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Big Stories and Little Stories: how  
children and family social workers  
make sense of who they are, what they  
do and how they do it in a climate of  
failure, blame and certainty

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# Abstract

This thesis reports a qualitative study which employed a combination of narrative inquiry and the conceptual framework of Bourdieu to explore who children and family social workers are and how they perceive their role and responsibilities, and those of other professionals when practising on the field of safeguarding. I carried out semi-structured interviews, involving 20 children and family social workers across the Midlands and Northwest of England. I asked the participants to share their stories of their day-to-day experiences of being a social worker. Thematic analysis revealed how the children and family social workers who participated in the study make sense of who professionally they are, what they do and how and why they do it in a climate of fear, blame and certainty. My analysis has led to an original concept of Four Windows into children and family social work: Sense Makers, operating In the Borderlands of practice while Managing Difference and Talking Back to Blame. The four windows into social work shine a new light on the professional space carved out by children and family social workers and provide understandings into how they actively shape and re-shape their professional identities in response to the Big Stories of certainty, blame and failure by claiming the Little Stories of children and family social work. The stories from day-to-day practices of children and family social workers showed their ability to absorb and manage several competing storylines simultaneously. Through the Four Windows social workers are seen to construct and have constructed for them, their professional identity by juggling several narratives simultaneously.

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*The welfare worker lies awake*

*But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake,*

*So Timothy Winters drinks his cup*

*And slowly goes on growing up*

Charles Causely – Timothy Winters



# **Chapter 1 – The Introduction**

## **1.1 Beginnings**

This thesis was born from my own practice as a children and family social worker. It is part of a process to make sense of who children and family social workers are, how they do what they do, and the rationales they offer to explain their practice. I qualified in 1987 and began what was to become a twenty-year career. The latter part of my time as a social worker was spent attempting to make sense of the mismatch between Lord Laming's assertions '...of doing relatively straightforward things well' (Laming, 2003: para 1.66); the simplifying "NOW JUST DO IT!" (Laming 2009:7) and the reality of my day-to-day experiences in the safeguarding field. The former statements represented the Big, reassuring Stories of certainty and self-evident truths in contrast with the practice space I inhabited where messy Little Stories were created daily but seldom heard.

As a practitioner, I was increasingly conscious of how New Public Management [henceforth NPM] took hold of and altered Children and Family Social work and how 'risk' as an objective and controllable entity supported and maintained notions of child abuse as 'obvious' and manageable. My experience, and the experiences of my colleagues and the families with whom we worked, did not fit with the neat pervasive narratives of NPM and risk. These were problematic. In this thesis I look to the messy contested field of the Little Stories from practice in an effort to discover who Children and family social workers are and how they manage narratives of 'neatness'. I look for the Little Stories of practice in empirical studies, especially those that get close to experience, which tell of the difficulties managerialism and

risk technologies pose for practice. The Little Stories can also be found in my own reflections on my own experience and, of course, they can be found in the practice stories from the Children and family social workers who contributed to this research. Each tells of experiences that are not simple, straightforward or an easy fit with proceduralised and standardized processes. Such standardisation does not fit with the individual needs of families, nor does it fit with the relational nature of Social Work. I seek to find out how practitioners manage themselves in this context. I also set out to discover how they perceive themselves and perceive others engaged in the protection of children and young people. I present the narratives of twenty children and family social workers about the safeguarding field, their reflections on their practice and, significantly, reflections upon the practice of practitioners from allied agencies. Their stories reveal the contested nature not only of the role and purpose of Social work but inter-professional relations. Their stories go some way to explain how social work is positioned and how the protection of children is both central and yet also peripheral to its practice.

I left school in 1979 and toyed with A levels at a College of Further Education in the West Midlands. I did not go on to Higher Education, a decision I, on occasion, regret but in the main am grateful for. Instead, I spent a formative six months working as a volunteer in a Hostel for Single Homeless Men and Women in Liverpool. This time was influential in many ways, but particularly socially and politically. Thatcher and neo-liberalism, the 'New Right' (Giddens 1998, Hendrick 2003, Ali, 2015) had come to power in 1979. At the time Liverpool, a core northern city, was in the grip of chronic unemployment, high levels of disaffection, deprivation and poverty; very

different to the relatively materially comfortable existence I had enjoyed at home. I might not have had the political maturity to fully understand the extent of the assault upon 'public and publicness' (Newman and Clarke 2009) at the time, but I was able to see what I believed to be hardship and poverty on street corners and on the faces of the people with whom I had come to live and work. This is not an undisputed analysis of those times. Hendrick (2003:180) argues that some Conservative commentators may still dispute the meaning of the word 'poverty', even its existence, in relation to Britain's recent economic history. He cites Daniel and Ivatts (1998) as supporting the existence of poverty and the nature and degree of social deprivation 'that can reasonably be described as poverty' (Hendrick 2003:180) and its links with carefully chosen economic and social policies. He provides a reminder of what he describes as the confused 19<sup>th</sup> century individualism which characterised the Conservative years: 'Let our children grow tall, and some grow taller than others if they have it in them to do' (Thatcher 1972 cited in Hendrick 2003: 179).

I cannot claim with any certainty that my experience in Liverpool led to my move towards social work and becoming a social worker. I cannot even remember if my career choice and path were the result of a definite decision. McNay's (1999) exploration of habitus and Bourdieu's '*le sens pratique*' ('feel for the game') provided a helpful evocation of a kind of knowledge that is not necessarily explicit about its own principles, which is 'constitutive of reasonable but not rational behaviour. It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know' (Bourdieu 1990:69). Bourdieu offers an important foundation here on which my thesis is built. My memory, then, of who I was and what

led to a lengthy career in social work, suggests Adams (1995), is integral and constitutes part of contemporary temporal existence. I may have in the past laid claim to an acute sense of social justice and values which found a 'natural home' in social work but in recent years I have increasingly come to question the manner in which social work has attempted to colonise anti-oppressive practice and lay claim to a distinct professional value base (Millar 2008, Banks 2012). I have come to query the strength of the tie between social justice and social work, despite the 2014 International Federation of Social Workers' (<https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work>) global definition of the social work profession: -

'Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing'.

During my time as a social worker I regularly walked away from and closed the cases of families who were in need of help and support in the knowledge that the local authority for whom I worked was not resourced to offer any. I removed children from parents, knowing I would be leaving them fractured and broken and with little recourse to healing or recovery. I removed babies from mothers who were themselves children; it sometimes felt as though it was taking away a doll rather than

a baby, such was the degree of damage and emotional disarray rooted in the children who had become parents far too soon.

For children and family social workers working in England, the legal and ideological value base underpinning and informing practice can be found in Part I, Section I of the Children Act 1989. Its core assertion is that the welfare of the child is paramount. This is, of course, laudable but recent developments in practice have dislocated the child from the integrated whole which is their family and their community. The notion of 'welfare' has become subsumed under 'protection'. Social workers, increasingly concerned with the protection of children, working with increasing referrals and diminishing resources (Jones, 2015), are less able, and perhaps less willing, to consider social justice not just for the child, but also for the family. My experiences and the developments in society since illustrated the fundamental tension is that being stretched ever tighter between legislation and practice.

## **1.2 An all-seeing eye.**

Whatever my reasons or motivations for becoming a social worker, post-qualification I began working in a small Metropolitan Borough Council in Merseyside in a team that specialised in long-term work with children and their families. My arrival into the discipline of children and family social work coincided with the "new" child protection system introduced following the death and subsequent inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974) and predated what were to be seminal developments: the Children Act 1989; the formative Messages from Research (DoH,1995); and the major policy reform which followed the 1998

Modernising Social Services and subsequent Quality Protects (QP) programme (Department of Health 1998b). This movement towards standardising and ordering practice was exemplified by the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH,2000). I do not intend to glorify social work in the 1980s as the Golden Age; it was neither glorious, nor a Golden Age. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, social work was not subject to the degree of criticism, and on occasion vilification, that it has experienced in more recent years. Nor was it the subject of continuing change and reconfiguration. I recall a time when there was support for social work but on reflection wonder was this a feature of the tail winds of welfarism and the lingering myth of government commitment to public services (Corby 2006a, Newman and Clark 2009)?

Newman and Clark (2009) see the last 30 years as marking a decline in and a dismantling of 'public and publicness':

'Political direction has moved to an 'arm's length relationship through the use of agencies, privatised contractors, public private partnerships and the creation of markets and quasi-markets in public services' (2009: 3).

Judt (2010:198) supports this view, remarking that the 'discounting of the public sector has become the default political language in much of the developed world'. But with the gradual demise of public services, there has also been an increasingly explicit expectation that social workers could, and should, provide for the absolute and complete safety of all children. Ferguson suggests that the expectation surrounding social work and risk calculation effectively involves 'colonisation of the future' (Ferguson 1997: 225). I argue in this thesis that children and family social

workers are expected not only to be effective 'colonisers' of the future but to be more like Janus, the ancient god of beginnings and transitions, with two faces. They need to see into, analyse and understand both the future and the past. It was while I was on holiday in Northern Ireland, at the time still a social worker, that I first encountered the enigmatic figure of Janus on Boa Island near the north shore of Lower Lough Erne in County Fermanagh. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney celebrated the figure's similarity to the Roman god Janus in his poem 'January God'. The ancient carved figure nestled in a grassy field is frequently evoked when I come to read Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) and Public Inquiries, the narratives of which collude with the all-knowing, all-seeing expectation and promote the presumption that the nature of the problem, the child requiring protection, was there for all to see. With the nature of the problem being promoted as objectively real, there comes alongside, from politicians and public alike, the anticipation and belief that action can and should be taken to make good the problem. Social workers become caught in an impossible bind as both the problem and the solution; they become the 'gap' between the policy prescription and the outcome. In doing so, they occupy 'borderlands', practising within the social policy and legislative framework but neither fully determined nor fully willed by it. Children and family social workers practise on the cusp of the private and public domain and, until something goes wrong, out of public view. As noted earlier, they are both central to and yet on the periphery of safeguarding children and young people; often dependent on the understandings and practices of others. This thesis looks at the stories which emerge from Government policies and child death reviews and inquiries. These form part of the master narratives that in turn help shape the counter-narratives which emerge from practice. The master narratives and

the counter-narratives subsequently emerge as narratives in opposition. This thesis examines how together these oppositional narratives create the conditions under which children and family social workers attempt, alongside others, to navigate the contested and political field of safeguarding.

### **1.3 Bourdieu – ‘good to think with’.**

Since my first encounter with Pierre Bourdieu in 2010 I have found his work relating to the theory of practice germane to my own research. His conceptual framework - the triad of Field, Capital and Habitus - has helped me situate the children and family social workers who contributed to this research within their specific social world. In this world, external macro-structures and objective conditions regulate and govern practice but the social worker, although immersed and inculcated in the field of practice, can and does practise with an inscribed yet relative autonomy. For the purposes of my own empirical inquiry, positioning of safeguarding as a field - a relatively autonomous social space, or network of relationships, with its own rules, laws and challenges (Bourdieu, 1989) - has been key in developing and framing my thinking. It has enabled me to conceptualise safeguarding as a field practitioners work on together in harmony and conflict, while attempting to manage the social construct of child abuse and symbolic political power instituted by regimes of straightforwardness. Field, along with capital and habitus, have proved to be powerful tools for thinking about the role and responsibilities of the social workers within the context of inter-professional relationships. Each inter-professional actor has the opportunity to exercise power and influence on the field. Referring to the concept of field during the course of my research has enabled me to better



understand the logic of inter-professional practices: what is deemed valuable and what is not, and how children and family social workers construct, and have constructed for them, their professional identity within a field of struggle and contention.

Bourdieu is 'good to think with' (Jenkins, 2002:11) and reflecting with him on my lived experience as a professional child and family social worker has helped to firmly contextualise that experience. Some 15 years after qualifying, I obtained the Post Qualifying Framework. I also obtained the Child Care Award and a degree. On reflection, each can be contextualised, through Bourdieu, as an attempt to strengthen my professional sense of self. New avenues opened to me, both in terms of my own capital and place on the field of career opportunities and in using the critical skills I already had but had used little, outside of interminable duty systems, rotas and report writing for Child Protection Case Conferences and court. For ten of the latter years of my time in social work, I worked in Liverpool, based in a busy Initial Assessment Team, dealing with front-line child protection referrals and medium term work. The team was routinely short staffed, with memorable episodes with four social workers instead of the ten there should have been. Despite the stresses and pressures, I remember times of great camaraderie and team spirit; dealing with difficult and frightening situations with able and trustworthy colleagues but with the underlying knowledge that we garnered decreasing levels of respect or understanding from the public or politicians. Eventually, the volume and nature of the work became unmanageable, if one wanted to practise safely and well. I left

social work in 2004 in the belief that it was no longer possible for it to provide me with the opportunity to do either.

Increasingly, the 'doing' of social work did not match, for me, the political rhetoric being delivered by New Labour. I became disillusioned, tired and dispirited. Toyne and Walker (2010) sum up the political context well, describing Labour's 'social policy making as if it was a kind of competitive sport' (Ibid: 149). I felt I escaped rather than left social work. The emotion and colour of policy making as a human activity (Yanow, 1996), it seemed to me, were not given due regard and did not allow for any margin of error. Instead, there was an expectation that the social worker was a neutral observer of the objective reality of child abuse; an impartial and almost disengaged witness who just needed to follow the rules. There was certainly no lack of rules. Bingham (2010: 40) noted: 'It seems legislative hyperactivity has become a permanent feature of our governance'. On reflection, I wonder if a number of key episodes conflated to lead me to where I am now, in both career and academic terms. These episodes include a career change, significant life course events, time away from the noise of child protection and the relentless onslaught of social policy initiatives, particularly in relation to increased service and agency integration - the latter policy drive delivered and implemented with an increasingly 'authoritative' and 'common sense' tone.

The New Labour administration had returned with what seemed to be a renewed zeal for reform, particularly in relation to Children's Services. The death of Victoria Climbié (25<sup>th</sup> February, 2000) provided additional impetus and justification for further

reform. The Laming Inquiry (2003) and the resulting 108 recommendations marked a seminal point in children and family social work. The biggest reorganisation of children's services in 30 years began, characterised by an emphasis on partnership and partnership working. Clarke and Glendinning (2002) note that, given that the integrative systems approach was so central to public policy development and provision in the UK, remarkably little was known about how to translate the rhetoric of partnership working into reality. Toyne and Walker (2010:149) endorse and support this view:

‘Labour created the first minister for children. Good idea. The government wanted the Department for Children, Schools and Families to wrap the “whole child”. But on the ground this never happened’.

#### **1.4 Agency integration and Working Together**

‘Partnership’ working remains of significant contemporary relevance. My professional interest in inter-professional working, the mismatch between rhetoric and reality, and the ‘competitive sport’ approach to policy making under Labour led to the development of a personal research interest summed up by Terdiman (1987) as revolving around ‘the common sense of things, the knowledge everyone is sure to have is precisely the starting point for the investigations of social science’ (p. 810). It is an approach that supports me in asking what it is to be a social worker and how the professional identity of social workers impacts on, and is shaped by, the inter-professional relationship. I argue in this thesis that working with ambiguity, risk and uncertainty is unavoidable in children and family social work. The indeterminacy of key concepts contained within the Children Act 1989 such as ‘children in need’ and

‘significant harm’, and the social and legal construction of both concepts within the context of childcare law, is reflective of what Bourdieu considers to be a dynamic, fluid and flexible judicial field that positions the law as a constitutive force in modern liberal societies. As such, the judicial field, like any social field, becomes ‘oriented by a set of internal protocols and assumptions characteristic behaviours and self-sustaining values’ (Bourdieu cited in Terdiman 1987: 806). The law as a socially constructed force is reflective of the way in which child abuse is socially constructed. Little (1997: 27) argues:

‘Social construction actually means that as a society we have to decide which behaviours in which contexts are abusive to children; and which of these behaviours we decide are abusive require some intervention, and what should be the nature of the intervention. None is given. We have to decide’.

Who, then, is the ‘we’? The protection of children in everyday practice is negotiated by a multitude of individuals with varied beliefs and skills located in a wide range of agencies with diverse perspectives, functions and priorities. This complex network of professionals and their agencies, each with their own incomplete but settled autonomy, is mandated to manage the phenomenon of child abuse, that phenomenon being socially constructed and, therefore, contested and lacking moral consensus. This is important in the study of inter-professional working because the factors which form and shape professional identity, and which in turn shape inter-professional and inter-agency dynamics will inevitably be played out on an already contentious area of work requiring professional judgement, risk taking and decision making. As discussed by Ashforth and Mael (1989), organisational identity has long

been recognised as a critical construct in effecting both the satisfaction of the individual and the effectiveness of the organisation.

### **1.5 Making Sense of Common Sense**

Like David (2002), I view the past, nearly 36 years since I first left home in 1983 as a naïve 20-year-old to work as a volunteer in Liverpool, as a journey through changing times. And I see myself as 'part of those changing times, constantly reflecting, and reconstructing my own identity and understandings of those changing times' (David 2002: 264). I am keen to interrogate some of the more 'common sense' discourses that I intuitively felt, as a professional, provided for an unhelpful misdirection of social policy and as a result social work practice. This thesis is part of that continuing journey: an opportunity for me to try to make sense of things and provide children and family social workers with a voice, a counter-narrative to the more strident tones of legislation and policy. Throughout, I will draw upon on my own experience and on the experiences of other children and family social workers to reflect on how successive policy change has attempted to redirect practice. Each policy reform creates an impetus for practice change that is accepted or rejected and, in turn, generates a new round of sense-making that informs the re-construction of a professional sense of self. The emerging stories build windows through which knowledge of children and family social work can be viewed. The government's response to the Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming 2003) forms part of that personal and professional autobiographical backdrop. The sweeping reforms resulted in what I would suggest, supported by Reder and Duncan (2004a&b) and Featherstone and White (2004), to be an over reliance on reforming the structure

and organisation of services. Like Cooper (2005) and Masson (2006), prior to undertaking this study my sense has been that the emphasis on whole systems reform post-Climbie took place at the expense of a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the initial referral and assessment process and the degree and extent of inter-professional and inter-agency difference. Assessment and all its inherent complexities and tensions were reduced to common sense simplicities in the Report: fifteen years on from the Laming Report, the call for the children and family social worker to be the all-knowing, all-seeing Janus pervades. It neglects the human elements of practice: emotion, motivation, the inter-play of professional and personal belief systems, the spoken and unspoken. It neglects to account for the ultimately unfathomable nature of social life and limitations of insight, foresight and control to which experts in all fields fall prey.

## **1.6 Policy, Knowledge and Practice**

In this section, I briefly explain some of the genesis of alternatives to, critique of, these normative ideas on which I have drawn to frame an understanding of Policy, Knowledge and Practice and the interrelations between them. I highlight, specifically, the contributions of Smith (2005 & 2005a), Crossa (2005), Yanow (1996), Haraway (1988) and Bourdieu (1989 & 1990). Together, these provide a way of approaching the task of untangling Policy, Knowledge and Practice and of re-presenting multiple accounts of Children and Family Social Work as legitimate subjects of a conversation – they all help to see the world, and accounts of the world, in ways that are not singular, pre-emptively assertive and dominating, but multiple and tentative, but important in seeking to reach a valid and more complete understanding.

I start with the 'taken-for-granted' arguments of social work policy. In the thesis, I follow Smith (2005) who, takes as her focus the examination of markets and market behaviour as she has witnessed their introduction into the provision (and consumption) of UK and US public housing. Like the other strands of neo-liberalism with which I will be primarily concerned in this thesis, 'the market' has been at the heart of the political and economic colonizing of policy and practice in this crucial element of public welfare. Reflecting on the myriad failures of the market, and the lack of 'care-full' policy response, Smith (2005: 8) argues; "It is as if policy is given not made and they work in ways which are beyond political control and responsibility'. Noting 'their passions alongside their rationality', (Smith,2005:8), describes the power of narratives which succeed in silencing realities and complexity. The market appears to be a singular thing rather than taking different, locally contingent forms. Smith catalogues the elements of the market and the different ways in which these combine to produce different mechanisms and effects within housing. In Chapter 2, I review new public management – managerialism - which is the summary term for the set of elements – ideas, ideologies, implied practices – that have come to dominate recent social work policy. I tease apart the different strands and their particular expression in social work, including the way in which risk, risk assessment and risk measurement have been incorporated into a proceduralised social work, one seeking to standardise practice.

A response to Smith's article (Crossa,2005) notes the different narratives that circulate. Whilst recognising the 'Big Stories' that dominate, she concerns herself with the importance of 'little stories' that challenge essentialist claims, to 'correct' over-simplification and the 'sheer common sense' by which those Big Stories are

structured and legitimised. Managerialism has diminished and silenced the contested nature of social work (Webb 2006, Parton 2014 and Burton and van de Broek 2009), reduced understanding of its inherent complexity and is at risk of becoming, indeed the only way of explaining, how social work should be ordered. Lipsky's (2008, 2010) powerful accounts of the way in which policy 'lands' and is enacted in different ways has been an important reference point. The insight Crossa (2005) brings by counterposing 'Big Stories' and 'little stories' both gives Lipsky's argument a stronger relationship to narrative and is evidently reflected in this thesis.

Like Smith (2005), Yanow (Ibid) draws on feminist thought when she suggests that what is NOT said, the silences in discourse, require, as much as what IS said, analytical attention. Policy documents represent organisational myths created in narrative form and comprised of statements "immune to fatal attack" (Ibid: 91). Myths, like policy, are a social construction rooted in a particular time and place, in a particular culture. And, Cuthbertson (1975) argues are produced to the needs of the moment emerging the way that rules of society do, over time, drawing on and reflecting societal expectations. In relation to Children and Family Social Work powerful and shaping myths arising from modernism are that risk, measurable and objective, is there for all to see. Awareness of the contingencies, uncertainties and complexity of practice is silenced, child abuse is fashioned as solvable, and child deaths are held as 'should have been amenable to professional intervention', the focus for technologies of prediction and prevention.



Myths express a reality for those who subscribe to them: the stories and the morals they carry provide a way of knowing about the world. Normative policy statements and law, together with political assurances that 'it will never happen again' perpetuate the myth that the matter has been resolved. The public has been successfully diverted and, Yanow (Ibid: 194) argues with the legislation of a policy public attention has been successfully redirected and further inquiry is shut off 'adding further to public silences'.

The webbed inter-relatedness of human life and the complexity of Children and Family Social Work is incompatible with 'predict and control' managerialism. But like Smith (2005) I acknowledge the success of the 'rational and predictable' claim. There is comfort in the order of NPM and it resonates strongly in Children and Family Social Work not because it is best but because it is so tied to all human relationships that construction of an alternative becomes increasingly difficult to build or even conceive. By threading notions of predictability and measurability through relations, norms, aspirations and experiences of life as we know it makes any alternative (for example unpredictability and immeasurability) difficult to envisage and seemingly impractical to enact. Smith (2005:15) argues that the myth of markets, a political assertion rather than an economic essentialism which has detached ideas developed around markets and inserted them into social provision. As a counter to the dominance of the market and market behaviours Smith (Ibid:16) constructs a '...care-full space...' where (individual) practices can differ radically, actively and powerfully from what are assumed to be singular, normative ideas and political predictions. "But everyday there are those who show...happily, defiantly, quietly, routinely or in desperation – that these are not the only ways of going on". Yanow

(1996) echoes the notion of Policy as a cultural artefact, an object that entails the use of language.

Underlying Smith and Yanow's attempt to see policy and practice in 'multiple' ways, and to access neglected, alternative understandings is a powerful argument about knowledge creation – science. In her classic statement (Haraway 1988), she sets out an idea of situated knowledge. Resassessing how knowledge is made and how power and knowledge claims are built, she calls for the recognition of multiple knowledge claims as part of a conversation in search of truth. She challenges 'the God View' – traditional empiricist science seeking and asserting one definitive truth. Equally, she rejects a science in which truth comes as a consequence of the distribution of power to assert knowledge claims over others. This resonates strongly with my sense that normative policy is just one knowledge claim about social work – there are others that can be found in webbed connections and ways of seeing that are thoroughly engaged in and with the field as I have declared earlier in this Chapter. 'Feminist objectivity is about limited knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn to see' (Haraway, 1988: 583). Like Haraway (ibid: 583) I believe there is good reason to want to know more about other vantage points and other ways of knowing and seeing. Here, I suggest that by drawing on the Little Stories from practice valuable insights will be provided into the situated and embodied knowledges and practices of Children and Family Social Workers. However, the Little Stories, while needing to be told, are not exempt from critical examination as: 'To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic...' (ibid: 584)

I argue here that Children and Family Social Work takes place under conditions of uncertainty and requires the appreciation and integration of various forms of knowledge and practices. The complexity of practice brings into question the expansion of 'perfect information' and rationality and logic into areas of welfare and public service where the value orientation manifests a deeply contrasting motivational structure – support and protection rather than competition. Christman (2005) argues that public discourse, more generally and not merely within critical debate and electoral activity has to reflect shifts in ethical orientation – therefore the political and the cultural are already mutually interactive and hence susceptible to pressures from democratic activity.

Following Smith's argument that markets give the appearance of detachment Smith (2005a:36), I argue that, in its insistence on universal truths and tools, managerialism, too, fails to account for the extent to which the most calculated interactions are infused with a range of value orientations rather than a singular goal. This value appropriation serves to manipulate the social cues which 'privilege certain qualities in how markets are and exclude other conceptions of what they might become.' Smith asks, what are the other conceptions and where do they cluster? An examination of practice as a form of action disrupts claims of neutrality and allows for 'other conceptions' of market values and behaviours and where and how they might 'cluster.' I argue here that they do not cluster in convenient spaces.

Practice can be equally complicit in the reification of the social production of social hierarchies. At the same time, practice exposes the limitations of rationalism; rational accounts are unable to allow for contingencies and situational rationalities. I would echo Haraway's (Ibid:584) call for a vision recognising and valuing 'partial,

locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections...and shared conversations in epistemology.' Like Smith (2005 & 2005a) and Crossa (2005), I am interested in challenging the Big Stories, or as framed by Haraway (Ibid:583), the 'unlocatable, and so irresponsible knowledge claims...' where 'Irresponsible means unable to be called into account.'

I am interested in the Little Stories; situated knowledges effective for constructing untidy worlds where people live, and practitioners attempt to make sense of complex lives. Exploring the Big Stories and the Little Stories is, perhaps, a way of 'Getting Even' (Smith, 2010). It is a way of challenging the enduring consensus of managerialism's rationality and neutrality and enables the construction of alternative stories from practice. Connecting knowing with doing, Bourdieu's account of the social world is constituted by innumerable spaces of meaning viewed as particular sets of experience. Knowing in practice, and practice as knowing, individuals can be unaware that each has a different understanding of reality. Bourdieu's (1989 & 1990) effort to transcend gaps between practical knowledge and universal structures by recasting diverse practices illuminates 'given' understandings of relations between social structure, systems of classification and language. However, replacing what might amount to a cultural system with a thousand tiny and not so small power struggles is only part of the picture. Small practices, or Little Stories, are the embodiment of disciplined pluralism involving the recasting of diverse practices which produce a repertoire of possibilities. Each is embedded in and articulated through the embodiment, negotiation and mobilisation of meaning and materiality of everyday life. The aim in this thesis is to gather, systematically, and to organise

accounts of practice – narratives - that derive from and make for Little Stories of child and family social work.

### **1.7 Conceptual framework**

The ontological view forming and underpinning this research draws on narrative inquiry which straddles both method and methodology (Chase, 2005, Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007, Riessman, 2008) and is informed by the conceptual apparatus of Pierre Bourdieu (1932-2002). My research is qualitative (Bryman, 2008, Butler-Kisber 2010, Ravitch and Riggan, 2012). This research is in response to the nature of the policy and political narratives which, I argue, lay false claim to the field and activity of child protection as a rational project. My experience of children and family social work was as a sense-making practitioner; I acted and interpreted the actions of others according to my own personal and professional autobiographical filter. The agencies for which I worked and the policies I enacted were, and continue to be, human creations (Helm, 2013, Smeeton, 2017).

I aim to juxtapose the narratives rehearsed in the policy and political context and the stories of children and family social workers, those who are employed to safeguard children and young people. I refer to these as the ‘Big Stories’ and the ‘Little Stories’ respectively. Attempting to safeguard children and young people can be ‘messy’. A practice context which allows for inevitable failure calls for the top down policy maker to engage with the ‘inevitability of incompleteness’ (Malpass and Wickham 1995: 39 cited in Jessop 2003) an approach, I will argue, that is not allowed for in the Big Stories. The overall aim of this study is to investigate, recognising my personal narrative and exploring those of other practitioners, how social workers construct

their professional sense of self, and that of other professionals engaged in child protection work. It is an opportunity to explore the way in which an emerging professional sense of self and 'others' may impact on the inter-professional relationship and the 'job in hand'. This thesis seeks to tell how children and family social workers navigate professional identity, sculpting it in their own interests while at the same time being subject to the scrutiny and actions of other actors within this contested and complex field of practice. I would suggest that Shon's (1983:42) evocative image of the 'swampy lowlands' where situations are confusing and messy and not always responsive to technical solution (Lipsky, 1980, 2010) reflects the reality of children and family social work.

## **1.8 Limitations**

As a self-funded, lone researcher I am mindful of the limitations of this thesis in both scale and scope. It does not attempt to provide a definitive picture of children and family social work; it does not attempt to provide for the voice of the children and young people who are core to the practice and purpose. Nor does it attempt to provide the story of the health visitor, the police officer or the teacher, all of whom can be key players. Its ambitions are to examine, and thus better understand, the professional identity of children and family social workers, to look at how constructions of professional identity impact on practice and on inter-professional relations which are often fraught and contested.

## **1.9 Initial questions from practice**

The following initial questions derive from my years as children and family social worker and my more recent time in social work education. These questions have informed this thesis from the outset and have enabled my research to straddle the structure and agency which guides and informs children and family social work practice:-

- How do social workers construct their professional sense of self, and that of other professionals engaged in the safeguarding of children and young people?
- How do social workers perceive their role and responsibilities, and those of other professionals, within the safeguarding context?
- What is the social work experience of inter-agency and inter-professional working and how does it impact on inter-agency and inter-professional practice?

### **1.10 Methodology**

I invited social workers to tell their individual stories of their day-to-day experience of inter-professional working. In this thesis, I am giving primacy to the process of storytelling in a shared historical and cultural context and in doing so acknowledge that we all, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Connelly and Clandinin (2006:375) explain:

‘People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful’.

The stories of the social workers who participated in this research have opened up a 'portal' through which my narrative inquiry became the study both of the stories told and, via the story telling, of the experiences of those social workers. This is key in narrative inquiry; it becomes both method and methodology. In using narrative inquiry I am locating experience as a phenomenon worthy of study and narrative as a process that is also of importance (Fischer, 2010). Connelly and Clandinin (1990:2) suggest that: 'It is equally correct to say "inquiry into narrative" as it is "narrative inquiry". By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied and it names the patterns of inquiry into study' (ibid:2).

### **1.11 Ethical concerns**

I have been ever mindful of research as a political activity and have relied, as a qualified and registered social worker, on the professional code for social work practice and research (BASW), 2014). My social work value base concords with the Kantian notion of 'respect for the person' (Banks, 2012) and through the course of my research in terms of the 'doing' of the data collection and its subsequent analysis I made every effort to treat the stories which were shared with respect. Lyons and Doucek (2010) suggest that The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects (National Commission 1979) provides the ethical and philosophical template that frames research involving people and articulates three principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, each of which is a core principle consonant with the BASW Code of Ethics (2014). Respect has been a thread running through the research process from outset to completion. I



am as confident as I can be that this has been made manifest by adhering to confidentiality and trustworthiness. I approached the participants who gave their time and words to this research with care and respect. Throughout the research journey I was acutely aware of the need to work hard to retain the integrity of the stories shared and the need to make their retelling credible, trustworthy and transferable in order to contribute new understandings regarding the relationship between the professional identities of children and family social workers and inter-professional practice. I kept to the forefront of my writing how instrumental the researcher becomes as the 'teller' of stories and the responsibility which comes with the process of co-production of the stories shared with me (Patton, 2002, Riessman 2008). I have been very aware from the outset of this research journey that I may stand accused of holding a partisan view of social work but would suggest that this been tempered somewhat by my being more realistically positioned on the insider/outsider continuum as I have been removed from direct face-to-face practice since 2004. Nonetheless, there are still questions to be asked. I address these more fully in Chapter 4, including how I respond to the theoretical and methodological challenge of using both professional experience and narrative. Peterson and Langellier (1997) suggest it is only through the study of context that the relationship between identity, experience and narrative can be articulated. Johns (2006:386) defines context as 'situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organisational behaviour...' In Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis I explore the social, political and practice context which gave rise to the 'situational opportunities and constraints' (Ibid) I experienced when I was a social worker and the social workers who shared their narratives of identity and experiences as part of this study.

### **1.12 Contribution to knowledge**

My research aim is to contribute to social work knowledge in relation to enhanced understandings of the construction and manifestation of professional identity of children and family social workers and how such identity claims might impact on inter-professional and inter-agency relations and practice within the context of safeguarding children. My intention is to capture the sense, strongly expressed in the accounts of their practice given by my participants, that the reductionist and simplistic calls for perpetual improvement which can be found in the messages from policy, Public Inquiries and Serious Case Reviews (henceforth SCRs), are unhelpful to the effectiveness and development of social work. I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, how such calls have come to shape the contours of expectation not least by claiming the realm of common sense (Loxley 1997) and ready recourse, or, as Shoesmith (2016:191) frames it: the 'easy response that had become habitual' in blaming social workers. The practitioners I interviewed were invited to tell not only of the complexity of working with children, young people and families. They were also invited to tell their stories of engaging and working with other professionals while providing a public service 'shot through with the contradictions of the State' (Bourdieu, 1999:184). How, then, do children and family social workers navigate the challenges and complexities of supporting families and protecting children while working in a climate of fear, certainty and blame? who shared their narratives of identity and experiences as part of this study.

### **1.13 Structure of the thesis**

Chapter 2 and 3 – The social policy and legislative context and Literature Review

Chapters 2 and 3 review the way policy and professional regulatory work, resting on either 'common sense' or on the changes to the way public services are understood and governed, produces master narratives that simplify and proceduralise social work. The theories of the changes to public services are introduced and discussed in Chapter 3, together with empirical work on the character and nature of social work practice. At the close of Chapter 3, I conclude my discussion of theories and empirical evidence with my initial questions reframed as research questions.

#### Chapter 4 – Method and Methodology

This chapter explains the choice of methods used in the study, the type of knowledge that it is intended to produce and the terms in which that knowledge might be considered of value. I outline the epistemological foundations which have guided and informed the research and which influenced my subsequent approach.

#### Chapter 5 and 6 - Sense Makers working In the Borderlands and Managers of Difference while Talking Back to Blame

In these chapters, I report and discuss the findings from my fieldwork and especially the interviews with the social work practitioners. In Chapter 5, I present the first two of 'Four Windows' through which I provide new ways of seeing the 'how' and 'where' of children and family social work. Chapter 5 constructs children and family social workers as Sense Makers who work In the Borderlands; practicing on the edge of the private and the public domain, core to and yet on the margins of safeguarding. Practitioners can often find themselves reliant on the understandings and practices of others. In Chapter 6, I position the children and family social workers as

Managers of Difference while Talking Back to Blame. Chapter 6 is concerned with the 'hows' of practice taking place on what is fundamentally an inter-professional and political field. Managers of Difference and Talking Back to Blame are each field effects in that each is generated through the interplay taking place on the field and impact on the practice of the social workers who actively position and assert children and family social work.

## Chapter 7 – Conclusion

In my final chapter, I reflect back and summarise the key points from this research. I argue that I have made a timely and original addition to the current debates regarding the nature and purpose of children and family social work.

## **Chapter 2: The social policy and legislative context**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter I introduced the scope and purpose of my research, and the way I have sought to report on it in this thesis. I also located my own social work story, in which I note lie the origins of my thesis. In order to better understand what, why and how social workers do what they do, and importantly for this research, the way in which they make sense of that work in the social work stories they tell, we first need to examine the context in which they practise (Johns 2006), the context from which the Big Stories emerge. In this chapter, therefore, I seek to contextualise those experiences in a local and national political, historical landscape, the structure of which is both shaped and controlled by social policy and legislation. I will draw attention to the significance of the many changes in government policy and law, during my time as a social worker, in shaping and reshaping children and family social work. The Children Act 1989 [henceforth CA89], implemented in 1991, which establishes core elements of practice which remain central to children and family work, marks the starting position for my broad review of the policy and legislative context from 1991 to date. I give consideration to what I argue was a refocusing of practice under the Children Act 1989 and the initial development, and subsequent reconfigurations, of 'working together' with families who with successive policy changes became 'troublesome birth parents' and/or 'troubled families'. I then explore the consequences of 'joined-up' government (Cabinet Office 1999) and policy changes on children and family social work practice, including the reshaping of services that took place. I give special consideration to the considerable impact of Public Inquiries and Serious Case Reviews, specifically Laming (2003), Haringey

LSCB, (2008) and Haringey LSCB, (2009), on the ongoing practice of children and family social work. I end the review with a critique of the further policy and legislative changes brought about by austerity politics, 2010 – present day. Throughout this discussion I make reference to the ‘Big Stories’ that are taking shape within the policy and legal context of children and family social work.

## **2.2 Working with indeterminacy and in partnership with families.**

CA89 opens in Part 1 Section 1 with the declaration that the welfare of the child should be the court’s paramount consideration when determining any question with respect to the upbringing of a child. Application of this principle is restricted to court proceedings and only where the child’s upbringing is thought by the court to be directly at issue. It is well documented that its application is unpredictable. For example, Herring (2005) and Bainham and Gilmore (2013), argue that this principle’s application reflects a lack of consensus within society over how best to raise children. The enactment of the welfare principle illustrates how children can be located in a complex matrix of law where their interests can clash with the interests of adults who care for them. Bainham (2005: 40) concludes [with original emphasis]: ‘The welfare of the child plays a *preponderant* role but cannot be regarded as *paramount* in the sense of being the *sole* matter under consideration; an awareness that children disputes are clearly about adult interests too.’ A Court of Appeal judgment in *Re G (Children)* [2012] EWCA Civ 1233, [2012] All ER (D) (Oct) provides an erudite analysis of the welfare principle where the language of Munby LJ reveals the relational and holistic nature of the construct of welfare:

‘Relationships are central to our sense and understanding of ourselves. Our characters and understandings of ourselves from our earliest days are charted by our relationships with others. It is only by considering the child’s network or relationships that their well-being can be properly considered. So a child’s relationships, both within and without the family, are always relevant to the child’s interests; often they will be determinative’.

Here, Munby LJ recognises that children’s welfare can only be understood within the context of the relationships and the communities in which they live. Despite all of the changes that have taken place since, it is the CA89, the freedoms and challenges within its key provisions and the inherent indeterminacy of key concepts such as ‘children in need’ and ‘significant harm’ (Bainham, 2005, Fortin, 2003, Bainham and Gilmore, 2013), which continue to preoccupy practitioners ‘doing the job’. The CA89 remains the most important source of children law for children and family social workers. It is their legislative tool and their decision-making framework. Its provisions reflect underpinning philosophies and ideologies which have percolated into and become indistinguishable from children and family social work core values and practice.

Social workers recognise that children’s welfare can only be understood within the context of the relationships within which they live. Children exist as part of an integrated family and community system. This welfare principle infuses the assessment and the judgments made by practitioners. The CA89 strengthened the legal standing of parents (and others with parental responsibility). Parental responsibility, s.3. (1) is a legal construct and a central tenet running through the Act which stresses that the primary responsibility for raising children rests with parents.

Throughout the legislation there is a constant theme of 'partnership' which carries a clear implication that social work support should be provided to help with the parenting endeavour. Partnership involves continuing co-operation with parents whether the working relationship be voluntary or non-voluntary. Therefore, working *with* parents is an expectation leading up to and following on from care proceedings when action may be taken to remove a child. The ongoing nature of parental responsibility pre and post family proceedings carries the clear practice requirement of ongoing co-operation between the involved social worker and the family.

