sen, R. (2016). Building relationships in a cold climate. *Social Policy and Society.* **15**(2),289–302.
8. Churchill, H. and Sen, R. (2016). Introduction: Intensive family support services: Politics, policy and practice across contexts. *Social Policy and Society*. **15** (2), 251-261.
9. Sen, R., McClelland, N. and Jowett, B. (2016). Belonging to the library: Humanising the space for social work education. *Social Work Education*. **35**(8), 892-904.
10. Sen, R., Morris, K., Burford, G., Featherstone, B. and Webb, C. (2018). ‘When you're sitting in the room with two people one of whom… has bashed the hell out of the other’: Possibilities and challenges in the use of FGCs and restorative approaches following domestic violence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, **88**, 441-449.
11. Sen, R. and Webb, C. (2019). Exploring the declining rates of state social work intervention in an English local authority using Family Group Conferences. *Children and Youth Services Review*, **106**. [Online Advanced Access, Viewed 2 October 2019]. Available from: doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104458.

# 2. Declaration of authorship for co-authored submissions

I confirm that the portfolio that I am presenting includes co-authored publications.

Within these co-authored publications, I declare, with the agreement of each of my co-authors, the following as being my individual contributions to the articles:

**Sen, R., Kendrick, A., Milligan, I and Hawthorn, M. (2008). Lessons learnt? Abuse in residential child care in Scotland.** ***Child & Family Social Work*. 38(4), 411-422. [Submission *1*].** I was lead researcher on the wider literature review commissioned by the Scottish Executive on which this article was based. I also led on developing the review into this article. My contribution amounted to 60% of the article.

**Sen, R. and McCormack, J. (2011). Foster carers involvement in contact: other professionals' views*. Practice*. 23(5), 279 - 292. [Submission *3*].** This was based on an empirical study I had carried out alone and which had resulted in submission *2*. For this article, I led on this article. My co-author undertook the literature review for the article and we edited each other’s contributions. My contribution amounted to 70% of the article.

**Sen, R. and Broadhurst, K. (2011). Contact between children in out-of-home placements and their family and friends networks : a research review. *Child & Family Social Work*. 16(3), 298–309. [Submission *4*].** My co-author had developed an earlier, smaller, literature review on this topic. For the journal article I significantly extended the literature review, developed the thematic foci and arguments and my co-author then edited the revised version. My contribution amounted to 70% of the article.

**Sen, R., Green Lister, P., Rigby, P. and Kendrick, A. (2014). Grading the Graded Care Profile. *Child Abuse Review*. 23(5), 361–373. [Submission *5* ].** I was lead researcher on the empirical study underlying this article and led on writing the study up for this journal article, with contributions from the other authors. My contribution amounted to 60% of the article.

**Churchill, H. and Sen, R. (2016). Introduction: Intensive family support services: Politics, policy and practice across contexts. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(2), 251-261. [Submission *8*].** This article served as the introduction to a ‘themed section’ of the journal in question for which my co-author and I were joint editors and in which we both also had our own individual articles – my individual article being submission *7*. My co-author led on the literature review for this introduction. I contributed to and added to the literature review and we edited each other’s contributions. We shared the task of summarising the other authors’ contributions to the themed section within this article. My contribution amounted to 40% of the article.

**Sen, R., McClelland, N. and Jowett, B. (2016). Belonging to the library: Humanising the space for social work education. *Social Work Education*. *35*(8), 892-904. [Submission *9* ].**  Nora McClelland first conceived of writing this article and developed the concept and original description of the Living Library within social work education. I developed the theoretical basis for the Libraries described in the article, honed the description of the running of the Libraries and added the section about the Libraries’ evaluation. My contribution amounted to 50% of the article.

**Sen, R., Morris, K., Burford, G., Featherstone, B. and Webb, C. (2018). ‘When you're sitting in the room with two people one of whom… has bashed the hell out of the other’: Possibilities and challenges in the use of FGCs and restorative approaches following domestic violence. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 88, 441-449. [Submission *10*]**. I led the empirical research on which this article is based, which was conducted with Kate Morris. It was Kate Morris who first suggested the three part typology which this article introduces. I further developed the typology from the empirical study data and wider literature and led on writing this up in the article with contributions from the other authors. My own contribution amounted to 60% of the article.

**Sen, R. and Webb, C. (2019). Exploring the declining rates of state social work intervention in an English local authority using family group conferences, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 106. [Online Advanced Access, Viewed 2 October 2019]. Available from: doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104458. [Submission *11*].** This article was based on the same evaluation as for *10.* I was chiefly responsible for writing the article. My co-author provided the statistical analysis for section 3.1 which augmented the pre-existing data by providing further analysis of national government data. My co-author also assisted in replying to statistical queries arising in the peer review process. My contribution amounted to 90% of the article.

Signed: 

Date: 03/10/2019

# 3. Introduction

After deciding to become a social worker, I moved from the north of England to Glasgow to study for a Masters in Social Work qualification. I then spent five years as a qualified social worker, principally working in a mainstream local authority children and families ‘Area Team’ in the south of Glasgow. I moved into a university position as a part-time Teaching Fellow at the University of Strathclyde in 2007, remaining in practice for the other part of the working week. After approximately six months I took up a full time Teaching Fellow position at Strathclyde before moving to Sheffield in 2010 to take up my current post as a lecturer. While in one respect it seems obvious that I should have developed intellectual interests as an academic that relate to my practice experiences there was also a conscious choice in doing so that was grounded in a belief in teaching, researching and understanding social work practice as part of a process of improving the experiences of children and families receiving statutory state intervention. Underpinning this belief has been a commitment to social justice and a commitment to the value of university based social work education and research activity. My intellectual interests have developed during the period I have been in the academy, but throughout they have remained in the area of child welfare studies and practice – that is to say that while both my teaching and research interests now extend beyond those connected to my direct practice experience, they remain grounded in that experience.

Kuhn (1996 [1962]) famously applied the concept of paradigm shifts to the development of scientific knowledge by describing a process whereby tyros within a given field were inculcated into that community through adoption of a set of paradigmatic constructs through which knowledge in that field was interpreted. In comparison to the natural sciences, the social work field – by which I mean social work as an academic discipline orientated around the study, and teaching, of social work practice - has a less discrete knowledge base, a less tightly regulated process of induction to a particular way of thinking as part of the entry into the field, and is both a more disputed and a more emphatically discursive field. Nonetheless, Kuhn’s description of scientific socialisation has some resonance. It has, for instance, been argued that the social work field has been prone to interpreting the subjects of its focus through a doxic lens – (e.g. Rojek et al., 1988; White, 1998; Oliver et al., 2012) and it would be strange if new entrants to the field were not influenced, albeit in looser ways than in the natural sciences, by its predominant constructs and leanings.

I want to consider the work presented here, then, as reflecting my individual interests and choices but also some of the wider pre-occupations in the field of social work during the period they were written. To do this, I will locate both the subject matter and methodological underpinnings of my work within key broader policy, political and social influences and philosophical debates – the coverage will necessarily be selective and the elements I focus on will reflect the key issues which have influenced my thinking during the period the body of work was written.

## 3.1. Structure of the commentary

After becoming a part-time teaching fellow at Strathclyde in 2007 there were several countervailing influences which I am aware of looking back. These were, firstly, a belief in a realist ontology which co-existed with a gravitation towards interpretive, qualitative, research in a context where this research tradition has been since the 1970s influenced by (radical) social constructionist and post-modern/post-structuralist positions which question whether there is a mind-independent reality. Secondly, the pull towards qualitative inquiry co-existed with a belief in the need for the field to develop a clearer evidence base for social work practice. However, the overarching tendency within the Evidence Based Practice movement has been to promote quantitative and, particularly, Randomised Control Trial (RCT) evidence as the gold standard. Thirdly, there was a tension in trying to reconcile compulsory state intervention in family life on the grounds of child welfare concerns with a commitment to social justice and progressive social change. These three tensions are brought out in more detail in considering the following five thematic areas which are used to structure the commentary:

* My use of qualitative research (*4. Contributions through qualitative research*);
* A realist approach (*5. Reconciling social constructionist and realist orientations*);
* The use of literature review to develop an evidence base for child welfare practice (*6. Developing knowledge for child welfare practice through literature review*);
* My use of mixed methods (*7.* *Mixed methods*);
* And, the reconciliation of practices which involve compulsory state intervention in family life with commitments to social justice and progressive change (*8. Values commitments, radical perspectives and statutory state intervention*).

## 3.2. Coherence and significance of the work

The coherence and significance of the work presented is laced through the coverage of the five thematic substantive subject areas set out above. However, I here also present four broader domains in which the work has made its most significant contributions, and in so doing illustrate its coherence. The four broader domains are summarised in *Table 1*, where I also set out in which domains I believe each of the pieces of published work have made their most significant contributions.

**Table 1: Main contribution of each of the articles in four domains**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Article* | *Domain 1: Contributions to an empirical knowledge base for child welfare practice* | *Domain 2: Theoretical contributions* | *Domain 3: Methodological contributions* | *Domain 4: Contributions to broader debates and understandings related to child welfare practices* |
| 1 | ✓ |  |  | ✓ |
| 2 | ✓ |  |  | ✓ |
| 3 | ✓ |  |  | ✓ |
| 4 | ✓ |  |  | ✓ |
| 5 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 6 | ✓ |  | ✓ | ✓ |
| 7 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 8 | ✓ |  |  | ✓ |
| 9 |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 10 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 11 | ✓ |  | ✓ | ✓ |

Domains 1 – 3 are self-explanatory. *Domain 4* requires a little further clarification to distinguish it from *Domain 1*. By ‘*Contributions to broader debates and understandings relating to child welfare practices*’ in *Domain 4*, I refer to ways in which the published work contributes to furthering debate and knowledge *underpinning* ethical and effective child welfare practice, whether that be in terms of values or political, policy or social issues which contribute to the broader context in which child welfare practice takes place. This is distinguished from *Domain 1* which refers to the published work’s contribution more in terms of findings *for* practice – contributions to the empirical knowledge base which directly speak to the ways in which child welfare practice should, or should not, be undertaken.