English law presumes that the upbringing of children within a family is desirable. Within what is termed a 'liberal standard', children are initially placed in the care of their parent(s), and the state should not encroach on the private family domain unless there is consent or the threshold is met to allow the power to intervene compulsorily to take over a child's care (Herring et al, 2015). The threshold for intervention turns on 'significant harm' and is established in the Act under s.47 and s.31. The word 'significant' continues to provoke debate in seeking to balance parental autonomy and choice in the bringing up of children. In a liberal state the public must be prepared to accept diverse standards of parenting and the consequences which follow. Hedley J stated:

'It means that some children will experience disadvantage and harm, while others flourish in atmospheres of loving security and emotional stability. These are the consequences of our fallible humanity and it is not the provenance of the state to spare children all the consequences of defective



parenting. In any event, it simply could not be done'. [2007] 1 FLR 2050 at para [50].

The decision-making within the context of the courts, outlined so adroitly by Hedley J sets the social and political context in which children and family social workers work in the cases which are managed day-to-day without recourse to the courts. Courts and social workers face the same dilemmas. The courts see the cases where efforts to work in partnership and to keep the child at home have failed. These are the 'tip of the iceberg' in terms of the caseloads held by social workers (Dickens and Masson, 2014). Working under the provision of section 17 of the CA89 can be the starting point of social work intervention and without the 'safety net' of the court. S.17 provides a 'general duty' on local authorities to safeguard a child's welfare and promote its upbringing through a concept of 'child in need'. Day-to-day case management of such ill-defined and ambiguous cases can be a stress inducing business. As a practitioner it often felt 'safer' working with cases, no matter how complex, within the court arena rather than outside of it. Some of the children, in terms of their assessed need, will be on the cusp of child protection (s. 47), either being managed by a child in need plan or having been made subject to a child protection case conference with an ensuing child protection plan (HM Government, 2015). In the reality of practice, there is a blurred line between working with a family within the context of voluntary provision and more coercive action. Both forms of intervention can take place under Part III of the CA89 and both forms of intervention take place with a deeply embedded legislative presumption of 'support' and 'partnership' working strongly underscoring the primary role of the parents.

### **2.3 Refocusing practice under the Children Act 1989**

The policy and practice period in the early 1990s, following the implementation of the CA89, was characterised by a narrow definition of child protection, concerned with identifying 'high risk' families and directing resources to where it was believed there was most need. Parton (2006) comments that early policy and practice interpretations of the CA89, the narrow definition of child protection and 'incident' focus, was subject to an increasing level of critique, the central issue being that practice belied the intrinsic spirit of the Act. Its underpinning philosophy, that of prevention, partnership and supporting children and families to stay together, where possible, were at risk of being lost. Two reports were central in changing the policy and practice. They generated what became known as the 'refocusing' agenda. One was the Audit Commission report (1994) *Seen but not Heard: Coordinating Community Child Health and Social Services for Children in Need*. The second was *Messages from Research* (Department of Health 1995). Both reports stated that resources were poorly planned and coordinated and called for a 'refocus' on assessing need, supporting families and engaging in meaningful preventative work. *Messages from Research* (ibid) was pivotal in reshaping child care policy and practice and relocating what was then termed child protection into mainstream practice. The assessments placed children and young people on a continuum of need, and a less binary approach divided between S.17 and S.47 was applied. Significantly, the assessments of children could be located anywhere between being in need and in being in need of protection. It was made clear that local authorities had a much wider responsibility, more in keeping with S.17 of the Act, to provide supportive, holistic services to all children. The focus had shifted. Child protection

and the promotion of a child's welfare were part of a continuum of need. I remember as a social worker that 're-focusing' meant a change of emphasis in practice and a different way of working. It was a paradigm shift for social workers at the time. A key finding of the report (Ibid, 1995) was that the priority given to safeguarding had not been reflected consistently or coherently in terms of either resource allocation or service planning. Guidance and a working definition of 'safeguarding' and associated practices was lacking, a view shared by Chief Inspectors in a Safeguarding Children Report (Department of Health, 2002). I remember that allied agencies seemed underprepared and out of step with the changes.

## **2.4 Working Together**

The first central government guidance with the title 'Working Together' was published in 1988 (DHSS, 1988), preceding CA89, and at the time of writing the sixth Working Together (HM Government, 2018) has recently been published. The 1988 guidance, a slight document just 72 pages long, was a precursor to the CA89 in calling for professionals to appropriately manage the protection of children while at the same time respecting and maintaining the private domain of the family. The Working Together guidance was revised twice during the 1990s (Home Office et al, 1991; Department of Health et al, 1999). Parton (2014) notes the two documents reflect the change in direction from child protection to family support. The 1999 publication was revised in response to Messages from Research (Ibid) and introduced a particular meaning to the word 'safeguarding'.

Safeguarding was further defined with the publication of the 2006 Working Together (HM Government) and alongside the definition there appeared a list of the

practitioners and service providers who now shared the safeguarding task. The size of the document (Ibid) increased too: from 119 to 231 pages. The size of the document reflected the sheer volume of the task. Professionals in named agencies were tasked with preventing harm to, and protecting, all children and young people as well as safeguarding and promoting their welfare. Not only had the net of concern widened considerably but so had the list of those deemed to be able, knowledgeable and responsible. Safeguarding had become everybody's business. I suggest that taken for granted assumptions about collectively shared ideas, expectations, values and attitudes informed the swelling document. By inserting the name of a professional body there was the belief that they had the required motivation, knowledge and ability to know how to identify need and/or harm and know how to communicate and share information appropriately. Knowledge in relation to safeguarding was somehow inscribed. The 2006 Working Together guidance was framed in terms of supporting all children and families using an integrated approach (Parton, 2014). It is organised on the positivist belief that agencies and the individuals who inhabit them are a homogenous collective, all of whom would be able and willing to identify need and risk of harm within the context of safeguarding. The guidance, with clear and detailed instruction, assumed it would be able to constitute and structure 'best practice' of the actors in the increasing network of agencies commissioned with the task of safeguarding and so would limit and determine their actions, obviating risk.

The scale and size of the next Working Together (HM Government 2010) was bigger still. Its 390 pages reflected its ambition to respond to the Laming Report (2009), and

the Action Plan (HM Government 2009) which followed. Both were written in the wake of the death of Peter Connelly (also known as Baby P). The term 'child protection' was resurrected. It was made clear that social work was at the core of effective child protection practice. But more than that, the longer text, increasingly prescriptive, seemed to be premised on the notion that ever more detailed and bureaucratic guidance would do what professional judgement could not: make children safe. This positioning of the role of children and family social workers results in practitioners occupying an invidious position. They continue to be charged with the fine balancing of family autonomy and protecting children thus occupying the space between the private sphere of family life and the public sphere of the state and societal expectations. At the same time, they are subject to continual political and public criticism for getting the balance wrong which has the potential to corrode the very core of their professional belief, legitimacy and authority. It is argued that this precarious and professionally vulnerable position is accentuated as a direct result of the people with whom they work: those who are perceived to be on the very margins of society in not only economic but in moral terms (Abbott 1995, Warner, 2014). While recognising that the need for effective inter-agency and inter-professional working had been identified as core in all child abuse inquiries since 1973 (Reder and Duncan, 2004a, 2004b, Parton, 2006), the drive to a more seamless, joined up approach took on a more intense focus and dimension with New Labour (Clarke and Glendinning, 2002, Garrett, 2003, Richards and Smith 2009). New Labour's first term in government (1997-2001) had a sense of urgency about it and was characterised by the antithesis of departmentalism with significant shifts towards centralisation and integration across central government.

The election of the coalition government in 2010 augured further change. Social work was provided with a new home, but without a dedicated government minister, in the Department for Education (DfE). A review of the child protection system in England was announced. The review was in three parts (Munro 2010, 2011, 2011a). London School of Economics Professor of Social Policy, Eileen Munro, led the review. Other reviews of significance, which will be discussed later in this chapter, were of early intervention (Allen, 2011a, 2011b) and family justice (Norgrove, 2011). The Munro review reports (Munro 2010, 2011, 2011a) contained a number of significant recommendations regarding the role of social workers, which were aimed at creating a practice context where social workers would feel able and safe to use their professional judgment, moving away from an emphasis on bureaucracy and compliance. Retired Judge of the High Court of England and Wales, Sir Mark Hedley, proffers a reminder as to how fraught the area is: practitioners criticised for both intervention and non-intervention where the duty to intervene involves a consideration and balance of shifting concepts and values, alongside what might be ‘unacknowledged assumptions and in fields particularly fertile for human frailties to flourish. This is the way the child care practice field is’ (Hedley 2014:1). Hedley’s reflections on the need for nuanced and balanced practice sits in contrast with the comments of the daily realities offered by President of the Family Division Sir James Munby 2016: ‘We are facing a crisis and, truth be told, we have no very clear strategy for meeting the crisis. What is to be done?’ (Munby, 2016, Family Rights Group, 2018). One response to this challenge was the bringing together a ‘coalition of the willing from across the child welfare and family justice sector’ (Family Rights Group, 2018:4) to identify the factors contributing to the rise in proceedings and

attempt to identify solutions. The review found grounds for optimism. There was a consensus that relationship building remains at the heart of good practice and that 'The Children Act 1989 has stood the test of time, as has its underpinning principle of partnership with families to promote their children's well-being' (Ibid:5).

Working Together to Safeguard Children: A Guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (HM Government 2013) came into effect on April 15<sup>th</sup> of the same year. It reiterated the significance of child protection rather than safeguarding, but child protection is without clear definition. This lack of definition has contributed to a practice context where need and harm are placed on an equal footing; each can lead to compulsory state intervention (Norman 2013). The 2013 Working Together reflected a broader social policy landscape and one where professional judgement has been redeemed but it appears to have come with a price. To have professional legitimacy, it must be of the 'authoritative' and policing kind (Parton, 2014). The impetus towards integration had faded into obscurity along with New Labour *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* programme (DfES, 2004).

The normative assumptions that inform the Working Together narratives fail to account for human agency. Different actors reason differently, and, by implication, their behaviour cannot be fully prescribed by procedures and flow charts no matter how detailed. The current Working Together guidance (HM Government, 2018) provides the following to practitioners in the field:

### **Who is this guidance for?**

8. This statutory guidance should be read and followed by strategic and senior leaders and frontline practitioners of all organisations and agencies as set out in chapter 2 of this document. At a strategic level, this includes local authority Chief Executives, Directors of Children's Services, chief officers of police and clinical commissioning groups and other senior leaders within organisations and agencies that commission and provide services for children and families. Members of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (see chapter 4) should also read and follow this guidance.

9. This guidance focuses on the core legal requirements, making it clear what individuals, organisations and agencies must and should do to keep children safe. In doing so, it seeks to emphasise that effective safeguarding is achieved by putting children at the centre of the system and by every individual and agency playing their full part.

HM Government 2018: paras 8&9.

The above is laudable but does not attempt to capture the subjectivities of the individual actors engaged in the field of child protection that form relationships with each other and with parents and children. I recognise this is a difficult thing to do. Jessop (2003:8) grapples with the efficacy of policy making and toys temptingly with the notion of 'something that undermines clarities, envisions chaos, negates affirmation...' While I do not suggest that the most recent Working Together (Ibid) 'envisions chaos' I do suggest that it could be more reflective of relationships, in all of their complexity, not only with children and families but between agencies. In doing, so it might be more likely to make explicit reference to section 17 of the CA89 which promotes the upbringing of children by their families. Relationships are key in working with families. It is difficult to provide or accept support without a relationship. The stated intention of the Working Together guidance is to 'help professionals



understand what they need to do and what they can expect from each other,' and 'focussing on core legal requirements making it clear what professionals and organisations should do to keep children safe'. The document does not allow for the uncertainty, hesitancy, confusion and fear involved when human agency engages with potentially high-risk situations. It denotes, instead, child abuse as a 'known' and safeguarding as a cogent activity with the practitioner as a passive applicator of policy prescription, not an active constructor.

## **2.5 Troublesome birth parents**

Although the child is the focus of working together legislatively, that child, as argued above, sits within a network of complex relationships, at the heart of which is the family. The sociological shifts in the concept of family in recent years is not the focus of this thesis. However, a short review of how successive governments have approached non-coping families and the impact these shifts have had on social work is necessary.

In his Policy Paper (2012) *'Troubled Families': the lessons of history, 1880-2012*. social historian, John Welshman charts the invention and reinvention of terms used to both describe and explain families who are believed to be experiencing, long term, a number of compounding socio-economic and psycho-social problems and hardships. Beginning with Charles Booth's 'social residuum' in 1880 to Sir Keith Joseph's 'cycle of deprivation' in 1972 Welshman (Ibid) notes the emergence of the United States as the driving force behind the concept of the underclass which emerged in the 1980s. There has been an assemblage of policies supporting the

varied nomenclatures used, each in my view varyingly pejorative, but the most recent manifestation has been the Troubled Families programme. The interest and focus on 'problem families' and the need to rescue children from them is part of a policy and legislative continuum, begun by New Labour with the Adoption and Children Act 2002 [henceforth ACA2002], and taken forward with enthusiasm by the Coalition in the form of the Children and Families Act 2014 [henceforth CFA2014].

The ACA2002 is the principal statute governing adoption in England and Wales. It aligns adoption law with the relevant provisions of the CA89, to ensure that the welfare of the child is the paramount consideration in all decisions relating to adoption. The ACA2002 'catapults the welfare principle' (Bainham and Gilmore, 2013:688) into decision making related to the adoption of children. This makes welfare one of only two conditions for dispensing with parental consent, leading Bainham and Gilmore (Ibid:688) to argue: 'legitimate speculation about what has happened to the rights of parents in the adoption process...' Adoption reform was viewed as being long overdue but the mantra of more adoptions, more quickly was less than welcome, with the view that adoption should be seen as the last resort not the first, after all other attempts to meet the needs of the child have failed (Bainham, 2005, Ball, 2005). The ACA2002 stemmed from the context of New Labour's modernizing, target-driven agenda with an expressed ambition of increasing adoptions from care by at least 40% within five years and a desired 50% increase (Prime Ministers Review, 2000). The birth family was seen as a problematic impediment to the speedy adoption of children and was at odds with the strongly managerialist orientation of the New Labour government and the policy initiative to

bring about change in relation to the adoption of children described by Prime Minister Blair as 'an eye-catching initiative' (Garrett, 2003).

Elements of the provision contained within the CFA2014 compound New Labour's direction of travel. It represents a statutory endorsement of an increasingly interventionist approach. It underpins the philosophical approach expressed by the Coalition government (2010-2015) and the current administration towards taking more children into care, and earlier rather than later (Narey, 2011, Gove, 2012). It should be the first and not the last resort to 'rescue' children from their families (Kirton, 2013). I argue that the CFA2014 can be firmly located in a policy context which called for more child protection practice to become authoritative. Early intervention was being redefined, undermining the philosophical premise of the CA89, that of keeping children with their families where possible. The public and private boundaries of state involvement in the family life were reconfigured.

### **2.5.1 Troubled Families**

Supporting families and spending time working in partnership alongside parents with parental responsibility has been replaced with making parents responsible for their children in a more explicit and draconian way. Rodger (2012) suggests that there has been an unhealthy coupling of the mass media with policy making. The political system, sensitive to the demands of the electorate, offers the public policies which provide certainty rather than reflecting human subjectivity, emotion and ambiguity. The Troubled Families agenda and the language which underpinned and justified it exemplify the normalising and dominant process outlined above. In 2011 the

government established the Troubled Families Team. It was a direct response to the riots which had taken place in England's major cities in August of the same year. It was intended to address what Ken Clarke, then Secretary of State, described as the 'social deficit' (Clarke, 2011: 34 cited in Parton 2014). Levitas (2012: 4) dismisses the imputed existence of 120,000 troubled families as a 'factoid – something which takes the form of a fact, but is not'. She notes the changing and discursive language which surrounded the Troubled Families programme: from families that have troubles, to families that are 'troubled', to families that are, or cause, trouble. While the Troubled Families programme was located in the Department for Work and Pensions, social work became implicated in the rhetorical strategy. The so-called Troubled Families were so troubled that they had been failed and were beyond the reach of Local Authority social work. 'Tough love' was required to replace the 'expensive swarm of services buzzing around the family, dealing with symptoms rather than the root- cause' (Pickles, 2015).

### **2.5.2 Troubled Families and social work**

There were significant and far reaching implications for the practice of children and family social work. In 2013 Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education gave a telling speech to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC):

'In too many cases, social work training involves idealistic students being told that individuals with whom they work will have been disempowered by society. They will be encouraged to see these individuals as victims of social injustice

whose fate is overwhelmingly decreed by the economic forces and inherent inequalities which scar our society’.

Children and family social workers were clearly seen as giving too much credence to social need and inequality. They were too preoccupied with systemic disadvantage. Their practice was overly infused with misplaced and misguided ideological dispositions diverting attention from placing due onus and expectation on the agency of individuals (Garrett 2015). In the same speech, Gove provided a roll call of names of children well known in the public space: ‘children who cried out in pain’ only to be met with silence and inaction; the result of social workers ‘succumbing’ to the ‘rule of optimism’.

‘Behind that little phrase – the rule of optimism - lie untold hours of suffering: Daniel Pelka on his dirty mattress in his dark, locked room, hungry and alone; the 4-year-old Hamzah Khan shrinking from maternal neglect to the size of a 12-month-old baby, in a house unfit for habitation, his corpse mummifying in his mother’s alcoholic swamp of a bedroom’.

Gove described children and family social work as ‘noble’ and ‘demanding’ and requiring a particular kind of professionalism, calling for a different kind of social worker which would be met via the launching of the Frontline programme, this to recruit ‘top graduates’ from the best universities. These individuals were most likely to foster agency and autonomy, be able to engage in authoritative practice, enabling or enforcing normativity and therefore helping to achieve and maintain a well-ordered wider society (Garrett, 2015). Gove made it clear – there is good and bad ideology.

The old ideology, peddled by social work educators, was bad. His new ideological vision was good. In this speech Gove made his focus the behavioural disposition of the poor and, by association, the regulation of behavioural dispositions of children and family social work. Gove was not a lone voice. He found support from within social work (Goodman and Trowler 2011, Narey, 2014). Sir Martin Narey (former chief executive of Barnardo's) was tasked with undertaking a review of social work training. The resulting report (Narey *ibid*), largely anecdotal, is highly critical of social work education and chimes with Gove's critique that too much time and attention is given to structural disadvantage and inequalities.

What was needed was focus on delivery locally, aided by a centrally determined philosophy, underpinned by measurable targets that were monitored through new management techniques. This in turn required joined up government to bring together the forces of the state across government departments.

## **2.6 Joined-up government – the road to joined-up practice?**

As discussed in Chapter 1, and earlier in this chapter, central to the modernisation project, so closely associated with New Labour, were policy initiatives centred on integration, joined-up government and partnership (Cabinet Office, 1999). The concern with joined-up government went hand in hand with a focus on the 'social investment state', (Giddens 1998: 117, Williams, 2004) early intervention and social exclusion. Sure Start Local Programmes were a cornerstone in this strategy constituting a universal local intervention for all families living within a designated area (Rutter 2005). Whether Sure Start Centres were a success is not relevant to the

discussion here, but what is relevant is that the Sure Start Centres became part of the Every Child Matters: Change for Children (DfES, 2004) and Every Child Matters: Next Steps (DfES, 2004a) and exemplified what became known as the Five Outcomes (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic wellbeing). The protection of children deemed to be at risk was located within a framework of universal services. 'Staying Safe' was added in the latter stages of the policy settlement (Parton, 2014).

The policy initiatives introduced alongside Every Child Matters (ibid) were the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (Department of Health, 2004) and the Children's Workforce Strategy (DfES, 2006). In order to achieve the successful integration of early years, schools, and health services, a workforce strategy was needed to build a 'World-class' workforce with 'common skills and knowledge'. Common language and common skills would, it was claimed, equal common goals towards shared ambition and a common understanding of what the Five Outcomes meant in practice and how they could be best achieved. The *Common Assessment Framework* (DfES, 2006b, 2006c) reflected the *Framework for the Assessment of Children and their Families* (DoH 2000) (henceforth the 'Framework'), in conceptual design but was targeted at improving the wellbeing of all children. Both the Common Assessment Framework and the Framework, although each with a different practice focus, were intended to be the professional embodiment of early intervention and service integration.

My frustrations in practice could not find relief in common frameworks and partnerships. There was a very real and perceived pressure to extol the virtues of

close co-operation between public services (Challis et al, 1988; Hudson et al, 1999). The critique by Powell and Glendinning (2002) resonated then and continues to resonate with my own reflections. Commenting on a lack of evidential rationale and the long search for coordination, the authors argue that there was a tendency to treat the term 'partnership' as uncontested:

'If the relationship is termed a 'partnership' by the partners then it is a partnership. In other words the relationships between the partners are not generally subject to much scrutiny' (Powell and Glendinning, 2002:4).

The Big Stories that were developing was not open to scrutiny by the Little Stories which tell of the experiences of children and family social workers and the families with whom they work. Simply terming a relationship a 'partnership' is problematic but is particularly problematic when imposed on distinct and separate agencies, each with varying degrees of autonomy, with the attendant expectation that they will work together seamlessly to protect children. The lack of definition and the absence of a clear theoretical framework were, perhaps, better served by 'useful ambiguity' (McLaughlin 2004). My own experiences suggest that the overriding policy drive towards collective endeavour did not account for inter-professional difference in defining and assessing need and harm when working with children and their families in service delivery.

### **2.6.1 Top down, bottom up and the gap in between**

Alongside the top down policy drive towards all things integrated was the prominence of management as the key instrument of reform. Performance auditing



and external inspection, pioneered by the Conservative administrations of the 1980s, were already well established when Labour came to power in 1997. The 'New Public Management' came to symbolise New Labour's commitment to modernise the institutions of British society, particularly the delivery of social services (Langan, 2000, Martin, 2005). The new language, which sat uneasily with integration and joined up working, (Dickinson, 2016) revolved around 'performance indicators', 'inspection' and 'audit.' I do not propose to assert that social work before the era of New Labour was the best of times. It wasn't. I remember cases being allowed to drift. Referrals not deemed as urgent could languish in 'in-trays' for weeks on end. Practice could be accurately construed as 'autonomous, private and idiosyncratic' (Munro 2004:1081), underpinned with a belief in professional bureaucracy and the use of discretion. McDonald (2006) and Bevir (2011) suggest that performance management was introduced, in part, to fetter professional autonomy and as a result children and family social work felt destabilised and was drawn into 'calculus of performativity' (McDonald *ibid*:22). Managerialism, premised on rationality, was intended to throw a light on the professional task, and the supporting audit tools, presented as neutral, introduced new, far reaching forms of control and accountability. Children and family social workers were required to demonstrate efficiencies and effectiveness (Webb 2006). Performance management became a regulatory tool for controlling and managing resources where quantitative indicators became key in monitoring effectiveness and 'outcomes'. Martin (2005: 497-502) refers to this period as the 'inspection explosion' undertaken enthusiastically by an 'inspection industry' concerned with driving up standards in public services with an agenda of evaluation, inspection and improvement. My memories of the early

manifestations of inspections programmes reflect Munro (2004). Practice became about speed of delivery and efficiency. My own practice became reconstituted and reconfigured with the professional task becoming more about the number of Initial Assessments completed, over their quality. The voice of the family and indeed the child became marginalised. Partnership working with children and their families, so vital and integral to the CA89, was harder to achieve and sustain.

The impact of managerialism is described by Marsh and Macalpine (1999) as imposing control of both the body and the mind. However, targets were met at the expense of relationship-based practice, welfare and quality. As Michael Power points out: 'The audit society is a society that endangers itself because it invests too heavily in the shallow rituals of verification at the expense of other forms of organisational intelligence' (1997:123). The effect on practice was significant and both direct and indirect in nature. Initial and Core assessments, often complex and involuntary, were completed speedily and within the prescribed seven or thirty-five working days respectively, and professional judgement, increasingly disciplined and constrained, became marginalised. The quality and purpose of the assessment and the experience of the family and the child became secondary. I argue here that, as the decade progressed, social work began to enter a more narrowly defined space where practitioners were being directed to practise within the confines of increasing managerialism (Webb 2006, Parton 2014). A characteristic of managerialism was the demand for greater accountability in all public services. This had a corrosive impact on social work. Burton and van de Broek (2009) suggest that while practitioners have always sought to find a balance of accountability toward the service user, the organisation and the profession the introduction of New Public

Management augured substantial change in the level of accountability and changed the substantive nature of the work that social workers undertake, diverting and diluting professional responsibilities. Munro (2004:1075) cautioned against the drive to accountability: 'The process of making social work 'auditable' is in danger of being destructive, creating a simplistic description of practice and focussing on achieving service outputs with little attention to user outcomes'.

## **2.7 Reshaping services**

New Labour's policy drive towards integration and joined up services, outcomes and the micro-management of children and family social workers had a denigrating effect on practice. Munro (2010) acknowledged the de-skilling and corrosive effect on professional expertise and confidence. The social policy context outlined above did not occur in a vacuum. It reflected a neo-liberal and paternalistic repositioning of public service provision and the state (Pollack, 2010, Soss et al, 2009, Liebenberg et al, 2013). The *Framework for the Assessment of Children and their Families* (DoH 2000) (henceforth the 'Framework') was introduced by New Labour and came to represent their approach to children and family social policy making. As discussed previously, closely associated with the New Labour reform programme were ideas of partnerships with and between what were believed to be allied agencies in the safeguarding task. For me, as a practitioner at the time, an ostensibly multi-agency tool, was, in fact, one that no head teacher or health visitor I worked with had heard of. When presented with the tool they expressed themselves reluctant to engage with 'yet more paperwork'. In a short space of time, the shared workload of co-ordination and completion of the assessment tool came to rest with the social worker

alone. Alongside the drive towards all things 'seamless' there was a command and control ethos closely associated with New Public Management (Featherstone et al, 2014). Richards and Smith (2009) note the policy emphasis on joined up government and integrated working as a prevailing part of the social policy landscape. New Labour was concerned with challenging and reshaping Social Services, an arm of public service which was perceived as moribund and monolithic: 'the failure of the old order', Langan (2000:155). The *Modernising Social Services White Paper* (Department of Health, 1998) and the subsequent *Quality Protects* (Department of Health 1998a) placed policies relating to children and young people at the heart of the reform programme. Langan (Ibid:157) suggests the reforms were underpinned by a narrative of failure which stood in 'symbolic contrast to that of "modernization"'. A key output of the Quality Protects agenda was the development and implementation of the assessment tool, the 'Framework' referred to previously. It has helped shape social work and inter-professional assessments and relations, for good or ill, since.

In October 2002, three months prior to the publication of the Laming Inquiry Report, a report that attracted much less media and political interest was published: *Safeguarding Children: A Joint Chief Inspectors' Report on Arrangements to Safeguard Children* (Department of Health 2002). The report, authored by key allied agencies found that safeguarding children was seen as a central responsibility of government and sought to provide a definition. Safeguarding was defined in broad terms: 'concerns about children and young people's welfare as well as risks of harm to young people's welfare' (Department of Health 2002 para 1.5). Safeguarding was

further embedded in the day-to-day practices surrounding children and family work and became firmly located within the context of universal services.

My time as a Senior Practitioner in a busy Assessment Team in the late 1990s felt the impact of these policy developments. The Family Support Centres which characterised my formative years as a social worker had been replaced by Sure Start Children's Centres. Family support, as understood by what at the time had been regarded as the seminal and far reaching Messages from Research (DoH,1995), had been replaced by Early Intervention. Children and family social work felt dislocated within the framework of the new and emerging government policy in relation to the state and family life; it was not always apparent where child protection fitted in. As social workers, we no longer 'protected' children and young people but instead 'safeguarded' them. I remember feeling thrown and professionally exposed at the complete absence of 'risk' in the Framework of Children in Need and their Families (Ibid), the tool the government had provided for me to assess risk. It seemed that social work was in the vanguard of child protection but at the same time deemed to be failing to do the job it was being asked to do.

## **2.8 Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) and Public Inquiries**

One way of examining the relevance and significance of context to social work is to look at when things go wrong and the Reviews and Inquiries that follow. Doing so provides an additional window into how social workers, and other professionals, are constructed in the public space. Like Pritchard et al (2013) I hold that Public Inquiries and Serious Case Reviews become a 'surrogate indicator of effective child protection'. Peckover et al (2015) argue that SCRs provide a rich source of

information about contemporary child protection and as such have been subject to a range of research reviews. In terms of their utility SCRs have provided significant insights into the provision and quality of public services (Brandon et al 2008a, Brandon et al 2009, Brandon et al 2012, Frederico et al 2014). For example, Brandon et al (2008b) explore the significance of thresholds, between services. Their extensive study found that what they describe as a 'preoccupation' with thresholds was one of a number of interacting risk factors. There will be a further discussion of SCRs and PIs in Chapter 3.

Serious Case Review (SCRs) were mandated in England and Wales following the death of a child when abuse or neglect were known or suspected to be a factor. Local Children Safeguarding Boards (LCSB), which were created by the Children 2004 Act, had responsibility for undertaking and overseeing SCRs. Serious Case Reviews originated from the government guidance *Working Together under the Children Act 1989* (Home Office et al, 1991). This guidance document provided the formal requirements for conducting a SCR, stressing the need for central government to be informed, so that public statements could be made and developments considered and reviewed. The guidance offered seven key principles that should underpin the process. These were: urgency, impartiality, thoroughness, openness, confidentiality, co-operation and resolution (Sinclair and Bullock 2002).

New guidance, *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, (DOH, 1999) provided a shift of focus, with less emphasis on checking whether child protection procedures were followed and more emphasis on learning lessons for improving collaboration

and on improving services and responsiveness within the relevant and allied agencies. It was intended that reviews should be about learning and not used as a trial or a methodology to apportion guilt. They should feed a culture of organisational audit and review rather than one of investigation and blame (Sinclair and Bullock 2002). Lord Laming supported this view in his 2009 Progress Report stating that 'the primary purpose of SCRs as a learning process to protect children more effectively in the future is in danger of being lost. This is (partly) as a result of both confusion about the purpose of SCRs, which are sometime perceived as holding individuals to blame or agencies to account' (2009:6.8). More rarely, the government may establish a Public Inquiry where it sees an issue of serious public concern. The Public Inquiry works to Terms of Reference that may be drawn narrowly or broadly but are aimed at allowing the inquiry to scrutinise past decisions and events that may have contributed to the child's death by calling witnesses, and compelling the release of records, and to make recommendations on future practice, policy and legal changes aimed at preventing future deaths

Not all of SCRs and Public Inquiries contribute to pervasive narratives about who children and family social workers are and what they do or fail to do. However, I argue here that the Public Inquiry relating to the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003) and the two Serious Case Reviews which took place in relation to Peter Connelly (DoE, 2008 and DoE 2009) were effective in writing the Big Stories feeding political and public anxiety regarding the child protection and safeguarding. I explore not only their impact on childcare policy in the UK, but their influence in becoming 'media templates' (Kitzinger, 2000:61) serving to maintain the perception that such incidents happen far too often and could have been prevented (Kearney,

2013, Lonne and Parton, 2014). The inherently retrospective view of SCRs and Public Inquiries provide for a specific treatment of past practice and social workers management of judgement and risk. Reviews and Inquiries by their nature are under pressure to construct comprehensible narratives. As public accounts, they provide meta-narratives of how social work, as a key public service, is seen to manage the interface between the state and the protection of children. Cooper (2009:11) adds that alongside the judgement and blame come allegations of incompetence and ‘...in doing so we abandon an inquiring stance’. The intrinsic limitations of the Public Inquiry and SCR process are overlooked. The final account emerges as a full and true story rather than a partial construction snapshot of the complexity and ambiguity of difficult lives and relationships. The politicians and media are served the heads that must roll (Clapton et al 2013, Warner, 2013).

There are different narratives to be told. Not only the practice narratives but the improving picture of the effective safeguarding of children. There is evidence to support the view that the UK has an improving record in preventing non-accidental child deaths (Pritchard and Sharples 2008, Harker et al. 2013) and that children known to the child protection system are less likely to die from non-accidental causes than children not known to the system (Sinclair and Bullock 2002). Pritchard and Williams (2010) analysed the number of child abuse related deaths between 1974 and 2006 suggesting that their rate and number have seen a decline marking an improvement more positive than most other major developed countries. They argue that the period in question can be seen as a relative success story for child protection and safeguarding more broadly. This is not the moral panic story being



told through SCRs and Public Inquiries and the political and media narrative surrounding them.

Victoria Climbe (2003) and Peter Connelly (2008 and 2010) became ‘the story’ and, ultimately, a ‘public truth’. Elsey (2010:1) makes it clear the extent of media interest in the death of Peter Connelly; ‘A search of the Lexus Library Database found that there were 2832 mentions of the Baby P case in UK newspapers from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2008 to 1<sup>st</sup> November 2009. The tabloid newspaper *The Sun* alone printed 848 articles mentioning the case during that year. The narrative of what happened and what ‘went wrong’ as produced either within the text of the Public Inquiry or the SCR or as a result of subsequent media and political scrutiny, sets the scene for unrealistic public expectation. It serves, unhelpfully, to create a policy and practice context in which practitioners are set to fail (Ayre, 2001) and fails to tell of the success story in protecting children (Pritchard and Williams, 2010).

The Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report (Laming 2003) is a landmark report in both its size and ambition; *“It is the hope of the full Inquiry team that the horror of what happened to Victoria will endure as a reproach to bad practice and be a beacon pointing the way to securing the safety and wellbeing of all children in our society”* (Laming 2003:1.68). It was billed as the ‘inquiry to end all inquiries’ (Stanley 2004:75), and as the most wide-ranging inquiry (Masson 2006) and did much to break the mould of the inquiry format. Publishing the proceedings live transformed the inquiry into a global event and made it widely accessible. The Report comprises 200,000 words and although the Inquiry served as the platform for an ambitious reconfiguring of services and led to, among other things, the merging of education and social services (into what became known as Children’s Services) and the

establishment of the Children Act 2004, the practice issues were the same as those identified in reviews and inquiries before and since. The practice problems were in relation to inter-agency and inter-professional practice; the identification of need and harm and the organisational context.

The Laming Inquiry took place in the midst of the New Labour Third Way project, a central theme of which was a strong emphasis on 'partnerships' and pragmatic solutions to 'wicked' policy problems. Laming acknowledged that the existing legislative context (Children Act 1989) was adequate and yet went on to make 108 recommendations. The majority were structural and top down, based on the premise that organisational mergers would filter down to practice on the ground and thus improve communication between agencies and practitioners. Organisational restructuring to achieve practice change was a key message of the Inquiry Report and is reflected in the summary recommendations many of which had a strong emphasis on creating new organisational structures and refining guidance documents. Lord Laming acknowledged 'that we are not charged with conducting a review of the whole child protection system in this country' (2.54) but the 108 recommendations were both substantial and far reaching with a clear ambition for whole system change. The emphasis on partnership working resonated with the New Labour governance narrative (Rhodes 2000) and signalled a shift away from hierarchical systems of control and co-ordination towards networks as a form of governance. Yet the legislative change and policy reform, left in place the legislative framework of the 1989 Act and with it the foundation for day-to-day social work practice.

The language of certainty is pervasive in Laming (2003). For example, Recommendations 13 and 34 cover the process of assessment and the purpose of home visits. They are 'top down' and fail to engage with the mix of relationships, fear and uncertainty in children and family social work. Recommendation 13 calls for: *'...a 'common language' for use across all agencies to help those agencies to identify who they are concerned about, why they are concerned, who is best placed to respond to those concerns' and 'it must prescribe a clear step-by-step guide on how to manage a case through either a section 17 or a section 47 track, with built-in systems for management and review'*. In addition, the Recommendation called for 'some consistency in the application of both section 17 and section 47 inquiries'.

The language of Recommendation 13 suggests that the re-writing of a policy document to 'prescribe', 'make clear' and provide 'a clear step-by-step guide' underpinned by a 'common language' will ensure practitioners are able to learn the lessons and not make the same mistakes again. Clear, concise language repeated frequently has the potential to create an 'official' version, normative and prescribed, of children and family social work. It is a language which fails to acknowledge the existence and influence of autobiographical filters and professional difference. Certainty and straightforwardness are absent from the reality of the referral and assessment process (Spratt 2000, White and Featherstone 2005, Ferguson 2011, Holland 2012). Yet the Recommendation calls for a 'common language' for use across all agencies to help those agencies identify who they are concerned about and the establishing of a 'clear step-by-step guide on how to manage either a section 17 or a section 47 track, with built in systems for case monitoring and review' and the call for consistency in 'the application of both section 17 and section 47.' In essence

the key message contained in Recommendation 13 is refer and assess better, improve the sharing of information and communicate.

Recommendation 34, similarly, provides a narrative of certainty and straightforwardness: *‘Social workers must not undertake home visits without being clear about the purpose of the visit, the information to be gathered during the course of it, and the steps to be taken if no one is at home. No visits should be undertaken without the social worker concerned checking the information known about the child by other child protection agencies...’* This Recommendation related to Laming’s belief that home visits to Victoria Climbié were ‘completely wasted’ (5.108 and 6.606) in that lack of focus resulted in lack of valuable insight into Victoria’s situation. The home visit, often undertaken alone by the social worker can carry with it high expectation but has been paid limited attention in the social work literature. Ferguson (2009) writes of the atmosphere in the homes where abuse may be taking place, the fear experienced by social workers who are disempowered from asking the questions they need to ask and feeling physically restricted even immobilised in the family home. This interface between the professional and the personal goes unexplored in the Inquiry Report.

In her statement to the Inquiry Ms Arthurworrey realised she had been ‘set up’. During the course of the Inquiry, Manning (Kouao’s partner) confirmed that he and Kouao had set out to mislead in order to gain some advantage with their housing application. However, Ms Arthurworrey saw what she was intended to see and at this

point, in legislative terms, she was under no duty or obligation to see and speak to Victoria on her own and she reminds the Inquiry, and the reader of the Report:-

*‘At the time I did not know that I was dealing with child killers. I thought that Kouao was a respectful adult who was child focussed. She had come to this country to make a better life for her and Victoria’ (6.297).*

## **2.9 Peter Connelly**

The first Peter Connelly SCR (2008) was different both in scale and ambition to the Victoria Climbié Inquiry but was highly significant. It served to mark the re-emergence of child protection as a significant governmental concern with the key role allotted to social work (Parton 2012). The post-Peter Connelly landscape saw the resurrection of ‘child protection’ and the displacement of ‘safeguarding’; the latter as noted previously had been the policy marker of New Labour. The death of Peter Connelly was transformed into a landmark event as a result of the way in which media and political responses coalesced. Labour’s Children’s Minister Ed Balls responded to The Sun newspaper that had turned the Peter Connelly case into a national social work crisis. Balls declared that the original Haringey SCR was ‘inadequate’. Butler (2013), writing in The Guardian, reports that officials from the Office of the Children’s Minister had seen the original SCR prior to publication and raised no concerns. Michael Gove, in 2008, as shadow children’s secretary, had sight of the initial SCR prior to publication and was positive in his praise, defining it as a manual of how to improve children’s services. His view, when in power, changed. Instead he joined in with the new political chorus declaring it to be ‘rubbish’.

The first Connelly Serious Case Review (SCR1) attempts to understand the practice context and is sensitive to the benefits and advantages of a retrospective, 'benefit of hindsight' (1.5.22, 1.5.27) view. The SCR1 evaluation is that:

*1.5.28 'The quality of the work of different agencies in the complex case, varied between and within them. Numerous examples of good practice within all agencies have been acknowledged in the analysis provided in section 6. Of particular note were the multi-agency responses by all the professionals and agencies to the December 2006 injury.'*

The Report goes on to state that the

*'detailed analysis and conclusions inevitably focus on the lessons to be learned' (1.5.29) and that 'There were many factors that contributed to the inability of the agencies inability to understand what was happening to child A. With the possible exception of the paediatric assessment of 01.08.07, none on their own were likely to have enabled further responses that might have prevented the tragic outcome.'*

SCR1 attempts to create a platform for learning. It acknowledges mistakes were made, errors of judgement occurred resulting in poor decision making and poor or non-communication but it does not attempt to reclaim and reconstruct key interactions to develop a macro-discourse designed to comment on the relationship between social work and the family. The Little Story of the individual practitioner is not heard in the Big Stories of failure and certainty. SCR1 locates the practitioner in

the moment not knowing what they could not have known and acknowledging what the practitioner did know but did not fully appreciate (Turner 1978).

SCR1 was 'insufficiently critical and insufficiently thorough' (Butler 2013). The second Connelly Serious Case Review (SCR2) ensures any association with SCR1 is severed, making clear at its outset that the membership of the second Serious Case Review Panel was almost completely changed and composed of personnel '*at a higher level of seniority than that of the previous SCR*' (1.4.2). A newly configured panel membership with a higher level of seniority and a broader remit of inquiry; the scope of the inquiry widened to include the period when the mother of Child A was first pregnant. However, there are other more subtle differences between the two Reviews. SCR2 provides a storyline which conveys an extra layer of meaning and offers the reader a way of seeing and thinking about the unfolding events and provides an 'if only' implication. It does not appear to matter that the story is told in a language that is unrecognisable in both policy and practice terms. But it resonates with the notion that things are far from satisfactory and require further attention. It confirms a perspective that social workers are too wedded to their value base and too reluctant to remove children from parents incapable of change.

The author of SCR2 applies both foresight and hindsight in the re-telling of the story of Child A: '*It is difficult to apply the discipline of hindsight only when the consequence of a tragic event is already known*' (1.1.5). The SCR is written from the advantageous position of both hindsight and foresight and the author believes this positioning better allows lessons to be learned so that future practitioners are

endowed with the attributes of Janus – able to work with both hindsight and foresight.

Both reports comment on the initial child protection case conference and subsequent protection planning in relation to a significant incident in December 2006 when Child A was admitted into hospital with bruising which was ‘very suggestive of non-accidental injury.’ (SCR1 – 5.6.1). Child A is returned home. In SCR1, the decision making which led to his return home is provided with a practice context and is therefore seen as plausible and understandable. In SCR2, the practice context is absent and therefore the decision making surrounding the return of Child A appears incomplete and amateur. The unknowing reader might be left with an ‘if only’ feeling.

#### SCR1

*5.7.2 Legal advice provided on 29.12.06 confirmed that the threshold for an Interim Care Order was met, but that given Ms A’s co-operation the local authority did not intend to pursue this. It was advised that it would be premature to return child A home before a risk assessment and ‘due to ongoing police investigation’.*

#### SCR2

*3.34 The legal view, given orally immediately following the child protection conference and confirmed by email on 29<sup>th</sup> December, was that the threshold for care proceedings had been met, but this did not prompt the Children and Young People’s Service to initiate care proceedings in respect of Peter.*



There is a normative argument woven through SCR2 or as Fischer (2010) citing White (1981) and McCloskey (1990) puts it, underlying the story telling is a demand for moral reasoning; every good story has moral weight. SCR2 delivers. The author expresses concern at the '*moral climate*' (3.8.11) within the household and concern about Ms A as '*someone who is quite shameless, and without much conscience*' (3.12.1) and who '*Was in rent arrears and she drank and smoked heavily with little regard for the impact of it on her children's welfare. The questions to be asked at this stage are: What have we got here? And Who have we got here?*' (3.8.4). SCR2 succeeds as a joint enterprise; the demonization of vulnerable families, deemed unfit to parent, and the positioning of social workers as failing to protect vulnerable children.

As Connolly and Doolan (2007:3) aptly observe: '*Systems of child welfare went from being protectors of public anxiety to being inadequate protectors of the nation's children*'. The notion that social workers could, and should, protect all children from harm took hold'. Shoesmith (2016), central to the Baby P story, confirms that the original aim of SCRs was to learn lessons from cases of abuse and homicide but that they have become a proxy for blaming social workers. It could be argued, however, that the possibility of blame is inherent in the fundamental and stated aim of a SCR. Sidebotham et al (2016) support this view suggesting that the '*narrative of blame and failure*' finds its way all too readily into SCRs as a consequence of the stated aim to '*find out what went wrong...when and why it did so and what can be done to minimise the chance of the same mistakes being repeated*' (DfE 2014:7). While SCRs have been reviewed and repositioned, their potential to become effective

learning tools is part of a much broader political and social picture (Shoesmith, 2016). This involves the shifting not only of how social work and social workers are perceived but also the public's knowledge and understanding of familial child abuse and homicide. Cooper (2014:271) argues there is a significant difficulty in establishing 'a secure symbolic framework or discourse in society for the emotionally indigestible facts of child torture and murder'. The SCR is emblematic in bringing into 'overt' public view the day-to-day 'covert' practices of the child protection system (Cooper, 2009). Here, potentially, the banks of public sensibilities have been breached. 'Containment' has failed and the problem of child abuse laid bare in public view (Cooper and Whitaker, 2014).

## **2.10 Practising Post-Laming**

The extent of the tragic deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly and the actual, or perceived, professional failure generated public and political opprobrium. In response to Laming (2003) the government was provided with the impetus to introduce extensive organisational reform, reframing the Big Stories of 'child protection' as a specialist or targeted intervention located within broader, universal services. The organisational reform was seismic, described by Hudson (2005a, 2005b, 2005c) as the most important policy shift in children's services since 1948. Practitioners continued to deal with the messy, ambiguous and uncertain day-to-day practice of safeguarding and protecting children which sat in juxtaposition with the messages from the Laming Inquiry (Ibid). Sitting alongside the Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme Parton (2014:68) noted the broadening role envisaged for children's services and the increased emphasis on integration: '...it

was less clear where child protection fitted in'. The recommendations from the Laming Inquiry were imbued with a prescriptive, rational tone. They imposed what were largely managerialist organisational reforms strongly underpinned by the expectation that increased and improved partnerships would result in a streamlining of human interaction characterised by rationality and comprehensiveness of service provision. The policy belief was premised on the idea that practitioner behaviour would alter once the organisational questions had been resolved. Extensive reorganisation at the top, the merging of Education and Social Services to become Children's Services, would improve inter-agency and inter-professional arrangements, communication and relations. The Every Child Matters changes were presented by the government as an explicit response to Laming Inquiry with assurances that child deaths like Victoria Climbié would not happen again (Parton, 2014). Laming (2003:1:66) was '...convinced that the answer lies in doing relatively straightforward things well.' 'Doing relatively straightforward things well' failed to capture the emotion of the child protection work I was engaged with at the time. I felt, sometimes, too frightened to speak to an angry, drunk man, known to have a predilection for violence, over the care of his children. I felt unsupported by Laming during the doorstep interactions with hostile parents with equally hostile neighbours looking on and ready to join in. Smeeton (2017:14) is resonant of my own experiences as a social worker. He counters Laming's idea of 'straightforwardness' by emphasising children and family social work as 'more than either 'science or 'art' but distinctly 'practice'. He embeds social work practice in a wider examination of the human condition and the value placed on childhood and family. Post-Laming, key policy and legislative manifestations were *Every Child Matters* (2004a, 2004b) and

the changes ushered in under the Children Act 2004. The latter called for a whole systems change, an ambitious programme to ensure that all the needs of all children were met (Hudson 2005b). The 2004 Act provided a framework for wide ranging reforms of children's services with a strong emphasis throughout on achieving integrated support and prevention. France and Utting (2005:80), with original emphasis, characterised the model informing the changes as:

‘The paradigm of risk *and protection-focussed* prevention since it embraces the concept of enhancing children's lives as well as tackling risk. ‘Protection’ in this context is defined as something other than the opposite of risk’.

Post-Laming, such was the shift away from child protection to universal services and safeguarding, that Munro and Calder (2005) were prompted to query, ‘Where Has Child Protection Gone?’ and Smith (2008) to comment on its marginalisation. Clearly the task of protecting children had not disappeared but it was now located in the wider context of ‘safeguarding and promoting welfare’. The professional task had been renamed – child protection was out and safeguarding was in. Parton and Frost (2009) felt it was more than just the marginalisation of child protection it was the marginalisation of social work as well.

The roots of my professional interest in professional identity, the demands and expectations of inter-professional practice and the mismatch between rhetoric and reality can be located in the wake of the Laming Inquiry and the ‘competitive sport’ approach to policy making under Labour. Terdiman lends a voice to my frustration, as real now as it was then: ‘The common sense of things, the knowledge everyone is sure to have is precisely the starting point for the investigations of social science’

(Terdiman 1987: 810). While my professional disquiet was awakened by the mismatch of the Laming's review of failure it was reinvigorated by the 'narrowness' of the retelling of SCR1. From SCR2 there was a complete absence of practice context – an absence of relationships and support and partnership. The story told in SCR2 is not one of partnership but is one where *“What was required was an authoritative approach to the family, with a very tight grip on intervention”* (4.1.12). The concept 'authoritative' applied in this context was new to me. It is absent in the literature surrounding inter-agency and inter-professional practice within the context of safeguarding children and young people. The author of SCR2 does not provide a definition and the word does not exist in any of the key policy guides in this area of practice; nor can it be found in the Children Act 1989. However, later, it found resonance with the language used by Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw (Wilshaw 2013) in a speech in October 2013 where he called for social services departments to exhibit 'firm, authoritative action' with struggling parents and called for social workers in 'manifestly weak' departments to show 'tough love' towards parents who fail to care for their children.

## **2.11 Austerity, politics and social work**

The morally conservative, neo-liberal Coalition of 2010 was replaced by a Conservative government in 2015. Each administration appears to have achieved the successful coupling of risk management with an increased emphasis on individual responsibility, agency and accountability (Rose, 2000, Kemshall, 2010). In

doing so the core values and progressive politics of social work are at risk of being undermined (Stanford 2011). The value base of children and family social work is informed not only by the realities of practice but the profession's regulatory and professional bodies which require social workers to 'understand the impact of injustice, social inequalities, policies and other issues which affect the demand for social work services' (HCPC, 2012:13). Social work does not take place in a vacuum.

The arrival of the Coalition government in 2010 was marked by stringent and far reaching cuts which were borne most heavily by women and children (Churchill, 2011, Featherstone et al, 2011, Taylor-Gooby, 2011). The programme of cuts was accompanied by a significant restructuring of public services directed mainly at lower income groups and was ideologically driven (Hopwood et al, 2012) with a core ambition to achieve a lasting reduction in the size of the state. Part of the vision for a smaller and decentralised government was coloured by 'a high Tory romanticism of a more organic social order' (Taylor-Gooby, *ibid*: 11). The neo-liberal discourse promotes the need to limit government and at the same time acts to prescribe the personal freedoms that follow. The brand of welfare promoted by the coalition was one which favoured an integration of state and market operations while at the same time favouring notions of autonomy and agency.

As stated, the refocusing on parental accountability took place against a backdrop of severe spending cuts. Oxfam expressed concern regarding the national picture: 'For the 13.5 million people who currently live in poverty – a fifth of the population - the

combined impact of all these challenges is creating a 'Perfect Storm' that is pushing already fragile livelihoods to breaking point' (2012: 2). Reed (2012) pursued the storm metaphor noting that changes to the tax and benefit system, would, on average, negatively impact on vulnerable households. In addition, cuts 'in kind' to public services were also having a disproportionately deleterious effect on vulnerable families. Concern was expressed regarding policy priorities:

'Even if the £448 million per year allocated to "troubled" families by the Government in 2011 were targeted solely on families with five or more vulnerabilities using the Cabinet Office's original definition, the money allocated per family would only just offset the losses which vulnerable families are suffering from the rest of the fiscal package' (2012:73).

The impact of fiscal reform was, not surprisingly, accompanied by sustained increases in children and young people requiring protection interventions with a sharper focus in areas such as Child Sexual Exploitation, neglect and domestic abuse (Brooks et al, 2012, 2014). The authors cite the combination of economic factors (welfare reform, housing and deprivation) and parental factors, as well as an amplified awareness and media attention, as causes for the increase.

A report from the National Children's Bureau and The Children's Society (2015:15) provides details of the extent and impact of austerity measures for local authority intervention. Drawing on data from the Department of Communities and Local Government, the report provides an analysis of national government funding over the period of the Coalition Government (2010-2015) and into 2015-16. The findings are

stark: 'all local authorities saw their early intervention allocation cut by at least half' (National Children's Bureau and The Children's Society, 2015). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2016:47) evidence review on the relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect reports that as resources decreased, the demands on Children's Services for child protection investigations and interventions rose rapidly as did the spending on increasing number of looked after children.

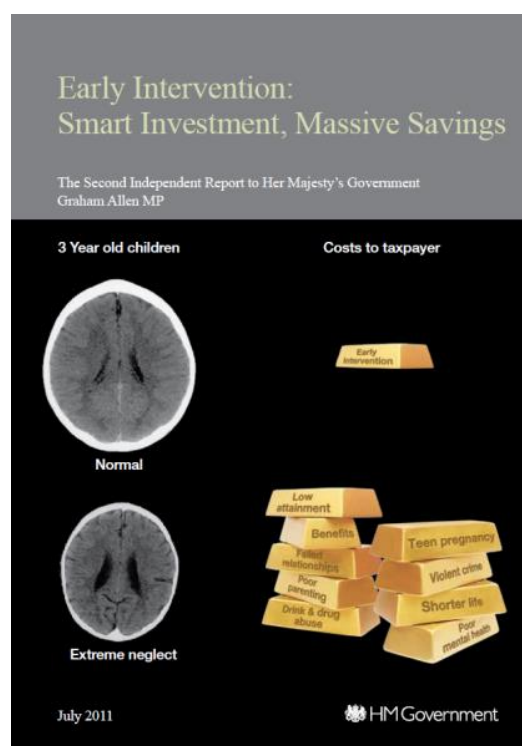
'The increase in 'reactive' as opposed to 'proactive' spending needed to meet this demand has also been considerable. For example, between 2011-12 and 2014-15 the cost of residential care, fostering and other looked-after services in England increased by 10 per cent in real terms to £3.34 billion, just under half the total children's social care budget... This supports the case that despite the rhetoric of support for early intervention in England, in practice expenditure is being transferred from family support to investigation, surveillance and child removal'.

The critique above brings into question the social policy agenda favoured first by New Labour and in more recent years by the Coalition government which has promoted early intervention with, as previously stated, a shift away from family support. Early intervention has become tied to an increasingly authoritarian approach and has sought to reorder the settlement between the state and family life. Early intervention has come to signal the removal of children from their family of origin. This is at odds with the spirit and philosophical premise of the CA89 which



continues to govern and inform the day-to-day practice of the children and family social worker.

However, it fits with the work and resulting policy premise of Graham Allen MP. The Allen reports (2011a, 2011b) were premised on a platform of ‘neuroscientism’ (Wastell and White, 2012, Tallis 2011 cited in Macvarish 2014). They warn about the danger to society and the public pocket, of inaction. The front cover of the report, Early Intervention: Smart investment, massive savings (Allen, 2011b), provides an illustration of the ‘normal’ child's large brain and the shrivelled, walnut brain of the neglected child. Each image has sitting alongside it pieces of gold bullion. The Allen report alongside the child centrist Munro reports (2010, 2011, 2011a, 2012), combined with the political and policy aftermath of the death of Peter Connelly, have captured the public and political mood (Featherstone et al, 2014). The definition of children at risk reaches far beyond the definitions provided as ‘Appendix A: Glossary’ in the most recent Working



Together guidance (HM Government, 2018) but appears to have become any child not meeting the government’s objectives for children. In positioning children at the forefront of political and practice thinking there is much to be applauded, but it is an

agenda that is at risk of decoupling Children *and* Family Social Work both in title and practice.

## **2.12 Public Law Outline**

The disparity of rising demand and shrinking resources took place alongside the introduction of new legislation which marked new ways of working. In 2010, the Labour government established a review of the family justice system; it was taken forward by the Coalition government following their election in 2010. The Ministry of Justice's Family Justice Review (Ministry of Justice, 2011 and 2011a) and the Children and Families Act 2014 set out a significant reorientation of child welfare in relation to the settlement and boundaries between the state, the judiciary and the lives of children and families. Following the recommendations of the Family Justice Review (ibid) and the government response (Family Justice Review and Department for Education 2012), the subsequent Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a statutory six-month time limit (with provision for longer where justified) for the completion of care proceeding cases. The ambition is laudable. Concern regarding delays in the family courts is well documented but the measures are not without a strong, and in my view, justified critique. The Children and Families Act 2014 is part of an agenda in favour of adoption as the favoured route to permanency. Then Prime Minister David Cameron made clear the intention to double the proportion of children placed with adoptive families before legal proceedings have been completed: 'It is a tragedy that there are still too many children waiting to be placed with a loving family. We have made progress but it is still a problem. I want to make sure that we do everything we can so children are placed in a loving home as soon as possible'

(Cameron 2015). The provision stems from the concerns expressed in the government's 'Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' (DoE, 2011) about the 'impact of delay' in the system. The report draws on the work of Ward et al, (2012) and Farmer et al, (2010) to support claims that 'many children are left in damaging situations for too long before being removed' (2012: 8) and that many children returned to birth families after separation suffer 'further abuse or neglect' (ibid:15). Adoption scorecards on local authority performance in placing children in adoptive families to support and monitor the drive towards adoption were instituted (DfE 2014).

Concern was expressed from all sides about the 26-week timescale and the potentially devastating implications for children and families. Family judge Nicholas Crichton (the driving force behind the award- winning Family Drug and Alcohol Court FDAC) warned that the time limit was 'at risk of becoming a tyranny'. He acknowledged 'the need to be quicker and more efficient' but expressed concern that the 'pendulum had swung too far'. He proffered a particularly salutary message: 'We know parties who have successfully had their children returned home, but who would have had them adopted under the 26-week timetable – it's as tough as that' (Crichton, 2013). Similarly, Holt and Kelly (2012) acknowledge excessive and problematic delay in the system but suggest a need for additional resourcing rather than the imposition of an arbitrary time limit. The impact of case law (the B-S judgement) and the Family Justice Review (Ministry of Justice 2011 and 2011a) were also seen to have placed additional demands on diminishing resources.

Ann Haigh, Chair of Nalagro, the professional association for social work practitioners, observed:

‘A six month limit is simply not workable without an increase in resources at the front line to cope with demand. A rigid timescale will work against the interests of justice and children's rights. Social workers and children's guardians will be criticised when unrealistic deadlines are not met, but it is children who will suffer when wrong decisions are made on insufficient grounds’ (NALAGRO, 2012).

While there is concern regarding decision making and the rights of children and families during proceedings there is equal concern regarding the pre-proceedings process.

The Interim Report of the Family Justice Review (Ministry of Justice 2011) endorses the continuing strength and significance of the CA89. Thorburn (2011:112) summarises them ‘as seven Ps for positive practice shared by family justice professionals:- Paramountcy of the child’s short and long-term welfare; Protection from all forms of maltreatment (by parents, carers, peers and ‘system abuse’); Permanence (a sense of); Parenting (skilled and committed – being ‘part of a family’ into adult life); Partnership and participation – for children, parents and carers and between professionals: Professionals who are caring, dependable, skilled and knowledgeable; Proportionate and timely decision making processes.’ It is worth restating and remembering the core principles of the CA89 as the cases in proceedings are only part of the story; the majority of cases are settled without

recourse to judicial overview and herein lies the importance of relationship building and social work adherence to negotiating with families in what can often be inherently adversarial circumstances. The ambition to divert cases away from court is commendable but this edge of care space is where the tensions which arise from the dilemmas in managing the fine balancing of care and control, need and risk are also in evidence. It is also the decision making space where there is a risk of pre-court practice becoming bound up with evidence gathering and timescales and less about support and prevention (Dickens and Masson, 2014).

## **2.13 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an account of the social policy and legislative context in which children and family social work takes place. It has noted a change of direction with 'support' and working in 'partnership' with families replaced by concerns with 'safety' and avoiding the day-to-day messiness and 'risk' inherent in practice. Stories of failure have come to dominate policy makers' concerns and help to justify shifts towards more interventionist practice. Such an interventionist and risk averse climate impedes the family/practitioner relationship development that has the potential to serve the best interests of the child. The day-to-day stories of children and family social workers working with uncertainty, providing for the protection of children, supporting families to nurture and care fall into the shadow of the emerging Big Stories of straightforwardness and failure. The Children Act 1989, despite all these policy shifts, retains in statute what Fox-Harding (1997) argues is the recognition of the centrality of working with birth or biological families to secure the best interests of the child. The Act enshrines support for the child's birth family and

continues to permeate the safeguarding field, shaping and influencing practice. The key principles, which were core to my own practice, such as working in partnership with families to try, where reasonable, to enable children to remain at home, have been diminished. The work of Bilson and Martin (2017) and the Care Crisis Review: Options for Change (2018) describe a far more interventionist and disruptive contemporary context.

Having reviewed the initial practice questions (below) which I conceived at the start of this research process, against the findings of this chapter. I find they remain the platform on which this study is premised:-

- How do social workers construct their professional sense of self, and that of other professionals engaged in the safeguarding of children and young people?
- How do social workers perceive their role and responsibilities, and those of other professionals, within the safeguarding context?
- What is the social work experience of inter-agency and inter-professional working and how does it impact on inter-agency and inter-professional practice?

The next chapter examines a range of literature which informs and shapes children and family social work. I place practice at the heart of the literature review. The practitioner emerges between risk dominated systems of command and control and the vulnerabilities, needs and risks presented by the individuals they work with. The 'doing' of social work surfaces as a complex and contested practice characterised by

the forging and maintaining of relationships in the most testing of circumstances. Normative policy narratives, alongside messages from retrospective child death inquiries and the lessons identified help underpin and inform the Big Stories which enter the public domain in relation to what social work 'should be'. The way these stories are framed, their assumptions and biases and the fact that they are authored and constructed can be too easily overlooked. The Big Stories can dominate, rendering invisible alternative narratives and experiences.

## **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews literature pertaining to the increasing expectations placed on social work identified in Chapter 1 and the impetus of social policy reform outlined in Chapter 2. In concluding Chapters 1 and 2, I observed an increasing mismatch between the 'doing' of children and family social work and the policy stipulating what children and family social workers 'should do'. In Chapter 2 I identified public policy, Public Inquiries and Serious Case Reviews as lacking in social context and oversimplified, but successful in telling the Big Stories of children and family social work. Each helps shape the prevailing discourses surrounding children and family social work. Fischer (2010:161) suggests that narrative, stories and discourse are closely related: 'Discourse can – but need not – take the narrative form'. However, narratives and stories, like discourse, create and shape social meaning. The events in Haringey in 2007 and the subsequent telling and then re-telling of the story of Peter Connelly in political and public arenas had devastating consequences for the individuals involved and has rewritten the role and purpose of the children and family social worker.

To begin to understand the evolving narrative of children and family social work, and how it has arrived in such a contested place, this Chapter examines four traditions of thought. The establishment of NPM and risk as two crucial, 'modernising' ideas, and how they infused the perspectives, experiences, strategies and devices practitioners employ in the 'doing' of social work are the starting point. Third, the Serious Case Reviews and Public Inquiry, introduced in Chapters 2, are an active part of the



process which successfully intensifies public concerns about risk. Here, I review the literature which has sought to understand the ways in which these have fuelled change to social work practice. Finally, although policy moves ‘top-down’ and through the mechanisms of scrutiny of professional practice, there are also traditions of inquiry that have recognised that policy is not always, or is variably enacted. Lipsky’s seminal contributions (Lipsky, 1980 & 2010) to this tradition provide a way of exploring the place and practices of the individual children and family social worker within a politically charged context. Relationships, situated judgement and professional discretion are integral to social work practice. Hood (2000) and Hood and Miller (2009) explore the uniqueness of the relationship between public service and risk. These critical voices help to reveal the issues that a simplifying policy narrative may encounter as it translates into the complexities and contingencies of practice.

### **3.2 Literature Search**

The purpose of this review is to ‘frame’ my practice questions in relation to existing theoretical and empirical literature, specifically where it examines the professional identities of children and family social workers undertaking practice in the safeguarding context. The emergence of child abuse as a major public issue in the UK was significantly accelerated, changing child protection practice, following the deaths of Maria Colwell in 1973 and Jasmine Beckford in 1985. The literature review charts the period from 1980 to date to capture the fluctuating narratives surrounding children and family social work and the protection of children. In assembling relevant material for the review, I adopted a conventional two-staged literature search

process which is outlined below. Stage 1 used search terms to identify the candidate literature. Stage 2 refined the list of relevant material through a review of the abstracts, and then by 'snowballing' from the references in the smaller number of papers thus identified as central to the review.

### **3.3 Stage 1**

My initial search used ProQuest (Including: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts; International Bibliography of the Social Sciences; Social Services Abstracts; Sociological Abstracts) and EBSCO (Academic Search Complete). Keywords used for the search were as follows: Safeguarding OR "child protection" AND Policy OR practice OR interagency OR AND Risk OR blame OR "serious case review". I excluded any literature that was defined as "adult protection". Selecting peer reviewed material only, there were 3,500 results. Adding the concept of 'managerialism' as a necessary keyword, this was reduced to 110 results. While reviewing the literature presented within the initial search, I became aware of the need to carry out a second stage. In order to understand what had been lost and reduce the risk of having lost any relevant material. I set out below the second stage process undertaken to achieve this.

### **3.4 Stage 2**

For the second stage of the review I began by conducting a hand-search via abstracts and keywords of the results to identify those most relevant to my subject of inquiry. Using the method advocated by Wallace and Wray (2011:41) each of the

peer reviewed articles was read, re-read and scrutinised enabling me to apply a critical synopsis of each of the texts.

I followed up references in selected studies to identify further relevant studies (Gibson, 2016) that were particularly relevant to New Public Management, thus closing the gap in literature created by the tightening of the initial search criteria.

I explored the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence in order to understand the competing discourses surrounding the role and purpose of children and family social work and how the practitioner enacts and embodies the policy and legislative tools available to them. My two-stage review of the literature led to identification of a set of empirical studies, concerned with the enactment of policy and the practice and 'doing' of children and family social work. The literature reviewed contained real diversity, offering a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives from both a national and international vantage point. The different foci of theoretical and practice literature are set out and explored below.

By using this method, I was able 'to evaluate the logical coherence of theories, methodologies and findings in a context of informed scholarship (Hart, 1998:44) and to avoid judging one piece of work as 'better than another' (Ibid:45).

### **3.5 Review of the literature**

I begin the main body of this literature review by exploring key developments in social work in the last almost forty years. There are four dominant themes in this telling. First, I identify changes in the organisation and delivery of children and family social work epitomised by NPM, some of which were introduced in my review

of policy in Chapter 2. I characterise the search for certainty and effective risk management, newness (modernisation) and change, as 'Out with the Old and in with the New'. As NPM was taking hold of social work, the risk paradigm, the explicit measurement of risk and the specification of risk thresholds were used as a means of informing and legitimating the targeting of resources. Limits to these approaches that have been suggested in some research are also discussed. I examine the weight of expectation both on individual practitioners and on children and family social work that the focus on 'risk' brings. But it is also the case that risk technologies (measurement and assessment systems) do not seamlessly translate into practice. I therefore characterise Risk as a 'Greasy Commodity'. Third, and given the expectations of 'risk elimination' that are introduced as a part of assessments, measurements and targets, disappointment in a public service commissioned to provide the full and complete protection of all children is all-encompassing and long-lasting. The perceived practice failures, and the blame that follows, go further than the individual social worker, team manager and Local Authority. It is attached, and sticks, to the job of children and family social work, resulting, I argue, in Sovereign Failure. It is worth underlining my concept of Sovereign Failure which applies the definition of Hood and Miller (2009). The 'distinctive risk' (Hood and Miller, 2009:2) in relation to public services that the authors identify with the 'misallocation' of blame associated with state failure in the face of concerted action by 'powerful lobby groups' is mirrored in social work when the media use and misuse the findings of Serious Case Reviews and Public Inquiries and build on normative policy positions of the visibility and ease of preventing child deaths to apply blame to social work in its entirety for the death of one child. Risk is

transferred from society, its structures, behaviours, funding and policy decisions through the 'failure' of individual social workers to the profession as a whole. Politicians, as seen most clearly in the government's response to the death of Peter Connelly, re-establish their power and control in the face of such Sovereign Failure by shifting society's risk on to social work. Second, I briefly revisit Serious Case Reviews and Public Inquiries as they are part of the apparatus which tells the story of preventable professional failure to protect vulnerable children. Drawing on a range of empirical research, I go on to examine the day-to-day practices of children and family social workers and accounts of the way in which they seek to navigate expectations, technologies and accountabilities as part of that practice. Finally, I construct practitioners and their practice at the end of a long and complex Policy Chain. But the end of the Policy Chain is a complex and contested space. Here, 'Doing' takes place where practitioners engage with Risks and Fears while working with Relationships and Resistance to maintain value systems which promote partnership working and supporting children to remain with their families. I end the review by highlighting some implications for my research.

### **3.6 'Out with the Old and in with the New'**

Pollitt's (2013) study of five key UK public reform white papers over a period of 41 years argues that, 'They are all tales of unsatisfactory pasts and better futures. The future will be better because the government is going to intervene in some way'. (2013:901). This suggests common sense will prevail: 'Where managerialism is dominant, its ideology is manifest as common sense requiring no further explanation, e.g. value for money, competitive advantage' (Klikauer, 2013:1106).

The 1980s and the 1990s saw the arrival of new managerialist styles in the public sector, in response to perceived inadequacies of the traditional, bureaucratic and administrative methods of co-ordinating public services (Pollitt, 1993, Langan, 2000). New Public Management (NPM) (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994, Butcher, 1995, Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000) introduced new norms concerning what counts as valuable knowledge, these privileging measurement, quantification and standardisation. Clarke et al (2000) argue a key effect of managerialisation of public services was to displace or subordinate the claims of professionalism, an ambition which some argue has enjoyed the ring of success (Newman, 1998, Clarke et al, 2000, Ozga, 2000). This supports my contention that, in social work, an emphasis on procedure over professional judgement in practice served to circumscribe professional autonomy.

Managerialism has gone hand in hand with market-oriented reform as part of a wider economic rationalism introduced with neo-liberal ideology. While managerialism and neo-liberalism are not synonymous, they share certain affinities (Klikauer, 2015). Connell et al (2009) argue that managerialism requires organisational and social transformation resulting in a reordering of relations between capital and the state. In essence the 'project of economic and social transformation under the sign of the free market' (Ibid:331). The free market, managed by neoliberal governments, uses 'welfare' instrumentally, for instance to raise poverty wages toward an accepted minimum; to intervene with 'problem families' to minimise social dislocations and to police disordered family relations, ideally through the provision of private services contracted through the state using taxpayers' money. In this way, welfare interventions – whether cash subsidies or services provided by social workers – become commodities, bought and sold through public sector tenders and franchises.

I have seen, during my time in social work, solutions for intervening in family life become arenas of market competition and subject to the political struggles that come with market competition. It is difficult, now, to recall the time when the linkage of commodification to social welfare was untenable. Managerialism is an ideology (Klikhauer, 2015) that legitimises both the right to manage and the terms of managerial action, including a shift to a business mindset with a strong focus on efficiency, economy and resources. This became familiar territory for children and family social work where the use of standards and targets also became synonymous with regimes of accountability. In a professional space where compliance with standards and the meeting of procedural targets became a form of accountability, it followed that 'harm', especially 'avoidable harm', should fall within the NPM remit.

NPM, or 'managerialism', produced an agenda of cultural and institutional change (Connell, 2009) with far reaching, largely negative implications for the social work profession (Healy 2002, Hugman, 2005, Carey, 2008, Rogowski, 2011,2012 and Chandler et al 2015).. Though managerialism represents a move from previous eras of administration in public services, the term is nevertheless associated with 'bureaucratisation' (Hibou, 2015) and processes of rationalisation motivated by the pursuit for neutrality and objectivity. Importantly, this is more a calculative than a 'rules-based' form of rationalism, focused less on adherence to policy and procedure than on the pursuit of economic efficiency. As, Tropman (2002) noted, managerialism can be viewed in a positive light, providing a much-needed impetus for improved performance to meet rising expectations within the context of reduced budgets and a 'common sense' ideology. Premised on the belief that 'better management' is a panacea for wide-ranging economic and social-ills, NPM has been

one of the key discourses in the transformation of welfare services in the United Kingdom since the 1980s (Hood, 1995, Pollitt, 2007 and 2013 and Dickens, 2008). Its ascendancy and longevity rest on the strength of its claims and its rhetoric (Ball, 2012 and Hood Ibid). One of the most powerful rhetorical devices is 'modernisation', a word which has been used extensively to justify changes in the structure and operation of public services. NPM has also benefitted from its strong association with 'economic rationalism', and metaphors from engineering. Such metaphors reinforce the impression of technological progress. While NPM cannot be 'seen or heard' (Pollitt, 2007), principles of business management and (re)engineering, were imported systematically into the organisation and management of the public sector and their use in promoting improved rationality and efficiency was recognised and rewarded. Under managerialism, the messiness of contested political discourse, which takes place in a democratic public sphere, is replaced by (technocratic) concepts of measurement, objectivity and, ultimately, rationality. This focus on measurable effects from what is deemed definable or standardisable (the average time this or that procedure is expected to take, for example; or the proportion of cases completed within a defined period) leaves children and family social workers vulnerable to perceptions and charges of failure – a failure to account for consumption of resource, and for the ineffectiveness of its work methods – the new standards of what might be considered an unrealistic public and political gaze.

Of course, the idea of modernization can be ambiguous. Hood (1998) outlines four claims on which NPM relies: the first an identifiable break between old and new; second, its inevitability as sheer common sense. The remaining two claims are of convergence and beneficence. Convergence relies on belief that other 'modern'



styles and approaches are being adopted elsewhere. The claim of beneficence is the most problematic due to a lack of evidence to point to and as such is often kept as semi-implicit (Hood, 1998). Claims of modernisation are not without critique (Pollitt, 1990, Armstrong, 1998 and Flynn, 2002). While difference, newness and convergence, are not without issue, to elide 'newness' with inevitability might, nevertheless, fit with the rhetorical strategy of 'newism'. However, claiming that something is inevitable does not make it desirable. Borins (2011 & 2012) explores the NPM and idea of organisational renewal through the device of 'advocacy narratives' (Borins 2012:17) in which change is presented as not only desirable and beneficent, but also inevitable and irreversible.

The power of rhetorical claims and claims of common-sense logic cannot be overestimated in explaining the successful embedding of managerialism. Its acceptance and success depended on a prevailing cultural context. In terms of children and family social work, a series of well publicised child deaths and ensuing scandals in the 1980s made the diagnosis and prescription beyond doubt. Common sense claims of failure due to lack of effective coordination and control, rather than the inherent 'messiness' of the problem, meant the issue was primed for an NPM solution – a focus on process and management controls. The 'problem' was not exclusively that of Social Services. In the NHS, Sir Roy Griffiths famously noted the lack of a clearly defined general management function and suggested in his letter reporting back to Margaret Thatcher that if 'Florence Nightingale were carrying her lamp through the corridors of the NHS today she would almost certainly be searching for the people in charge.' (Griffiths, 1983).

The rhetorical recourse to common sense failures led to demands to renew and re-organise (Hood and Miller, 2009). Responses to scandal or significant shifts in dominant ideologies in new public management are a test of cultural bias (Hood, 2000). These responses provide a 'tombstone effect: casting long shadows in pursuit of comfort' (Dixon-Woods, 2012:33). The seamless protection of innocent children as a marker for the dominant culture means that when a child dies, the response must seek not only to investigate the 'why' but act to place the blame away from the cultural bias in order to protect it. The task of protecting children is particularly open to this effect given the risk-laden, uncertain nature of the work and deaths of children being perceived as culturally toxic (Shoesmith, 2016). Hood (1998:27) suggests each major organisational way of life is likely to have its own inbuilt Achilles' heel or 'characteristic path to collapse'. Both Howe (1994) and Parton (1998) discuss the particular challenges to social work as a profession characterised by uncertainty. Hugman (2005) in his reflective piece, 'Looking Back: The View from Here, notes the way in which social workers 'increasingly have had to face the question of limitations in predictive capacity of concepts and techniques' (ibid:612). However, social work became subject to increasing levels of managerialist thinking designed to manage and eliminate the risks that are inherent in the practice of social work (Howe, 2014). Spolander et al (2014:305) study the international implications of market reform for social work and assert the relational and interconnected 'uniqueness of social work' particularly vulnerable to neoliberal policy reform. In practice, NPM reflected market-based strategies through performance management regimes of inspection and regulation (Skinner, 2010) which in turn manifested itself in understandings of human behaviour which privileges certainty and predictability while being less understanding

of emotion and unpredictability (Ruch, 2012). Services were re-conceived: social workers became 'case managers' rather than 'case workers' (Howe, 2014). Parton (1998:21) suggests that 'In the process, they are made responsible for playing their part in the strategy of risk reduction and harm minimisation – to the child, the family and the organisation – under threat and sanction and blame if things go wrong'.

The rhetorical power of the narrative of renewal aids the reach and influence of New Public Management. Hood (1995) and Politt (2007, 2013) argue there was actually a paucity of evidence base or systematic analysis in relation to NPM. In Hood's (1998) cultural analysis of New Public Management he draws on Aristotle's Logic. Aristotle believed that persuasion involves 'speaker, speech and audience' seeking to persuade others to accept certain conclusions they already accept. The message (the speech) is clear: children and family social workers who are not following prescribed procedures or best practice are at fault. The solution is to tighten up managerial rules and the authority structures to prevent the same thing happening again. The audience is keen to hear that lessons have been learned (Shoesmith, 2016) and the same prevented from happening again. But rather than focusing on learning, the normative, rational and reasonable policy (Yanow, 1996) in which voice speaks to practice with common sense, the version of accountability and improvement (modernisation) adopted in social work is couched in the rhetoric of failure and blame. At play is a workable and effective rhetoric providing a plausible and logical discourse or '...sites of veridiction. They [*schemes of governance*] self-articulate truth as the practice of government' (Ball, 2015:3) based on believable stories and metaphors or 'excess rationality, a blind faith in the power of rules to

manage and contain the social panic that exposure to the excessively painful and disturbing details of a child murder...' (Cooper, 2014:280). The Big Stories of and about social work emerges, a preferred social reality where children and family social workers can predict the future and manage risk. There is no audience for the Little Stories.

### **3.7 Risk – a Greasy Commodity**

The rational orthodoxy underpinning managerialism and the reconfiguration of professional work into formalised business processes (White et al 2009) also brought with it an increasing emphasis on risk (part of the calculative form). Despite its ubiquity, the meaning of risk remains indeterminate in contemporary society and it can obscure more than it illuminates (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2005, Alaszewski and Burgess 2007, Mythen, 2007, Zinn, 2010). Power (2004) proposes that the ubiquity of risk is such that it has extended to the 'risk management of everything'. This is particularly problematic in situations where risks are of degree rather kind, such as within a family where risk may present as need or harm or both. Risk, and risk discourses, have become an expression of professional knowledge and how we think about uncertain futures and possible harms (Webb, 2006 and Zinn, 2010). In terms of children and family social work they imply the possibility of gaining knowledge of whether to intervene that may not be possible within the complexity of relationships that make up a family. It may not be in the gift of the social worker, the risk holder, to determine prior to the decision whether to act.

As noted above, risk 'discourse' is an ill-defined term but has been traditionally linked to language with a wider definition which perceives discourse as a set of ideas beliefs and practice that provide ways of presenting knowledge. Discourse enables the presentation of certain forms of knowledge and precludes the construction of others (Woodward and Watt 2000). The Risk Society (assembled by Beck 1992,1999) and seconded by Giddens, (1998,1999) has delineated the pervasive effects of risk on everyday life. Beck marks out two perspectives that have been traditionally used as framing mechanisms. First, Beck inclines towards natural objectivism (Beck, 1996) but at other moments he stresses a second frame, the culturally situated nature of risk perceptions (Beck 1996 and 1999). The risk paradigm of rational objectivism has dominated institutional risk assessment practices and is widely employed within medicine, health law, economics and education (Lloyd-Bostock, 2009 and Scrivens, 2009). Like NPM, 'risk' rests on assumptions of scientific knowledge and economic calculation. Both NPM and the dominant risk paradigm seek to make orderly the disorderliness of contingent life experiences and professional practices in neat calculable entities that can be controlled, predicted and managed. Beck's 'risk society' thesis has had a significant impact on risk discourse but also stands subject to critique (Mythen, 2007, Rasborg, 2012). In particular, the account of risk as a measurable phenomenon capable of being known - identified and quantified - prospectively, and objectivism as an immutable truth are contested (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003, Mythen, 2004). I look later at the failure to take account of the social actor as an active participant in a social system (Zenn, 2008). For me, these critiques are applicable to the family where a distinct quantum of risk is better thought of as a wave of possibilities – an unknown

outcome until realised and, therefore, understandable only with hindsight. Parton (2000) suggests that social work is an intrinsically interactive and contingent activity. Professional identity, or 'how a social worker thinks of him or herself as a social worker' (Webb, 2015:2) is not a stable entity but is defined and self-defining by '...boundary maintenance, jurisdiction disputes and inter-professional tensions'. Children and family social workers are therefore judged by a variety of audiences not only in relation to what they do but, also, in relation to what it was considered, often retrospectively, they ought to have done. I suggest here that social workers must choose to intervene or not based on something other than the management of risk alone. Economic, scientific and social rationality stand as powerful, but fallible discourses. As noted by Mythen 2004:67 '...where risk is concerned 'truth' is a greasy commodity'.