The work presented has made a contribution in *Domain 1* by helping develop – through primary research and evidence and policy review - the knowledge base for child welfare practices. The focus of my work has primarily been on improving the knowledge base in areas of practice that have been relatively overlooked (for example, practice around managing ‘contact’ for children in care ­- *2, 3* and *4*), or on under-explored aspects within wider issues which have been well explored (for example, parental perspectives where child neglect is a predominant concern and the historical abuse of children in the care system - *1*, *5* and *7* ), or on emergent issues for practice (for example, digital media usage - *6*).

Secondly, the work has made a theoretical contribution to the social work field in two ways (*Domain 2* ). My views on the use and creation of knowledge for practice have evolved over the course of the writing presented here. However, one consistent thread, which represents a contribution to the field, has been in steering a course between the polar siren calls of extreme relativism and naïve positivism in the creation of social work knowledge – poles towards which social work and social science research have both been drawn (White, 1997). I therefore spend some time within the commentary outlining the key elements of a broader (critical) realist ontological perspective which is a significant influence, illustrating how my work fits within it. There have also been more specific theoretical contributions in the application of particular social theories to social work contexts within three of the articles (*6* , *9* and *10*), which are explored within the substantive discussion.

Thirdly, the work has made some contribution in respect of research methods (*Domain 3*). The effective use of a range of data collection methods within the empirical research undertaken, and the tailoring of these methods to the aims of the different studies involved has, I believe, required creativity and made a contribution to the field. The empirical work I have undertaken has primarily involved using a range of qualitative methods but has also comprised the relatively complex use of mixed methods in two studies presented here (*5, 10, 11*). Within this domain an openness, as a primarily qualitative researcher, towards the uses of statistical data and analysis, alongside a critical awareness of its limitations, is a contribution.

Finally there is a contribution in all of the work to *Domain 4*  in engaging in, analysing and furthering debates relating to the wider context for child welfare practices. I principally illustrate it here in two ways. Firstly, through discussing how the work reconciles a commitment to improving the evidence for child welfare practice with an openness to what constitutes evidence for practice. Secondly, through exploring how the work has sought to reconcile social work as state mandated activity, with a legal mandate to intervene in private family life, and social work as a profession with explicit commitments to social justice and progressive change. In discussing this second element I explore my evolving views around the balance between social research as a scientific activity and a critical, value-infused, one.

# 4. Contributions through qualitative research

In this section I explore the way in which the work presented here has been influenced by, and contributes to, a tradition of qualitative research in the social work field. I begin by locating the qualitative tradition in social work and looking at the different qualitative data collection methods and strategies I have employed (*Domain 3*). I then draw out findings from some of the qualitative work submitted here to illustrate some of the contributions it has made to the empirical knowledge base and broader practice and policy development in my field (*Domains 1 and 4*). Finally, I illustrate the theoretical contributions in three of the qualitatively driven articles (*Domain 2*).

There is a strong tradition of qualitatively influenced research and researchers within the field of UK social work reflected in the 2009 survey finding of Scourfield and Maxwell. This reported that of UK social work doctoral studies, over half were primarily qualitative while only five per cent were primarily quantitative. Two of the empirical studies on which articles (*5, 10, 11*) in this submission are based were mixed methods studies though *5*  was primarily a qualitative study; *2, 3, 6, 7* are based entirely on qualitative data; and, *9* describes the introduction of a new teaching method, the use of which was influenced by concepts associated with qualitative inquiry. My attraction to qualitative research was partly based on a preference for the types of data it generates and explanations which it can offer. That the processes which the qualitative researcher engages in mirror some of those which the social work practitioner undertakes (Sheppard, 1995; White, 1997) may have underlaid this. Qualitative research is influenced by interpretivism and the concept of *Verstehen* (understanding), phenomenology, hermeneutics and social constructionism (Heidegger 1996 [1927]; Schütz, 1967; Schwandt, 2000) which emphasise the need to understand the subjective aspects of human life. This includes an understanding of how the individual subject interprets social reality, the exploration of the processes through which meanings are attributed to social phenomena, a focus on the ways in which social interaction is accomplished and the generation of understanding about the ways particular cultures and sub-cultures operate. Qualitative research thereby typically seeks to generate contextualised, textured, in-depth accounts that capture some of the complexities of situated lived experience (Mason, 2018). Though by no means exclusively focussed on them, qualitative research also has a tradition of giving attention to the accounts and perspectives of outsider or marginalised individuals, groups, cultures and sub-cultures, and on providing insights into issues which have been overlooked within wider public discourse and policy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This aspect of qualitative inquiry resonates with the social justice aims of the social work profession (e.g. IFSW, 2019).

It is important to acknowledge that, while I present qualitative inquiry as a unified approach above, there are divergent traditions within it. One of the issues of contention, to which I later return, is that of objectivity within the study of human subjectivity. The social constructionist perspective emphasises the human construction of social reality and thereby introduces the relativist notion of the particularity of social reality within a given culture in a given socio-historic period (Berger and Luckmann, 1991 [1966]). Consistent with this, qualitative inquiry associated with both social constructionism and hermeneutics emphasises the need to recognise the situated nature of any data and the influence of the researcher’s own subjectivity in co-constructing a research account and attributing meaning to it, both during data collection and analysis (Schwandt, 2000; Charmaz, 2006). This emphasis flows from assertion that, in Hammersley and Atkinson’s phrase (1995, p.17), ‘there is no way in which we can escape the social world in order to study it’. The implicit relativism of these positions is however in contrast to the classical Weberian description of interpretivism which argues that it is possible to objectively determine and describe the subjective meaning of social action (Schwandt, 2000).

Within the empirical work I have employed a range of qualitative methods: in both the range and the tailoring of particular methods to suit the divergent research aims in the studies in which I have been involved, there is a contribution. I have employed different types of qualitative interview, focus groups, practice observation and brief ethnography and qualitative thematic analysis of case file data within the studies on which the published work is based. My use of data collection methods has been purposively oriented towards meeting particular research ends. For example, in the study underpinning *2* and *3*, a focus group was employed after the qualitative interviews with a self-selecting subset of interview respondents. It, therefore, served as a form of respondent validation (Bryman, 2012a) of the themes which emerged from the initial interview analysis. In *5*, *10* and *11* the use of focus groups with professionals was close to the start of the data collection in these studies. This had a pragmatic element in that my colleague and I were outside researchers looking to gain data from parents, accessing these parents via professional gatekeepers. The focus groups in these two studies allowed us to gain initial professional insights regarding the subjects under exploration, as well as allowing us to discuss practitioners’ views on the best ways of gaining access to parents for the studies.

As the data collection tool I have used most frequently I focus here on the qualitative research interview. I have been sensitive to using interviews in different ways according to context and purpose. Semi-structured interviews fitted the purposes of the study underpinning *2* and *3*. I already had, from my own practice experience and the literature, a set of pre-defined topics I wished to explore on this issue with participants, but was open in the conduct of these interviews to participants shaping the dialogue via their own perceptions and experiences, and open to capturing participants’ experience which diverged from the topic guide contained in the semi-structured interview schedule. For the study in *6* two different types of interview were used. The first was a deliberately structured one which sought through vignettes, including a video vignette, to identify how young people themselves understood and framed four commonly defined risks associated with young people’s use of digital media (‘sexting’, a potential grooming scenario, unsolicited contact from a birth parent, and cyber-bullying), rather than focussing on their direct experiences. This round of interviews was followed by a second, a week or so later, which was relatively unstructured and based around the young person leading the discussion around a diary of the digital media they had used in the previous week. This second interview allowed young people to shape the narrative of the discussion around their experiences, interests and concerns.

I have, however, also employed a briefer type of qualitative interview – most often undertaken by telephone but also used face to face in ‘close to practice’ research encounters before and after observing a practice activity (e.g. in the studies underpinning *5*, *10, 11*). These interviews are undoubtedly ‘qualitative’ in the sense that they were open to the participant’s shaping of the dialogue but were also more restrictive than a fuller, semi-structured, or unstructured, interview as their shorter nature meant the discourse was shaped to a notably greater degree by the interview questions asked. The questions in these interviews also had a greater focus on capturing the actions and events which had occurred, rather than the trying to facilitate an understanding of the participant’s subjective experience and perspectives. This briefer type of qualitative interview is not well described or classified in the research methods literature. Given its brevity, event focussed nature and restrictiveness it seems a mismatch to frame it as sitting within the interpretivist paradigm. Rather, drawing on Goldkuhl (2012), I would suggest that they are better located within the paradigm of pragmatism. As with many philosophical and research traditions, philosophical pragmatism has spawned several divergent, not always consistent, strands (Legg and Hookway, 2019). However, two of its core shared features are a commitment to fallible progress through self-correcting methods of inquiry and, a focus on the practical consequences of a belief, idea or, particularly, an action (Legg and Hookway, 2019). The first feature has some overlap with a realist approach, which I explore below. At this point, it is noted that these two features of pragmatism are helpful in locating the briefer qualitative interview methodologically: it has a more instrumental focus, is more focused around actions and events rather than subjective understanding, and is more interviewer than participant led. Space restricts me from discussing my use of practice observations and brief ethnography in greater detail, but I also note that some analogous points could be made about such use. In both cases, there has been a contribution through a willingness to adapt the traditional ‘ideal type’ qualitative methods set out in the research methods texts to the requirements of undertaking real world research exploring social work and related practices.

## 4.1. Empirical contributions via qualitative work

In terms of developing an evidence base for child and family social work, qualitatively influenced aims can be seen in articles *5* and *7* which include findings on parental interpretations of, respectively, an assessment tool for assessing parental neglect and an ‘edge of care’ family support service provided to families where there were concerns about parental neglect. Notably, despite the identification of the ‘neglect of neglect’ within child protection policy and research (McSherry, 2007), studies which have gathered the perspectives of parents labelled as ‘neglectful’ are still relatively rare. The marginalisation of such voices can lead to a disjunction between service presumptions about what underlies family difficulties and what support may be best suited to helping. In particular, it currently often obscures the way in which poverty contributes to the issue of child neglect (Gupta 2017; Gupta, 2018; Morris et al., 2018).

In *5,* the interview data from parents, coupled with data from a small number of observations of the use of tool, threw into question some claims which its designers had made for it. Despite demonstrating some positive aspects of the tool’s usage, the study also illustrated that it could replicate, and sometimes amplify, tensions between parents and practitioners who were raising child welfare concerns. Within the wider study underpinning *7,* parental accounts of the ‘edge of care’ service were central to our evaluation of it. The decision to focus on one of the case studies in *7* allowed a more in-depth interpretive focus on one family’s experiences of the service. There is not currently widespread use of the qualitative case study method in social work research but its regular use dates back to the Chicago School in 1920s USA (Alasto, 2012). In more recent times it has found favour within realist qualitative inquiry as it allows exploration of the rich contextual detail within a case, and this is central to developing realist causal explanations (Maxwell, 2012). Though not tightly bound by a realist programme evaluation strategy, the evaluation study described underpinning *7* was explicitly framed within the realist influenced evaluation question of ‘*why* a programme works for *whom* and in *what* circumstances’ (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p.16, italics in original). Qualitative data allows the exploration of how actors’ reasoning, beliefs – their interpretations of social reality - impact on programmes, thereby helping to develop programme theory grounded in how and why participants respond to a social intervention in a given context, rather than how policy makers and programme designers perceive they should (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Pawson, 2006b).

In *7*, the detailed focus on the parents’ engagement with the service over two years also helped identify that the family’s progress – probably the most clearly positive amongst the nine families we included in the evaluation – had several ‘ups and downs’ during the course of their involvement. The Hughes family case study thereby illustrates both a success of intensive family support and some key limitations - that even in a family where family members and the service judged the work to be an outstanding success, the positive changes were hard won, non-linear, relatively precarious and not of the kind which met the then Government’s explicit criteria for evidencing a transformation of family circumstances in the analogous Troubled Families Programme (DCLG, 2012). On the other hand, the support did provide the key resources via which two parents, who desperately wished to maintain care of their four children, were able to do so: it is hard to overstate the value the parents and young person interviewed for the study attributed to this.

One of the motivations for undertaking the study underpinning *6* was increasing professional discourse and concerns about the ‘risks’ in the use of social media of looked after and adopted children (Fursland 2010; see also *2* ). ‘Risk’ has become a predominant paradigm through which children and young people’s lives have become viewed within children and family services (Featherstone et al., 2018a; Lefevre et al., 2018). The perceived risks of digital media were generating understandable concern on the part of professionals, social workers, carers and adopters. However, these concerns were based largely on hearsay and there were, at the time, no empirical data about how those with care experience conceived, interpreted and understood their use of digital media. It did also seem that, to the extent that greater ‘risks’ were identified for looked after and adopted children, this was accompanied by well-meaning but problematic recommendations to restrict their use of the Internet and other digital media . This study was then an attempt to better understand care-experienced young people’s own perceptions of how this medium affected their interpretation of, and engagement with, their digitally mediated social reality rather than presuming it.

While the data do illustrate that young people felt individually comfortable with their use of digital media, they also identified a number of broader difficulties and challenges in the young people’s experiences of digital interaction. A number of the young people vocalised personal knowledge or direct experience of different forms of ‘cyber-bullying’ and there were painful illustrations provided of the ways in which digital media had amplified, or emboldened, offline taunting or abuse. This extremely upsetting, but rather more mundane, concern of some of the young people in the study contrasted with the popular media focus on the risks of online grooming, and professional and carer concern about unsolicited online contact from birth family members. This led me to question whether the issues and concerns that pre-occupied young people in the study were qualitatively different from those that young people had in a pre-digital age, and whether the priorities for practitioner and service responses around young people’s digital media usage were properly aligned with young people’s own predominant concerns.

The study on which *2* and *3* was based was focussed on social workers’ experiences and views of managing ‘contact’ (what I will principally hereon refer to as ‘family time’ and ‘family relationships’). It was motivated by a sense developed as a practitioner that, despite social workers’ central role in facilitating family time, their perspectives were largely absent from the UK literature on this topic and there were no data on their views on this issue in Scotland, which has a distinctive child welfare system. While I do not want to overstate the marginalised position of child and family social workers given the far reaching state powers their role carries, it is the case that frontline social workers’ voices are often overlooked in policy, service and practice developments (e.g. Jones, 2001; Parton, 2004; Beresford, 2019) as well as some areas of research. The focus on frontline perspectives provided a number of insights into family relationships in care. Amongst these were that the study was one of the first to carry empirical data on the significance of the Internet as a new medium likely to influence the management of family relationships for children in care. Notably, despite the absence of many participants having first-hand experience of any family time occurring via the Internet, some practitioners still framed the possibility of it negatively. In turn, this sparked a motivation to pursue the topic further resulting in the study underpinning *6*. Secondly, the study highlighted the issue described in *3* of the lack of foster carer involvement in family time arrangements: this seemed to be an indicator of the way in which practice around family time for children in care in the authority in question had moved away from conceptions of partnership with parents originally envisaged in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

## 4.2. Qualitatively driven theoretical contributions

*9* describes and provides a theoretical underpinning to the use of Living Libraries as a mechanism for involving people with experience of services in the social work classroom in a way that engenders a respectful dialogue about understandings and experiences of social work. The Living Libraries were developed in response to questions raised in an internal course review that identified we could improve the involvement of people with experience of services on the course. The review found the narratives of people with experience of services tended to be reified by students in the teaching classroom, and yet marginalised in student discourse around their practice placements, where the focus was on the development of a professional social work identity. We identified the lack of dialogical exchange around different understandings of social work in the classroom inputs was likely to be linked with students not making connections between the learning from these inputs and their subsequent professional practice.

In *9,* I linked the ideas around the practice of the Living Libraries to phenomenological concepts. Schütz’s (1967) development of the lifeworld as a qualitative sociological concept is relevant: the Living Library exchanges are shaped around those parts of Living Books’ everyday thoughts, feelings and life experiences which they choose to share with students. However, deriving from Cartesian dualism, there is an idealist tradition within phenomenological thought that focuses on, and reifies, the mind as separate to the body. The article therefore instead drew on the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas to conceptualise the face to face, embodied, character of the Living Library exchange: Living Books and Readers experience each other as *body subjects* with the focus on the corporeally situated subjectivity of a Living Book. For some Living Books - for example those with disabilities and some of those attending the LGBT Living Libraries - recognition of the body as a site of exclusion and discrimination is significant and the emphasis on embodiment has been relevant for our thinking through the use of university space and the significance of the buildings in the place of the University as sources of inclusion/exclusion and sources of identity.

*6* brought social theory around personal relationships and intimacy (Bauman), theories of networked individualism (Castells) and digitally mediated communication in social work settings (La Mendola) to consider young, care experienced people’s narratives of their digital worlds. These empirical narratives suggested applicability of some aspects of these theories to some areas of the young people’s lives including a fear of missing out driven by constant connectivity and some greater superficiality of communicative exchange. Equally, other aspects were not applicable: most notably the young people’s social networks were overwhelmingly ones developed through face to face and geographically localised interaction, with digital communication more likely to augment communication with those known offline, rather than replacing it with networks which had been established online.

*10* introduced a three part typology of Family Group Conference (FGC) use in situations of domestic violence developed from observational and interview data from the study, augmented by an influential previous study in the subject area (Pennell and Burford, 2000). The typology proposed was original in seeking to classify types of FGCs used in situations of domestic violence and in so doing, trying to theoretically encapsulate how a restorative model of family participation is being adapted within the English child protection system. While the typology is primarily descriptive and classificatory, rather than axiologically hierarchical, it is the case that *Restorative* FGCs do offer the possibility of more fundamentally addressing the issue of domestic violence. This is because they can facilitate both the acknowledgement of the harm done through domestic violence and a plan of negotiated redress for it on the part of the perpetrator of the violence. *Resolution-Focussed* and *Pragmatic* FGCs are both limited in this respect, due to absence of paternal networks in the first type of FGC, and the absence of focus on the past harm of domestic violence in the second. The sparsity of *Restorative* FGCs in the empirical data itself illustrated the challenges in applying a restorative model within a wider child protection system which is not restorative.

# 5. Reconciling social constructionist and realist orientations

In this section Iexplore an important tension throughout my use of qualitative methods: my adherence to a realist ontology when the prevailing philosophical approach associated with qualitative research since the 1970s has been social constructionism (Houston, 2001). The reconciliation of these two approaches in my work represents a theoretical contribution to the field (*Domain 2*). This subject is implicit in the work itself, and I therefore expand on it here by firstly exploring key criticisms of social constructionist and realist positions; by secondly outlining the critical realist understanding of ontology and epistemology which has been a significant influence on my thinking; and finally by illustrating the ways in which a social constructionist-influenced realism manifests itself in my work (*Domains 1* and *4*).

While there is an implicit anti-realism within many contemporary versions of social constructionism, this is not the case with all (Hjelm, 2014), and it is important to acknowledge that social constructionist writing and thinking remains a notable influence on my thinking. The tension I refer to here is then a matter of how to reconcile the influence of social constructionism with a realist ontology, rather than rejecting social constructionism outright. In this section of the commentary I focus more on a critique of extreme relativism but the avoidance of a naïve positivism is also touched upon in this section, and underpins parts of the later discussions of Evidence Based Practice (*Section 6*) and mixed methods (*Section 7*). It is also worth acknowledging that while, throughout my academic career, I have held to what I would characterise as a pragmatic-realist ontology, the realist position I outline below has evolved over the last two years by more detailed engagement with elements of scientific realism and critical realism. This engagement partly relates to an ongoing piece of work applying the realist evaluation methods developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997) to an evidence review of FGCs.

Contemporary realism merges an ontological realism - a view that there is a reality independent of human thought - with an epistemological social constructionism – a view that humans can only have mediated knowledge of this independent world through mind-dependent constructions. While it can be said that existence of an ‘independent’ reality entails that it exists ‘objectively’ (Collier, 2003), I here maintain a distinction between the two to avoid conflating a realist position with a positivist one which maintains that there is a single reality, to which humans have direct and unmediated access. The realist position differs from most social constructionist perspectives which hold that there is no access to an independent reality beyond our mind-dependent constructions of it (Hjelm, 2014). Realists accept that knowledge of the world is perspectival and largely only accessible via discourse (Sayer, 1992; 2000; Bhaskar, 1998b [1979]) but the combination of this acceptance with an ontological realism places limits on the range of valid theories we can have about the world by reference to an independent, causal, reality. Critical realism therefore shares with social constructionism an epistemic relativism, but, unlike radical constructionism, rejects judgmental relativism (Fleetwood, 2014). Our observations of the world and reflections on them are accepted to be inevitably partial, contextualised and theory-laden but as these relate to an independently existing reality, they are not viewed as theory-determined:

*it is precisely because the world does not yield to just any kind of expectation that we believe it exists independently of us and is not simply a figment of our imagination* (Sayer, 1992, p.67).