Risk is relative; it is not objectively measurable (Mythen, 2004 and O'Malley, 2004). The social context is important in shaping perceptions and responses to risk. What is being considered as 'risky' and by whom affects perceptions and understandings of risk and the manner of dealing with it (Lupton, 1999). Positivist constructions of risk, underpinned by a linear understanding of the relationship between risk, perception and behaviour, have mistakenly positioned individuals as machine-like and unemotional (Lupton, 1999). Further, it has led to a lack of awareness toward the everyday in developing understandings of risk (Mythen et al 2000). This view is supported by Lupton (1999:172) who suggests dominant risk discourses '...represent the risk actor, in many cases as lacking a gender, age, ethnicity, social class, geographical location or sexual identity'. In short, people are more than risk

algorithms and properly constructed risk analyses are more than an aggregated algorithm or modelled on an idealised individual or family; public policies based on NPM are themselves at risk from the miscalculation that people do, or even can, behave rationally at all times. Hood and Miller's (2009) notion of sovereign failure resonates here. The State and children and family social workers are both policy makers and are inextricably linked. The State generates policies 'to negotiate the realities that confront them' (Fischer, 2010:168); the practitioner enacts policies to negotiate the reality that confronts them. However, the State may not know how those who manage the risk actually experience the management of it and this I suggest, is worthy of continued empirical inquiry.

### **3.8 Sovereign Failure**

As discussed in the previous two chapters, NPM and the increased individualisation of risk have become more dominant on the political and public platform from which social work is judged. In the chapter introduction I argued that Sovereign Failure resulted in the 'misallocation' of blame (Hood and Miller 2009). In the next section, I will argue that SCRs and Public Inquiries are an active part of the individualising and responsibilising process. Risk becomes a critical lens through which political and public examination of professional competence can legitimately take place. Hood and Miller (2009) argue that the provision of public good exposes the sector to increased and additional forms of risk associated with reputational impacts on significant public agents who will act to protect their reputations from blame by displacing it to others. I argue in addition that the state has determined an idealised level of risk that children and family social work are expected to manage. The messy,

intangible, contingent unknowns with which social workers interact have been displaced by objectivised norms. Risk becomes the product of legal power held by the state (Hood and Miller 2009). Unlike private actors, the State has the legal power to decide the boundaries that define 'who runs the risk' (Ibid:2) and, I would add, how that risk is managed.

There are, therefore, strong incentives to promote risk assessment tools for totemic reassurance (McDonald and McDonald, 2010). The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH, 2000) transformed into a risk management tool. Timely completion offers reputational reassurance, even if meeting such top-down targets does little to build relationships with families. ' We need public service-specific risk management frameworks that are more than convenient tools for blame avoidance or for avoiding difficult choices' (Hood and Miller, 2009:5). Risk is calculated through 'political reputation and the chances of retaining or securing political office' (2009:2).

Hood and Miller (2009:2) describe public services 'as services politicians choose to provide' and the method of delivery is produced by a combination of information age media and a political interest, a description that is of particular relevance to the politics and policy of children and family social work. New Labour's (1997-2010) emphasis on partnership arrangements as a way of organising government (Hudson et al 1999 and Hudson, 2005) is a useful example. Alongside heightened expectations of performance and accountability there is an increased opportunity for organisations to pass risk and blame on to one another (Brett et al 2005, Hood and



Miller, 2009). Risks associated with public services also pose political risks (Hood and Miller 2009, Morgan 2009, Shoesmith, 2016). Formalised protocols and partnership arrangements diffuse rather than concentrate responsibilities as actors seek to allocate the risk of blame, itself a product of NPM, away from the political sphere. The standardised approaches that flow through social work under NPM cannot capture the complexity of the work and essential role of professional judgement (Munro, 2010).

Approaches to risk assessment and risk management in child protection have been increasingly aligned with the objectivist risk paradigm (Houston and Griffiths, 2000) underpinned by managerialist notions of prediction, control and inevitable culpability/accountability. A number of authors have commented on the risk paradigm as a technocratic driver for managerialism and risk management (Burton and van den Broek, 2009, Waterhouse and McGhee, 2009 and Lees et al 2013). Munro (2010:16) writes of the predominance of a 'technocratic' approach' premised on unhelpful misconstructions of risk whereby attempts to avert, lessen or even eradicate risk lose the contextualised nature of children and family social work. Reder and Duncan, (2004b) and Ferguson (2005) comment on the conflation between managerialism and government responses to perceived failure: the consequent reductionist and structural approach fails to account for social relationships and human complexity. The prevailing response to children and family social work being seen to fail has been to create more law, more policy and more procedure. This suggests an ontological separation between the way the phenomenon of social work practice is understood and the regulatory apparatus that

underpins it and, at times, appears to drive it. Devices to order, calculate, plan and regulate practice have been absorbed into social work practice as 'techniques of management' (Hughes and Wearing, 2013). Within these devices and practices are also found the seeds of blame (Culpitt, 1999, Rose, 2000). Hood and Miller (2009) argue that the social journey of blame outlined above does not 'begin' from the risk and move outward toward the group. Rather, it begins with the group targeted for blame and affixes them to the risk. Mythen (2005:5.7) argues that the 'subordinated groups can act as a convenient sink for depositing risk' and by loading the process of risk definition there is political interest in 'presenting preferred paths of action as inevitabilities'. As discussed above, there can be no such certainties since knowledge is always imperfect at the point where the social worker makes a choice. Blame after an event for failing to weigh unknowable prior risks cannot assist future social workers in making fine judgements. Dean (1999:131) suggests, '...the significance of risk does not lie with the risk itself but what the risk gets attached to'. This raises an important issue for literature and for practice and for this study in relation to the understandings and responses of children and family social workers regarding the way in which they appear to be affixed to risk and blamed for a failure to manage risk. In social work, blame follows from a perceived failure to deal appropriately with risk (Lachman and Bernard, 2006, Warner, 2014, Shoesmith, Flemming et al 2015, Shoesmith, 2016 and Leigh, 2017). With the focus, politically, publicly, and professionally on a narrative of failure, the other elements of who a social worker is and what a social worker does in supporting families, working in partnership to prevent harm and keeping families together, have been lost. The 'Big Stories' prevail. Beckett, (2008), supported by Flemming (Ibid), argues that the

general public will tend to compare accounts of 'the dysfunctional family' with their own family, or with a family of their acquaintance, which appears to function without exposure to significant risk, or in which risks are managed. This, inevitably, leads to 'stark contrasts' and to a sense that 'self-evidently' the family requires intervention. By contrast, in reaching their judgements, social workers will be assessing and comparing one dysfunctional family with other dysfunctional families, in which risky behaviour is inherent and its management difficult. Here, the judgement to intervene or not is a matter of degree. Sheppard and Charles (2015:1837) refer to professional judgement being a mix of 'head and heart', or Howe (2008) thought and feeling, Munro (2008) analysis and intuition and Hackett and Taylor (2014:2182) 'analytical' and 'experiential'. Winter and Cree (2015) remind us that, although the home visit is a key site for the initial social work assessment it, and the processes through which risk is then assessed, have received relatively little attention in research.

The idea that social workers operate as sense makers in a world that borders the world of normative common sense will be returned to later in this thesis. A crucial question is the extent to which the assessment of the children and family social worker mirrors the prevailing intellectual, emotional and political climate. Hyslop (2008) suggests that the lack of trust in children and family social workers to effectively manage risk may be linked with deeper societal worries and fears. He further contends that the challenges and opportunities facing contemporary children and family social work need to be located within the contexts of anxieties connected with the breakdown of modernist certainties over some four or five decades.

Hyslop's discussion resonates with the Troubled Families Programme discussed in Chapter 2. At the time it was a politically important strand of government social policy and gave rise to a number of ethical concerns, one of which was the political morphing of Troubled Families, almost seamlessly, into families who cause trouble. Hyslop (Ibid) positions social workers as intermediaries between 'the comfortable and the threatening classes', or an enduring phenomenon of a 'constructed underclass' (Ibid:62). He argues that a breakdown in the comfort of certainty has created an impetus to define and measure risk to children in a standardised risk averse manner which fails to account for child protection as situated practice, creative and interactive and deeply embedded in its social context. This prompts a series of questions: How, then, is risk assessed across agency boundaries, and how do these agencies act? Are the actions seen as legitimate, and for whom? The messiness of practice and child protection as a risk averse practice is, in part, addressed by Hyslop (Ibid). He suggests that the result is a 'clash of paradigms' (Ibid:69) with social work refusing to be 'instrumentally classified' not out of a wilful disobedience but grounded in the claim and application of social and moral values and an acute awareness of the complexity of practice. Hyslop argues that social work does not resist for the sake of resistance, but as a result of its value base deeply-rooted and informed by an understanding of the complex and social nature of practice realities. While Hyslop's theoretical analysis has much to offer, the picture he paints is a negative one, calling for social work to awaken itself from 'its apparent torpor' (Ibid:71). If Sovereign Failure, as I have argued here, is a significant policy driver then it begs the question what solutions can be deployed in line with NPM to

mitigate it? I look in the next section at some of the managerialist tools that have been reached for.

### **3.9 Technologies**

The rational actor (Taylor-Gooby, 2000) can respond appropriately only if provided with valid, accurate and timely information. The attempt to develop rational/technical approaches undermines the role of individual subjectivities (Kemshall 2010). Examples from Ireland (Buckley 2003), where she identified dissonance between technological rational referral systems and their human operators; Australia, where Gillingham and Humphreys' (2010) found tensions between the technologically advanced assessment tools and their human operators and New Zealand, where Stanley (2007 & 2012), explored further in 3.13 below, found a strong value base resisting rationalising technologies. White et al 2009 conceptualise the Common Assessment Framework (DfES, 2006b) as a 'technology' whether or not it be e-enabled. This description echoes my own experience of working with the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH, 2000) – an assessment form which resisted the telling of the narrative of the family but instead required the child and family to be inserted into pre-configured boxes. At the time I was using the early iterations of this assessment form the emphasis was on assessing need over and above risk.

Drawing on the work of Gubrium, Buckholt and Lynott (1989), White et al (2009) describe 'people forms' as underpinning 'descriptive tyrannies' of a means of categorising families. I recall these standardising and technocratic attempts to

manage risk resulted in increasingly, descriptive, formulaic social work practices. The aspiration was to rationalise and make uniform the messiness of assessments or, as argued by Horlick-Jones, (2005:258) the 'technical discourse of risk' gave rise to 'a language and set of techniques rooted in economically efficient and accountable management practices...' The study by Broadhurst et al (2010) explored further in section 3.11 below, found that the Integrated Children's System tied social workers to computers, reduced interaction with families and proved unable to meet the needs of social work practice. Devaney and Spratt (2009) conceptualise child abuse as a wicked problem with no single discernible solution: attempts to impose a technical rational approach to the management of child abuse and work with children and families who are experiencing multiple adversities are flawed. A one-size, standardised version of risk and practice, amenable to technological recording and analysis does not reflect the vagaries of a highly relational human engagements in emotionally charged and challenging circumstances. Child-centred services and the disaggregation of the family (Parton, 2011) and the centrality of the child in the assessment process have resulted in narrow constructions of 'welfare'. Children and family social workers need to be concerned with the situated child (Choudry et al, 2001) and the challenge and complexity that comes with assessing the value of 'relational autonomy' (Herring and Foster, 2012).

Scourfield and Welsh (2003) query the degree of fit between abstract concepts of risk and the manifestation of need within the inescapably social and complex nature of lived relations. They explore the way in which risk identification and the

categorising of risks into thresholds for intervention have become a key discipline in rationing social work resources. Stanley (2007 & 2012) Policy assumptions that risk can be measured and used to allocate scarce resources, tools designed to do that and public demands to eliminate risk of harm to children combine to impact on the lives of large numbers of children and their families. Bilson and Martin (2017), working with data from 75 per cent of English children's services departments showed that more than one in five children are referred to children's services before reaching the age of five. Of particular note is the increase in the number of child protection investigations which took place, but did not result in a finding of significant harm. These more than doubled from 45,000 to 98,000 between 2009-10 and 2014-15. In 2014-15 it is likely that fewer than two in every five investigations led to a child protection plan. This research raises interesting questions regarding the role of technological solutions employed to support policy drivers in changing the practice of social work enshrined in the Children Act 1989. There is, however, space for contingent practices in social work risk assessment which have been well documented (Regehr et al 2010, Enosh and Bayer- Topilsky, 2014, Keddell, 2014).

### **3.10 Practice and the Policy Chain**

In the remaining section of this literature review I will consider the role of the individual practitioner in dealing with the 'stuff' of child protection and safeguarding. I will briefly consider the role of professional agency and discretion as the last link in the policy chain as a necessary response to the uncertain, contingent conditions faced by children and family social work via the work of Lipsky (1980 and 2010). Lipsky's definition of the public service worker as the Street Level Bureaucrat who is

officially required to follow a set of rules 'doing the job' but who practises some distance 'from the centre where authority presumably resides' (2010: xii) and who is able, therefore, to repair the blunt and standardising effects of policy, continues to offer valuable insights into how practitioners behave. The intersection between institutional expectations, rule setting and 'the doing' '...involves exploration, experimentation and challenge (Goss, 2001:163). Lowndes (2005:291) suggests such 'creative spaces are occupied by institutional entrepreneurs. Rice (2012:1039) describes the street level bureaucrat 'as the last link in the policy making chain' while Dunrose (2011:993), in her paper 'Revisiting Lipsky', favours 'civic entrepreneurialism'. Despite some variation in the framing of discretion, it remains a critical dimension of what Street Level Bureaucrats do. But for Lipsky (2010) a paradox is at play. On the one hand, what the worker is commissioned to do is often highly scripted to achieve policy objectives and political objectives. On the other hand, the work demands improvisation and responsiveness to the individual case. It is here that discretion sits. Lipsky's view is that all public services reforms which take place to increase performance or accountability may be understood as attempts to manage this paradoxical reality. He constructs the policy maker as attempting to control behaviour by making the Street Level Bureaucrat more accountable by reducing discretion and constraining alternatives: '...they write manuals to cover contingencies' (2010:62).

Conceding that social work has a contested place in society, Lipsky's analysis that antagonism is directed toward the agents of social services and control and away from the political forces is reflective of today's reality (Hood and Miller, 2009 and



Shoesmith, 2016). His analysis continues to raise some probing and significant issues regarding the need to better understand how the Street Level Bureaucrat utilises autonomy which is mainly hidden from view. There is a small body of literature that explores Lipsky as an analytical tool. For example, Evans and Harris (2004:872) locate the work of Lipsky as an idea that is successful in shedding some light on the 'real world'. Their discussion explores the extent to which the nature of social work has changed under the impact of managerialism, noting that such changes have been regarded as undermining discretion in practice and have produced more 'compliant' (ibid:873) social workers. The authors explore the extent to which managerialism has impacted on professional and autonomous practice. They suggest two literature streams which capture two different professional responses to NPM – 'continuation' where the use of discretion is in play and 'curtailed' where it has been reduced.

The authors argue that the 'curtailment literature' (citing Langan 2000, Jones 1999 and Lymberry 1998, 2000) is key in documenting the changes in social work under the impact of NPM. They also argue that this stream of literature contains two fundamental assumptions: the success of managerial control, and worker compliance. However, this, Evans and Harris (Ibid) assert, fails to engage with Lipsky. They suggest it is the empirical material which calls into question the claimed 'death of discretion'. More policy and guidance results in more, not less, practitioner autonomy.... 'paradoxically, more rules may create more discretion' (Evans and Harris, 2004:871). In making this argument, they do not valorise discretion, conceding it is neither a neutral nor benign activity. The latter standpoint

is one that is echoed by Pollack (2010:1263) who locates the social work professional as an 'intermediary charged with translating state power to individuals, families, groups and communities'. Her analysis recognises the power invested in the children and family social worker and the need to exercise such power with care. Using the experience of criminalised and marginalised women, she delineates the potentially damaging neo-liberal regulatory effects of professional power and 'risk thinking' as the ideological discourse which frames how criminalised women are constructed. Evans and Harris (2004) exercise caution regarding discretion noting that it can be a valuable professional attribute but equally it 'may be a cloak for political decision-makers to hide behind or it may be an opportunity for professional abuse of power' (Ibid:871). These themes of discretion, practice constrained or liberated by policy and bureaucratic guidance, and the reaction of social workers to them point toward the need for further empirical inquiry in relation to professional identity, perceptions of roles and responsibilities and how these interact with other professionals concerned with the welfare of children and their families.

Matland (1995) locates Lipsky as a 'bottom-upper', a theorist who argues that a more realistic understanding of policy implementation can be gained by looking at a policy from the view of the target population and the service deliverers. Matland suggests that if it is conceded that the street level bureaucrat does have discretion then policy settlements need to be reached on the basis of inbuilt flexibility. Jessop (2003) supports this position arguing that meta-governance should be dynamic, complex and varied and calls for 'something that undermines clarities, envisions chaos and negates affirmations' (2003:8). Jessop suggests that 'Irony, with its emphasis on

context perspective and instability is simply what defines the present conditions of knowledge' (2003:8). Power (2004) similarly proposes a politics of uncertainty alongside 'a public politics in which myths of perfect manageability are laid to rest by necessarily imperfect, humanly designed and operated risk management systems that continue to support an engagement with unknowable futures' (ibid:58). Revisiting the central claims of his earlier *Audit Society* (Power, 1999) re-examines some of his early assertions (Power, 2000). While acknowledging that the notion of the audit society might benefit from further empirical support, he continues to argue that in order to understand the impact of auditing one needs to think of it not as the isolated act of practitioner judgment, but that of collectively negotiated settlements (Power, 2000:111).

Garrett (2005) sees social work's 'electronic turn' as a means of rendering top down policy more effective. Power's (2000, 2004) notion of techno-rationalities that have also colonised professional thought and practice echoes here. Such an approach to public policy is also identifiable in Sweden, the Netherlands, Australia, Canada and the United States (Katz & Hetherington, 2006). Earlier, Challis et al (1988) had also been concerned with the limits of a 'top down' approach. They note the limits of research into coordination which relies on a 'top down' mapping of the machinery of coordination and the identification of its outputs (for example, records of meetings, service agreements, joint planning documents). The top down approach is explored by White et al (2010), Broadhurst et al (2010a), and Broadhurst et al (2010b). They report findings from a two-year multi-site ethnographic study of the impact and origin of the Integrated Children's System. Beleaguered by design flaws, this system was

deployed as part of the wide-ranging reforms post-Laming. It is described by the writers as an attempt to micro-manage work through a rigid performance management regime 'and centrally prescribed practice model' (2010:405). The focus of their research was to explore the professional task by observing everyday practice in five local authorities in England and Wales over 20 months from 2007 to 2009 in 'a genuine effort to convey the lived experience of workers' (White et al. 2010:410). Their three papers have slightly different emphases, but each reports unanimous dissatisfaction with the impact of top down reforms on the professional task. While insightful in terms of the impact of policy implementation, the 'professional task' is not defined. Here, implicit in the 'professional task' of children and family social work is the assessment process and the management of need and risk, attendant with discretion and decision making in terms of information sharing. They call for a new approach to policy design and ask: 'How is it that this policy axiom has never been seriously interrogated by those that take the decisions (rather than those who do the work) especially when the consequences for practice and for service users are so profound?' (White et al. 2010:424).

The disconnectedness of the policy maker is made clear by Stevens (2011). In his report of an ethnographic study, based on participant observation in a team of British civil servants in 2009, Stevens (Ibid) worked as a policy adviser for six months in a policy making section of the UK Civil Service. His research is based on a mix of overt and covert observation recorded in field notes and on interviews conducted at the end of the process with five of the civil servants with whom he had worked. Methodologically, he does not claim he is able to provide any more than a partial

depiction of reality; he is aware of the limitations of his work but nonetheless useful insights into policy making are provided. Stevens (ibid) suggests eight key themes are 'at play' in policy making. These are: commitment to the use of evidence; the oversaturation of evidence in policy; intra-government relations; the control of uncertainty; bureaucratic competence and the Civil Service career; the third face of bureaucratic reason; the silent silencing of inequality, and totemic toughness. He reports the policy making process not only as a deeply socio-political activity but with a strong onus on using evidence as a tool for persuasion over and above the importance of any identifiable methodological approach. The focus became the storytelling potential and the '... creation of coherent policy narratives [to] reduce the role of uncertainty as a barrier to action. ...uncertainty was seen by many of my colleagues as the enemy of policy making' (Ibid, 2011:9). Uncertainty is effectively silenced. 'Tough, totemic policies' and the 'need to make a totem out of toughness' (Ibid: 17) was consistently and robustly called for.

### **3.11 'Doing' Policy**

The attempt to design risk and contingency out of practice through policy construction while limiting professional judgment and decision making is exemplified by the Integrated Children System flashing on screen demands and timed out warnings. The system, introduced to support the uniformity of assessment processing under Every Child Matters, failed to recognise that in all but one of the children's services used as research sites 'far more contacts/ referrals were received than could be managed' (Broadhurst et al 2010b:359). The coupling of technology

and performance management and the corrosive impact on the core value base of children and family social workers is also explored by Broadhurst et al (Ibid). Practitioners were found to become habituated to filling in the form rather than addressing the human need behind the form, moving swiftly from case to case and situation to situation. The authors are aware that at the time of writing the findings were controversial and 'designedly polemical in tone' (Ibid:366). However, this should not detract from a detailed account of the story of children and family social workers grappling with a policy initiative which was later recognised as not fit for purpose.

The work of Lipsky (1980, 2010) is used to frame a concluding discussion regarding the importance of professional discretion in effective front-line children and family social work. Munro (2011:para 8.28) argued that in responding to her review, the Government will have to manage the inevitable anxiety of giving greater discretion in how local agencies exercise their statutory function.' There is little evidence to suggest that this is the case. I argue that technological innovations link to NPM policy drivers to reduce risks to zero meant that practitioners became controlled by the machines that were meant to bring order to the messiness of their work.

White and Featherstone (2005) explore top down reform through the prism of structure and agency and address how each impacts on professional identity. The research aimed to develop an understanding of the construction of cases and the nature of inter-professional relations in an integrated health service comprised of paediatric, inpatient and outpatient child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), child development services (CDS) and a local authority children and family social work team. The re-organisation takes place post-Laming and therefore

within the context of the 'top down' policy emphasis on integrated service delivery identified in Chapter 2. The authors position themselves as engaging with and advancing the work of Reder and Duncan (2003, 2004b), who explore the interactional feat of understanding and the complexity of communication within the context of safeguarding and protecting children. White and Featherstone (2005) critique the Laming reforms (2003) as having too strong an emphasis on organisational and structural service changes in improving everyday practice and the 'healthiness' of interagency relationships (Ibid: 214). The research focus of White and Featherstone (Ibid) is on the nature of inter-professional talk and social relations, particularly within the context of a new co-location of services. The authors provide an account of how different agencies manage, defend and promote their professional identities or, of equal interest, secure their professional sense of self. Acute paediatrics did not feel the need to 'shore up' (Ibid:209) or defend who they are or what they do. Strong and positive professional identities and alliances emanated from having the skill to identify children in need and at risk of physical or emotional harm and to be able to protect children through recognised statutory routes of Child Protection Case Conferences and court. The successful assembling and subsequent management of risk was seen to act as a strong unifier and identifier among the practitioners: 'Uncertainty and fence-sitting were often constructed as evidence of naivety or even cowardice' (Ibid:210). Equally, the management of non-urgent work, although not always resulting in conflict, did help to maintain boundaries between the different services. Drawing on the work of Damasio (1994) and Dingwall (1977), White and Featherstone (Ibid) argue that the performance of professional identities carries a deeply embedded moral dimension and that story

telling through and about cases 'does important moral work in the organisation' (Ibid:210). Moral judgement and emotion are fundamentally fused in human reasoning. In a practice world where ambiguity, risk and uncertainty are permanent features, the researchers describe the decision making as taking place 'through an interpretive melange of tacit professional presuppositions and locally strategic rationing practices' (Ibid:213). The researchers observed 'boundary disputes' regarding the ownership of cases or, of equal importance, the legitimate call for non-ownership and for the case to be managed by another agency. Through the process of claiming or disclaiming ownership of a case, the researchers contend that moral components of professional identity construction are acted out, communicated and replicated. The complexity of human performance is a theme running through the work of Hood (2012 & 2014) in his examination of integrated and inter-professional working which, he argues, sits at odds with the functional and prescriptive approaches 'associated with an increasingly technocratic culture in children's services' (2014:27).

The preoccupation, often linked to thresholds and eligibility, about which professional group is 'responsible' for the child, is borne out in Sidebotham et al's 2016 ten-year review of professional practices in SCRs. This professional tension appears to be a perennial feature of child protection and safeguarding. Professional narratives and boundary making, within the context of inter-professional relationships, raise questions of professional capital and power. Who has the power to accept or reject responsibility when practice boundaries may be murky or indeterminate? Who manages the differences generated at the boundaries?



### **3.12 Risks and Fears**

In addition to the role of professional identity and narrative as a boundary making function, a further layer of complexity is observed by Smith et al (2003, 2004) who reports on the emotional state of a range of practitioners across a range of settings. Arguing that the impact of fear on social workers and social work practice is a relatively neglected topic, and deserving of attention, Smith et al (Ibid) invited a sample of 60 employees of social services department in Northern Ireland to talk of a time in their work when they had experienced fear. Eighty-two different fears were reported, ranging from fear of assault to fear of being killed. 'Organisational fears' included being overwhelmed by work or being the subject of disapproval or rejection by managers. The role and nature of management oversight within the context of supervision is explored by Beddoe (2010) alongside concern that the drive to excessive regulation has strengthened the mandate for supervision but at the same time threatens it as a safe space 'and learning focussed activity' (Ibid:1280). Nevertheless, the supervisors who participated in the study resisted the micromanaging 'surveillance of professional practice' in favour of the preservation of a reflective and supportive space (Beddoe, 2010:1292). While Beddoe's research is small in scale it is encouraging that supervision continued to be valued as a safe and supportive professional space where 'striving for best practice and the risk and unpredictable aspects of human behaviour can be held in a creative tension' (Ibid:1293).

The ability to manage the unpredictable, sometimes dangerous, aspects of human behaviour alluded to by Beddoe above, impacts on decision making in a number of

ways. Smith's (2003, 2004) findings, discussed above, are elaborated in the work of Horwarth (2006) who found that factors which impacted on social workers in England involved in decision making about cases of neglect included fear of aggression. The presence of a physically aggressive carer could lead to standards of care being tolerated that would not normally be accepted. Fear of blame or 'getting things wrong' was a feature of the research undertaken by Flemming et al (2015) as they explored how to explain variability in decision making in the assessment process. Their study of 40 social workers and 105 students from two universities assessed vignettes where child maltreatment was suspected or likely. Qualified social workers rated risks lower overall than did students, and those social workers with more experience lower than those social workers with less. When blame was introduced as a factor, social workers reacted by evaluating risks as higher. The role of dread, worry or regret and perceived risk was explored by Chapman and Coups (2006). Anticipated worry and regret outweighed perceived risks as a predictor of a decision whether to vaccinate. However, participants were found to have over-anticipated the emotional impact of their decision making, once the decision had been taken. The emotive measure used in this study was taken up by Flemming in the 2015 study of the role of experience in risk taking referred to above. The emotional worry of taking the 'wrong' decision, particularly if blame was thought to be applied, was a powerful driver in how social workers used intuitive and calculative reasoning in approaching risk. Notwithstanding some of the inherent limitations of a vignette and questionnaire-based research (Bliss and White, 1998), the study found that the judgements of the social workers were influenced by the perception that they might be blamed for a negative outcome, while students' judgements were not. These

findings are supported by Littlechild (2008) and Macdonald and Macdonald (2010). The latter maintains that risk in social work is usually 'read as risk-of-bads, and specifically extreme bads' (ibid:1174) reflecting a broader public service preoccupation with risk and its management. Talk of risk is rarely on positive risk taking and the risk of "'goods' as well as 'bads'" (ibid: 1175).

The work above accords with the individualisation of risk identified and explored by Webb (2006) and Munro (2010a) and chimes with the research undertaken by Stanford (2010) who reports the results of research conducted in Australia. She locates the practice of the social workers within what she terms a 'neo-liberal risk society'. The rhetoric of risk is effective in mobilising fear as 'an emotive defensive and strategic medium for advancing the values of safety and security' (Ibid: 1065). Stanford (Ibid) explores the extent to which risk functions as a powerful discursive construct for the knowledge and practices underpinning social work. She identifies two gaps in empirical study: first, how the language of risk becomes embodied in 'what social workers actually do' (Ibid:1067) and, second, how social workers can 'speak back' to the 'culture of fear' (Ibid:1067). Conceptualising risk as a discursive construct, rather than objective and measurable, Stanford (2008, 2010) sets out to explore how ideas about risk are constituted and embedded into social work interventions. There were two stages of data collection. First, working with 18 practitioners, Stanford asked the social workers to discuss an intervention they had implemented that was significant to them. Second, to interrogate further understandings of what Stanford (2008) describes as the 'what' and 'how' of risk, practitioners were interviewed twice about the intervention they had carried out.

Stanford (2008, 2010) deliberately avoids asking explicitly about risk interested to see whether the language of risk emerges from the data organically and in what forms. Repeated listening to the data, suggested that risk consistently appeared as a negative construct. It was an inherent aspect of practice, the concept integrated into social workers' practice through the participants ascribing a number of risk identities to clients and themselves. Clients and practitioners were thus spoken of as 'embodiments of risk' (Stanford, 2008). Stanford (2008, 2010) delineates a complex picture of risk and social work, positioning social workers as active moral agents who were purposive, not powerless and hopeless. Stanford's work raises an important question: is engaging with risk 'morally' rather than 'technically' a means of helping the children and family social worker to understanding and justify when and how to intervene? Stanford's findings (Ibid) support the work of Kemshall (2010:1249) in identifying practitioners who are able to recognise situated rationalities 'namely rationalities embedded in place, time and network,' committed to fashioning a moral response within the context of a neo-liberal risk society and in doing so resist neo-liberal constructions of risk. In seeking to maintain discretion in interpreting, mediating, and implementing policy social workers can be seen as resisting certain top down policies? This argument is taken up in the final section, drawing on empirical research into social work practice.

### **3.13 Relationships and Resistance**

The presence of a practice resistance to standardising, technocratic approaches to risk management can be found in the work of Broadhurst et al (2010b). Here, the confluence of what they term the 'Humane Project' of children and family social work,

characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity, with risk technologies and administrative power diminishes the informal and relational aspects of social work practice. Through the discussion of three case examples, the authors illustrate practice not as a rational activity but one that is characterised as negotiated, complex and contingent. The authors explore how practitioners balance the gamut of informal practices of 'care, trust, kindness and respect' (Ibid:1047) with government concerns of efficiency and accountability within the context of 'top-down' policy administration. Citing Lash (2002:41), practice is seen as an interaction between individual agency and structure constituting 'playing fields of inter-acting, strategically acting and negotiating agents'. Risk is described as a calculated trade-off between rationality and moral professional intuition decided in individual situations. Each case is different. Practice has as much to do with discussion, negotiation and relationships as it does procedure (Jaeger et al., 2001). Here, accounts of risk are negotiated using 'locally' fashioned rather than universal dimensions or 'scales' of experience. The need for face-to-face communication when dealing with complex and sensitive matters 'beyond the VDU' (Visual Display Unit)' is stressed by Broadhurst and Mason (2014) and the situated nature of practice, structure and agency is explored by Broadhurst et al (2010: Ibid). Part of the research design of the latter is via interviews, which allows 'the practitioners to talk relatively freely' and to help identify and understand the social workers' concerns and strategies regarding risk management. Munro (2011b) has articulated disquiet about the impact of NPM and techno-rationalities and the attendant danger of losing sight of the significance of the human to human relationship with permeate the process of trying to understand, engage and work with a family. Munro (Ibid) voiced the concerns of the profession

in drawing attention to the need for social workers to be able to forge and sustain relationships – the essential quality of social work - was overshadowed and compromised by the demands of procedures, timescales and targets and a drive to risk averse practice, these part of the new managerialist rationalities that had been central to the reform of public services.

The selected case examples are rich in data and tell the story of social workers engaged in the use of 'informal logic' to manage risk. The themes which emerge from this element of the research are: (1) that the management of risk is *complex/emergent/contingent* – each case is different and requires individual and tailored responses; (2) Risk assessment practices are embedded in *social relations* – emanating from the specific team culture, and the service user-practitioner relation, which go to produce both 'unique contingencies but also habitual responses' (Ibid:1052); (3) The researchers found a *multiplicity of rationalities* in operation concerning a host of human responses such as sympathy and empathy and a sense of moral responsibility for others but also a number of concerns (or fears) including a heightened awareness of risks and a sense of accountability for outcomes that also shaped practice.

Ferguson's (2010, 2014 and 2016) ethnographic study of the face-to-face encounters between social workers, children and families gives a rich account of social workers 'doing the job'. This is the very stuff of practice – the way complexity and uncertainty present, and the way practitioners prepare for and then engage (and disengage) with 'a case' and the contingencies involved. Ferguson asserts that

understandings of how social workers respond to and manage risk need to be grounded in their everyday actions of practice. He captures the atmosphere, the smells, the noise and the physicality of poverty, which can assault the social worker. He connects these experiences as being inextricably linked to how social workers respond to and manage risk. The accounts provided disrupt the totemic certainty of the policy maker and the 'linear' scales of risk that 'thin' the social workers assessment of each situation. Social workers in the study express an array of emotions before undertaking a home visit; practitioners about to embark on what is essentially unknown territory where they may encounter violence and where a range of emotions are at play from excitement to dread. The narratives elicited by Ferguson provide valuable insight into why social workers do the job they do. The narratives speak of able individuals proud of their sense making and change making capacity and enjoying the professional autonomy that lone working can bring. He offers a balanced account, outlining the strengths and the weaknesses of the practices observed. In doing so, he provides a context for why social workers did not do what perhaps they should have done. Through thick description and analysis Ferguson identifies practice failings, particularly in relation to not seeing children alone and not challenging parents. At the same time, he locates the practice in complex, resistant and hostile atmospheres where the practitioner, most often alone, ran the risk of being immobilised and therefore less effective in the protective role. The field of practice depicted by Ferguson captures the complexity of the social work task. The practitioner must meet with and protect the needs of children and negotiate the private domain of the family home while dealing with and absorbing atmospheres of hostility.

The work of Broadhurst (2012:293) expands the role of the children and family and social worker further and offers an additional perspective on social work practice, emphasising the importance of moral agency in everyday safeguarding work and the importance of 'reclaiming hope in the 'small stories' of family support.' She draws on illustrative material from three separate studies of safeguarding practice she had undertaken over a period of five years. The studies were concerned with 'support', the construction of support, and how it was provided to families to prevent family breakdown. Broadhurst (Ibid) made use of semi-structured interviews with practitioners to explore the moral and ethical elements of their practice. She found practitioners giving voice to a strong preference for supportive and relational practice. She describes them as 'small stories' of family support (Ibid:300). These 'small stories' are in contrast to the over-arching narratives of top down NPM and risk rationalities and raise questions regarding how and why practitioners construct their practice in the way that they do. Broadhurst's 'small stories' give an account of practitioners attempting to engage with families as an integrated whole and being attuned to single parents themselves as vulnerable and needy. The 'small story' of a woman, the victim of domestic violence, a struggling single parent to five children residing on a housing estate with high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime is told. It sits in convincing juxtaposition with what Broadhurst (Ibid:302) argues is what has become the 'dominant child protection episteme which gives weight to moral individualism'. The 'small stories' told to Broadhurst emanate from a variety of contexts but each speaks with an emotional, aesthetic deliberation, favouring supportive interventions, mindful of the needs of parents, and viewing the family as an integrated whole. In doing so, the practitioners consciously manage what



Broadhurst (Ibid:2012) describes as 'an emotive child-centred discourse [which] has served to occlude the needs of parents clearly and deliberately exercising a rejection of the unbridled child-centric approach'. The case examples presented by Broadhurst (Ibid) depict a practice field where practitioners grapple with normative assumptions about children and the families they inhabit which sit alongside the totemic policy context imbued with the certainty and rationality so effectively delineated by the work of Stevens (2011). Despite this, practitioners, according to Broadhurst (Ibid), can and do carve out for themselves an autonomous and ambiguous space, where they have stored innumerable rehearsed and unrehearsed repertoires of practice, reflecting the relational and situated context in which they do the job. There are echoes of Broadhurst's 'small stories' with the work of Stanford (2011) who through her qualitative study in Australia reports social workers, enacting a moral stance, were able to undermine the conservative impetus of risk within their practice. Stanford constructs the practitioners as 'Speaking Back to Fear' but they might also, in asserting their professional identity as did the paediatricians (White and Featherstone, 2005) in rejecting the attachment of risk failures, be talking back to blame. I will return to this concept in the next chapter.

The qualitative research undertaken by Keddell (2011) provides useful insights into the reasoning processes of social workers in child protection social work as they make decisions or, as framed by Keddell (Ibid:1252) 'make sense of the chaos that often confronts'. She claims that research is required in this area to develop our understanding of what social workers do in practice and, using qualitative methodology, explores the discourses available to social workers and how they

interpret what they observe within the context of those available discourses. Her standpoint is one of social constructionism: essentially, the ways in which social workers assign meaning to service users and their behaviours are described, situated, negotiated and considered via prevailing discourses. In her work, Keddell (2011) set out to examine how stakeholders in child protection social work understand the reasons for the decisions made about children and their lives. She defines stakeholders as 'social workers, managers, young people, parents and foster parents (depending on the case)' (Ibid:1256). 19 workers and 15 'other' stakeholders from cases identified by the workers were interviewed. The stakeholder group included seven parents, five foster parents and three young people. Examples of positive practice, deemed positive by workers, suggest that they view the maintenance of children's family relationships as a primary consideration in practice, this reflecting a practice paradigm contained in New Zealand legislation. However, this was not achieved in a moral vacuum but with the social workers actively engaged in partnership working with families, explicitly adopting social work values, mindful of but resisting the dominance of a risk-*saturated* society attendant with the sensitive and defensive practice it can produce (Houston and Griffiths, 2000; Stanford, 2010).

The notion of risk as being mediated by social workers as situated, negotiated and contingent, influenced by prevailing discourses, rather than against a standardised, 'agreed' version is explored by Stanley (2007 & 2013). As referred to above in section 3.9 Stanley draws on his ethnographic doctoral research to argue that risk discourses play a key role in organising and regulatory regimes, particularly via the

use of assessment tools which aim to assist the practices of risk assessment and its management. Stanley's work, located in New Zealand, positions children and family social work as under siege from an anxious public and ever-increasing political scrutiny'. Stanley (2007:163) expresses concern that social workers will increasingly construct their role as assessors and managers of risk within the context of both child protection and family support imperatives. In pointing to a Risk Discourse Continuum from Certainty to Uncertainty ranging from realist epistemologies to constructionist epistemologies where definitions of risk are mediated through historical, cultural and social processes, he echoes the general, theoretical debates about risk that I summarised earlier in this Chapter. Positions closer to the latter end of the continuum are more sympathetic to the essential uncertainty and ambiguity that practitioners experience in practice and so give space to the messy and the grey. Stanley argues that the more risk is measured and 'decision legitimacy' (2007:166) sought and framed within the perspective of objective positivist understandings, the greater the risk of the premature 'closing down' (2007:171) of assessment work. He calls for a more reflexive engagement with risk premised on concern that discourses of risk have entered the lexicon and practices of social work with 'little critical attention paid to how they are utilised in practice' (Ibid:174). In his 2013 account of his work, Stanley provides more detail, through interviews and observations with children and family social workers who employed a range of tools to 'encode the imprecision of risk' (ibid:67). For Stanley, this demonstrated a lack of insight into and understanding of the limits and organic nature of risk assessment. The participants in the study tended to treat risk as something that needed to be known early on in their involvement in the case. A strong focus on what was known

and what could be recorded was the basis for the intervention. This approach effectively closed down the possibility of change from the family or challenge. Stanley does not identify who the challenge, if any, was likely to come from. This would have been interesting and, perhaps opened up other discourses of power and legitimacy. The lack of reflexivity from the social workers in the study is concerning.

The increasingly positivistic risk rhetoric that Stanley (2007 & 2013) identifies is also addressed by Vyvey et al. (2014). Reporting on policy reform in the field of child welfare and protection in Flanders, they argue that debating and managing risk needs to be reoriented to embrace a welfare perspective. In their comparative (three country) study, Kriz and Skivenes (2013) analyse how 'child welfare workers' assess risk to children while practising with specific risk assessment tools reflective of the different policy orientations and welfare regimes. They found that policy frameworks, setting out a particular direction of travel in terms of the role of the practitioner, and the assessment tool both shape decision making and, I suggest, what might be called 'contextualised knowing'. The assessment tool shapes the assessment but so, too, does the pervasive policy context. Faced with the same case vignette, the sample of workers from Norway identified the case as high risk, those from England placed it in the middle 'but leaning towards the United States' (ibid:1868), with the sample of workers from California situated at the opposite end of the risk assessment spectrum. Of note is that Norway workers assessed the vignette without using an assessment tool and were the most homogenous while the English and United States workers were more internally heterogeneous. The relationship between the state, families and their children are different in the three

countries under consideration. The findings suggest that a child at risk in Norway, where the threshold for intervention is much lower, would be more likely to be the subject of a social work intervention cast in terms of prevention with an underpinning ethos to resist care and work to keep the family together. Conversely, a child living in England or California would be more likely to be the subject of a child protection intervention. This is echoed by research undertaken by Regehr et al 2010. They found that that even when presented with the same two families, practitioners were 'highly variable' (ibid:626) in their assessment of risk with workers positioning themselves at either end of the continuum of high and low risk. Fallibility, fear, uncertainty and subjectivity in decision making and the management of risk whether mediated by professional confidence or professional values, was found to be a factor in a number of research studies (Smith, 2003, Gambrill, 2005, Horwarth, 2006, Hay et al 2008 and Van de Luitgaarden, 2009).

### **3.14 Conclusion**

The literature, for all its diversity, points to a series of tensions. In brief, these are that the public, and the state acting on its behalf, expresses the common sense demand to reduce child deaths to zero, recognises the social worker as the professional charged with carrying out this responsibility and, over the years, provides these professionals with the legal framework, policies, procedures and technological supports to achieve this end. However, the social work professional, practicing in a non-rational world, with individuals existing within complex relationships, experiences the world differently. Policy support is experienced as constraint, technological innovation can be experienced as descriptive and normative

and the strategic goal of eliminating all child deaths can be experienced as being set up to fail. When a child death occurs, the resulting inquiry is focussed on the allocation of blame rather opening up understandings of what is a human, contingent event occurring in the messiness of complex and often disorganised lives. The result is daily practice that sits uneasily between the orderliness of policy prescription and the contingency of life. This is where I have identified a gap in the literature. There is too little appreciation or understanding of how it is to do the job of trying to manage unrealistic expectations of what social work is and what social work can 'deliver' while individualised fearing failure and blame. What I explore below and through answering my research questions is what and how it is to be a social worker within the tensions highlighted in my reading of the literature. How do individual practitioners construct their day-to-day practices while working alongside allied agencies and against a shifting policy background in which so much of the now and the future is informed by the hindsight of the SCR? Is the ever-present risk of the death of a child the Achilles' heel of children and family social work? How does it feel to be a professional tied to the certainty of new management practices while always being so open to blame for failures to manage uncertainty and risk? Indeed, the social worker may be the key worker but a worker wholly reliant on the commitment and success of the inter-professional endeavour. These questions relate not only to who the children and family social worker is but also, more broadly, the role and purpose of children and family social work. How is it to practise, with risk and blame as insistent companions? My research offers an original exploration to this question.

My practice questions therefore emerge, refined, as research questions:

- How do children and family social workers construct their day-to-day practices, working alongside agencies while negotiating the expectations and certainties of new management practices and knowing they are exposed to failure and blame?
- How do children and family social workers perceive and articulate the role, purpose and practices of children and family social work?
- How and where does the professional identity of children and family social workers emerge in such a contested field of practice?

The next chapter will explore the methodology and method of my empirical study and, specifically, my selection of narrative inquiry supported by the theoretical framework of Bourdieu.

## **Chapter 4: Method and methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter follows scrutiny of the literature and offers a moment for brief reflections. In Chapter 1 I set out the personal and political landscape which helped germinate the early seeds of this thesis and shaped and re-shaped my subsequent research journey. In Chapter 2 I provided the policy context in which children and family social workers operate, informed by the Big Stories, told and re-told, of failure and blame. I argued in that chapter that in order to develop a deeper understanding of the practice and professional identity of practitioners they must be located in the social and legal context which commissions, informs and influences what they do and why they do it. I set the Big Stories against the possibility of Little Stories of practice where children and family social workers routinely work with the indeterminacy of the Children Act 1989 and the ambiguity of need and harm.

Chapter 3 reviewed relevant theoretical and empirical literature relating to the social policy and legal context in which children and family social work takes place. I noted the rise of NPM which took root in the late 1990's alongside the structural and organisational responses to perceived failure of not just individual children and family social workers but children and family social work. My review of literature indicated the space for a variance of perspectives and narratives on the 'doing of social work'. For example, the literature identified pockets of resistance against the shift towards authoritarian practice. I argue that, while the empirical literature explores the experiences and practices of children and family social workers, it does not explicitly explore where and how counter-narratives emerge. Neither does it consider how



alternative accounts of lived experience might be translated into counter-narratives or how such narratives open up spaces for the expressions of professional identity to surface. I concluded my review of the literature by refining and reframing my initial questions from practice. My newly formed research questions attempt to capture the context and challenging practice context of children and family social workers. They work with the Little Stories of uncertainty but inhabit a practice context where Big Stories of certainty, along with the risk of failure and the threat of blame, prevail. In this chapter I argue for a methodology and method that whilst addressing my research questions has the potential to enable those other stories to emerge. I will examine my role as an insider/outsider researcher; the development of narrative inquiry; my pilot study; methodological readjustments and the relevance of Bourdieu.

As discussed in Chapter 1, my research has been informed by qualitative enquiry (Seale 1999, Corby 2006b) and is located in a social constructivist paradigm. I have found narrative inquiry in particular and the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu most useful to work with. The attraction of narrative inquiry, in relation to this research process, is that it reflects the practice context of social work. It does not seek to establish certainty but can give meaning to the different interpretations that may be possible (Bold, 2012) and therefore opens up the possibility for other stories to be told. Narrative inquiry can be situated in practice and capture the contextual influences from which the narratives emerge (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Bourdieu, by offering concepts such as field, habitus and capital, has provided a vision of social reality that I felt from the early stages of this research reflected the inter-agency and inter-professional environment where safeguarding activity occurs;

where actors struggle to maintain or improve their positions of dominance, subordination or equivalence according to the nature of capital at stake.

## **4.2 Positioning of self**

The research questions emerged from my own practice experience. In Chapter 1 I charted my own emerging and changing ontological position. I have from the outset reflexively positioned myself as being central in the gradual shaping of this thesis. The previous Chapters (1, 2 and 3) have all been informed and influenced by my own subjectivities as a social worker of some longevity and latterly as a social work educator: an individual with a unique position in the 'web of reality' (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004:2 cited in Jackson *ibid*). My own positionality and reflexive awareness have influenced the choices I have made in relation to the conceptual framework of Bourdieu and the method and methodological approach of narrative inquiry. My own ontological perspective is not that the world exists independent of my perceptions of it but that there are experienced and constructed realities based on social and individual constructions and conceptions. Individuals see and construct the world differently. Given my philosophical leaning toward the personal and the subjective, it follows that my starting point, in an effort to develop understandings of who they are and what they do, is to ask questions of children and family social workers involved in the day-to-day business of protecting children.

I have been concerned from the outset with the core components of quality research: credibility, trustworthiness and transferability. I have been mindful of the implications of my stated qualitative approach, in attempting to seek new understandings of the

professional identity of children and family social workers and inter-professional working. Quantitative research depends on accurate instruments, whereas in qualitative research 'the researcher *is* the instrument' (Patton, 2002:14 with original emphasis). I have been consistently mindful of my insider/outsider status and my inability to distance myself from the research process. I have critically questioned my impact on the research. In an effort to offset and rebalance my influence, I have, throughout the research journey, made transparent how I believe my perceptions and values colour the research process. There is no unbiased knowledge and, therefore, I have had to actively engage with my own ontological autobiography. While I cannot 'unknow' what I know, I can have a reflective and reflexive knowledge of who I am and where I come from in both personal and professional terms. I am most comfortable with the discussions cited in D'Cruz and Jones (2004). The authors draw on the research experiences of Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Boulton (2000) to illustrate some of the difficulties that may confront the researcher in clearly and unambiguously positioning as either 'outsider' or 'insider'. Boulton (2000:89-91) promotes the notion of the 'insider-outsider continuum'. As a social worker and now social work educator, I feel I must own both insider and outsider status. During the course of this research journey I will recognise myself to be both.

Bartunek and Louis (1996) suggest that insiders and outsiders differ in their psychological and physical proximity to the setting studied. This means that the insider is straightforwardly inside the system and the outsider outside, but other combinations are equally valid. I have inside knowledge of social work but would suggest that I am sufficiently removed from the professional context in time, practice

and interests to also be an outsider. Butler (2005), in her powerful exploration of the intersection of identity and responsibility, suggests there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence. I have my own habitus, my own disposition born out of occupying the two professional fields of social work practice and social work education.

### **4.3 Why narrative inquiry?**

Somers (1994) charts the emergence of narrative inquiry. She notes its early marginalisation, viewed as little more than a mode of representation, as the 'epistemological other' (ibid:606, Lal, Suto and Ungar 2012). Over time it garnered increased status and interest. New approaches of narrative inquiry defined narrative and narrativity as concepts of social epistemology and social ontology. It is through these concepts that we come to know and make sense of the social world around us and, significantly, begin to understand and construct our social identities: 'We all come to be who we are by being located or locating ourselves in social narrative' (Somers 1994:606). Chase (2005), reflects on her early ventures with narrative inquiry when writing in the wake of Barthes's declaration that 'narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society' (Barthes, 1977:79 cited in Chase, ibid: 651) but reflected in few examples of empirical studies based on narrative method. She notes Riessman's (1990) *Divorce Talk* as a notable exception. Chase (ibid) and Polkinghorne (2007) present narrative inquiry as an amalgam of inter-disciplinary approaches spanning disciplines as diverse as anthropology, literary criticism and history. It may be oral or written and may be elicited or heard during research field work via an interview or a naturally occurring conversation.

The term 'narrative' carries a number of meanings and is used in a variety of different ways by a range of disciplines (Chase *ibid*, Riessman and Quinney 2005, Baldwin, 2013). Riessman (2008) argues for caution in seeking a simple, clear definition. Connelly and Clandinin (1990:2) argue that the main claim for narrative inquiry is that people are essentially storytelling organisms who individually and socially lead storied lives:

'It is equally correct to say 'inquiry into narrative' as it is 'narrative inquiry'. By this we mean that it is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns for its study.'

The ubiquity of narrative inquiry is understandable as it acts as the lens through which we can study and understand not only the world about us but our perceived place in the world through modes of knowing and modes of communication. The rise of the narrative moment can be seen as synonymous with the increasing use of stories to express emotions and convey beliefs about how 'things should be' (Fraser, 2004:180) and the power of the story to represent identities of the individual and the collective. Narrative inquiry can engage with the plurality of truths and can open up spaces of contest and difference as well as illuminate sameness and common ground. As such, it has proved to be the ideal tool to engage with empirical inquiry into inter-professional relations and how professional identities shape and influence fields of practice in the safeguarding of children. Investigation into inter-professional relations must involve cross-cutting relational storylines in which the children and family social worker locates him or herself but is also located by other actors. Narrative inquiry allows for the analysis of the central axis of agency and structure.

The interaction between them is where the social worker is enabled to practise discretion but, at the same time, is bounded by their function. Stories and the making of stories guide action; they explain and justify; they construct identities and are constructed. As highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3, there are the Big Stories and Little Stories master narratives and counter-narratives which structure and restructure the repertoire available to the children and family social worker.

Professional narrative is a strong unifier and signifier. I use the device to explore professional narratives that maintain ritualised ways of working and reinforce professional boundaries. White and Featherstone (2005) cite Damasio (1994) in relation to storytelling and the moral dimension of performance and professional identity. Storytelling about cases and about services does important work in the organisation, remembering that moral judgement and emotion are intrinsically connected in human reasoning. Dingwall (1977) makes mention of what he calls 'atrocious stories'. These powerful narratives serve to strengthen and confirm professional identity. Tales of the perceived incompetence, poor decision making, and inadequacy of others give one professional group or individual a perceived monopoly on expertise. They serve to establish and confirm their acceptance as a competent member of a profession, and at the same time locate the failing or inadequate professional as 'other' or even unnecessary (Hall 1997). Narrative inquiry connects the interaction between agency and structure. It gives voice to the human action that structures and is structuring of social order, organisations and frameworks inhabited by the actors.

#### 4.4 Why Bourdieu?

Narrative inquiry and narrative identity work, in this sense, share much with the relational epistemologies of Pierre Bourdieu. Fusing the work of Bourdieu with narrative inquiry embeds the social workers within relationships and introduces space and power and a theoretical language for a more focussed interrogation of rationality which is at the very core of inter-professional and inter-agency interactions. As my review of the literature indicates, this fusing – using Bourdieu to think with while closely examining the stories of the social actors, big and small, has not been attempted in this way before. This thesis is a new addition to the literature. I found Bourdieu's spur to identify the 'problem', not to be bowed by it, but to 'do' something with it, both challenging and energising:

'To avoid becoming the object of the problems that you take as your object, you must retrace the history of the *emergence* of these problems, of the progressive constitution, i.e., of the collective work, oftentimes accomplished through competition and struggle, that proved necessary to make such and such issues to be known and recognized....as *legitimate problems*, problems that are avowable, publishable, public, official' (Bourdieu, 1992, in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:238, original emphasis).

#### 4.5 Thinking with Bourdieu

The concept of capital has been useful in helping to explore and explain the position, or professional identity, of children and family social workers. Capital, according to Bourdieu, may have different forms, economic and cultural. Each can be converted into symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) which can emanate from the existence, or lack

of such things as social standing, respect and reputation. Capital has provided a useful conceptual tool with which to explore the professional identity of children and family social workers. The third, central, element of the triad is habitus. This is defined by Bourdieu as the system of durable dispositions. It is an internalised mental or cognitive schema that functions both consciously and unconsciously providing for the actor (or social work practitioner) a repertoire of practices, behaviours and strategies through which they relate to their social world. As such it is essentially a '*science of human practice*.' (Wacquant, 2008:263/4). I am positioning habitus as a system of durable dispositions which pervades and saturates children and family social workers' value base and their decision making practices within the field of safeguarding.

The triad of field, capital and habitus makes most sense in empirical work when used together and situated in a particular practice context. In keeping with Bourdieu's own inquisitive approach (Bourdieu, 1990 and Bourdieu et al 2012), it is these shared understandings and mechanisms of understanding which have proved so useful for my empirical inquiry. Bourdieu's theoretical framework is relational in approach and captures the essential component of social work as a job that involves relations with people, be they service users or allied professionals. He holds two moments, the objectivist and the subjectivist, standing in a dialectical relationship as an artificial opposition. He transcends this dialectic and effects a synthesis of objectivism and subjectivism by forging habitus, capital and field.

The usefulness of habitus as a theoretical and empirical concept is contested (King 2000, Sullivan 2002, Reay 2004 and King 2005). For instance, Sullivan (Ibid) argues



that the concept of habitus is theoretically incoherent. King (2000) queries the capacity of habitus to overcome the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism but concedes that it does add value to the agency-structure debate. Nash (1999:185) finds the concept as having little to offer educational research and queries, 'is it all worth a candle?'. Jenkins (2002) emphasises Bourdieu's contribution to theory and methodology and recognises his substantive studies in both education and culture. Jenkins (Ibid) describes Bourdieu's intellectual project as 'longstanding, relatively coherent and cumulative' (ibid 2002:67). However, Jenkins argues that even with an extensive familiarity with Bourdieu and his body of work: 'We still don't know *what* habitus is or *how* it works to generate practices, an ignorance which can only be inferred from its putative practical effects' (ibid:93 original emphasis). I can see that habitus, if used as a standalone theoretical concept, is open to criticism but like Bourdieu (1970, 1984) in his own empirical endeavours and alongside Wacquant (2003), Davey (2009), Emirbayer and Williams (2005) and Beddoe (2014) I have fastened habitus to capital and field as a mediating scheme.

I argue that while habitus may be without clear definition, the concept has become increasingly tangible in my own research not only during the collection of data but in assisting the analysis. Habitus has served as both a conceptual tool and an empirical device. Thinking with habitus has helped reveal and explain an embeddedness of practice, language and shared meanings amongst children and family social workers. It has helped provide critical insights into the decision making of social workers which, without empirical scrutiny, may remain as taken-for-granted or unexplained. As an unconnected concept habitus can be elusive but, worked with as intended by Bourdieu as a relational concept, within the theoretical framework of

capital and field, it goes some way to reveal and explain the entrenched nature of the practices of children and family social workers.

Combining narrative inquiry and the conceptual apparatus of Bourdieu provides insights into how the individual actor is constructed and constructs the configuration or field of relationships which are composed of a variety of symbolic, institutional and material practices. Locating the social workers in the field of safeguarding practice endows them with roles. With the added dimension of narrative inquiry they are offered the opportunity to explain and justify how and why they act, or do not act. Their expression of their role accords with how they understand their given role and place in any number of narratives that have been consciously or unconsciously given to them. The social workers' individual and collective narratives serve to both support and disrupt expectations. Their narratives reflect a complex web of relations not only with 'other' professionals but with dominant public and political narratives. Chapters 2 and 3 have revealed that the mainstream media connect events to create a master narrative about 'how' social work should be and how social work should govern social disorder and families perceived as 'deviant'. As noted above, they can only draw from a limited repertoire of available professional representations and inter-professional tales. There might be an expectation that since they are so limited in the construction of the professional narratives (bound by law and policy) that there might be feelings of powerlessness. An important consideration in this thesis is how the possibility of professional powerlessness is recognised and challenged in the potential counter-narratives constructed by the social workers and the extent to which that powerlessness is or is not recognised or managed in the narratives of the social workers in my study.

Elliot (2006) suggests there are three key features of narratives. First, they are chronological; second they are meaningful and third they are inherently social in that they are produced for a specific audience. Somers (1994), however, suggests a narrative framework which links the concepts of action and identity, accepting that some notion of social being and social identity is incorporated into each and every knowledge statement about action, agency and behaviour. Somers argues: 'We thus enlarge our analytical focus when we study social action through a lens that also allows a focus on social ontology and the social constitution of identity' (1994: 616). The value of Bourdieu-infused narrative inquiry in exploring the professional identities of children and family social workers is that it has the potential to expose the contradictory and shifting nature of master and counter-narratives which can be seen to exist in inter-professional safeguarding of children and young people. Narrative inquiry is the methodological use of a story with a focus on how people make use of stories to interpret the world. The story, therefore, becomes more than a set of facts. It becomes a social product punctuated with interpretive devices through which the social workers represent themselves and develop a prism through which they view 'others'. The story becomes not just about what happened but the significance of the event.

#### **4.6 Matters of reliability and validity**

I have argued so far for the potential of narrative inquiry to increase understandings of children and family social workers, how they 'know' situations and how they work with 'others' but I do not attempt to argue for generalisability or certainty from the findings that will come from this research. There are a number of validity and reliability issues which require consideration. As a narrative researcher, I must be

clear in relation to my understanding of the nature of my collected evidence. Polkinghorne (2007) and Wengraf (2001) argue that the narrative inquiry research endeavour must be located in its broader research context before the arguments the researcher seeks to justify from the data can be meaningfully critiqued as valid and reliable.

#### **4.7 Validity**

Validating knowledge claims is not a mechanical process but an argumentative and performative practice involving the collection of evidence and the analysis or interpretation of the evidence. I have assembled the stories of the social workers not to determine if the events they spoke of actually happened but with an interest in meaning over and above accuracy. My interest is in the meaning they express. The use of narrative inquiry provides a window into some of the sense and sense-making the participants ascribe to their day-to-day experience of the practice of children and family social work. I do not claim that the stories told to me are a mirrored reflection of their day-to-day experiences. I have worked with the assumption that it is likely the participants omitted or accentuated stories. I understand that stories are retrospective accounts and likely be assembled in a way that showed them in good favour. Polkinghorne (ibid:480) highlights the possible disjunctions between a person's actual experienced meaning and their storied account as having four sources:

'(a) the limits of language to capture the complexity and depth of experience meaning, (b) the limits of reflection to bring notice to the layers of meaning that are present outside of awareness, (c) the resistance of people because of

social desirability to reveal fully the entire complexities of the felt meaning of which they are aware, and (d) the complexity caused by the fact that the texts are often a co-creation of the interviewer and participant.'

I do not pretend that I have completely eliminated these four potential threats to validity. I have seen my task as producing an articulation of the stories shared with me and to not overly distort participants' meaning. My undertaking of narrative inquiry for the first time has felt exposing and perilous at times. I have been all too aware of both the risks and responsibilities that come with the territory of dealing with the stories of others. Gubrium and Holstein (2009:93) note the porous nature of storytelling as far removed from being an individual endeavour but 'a full blown interactional accomplishment'. They cite Norrick (2000:189) as observing: 'Sometimes two or more participants collaborate in producing a story so that it becomes impossible to say just who is the teller or even the primary teller'. Gergen and Gergen (2003) refer to the crisis of validity and the rights of representation.

#### **4.8 Reliability**

D'Cruz and Jones (2004:67) remind the researcher that a test of good, that is reliable, research is the replicability of the research process and outcomes: 'Any differences that may emerge in the study must be related to the actual phenomena and not to inconsistencies in the research instruments. I sought as far as possible to minimise variations in the setting or the conditions for the collection of the data and was mindful of the inherent risks to reliability in the use of narrative inquiry and semi-structured interview. My opening statements in setting the scene for the interview were the same as were the questions which formed the spine of the exchange.

However, I am aware that the potential threats to reliability, like validity, in such an organic process as narrative inquiry through the use of semi-structured interview cannot be removed completely.

I have found that the honest approach is to actively work *with* the risks and threats not to minimise or hide from them. As this chapter progresses and I explore the research process in detail I will justify and explain my process of data analysis in the form of a commentary. I will make transparent the uncovering and interpretation of the data. In doing so I will acknowledge the process as a creative co-production that has stemmed from my own historical, cognitive and situated embedded perspectives in relation to the identification and recognition of patterns and themes in the transcriptions produced from the words given by the participants.

#### **4.9 Ethical considerations**

I addressed the political nature of social work and social work research in Chapter 1 in relation to my professional sensibilities and responsibilities. It is now timely for me to address the specific ethical issues which were pertinent to undertaking this research. Ethical approval to carry out the research was sought and obtained from Keele University Ethical Review Panel in February 2013 (Appendix 1). Before meeting with each of the participants I explained the purpose of the research, providing them with details of the research questions and the interview questions via email. Each participant was advised prior to meeting that if they had any sense of disquiet about the interview or simply did not want or have time to commit to the meeting they need only text me or ring me to cancel. Each participant was assured confidentiality and anonymity. I explained that, with their consent, on the day of the

interview I would ask to use a digital recorder. I explained that when I came to write about the research they would be identified by a number. Their geographical location would be referred to only in terms of the Northwest and the Midlands. All identifying information would be redacted from the transcriptions. I felt this degree of transparency assured anonymity as an important platform for the subsequent interviews. The digital sound recording and transcription in soft copy were held in a password protected computer which is owned by me. In keeping with the Keele University's ethical approval requirements I devised an Informed Consent Form (Appendix 1). I was aware of the potential for the interviews to reap rich, detailed data so I wanted to be explicit and honest about my intention to make the dynamic oral and aural performance of the semi-structured interview visible in text and lectures. I felt the responsibility of this to be weighty. How the stories of the social workers were to be used following the interviews, needed to be taken 'more' rather than 'less' seriously (Mason, 1996).

#### **4.10 Method- starting out**

Finding out what children and family social workers thought was the job of safeguarding and what they thought about the 'doing' of inter-professional practice were inquiries that found a natural home in semi-structured interviews as my method. The purpose of interviews in qualitative research is to allow the researcher to enter the other person's perspective (Patton, 2002:34). Interviews facilitate admission to that which goes beyond observation such as feelings and perspectives. Given the stated focus of this research, the research questions and the methodology underpinning this research project, I considered interviews to be the most effective

way of answering my research questions. It was important to trial my method via a pilot study to test validity and reliability as well as providing an opportunity to practise my interviewing skills within a research context (Hek and Moule, 2006) before attempting the field work.

#### **4.11 Pilot studies - First Pilot Study**

My initial intention was to observe a Child Protection Case conference [henceforth CPC] in addition to conducting semi-structured interviews. I believed it would give me an opportunity to explore the dynamics and the relational interchanges involved in inter-agency working within the context of safeguarding children and young people. In keeping with my questions from practice, and working with the epistemological language provided by Bourdieu, I attempted to utilise two methods of data collection: observations of a professionals' meeting (CPC) and a follow-up semi-structured interview with the social worker who attended and contributed to the CPC.

With significant difficulty, considerable time delay and much negotiating, resulting in no small measure of frustration on my part, I gained access to a Children's Service's Department in the North West of England with the agreement that I could 'overtly' (Smith 2009) observe a CPC. I had been hopeful at the outset that I would be given permission to tape record the meeting believing that the resulting data would be rich in terms of capturing hesitations, interruptions and the language used by the actors involved. The Assistant Director of Children's Services was advised by the Local Authority Legal Department not to allow the conference to be tape recorded.



The observation 'told' me less than I thought it might and prompted me to want to get closer to the micro-political processes that lie behind the interactions. The CPC told me what the conference members said but did not tell me why they said what they said and it gave me no way of knowing what they do in practice, providing little insight, if any, into perceptions of self or other (Dingwall, 1977, Reynolds 2007), both key elements in the exploration of habitus within respective fields. The CPC, while key in the safeguarding ambition, provides only a narrow window into the field of practice. The semi-structured interview with the social worker following the conference was far more instructive in providing insights into the practices of children and family social work and confirmed that talking to social workers would be my preferred way forward.

#### **4.12 Pilot 2**

My focus shifted to the day-to-day experiences of children and family social workers. In order to rigorously test out the process of my research, I undertook three pilot interviews. The opportunistic sample was of ex-colleagues, all of whom were children and family social workers and all of whom had been practising social workers for 15 or more years. As discussed earlier in this chapter, I have been constantly aware of the prominence of my own habitus in the research and inquiry process. While I have not practised as a social worker since 2004, I can, with very little prompting, begin to think like one. During the interviews I found myself quickly identifying with the frustrations and disappointments of practice. I therefore acknowledge that a great deal of my natural sympathies lie with the role and practice of the children and family social worker. It was my view during the pilot process, and

it remains my view, supported by Fook (2002), that the best way to guard against bias is to acknowledge it. I guarded against prompting or leading the storyteller by framing the semi-structured interviews with questions to allow the stories and narratives to emerge by themselves.

During my second pilot project the words of Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) were helpful and comforting in equal measure: 'Little wonder that the novice researcher comes away from early encounters feeling too lost in either minutiae or grand theory to transport narrative method to new projects with confidence' (2004:vii). While I could see the challenges of this approach, I could also see its immense potential to be rich and revelatory. The themes emerging from the three pilot interviews provided different layers of meaning and insights into the experience of the children and family social worker. The pilot studies were a useful exercise. They exposed interview questions (see below) that on closer inspection could be seen as carrying too much of my own agenda in looking towards the social workers as providing 'answers' rather than being enabled to talk freely of their experiences.

- The failure of effective inter-professional communication and practice is a perennial theme of Serious Case Reviews. Why do you think this is the case?
- What factors shape existing forms of communication in relation to safeguarding children?
- Do existing structures which serve to support the safeguarding of children and young people need professional difference?

The questions needed to be revised partly to allow for the stories to emerge freely but also in response to the developing social policy agenda. Since the beginning of my research journey the nature of children and family social work appeared under

threat and increasingly under the political microscope. I became interested in the stories and experiences of social workers not just in relation to inter-professional relations but what they revealed of the fundamental purpose of children and family social work. The research focus began to shift to how and in what way professional identity informs and influences the nature and quality of inter-professional relations. This was a pivotal point in my inquiry. It reinvigorated the research process. It opened up spaces for exploration in relation to the experiences of children and family social workers with a focus on the social workers' perceptions of their role and purpose and their perceptions of the role and purpose of others. The second pilot project also exposed the limitations of my personal time and resources. I had attempted the manual transcription of the interviews but my transcribing skills proved not to be up to the task. I made a decision that when I came to undertake the main field work I would need to employ a transcriber. My interview questions for the second mini-pilot project were a useful starting point but during the interviews I was conscious of the importance of revisiting the questions and revising them further. I recognised they would need to be added to and 'fleshed out' to capture the embeddedness of social work practice and to build on the potential of the organic, collaborative approach of storytelling. The interview questions, revised following the second pilot study, were as follows:

- Can you tell me about your path to becoming a children and family social worker?
- What, in your view is the purpose of children and family social work?
- Can you tell me about your experience of working with allied agencies within the context of s17 and s 47 (Children Act 1989) assessments?

- What do you think are the expectations (and frustrations) of allied professionals of social work and the social worker within the safeguarding context?
- What do you think are the expectations from social work of allied agencies regarding social work when working within the safeguarding context?
- Do you think that the current media and political mistrust of social work and social workers impact on the management of families and the inter-professional relationship?

#### **4.13 Sampling**

My sampling strategy for my field work was purposive and my inclusion criteria were deliberate: 'As its name implies, purposive sampling is done with a purpose in mind' (Lyons and Doueck, 2010:123). I set out to interview 15-20 children and family social workers with current experience of working in the safeguarding field. I was interested in speaking to individuals with three or more years post-qualification experience. Wengraf (2001:95) suggests that apart from the 'general specification of type...other criteria might include the amount of experience they have of the subject in question, and their capacity to express that experience in words, as opposed to, say in painting or action'. Of equal interest to me, was the likelihood of the participant being able to put me in touch with someone they knew, also a children and family social worker with the set criteria of experience. Their geographical location was not of any significance. Observing Bourdieu's use of the concept of field to theorize society as a social space or a network of relationships between positions occupied by actors (Ihlen, 2007, Khanchel and Kahla 2013), I was keen for my research not to be bounded by the geographical space of a particular Local Authority. Instead, I favoured attempting to reflect Bourdieu's notion of space as a relatively autonomous

social universe. With this in mind, the most fitting method of selection was the use of snowball sampling, a form of purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008), and an approach that fits with my expressed research paradigm. It is also reflective of what Lyons and Doueck (2010:123) term the 'logically defensible'. Sikes (2004) and Jackson (2013) argue for the need for the researchers own ontological and epistemological perspectives to be aligned with the research process in order for the research to be credible. Hek and Moule (2006:72) also refer to purposive sampling as 'judgmental' sampling as the method invests so much in the researcher choosing sample members who might be relied on to reflect a certain viewpoint. I was aware of this but suggest that the snowballing technique used with the purposive framework went some way to alleviate bias.

I achieved my aim of interviewing 15-20 social workers. I had to start somewhere, so I contacted two ex-colleagues from my time as a practitioner (at the time of the data collection I had been 10 years out of practice). From this starting point I was given names of people who my ex-colleague participants felt would be happy for me to contact them and would be willing to engage in the research. I made initial contact by telephone and explained the purpose of my research. I asked them to think about whether they wanted to participate and then communicated with them via email and telephone before the meetings took place. As the snowballing process began I found myself being put in touch with potential participants with whom I had a past acquaintance. Out of the 20 social workers interviewed, I was acquainted with 10. The remaining 10 I had never met nor had any form of prior contact with. Of the 10 I knew, I had worked with or known four of them when I was a practising social

worker. I had taught three of them in 2004 when I first moved from practice into Higher Education as a social work lecturer. I had not had any contact with them since. The remaining three of the 10 I knew on a long arm professional basis through Practice Education. In setting out the criteria for selection (above) and the characteristics of the participants (below) I do not suggest that my own world view has been, or can be, expunged from this process. I see myself, in keeping with narrative inquiry, as a co-producer. In qualitative research, the positioning of the researcher and their impact on both the design of the research and framing and the method of data collection is significant in explaining methodological choices and collection methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Similarly, Reason and Rowan (1981) have argued that social research should be understood as a dialogue between participants and researcher with the aim of co-creating meaningful knowledge. While acknowledging the impact of self I have taken into account the matrix relations, old and new, which were formed in the process of my research by carefully coding and categorising the data.

#### 4.14 Characteristics of sample

Age	Gender	Post-qualifying experience	Location	Ethnicity
25 – 30yrs – 3	Male = 2	3 – 5 yrs - 3	Northwest –11	White British -18
31 – 40yrs -10	Female = 18	6- 10 yrs -4	(3 Local	White Irish -1
41- 50 yrs - 5		11 – 15 yrs - 5	Authorities)	White Scottish -1
51 -60yrs - 2		16- 20 yrs – 5	Cheshire – 5	

		21 – 25 yrs- 1 26 – 30 yrs – 2	(2 Local Authorities) Midlands – 4 (2 Local Authorities)	
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#### 4.15 Semi structured interviews

The interviews took place over the summer of 2014 and each participant was interviewed once. The interviews took place either in the homes of the participants or in social work offices. Each interview lasted between 50 and 90 minutes, was taped and then sent for transcription. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by an interview questions set out above (4.12). This was generated from an initial literature review, the research questions, and from the experience of the two pilot interviews as part of my second pilot study referred to above. The term semi-structured interview is used interchangeably with in-depth interviews (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005) and relies on a set of questions as the guiding framework for an interview or conversation (Robson, 2002, Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). The method provides an ideal vehicle to explore the day-to-day experiences of children and family social workers, allowing for and enabling a structured interaction between researcher and participant and the collection of what Patton (2002) calls ‘thick description’, that is in relation to practice and its context.

Patton (Ibid) argues that the quality of the data obtained in qualitative interview depends largely on the expertise and skills of the interviewer. I felt confident in ‘the

doing' of the interviews as I had spent all of my working life as a social worker interviewing service users and speaking with children and young people in an array of contexts, often in emotionally challenging circumstances. I have always had, and continue to have, a firm belief in partnership working within the context of children and family social work. I could draw on this approach when undertaking the field work. As the interviewer, I approached the stories of the social workers as interactional projects, as 'narrative work' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009:41) envisioning the social worker as both an actor in the field of safeguarding and storyteller and in doing so considered the participants as knowledgeable, capable and reflective. My interest was in uncovering the social workers' perceptions and perspectives of themselves and of developing understandings of and insights into their practices by, as far as possible, locating myself in their world view to explore with them their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Alston and Bowles, 2003) but I was also focussed on ensuring I gave space and respect to the participant contribution (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). However, as suggested by Fontana and Frey (2005), I was aware that it is not possible for the participant and the researcher to be equals in the research interview process but believe that continuing reflexivity can go some way to allay the imbalance.

#### **4.16 Data analysis**

This process has been assisted by the contribution of a second person to ensure the appropriateness of the categories which have been created and how the content has been coded (STEP 5). Through the interviews, I collected approximately 150,000 words of data. Drawing on the work of Riessman (1993) and Feldman et al (2004), I



was reminded that as a narrative researcher my task was to interpret the stories that had been shared with me. I listened to the recordings while reading the transcripts and knew from this process I did not want to summarise each of the participant's narratives but work with the text as a whole in the first instance. This involved between two and five readings of each transcript. From this process I was able to identify 'mini' stories and themes. I then began to conduct a thematic analysis of the data (Ezzy 2002, Reismann, 2008), coding by significant sentences and identifiable chunks of meaning. This was done manually. By reducing and distilling individual pieces of text, I began to group emerging narrative into codes, categories and then, finally, concepts (Lichtman 2013). Below I provide an example of my process. I chose to proceed using manual analysis. This was for two reasons: first I am unfamiliar with the available software. I felt, while immersed in the data following the field work, familiarising myself with, for example, NVivo, would be an unhelpful and a distancing distraction. Second, I had enjoyed talking with the social workers. Their stories had hinted at some surprising findings. I looked forward to a growing intimacy with the data. That said, I found the data analysis of narrative inquiry challenging. Hunter's (2010) evocation of the long and winding road of data analysis was apposite but Lichtman's (2013) Three C's of Data Analysis: Codes, Categories and Concepts was a valuable tool enabling me to manage the analysis of the data in a transparent and systematic manner demonstrating my choices to 'include some things and exclude others' (Stone 1998:306 cited by Feldman et al 2004) and to allow the reader to assess the validity of my interpretation.

The Three C's of Data Analysis: Codes, Categories and Concepts (Lichtman, Ibid) is comprised of six steps:

Step 1. Initial Coding, Going from responses to summary ideas of responses;

Step 2. Revisiting initial coding;

Step 3. Developing an initial list of all categories;

Step 4. Modifying initial list based on additional rereading;

Step 5. Revisiting your categories and subcategories – further refined following a joint coding exercise during the revision phase of the study which included a specific change in relation to messages from SCRs to media responses.

Step 6. Moving from categories to concepts.

#### 4.17 The Long and Winding Road

##### **Step 1. Initial Coding, Going from responses to summary ideas of responses**

Litchman's (Ibid) strategy of going from responses to summary of ideas of responses was instrumental in getting started. It enabled my manual analysis to be focused in the process of thinking, deciding and interpreting the data. It paid dividends also in terms of a reflexive process of reviewing and recording my thoughts. For instance, I encountered repeated themes from the interviews of social workers who believe in the importance of the birth family and the need to support parents where possible. The use of discretion, risk-taking, and the inherent contingent nature of practice were apparent from the outset. My initial coding is shown in bold below:

**P5**

**R: Yes. Yes. I think preventative work and support, to me that's the whole point of social work [ideologically driven to support]. It's about – I find a lot of the time the focus is on the parent rather than the child, and my focus, I like to think my focus is still what's best for the child. So if that's keeping a child within the family I'll fight tooth and nail to try to do that and I'll support the parents, but not at the cost of putting a child at risk[keeping children safe and at home ] [children**

and family social work about managing risk] [strong professional sense of purpose]. So, it's a constant battle to weigh up the risk that you've got, and the potential for the adult to change. If you're too optimistic, you're slated. And if you are too draconian, as they say in court then you're seen as harsh, so it is a very fine balancing act [dammed if you do and damned if you don't], and I found if you go back to your old knowledge base, even some of the questions in the orange book that we used to have, and if you keep your assessments structured, and if you keep them informed, evidence-based, your decisions

**P5**

I: Or the general public, what do they want from social workers?

R: For you to run in and save every child [unrealistic expectations of social work] **that's** at risk. To sort those parents out who are bad parents. Protect children, that's what they want. Because there's nothing... in our society, there's nothing worse than the abuse of an innocent child, to the vast majority of people who are good people. And the thought of that makes people recoil, it does make you recoil in horror. It is the upmost sin, to hurt an innocent baby, to hurt a child. [media coverage does impact on day-to-day practice] [blaming messages seen as threat not as learning] [there are uncomfortable truths] So you are dealing with a taboo subject. You really are. It's taboo, and people want someone to stop it. So if you're the closest thing to a responsible adult to prevent that, you are the target. You are the target. Baby P's a classic example. God, people went round there and they didn't do this and they didn't do that... I'm sure that some of the people that were going to Baby P actually done what was required of them. But the media can't see that, because they concentrate on what you haven't done, or what they perceive you haven't done, because the end result is so vile. And that cannot go without blame. [media coverage impacts on day-to-day practice] [blaming messages seen as threat not as learning] [there are uncomfortable truths]

R: Yeah. We're perceived as incompetent, and the media see us that way... how can other professionals see us as.....[media coverage impacts on day-to-day practice] [media coverage reduces professional standing]

I: Do you think it does influence... do you feel it does influence?

R: I was sitting at a... I've got a few friends who are nurses and midwives **and what have you, and that often talk about social work and I don't get involved in discussions about social work socially.** This very experienced midwife said, well come on let's face it, it's just common sense, isn't it? So I thought to myself, all those years studying law, psychology, sociology, attachment theory, keeping up with the latest legislation, changes that are put on us by **certain governments, whether that being you work with the orange book, the lilac book, children's act 89, the adoption act, powers taken away from you, responsibilities given on you...** and you think to yourself, well I may as well **not have gone to uni or anything because it's just common sense.** That was a very intelligent woman who perceived social work as just common sense. [social work seen as just common sense]

I: Do you just almost like... I'm not rising to it, do you accept that?