Realist positions in contemporary social science writing are hardly rare (*inter alia* Archer (1998a & b; 2007); Bhaskar (1986; 1997 [1975]; 1998a; 1998b [1979]); Hammersley (1998); Pawson and Tilley(1997) and Sayer (1992; 2000; 2011). Nor are they without support in the social work field (e.g. Houston 2001 & 2010) or within qualitative research (Maxwell, 2012). They are though a minority position in qualitative inquiry which tends to adhere to a non-realist social constructionist paradigm (Houston, 2001; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2008; Maxwell, 2012). The vehemence with which some qualitative researchers reject realist positions is notable. Take, for example, two prominent qualitative US researchers, Guba and Lincoln, who in a popular and respected international text on qualitative methods remark that :

*the “postmodern turn” (Best & Kellner, 1997), with its emphasis on the social construction of social reality, fluid as opposed to fixed identities of the self, and the partiality of all truths, will simply overtake modernist assumptions of an objective reality, as indeed, to some extent, it already has done in the physical sciences. We might predict that, if not in our lifetimes, at some later time the dualist idea of an objective reality suborned by limited human subjective realities will seem as quaint as flat-earth theories do to us today.* (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, pp. 204 -205).

While it may be said that the target of Guba and Lincoln’s criticism above is ‘objectivism’, and by implication positivism rather than realism, the reference to ‘limited human subjective realities’ implicates realism within the remit of the critique. Indeed, a chapter in a slightly later book on qualitative methods one of the authors co-wrote specifically rejects critical realism, suggesting it has foundationalist and positivist roots (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

Social constructionist perspectives are united by the belief that social reality is contingent and accomplished by social actors and social action (Hjelm, 2014). Berger and Luckmann’s (1991 [1966]) influential account proposed that social reality was dialectical - people help shape social constructions of the world, but are also influenced and socialised into receiving accepted social constructions as ‘truths’ about the way the world is. This then suggests that a core social scientific task is the identification of social constructions within a given society and the exploration of the social processes by which those constructions are accomplished by and within given groups. According to some ‘soft’ versions of social constructionism, while we come to know the world through socially constructed concepts, there is an independent reality underpinning these such that the ‘empirical world can ‘talk back’ to our picture of it or assertions about it’ (Blumer, 1969 : 22[[1]](#footnote-1)). Such a position is clearly compatible with a realist ontology. In contrast, more radical social constructionism is not. Typically influenced by both postmodernism and critical theory it maintains that there is no mind-independent reality - or at least no secure knowledge we can arrive at about such an independent reality, its properties or effects (Guba and Lincoln, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Hjelm 2014). There are, therefore, argued to be multiple contextually situated ‘realities’ (Fleetwood, 2014).

However, I agree with Woolgar and Pawluch’s (1985) observation that adherents of social constructionism have a tendency to inconsistently militate between claims which imply the contingency of all knowledge while utilising concepts or arguments that invoke the existence of an independent reality. This point can be illustrated by reference to the Guba and Lincoln (2005) quotation above: their assertion of a radical social constructionism draws an analogy, without apparent irony, between a belief in an objective reality and a belief in discredited flat earth theories. Yet, the discrediting of theories that the earth is flat depends on the acceptance that our knowledge of scientific laws allow us to arrive at secure knowledge about the shape of an independently existing external world, beyond our mind-dependent constructions of it. An argument rejecting realist ontology therefore invokes it to make its case. Guba and Lincoln thereby engage in what Woolgar and Pawluch (1985, p.214) memorably term ‘ontological gerrymandering’ in their critique of the inconsistency of many social constructionists’ descriptions of social phenomena.

I also want to acknowledge a debt to work in the social constructionist tradition. One prominent representative of a more radical social constructionism is Foucault, whose wide body of work has influenced my thinking in several ways, as it has many others within social work and related fields. Though his influence is not explicitly referenced in the articles submitted here, I had utilised a Foucauldian genealogical method within my MSc Social Research Methods dissertation and other elements of his thought influenced ways I approached some of the subjects within the articles here, as I illustrate below, after briefly introducing some key relevant elements of Foucault’s thought. A central focus within Foucault’s work is on the way in which discourse – taken to be not just language but also rules, laws and action at individual, institutional and societal levels – constitutes the individual subject through bestowing on them a subject position which enables or constrains particular ways of acting, being and seeing the world and which thereby appear to be objectively true within the terms of that discursive formation (Foucault 1970 [1966]; Hall, 2012). Consistent with a social constructionist perspective, Foucault argues discourse to be historically variable ways of presenting knowledge which is the result of power relationships in a particular socio-historic moment or episteme (Foucault, 1970). What moves Foucault’s position beyond a soft social constructionism is the argument that nothing exists, or meaningfully exists, outside discourse (Hall, 2012). Thereby judgemental relativism results as there are no ways outside of socio-historical specific regimes of truth for judging any truth claim: ‘Truth isn’t outside power…Truth is a thing of this world’ (Foucault, 1980, p.131). Consistent with this contention, Foucault draws on Nietzsche to question Enlightenment accounts which position changing values and knowledge through history as part of a linear, progressive development because it assumes that ‘words had kept their meaning, that desires still point in a single direction and that ideas retained their logic’ (Foucault, 1977, p.1).

The postmodern/post-structuralist contention that discourse is constitutive of human consciousness rather than constituted by it underpins a strongly relativist epistemology (Callinicos, 1989). Some within social work had argued for the possibility of using the deconstructive critique inherent within postmodern analysis along with its embracing of pluralism, divergence and difference as part of an emancipatory project geared towards social justice and progressive change (e.g. Parton, 1994; Pease and Fook, 1999; Parton and O’Byrne, 2000).Undoubtedly there are positives to the ways in which postmodern-influenced critical analysis has sought to deconstruct accepted orthodoxies, and again elements of this influence can be traced in the work here. In *9,* the possibility of multiple different narratives are embraced in the Living Library both in terms of, for example, the diversity of ways in which a Living Book may narrate an aspect of their experience in a given reading and how Readers attribute their own meaning to a reading based on the co-construction of the story through the lens of their own experiences. The possibility of multiple identities is also embraced in seeking to move beyond the essentialising constructs of ‘service user’ and ‘student social workers’ to understandings that intersect these categories. Arguably the influence of a post-modern criticality is also evident in article *10*. In an influential article Featherstone and Trinder (1997) challenged essentialist constructions of gender which domestic violence policy, influenced by mainstream feminist thought, had adopted. *10* grapples with similar issues in conceptualising the possibility of different responses to the complexities of domestic violence. While recognising the positive way in which state recognition of domestic violence has moved it from being a private trouble, we also question the ways in which the state co-option of feminist concerns now often leads to rigid, formulaic, state responses to it. Such responses result in a separation paradigm which often responsibilises victimised women for managing their separation from violent partners, with limited support. It also tends to assume violent men are uniformly beyond the scope of meaningful change.

The adoption of a postmodernist radical social constructionism is though open to several criticisms. One criticism relates to questions regarding its explanatory accuracy in respect of social work within late modernity (Smith and White, 1997). Its most problematic facet in respect of the current discussion, however, relates to the relativism invoked by the assertion that there is no extra-discursive reference point by which to judge truth claims. Without such a reference point it is hard to see how arguments for social justice can be sustained in the face of challenge. Within a postmodern paradigm such arguments can only be understood as one localised narrative jarring against another, with the relationship between discursive claims and an independent material reality unknowable (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]). Non-realist social constructionism is criticised by critical realists due to a an ‘epistemic fallacy’ (Bhaskar (1998b) [1979], p.14, *passim*) whereby it collapses ontology into epistemology by arguing that our mind-mediated knowledge of the world is all that there is to the world. Positivism and empiricism are similarly criticised for equating ontology with epistemology by arguing that empirical knowledge of the world provides direct, unmediated access to an objective reality (Bhaskar, (1997) [1975]; 1998a). In critical realist ontology the world is both stratified and causal - with experiences, events and underlying structural causes/generative mechanisms the three categories of entities which exist in the three domains of *empirical reality* (experienced events), *actual reality* (events whether experienced or not), and the *real* (generative structures and mechanisms, which are typically unobservable and which have powers, liabilities and tendencies having causal effect on events and experiences) (Elder-Vass, 2007). This brings the focus to the search for underlying generative mechanisms and structures, and the contextual conditions which allow such mechanisms to operate and give rise to effects observed in the empirical world (Mingers, 2006). Given that such mechanisms and structures are largely unobservable, this occurs through a process of *retroduction* ­- or creative reflection on the underlying generative causes which give rise to empirically observed effects (Mingers, 2006). In the application of these concepts to evaluation research in the work of Pawson and Tilley (1997), the search for generative mechanisms is operationalised through the Context-Mechanism-Outcome configuration (CMO) heuristic.

The realist position acknowledges that, unlike entities of the natural world, social structures do not exist independently of human thought and action and their operation is thereby entwined with human agency and interpretation. As such, explanations of social phenomena, unlike natural laws, are to some degree localised and time specific (Mingers, 2006). Nonetheless, social structures are, in realist accounts, ontologically real and have causal effect (Archer, 1998b), or as Mingers terms it, they ‘exist only in their effects or occurrences’ (2006, p.25). Social phenomena are also conceived as having a close relationship with entities in the material world and are linked to the cultural resources available in a given society which condition the ways in which individuals interpret social reality (Sayer, 1992; Maxwell, 2012). Core tasks within the realist causal explanation of social phenomena are therefore the exploration of the relationship between the social and material worlds (Sayer, 1992) and the exploration of the contextualised reasoning and understanding underpinning human action (Sayer, 2000). Rather than seeing causation in the empiricist, Humean conception of the constant conjunction of events, with a consequent focus on outcome regularities, critical realism seeks to explore the interaction between particular contexts and mechanisms which result in the occurrence or non-occurrence of particular events (Fleetwood, 2014). As realists view mental processes as ontologically real, this also avoids the sharp Weberian separation between interpretive understanding and causal explanation: reasons and beliefs can viewed as part of a ‘causal nexus’ which along with agency, reflective capacity and social structures interact to result in human action (Archer, 1998b; Maxwell, 2012).