R: I did challenge that. And I asked her if she was aware of what the curriculum was for

a social worker. I did challenge that. But, that was a very intelligent woman who perceived me as that, just common sense. **If you're perceived as negative or incompetent from people at the top, it has a ripple effect, but when you consider how many times social workers over the years, certainly over the last 50 years, have been portrayed as incompetent, it's ingrained in society.** ..... [media coverage impacts on day-to-day practice] [media coverage reduces professional standing] What do you ever hear of nurses? Poor nurses, they're overworked, they're underpaid, they get abuse. And you go to hospitals and it's, you know, verbal abuse will not be tolerated. We get called all kinds. **I'm not condoning it, nurses do a fantastic job, but so do we.** [resistant to blame] [professional self-esteem intact – despite]

## Step 2. Revisiting initial coding

Completing the above process for each of the interviews I was left with a large number of codes or 'chunks' of meaning. I scrutinised the codes for duplicates and collapsed several, a method which allowed not only for the removal of duplicates but also for the process of renaming synonyms and clarifying terms. As part of this process key themes and storytelling devices began to emerge. The example below from Participant 6 demonstrates the emergence of a robust sense of professional self despite the ever present threat of scapegoating and the inherent ambiguity of children and family social work highlighted in bold. Returning a child home or achieving removal of a child speaks to both the ambiguity of practice and professional confidence in being able to justify recommendations.

### Q6

[media coverage does impact on day to day practice] . I think sacking people, social workers who've been sacked, who've been made scapegoats or whatever, if I thought... I actually do think that could happen to me. It could happen to me tomorrow. It could happen to me next week. Sometimes my head is that full with things I have to do, I forget what I have to do. [blaming messages seen as threat not as learning] Because you feel as if you're going on overload. [unrealistic expectations of social work] [media coverage reduces professional standing] [social work seen as just common sense] [resistant to blame] [professional self-esteem intact – despite] [social work enters into the private domain] .[social work by definition of who they work with and what they do will never be popular] [social work is a thankless task] : Because you've produced, in my view, a piece of work that justifies your recommendation, whether that be a child return home or a child be removed. [clarity of professional purpose]

### Step 3. Developing an initial list of all categories

Step 2 allowed for a sifting, sorting and distilling process. Step 3 enabled me to move beyond the initial list of codes and to begin to reorder them into Categories. Below is an example of the codes emerging as categories (highlighted in red).

## Codes

[Important] [social work becoming central] [early interest in the 'social' and public service] [positive professional identity] [Help, Support] [education needs social work] [working with families] [social work offering a different level of involvement] [Help, Support] [ideologically driven to support] [Difficult/challenging] [clarity of purpose with individual families] [committed to Social justice] [centrality of social work] [protectors of children and young people] [Limitations of social work] [Intervening] [Safeguarding] [social work politically driven] [challenge of social work] [clarity of professional and personal purpose] [unrealistic expectations of social work] [working with families] [active -IPP] [IPP – social work led] [centrality of social work] [IPP-othering]. [IPP-cautious praise] [inherent limitations of state intervention] [too much expected of the CP teacher] [Low expectations of IPP] [social work difficult for families] [lone voice of social work] [social workers protectors of children and young people] [IPP resource driven] [health – good IPP] [IPP - reluctant praise] [IPP-frustrations with] [education abdication] [sw the judge of good/bad IPP] [the importance of relationships]

### Step 4. Modifying initial list based on additional rereading

Step 4 was used as an opportunity for a further reread and as preparation for Step 5.

### Step 5. Revisiting categories and subcategories

This step seemed to be a pivotal point along the long and winding road of data analysis. The revisiting of my list of categories allowed for further sorting and sifting - the removal of redundant or duplicate categories. It made space to begin to identify critical elements which could take the shape of concepts into Step 6.

## Categories

**A-Z - All in one - Exact duplicates removed**

Achieving good outcomes for children and young people

Birth families very important for children

CA89 seen as a social work tool

Children and family social work is about managing risk

Clarity of purpose with individual families

Constant criticism is unhelpful

Core belief is that people can change

Dammed if you do and dammed if you don't

Dealing with other professionals is the most challenging aspect of social work

Decision making not always with the social worker

Differences in approaches to safeguarding can be stark

Difficult to challenge parents

Expectations of other professionals frustrating

Feeling of ultimate responsibility

Frustrated at lack of professional voice

## **Step 6 - Moving from categories to concepts**

The final step in the process was stimulating and challenging. Having sifted and sorted the codes and read the interviews again, I discovered numerous replications and sub-categories which on revisiting were far more suited to different conceptual or metaphorical headings. In the latter stage of this process the categories gradually emerged as concepts. I present each of these concepts below in the form of Four Windows, or vistas, into the complex world of the children and family social worker and children and family social work. Each of the Four Windows seeks to provide a conceptual framework for fresh consideration of who children and family social workers are and how they manage the Big Stories of certainty, failure and blame.

Each of the Four Windows reveals the Little Stories of practice with insights into the essential complexity and uncertainty of working, alongside others, to provide the complete protection of all children. I have chosen to frame these concepts in four windows, to emphasise my own role as a researcher looking in to the ‘doing’ of social work, and ‘how’ children and family social workers manage to do what they do. At the same time, I look out from my role as a past practitioner onto the Big Stories and Little Stories of children and family social work.

#### Four Windows into Children and Family Social Work.

<p><b>Sense Makers</b>  Supporting families and protecting children  Inherent limitations of state intervention  Nature of social work is subjective  ‘Knowing’ thresholds – feel for the game  SW is about managing risk  Practice is contingent</p>	<p><b>In the Borderlands</b>  Social work needed but not wanted  Not feeling supported feeling exposed  Safeguarding {feels like} singular/ lonely activity  Powerful but without power  Social work diffuse and messy  Managers of uncomfortable truths</p>
<p><b>Talking Back to Blame</b>  We’re good at what we do  The power of the social work team  Beyond our capacity  We’re all not in this together  Not wearing the incompetent badge</p>	<p><b>Managers of Difference</b>  Lack of ownership from others – it’s not ours it’s yours.  Managing the IPP relationship – doesn’t occur naturally  They don’t get it – there are inherent differences  Damned if they do and damned if they don’t  Well? What are you going to do about it?</p>

#### 4.18 Conclusion

The children and family social workers who contributed to this research shared with me a repertoire of emplotted stories and their individual experiences of practising children and family social work. Their stories were assembled in such a way as to



make sense of their world to themselves and to the listener. The individual stories provided a medium for the 'tellers' to make sense of what happens during the course of a working day (Sense-makers), where it happens (In the Borderlands) and how they do the job (Talking Back to Blame and Managers of Difference). I have, in turn, used these 'windows' to help present my findings in a systematic way that supports analysis without disguising the complexity and ambiguity of much of the workers' day to day engagement with the families with whom they work. The 'how' (Sense-makers) and 'where' (In the Borderlands) are presented in Chapter 5 where practitioners can be seen to grapple with 'risk as a greasy commodity.' The 'hows', (Talking Back to Blame and Managers of Difference), are presented in Chapter 6. It became apparent in the telling of the stories that they are guided to work and act in certain ways, and not others. They are informed and influenced through a multiple yet limiting, repertoire of legal, social, political and public narratives. This chapter has detailed the method and methodology adopted for the purposes of this thesis to answer the research questions which arose from the literature review. I have outlined the processes of data collection and discussed some of the difficulties which can arise from being a researcher on the insider/outsider continuum.

I have argued that drawing on both narrative inquiry and Bourdieu's conceptual framework of field, capital and habitus is an effective way of addressing the research questions posed and in doing so set out the theoretical framework in which the next two chapters, reported findings and the subsequent discussion, are premised. The two conceptual approaches help to look beyond and behind the master narratives of certitude and rationality that are powerful influences over the meaning of social work.

Used together they have enabled me to examine, through the process of storytelling, where social workers construct and have constructed for them their professional space as they can be heard talking of juggling several narratives simultaneously. Bourdieu's framework asks how the stories of the social workers are situated in fields of practice and how professional habitus resists discourses of blame but instead opens up opportunities for children and family social workers to emerge as sense makers and managers of professional difference. The notion of fields situates the story telling in practice, revealing sites of tensions and struggles in a social world with other actors and bringing the four windows together.

In my findings chapters below (5 & 6) I further utilise the windows to facilitate an understanding of what they are saying about the themes raised earlier. In Chapter 3, I explored how risk understood within New Public Management had become a key tool used to shape social work practice. In Chapter 5, I present findings that show through the windows of daily practice, how social workers have responded as Sense Makers operating in the Borderlands, a space/field both created for and by the social workers themselves. In Chapter 6, I present findings that show through the window of social workers experiences of Sense Making In the Borderlands how they find ways to reassert their unique identities by Talking Back to Blame as an act of resistance and affirming their position on the field of struggle as dynamic Managers of Difference, actively owning the ambiguities and professional conflicts that flow from policy directions to manage with certainty the unmanageable.

## **Chapter 5 Sense Makers working in The Borderlands**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I construct children and family social workers as Sense Makers (what they do) working In The Borderlands (where they do it). Through these two windows I will tell the Little Stories shared by the interviewees to illustrate the concepts derived from the analysis carried out in Chapter Four, above. Each of the concepts is encapsulated by a side-heading taken from the construction of the related window as set out in Chapter Four, above. Children and family social work is a public service with the responsibility to protect and safeguard children from harm. My findings are set against the attempts to standardise and micro-manage children and family social work through increasingly prescriptive policies and reviews which fail to recognise the contested nature of practice. This chapter is about the 'doing' of social work – what social workers do and where they do it. I have shown in Chapter 2 and in Chapter 3 that there are expectations of straightforwardness and rationality but that the reality of practice is contested, messy and grey. The social worker, as Sense Maker, has circumscribed autonomy shaping and reshaping the objective presentations of child abuse in the present while attempting to predict the safeguarding future. The social workers can be seen to work In The Borderlands, practising within the social policy and legislative framework but neither fully determined nor fully willed by it. The greatest strength of social work - making sense of complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty - has the potential to be its greatest weakness. Sense making by definition is subjective. It has been illuminating to draw on three elements of Bourdieu's sociology - field, habitus and capital - introduced and discussed in Chapter 4. Each provides an additional analytical lens. Bourdieu's

concept of field sensitises me to a safeguarding field: a multidimensional, contested space of positions with agents positioned within it. It has been worthwhile to reflect on the relationship of the safeguarding field to the 'field of power' (politics). The field of power creates, promotes and enables the Big Stories of certainty and rationality to emerge undisputed and unchallenged and undermines the Little Stories. This is not 'simply' in respect of the everyday reality of social workers but also of the lives of the families with whom they work. I suggest both, by association, are successfully traduced.

## **5.2 Introduction to Sense Making**

In their narratives, the social workers talk of being presented with an abundance of dynamic information from any number of sources. Very rarely, are they provided with the full picture. They are required to make sense, decide what needs to be done. Professionals from allied agencies look to them to assess need or harm and whether to intervene. Much of their Sense Making takes place in the private domain of family life. They are required to work with families who meet the criteria for s17 but may also be on the threshold of s47. Undertaking the home visit, they are required to cross from public to private spaces. The social workers I interviewed spoke of no common public understanding or sympathy for the job they do. One participant spoke of a feeling that whatever they as social workers do, they should do 'quietly and over there'. She was not alone among the participants in feeling that the preference would be for them to practise out of public sight and mind. This feeling of 'invisibility' finds some resonance in the reflections of Cooper (2014).

My review of the literature revealed that decision making in children and family social work is complex and contested (Cornish, 2017), despite the attempts in policy and in prescriptions from Inquiries and Reviews to construct it as a straightforward, technical exercise. Research participants shared stories where, as Sense Makers, they are required to navigate a difficult balancing act: that of seeking to support and protect children within their relational context while working with the rules and limitations of State intervention. Social work calls for and produces subjective practices. Sense Making is subjective (Platt and Turney, 2013).

### **5.3 Supporting families and protecting children**

The Sense Maker is concerned with supporting families and protecting children and in doing so the children and family social workers impose their social identity and view of the social world. They express an awareness of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the protection of children, informed and underpinned by a strong value position towards keeping children with their families where possible if it is believed to be in the best interests of the child. This is a value base in tune with the Children Act 1989.

Research participants acknowledged the need to situate children within their familial and relational context. For example, Participant [henceforth P] 7 describes the need to work with the settlement between the State and family life: *'It's that balance all the time, isn't it? Yes, we can say of course a child's needs are paramount, but parents do have rights as well, and needs'*. While P3 alluded to the relational autonomy of the child and the need to be mindful of family, networks, culture and location before intervention should be considered: *'I mean, at the end of the day we can all go out*

*there and we can all be put at risk, every kid, but I think you have to look at them all individually and take into account all of that, all the social factors and all of that, before you make any rash decisions. I think you have to look at all of that, because no family is perfect.'*

P3 goes on to give a sense of how she makes use of her individualised skills, knowledge and values in an assessment of risk and or need. *'You have to look at it holistically, in a sense, so you get an understanding of how the family works. You could be moving a kid and you're going to make it 100 times worse. And that kid's never going to go back there, or it's going to make things so much more difficult because you've severed that. I think... and I'm not saying it's right for the parents to hit the kids, but it does happen as one-offs, you know? And I think you have to look at that and not jump on the bandwagon, in a sense.'* Here, the practitioner has situated the family within a range of possible interventions and has judged, using logic and reason that, in this instance, non-intervention is the preferred course of action.

#### **5.4 Inherent limitations of State Intervention**

In doing so, she acknowledges the inherent limitations of State intervention and its potentially damaging effects. Her words suggest a sense of threshold in response to what may be a 'one-off' rather than repeated concerns. There is a Little Story in this response, a children and family social worker seeking to manage and make sense of the risk presented to the children concerned. Her 'bandwagon' is the Big Story where risk is everywhere to be seen and intervening in the private family domain is the answer. P3 provides a further example of situated practice

underpinned by an awareness of the need to locate children in their family and community context. The practitioner expresses an awareness of the limits of State intervention in family life. She exercises her discretion to make sense of and determine the content and nature of her practice. Echoing the work of Smith (2005) she attempts to create a 'care-full space': *'See, I think you've got to go out and look at people's normal family life, what their family life is like. For instance, say a mother and a daughter having an argument and they slap one another, whatever... I see that – I'm not saying it's acceptable – but I think it's part of normal family life when teenagers and parents do have that. But I think other people rush in, they move... and I don't think it needs to be that'*.

The practitioner makes sense of the personal and particular aspects of the each and every situation, partly, I suggest, as a result of her value base but also because of an understanding that the State cannot make 'things better'. *'You've got to treat them differently, but you've got to be realistic about things as well. Like, I don't know, for instance, they all play outside in the street with nobody watching them... but that's the majority of [redacted place name, 24:46] that do that, so what are you going to do? Take them all?'* There are limits to her professional role. Social work cannot and should not 'own' or be responsible for all societal and individual fallibilities which may result in harm.

Practice is underpinned by an imperative to make sense of how a policy or provision within legislation might or might not be applied to an individual family in unique circumstances. Regarding the implementation of the Public Law Outline (discussed in Chapter 2), practice is contingent on a number of factors. P5 speaks of her need

to work with the individual needs of each family. While understanding the policy impetus for the PLO she says: *'I struggle with one size fits all, in that policy, which I get – I get the policy, I get the time delay, I get the fact that we need to move quicker, but I think it does really depend on the family, and I don't think that's a blanket one size fits all for social work.'*

P5 articulates a reluctance to reflect the policy maker's vision of straightforwardness and objectivity. Instead the practitioner knowingly uses her sense of her professional self to engage with the family. She is an autonomous and critical practitioner with a strong capacity to use her sense of discretion to make professional judgements. She becomes the last link in the policy chain: *'Although we do need guidelines, I get that, but you can work with some families for an awful long time, and you've got instincts, your professionalism kicks in where you think, "I'm going to get somewhere with this family" and other families you'll think, "I'm going to knock and knock for a very long time and not get anywhere"'*. She can be seen to make use of her own individual sense making in what she does and how she does it. She has her own set of devices, routines and understandings to work with the family with whom she feels she can 'get somewhere' and the family who she believes will be slow to respond or may never respond and engage. The reality of practice is the antithesis of prescriptive and directive policy making, which purvey a sense of 'market detachment' as explored by Smith (2005), and found in Chapter 2 and, partly in Chapter 3. P5's contribution resonates with the counter narratives of complex and contested practice which were to be found in the empirical literature (Helm, 2013). The response here is relational and reflective (Ruch, 2004). She reflects upon the



significance of relationships in working with families. She discerns between one family and another.

### **5.5 The nature of social work is subjective**

For the practitioners who contributed to this study the belief in subjective practices was supported by positive and constructive practice. There was a belief that families can and do change. Key to the assessment process was negotiating and working in partnership with the family, to find a way through. The subjectivities and rationalities of individual practitioners, premised on relationships and relationship building, was a core theme: P7 was clear in her role and responsibilities here: *'I think the time's come for me to get out if I'm automatically thinking this one's got to be removed, before you've even done a thorough assessment. Because, the environmental factors always keep changing, throughout a person's life. Hers definitely have, to start off with that partner's died, who was involved with all the horrendous domestic violence. So that risk is decreased, it's gone'.*

P7 is determinedly unwilling to become the practitioner who 'does to' families. She wants to be the practitioner who can work flexibly, compassionately and with humanity. It is also notable that she feels compelled to apologise for her value stance: *'She's in a relationship now with a man who's previously had very, very long term relationships with women, no evidence of domestic violence or any patterns emerging. Different person, different circumstances. So, yeah, I think it's what that child should be owed, is to how their situation looked as an empty canvas, until it's pulled together. Sorry'.*

The practitioner expresses a responsibility to the child within a complex and changing family context. She sees the family and their circumstances and makes a choice not to be '...part of authoritarian demonization' ... but to offer hope and support to families to care safely and flourish' (Featherstone, et al. 2014:35). There is an expression of hopefulness and possible transformation from the social worker. Individual practitioners speak of using subjective judgements while working within a repertoire of possibilities. Crossa's (2005) challenge to essentialist claims of over simplification resonates here. The 'doing' of social work by its very nature is unpredictable and uncertain. Here, P12 speaks of the strengths and weaknesses of subjectivities in practice: *'That's the whole point of social work, I've always thought, a lot of it is about professional judgments, even our own professional judgments, and we have our team meeting last week, when I was sitting round the table saying, all of us sat around here could go out and do an assessment and we'd all come up with something slightly different'*.

Here, the subjective practice is described as leaving the practitioner (and the family) vulnerable: *'And that's still a very scary thing I find, about social work. It just is. That's still quite frightening, but that is the reality of it, because all of those things that you bring to it, your own past, your own values, your own current professional capacity, all impacts on what the assessment is, it's not just an actual thing you can define... it happens within teams, within all aspects'*. The significance and influence of the practitioner's habitus; their personal and professional filters are apparent in the segment above. However, the practitioner's subjective responses are not as random as would first appear. They are designed and constructed within the context of the laws, policies and procedures, nationally and locally, available to them. Yet

they remain connected and responsive to each individual situation. Here, the practitioner is mindful that the focus of the assessment is not 'just the thing you define' but at play are a complex range of human factors. This 'individual response echoes with Littlechild (2008) who argues that social workers construct their own realities within their work which leads them to actions which are not always anticipated by policy makers.

P9 adds weight to this view. She voices the need to be both responsive and systematic. One approach needs the other and takes time. *'I mean, I can remember some situations I've had with families where, on paper it looks horrendous, they're definitely touching the threshold for having the children removed, but I think because we're social workers trying to take it into its context and to use our systemic approach now, our different way of working, change doesn't happen overnight, if these are long ingrained problems they're going to take a long time to undo and get better.'*

In the extract above, P9 explains that social workers cannot force people to change but need to work with families during their change process. This can be frustrating for allied agencies and can result in a lack of trust in who children and family social workers are and what they do. The practitioner perceives a lack of professional understanding in relation to how social work operates and believes it can be damaging for inter-agency and inter-professional relations: *'They're [other agencies] still very based on right and wrong; they have very... they find it difficult, have a narrow way of thinking, their approaches don't meet our approaches, and I think health, law, we struggle with that. We can't fix it instantly, it doesn't mean you have to remove the child. So that can be difficult. And I think they lose trust in us then'.*

The practitioner does not want to be seen as a quick-fix 'resolver' of families with problems. Instead she calls for the long view where professional time and energy can be given to building up relationships with parents, carers and their children. This is a view which does not resonate with the Big Story but is core to the Little Stories from practice and finds an echo in Cottam's (2011) plea for 'relational welfare'.

### **5.6 'Knowing thresholds' – feel for the game**

The existence and use of thresholds are an essential element of the practitioner's tool-kit. Thresholds are fluid and dynamic, impacted upon by a range of operational, managerial and social factors. 'Need' and 'harm' are shifting constructs (Masson and Dickens, 2013). As explored in Chapter 3, thresholds can also be a particularly problematic aspect of inter-agency and inter-professional working through boundary making and associated disputes (White and Featherstone, 2005) and a divergence between practice and the linear policy expectation (Hood, 2014). The day-to-day interactions of inter-professional working expressed by the practitioners are much removed from the Working Together guidance which have become such a familiar feature of the policy landscape of 'organisational myth' (Yanow, 1996:91). While inter-professional might be considered a valid response to a complex problem, to the social workers who contributed to this study, it is often the source of additional complexity. The social workers appeared to be comfortable with thresholds; working with them and talking about them with ease and confidence. Thresholds, for the social workers seemed to 'perform' an 'insider/outsider' function. As a team member of a social work team there is a lived awareness of the 'rules of the game' in terms of their cultural and operational function. This is 'insider' information and those

'outside' are rarely privy to it. Understanding thresholds, also the work of categorisation, seemed to be an important marker of group consensus in securing the power of group membership. The result is that universal services, often at the front-line, are left in the invidious position of perpetual outsider, trying to second guess what case will be accepted as a referral by Children's Services (Mason and Dickens, 2013).

For the participants there was a professional pride in 'knowing' thresholds and having a feel for the game. Thresholds - making sense of them, managing and working within them - were seen as influential in working with families. This social worker explains how she makes sense of the legal framework and balancing risk. The contribution from the practitioner below suggests almost a two-tier threshold system. The threshold for the Local Authority but then a personal threshold setting too. P4 explains how she works: *'I mean ours are very high. I tend to set my own thresholds, which we do. And I base mine a lot on what's happening in that community with other children. If we've got other children who are going to school dirty, who aren't on child protection plans, who aren't on child in need, is it necessary for that child? I see the threshold is, "Is that child at significant harm? Are they going to get a really bad injury? Are they going to get emotionally damaged?"'*

The organisational 'climate' and the autobiographical filter, with the pivot of significant harm, are at work here. Decision making in this context carries substantial risk for the social worker and for social work. The use of subjectivity and the exercise of discretion might result in 'Too few, too late' or 'Too many, too soon' (Masson and Dickens, 2013).

P3 used the threshold construction almost as a defensive weapon: a rational and functional way to manage the flow of work. P3 goes on to explain how she uses thresholds to manage and mark the boundaries of her relationship with other agencies: *'...they don't get the thresholds, and obviously we've got a new threshold document now that I keep in my bag, I carry it with me in my bag, so I can say "well it doesn't meet the threshold of significant harm, so we wouldn't keep it in – because we are only keeping things where kids are at risk of significant harm", and all the other agencies, it's back down to all of them to deal with'.*

Significant harm (Children Act 1989) features highly in the practice of the children and family social workers whether pre-proceedings or in court work: P15 is clear: *'It is, definitely. And that's what we're always arguing in court, isn't it? Whether it's significant harm or can we work within a family trying to manage it?'* The notion of sense making was viewed as a core strength for the practitioners; they 'got it' while 'others' didn't, and each of the social workers spoke with a common language and expressed common understandings of how practice needs to operate. These understandings resonate with Bourdieu's notion of a repertoire of possibilities embodied in small practices or, as I am framing them here, Little Stories

However, for the outsider looking in, the social world of the children and family social workers can appear as an opaque and confusing space. P15 acknowledges the frustration of allied agencies, also engaged in the safeguarding of children; understanding the fluid and changing nature of thresholds was an uphill task: *'I don't think they have got a chance of understanding our thresholds when they change on a regular basis. Based on the amount of stuff that's coming in. And I've noticed, I've*

*seen thresholds change, and obviously you see it differently when you work for different local authorities, it depends on the amount of referrals that are coming in as well, and they change the threshold constantly'.*

This does not augur well for the inter-professional task and collective task of safeguarding children and young people. The changing and mercurial nature of thresholds was part of the practice landscape and one to which the social workers were alert to and able to adapt but the picture seemed to be less positive for outside agencies looking in. P15 continues: *'If the threshold's continually changing and we adapt it, I don't know how people working with us are meant to understand the thresholds. I don't really know what impacts on it'.*

P16 explained the dynamic and changing nature of thresholds: *'Oh yeah. That's when the thresholds normally change, that's what you notice. I've noticed that, when there's a serious case review the thresholds drop again. They become lower, yeah. And then you'll find that gradually over time the thresholds will go back up again. The government just jump'.* Thresholds are complex and contested (Platt and Turney, 2013). Hawkins (2002) uses the concepts of 'surround', 'field' and 'frame' to unpick the many and varied influences, both macro and micro, on organisations, such as local authorities, whose decision-making is both policy-led and generated by internal factors. The macro and micro influences are interconnected and interacting. For example, the death of Peter Connelly may effect a change of practice, as children and family social workers adjust their own practice as part of the new settlement of what is expected from them (Hawkins, 2002 and Masson and Dickens, 2013). Platt and Turney (Ibid) find practitioners call upon different sense-making processes to

gauge information when making decisions about child protection thresholds imposed from both outside and within the local authority.

This is evidently a challenge that needs to be addressed in relation to inter-professional relations and the effective safeguarding of children and young people: P17 '*... but I still think at the front door in terms of how do we refer? What do we refer? I still think social services as we were, social workers aren't great*'.

Here the participant suggests that the difficulty posed for universal services in relation to thresholds is something to learn from and improve. '*We're still very dependent, with all our policies on thresholds and all our pathways, it's still often tricky I think, for agencies to know what to get in and to be told one day no that's.....so when I look at it from the other side I think yeah, I can see why you get fed up and you don't know what's going on, and we need to learn from stuff like that.*'

Inter-agency and inter-professional working is complex, characterised by a network of social practices, particular to each agency, in which the subject of concern, the child, seems to be seen but not seen, talked about but not talked about. The broader conceptualisation of risk, where working with a child in need now sits alongside a child protection inquiry as a statutory assessment has widened the welfare net. The conflation of risk and need discussed in Chapter 2 and again in Chapter 3 has made the job of the practitioner more challenging not less.

## **5.7 Social work is about managing risk**



The practitioners, who contributed to this research, supported by Kemshall (2010) and Webb (2006), were clear that a core element of their practice is managing risk. Part of the daily fabric of working with families involves operating with a level of risk sometimes greater, sometimes lesser. This was seen as carrying professional value, marking the social workers out as different: *'Children and family social work, I think, is really about managing risk a lot of the time. I think that's what the job is. Teaching isn't about managing risk, and health visiting isn't about managing risk. Even policing isn't. Policing is about investigating crime and responding to disorder and criminal activity'*.

The perceived ability of Children and Family Social Workers to absorb and live with risk was a significant professional identifier. P18 sees social work as unique as a risk absorber. *'...social work is unique among all those other professions...it's about identifying risk and then responding to it, but in a lot of instances managing it, living with it, to a certain extent. I don't think other professionals come from that perspective, and I can see why that is the case, because they do a completely different job. So I don't think that other professionals get the idea that social workers can recognise risk, identify risk, and then live with a certain level of risk and attempt to manage it. Because you can't eradicate risk entirely'*.

While actively engaging with risk the practitioners were reluctant to accept risk being given, in their view, a mistaken priority or being allowed to dominate the referral. Resonant with the work of Broadhurst (2012) the participants were keen to talk of Little Stories reflecting a process where a more balanced, thoughtful and supportive

approach was required. Here, the practitioner appears to opt for a more thoughtful and supportive approach. P12 views the family in their broader context. In doing so she accepts the challenge that comes with working with the family: *'The school have said lots of times about being worried about the older two, and them being very thin, eating off the floor... I think, when you talk to them about it they say it in very generalised terms that they're always really starving and really skinny, but when you go down deeper it's just the girl picks a packet of crisps up off the floor one day. It's not... I'm not saying we don't have concerns, there is no food in that house because the parents spent it on drugs, there is an issue there, but it's not quite...'*

The ability to assess and make sense of levels of acceptable or unacceptable levels of risk, while seeking to support children and families, was deemed to be a strong professional attribute. In keeping with the notion of 'relational autonomy' (Herring and Foster, 2012), it involved, for P5, producing and imposing meaning on the social world around her. She spoke of practice as balancing the needs of the parent while working hard to maintain a core focus on the paramountcy of the child. *'... I find a lot of the time the focus is on the parent rather than the child, and my focus, I like to think my focus is still what's best for the child. So if that's keeping a child within the family I'll fight tooth and nail to try to do that and I'll support the parents, but not at the cost of putting a child at risk.'*

P5's depiction of her practice is not one that could be considered rational or objective. Rather P5's account exposes the limitations of rationalism. It is more in keeping with Haraway's (1988:584) call for a vision recognising the value of 'partial, locatable...knowledges...sustaining the possibility of webs of connections...' She

speaks of practice as a value-based battlefield. For this practitioner it would seem that the active management of risk shows risk not as exogenous phenomenon but a 'fight' with an audience (in this instance, the court) who will be quick to critique misplaced hopefulness as well as an unduly pessimistic and interventionist approach. *'It's a constant battle to weigh up the risk that you've got, and the potential for the adult to change. If you're too optimistic, you're slated. And if you are too draconian, as they say in court, then you're seen as harsh, so it is a very fine balancing act.'*

Answers to practice problems are not easily available and rarely simple or linear (Smeeton, 2017). This reflexive practitioner is not looking for solutions but instead draws upon her Sense Making capacities: the essence of her embedded practice. Part of her Sense Making is clearly generated by an awareness of a critical political landscape that will judge the efficacy of what she has done and how she has done it. Her practice constituted a strongly expressed professional autonomy. She was not prepared to be the empty vessel into which the latest policy initiative was poured.

### **5.8 Practice is contingent**

There was a shared understanding that Practice is contingent; each situation is different. Constructive practice was underpinned by a belief that they were more likely to be working with a mix of dysfunction and need rather than malign intent. P5: *'I think that whenever I've worked with families and when I've seen other people work with families, it's very rare you come across parents that are wilfully or purposefully neglectful or harmful to their children. They, the parents themselves,*

*have got such a complex history and past and current situation, you very, very rarely walk into a family and there's parents wilfully doing things to their children'.*

A commitment to keeping children and families together, where possible, and working in partnership with families was an important feature for the social workers. Here there are echoes of 'humane social work' conceptualised by Featherstone et al (2014). They steadfastly believed in the capacity of families to change and were reluctant to demonise families. They remain wedded to the principles underpinning the Children Act 1989 and were clearly philosophically orientated to supporting families. P17: *'It's important not to write off families, not to underplay families, even when children are in care, not to underplay the importance of the family. So I'm still philosophically at the point of putting in the resources to keep families together, not being too quick to see families as... situations, as unworkable.'*

Here, the family is positioned first as a family – not a situation - and not irredeemable. There is a strongly expressed professional and ethical impetus to work with families and, where possible to minimise the role of the State. There is, of course, a challenge that requires thoughtful and balanced practice: *'Now, the risk that runs is the other side of the coin, saying you're leaving children exposed to neglect for too long, and you've got to be alive to that, trying to reduce that, and seeing when it is necessary to remove children, and I've removed plenty for those sorts of reasons, but that doesn't change... I mean I generally don't hold the view that kids do better in care than they do in families, they most certainly don't, so it's worth trying to save families as much as you can'.*

The imperative to help and support children to remain with their families seems to be lessened and without political support. P17 suggests that there is a risk that constructive practice is at risk of being replaced by child protection and dangerous parents being seen everywhere. There is a danger that the risk discourse may change the character of future social workers who may be less embedded in positive and constructive practice: *'To try and help people to cope really with what was going on in the world. Now, it's hard to hang onto that day in and day out. So when you come to the modern day, the purpose now of children and family social work - the emphasis is much more heavily on safeguarding than it ever was, and again a lot of my time.'*

There is concern from P17: *'Particularly with young social workers in trying to help them get a context to some of that I suppose, and not fall into what I see as a trap of looking for malign abuse, I suppose, or malign neglect, around every corner. And know the job isn't actually to be part of the punishment machine for that, although it feels like that at times'.*

## **5.9 In the Borderlands**

Efforts in supporting and helping families felt disparaged, with limited public value or political worth. For example, P18 felt that his practice would be better regarded, politically and by the public, if it were to occupy the child protection paradigm. *'I think society wants there to be no Baby Ps, no... I suppose what does society generally know about social work? I like these questions. What's society, as well? I suppose the kind of... I hate this word but everyone knows what we mean by it, but I think the underclass wants us to go away. Just go. We're interference. I think society in*

*general wants... would probably regard social work as being the profession or the part of society that should stop children dying in horrible situations at the hands of their carers. I think so. I think probably, I don't know if there's any greater expectation on social work than that.'* The language and practices of the child protection paradigm is identified by Lonne et al (2009) where there is 'child protection' rather than 'child welfare' and 'child at risk' rather than 'family in need'.

P18 encapsulates what appears to be a double bind. The perceived expectation to provide for the full and complete protection of children risked making their role and purpose narrow and unachievable. The expectation that children and family social work must 'protect' children (Littlechild, 2008) rendered their broader remit of support and prevention invisible or 'distorted' (Ayre, 2001:887). It is neither practicable nor ethical to 'do' social work to people. Nor is it practicable or ethical to do it out of plain sight. However, that is how the social workers felt themselves positioned – to rescue children but to do so in such a way that does not result in State interference in family life.

P6 gives voice to the tensions and difficulties in managing the boundary of public and private domains: *'The public wants us to keep children safe, but they don't want us to interfere in their family lives, even if it's needed in their family lives. Because we upset people, we say this has happened to this child, x, y and z, and we upset all parts of society. We don't just upset one part; we upset all parts, because we go into families who don't want us and when things go wrong, we upset the people who read the broad sheets'*.

### 5.10 Social work needed but not wanted

Being Needed but Not Wanted resonated with a number of the participants. While working with ambiguity and uncertainty, practitioners are tasked with assessing a broad spectrum of need and harm in children and young people. They are positioned as core to the child protection process, but at the same time on the periphery, dependent on the inter-professional other to work with and understand the inherent indeterminacy of the provisions of the Children Act 1989. Children and family social workers operate at the intersection of the State and family life In the Borderlands of Practice. They can and do impose, often unwanted, State intervention. On other occasions they act as a bulwark between the State and the family, resisting what they might consider to be over zealous or unnecessary levels of involvement. P1 explains the role of the practitioner in working with people: *'who are often in poor housing, often in well appalling housing with poverty, with powerlessness, with oppression, with poor mental health, addiction of one sort or another to legal or illegal substances'*.

Their presence may not be wanted and often resisted in what can be complex, transitory, and often 'hidden' situations (Pithouse, 1998, Ferguson, 2010 and Winter and Cree, 2016). Here P4 talks of working with cultural difference where there are safeguarding concerns: *'...And then you've got people who are so vulnerable because they come from warzones, basically, and people who are being exploited, and young girls that are being exploited....and it's acceptable for a 15-year-old to already know who she's going to marry, and we've got children who are pregnant with children, who are not going into school, but they can't see what we're going on*

*about. They can't see our concerns'. P1 and P4 (above) give some sense of the fast changing and complex social world, rife with problems and inequalities, with which social workers engage.*

### **5.11 Not feeling supported - feeling exposed**

Littlechild's (2008) reflections of 'Impossible tasks from Impossible Goals' rang true with the participants. There was an understanding among the participants that they cannot fulfil the expectations placed upon them: the complete protection of children and young people. Media and political expectation undermined them on the 'doorsteps' of people who may already be fearful and resistant. P3: *'Yeah, I think without a doubt. Because I remember after the Baby P one, I'd gone into a house and that's all that was thrown at me. Because, I mean, obviously they were reluctant to let me in. I think it was to do with gun crime or something like that. They were like, "what are you fucking doing on our doorstep, we're not going to assault our kids like fucking Baby P," and all that palaver.'*

P5 shared this view: *'I think sacking people, social workers who've been sacked, who've been made scapegoats or whatever, if I thought... I actually do think that could happen to me. It could happen to me tomorrow. It could happen to me next week. Sometimes my head is that full with things I have to do, I forget what I have to do... So, you've got a difficult job to do, ... always a lot of the time a confrontation, and then if you've got... 1) they don't want you there, 2) you're an insult to them, and 3) media coverage encourages them to think badly of you. People are influenced by that'.*



### 5.12 Safeguarding - a singular/ lonely activity.

The task of safeguarding was felt by the participants not to be a shared inter-agency and inter-professional undertaking. Either through lack of understanding regarding roles and responsibilities, or through a motivation to pass responsibilities on, there was a feeling among the participants that the bulk of the work and the weight of responsibility rested with them. Ayre and Preston-Shoot (2010), comment on the increasing emphasis on increasing not only public but professional anxieties in relation to risk. P19 expressed some frustration about the reluctance of allied agencies to share the risk and the responsibility: *'... once it gets to social care, they just back right off. If there's a social worker involved - everything's down to the social worker. I always, in meetings, core group meetings or whatever, I'll... because it's difficult to chair a meeting and take minutes, so sometimes I'll say to another professional, will you take... and it's like, but this is a social care meeting... Loads of people will just be, well no. And it comes down to the basics of that'.*

This view was shared and supported by P17: *'They want you to do what they're asking. We all do that a bit, but I think there is an element sometimes that they just want you to do what you're asking them to do, and if you don't do that then there's frustration because you're not... and sometimes that's just take it off me. Whatever it is, just take it off me, and it's yours not mine. ...There're frustrations then. I think there is an expectation, I am certain, in my line of work particularly with older children, there's an expectation from the police that we will just stop an adolescent offending by, if we can, placing him out of that police area. That seems to be the idea. To bring something to an end'.*

The ability to forge and maintain relationships with allied agencies and achieve partnership working was viewed as part of the fabric of Children's Services (Crawford, 2012). But there was a feeling that forging and maintaining partnership working was disrupted by what were seen to be uninformed and unhelpful expectations of children and family social work. The projection onto social work of powers not possessed was a strong and often repeated theme. Unrealistic expectations, alongside thresholds to gain access to, and move between, services and a perceived failure to acknowledge the 'swampy lowlands' of practice (Schon, 1983:42) could make inter-professional relations problematic. Here, Lipsky's (2008, 2010) accounts of the complexity of policy making and the policy maker echoes and counters the diminishing and silencing effects of managerialism (Webb 2006, Parton 2014). It is notable here that professional disputes can pivot on the boundaries of s17 and s47, in essence borderland and territorial disputes. P5 expressed concern and frustration regarding misunderstandings relating to definitions of significant harm: *'And I think that for me, what the other agencies don't get is the threshold for safeguarding, I call it child protection but safeguarding. They don't get thresholds, they don't get what is significant harm, and they don't get what is a section 17. The problem that I have every day of my working life is other agencies wanting children to be on child protection plans ....'*

P4 and P19 reflect professional frustrations around common misunderstandings concerning the reach and extent of social work power. P4: *'And they look to the social work world to wave a magic wand and be able to work wonders and to stick all children on child protection plans'*. P19 also used the magic wand analogy as a

source of frustration at the level of misunderstanding and misinformation: *'I think they think we've got more power than we have, as social workers, I think when you talk to teachers they think we've got this wonderful power that we can just go in with this magic wand and we're going to fix these families straight away'*. The social workers know they work with bounded power and strongly refute the notion of 'controllability' (Hood, 2012:36).

### **5.13 Powerful but without power**

Before the more interventionist measures to protect children and young people can take place, it is required that there is evidence of significant harm. When it is not legally feasible for social workers to do what is being asked of them, the failure to do so can manifest as a critique of the profession. This was clearly expressed by P19: *'We need that evidence. And we can't... sometimes professionals will be saying, that child shouldn't be in there, this and that's going on, and we say well, we don't... we need to go to court for the authority ... But we don't have that authority, and I think because of the criticism we have maybe that's a lack of confidence that we have, that we're saying well no, we can't, there's no respect for the social workers'*.