I conclude this section by illustrating how some of the work in this submission has worked within this reconciliation of social constructionist and realist thought, and made a contribution to the field through it. Foucauldian notions of the normalising judgements within professional discourse (Foucault, 1999) influenced me to question claims to objectivity made about the Graded Care Profile assessment tool in *4*, and to think about ways in which the label of parental neglect in the lives of the parents in *4* and *7* helped frame the parents in ways that were beyond their control, and legitimised state intervention in their family lives. However, these discursive constructions of the families were not so hegemonic that they obscured the wider social and material factors which were closely entwined with the reasons the families required external support. The lack of material resources for families in both studies had real effects on them. Though the families’ circumstances were interpreted through socially constructed understandings - my own included - of good enough parenting, and the legitimated authority of the state to intervene in family life, they also related to an independent reality. The causes of the material independent reality in this example could be debated; the fact of it could not credibly be so. Equally, while there could be many differential constructions of the practices of state mandated professionals with families, and of the types of care provided to children, in each case I held that these constructions were related to an independently existing world. Put another way, I believed they related to real events which had real effects. The realities of children’s needs and material poverty places boundaries on the credible range of perspectives that can be sustained about professional practices, parenting practices and the ethical basis for state intervention in family life on the basis of child welfare concerns.

In *1,* Foucault’s concept of sudden ruptures in discursive formations through epistemic changes made me open to viewing the ways in which the framing of child abuse has changed over time, sometimes in non-linear ways that militate against seeing changing professional, policy and social discourse as a smooth transition to more ‘enlightened’ ways of caring (Hacking, 1992). In undertaking the research underpinning *1* I was also conscious that such changing notions of what constituted child abuse made judgements about historical review of child abuse difficult, but I also believed it was possible to do so (*see* Bingham et al., 2016). In the review, we adopted a pragmatic strategy of identifying acts and behaviours which would have been considered clearly abuse by the standards of the time period in question (Hawthorne, 2006). This is itself not unproblematic as judging what ‘the standards of the time’ were is most readily done by reference to laws, policy and public discourses. These far more strongly reflect the perspectives of those in more powerful positions in society, and also tend to set out official positions, rather than necessarily revealing actual practices (Bingham et al., 2016). Nonetheless, it was apparent from historical sources and secondary reviews of that period that there were behaviours towards children — for example, physical beatings, deliberate physical deprivation such as denial of basic food and water, adult carer-child sexual relationships — which were widely viewed as wrong both at that time, and by contemporary standards (*1*; *see* *also* Delap, 2018). These historical and historically focused sources also suggested that the ‘wrongness’ of such behaviours were understood then, as now, in realist terms regarding the real negative effects of abusive treatment on children, though understandings and constructions of what these effects were changed from the start of the period in question to the end. For instance, carer-child sexual relationships were seen as principally ethically wrong in terms of the ‘moral’ corruption of a child in the immediate post-war period, rather than in terms of lasting psychological harm, as from the later part of the twentieth century onwards (*1*; *see* *also* Delap, 2018).

From reading historical sources and analyses of abuse, I came to the view that while there is evidence that understandings of what constitutes child abuse are indeed socio-historic specific and localised, the claim that child abuse is a ‘social construction’ (Hacking, 1992) can be interpreted in ways which overstate historical discontinuities in understandings of child abuse. While I accept that changing understandings of child abuse illustrate that knowledge and practice in this area has not developed with smooth linearity, nor has knowledge been marked by clear epistemic breaks in understanding or discourse: indeed for two sets of ideas to be in contradiction it is the case that they must at least be mutually intelligible (Sayer, 1992; Kuhn 1996 [1962]). Consistent with this understanding, we found that the research for *1* identified bursts of policy concern and societal focus about the care of children in state care, followed by periods of relative silence, rather than complete ruptures in how this, or indeed child abuse itself, was framed and understood. It is further worth noting that the controversies around historical abuse are principally ontic rather than epistemic in character: that is to say, most disagreements do not concern whether acts which are agreed to have occurred should be constituted as abusive in the present day, when they may not have been so viewed by actors at the time they were undertaken. Rather, they tend to concern differential, largely mutually incompatible, accounts of whether actions both parties accept as abusive did actually occur, or not.

#  6. Developing knowledge for child welfare practice through literature review

In this section I consider my use of narrative reviews to review the literature in three of the articles in this submission (*1,2,8*). This section of the discussion principally relates to contributions the articles cited above have made in *Domain 1* but also speaks to some of their contribution in *Domain 4.* I refer to some of the key subject themes within the three reviews, but largely in passing, as the focus is on the use of a narrative review method in an era when there has been an increasing preference for employing systematic reviews*.* Questions about the most appropriate ways of reviewing evidence in turn require some consideration of what constitutes evidence for child welfare practices. Therefore, I start this section of the commentary by exploring this issue.

After starting work in a university post I was given the opportunity to lead on a literature review on historic abuse in residential child care commissioned, indirectly, by the (then) Scottish Executive, as part of a wider inquiry into historic abuse in residential care Scotland (Shaw, 2007). I also separately became involved in undertaking an evidence review on family relationships for children in care soon after. Subsequently, undertaking literature and evidence reviews has formed a substantive part of my research work, including second authoring an overview of intensive family support provision as part of an edited themed section in *Social Policy and Society* journal (*8*) as well as work not included in this submission (Sen and Green Lister, 2011; Sen, 2018).

During my academic career I have had different thoughts regarding how best to the develop the evidence base for social work practice. When I first moved into the academy, I was committed towards a view that there needed to be a stronger empirical evidence based on research data. However, I moved quickly towards embracing ‘evidence informed practice’ rather than Evidence Based Practice. Evidence informed practice is consistent with the acceptance policy, law, practice wisdom, the perspectives of people using social work services and ethics sit alongside research evidence as legitimate sources of knowledge for practice (Hill, 2009). On the other hand, Evidence Based Practice has tended towards a more narrowly constituted ‘What Works?’ agenda (Hill, 2009) associated with government funded research and programmes of research which promote the RCT methodology as the primary mechanism for establishing a stronger basis for practice (Sen, 2018). Evidence Based Practice has tended to a more prescriptive mandate of what practice should be, seeking to promote only specific interventions which have been proven to be more effective through experimental evidence (Webb, 2001). The central argument for prioritising RCT evidence is that its underpinning methodology minimises bias (Dixon et al., 2013; Dijkstra et al.,2016). With minimisation of bias as the guiding criterion for the quality of evidence, RCTs are argued to be the ‘gold standard’ of empirical study, followed by quasi-experimental studies, with qualitative evidence placed at the bottom of empirical evidence hierarchy, just above non-empirical expert opinion pieces (Gray et al., 2009). Where an intervention shows notably better overall outcomes than ‘treatment as normal’ it is seen as effective. If it is accepted that RCT evidence is indeed stronger and more reliable, then arguments can be made on the basis of both ethics (if interventions have negative effects we should stop using them) and efficiency (more cost-effective interventions should be preferred as they allow scarce resources to be more efficiently used), (Sen, 2018).

The desirability of Evidence Based Practice within social work has been subject to question and debate (e.g. Webb, 2001; Sheldon, 2002; Dixon et al., 2013; Gambrill 2018; Khoury, 2019). In terms of evidence review, systematic reviews of evidence which only include, and amalgamate findings across, rigorous RCT studies are seen as the most reliable evidence of all within the Evidence Based Practice movement (Gray et al., 2009). A systematic review is characterised by the use of explicit research questions to guide the review, explicit literature selection criteria and, crucially, criteria for excluding literature found to be methodologically evidentially weaker according to the hierarchy of evidence. In the associated procedure of meta-analysis, statistical amalgamation of study findings is undertaken by the pooling and weighting of the collective results of the individual RCTs to produce overall effect sizes for a particular intervention. Systematic reviews were initially developed in medicine where treatments tend to occur in systems which are more closed than complex social interventions. However, the pull of systematic reviews in the social sciences was sufficiently strong that at the time I began at Strathclyde a popular, well-regarded, social science text the methods declared on its back cover that: ‘Any piece of primary research ought to be preceded by a Systematic Review.’ (Torgerson, 2003, no page number). Such an assertion is made on the basis that systematic reviews better adhere to the principles of explicitness, transparency and replicability (Torgerson, 2003).

While my own views of the use of RCTs in complex social interventions have changed over time – from largely very supportive to far more questioning - I have maintained a view that evidence for practice should not only include experimental evidence, and been open to wider conceptions of what knowledge for social work practice should consist. Accordingly, the three evidence reviews submitted here, as well as one other not part of this submission (Sen and Green Lister, 2011) have all been narrative reviews, despite the arguments that such reviews are less rigorous and substantially more prone to bias than systematic reviews. The decision to undertake narrative reviews in *1* and *8* was partly pragmatic – a systematic review was clearly not feasible for the purposes of either study *–* but in *1, 4* and *8* the decisionwas also based on some more fundamental concerns about systematic reviews’ claimed superiority. I will deal with each point in turn.

In *1* the historical focus of the review meant there was relatively little empirical research evidence. Consequently, this necessitated utilising sources of data from the early post-war period onwards. The final included literature included a small number of primary historical sources (e.g. the Clyde and Curtis Reports), contemporary inquiry reports into abuse in residential care in Scotland, secondary sources with information about the issue in the time period in question and professional literature from the post-war period. In *8*, the review was purposive in picking out key sources to help contextualise and categorise the use of intensive family support services within contemporary welfare responses. The article served as the introduction to a themed section of articles in the journal - two of which drew on empirical studies and the other three of which were non-empirical in the sense that they did not present primary data, but instead undertook detailed policy analysis. While for this purpose a full systematic review would have been unfeasible, it would have been possible to restrict *8* to a review of empirical evidence, and to include only studies of intensive family support within it which could be viewed as ‘methodologically stronger’ according to modified hierarchy of evidence criteria. However, *8* includes only one empirical study and one evidence synthesis because the emphasis was instead on providing a critical overview of the way in which intensive family support services were situated within welfare policy. It therefore drew on sources which provided, or allowed for, policy commentary, critique and analysis. In carrying out the review in this way we were able to succinctly highlight tensions within international developed countries’ development of welfare provision, and through this, identify some of the tensions underpinning state intervention in, and support for, family life. In each case the inappropriateness of trying to carry out a systematic review is illustrated. I would contend that the way the narrative reviews in *1* and *8* succeed in meeting the purposes for which they were written supports Dijkers’ (2009) contention that, rather than the overarching aim of ‘systematicity’ in systematic review, the more purposive scope of narrative review can be better suited to meeting particular literature review aims.

There are, however, more fundamental questions about the claimed superiority of systematic reviews which contributed to a deliberate decision we made not to attempt one for the literature review in *4 –* the most conventional evidence review of the three articles discussed here. As Hammersley (2001) notes, this claimed superiority has been largely based on assertion rather than empirical evidence of systematic reviews’ advantages. It has been noted that these assertions are also grounded in, often unexamined, positivist assumptions which include that the elimination of bias is possible and desirable, that eliminating bias leads to stronger quality evidence and, accordingly, that the replicability of an evidence review is a core criterion by which to judge its rigour (Hammersley, 2001; Eva, 2008). Additionally, I would add that the claimed systematicity of systematic reviews is often heavily compromised by their explicit exclusion of a large part of the evidence base on methodological grounds. Pawson (2006b, pp.38 - 72) makes a similar point about meta-analysis and refers to the context-insensitive amalgamation of findings within meta-analysis as ‘systematic obfuscation’ (p.38). By contrast, within realist systematic reviews, the focus is instead on seeking to understand how contexts and mechanisms may interact to produce demi-regular patterns, with a view to generating programme and mid-range theories (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Such theories then allow for the potential transfer of theoretical understanding about how an intervention may work from one setting to another, but the understanding is framed in terms of the causal *tendencies* of underlying mechanisms and structures, operating within contexts, rather than the law-like relations of cause and effect conceptualised in positivist empirical inquiry (Fleetwood, 2014).

Given these criticisms of traditional systematic reviews, Eva (2008) suggests their wholescale rejection in favour of traditional narrative reviews. While I have some sympathy with this position, my own position is more akin to that of Cook (2008) and Dijkers (2009) who argue that systematic reviews and narrative reviews fulfil different functions and each has their place according to purpose. In my view the place of the systematic review within child welfare studies should be limited to the evidence review of intervention effects for interventions in relatively closed systems (e.g. non-complex interventions in comparable controlled environments) as they are otherwise too exclusionary of other relevant evidence and the contextual conditions of an intervention’s operation, that their findings become distortive. I also believe that in seeking to understand how, and why, practice may work both qualitative and non-empirical work is important to consider within a review (Pawson, 2006b).

At the same time, I also hold that some of the technical features of systematic review can be usefully adapted within narrative review. For example, I believe explicitness about search and selection techniques, and description of literature analytical strategy, should be included in longer narrative reviews to support the transparency of their conduct. I am also comfortable with the idea that the inclusion of studies within a narrative review should be influenced by an appraisal of their quality, as well as relevance, but believe that exclusion according to study methodology alone is highly questionable in most reviews. In more recent times, I have also been persuaded that the application of any quality appraisal criteria should be done with a good deal of caution because, as Pawson (2006a) strikingly argues, nuggets of insightful evidence and argument for programme theory can be found in studies which are of poor quality in some aspects of their design, data collection or analysis. Most would agree that social reality is complex, nuanced and textured. It should not come as a surprise, then, if the studies which seek to encapsulate aspects of them are also, and a strategy of reviewing such studies needs to be open to such complexity, including the possibility that a ‘weak’ study may nonetheless carry pertinent and useful insights. Consistent with these beliefs, the narrative review in *4* did include the use of some technical features associated with a systematic review by detailing searches and search terms, adopting explicit literature selection criteria and including some selection of literature based on quality appraisal. Importantly though, the adoption of a hierarchy of evidence was eschewed as the basis for any literature selection or exclusion. Instead, we sought to utilise the most relevant good quality evidence regarding how family time was working or not working for children in care. This included both quasi-experimental evidence and qualitative data as well as some non-empirical evidence around emergent issues, such as family time via the Internet/new technology, on which there were not then any significant empirical studies, but about which there had been considerable discussion and debate.

# 7. Using mixed methods as a primarily qualitative researcher

In this section I consider the use of mixed methods from the perspective of a primarily qualitative researcher. I engage with concerns and critiques of mixed methods as back door positivism, provide a justification for their use and then illustrate how they have been used in three of the articles in the submission (5, 10, 11). This provides evidence of the contributions of the work in *Domains, 1, 3* and *4* .

The use of mixed methods sits well alongside a realist orientation which is methodologically pragmatic about utilising a range of methods as appropriate to the particular aims of a given study (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Typically the descriptor mixed methods refers to research which has used at least one qualitative and one quantitative method, and which therefore straddles what some view as a paradigmatic divide (Bryman, 2012b). The overarching case for using mixed methods is that social phenomena are complex and all data offer limited insights into them: through strategically combining their insights it is argued that a more a more multi-faceted picture of a complex social phenomenon can be captured (Mason, 2006; Pawson, 2006b). Some mixed methods researchers – although not all – see the use of multiple, mixed methods, as part of a ‘triangulation’ strategy such that one type of data may support the findings and interpretation of findings of another type of data in the same study (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2008).

Generally, quantitative data tend to be more extensive and provide a broader, thinner, overview of properties belonging to a larger sample of people or things than qualitative data which tend to offer intensive, contextualised accounts of greater depth of a smaller sample (Sayer, 1992; Fleetwood, 2014). These mean the approaches have different strengths and shortcomings. Two of the most salient are that good quantitative studies, due to larger, representative samples, may be more securely generalisable to a wider population, but tell us little about the context, meaning and reasons behind the surface properties of numerical summaries. Often the definition of the meanings within, and objects of, quantitative study are also given rather than open to exploration by the outside reader. Good qualitative data offers in-depth, contextualised accounts of human experience and reasoning where meaning and interpretation is more open to exploration by the outside reader, but the wider applicability of findings is often unclear. An additional challenge comes from the ‘crisis of representation’ in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, p.19) – how well the qualitative data segments presented in a publication represent the in-depth accounts garnered from participants’ lived experience can be opaque.

I agree with Bryman’s argument (1998) that mixing quantitative and qualitative methods is reconcilable via a ‘technical’ approach which accepts that methods developed within different methodological traditions can be used without the researcher being wedded to all of the epistemological and ontological beliefs the traditions hold: using semi-structured interviews does not entail that a researcher subscribe to all aspects of interpretivism any more than using a questionnaire entails they hold to a positivist perspective. However, I also think it important to explore how the use of particular methods may imply the acceptance of broader philosophical positions and, therefore, I consider what Bryman (1998) terms the ‘epistemological’ approach here. This sees qualitative and quantitative methods as belonging to fundamentally inconsistent paradigms and the methods associated with them as also thereby inconsistent.As Tashakkori and Teddlie (2008) note, for those of this viewpoint, the inconsistencies may be illustrated by considering some of the key characteristics associated with a positivist position — a belief in a single knowable reality, the possibility of separating researcher from researched, the possibility of value-free inquiry and of context-free generalisation – and noting that a social constructionist would accept none of these propositions. A second axis of difference identified by Law (2009) is between those who view research data as describing real things (a view associated with positivism and some versions of realism) and those who understand such data constructions (associated most obviously with social constructivism). Though Law’s differentiation is not synonymous with a quantitative and qualitative split, it clearly maps on to it, with most quantitative research adopting the first position, and much qualitative research from the 1970s onwards adopting the second.

More concern has been voiced by those working within qualitative inquiry about mixed methods than vice versa. Denzin’s articulation of interpretivism, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Schütz and the idea of the inherent indeterminateness of the lifeworld (Denzin 1982, in Williams 1998) eschews the very goal of generalisation as inconsistent with interpretivism. In turn this suggests an incompatibility between interpretivism and quantitative research, which frequently explicitly aims to produce data from which some form of generalisation can be made. Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p.12) further claim that ‘mixed-methods designs are direct descendants of classical experimentalism’ which relegate qualitative methods to an ancillary role. Charmaz (2007) and Giddings (2006) also each question the positivist leanings of mixed methods. Giddings (2006) does so from the perspective of a qualitative researcher open to the potential of using them, but who raises the spectre that without adequate reflection, their use could ‘serve as a cover for the continuing hegemony of positivism’ (p.195).

As Law (2009) also proposes, however, there are more optimistic readings which, while viewing all research methods as presenting interpretations of reality, are open to embracing the varied insights produced from different methods through critical discourse about the character and basis of the different data types. Law does not ground this argument within a realist ontology. However, his proposition is consistent with a social constructionist influenced realism which accepts multiple interpretations of reality are possible within the boundary of there being an independent reality. This boundary provides a check on the credibility of such interpretations, and therefore allows for judgmental rationality (Fleetwood, 2014). As Williams (1998) points out, a strict interpretivism which rejects the use of quantitative methods based on the fact that they seek to generalise must, taken to its logical conclusion, also rule out the possibility of any theoretical generalisation about the social world through its emphasis on indeterminacy. Once we move away from this polarised position to one that accepts the possibility of some generalisation – including a qualitative approach to generalisation through generating theory using comparison across cases and contexts (Maxwell, 2012) - as well as the non-inductive process of retroduction, it opens up the possibility for mixed methods to be used in a way that is consistent with a qualitative, and interpretivist, approach.