P17 questioned whether misunderstandings in relation to how much power a social worker holds might be as a result of their professional difference. *'I think quite often other agencies don't know where social workers sit in terms of that power, because they don't always look like a lot of the other professionals...for example in a proper strategy meeting, including a variety of agencies, in terms of power the social*

*workers will often be the least senior person there but hold an awful lot of the influence and power, so they're quite interesting little groups to watch at times'.*

Feeling powerful, but without power seemed to be a significant feature for the social workers. They felt they were almost inevitably destined to disappoint or be overlooked knowing their power is often latent rather than actual. The work of Reder and Duncan (2003) provides some useful reflections regarding the pressures the safeguarding context can place not only on judgement making but also on the distorting effect which can be brought to bear on inter-professional relationships.

#### **5.14 Social work – diffuse and messy**

The feeling that they will disappoint and be overlooked was, in part, because the participants felt that social work is diffuse and messy. The practitioner is concerned with judging the nature of State intervention; they are a key arbiter between the State and family life. P2 provides a useful example: *'I think we had one last week, a child of about 5 said, "my mum pulled my arm and dragged me onto the ground because I was naughty," but we get these comments and that's it – it's a bubble that's presented to you.'* She cites another example in relation to receiving information from a school where the child has said: *"My dad said he'll kill me when I get home" – now I think we have become much more nervous about managing risk, because schools say "well, they've said that dad's going to kill them."*

There then follows a balancing act in terms of responding to but not over managing the situation where the Social Workers asks for more information from the school:

*'But have you unpicked that and asked a bit more about it? Have you sort of said to the child, "what makes you worried about that?" And then there's sometimes a bit of an exchange and then we have to weigh up whether or not we go out and see this child and speak about a comment that they've made. But sometimes, if it's taken out of context...'*

Here, the social worker is involved in a carefully orchestrated process of positive risk taking. The practitioner decides, on the premise of the incomplete picture that has been shared, not to intervene. *'But the other side of the coin is that you can't over-manage situations, and there'd be no basis to intervene. And you can imagine the sort of problems if you began to try and investigate something that has not been identified. So those are difficulties'*. This very typical scenario calls on P2 to draw on her own solution and is an example of the 'street level bureaucrat' (1980, 2010) at work. In order for the safeguarding system not to grind to a halt by fearful indecision, P2 makes a decision using incomplete information and her subjective judgement (Gamrill and Shlonsky, 2000).

There is no clear red line dividing s17 and s47 yet it can be pivotal in terms of the experience for the family. Social work involvement in family life is seen as significant and not to be undertaken lightly. Both P2 above and P4 below look for the evidence of harm or need before proceeding, with both of the participants 'sifting and sorting' the information being shared with them. There are often no clear answers, with practice, out of necessity, being not black and white but grey.

The need to work in partnership with families, where possible, defining a child in need and not in need of protection: where *‘...I struggle when a professional will say, “no, no, no, no, this is definitely a 47”. I’ll say, “no it really isn’t...evidence the abuse to me”. And then something might have happened and I’ll say, “but that was a one-off, so let’s look at that from a probability – what is the likelihood of that happening again?”’* Here the participant felt that confidence in her role and responsibilities were key. *‘One thing I do do – and I think this is simply based on experience and confidence – I will often say, “Well, what would you do differently if it was on a child protection plan?”’*

### **5.15 Managers of Uncomfortable Truths**

The participants felt that much of what they do goes unseen and is undervalued because they are Managers of Uncomfortable Truths. There was an expressed feeling among the participants that much of what they do goes unrecognised and misunderstood until a child death hits the headlines and captures political and public attention (Cooper, 2014). It is not a job that garners favour or understanding (BASW, 2103). Matters only arrive in public view when things go wrong. P11’s articulation of this was both powerful and poignant: *‘Probably devalued in one way, because they [the public] want you but they don’t want you. You know? “We know you’re needed but we don’t want it in us face. We’ve got all these abused children and all these bad things are happening in our society, but if you’re going to do it do it quietly, over there”’*. There was a strongly expressed feeling that social workers work with a truth not acknowledged: P1 *‘People kill their children and abuse them in terrible,*

*terrible ways and that's a truth and I don't believe society wants to acknowledge that truth'.*

The truth not acknowledged was twofold: that some parents and carers can seriously harm or even kill their children, and that it is impossible to eradicate risk to children completely. P2 gives this feeling expression: *'Because you can implement all the safeguarding procedures in the world, and there will be a number of child deaths in this country, and in every country. Because there will be a situation where a parent loses their temper and injures a child, and that's something that no amount of legislation can protect every child'.*

The same participant spoke of practising daily with uncomfortable truths: *'Because there's nothing... in our society, there's nothing worse than the abuse of an innocent child, to the vast majority of people who are good people. And the thought of that makes people recoil; it does make you recoil in horror. It is the utmost sin, to hurt an innocent baby, to hurt a child. So you are dealing with a taboo subject. You really are. It's taboo, and people want someone to stop it. So if you're the closest thing to a responsible adult to prevent that, you are the target. ....And that cannot go without blame'.*

## **5.16 Conclusion**

The narratives explored here provide some insights into the complex processes and emotional dynamics which characterise children and family social work. Their narrative accounts show their Sense Making while working In the Borderlands to be layered and multifaceted and begin to provide some insights into how and where

their professional identity emerges. I argue here that it emerges from how they construct their day-to-day practices working alongside agencies while negotiating the expectations and certainties of new management practices and knowing they may well find themselves exposed to failure and blame. The Big Story of certainty provide a misleading and incomplete picture of the purposes and practices of children and family social work. The Little Stories in relation to how children and family social workers perceive and articulate their role can be found in their narratives. While working with contested notions of need and risk they also reveal themselves, ultimately, to be people working with people; appearing to frame their motivations using 'explanatory accountability' (Kline and Preston-Shoot, 2012) making and defending complex judgements while mindful of their legal powers. As such they can be seen to exercise a high level of professional autonomy and discretion far removed from exhortations of linear policy makers. Policy and legislation can be seen to inform (and 'enable') but not direct or prescribe practice. Much of what the practitioners do, despite NPM's drive for greater accountability through copious recording and documentation, is not in the public view or indeed public domain. They practise in between legislative provision and in between the public and private.

I argue that locating children and family social work In the Borderlands, often working out of public view at the intersection of the private and the public, provides a space where practice narratives are constructed and, more significantly, an intervention point where narratives might be observed and therefore studied. There is little straightforwardness in the reality of Working Together. Inter-professional relations



can be seen to be messy, and information sharing influenced by a range of inter-personal, social and organisational factors. It is clear that the perennial difficulties of timely and proportionate information sharing will not easily be solved but an issue that, as the next Chapter shows, requires active organisation. The next Chapter of this thesis provides insights into children and family social workers as active Managers of Difference who Talk Back to Blame.

## **Chapter 6 – Managers of Difference while Talking Back to Blame**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I construct children and family social workers as Managers of Difference and Talking Back to Blame (how they do what they do). Through these two windows I will tell the Little Stories shared by the interviewees to illustrate the concepts derived from the analysis carried out in Chapter Four, above. Each of the concepts is encapsulated by a side-heading taken from the construction of the related window as set out in Chapter Four, above. In the previous Chapter I discussed what children and family social workers do and where they do it: practising as Sense Makers, often out of sight, In the Borderlands of the private and public domain. Telling their stories from practice, the practitioners spoke with confidence, clearly expressing a strong sense of professional pride while perceiving themselves as lynch pins of the safeguarding and inter-professional practice. Eschewing notions of certainty, the practitioners were attentive to forming and maintaining 'relationships' with families. In their roles as 'sense makers' and managers of 'uncomfortable truths', they spoke of relationship-based, value-laden practices. At the same time, they talked with an understanding of the complex and highly individual world inhabited by the child and their family. In this chapter I explore two further windows into practice of children and family social workers and explore how they manage to do what they do while working as the key member of what should be a collaborative endeavour. In this chapter I construct the children and family social workers as Managers of Difference. They can be heard telling Little Stories of their frustration in relation to what should be the collaborative endeavour of protecting children. Their

stories here speak to a robust sense of the professional self. They refuse to carry the unreasonable expectation that they can be the sole protectors of children. In this they Talk Back to Blame.

The extent to which children and family social workers Manage Difference is, I suggest here, an underestimated part of the children and social worker's professional task. The degree of collaboration is variable but, in relation to the protection of children, the responsibility and accountability carried by the children and family social worker is not. In order to do the job they are asked to do, they must be an effective Manager of Difference. Here is a clear expectation in the Working Together guidance (DfE, 2008): 'The local authority and its social workers have specific roles and responsibilities to lead the statutory assessment of children in need (section 17, Children Act 1989) and to lead child protection enquiries (section 47, Children Act 1989)'.

In relation to Early Help assessments there is an equally clear expectation that the lead practitioner can be a 'GP, family support worker, school nurse, teacher, health visitor and/or special educational needs co-ordinator'. This outwardly clear demarcation between need and harm and respective roles and responsibilities is part of the Big Stories. 'Lead' does not reflect the negotiation and re-negotiation involved in actively managing and driving the inter-professional safeguarding of children. The demarcation of roles and responsibilities suggests that each professional knows what to do. It suggests an 'expert system, with its penchant for stability, predictability and control' (Hood. 2014:36). The stories from the children and family social workers suggest inter-professional working is the antithesis of an 'expert system'. It

is shown here to be a contested and fraught activity in need of constant attention and repair.

## **6.2 Managers of Difference**

There are a number of significant players involved in the safeguarding and protection of children. As a result, disputes, representational and territorial, are pervasive. In examining inter-professional relationships I have found the theoretical construct suggested by Bourdieu, of field as a social space, useful for exploring the centrality of social relations. I have found social relations to be contingent and fluid in character, with each key player contributing to the construction of the safeguarding field by trying to impose on it their view of the world or their view of their position in the world. The social workers who contributed to this study spoke of disagreements and clashes with allied agencies in naming 'harm' and 'need'. Successful naming reproduced their legitimate vision of safeguarding practices. In doing so they believed themselves to be central in managing professional difference and driving the working together imperative. Inter-professional practice does not occur in a vacuum. Nor does it occur without active and willing involvement from all concerned. Participants expressed resentment regarding the lack of ownership of safeguarding children and young people as a collective and inter-professional function. This perceived 'absence' results in children and family social workers being required to prompt, steer and co-ordinate the engagement of others.

## **6.3 Lack of ownership from others**

A recurrent theme was lack of ownership from others - it's not ours, it's yours. Perceived professional misunderstandings and misperceptions regarding the nature of roles and responsibilities within the safeguarding process, particularly the extent of professional powers and boundaries of children and family social work, impacted on the inter-professional relationship. The policy and legislative imperative for the child and family social worker to lead the inter-professional endeavour is understood to be a key part of the social worker's job. However, there was a feeling that their role as key worker was given broad interpretation and resulted in an inequitable onus of responsibility being placed on the children and family social worker, thus giving other agencies permission to relinquish responsibility. An experienced practitioner, P12, expressed a view that not much had changed over two or three decades: *'I would say we're still facing some of the same frustrations that would be faced 20, 30 years ago in terms of partner agencies such as a school not phoning something in, or phoning something in at 4 o'clock on a Friday, and we're the ones that have to pick it up. I was in a [Child in Need] meeting yesterday, I could have been in it 20 years ago, the same arguments still about who should take it...'* The collaborative ambition of Working Together policy drivers should not be mistaken for collaborative commitment or activity. Or, as Dugmore (2013:335), in his critique of Working Together 2013 queries, is it appropriate to have: 'Straightforward guidance for a complex activity?' Working Together, in its many guises, stands an example of a strand of the Big Stories – one of many and rational and neutral account of what social workers and allied agencies should do. P12 shares her account of a messy and contested meeting where it appears that the practitioners present constructed alternative Little Stories (Smith, 2010).

P2 believed that allied agency players fail to *'have as good a grasp as they should do'*. It was not unusual for the act of referral to signal a professional withdrawal: *'I think that there's still far too many of them wanting to make a referral, for example of a safeguarding nature, and then abdicate quite a lot of the responsibility.'*

There was some slight variation as to reason for this perceived lack of ownership of what should be, at least in policy terms, a collective effort. It was seen as a mix of lack of understanding (P2 above) and intentional abdication, P17: *'The most cynical answer to that is they want you to do what they're asking. We all do that a bit, but I think there is an element sometimes that they just want you to do what they're asking them to do, and if you don't do that then there's frustration because you're not... and sometimes that's "just take it off me". Whatever it is, "just take it off me, and it's yours not mine"'*.

Both of these versions have their own truth and both speak to boundary and role confusion. Disputes over boundaries and case responsibility are not reflected in the Yanow's (1996) 'silences in discourses' or Smith's (2005) myth of markets, detached from economic essentialism and inserted into social and welfare provision. In addition, there were different perspectives regarding what should happen to a case. P3 describes a very typical situation which could result in professional disagreement and tension: *'I think there can be difficulties, in that we believe something should happen and other agencies don't, particularly when we want to shut things or we want to step things down to family support'*.

Told in an easy vernacular these representational and territorial disputes are commonplace. They reveal the safeguarding field to be a space of significant symbolic struggles, where professional power is exerted and battles joined over the case ownership and allocation of increasingly scarce resources. It is a site constituted by specific values given to cases (need or harm) and the ability of key agents to have the professional assets to deploy in the assessment and management of risk. Relations, and differential power, within fields are central to Bourdieu's analysis. Utilising it here, I argue here that each of the key actors practising on the field of safeguarding is premised on different understandings regarding the relationship between individual practice, knowing and understanding the safeguarding context, and the subsequent power relations at play.

#### **6.4 Managing the inter-professional relationship – it doesn't occur naturally.**

The professional 'marking' of territory within the safeguarding fields can be confusing and indistinct even for those who inhabit the space more routinely. While attending a Child in Need Meeting, P4 calls for an improved level of collegiality. P4 is clear that sitting in the same room is not the same as working together: *'...I think from my view if professionals are in a child protection conference and they're all sat round the table, that alone isn't working together....it's about what we do when we leave that room and how committed and how accountable we are for our part and our role that we put into that'.*

It may, of course be that not everyone 'sat round the table' feels emotionally or practically equipped to be accountable or play the part that the policy guidance states they should. Laming (2009) has observed that practitioners are routinely

asked to do work for which they are insufficiently experienced. Preston-Shoot and Kline (2012:17) refer to 'hidden curriculum' identified in medical and health care research where staff feel unable to meet organisational expectations. Preston-Shoot (2012), notes that much less emphasis has been placed on exploring the organisational environment in the social professions. He reframes the 'hidden' into 'silent curriculum' believing it to have a potentially useful application to social work.

There is little evidence of policy or legal mandates having their intended effect by virtue of their existence alone. As argued in Chapter 1, policy is a social construction, produced to the needs of the moment. Haraway, (1988) is more strident in her critique and questions how responsible 'unlocatable' normative knowledge claims are when it is not possible to call them into account. I would argue that in their Little Stories practitioners feel both locatable and responsible. Significantly, inter-professional relationships appear to be a constantly negotiated process with lines of accountability and responsibility being drawn and re-drawn around policy developments by each of the key players. The social workers who contributed to this study lay claim to being both drivers and shapers of inter-professional activity. There is no ready template for the inter-professional process (Horwarth and Morrison, 2007). Instead, it is relationship dependent. P10 describes working inter-professionally as a highly relational and individualised experience: *'A lot of it comes down to your own abilities to work with professionals, because quite often you can hear people's frustrations, "so-and-so this" or you know. I think it's about using your social work value base and understanding everybody's under*



*pressures, and let's work positively for the child and that means all the systems and people at all levels having accountability'.*

But a dominant theme of general inequity of responsibility and accountability resonated among the participants. P11 felt that *'it's a feeling of it's all on your head. When actually it shouldn't be, it's everybody's game, everybody has a part to play'*. P18 echoed this but in stronger terms. They felt the level of responsibility was rendering the job impossible: *'It can't all be, "oh the social worker needs to do this, this and this". Often you'll see child protection plans and it's a list of what the social worker needs to do, and what the parents need to do. ... But I do think it is the social worker who holds that group... so if you're thinking about core groups, I think the social worker has, it's not... there's a good reason why social workers are key workers, because I think it's about bringing other agencies together'*.

Misunderstandings, deliberate or unintentional, between social work and partner agencies seemed to be a constant feature of interactions and exchanges (White and Featherstone, 2005 and Dickens, 2008). Here, P3 expresses frustration in relation to a teacher's understanding of a child protection plan: *'It depends what the nature of the call is. If they leave a message to say, "such-and-such never went to school today", then I'm not going to be phoning up and saying, "oh my god, why is that?" If he hasn't gone to school, go out and see why he hasn't gone to school. They've got learning mentors and all kinds of people in schools. There's only one of us, do you know what I mean?'* P20 echoed this view suggesting that the more the work was shared, the less intrusive and less worrisome for the family, even within the context of both s17 and s47 assessments: *'But I think also with a child in need assessment,*

*you need to... social work assessments need to be informed by having sight of those aspects of a child's life and experience. But I don't think other professionals are prepared to do that, and health visitors will sometimes argue that that isn't their role, and that really frustrates us, that, I think, it would be much easier for a parent to accept a health visitor asking to see a bedroom than it would be to have a social worker doing it. Health visitors are perfectly well placed to make an assessment about whether a bedroom is appropriate for a child, as are social workers, but I think health visitors will insist that that's not part of their role, and maybe it isn't part of their role, but...'*

This echoes Haraway's (1988) idea of situated knowledge and her call to reassess how knowledge is made and how power and knowledge claims are constructed. In these territorial disputes there are multiple truths and multiple conversations taking place. It may be that the health visitor is perfectly well placed but does he/she feel able? Normative and prescriptive policy guidance only tells part of the safeguarding and inter-professional story. I argue that the health visitor may have felt professionally vulnerable and the focus on complete risk management may have resulted in the unintended consequence (Macdonald and Macdonald, 2010) undermining safeguarding as a collective task and distorting professional behaviour.

## **6.5 They don't get it – there are inherent differences.**

Much of the role confusion and relationship tension stemmed from fundamental misunderstandings. Differences revolving around different interpretations of thresholds were a recurrent theme. The stories from the social workers resonated

with Platt and Turney's (2013) analysis of making threshold decisions. They argue for a 'naturalistic', sense-making response to thresholds rather than what they describe as the more pervasive 'limiting' 'techno-rational' approach. The essential nature of thresholds, and their impact on definitions of need and harm accentuated professional difference. Inter-professional relations were framed as 'us' and 'them'. P4 believed that there exists a fundamental misunderstanding: *'So I think a lot of the time people don't get what we do. I think that is the problem you've got'*. This, P17 felt was the result of lack of meaningful attempts to understand the roles and responsibilities of social work: *'That's one of the things I get most frustrated by. I expect agencies to be realistic. They can't say we haven't got any thought processes in that, so you can't for example have a school thinking "the slightest thing I'm just going to refer to social services to be safe"'*.

Other agencies perceiving Children's Services as a holder of 'things miscellaneous' was unhelpful: P17 *'Well that might make you feel a bit better but actually that's not going to work, and you have to engage a bit more, and actually sieve out some of the stuff that doesn't need to go to social services, and some that do'*.

Multi-agency child protection training made less of a positive difference than hoped in terms of increasing shared understandings of safeguarding processes and respective inter-professional roles and responsibilities. However, there remained frustrations and for, P15, surprises: *'I mean, I'm part of [redacted 22:18] safeguarding board. I deliver training on what the role is of a social worker, and it always comes up in training, they're always shocked at what powers we don't have. Really, still to this day, which shocks me, that they still think that we can remove*

*children like that, at the drop of the hat, that I could walk in somebody's house...Teachers, health professionals, health visitors...'*

Classificatory processes, in relation to s17 and s47, were crucial here as the implications for resources, practice and outcomes for children and families are weighty.

The role of the Safeguarding specialist in schools had potential for greater change and dialogue but P17 questioned whether it had made any significant difference: *Schools still do have designated safeguarding teachers and children in care teachers, often the same teacher now, different to how it used to be. They should make that mean something, within the context of... so that person should be knowledgeable and should interact with social work teams and so on'.*

Inter-professional working was felt to be a work in progress, with responsibilities on both sides to learn more and criticise less: *'We've got responsibilities for that, to discuss properly and not just raise our eyes and sort of go, "oh can you believe this?" I think I expect them to have some awareness of the limitations of all agencies, because they'll have their own limitations, and they'll talk about them, and it's silly to start thinking that other agencies don't have them. So when they're giving us huge grief for not going into care proceedings on a 17- and 9-month year old, well just learn a bit more'.*

While the participants were not co-located, as in the study of White and Featherstone (2005), there was a strong sense that they needed to be active Managers of Difference when meeting the challenges, variously opaque, demanding and unrealistic, of the inter-agency and inter-professional context. Children and

family social work as an essentially compassionate and relational activity (Broadhurst et al 2010a and 2010b, White et al 2010) occurred as a repeated motif in the data.

## **6.6 Damned if they do and damned if they don't**

The stories from the social workers described an inter-professional landscape that was almost impossible for the allied agencies to understand or navigate. The health visitor, the teacher and the police officer could stand to be damned if they do and damned if they don't. The rules of the game, from an outsider's perspective, are difficult to comprehend, with the potential for serious error. There is an absence of the universal truths so favoured by managerialism. Agencies ringing and/or not ringing with information can be criticised in equal measure. P15: *'Well, of course, it's not okay, why are they ringing me with that? So it's almost like, other agencies, ring and share your concerns, but don't share silly ones, because we get irritated with you. So, it's almost like, social workers are damned if they do and damned if they don't, other agencies are a bit damned if they do and damned if they don't'.*

I suggest, not knowing and not being able to manage risk are synonymous and seen as a professional deficit. To the children and family social workers seeing, assessing and engaging with risk is routine and unremarkable aspect of their lives but it 'does not necessarily appear to be so to the observer' (Crawshaw and Bunton, 2009:275).

There was an expectation that Child Protection plans surrounding children should be understood and shared by all concerned. P4: *'It's like silly things: I had a school*

*ring me the other day; they know the mum's not allowed unsupervised contact, and then they ring and say, "Can Mum go on the school trip, but she's not going to be supervised?" And I think, "Why are you even wasting your time ringing me, when you know it's supervised contact?" So unless you're supervising it, then no, she can't go. Things like that'.*

There was, at the same time, beneath the overt frustrations and tensions, an understanding that professional difference is a factor that can impinge on the inter-professional relationship and difficulties emerge for a number of different reasons: P5 and P13 felt professional differences showed themselves in a number of ways (Darlington and Feeney, 2008).

### **6.7 Well? What are you going to do about it?**

The example shared from P5 (below) is a mix of agreement and conflict resulting from not understanding the degree of power invested in, and the information held or known by (Stanley and Humphreys, 2014) the social worker: 'Well? What are you going to do about it?' spoke to some of the frustrations in relation to professional misunderstandings. P5: *'I think schools get frustrated with the lack of progress, and actually have heard so many times over the years, "well what are you going to do about it?" So it creates an atmosphere – and I know this is common amongst social workers – where we feel that it's multi-agency when you're planning something, but social work centred when you're doing something'.* She added the inherent difficulty of being censured: by *'... other professionals, and what seems to be constant*

*criticism, because there is always something they think we haven't done. Even when we can't do it.'*

The ability to accept work or not was not just one of professional delineation and fixed notions of responsibility but one of resources. P13 understood the impetus to refer work '*...I have that to a point because they see things differently to how we see them, working in a school is completely different to what we're doing, and I see it from all their perspectives really, and I understand why they do what they do about making referrals, about wanting to keep social workers... I understand all of that, but we just haven't got the capacity*'.

## **6.8 Talking Back to Blame**

Their management, as they see it, of the complexities of information sharing and inter-professional relationships comprises a number of contending processes (Richardson and Asthana, 2006). On one hand, the practitioners are perceived as core to safeguarding. On the other hand, they are on the periphery, wholly dependent on the practices and timeliness of others. They cannot safeguard and protect children alone. Their positioning on the field necessitated them Talking Back to Blame as a way of managing this duality. They are reliant on others to share, not just information in a timely way, but some of the responsibility and even some of the blame. The ability to navigate and manage the inter-professional landscape added to their sense of professional capital and the resilience of their professional self-esteem. There were strongly expressed views that while policy expectation and public opinion position them as central to the complete protection of children, this

raised unachievable and damaging expectations (Munro, 2004a and Reder and Duncan, 2004a). While there may be some comfort and reassurance in what NPM can be seen to offer, child deaths can be solved, it is a myth. But a successful and diverting myth and, Yanow (1996) argues, it expresses a reality for those who subscribe. The social workers in this study are non-subscribers and they Talk back to Blame.

A negative public perception of social work played out during home visits. P16 reflected on her experience of working with service user dissatisfaction during home visits and its potential impact on the integrity and focus of the assessments in hand: *'I don't think it impacts on the way I work, but I think it impacts on families, because... I get it all the time, the media only portray us in one view, incompetent, neglectful, not doing our jobs properly, and when you go on visits you get a lot, you get, "oh, they're concerned that [unclear – 29:40]" and yet you're not recognising children... they're talking about children that have died or whatever distraction technique they want to use, and start talking about how incompetent we are.'*

P5 felt that such negative views were ingrained: *'If you're perceived as negative or incompetent from people at the top, it has a ripple effect, but when you consider how many times social workers over the years, certainly over the last 30 years, have been portrayed as incompetent, it's ingrained in society...'*

## **6.9 We're good at what we do**



The social workers, knowing that the job entails far more than ‘just’ removing children, were confident in expressing the expertise it can take to maintain a child at home while being able and prepared to manage the ensuing risk. The participants were keen to work with families, to connect with the lived experience of the child about whom there was concern. They were resistant to reactive and ideological responses where the ‘answer’ lies in the removal or ‘rescue’ of children (Featherstone et al, 2014). The social workers know that removal of children, itself, carries risk and is rarely a panacea. P7: *‘I think I do a really good job, professional self-esteem, 8 out of 10, because I do believe in our team, we do a really good job, the Children in Care team do, and as a professional, and especially after that court, that [TV documentary reporting social work], it kind of really bumped us all up because we got some really good feedback from lots of different professionals and different agencies, that yeah, you’re doing a good job, you’re doing... so it makes you feel worthwhile’*. P3 was equally positive: *‘I like the job, and I like doing what we do. Sometimes we do things that are not nice, but there are some good things out there’*.

Having a belief and sense of purpose in the professional role appeared to be fuelled and sustained internally from within the profession. External affirmation was not sought. P4, felt despite perceived unpopularity, ‘proud’ to be a children and family social worker: *‘I’m not popular. ... But for me nobody tells me this, I never hear it from anybody, but when I go home I really feel like I’ve done a good job that day.’* Her professional esteem came from a belief that she had: *‘...made a difference at some point in that day, I know I have. Every time I get in my car and go home*

*because nobody sees the good stuff that we do. Nobody ever goes on the news and reports on the really good work we do. And I think we feed into that, as social workers, sometimes'.*

P18 shared this positive sense of professional self but acknowledged it could be fragile and fluid: *'In my head if I'm sitting here thinking I'd say I'm about a 10. When I'm in practice, when I'm actually doing it, in crisis, meeting myself coming backwards, I'd probably say I'm right in the middle of - a 5. Once I'm running with it, I feel confident that I know what I'm doing.'*

Positive professional identity also came from clarity of the professional task and sense of purpose regarding the centrality of social work and its ability to effect change in the lives of children. P4 felt that the belief in the ability to make positive change in a child's life helped her do the job. Without that sense of purpose, she questioned whether she could do the job: *'For me, with the ethos around that of you're going to hopefully change a child's life for the better. It sounds quite big I know, but I do believe in what I do, else I couldn't do it, because the job's too hard'.*

P7 focusses on prevention: *'Because I do think we do do good. And we do. I have had some families that have been on child protection plans, they're no longer on child protection plans, and I've bumped into them in the street, they're doing great'.*

This family could have been anchored to a child protection plan but instead hope and support have been offered showing the possibilities of operating beyond the

'shackles of individualistic and mechanistic ways of working' (Featherstone, et al 2014:35). She also recounts working with a family where there was neglect, but positive change was achieved: *'Well, emotional or what? That was fantastic. Because at the time, it was really, really rough. Mum was using cannabis, the little girl was being neglected, she'd got no self-esteem, she'd got a little social circle, you know? And to hear that. And we probably hadn't really done much, but we helped to empower that mum to bring the best out of her daughter. So that was really good, I liked that'*. Or working to remove children where concerns and presenting risks could no longer be managed at home. P4 articulates a clear sense of professional purpose: *'If I get to the point where I feel like I've got the evidence, so it's not me it's the judge, if we get into court and we've got the evidence to remove children, I have no problems in that being the outcome for children, and living at home isn't always the best thing for children. I think that's a reality of social work. I have no problems in saying, "okay, let's get into the court arena", because these parents cannot keep their children safe'*.

#### **6.10 The Power of the Social Work Team**

Teams, but not managers, were seen as an invaluable source of mutual support in actively countering negativity and misunderstandings in relation to the role and purpose of social work. The power of the social work team is seen as an important internal source of positivity in serving to support and maintain morale and professional self-worth. The social workers expressed a conscious and robust claim of professional self-esteem and professional self-belief seemingly made in the face of negativity and unpopularity. The feelings of self-worth emanated from and were

sustained by social work teams. P17: *'I think what mitigates it to some extent is, and it's the strength of social work, when you get a good team together, a team that functions well together, and the mutual support they give each other within that, it makes up for all the downsides, a really positive experience. I think, a social work team. I think we've underplayed it over the years, in terms of how important it is, in terms of fending some of that stuff off'.*

The existence of mutual support from other team members was an important aspect of day-to-day practice in terms of understanding the demands of the job but also in deriving a sense of professional identity: P14 expressed a view that clarity of purpose was key to robust professional identity: *'I think that comes from a personal quality rather than an organisational one. I know a lot of the social workers I work with have got good, strong characters. They understand the role, we know why we do the job and we know what we want to achieve, and I think that drives us and gives us our identity, what we are as social workers. Peer support is fundamental in the safeguarding team. It lacks in the management so you do need your peers'.*

As indicated above, support, understanding and interests in the day-to-day machinations of practice, were not always evident from managers. P7 expressed disappointment in the apparent lack of interest: *'Yeah. And that really disappoints me. And the lack of insight as well, and wanting to know more about your families, and being interested. You know, actually putting their hands away from the keyboard and going, "tell me the story". "Where's that gone?" Where our cases feel like they're being an inconvenience to our managers'.* The managerialist concern for monitoring,

accountability and reporting seems, here, to miss the practice story (Bevan and Hood, 2006 and White et al, 2010).

### **6.11 Beyond our capacity**

The participants, while aware of their strengths, were also aware of their inherent limitations. The wholesale protection of children was judged as beyond the one public service, social work. There was a sense from the participants that mistake making in social work was minimised. However, mistakes were contingent and, sadly, inevitable. Partly, the limitations of their role were a response to the growing demands of what they believed to be not just excessive, but emotional and complex, caseloads (Ferguson, 2017). This had an adverse impact on their ability to always practise safely and well. P3 described case load size as a significant challenge: *'I think people are so busy, and that's why they miss things. And I think a lot of it, that's why things are not recorded as well, because people are just so busy'*.

P4 cited managerialism and a target driven culture: *'– it's all about targets, it's all about performance, it's all about what cases we can close down, all about what cases we're escalating. You can never, ever, ever keep children safe if you're going to run it like a business, it will not work. It completely goes against the ethos of social work. And until we can get our head back around that again, because that's the way it's going, it isn't a business, we safeguard children, you can't run us like a bank, you can't run us like the NHS, we can't be talking about performance targets, because it isn't going to work.'*

What made the job feel more difficult was a mix of unrealistic expectations and reduced autonomy: *'...there's always going to be children who are dying, who are*

*known to all agencies, which I don't want to say but it's the truth, we're always going to have that, but for goodness sake give us the opportunity to be able to manage it, make us accountable for what we do. Don't make us accountable after the event, where social workers are then scapegoated because the visits aren't done and things aren't written up. No good doing that'.* Here, Crossa (2005) and her counterposing of 'Big Stories and Little Stories' are important for the children and family social workers. They recognise the expectations placed upon them but refute them and share stories from their practice which speak to the impossibility of keeping all children safe from harm.

#### **6.12 We're all (not) in this together**

The participants were clear that they could not shoulder all of the responsibility for failure, real or perceived. Blame could not be individualised but rather should be located systemically. The policy ambition of collective endeavour was not the experience of the practitioners and was not enacted by allied agencies' understandings of collective roles and understandings. The reflections of P17 resonated with those of Dugmore (2013) in relation to the normative ambition contained the Working Together agenda. P17 believed it to be: *'probably too ambitious. If I'm being honest, I wonder if people really mean it. I think if when we say child abuse is everyone's business, or safeguarding children is everyone's business, do people mean that? I think by and large people say, "Yeah, we want children to do well". Actually, when it goes wrong though, that's mainly your business, really, and use policy as and when, and we might resist, we might not, but really I'm not sure people do see that as their business...'*

There was concern that Social Workers are viewed by society and the media as carrying all the responsibility for preventing harm coming to children. One participant commented that, while questions may be asked of other professionals, the overall responsibility for keeping children safe from harm was perceived to rest with the social worker. The media plays a key role in amplifying the message of responsibility and failure (Stanley and Manthorpe, 2004). P18: *'How do you judge what society wants? It's often the media, isn't it? The media is seen as articulating what society thinks or wants, so whenever there is a tragedy there's a focus on what... not just social work, thinking of some of the recent tragedies there's been questions asked about the police response and GPs, hospital-based doctors, how they've responded to presentation of children. But social workers are seen as the group of professionals with the most significant responsibility for trying to make sure that those things don't happen, and I think that's what, if you can measure what society wants, I think that's what they want'.*

Above, the practitioner speaks to a practice space which is shaped by the often contradictory discourses which surround children and family social work.

The expectations placed on the safeguarding space, and those within it, have objective properties which can be found in the various Working Together guides which have punctuated the policy and practice landscape for decades. The use of the words 'should' and 'clear' and 'comply' punctuated the documents and underpin the exhortation that keeping children safe requires 'A co-ordinated approach – safeguarding is everyone's responsibility'. But it has taken subjective practitioners to effectively respond to the policy pendulum swings from child protection to

safeguarding and back again highlighted in Chapter 2. The practitioners, through necessity, organise, shape and regulate their immediate space where localised organisational and resource impingements will influence their patterned behaviours, structuring and shaping individual practices (Krantz, 2010 and Lees, et al 2013).

P18 provides valuable insight regarding the complex interplay between the structural context in which they operate and their distinct sense of agency and professional autonomy. Their Management of Difference is a manifestation of more or less overt struggles of positioning in the safeguarding field through the definition of what they, and allied others, regard as legitimate Sense Making. Their positioning is far from one-dimensional or linear. It is a process of constituting and re-constituting the contested practice space.

The full professional task of protecting children, which can involve working with challenging, and occasionally threatening and hostile families, was not seen by the social workers to be adequately understood or fairly shared (Ferguson, 2017). For the social workers this, again, was the result of entrenched and significant levels of misunderstanding regarding the nature of the power invested in them. As a consequence, the more testing and difficult elements of the safeguarding task, avoided by others, lay with them and undermined the collective effort. A significant frustration for the social workers was the belief that other agencies were overly concerned with protecting their working relationships with families. The social workers' view was that this undermined safeguarding as a genuinely collective task and presented further evidence that the safeguarding task was not shared.



Again, role confusion and professional misunderstandings, or as Lees (2016) calls it 'facts with feelings' could lead to challenging inter-professional relationships. For example, P18 said: *'I have heard it said "that's a role for a social worker", to insist on seeing a bedroom for example. And the reality is that social workers can be refused that, and there isn't anything a social worker can do with that refusal, it's about I suppose the way you ask and the way you work with people. So I think there's sometimes a misunderstanding there, that other professionals think social workers can insist on certain things, and clearly we can't'*. This chimed with the thoughts of P20: *'I think social work wants other agencies to... people may have said this to you before in other interviews, social workers and certainly conference chairs often say to me that people from other agencies are very concerned not to damage a working relationship with a family. And I think social workers would want other agencies to take responsibility for some of the difficult work that social workers often do'*.

There was unease that other agencies rely on social workers to undertake particularly intrusive tasks in order to protect a working relationship. P5 felt that this helped to contribute to an already negative image of who children and family social workers are and what they do to families: *'People value their relationship with parents, like health visitors and teachers, and family support workers, and are reluctant to challenge parents with real, hard discussions, because they don't want to ruin their relationship with them, so we are perceived in quite a bad light all the time, as a threat to families, and it takes time to win people's confidence over sometimes'*.

### **6.13 I'm not wearing the incompetent badge**

The multi-faceted demands and challenges experienced by the participants alongside what were believed to be unrealistic expectations resulted in strong rebuttals from practitioners. P10, was determined she was *'Not wearing the incompetent badge'*. A perceived lack of understanding alongside stress and a busy diary led to a refusal to be seen as chaotic and incompetent: *'The stress gets to you. What really does get me is safeguarding compromises your professional reputation. I was so busy I was running late to meetings, looking disordered, "sorry I'm late", and the core group is waiting for me, because you had to do this just before you came out, and do that, looking like some bloody bumbling... and I hate that. It's not because I am, it's because...it is not who I am. So I'm not wearing the incompetent badge'*.

The difficult, sometimes threatening, working relationships with service users who used blame to threaten was seen by the social workers as part of the occupational territory. The social workers resented that their treatment was not given due recognition. The notion of threat was seen as offering status and protection to other public sector workers, but not social workers. For example, P13: *'I mean, I laughed as I went into the hospital casualty department a few months ago and there was a big sign saying "If you are violent or disrespectful to staff, you will not be treated." We don't have that option a lot of the time. People can spit at us, they can shut doors in our faces, they can threaten us, physically threaten us, threaten our families'*.

Regardless of concerns of violence, there is an expectation that social workers continue to try and engage and work with families: *'And we're told to go out and work with people. We can't say well we're not working with that family because that dad's*

*being really aggressive'. Here, again, the perceived lack of professional status or understanding or interest in what Social Workers do was felt to be a factor. P10: 'Yeah, I would like it out there what social workers do. I don't think everybody, whether professionally or the general public, understand what we do. They only understand it when we don't do it and something happens. I'd like the social work profession mentioned when there is talk about government workers, they will mention nurses, teachers, you never hear them mention social workers.'*

Lack of visibility and recognisability was felt to contribute to lack of understanding: *'I know we're not universal, and that is an issue, but we're never seen in a hugely positive light. I think what was really good was the adoption programme that was on a few weeks ago. I'd like to see more of that. You'd have to be careful that fly-on-the-wall documentaries don't come into my office [laughs] but I'd like people to understand more what we do and why we do it'. [P10]*

The inherent ambiguity of practice characterises social work and social workers' ability to manage levels of conflict and risk. There appeared to be some understanding that ambiguity was far reaching. It meant different and competing narratives and interpretations between agencies, whether as a result of unspoken, tacit beliefs or local responses to scarce resources. Despite this understanding, there were traces of Dingwall (1977) White and Featherstone (2005) here in that talk about cases 'does important moral work in the organisation' (2005:210). There was a resonant feeling from the interviewees that 'other' agencies fail to understand the practice implications of working with inherent ambiguity and subjectivity. These two

practice strands do not fit with the ability to secure the complete protection of children and young people. The social workers were firm in their belief that they will not be held solely accountable for the safeguarding task. It is too complex, too muddy and its drivers shared. There was a strongly expressed view that, despite policy and legislative exhortations asserting that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, it is not. This leaves children and family social workers in the invidious position of feeling that they carry the greater part of the responsibility along with the greater part of public and political accountability, and on occasion blame, for what is designed to be a collective undertaking. The social workers have full responsibility in the field of safeguarding practices but they are, at the same time, dependent on others. It is a circle that will not be squared and they Talk Back to Blame. Children and family social workers know that while they may be positioned by the government as central to the safeguarding of children and young people they cannot do it alone. It is not possible to promise there will never be the recurrence of the death of a child. At the same time, they understand the covert role they play, articulated in Chapter 5, involving protecting children 'quietly and over there' in order to protect society from the 'prevalence of child maltreatment' (Cooper, 2014:271). The Little Stories from the social workers who contributed to this research speak of uncertainty and complexity alongside a repertoire of practices premised on different realities and knowledges. Their stories determinedly refuse to chime with, or support, the Big Stories which continue to perpetuate myths of universal truths, predictability and measurability. In the Little Stories there are multiple ways of knowing, seeing and doing.

### **6.14 Returning to the Four Windows**

The narratives of the social workers are unapologetic. They are confident in who they are and, of equal importance, who they cannot be. The four windows into social work: Sense Making, In the Borderlands, Managers of Difference and Talking Back to Blame, shine a new light on the professional space occupied by children and family social workers. Looking through the windows provides understandings into how they actively shape and re-shape their professional identities in response to the Big Stories by claiming the Little Stories created through practice. There was, from the social workers, a mix of tolerance and intolerance, acceptance and impatience regarding the difficulties experienced by allied partners in knowing how to perform on this field. The 20 social workers in this study 'inhabit' the safeguarding space but experienced the inter-professional other as critical onlooker resisting the responsibility of sharing or indeed understanding the safeguarding task.

As Managers of Difference, the children and family social workers spoke of their ability to 'get it', and the inter-professional 'other' 'not getting it'. This was a constant and generative process. While there was some understanding that the referral process could be problematic, there was less understanding and tolerance of professional difference, which manifested itself when a case was active. They were able to establish themselves as mediators of definitions of need and harm either acting for the State or acting as a bulwark between the State and the family. The 'space' in between, and how this space is constructed by them, is where they seem to feel enabled and empowered to give meaning to their emerging social reality and robust professional identity. It is in the space in-between where the practitioners

make their claim for professional 'difference' and 'opposition' to the dominant child protection paradigm of finding safety in risk-averse practices. From this positioning they recognised the value of, and gathered and stored, significant symbolic capital. Bourdieu's conceptual arsenal brings added value in providing an additional layer of critical and theoretical examination of the professional identity of the children and family social workers, their practices, who they are and what they do. Introducing habitus and capital into the field of safeguarding has allowed for the practices of social workers to be viewed dynamically through the matrix of actual and perceived relationships with allied agencies and political power.

To conclude, in this chapter I have presented my findings from my analysis of the data regarding the day-to-day practices of children and family social workers. I have focussed on how they see themselves manage the challenges of safeguarding children and young people while working alongside practitioners from other agencies. My analysis provides insights into the sense these social work participants have of themselves and how they believe themselves to be perceived by the public, media and allied practitioners. This chapter has provided insights into the professional spaces where children and family social workers construct, and have constructed for them, professional identity. I have shown how the habitus of the social worker engages with, and influences, the inter-professional relationship while framing and re-framing the safeguarding activity as they respond to individual families and individual children. The stories of the practitioners who participated in this research can be considered as collective narratives and have been framed as windows into the relational, contingent and situated practices of children and family

social workers. There is optimism in their stories: a commitment to 'working with' and not 'doing to' families.

The social workers are aware of the Big Stories of policy certainty and practice failure and blame. They see these stories as powerful master narratives in setting expectations of not only who the children and family social worker is meant to be but also what they do. They know the Big Stories only tell part of the whole, but nonetheless are effective in their impact. The social workers understand and live with the limits of who they are and what, working alongside others, they can hope to achieve. They know that children and family social work cannot provide certainty and, inevitably, given the complexity of the safeguarding task, there will be failure. They spoke with pride and resilience of occupying the Little Stories: working with families to achieve positive changes. These are the immediate, everyday stories of supporting families and protecting children. They believe they do what they do well and, refusing to wear the incompetent badge, – they Talk Back to Blame.

In the next chapter I bring this thesis to a close. I will reflect on the research process and explore the way in which the children and family social workers told their stories and my own role in the sharing and the re-telling of those stories. I will consider the messages my research has for practice and will, finally, make recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 7 Discussion and Conclusion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In this concluding chapter of my thesis, I now have the opportunity to look back to my starting point and consider what I found out (7.2 Revelations; 7.3 Testing New Theoretical Ground), reflect (7.4 Knowledge Contribution; 7.5 Reflections; 7.6 Ethics and Limitations) and look forward (7.7 Future Research).

My starting point was my own experience as a children and family social worker, a social actor in a social system (Zenn, 2008), the challenges I faced and the questions that arose from that practice experience. I wanted to know, as the title of this thesis makes clear, how children and family social workers make sense of who they are, what they do and how they do it in a climate of fear, blame and certainty. I was interested to understand how the 'doing' of social work was formed, challenged, maintained or changed over time and through shifting circumstances.

Social workers deploy their capital, construct and reconstruct their habitus, define, test and refine dispositions to create a professional identity. How does the experience of working with risk and blame as insistent companions express itself in the work and identity of the children and family social worker? As Webb (2015: 2) points out, how a social worker thinks of him or herself as a social worker is not a stable entity but is defined by 'boundary maintenance, jurisdiction disputes and inter-professional tensions'.



Secondly, the practitioner enacts policies to negotiate the day-to day-realities that confronts them. However, the State designs policies to address a reality that is developed from a narrative created from often competing interests. In the context of risk, a gap opens up between what is desirable – the elimination or full mitigation of all risk – and what is possible in a contingent, messy field populated by competing social agents. Reality demands that risk be treated as a wave of possibilities – an unknown outcome until realised and, therefore, understandable only with hindsight. Policy demands risk be treated as a distinct knowable quantum. Social workers must make sense of these tensions, choose and act. Tension emerges between the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky 1980,2010) negotiating with mess and confusion, and managerial attempts to reconstruct social work via standardised approaches that cannot capture the complexity of the work nor value the role of professional judgement (Munro, 2010).

Thirdly, Sovereign Failure. I have shown that when social workers act and the results of intervening, or not, lead not to neat resolution but involve the death of a child, the resulting reviews, inquiries, media and public interest present the specific as the general. Blame is assigned to children and family social work as a whole. Children and family social workers become placeholders for blame. Hood and Miller (2009) argue that such blame does not 'begin' from a rational consideration of risk, judicial weighing of evidence when risks are realised and due apportioning of blame on the basis of a just weighing of responsibilities. Instead, there is an irrational assumption that the risk could have been averted. The people managing the risk – the children and family social worker - must have failed and therefore be blamed. Blame attaches

to the group rather than to the risk. Mythen (2005:5.7) argues that it becomes politically convenient to structure and define risk in such a way that blame is pre-determined, while Dean (1999:131) argues that the greater significance is where blame is attached.

Fourthly, it is on this terrain, in this field of blame and uncertainty that children and family social workers operate. Day to day, they act as sense makers, having first to deconstruct the normative, common-sense narrative suggested by the policy makers.

## **7.2 Revelations**

What has been revealed through this research set against what I set out as my opening intentions?

I set out to know the children and family social worker, how they identify themselves, how they see themselves identified by others and how they work within shifting frameworks of policy prescription and public perceptions. In Chapter 1, I located my personal and professional self in the genesis of this research. This included my early practice frustrations at being asked to manage an impossible task and my profession being harshly rebuked when perceived as failing.

I found that children and family social workers practise in response to new public management techniques. These techniques, I argued in Chapter 2, sought to treat risk as something wholly knowable, and capable of being boxed off and contained. Public and politicians demanded that no child should die and the social worker

should display Janus-like qualities of hindsight and foresight. Practitioners, however, experienced risk as messy, contingent and part of their, and the families' they worked with, everyday reality. These tensions were highlighted in the serious case reviews and the empirical research literature reviewed in Chapter 3, played out in the competing narratives that I have conceptualised as Big Stories and Little Stories, and reflected in the numerous policy developments and guidance notes that have vied with, but never quite fully replaced, the values and principles of professional judgement enshrined in the Children Act 1989. New Public Management's notions of neatness and prediction helped nurture the Big Stories written into policy. The empirical literature reviewed suggests there are different, Little Stories of fear, uncertainty and resistance to be told.

I have given a voice to the children and family social worker and sought to reflect on my own professional and academic experiences to fully understand and explain why and how practitioners in their daily practice reject the simplifying narratives of the Big Stories by telling their own Little Stories of resistance and autonomy. I have given expression to the 'invisible trade' (Pithouse, 1998), which I believe continues to be children and family social work. These daily acts add up to a confident and resilient professional identity. Viewed through four windows, today's children and family social worker is seen as resistant to blame, while working in the borderlands, desirous of making sense of complexity and able to manage professional difference. It is a bold and confident portrait of the children and family social worker in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, one that offers cause for celebration and hope.

### **7.3 Testing new theoretical ground**

This thesis has tested new theoretical ground in bringing together and applying the theoretical frameworks offered by Bourdieu and narrative inquiry to the practice of children and family social work. In Chapter 4, I justified this approach as providing me with the opportunity to look beyond the master narratives to hear the stories generated by everyday practice. The exploration created the opportunity in Chapters 5 and 6 to open four windows - Sense Makers; Working In the Borderlands; Managers of Difference; Talking Back to Blame. Through these windows social workers are seen not as passive, authoritarian, policing conduits of the State but as practitioners, working alongside allied agencies with a clear professional identity. Through the four windows, children and family social workers are seen to actively shape their identities. Autonomous and agentic, they juggle competing narratives of Big Stories and Little Stories simultaneously.

In listening to the voices of children and family social workers who participated in this study, and the stories they told, I have thought carefully about what they said, what the literature said, and did not say, and how their experiences relate to policy. In doing so, it is Bourdieu who has proved 'good to think with.' Bourdieu posits the question: 'Is it because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know?' (Bourdieu, 1990:69) His suggestion that the professional is in large part defined by their 'feel for the game' (*le sens pratique*) has proved a powerful theoretical tool for understanding how the children and family social workers studied here develop and hold such a strong professional identity. This '*sens pratique*' is an outward expression of '*habitus*.' For Bourdieu, *habitus* is

not a fixed identity developed as an expression of purely subjective or objective forces, but a mutable set of foundational dispositions shaped by experience and shaping both current experience and our perception of it. In listening to the voices of children and family social workers it is clear that they have accumulated what Bourdieu conceptualises as cultural and symbolic capital and that they are able to wield it in managing differences between themselves and other professionals and in resisting the least helpful aspects of New Public Management, what I have determined as 'talking back to blame'. The Children Act 1989 and subsequent policy and guidance create the contested legal, social and political environment in which children and family social workers operate. It can be treated as a Bourdieusian field; one of child protection. In deploying their capital on this field, children and family social workers mark out a space for themselves as the sense makers and exert an authority over professionals that, while always contested, is rarely entirely defeated. In telling their stories, the children and family social workers create a narrative that can be analysed alongside that of the policy makers.

I have shown that narrative is central to the policy process. It constitutes public policy instruments, is designed to persuade decision makers and the public alike, and shapes all stages of the policy process. By deploying the theoretical tools associated with narrative inquiry I have been able to look beyond the master narratives of certainty and rationality and argue that they undermine and misrepresent the task given to children and family social workers. Bringing together narrative inquiry and Bourdieu and applying them to the field of child protection opened up four windows on to the practices of children and family social workers, each of which provide a

different insight into the doing of social work. Through these windows, social workers appear, not as passive, authoritarian, policing conduits of the State but as active practitioners, working with allied agencies, on a contested field and in doing so creating a clear professional identity. In testing new ground, this thesis opens up the possibilities for further applications of this theoretical approach to better understand the relationships between the professional and other actors on the field of child protection, not least the children themselves whose reservoirs of social and cultural capital might be predicted to be low despite the field being constructed in their name.

#### **7.4 Knowledge contribution**

This research has made a significant contribution to professional knowledge and contains important lessons, both for the development of the profession and policy concerned with the welfare of children. This research has shown the professional value of children and family social workers and the unique mix of aptitudes and skills they hold amongst the professionals they work with. I have shown that New Public Management has sought to constrain professional autonomy and judgement, routinise complex human behaviours and use technological advances to micro-manage practitioners. In doing so, New Public Management has demanded the construction of normative, common sense Big Stories that convey a narrative of an all-knowing, all-seeing professional capable of achieving— but too often failing to achieve - the total protection of all children. By listening to children and family social workers, and teasing out the Little Stories they tell of day-to-day practice, as well as reflecting on my own professional and academic experience, a counter narrative emerges. This counter narrative reveals professionals frustrated by the gaps that

exist between their day-to-day realities and the policy prescriptions they are held to, but determined to act at all times in the best interests of the child, even when this demands that they resist external demands from other professionals and assert their leading role established in statute.

The children and family social workers who told me their stories shared an understanding of what they do and why they do it. Although they did not share physical organisational spaces, they shared insights, common understandings, language and meanings related to, for example, categories of need and significant harm almost as if they 'know the truth about things' (Terdiman, 1987:811). They positioned themselves and felt positioned by others as Sense Makers and risk managers working In the Borderlands. As Sense Makers they had an identifiable professional habitus, an acquired disposition. The social workers told stories of how they are shaped by and in turn shape the social and legislative policy environment in which they function. The social worker and 'others' clashed over meanings ascribed to definitions of need and harm and the manner of interventions. Definitions of need and harm determined access to services and gave the practitioners ownership and accountability for a case. In the stories told by the social workers, power over defining and naming, was clearly an important prize leading to the symbolic power to impose a world-view. This is the

'inextricably theoretical and practical struggle for the power to conserve or transform the social world by conserving or transforming the categories through which it is perceived' (Bourdieu 1989:729).

The social workers did not tell tales of passivity. They were not, 'a blank surface upon which power relations are inscribed' (McNay, 1999: 100). Sense Making is an acquired disposition; it is not a principle of determination but is a generative structure. Within certain subjective limits, the practice field engenders a potentially infinite number of patterns of behaviour. The narratives of the children and family social workers spoke of contingent practice within a given, objective, template of policy and legislation. There was evidence of the social work narratives sharing a 'practice script' suggestive of the existence of predefined limits relating to function and decision making. But within this ordered, bounded rigidity, the social worker's own subjectivities were clear and made manifest by stories of discretion, improvisation, initiative and inventiveness all of which appeared to be as potentially infinite as the children and families whom they encountered. The interviewees for this thesis showed themselves willing to undertake the categorising of child abuse while supporting families where there may be risk to children. In doing so, they became Managers of Difference; inevitably having to assert themselves when things go wrong by talking back to blame. It is through this struggle that the identity of children and family social worker happens.

## **7.5 Ethics and limitations**

At the outset of this work I made a commitment to reflexively engage with the words of the participants. I have achieved this. I have made transparent and 'owned' my insider/outsider status. I have been integral to the dynamics of the interviews with the social workers and therefore the process of data collection and analysis. My position as insider/outsider did not detract from the interview process but added to it. I



achieved the balance of being suitably informed and knowledgeable during the interviews but at the same time objective and analytical. This research process has been both a personal and professional undertaking. I have made more sense of who I am and understand more of the career I 'fell' into in 1987. Throughout this process, I have been a research-minded practitioner (Everitt et al 1992) with my long-held and core belief of partnership working informing and influencing the ethics of this research.

This is necessarily research limited by time, resources and its construction around specific questions. I set out below the further research topics that are suggested by my findings. Here, I acknowledge the limitations of the present thesis. This study was carried out with a small cohort of children and family social workers with limited diversity and from a limited geography obtained through snowball sampling. An inherent limitation of this study is that it provides only the perspectives and experiences of a specific group of children and family social workers. I have no doubt that equally valid and useful perspectives in relation to safeguarding and the inter-professional relations could also be gained from health, education and police professionals and, of course, from the children and families themselves. Bryman (2008) provides a useful caution in relation to the efficacy of snowball sampling in noting that it is unlikely to be representative of the population. I do not contend that this research reflects the practice of all children and family social workers everywhere. The stories of the individual social workers were told with a consistency strong enough to suggest that a professional story was being told. The interviews, while allowing for the collection of rich data, also introduced the possibility of

researcher bias, which I recognised and mitigated through that recognition. I achieved an easy rapport with the participants and maintained neutrality while treading and negotiating a fine and reflexive line (Patton, 2002, Seidman, 2006). For a more detailed, critical reflection on the process of the research, see Appendix 2.

## 7.6 Reflections

From the outset, I have recognised that part of my motivation for asking the research questions I have, was to better understand my own experiences as a children and family social worker for over 30 years.

I have seen myself reflected back to me in many of the interviews. In spending time with the words of other children and family social workers and analysing them through the twin lenses of narrative inquiry and Bourdieu's theoretical framework, I have a refreshed and renewed respect for the practitioners who confront difficult and painful decision making in their day-to-day-practice. The words of one of the participants remain with me:

[P4] *'... you've done a really valuable piece of work with a child, you're content that you know a child is safe, that's the satisfaction you get, but there is never any joy in seeing parents separated from children. Regardless of the problems it's devastating for them. So, if you think that you're going to be... you know like you're a painter and you do a work of art and you look back and sell it for a few grand or whatever, you think "oh my god what a fantastic picture". You're not going to walk away in social work feeling that way. Because there's trauma in everything. Even in a positive outcome for a child, it's always...a negative'.*

These words helped make sense of my own experiences; sometimes emotionally reeling from a particularly difficult day in court, having managed to disappoint all of the parties concerned, consoling myself that I had done my best to secure not so much what was best for the child but what was least bad.

The social workers who shared their stories with me remain, like me, firmly wedded to a belief in the significance of the birth family and its reflection in statute through the Children Act 1989. This heavily weights the social worker's practice towards favouring that the child's best interests will be served best by being cared for by its natural parents. However, the social workers' words analysed for this thesis also reflected my worry that the current settlement between state and family, premised on the assumption that the family unit can and does function, with support if needed, and that any state intervention must be minimal and constrained, is at risk of erosion. As a mark of a liberal state, Dingwall's (1986: 502) words appear to be more salient each time I read them:

'The private behaviour of parents in the raising of their children within the family has public consequences for the moral fabric and economic productivity of the liberal society. Yet to regulate this aggressively is to negate the constructive role of the family in a democratic state of that type. The rule of optimism is one part of the system that makes any degree of child protection possible' (ibid 1986).

The rule of optimism demands an agreed settlement of jurisdiction from the state, the public and other agencies. There is no agreed settlement. This leaves children and family social workers exposed, practising in between statute and autonomy mediated

on shifting sands of policy innovations. They must 'broker' and at the same time 'drive' the safeguarding activity with allied agencies. The policy framework means they operate in and at the borders of the legislative mandate, practising in-between the sections and parts of the CA89 and in the borderlands of consenting and non-consenting partnership working arrangements with families and knowing and unknowing allied agencies.

## **7.7 Future Research**

This thesis opens up new areas for research and further exploration around the use of Bourdieu as a theoretical tool, the identity of children and family social workers, how they do what they do in an arena of blame, how they manage external relationships, the shifting policy agenda and the gap between it and the reality of the job.

These are relevant areas of exploration given the contemporary environment in which children and family social workers practice. Social work is, so far, succeeding in doing more with less. In January 2016 Cafcass received 1,040 care applications – representing a 16% increase compared to those received in January 2015 (Cafcass). Naqvi (2016) reports: 'Over the last decade the number of children on child protection plans in England has increased by nearly 90 per cent'. However, 'the number of children dying from violence or abuse remains small – 67 in 2013/14 – and shows a general downward trend across the UK since the early 2000s'. British Association of Social Work (BASW) vice-chair Maggie Mellon (14th May 2015) made an appeal 'to stop and think' about the fall in adoption orders following two landmark

family court judgements. Re B-S (referred to in Chapter 2) of this thesis and the Court of Appeal decision of W (A Child) v Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council [2013].

How long can the values so clearly part of the habitus of the social workers interviewed for this thesis continue as budgets are squeezed and social workers come under increased pressure to work faster to remove more children from their families, into care and on to adoption?

The Knowledge and Skills Statement (henceforth KSS) (DfE 2014) sets out the standards for a children and family social worker at the end of their first year in employment. It is part of a wider change strategy. Children's Social Care Reform - A vision for change (DfE, 2016:5) declares: 'To deliver this change we must: Set the highest professional standards for social work and hold people to them'. The KSS sets out 11 standards for the newly qualified practitioner. They 'will know and be able to do' a range of tasks and be in possession of a range of skills suggestive of a consummate practitioner. It speaks to newness and forward looking change. It is a master narrative of matter-of-fact statements 'immune to factual attack' (Cuthbertson, 1975:157 cited in Yanow, 1996:191).

Its positivist philosophy needs to be tested against the messy reality of life as an over-stretched, under-supported newly qualified children and family social worker. Social Work England, the new regulatory body set to replace the Health Care Professional Council under the Children and Social Work Act 2017, should be tasked with commissioning such research. The Secretary of State for Education must

approve Social Work England's recommendations for new professional standards. It would be welcome for the recommendations and approval of them to be based on research evidence derived from the realities of messy practice rather than tidy policy prescription alone. The Little Stories generated by new practitioners given space to reflect on their early experiences would be a valuable contribution to the change process to the professional standards the government wants Children and Family Social Workers held to.

Two recently published reports, The Care Crisis Review – Options for Change (2018, Family Rights Group) and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children Report of the Inquiry into Children's Social Care in England (National Children's Bureau, 2017) worryingly titled 'No Good Options', describe a system struggling to meet demand. Bilson and Martin (2017) report that 22.5% of children born in 2009-10 were referred to Children's Social Care before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. The interviews I conducted show other professionals confused by shifting thresholds around need, protection and referral processes. Today, children and family social workers risk fulfilling the stigma that has beleaguered them – that they remove children too readily rather than work with others in supporting families. There needs to be a much-improved alignment between the definitions of need and protection in the CA89 and the resources available to Children's Services to deal with each. This requires uncomfortable conversations based on facts and research, not policy designed for political expediency. Only then will it be possible for children and family social workers as sense makers to successfully manage difference in their relations with other professionals in the interests of each child.

The social worker should not be presented to the public as the Janus of the safeguarding field. It is not for the social worker alone to protect the child and not the social worker alone who should be blamed when systems and processes fall short in the face of difficult family relationships. The complexity of the safeguarding process taking place within a liberal, democratic society demands a degree of compromise and flexibility around outcomes. It is not complacent to argue, as I do now, that public space needs to be opened up to discuss the realities and limitations of child protection. The Little Stories being created every day across the country from making sense of this reality need to be heard in that public space.

The government's reform programmes for social work includes experimentation within education and training. Fast-track courses such as Step Up and Frontline (14 months' and 12 months' duration respectively) have been supported with a £100 million investment. The 'mostly positive' evaluation of the Frontline pilot (DfE, 2016) raises as many questions as it answers, not least on its impact on professional identity and retention rates. The average working life for social workers is under eight years compared to 16 for a nurse and 25 for a doctor (Curtis et al, 2010). Children and family social work found itself on the national occupational shortage list in 2015. When staff turnover is high, and vacancies are unfilled questions need to be asked about professional identity. The social workers I spoke to were clear that their ability to believe in who they are and what they do is derived from their peers. Supportive, stable teams are crucial, but take time to build. The social workers in this research were robust in Talking Back to Blame but also expressed feelings of being needed but not wanted and being powerful but without power. Education reform needs to be evidence-based.

Urgent open and transparent research is required to test some of the more common-sense assertions upon which some of the experiments are based and the impact of fast-track courses on professional identity.

Inter-agency and inter-professional practice is complex and territorial. This should not be shied away from within exhortations to work together. It should meaningfully be embraced, studied and valued. In the KSS, the social worker is exhorted to: 'Operate successfully in a wide range of organisational contexts, including settings undertaking statutory activity, understanding that the success or failure of the social worker depends on the operation of organisations' (KSS; Ibid: Standard 11). The social worker is a key worker whose 'success or failure' depends on understanding and knowing the inter-professional other. There is no mention of safeguarding or child protection as a shared endeavour in the Department for Education Children's Social Care Reform A vision for change (DfE, 2016). The Working Together 'project' has been rolled back under what I suggest is a myth of organisational and regulatory flexibility; the government submit that it has played its part in not over-reaching its role and 'dictating practice' DfE, Ibid:6): 'That means further rolling back unnecessary regulations and guidance, as was done in the last Parliament when statutory guidance on child protection was reduced by 700 pages and distorting statutory timescales were removed'. Difference is inherent in relationships between professionals with different training, value bases and tasks. They need to be studied and acknowledged.

## **7.8 Conclusion**



Finally, in a challenging economic environment, social workers are called on to 'rescue' more children by placing increasing numbers with adoptive families more quickly. At the same time, the principles of the Children Act 1989 to support children in the care of the birth family by working in partnership with all of the richness of difference and diversity that is family life in the twenty-first century remains. Children and family social workers are policy actors, not automatons. They construct practice narratives of positive resistance. The technicolour lives of all those involved in the making and shaping of the Little Stories will never fit with the monochrome, totemic, master narrative Big Stories. This thesis is just one contribution to understanding the formation of professional identity and the nature of inter-professional relationships by analysing the Little Stories practitioners tell.

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## Appendix 1



Noreen Maguinness

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Research Institute of Social Sciences

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University of Keele

Staffordshire

ST5 5BG

## Information Sheet for Research Participants

**Study Title:** From Policy to Practice: How do Social Workers make sense of their lived experience of inter-professional practice within the context of safeguarding children and young people?

### Aims of the Research

To explore how Social Workers experience inter-professional practice within the context of safeguarding children and young people. How do they experience engaging with practitioners from allied agencies when working within the policy and legislative context which underpins child protection practices?

### Invitation

You are being invited to consider taking part in the above research project.

I am not being sponsored to undertake this research; this project is being undertaken by me, Noreen Maguinness, as part of a Professional Doctorate at Keele University.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with colleagues, friends and relatives if you wish. Please do ask me if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information. I can be contacted by telephone on 01782 734290 or my email [n.maguinness@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.maguinness@keele.ac.uk).

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen because you are a qualified Social Worker with over two years' experience in the area of child protection and safeguarding. I would like to hear your story regarding your lived experience of being a Children and Family Social Worker, how you feel you perceive professionals from allied agencies and how you feel perceived by others. It may help you to see the questions which are intended to provide a framework for the interview – please see below.

Please read the following information before confirming your participation.

### **Do I have to take part?**

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms, one is for you to keep and the other is for my records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reasons.

### **What will happen if I take part?**

You will be asked to participate in an interview which will last approximately 1.5 hours. The interview will be semi-structured. As noted above I have made the interview questions available in this Information Sheet. The questions are intended to provide the framework for the interview. Other supplementary questions will be asked as the interview progresses but you are under no obligation to answer the set or supplementary questions. The interview will be audio taped. I will be transcribing the data from the interview and will use the data provided for my research. In addition I may use data from the interview for teaching purposes and for future publication. I will not use the interview recordings themselves.

### **If I take part, what do I have to do?**

I will be asking you to meet with me at a time and venue of your choice to answer the following questions:-

- Can you tell me about your path to becoming a children and family Social Worker?
- Can you tell me about your experience of working with allied agencies within the context of s17 and s47 (Children Act 1989) assessments?
- Can you tell me about the challenges and rewards of being a children and family Social Worker?

In addition I may ask some supplementary questions but the questions will only be in relation to the title of the research project; noted at the beginning of this document. As noted above the interview will last approximately 1.5 hours and will involve you sharing your reflections on practice and personal experiences of being a Social Worker working in the practice area of Children and Family Social Work.

### **What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?**

You may be aware that problematic inter agency working and inter professional practice are frequently cited in Serious Case Reviews – contributing to this original research may provide



new insights into inter professional relations. It may lead to useful messages for practice and therefore improve outcomes for children and their families.

### **What are the risks (if any) of taking part?**

I do not anticipate any risks however I am happy to meet with you after the interview if this would be seen to be helpful to you. I am aware that the practice of child protection can be stressful and understand that reflecting on difficult practice situations may be upsetting for you. If this is the case the interview can be paused or stopped, whatever suits you. I will also discuss with you the provision of a debrief discussion or a follow up meeting if you feel both or either may be useful.

### **How will information about me be used?**

You will not be required to provide any personal information which will identify you in this study. I will be recording the conversation and the content of our discussion will subsequently be transcribed to assist me in the process of writing up the theses. I will use quotations in my work but they will be anonymised. Material generated will only be used for the purpose of the research, teaching and possibly future publication. Data will be disposed of in an appropriate manner and within an appropriate time frame.

### **Who will have access to information about me?**

Your confidentiality will be maintained appropriately throughout the period of the research. No personal details will be used to identify you in my work. I do however have to work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law. For example in circumstances whereby I am made aware of any criminal activity, abuse either to yourself or another or concerns about your professional practice I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.

### **Data Storage**

- All data will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet or on my password protected personal computer and will not be accessible to any third party.
- Individuals involved will be referred to as person A, person B and person C to maintain confidentiality.
- Once the data has been used for the purpose of the pilot study it will be securely disposed of.

### **What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher who will do their best to answer your questions. You should contact **Noreen Maguinness** on [n.maguinness@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.maguinness@keele.ac.uk). Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact

the researcher you may contact one of my supervisors **Dr Pat Chambers** by email - [p.a.chambers@keele.ac.uk](mailto:p.a.chambers@keele.ac.uk). You can also contact Dr Chambers by letter: **Dr Pat Chambers, DSW supervisor, Research Institute of Social Sciences, Moser Building, Keele University ST55BG**

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:-

Nicola Leighton

Research Governance Officer

Research & Enterprise Services

Dorothy Hodgkin Building

Keele University

ST5 5BG

E-mail: [n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk)

Tel: 01782 73330

Noreen Maguinness

Professional Doctorate Student

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences research

Claus Moser Building

University of Keele

Staffordshire

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## CONSENT FORM

**Title of Project:** From Policy to Practice: How do Social Workers make sense of their lived experience of inter-professional practice within the context of safeguarding children and young people?

**Name of Principal Investigator:** *Noreen Maguinness*

**Please tick box if you  
agree with the statement**

- 1 I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐
- 2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time. ☐
- 3 I agree to take part in this study. ☐
- 4 I understand that data collected about me during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication. ☐
- 5 I agree to the interview being audio recorded ☐
- 6 I agree to be contacted about possible participation in future research projects. ☐

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Noreen Maguinness

Professional Doctorate Student

Research Institute of Social Sciences

Claus Moser Building

University of Keele

Staffordshire

ST5 5BG

[n.maguinness@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.maguinness@keele.ac.uk)

**CONSENT FORM**  
**(for use of quotes)**

**Title of Project:** From Policy to Practice: How do Social Workers make sense of their lived experience of inter-professional practice within the context of safeguarding children and young people?

*Noreen Maguinness*

**Please tick box if you agree with the statement**

1 I agree for any quotes to be used ☐

2 I do not agree for any quotes to be used ☐

<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
Name of participant	Date	Signature

<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
Researcher	Date	Signature

## Appendix 2

### Critical Considerations

It is timely, as I come towards the end of this thesis, to undertake a retrospective, critical reflection on the process of my research. As a researcher, with a long career in children and family social work practice and latterly social work education, undertaking research with children and family social workers, I will pay specific attention in this reflection to the potential for bias and skew within the thesis with regard to sampling and coding that may have arisen from my 'insider' status. I will therefore focus on both the sampling process I employed and the coding and categorisation of the data I collected.

As indicated in my methodology chapter the sampling strategy for my field work was purposive and my inclusion criteria were deliberate, that is I was seeking to interview children and family social workers 'with three or more years post-qualification experience'. I interviewed 20 children and family social workers, who met the criteria and all of whom were currently working in the safeguarding field. Their geographical location was not of any significance. As I noted in the chapter, observing Bourdieu's use of the concept of field to theorize society as a social space or a network of relationships between positions occupied by actors (Ihlen, 2007, Khanchel and Kahla, 2013), I was keen for my research not to be bounded by the geographical space of a particular Local Authority. After reading through the literature on sampling, the most fitting method of selection, given the limitations of a lone researcher, was the use of snowball sampling, a form of purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008), and an approach that fitted with my expressed research paradigm. I anticipated that each participant would be able to put me in touch with someone they knew with the required set criteria of experience. I was aware, as noted in the methodology chapter, that Hek and Moule (2006:72) refer to purposive sampling as 'judgmental' sampling as the method invests

so much in the researcher choosing sample members who might be relied on to reflect a certain viewpoint. With that critique in mind, I approached the process with caution and some trepidation.

When I was planning my fieldwork I had not practised as a social worker for over 10 years and my direct contacts with practice were few. Nevertheless, I contacted two ex-colleagues from my time as a practitioner. They remembered me, were interested in the research and both agreed to be interviewed. From this starting point I was given names of people whom my ex-colleague participants felt would be happy for me to contact and would be willing to engage in the research. I made initial contact by telephone and explained the purpose and process of my research. I asked them to think about whether they wanted to participate and then communicated with them via email and telephone before the meetings took place. It is interesting to note that initial contacts in the snowballing process did not, as I was concerned might be the case, necessarily refer on individuals with views similar to themselves.

Although there were many commonalities across all the interviews undertaken, some interviewees were more vocal or challenging than others and they were certainly not carbon copies of each other. However, as the snowballing process was underway I found myself being put in touch with potential participants in the North West of England with whom I had a past, albeit in most cases fleeting, acquaintance: 4 from when I was a practising social worker; 3, on a 'long arm' professional basis through Practice Education; and 3 from when I first moved from practice into Higher Education as a social work lecturer. Although I had not had any contact with most of them for many years, I was wary of being seen to be interviewing only 'people like me' and leaving myself open to the challenge of bias and skew. I was not aware during the interviews I'd undertaken at that point that previous knowledge of me as a person impacted on what they were prepared to say to me nor that

they were trying to please me in any way. However, I was aware that our shared experience of children and family social work practice, that is me as an 'insider researcher', gave me access to information that may not have been shared with someone from outside the profession. Nonetheless, I remained mindful of the criticism of Hek and Moule (ibid) and the potential for both bias and skew arising from the purposive, snowballing process, alongside my 'insider' status. Having moved to a social work lecturer post at a University in the Midlands, I made a deliberate choice as someone new to the University, to access, via sources within the social work programme, another potential 'pool' of initial interviewees and began further snowballing strands. The remaining 10 interviewees were all children and family social workers I had not previously met (see Table, 4.14)

This process of broadening my sampling strategy to access a range of participants, built on the previous interviews and went some way to mitigating the potential for bias and skew of the sample and data collected. I cannot of course ignore the fact that people with a particular view on, or interest in, the research topic and/or those who are more articulate may be more likely to agree to participate in research and that this may skew the final sample nor can I claim to have completely eradicated the potential for bias and skew that may come from the snowballing process itself.

A key element of this critical reflection, in relation to the potential for bias in the coding and categorisation of my interviews (which took place in 2014) has been the retrospective sharing of a sample of the original interview transcriptions. The transcriptions and my initial analysis coding and categorisation have been read and discussed with a second person. Reflecting with another person has proved to be instructive and insightful with the work of Brookfield, (2007), proving to be an additional tool and prompt. Brookfield (Ibid:197) notes that there are limitations to self-reflection: "No matter how much we may think we have an



accurate sense of ourselves, we are stymied by the fact that we are using our own interpretive filters to become aware of our own interpretive filters”.

Over the period of one week there were a number of virtual exchanges (email, WhatsApp and text) between myself and the second reader. The second reader initially read two interviews, interview 3 and interview 5, and scrutinised the interview process, the coding of those interviews and the categories that emerged from the codes. Comments were inserted in the two documents and returned to the researcher for a response. These initial comments included: ongoing reflections on my interview and coding process, confirmation of the majority of the codes and raised questions regarding the explanation of one particular code and the way in which I had illustrated it in the thesis. An alternative code, that reflected more precisely what had been said, was recommended.

The virtual exchanges have allowed for space and distance and time to think before responding. I have found the interactions constructive in critically reviewing my own voice in the data analysis and to reconsider the validity and truthfulness of the process. The comments provided by the second reader were thought provoking. She raised the potential for me to have been ‘hearing as well as seeing’ between the coding of each interview, as well as my prior knowledge of the specific topic under discussion at that point in the interview. I acknowledged the recommended, minor change in coding and recognised that the illustration on that occasion could have been better selected. The 2<sup>nd</sup> reader reflected that there were many other examples that could have been chosen. The 2<sup>nd</sup> reading of a third interview, Interview 12 confirmed this. Having reviewed the soundness of the categories as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading process, the minor change in code was found not to have distorted the categories in any way.

I also reflected why, on occasion, there was no coding, which gave me an opportunity to recap with the second reader my expressed intention in Chapter 4 of the thesis, supported by (Ezzy 2002, Reismann, 2008) to code a mix of significant sentences and identifiable chunks of meaning. These active and reflective conversations have provided an additional lens and challenged the risk of a 'self-confirming cycle' undermining the integrity of the data and my findings.

As someone immersed in Social Work for three and a half decades, my own biases and interpretations and my role within the social context of the research (Thomas, 2011) requires specific reflection. As the second reader and I engaged in our virtual critical reflection I was prompted, by her, to consider whether knowledge and confidence became blurred during the coding of the interviews. Looking back upon my research journey I echo the views of Creswell and Plano Clark, (2011:12) in that my qualitative approach, and my 'insider' status and knowledge, enabled me to collect and 'directly hear the voices of the participants'. The potential for skew, however, arising from my own prior knowledge, may on occasion, not have been eliminated.

May and Pope (2000:51) argue for the need for the researcher to address issues of reflexivity '...how the researcher and research process have shaped the collected data...' and the need to give consideration to whether the research 'either adds to knowledge or increases the confidence with which existing knowledge is regarded' (Ibid:52). I believe that my research has been successful in adding to the body of knowledge in terms of who Children and Family Social Workers are and why they do what they do. Interviewing practitioners was an appropriate method of qualitative data collection. There is a familiarity with interviews (Robson, 2002). As noted by Runswick and Cole, (2011:88) '...interviews are everywhere' (Runswick-Cole, 2011:88). I found the method to have a natural home in

Children and Family Social Work and led to natural and, on the whole, comfortable interactions during the data collection process. The potential 'ease' of the interview process was commented on by the second reader. We discussed and reflected upon the presence of 'shared knowledge' between researcher and interviewee was a useful tool in engaging interviewees and maintaining trust. There was evidence in the sample interviews of the interviewee actively assuming such knowledge as 'shared' with phrases such as 'You will know this...' The semi-structured nature of the exchanges allowed for supplementary questions or the ability to seek clarification if needed. However, Runswick-Cole (2011) provides a cautionary note in relation to interviews, noting that 'positionality' is a key issue in interviewing. During the reflective process, and 'virtual' discussions my own 'positionality' and 'shared understandings' were helpful in enabling detailed and rich exchanges. Such reflections have been constructive but can only go so far. I do not believe, looking back, I can ever know to what extent I unconsciously influenced the response of the participants. But I must actively consider that my own beliefs resulted in biases in the data analysis (Boyatzis, 1998).

During the data analysis I tried to be explicit and transparent. I read and re-read the interview scripts to get to know the data. Suspending my own judgement was difficult, particularly during the inductive stage when attempting to carefully read what had been said. However, I am reminded by (Bryman, 2008) that there is always the possibility for biases in any form of qualitative data analysis. Using Lichtman (2013) six steps of Data Analysis: Codes, Categories and Concepts was intended to lessen the likelihood of biases occurring. Having scrutinised the coding of the sample of what became 3 interviews and the discussion that followed on from the questions that were raised, and the minor change to one of the codes, the second reader confirmed the soundness of the categories. I reflected with the

second reader my pleasure and surprise at the professional buoyancy of the social workers, and their notable resilience. I did not expect to find either.

Throughout the research, I was mindful of my role as part of the construction of knowledge (Haynes, 2012). In this reflective process I have found Lynch (2000) to be helpful. He asks that the researcher engages in philosophical self-reflection and introspective methodological self-consciousness to explore their relationship with the object of study. In terms of being 'methodologically self-conscious' (Lynch, 2000), it is important to consider my relationship with the object of study. As discussed in Chapter 1 I am a qualified and registered Social Worker with significant experience in Children and Family Social Work and, more latterly, Social Work education. I began the research process with an existing understanding, based on that experience. I have built on that prior knowledge by employing a method of data collection that has enabled me to gain access and thus listen, analyse, reconsider and ultimately develop further knowledge via the stories of 20, practising social workers that provided valuable insight into 'who they are', 'what they do' and 'how' they do it in the context of current social policy. All methods of data collection have their strengths and limitations and I did not start out from the standpoint of believing interviews to be a neutral and objective method of data collection. Having undertaken this joint reflective process I concur with Fontana and Frey (2005), that interviews as a research method can certainly be liberating but they are also, ultimately, politically, historically and contextually bound.