I want to go a little further than Mason (2006), however, who produces a strong case for qualitative led mixed methods research, to argue that the use of quantitative methods - whether or not led by qualitative data - does not entail a positivist position, so long as there is a critical orientation to what those statistical data represent, and a questioning of what any correlations between variables revealed by statistical analysis may reveal. This position is sustained through the acceptance of Bryman’s (1998) argument that one can use different methods without at the same time adopting the ontological and epistemological premises which underpinned their original development . Though I tend to favour qualitative oriented inquiry, I also embrace the ability of quantitative data to summarise and allow analysis of associations between variables in large datasets. This openness to quantitative techniques does not entail a view that such data provide simple reflections of independent reality – in other words a positivist world view. Quantitative analysis can tend towards such a view because, as argued in *5* (p.371), ‘attaching a numerical value to something can provide a misleading veneer of objectivity’. A critical questioning of patterns in statistical data is required regarding what they might tell us about complex social phenomena, processes and causation. In the critical realist view this questioning is further emphasised due to the assertion that causal mechanisms are not directly observable and cannot be inferred from trying to observe constant conjunctions between variables, as in the Humean view of causation (Sayer, 1992; Archer, 1998).

Creswell et al. (2008) present typologies of mixed methods designs based on whether the methods are simultaneous or sequential and also whether quantitative or qualitative methods are given priority or equal weighting in the design and, by implication, synthesis and explanatory frameworks applied to the data. My own use of mixed methods has been more organic than this: in *5* we used a questionnaire at the start of the study with practitioners, but the study was overwhelmingly qualitative with interviews (with parents and practitioners), focus groups (with practitioners) and a small number of observations of parent-social worker interaction during use of the assessment tool. To a small degree the questionnaire with social workers did provide a more ‘extensive’ reach which gave us some summary data about what social workers in the local authority might think about the GCP. However, the sample of social workers who completed the questionnaire was so small that we never made claims - as in the aims of classical survey research (Sapsford, 2006) - that the questionnaire results could be generalised to the wider population of social workers in the local authority. The aims of the study were also qualitatively driven, focussing on the exploration of the experiences and views of professionals, and particularly parents. The questionnaire data had some, but limited, utility in addressing these aims. Commensurate with this, *5* privileges qualitative data in the reporting of the study.

The study underpinning *10* and *11* was a larger and more complex one than that in *5*. A range of quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. Though there was some conscious sequencing to the data, this sequencing was not primarily done according to whether the data were qualitative or quantitative, but more reflected practicalities and pragmatics. For instance, it made sense to try to engage FGC co-ordinators through focus groups at the start of the study, as their involvement was key to the evaluation. The study was therefore neither qualitatively or quantitatively led, though greater overall focus was placed on the qualitative data in trying to understand the practice developments which were being implemented in the local authority, which has a logic given the character of qualitative data. One of the key issues in using mixed methods is how data are combined, and at what point. Creswell et al., (2008) suggest this can be done at either the interpretation or analysis phase but set out a fairly rigid set of typologies of mixed methods designs based on the different sequencing possibilities. By contrast, Mason (2006) presents a case for how mixed methods findings can be combined in a looser, less prescriptive, form of integration. In this study, we followed this looser kind of integration. We accepted that the qualitative and quantitative data strands gave different insights into the operation of FGCs in the local authority, and allowed the overall presentation of the findings to clearly reflect these divergent data strands. While we did produce a cohesive statement of what these different data strands suggested in respect of the evaluation questions (*see* Mason et al., 2017), we did not seek to force them into a more tightly unified synthesis in the overall report.

This approach is reflected in article *10* which is structured around a typology which was drawn primarily from the qualitative data, but which draws on quantitative data to help explore it. Article *11* presentsquantitative data from the evaluation, supplemented by national quantitative data analysis, to explore the ways in which the local authority in question managed to resist national trends towards rising Looked after Child and Child Protection rates. While this article does solely present quantitative data, it illustrates the non-positivist use of these in three ways. Firstly, the article relates the quantitative outcomes data to contextualisation of the way in which FGCs operated within the local authority. Secondly, the quantitative data are drawn on cautiously, and critically, in terms of what it may represent regarding FGC use and family outcomes. This is, in part, due to gaps in the quantitative data. However, even were this not the case (e.g. there had been a matched comparison group for the children having an FGC), my approach would have been similarly cautious in interpreting these findings, not least because the outcome measures used – as in most child welfare outcome studies - are partial, imperfect, proxy reflections of child and family welfare and family experiences. Finally, the article argues for recognition of FGCs as a rights-based practice: as such it proposes that outcome data such as those presented in the article should be used to explore how FGCs might be used better, and the contextual factors which support their use, rather than whether a rights based approach to family engagement should be used at all. This argument rejects a strict and simple separation between ‘facts’ and ‘values’, associated with positivism, an issue to which I turn in greater depth in the next section.

# **8**. Values commitments, radical perspectives and statutory state intervention

In this chapter I explore some of the values and political commitments underpinning the work in this submission: this discussion principally relates to *Domain 4* in exploring the work’s contribution to underlying ethical, political and policy debates, particularly around the character and characterisation of state intervention in family life. These issues also relate to some of the ways in which I have handled empirical findings related to child welfare practices and, therefore, have some relevance to *Domain 1* as well.

The desire to be a part of a process of progressive social change by supporting children and families to achieve ‘better outcomes’, however defined, has been a strong motivating factor in both entering child and family social work practice and in undertaking the work presented in this submission. Therefore, I reflect here on the common ethical and political commitments underlying my decision to become a social worker and my academic publications, exploring a key tension within them between social regulation and social change.

My mother’s strong Christian faith was one influence on my decision to become a social worker. While I have been an atheist since my early teenage years I was brought up as a practising Christian until then and values I associate with aspects of my mother’s faith - particularly a sense of duty to help others where we can - were an enduring influence. This subsequently combined with a political commitment to campaigning for progressive social change. As a result, when I explored social work as a career I was drawn to community development models of practice because of their radical aims of societal transformation. One reason I moved to Glasgow to study social work was that it had an enduring tradition of community development and Glasgow was the only social work course I found which offered a community development elective. Within Scotland, Strathclyde Regional Council had been, until its abolition in 1996, an outlier in terms of the number of community workers it employed and the prominence it gave to community work (Barr, 1996 [1991]). Influenced by the example of such practices, as a social work student I helped establish and then chaired the management group of a food co-operative in one of the poorest areas of Glasgow, to which a number of asylum seeking families had been dispersed under the first New Labour Government, and where there had subsequently been significant community tensions, including physical attacks on the asylum seeking community. Social work with asylum seeking children and families also became the focus of my Masters dissertation on the social work course, for which I interviewed both social work staff and community workers.

Once qualified, however, I began my social work career as a child and family social worker. In distinction to community development, this role is considered by some, particularly in its child protection functions, to be more about social control than social change. The decision to become a child and family social worker was partly based on a personal interest to work in this area of practice, but it is worth emphasising I did not see that decision, or the decision later in my academic work to write about child welfare practices, as a renunciation of a commitment to social change, but as an expression of it. To understand why, and in so doing explore a contribution of my work, it is necessary for me to critically explore the radical critique of statutory casework and state intervention in family life as antithetical to progressive social change.

Given child and family social work involves compulsory state intervention in family life on child welfare grounds it has been framed within some radical accounts as an oppressive form of policing, surveillance and social norming (Davies, 1991). Casework - the bread of butter of statutory child and family social work - has also sometimes been presented as inherently conservative, in distinction to community work which has been extolled as participatory and emancipatory (Pease and Fook, 1999). This is due to a belief that casework is inherently pathologising through its focus on regulating individual family functioning and behaviour (Pease and Fook, 1999). In contrast, it has been noted that community work has traditionally aimed at facilitating wider structural change (Mayo, 1975). In 1975, at the historical height of the radical social work movement in the UK, Stanley Cohen (1975, p.78) argued that a common, and problematic, Marxist framing of a social worker was as ‘an agent of social control, a tool of the welfare state, a weapon of pacification’. Underlying this framing were questions about how far mechanisms within the capitalist state, traditionally viewed as instrument of repression within Marxist thought, can be harnessed for progressive social change. Or, as the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1979) had it, how far social and community workers could be ‘in and against’ the state. Foucauldian influenced analyses of social work reinforced this pessimistic view of statutory intervention in family life. Donzelot’s (1980) renowned critique of child and family social work in France portrayed social workers as oppressive state functionaries who perpetuated their own professional interests by defining the family as their area of expertise, acting as the agents of state surveillance of the working class family and manipulating working class parents to justify state intervention in their lives.

While I recognise the accuracy of some elements of this critique, I also see other elements of it as highly problematic. Donzelot’s (1980) work has itself been criticised for a sexist, if not misogynistic, characterisation of the role of mothers and wives, the overlooking of abuse within the family unit, and the reification of working class men (Garrett, 2019). Davies (1991) also notes that if statutory social work is only a tool of surveillance and pacification then, logically, radicals should argue for its abolition. By the same logic, it could be argued that radicals should argue for the removal of other state welfare provision which impairs the mass discontent which could lead to the overhaul and transformation of existing systems of governance. I view such an argument as both politically undesirable (I doubt it will lead to the progressive political ends it seeks to achieve) and morally wrong (it will hurt those with the greatest needs the most). Rejecting such a blunt, pessimistic, characterisation of state intervention, while also accepting that there are indeed surveillant, regulatory aspects to it move us towards what Rojek et al. (1988) termed the ‘contradictory position’. This recognises the state - and by extension the role of the state social worker - to be Janus faced in providing resources that can support families, while also bringing with it aspects of control.

I view both my practice as a child and family social worker and all of my writing around child welfare practices to be located within the space of this ‘contradictory position’. Some of this work has focussed on the importance of child welfare, the avoidance of child abuse and on supporting children’s development and agency within their development when children are in state care, and, therefore, have already been removed from parental care (*1, 2, 3, 4 & 6*). Underpinning this focus has been a view of the potential for positive — sometimes life changing — support which positive child welfare practices can play in the lives of looked after children and young people. At the same time, the removal of children from their birth parents is rightly viewed as an extreme form of state intervention. I have consistently viewed this measure as a last resort, but also a necessary part of child welfare practice. Duckett and Spandler (2018) argue that such state intervention can be part of a radical social justice orientation given children are a disempowered group who are dependent on adult care and given the harmful effects of child abuse. I disagree with their contention that such intervention usually constitutes a form of *radical* social justice due to the individualised, regulatory character of it. However, I do believe that the protection of children is a matter of social justice, as well as of child welfare.

Few would argue that children should never be placed outside parental care due to child welfare concerns. Instead, the debate centres around what the root causes of child abuse are, how we might address them, and where the rightful checks and balances between support, monitoring and intervention should lie within a well-functioning child protection system (Parton, 1985; Corby, 1991; Featherstone et al., 2014; Parton, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2018b). Some of my writing relates directly to the question of this balance within child welfare practice, and challenges associated with achieving it (particularly *3*, *4, 5, 7*): this work has sought to explore ways in which ‘partnership’ working with parents can be supported, as well as recognising the difficulties, tensions, some might say contradictions, in achieving genuine partnership in this arena. While the goal of partnership with parents subject to child welfare intervention is a valuable one, the power imbalances and antagonisms often present when decisions about whether a child remains in parental care are made mean that conventional notions of partnership can be hard, sometimes impossible, to sustain (Hill, 2002; Broadhurst et al., 2012). In my view this does not suggest that partnership should not be an aspiration of any engagement with birth families — there are highly powerful examples of the ways in which parents have taken up the role of partners, advocates and influencers within child protection systems (Tobis, 2013) — but that the tensions and difficulties in partnership working need to be acknowledged and worked with, rather than glossed over (*5, 7*). Other parts of my work, particularly later work, has focussed more on ways in which these difficulties may sometimes be overcome through the use of intensive family support and FGCs (*7, 8, 10, 11*). While a shared aim of each of these approaches is to avoid children’s entry into care wherever possible, it should also be emphasised that in FGCs the goal of family participation and involvement in key decisions, regardless of whether children are able to be maintained in parental care, has been a guiding ethos of their development. This is instructive as it takes the discussion of partnership beyond the notion of birth family unit preservation into the place of, and mechanisms for, parental involvement in children’s upbringing when children are no longer in parental care.

I view an underpinning contribution of the work presented here, then, as one which recognises the potentially oppressive experience of state mandated child welfare intervention in family life, but also sees within such intervention the possibility of supporting positive change. The professional practices I have written about do undoubtedly partly involve regulatory surveillance of principally marginalised families. However these practices also sometimes succeed in delivering resources which are supportive of, and valued by, families. In the later articles presented here some of the challenges in balancing the provision of positive support within a role that has regulatory functions are more explicitly laid bare, and thereby some of the policy and political contexts which militate against family engagement are more explicitly critiqued (*7, 8, 10, 11*).

Writing this commentary has led me to reflect on whether there might have been more explicit engagement with policy and political issues within some earlier work, given commitments to social change have been consistently there in my approach to social work. There is engagement with values issues in all of the work submitted here and a commitment throughout to the possibilities of using ‘power with’ children, birth families and other people using social work services, rather than ‘power over’ (Dumbrill, 2006). However, broader policy and political issues are only explicitly brought into the later articles referred in the submission. There are some readily identifiable contextual reasons for that: when I moved back to England in late 2010, it was the start of austerity and the dramatic public spending cuts which that heralded. These have co-existed with increasing child protection rates and rates of children in state care. It, therefore, became hard to avoid the conclusion that the balance between social control and social change in the policy and political underpinnings of practice had moved firmly towards the former, and indeed had resulted in a child protection system that was often more punitive rather than supportive of families in need of support. This context influenced me to want to empirically study ways of supporting families, leading to the studies of intensive family support and FGCs which relate to articles *7, 8, 10 & 11*. In turn the nature of this subject matter meant it seemed an obvious step to make critical connections between those practices and the child protection system and political contexts within which they operated.

On reflection, however, a second reason for the absence of a more overt political engagement in some of my earlier academic writing was the belief I held on entering the academy that the process of knowledge production should be boundaried from explicit political and social commitments. While I still hold to a less strong version of this view, my views have evolved on this issue. The position I originally held may be criticised as reflecting a positivist commitment to trying to maintain a hard distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘values’: Zammito (2012, in Davis, 2013, p.554) refers to this distinction as ‘the last dogma of positivism’. The position may also be critiqued from a Foucauldian perspective which views knowledge production, knowledge status and power as being inextricably linked (Dreyfus and Rainbow, 1982). Consistent with a critical realist position, I now view any knowledge we have of the world as theory bound. I also accept, following Weber, that values are an inherent and necessary part of social scientific study of the world (Scott, 1998): they influence a researcher’s decision regarding what they study and the ways in which they study, understand and engage with the subject matter. This is illustrated in *7* & *8* where, in contrast to a strict consideration of evidence about the ‘effectiveness’ of intensive family support, the two articles also highlight the moral dimensions to debates about welfare support and emphasise that who is eligible for such intensive family support provision, at what points, with what choice, and in what form, are bound up with normative conceptions of family, family life and the legitimacy of state intervention within particular families’ lives.

At the same time, I remain committed to a view that a researcher’s task involves allowing data to ‘speak out’ beyond that which they may have expected, or perhaps wanted, to find. The maintenance of some separation between data collection and analysis and political and social commitments is, in my view, central to the integrity of the research process. Therefore, in *8*, while there is recognition of the ethical nature of the terrain and an explicit statement that our research interests were motivated by commitment to studying social inequality and social exclusion (p.256) we were also clear that this commitment should not overshadow accurately capturing the policy positions, arguments and welfare support developments in the review. Without maintaining such a separation the chances of perpetuating a ‘moralistic fallacy’ appear greatly increased: claims about what the social world ‘is’ become distorted by the ways we may wish that it ‘should be’. In short, the views I have evolved to hold - that study of the social world cannot be value free - do not entail an acceptance there can be no separation at all between what ‘is’ (facts) and what ‘ought to be’ (values). While the exact nature of this separation is not always clear, and requires both reflexivity and justification as to where the boundaries lie in each case, the importance of a more overt engagement with policy and values issues is, I believe, better reflected in the later work in this submission (*7, 8, 10 & 11*).

# 9. Conclusion

The coherence and significance of the submissions in this thesis have been articulated through discussing five thematic areas which cut across the articles. These are: contributions through qualitative research; the reconciliation of social constructionist and realist orientations; developing an evidence base for child welfare practice through literature review; mixed methods use as a primarily qualitative researcher; and values commitments, radical perspectives and statutory state intervention. These thematic areas have been mapped against four broader domains to provide additional clarity. These four domains are: contributions to an empirical knowledge base for child welfare practice; theoretical contributions; contributions through my use of research methods; and, contributions to broader debates and understandings related to child welfare practices.

The articles in this submission are centred around a belief in supporting the development of professional practice with children and families receiving child welfare support, through seeking to review or produce knowledge, and disseminate it, around effective and ethical ways of protecting children in care (*1*), engaging with, and supporting, children with experience of the care system (*2, 3, 4, 6*), understanding the perspectives of people receiving social work support (*9*) and supporting children, parents and wider families where there is state intervention due to child welfare concerns (*5, 7, 8, 10, 11*).

Within the empirical papers there has been a contribution through the range of methods used according to purpose and context. The majority of this work sits within the qualitative tradition given both its aims and the data collection methods used. While *9* is a non-empirical paper, it offers the development of a learning method in social work education that is grounded within social theoretical concepts which underpin qualitative research, and indeed the method of the Living Library could be easily adapted for qualitative inquiry. Given the relative scarcity of mixed methods studies in the social work field, there has been a particular contribution in the use of both qualitatively-driven mixed methods (*5*) and the use of qualitative and quantitative methods organically together, such that neither qualitative or quantitative data direct the study, but different data strands sit alongside each other to show different aspects of a complex whole (*10, 11*). The latter use of mixed methods has entailed some engagement, as a primarily qualitative researcher, with quantitative data and quantitative data analysis. Though I remain a learner in respect of quantitative methods, I believe articles *10, & 11* also offer a contribution in the way they utilise statistical analysis without reifying it, by clearly acknowledging the gaps and limitations in what those data might represent, and what might be drawn from them.

The work offers a contribution in developing the application of specific social theories to data about child welfare and social work contexts (*5, 7, 9, 10*). Alongside this, the work offers an underlying theoretical contribution in neither adopting a radical social constructionist or narrow positivist perspective. My understandings of these issues has developed to be more explicitly influenced by a realist and critical realist approach in recent years. This provides a coherent and important reconciliation of a belief in the social construction of reality with a belief in an independently real world. Realist approaches are also consistent with the body of work presented here in emphasising the need for qualitative data to understand human behaviour and complex social phenomena.

Finally, the articles presented in this thesis offer a contribution to broader understandings and debates underpinning child welfare practices. They do this through reconciling the need to extend the empirical knowledge base of child welfare practices with a critical openness towards what constitutes evidence. An emphasis on the importance of drawing on the lived experiences of people receiving services is heavily implicit within several of the articles, as well as explicitly so in *9.* The work offers a contribution to broader understandings in the field through maintaining a focus on the positive contributions which child welfare practices can make, while also recognising these practices are located within coercive mechanisms of intervention in family life, which bring with them surveillance and social control. A failure to recognise this latter characteristic of child welfare intervention may result in a quixotic view of them, while radical critiques which present state intervention as being intrinsically and inescapably oppressive tend to overlook that such intervention can provide help and support which is wanted and valued by families. The work in this thesis has steered a course between both positions. One of the challenges in striking a balance which seeks to provide as much support to families as possible within a framework of statutory intervention is in how genuine partnership can be achieved with parents and families within the current child protection system. Within more recent articles there has been a contribution through critiquing aspects of policy underpinning the child protection system which militate against more genuine partnership working. Political and social changes in England since 2010 have made engaging in this critique more urgent in my own mind, but underpinning it has also been an evolving acknowledgment that study of the social world is inevitably value laden, rendering a hard separation between facts and values unsustainable. While I maintain there is need for some separation between facts and values in the research process, an evolving acceptance that there is always an axiological underpinning to any study of the social world has freed me to engage more overtly in policy and practice critique within some of the later work presented in this thesis. I envisage such engagement will strongly continue in future work.

# 10. References

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# Published work included in submission (Hard copy versions only)

1. According to May and Powell (2008) there are different views as to whether Blumer believed in a mind-independent reality but George Herbert Mead, who strongly influenced Blumer’s thought, clearly did so. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)