# _Troubling Child Protection in England_: Developing Critical Social Work Practice

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**Declaration of Authorship for**      **Co-Authored Work**

If you are presenting partly co-authored work, please indicate below your individual contribution to the thesis.

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Thesis title: ***Troubling Child Protection in England:* Developing Critical Social Work Practice**

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

Within these co-authored publications, I declare the following as being my individual contribution:

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**Gupta, A. and Blewett, J. (2007) 'Change for Children? The challenges and opportunities for the children's social work workforce',** *Child and Family Social Work,* **12 (2): 172-181** – This article was jointly written with James Blewett. My contribution was 50%.

**Bernard, C. and Gupta, A. (2008) 'Black African Children and the Child Protection System',** *British Journal of Social Work,* **38 (3): 476-492 –** This article was jointly written with Claudia Bernard. My contribution was 50%.

**Gupta, A. and Blewett, J. (2008) 'Involving Services Users in Social Work Training on the Reality of Family Poverty: A case study of a collaborative project',** *Social Work Education,* **27 (5): 459 – 473** – This article was jointly written with James Blewett. My contribution was 50%.

**Gupta, A. and Lloyd-Jones, E. (2010) 'The Representation of Children and their Parents in Public Law Proceedings since the Children Act 1989: High Hopes and Lost Opportunities?',** *Journal of Children's Services,* **5 (2): 64-72** – I primarily wrote this article. My contribution was 75%.

**Gupta, A. and Lloyd-Jones, E. (2014) 'Re B-S: a glass half full? An exploration of the implications of the Re B-S judgment on practice in the family courts',** *Child and Family Social Work,* **early online publication – first published: 28ᵗʰ August 2014 -** I primarily wrote this article. My contribution was 75%.

**Gupta, A., Featherstone, B. and White, S. (2014) 'Reclaiming Humanity: From Capacities to Capabilities in Understanding Parenting in Adversity',** *British Journal of Social Work,* **early online publication – first published: 23ʳᵈ November 2014 -** I primarily wrote this article. My contribution was 75%.

**Gupta, A. and ATD Fourth World (2015) 'Poverty and Shame – Messages for Social Work',** *Critical and Radical Social Work,* **3 (1): 131-139 --** I primarily wrote this article. My contribution was 75%.

**Gupta, A. and Featherstone, B. (2015)** *What about my dad?* **Black Fathers and the Child Protection System,** *Critical and Radical Social Work* **early on-line publication – first**

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**Gupta, A., Blumhardt, H. and ATD Fourth World (2016) '*Giving Poverty a Voice:* Families' experiences of social work practice in a risk-averse system'***, *Families, Relationships and Societies,* early on-line publication – first published 1st February 2016 -** This article was jointly written with Hannah Blumhardt. My contribution was 50%.

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises of twelve peer-reviewed journal articles and a critical appraisal of the coherence and original contribution of this work to the field of social work. The publications explore the role of the state and social work practice within the child protection and family court systems in England. In different ways the articles examine the complexities of practising socially just and humane social work within policy contexts and systems that can be inherently oppressive. The publications include theoretical articles and papers based on qualitative studies using focus groups and workshops. The experiences and voices of people living in poverty who have had to use social work services are incorporated in different ways, through the workshops and case study material. In the critical appraisal ideas from autoethnography are used to present a narrative account that contextualises the published work.

The coherence of the body of work is demonstrated through developing ideas about the application of anti-oppressive and critical social work theories, and the influence of child protection policy and legal contexts on social work practice. The traditional binaries of psychological and social, macro and micro, research and practice are challenged. In later publications consideration is given to the Capability Approach as a framework for critical social work practice. The publications together make a significant contribution to understanding the complexities and challenges of child protection work within neoliberal policy contexts and increasing inequality, and to the development of social work practice that strives to promote social justice and the human rights of marginalised children and families.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Introduction to my portfolio

My academic contribution is primarily in the field of statutory social work with children and families in England. In my work I have explored the role of the state and social work practice with vulnerable children and families, in particular within the child protection and family court systems. My publications make an important and original contribution to understanding the complexities and challenges of child protection social work within neoliberal policy contexts, as well as highlighting the perspectives of families living in poverty who have had involvement with child protection services. Not only do my published works critique policy and practice, but, crucially, also provide a unique contribution to the development of critical social work in a climate of austerity and increasing inequality.

In different ways my publications have examined the complexities of practising socially just and humane social work within systems that are inherently oppressive. This critical appraisal documents my work developing ideas for child protection social work practice within a human rights and social justice framework that attends to the impact of macro level structural inequalities and dominant discourses on the micro level of individual children's and families' lives, and the practice of social workers. It draws on work I have conducted since 2007 whilst

employed as a lecturer and then senior lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Alongside my academic work I have continued links with practice through initially work as a Children's Guardian, representing children's interests and views in public law family court proceedings, and later as an independent social worker and expert witness in the family courts. In constructing this appraisal I use ideas from autoethnography and critical reflection to present a narrative of my intellectual journey drawing upon theoretical literature, research and reflections on my experiences as an academic and practitioner in public law family court proceedings. This appraisal is therefore written in the first person. My work as a practitioner and academic enables me to be in the liminal space of being both an insider and outsider. The influence of my academic work on my practice is clear. It informs my interactions, decision-making and is evidenced in my reports, but the reciprocal learning from practice is less obvious. This critical appraisal seeks to make more explicit these influences, and in particular how my disquiet and disturbance at witnessing the lived experiences of marginalised children and families involved in the child protection and family court systems has informed my more recent work. Themes throughout this critical appraisal of my work involve the crossing of boundaries: research and practice, personal and political, psychological and social, macro and micro. As a narrative journey I do 'arrive' somewhere at the end, namely the development of the Capability Approach as a framework for critical social work practice, and in the process signal beginnings of new journeys.

In this critical appraisal I demonstrate the coherence of my body of work through developing ideas about the application of anti-oppressive and critical social work theories, and the influence of child protection policy and legal contexts, both constraints and opportunities, on social work practice. Whilst my earlier articles address seemingly disparate themes that are interlinked, my recent work has built on these themes with a particular, but not exclusive, focus on poverty and child protection; highlighting the psychological as well as social impacts, intersections with other social divisions, and the influence of political ideology and dominant discourses about poverty on families, policies and social work practice. It is this recent work that provides my most distinctive contribution. I respond to the changing nature of welfare provision and social work practice in 'austerity' England in ways that challenge the traditional binaries of psychological and social, macro and micro. Whilst acknowledging structural level power dynamics and organisational constraints, I demonstrate the potential for micro level exertions of power and agency by both workers and service users to challenge oppression and promote social justice, and in the process develop knowledge about the practice of critical social work.

## 1.2 Structure of the critical appraisal

I have structured this critical appraisal into five chapters. In Chapter Two a narrative review of the literature in two areas is presented in order to contextualise my published work, and highlight authors and texts that have been particularly influential in informing my writing. In the first part of the chapter the

academic literature on child welfare and protection policy, with a particular focus on England, is reviewed. Secondly theoretical developments and models of practice relating to how social work constructs the relationship between the individual and society, including relationship-based, anti-oppressive and critical social work practice, are discussed. In Chapter Three epistemological and methodological considerations are explored and methods of knowledge construction that I have used are critically appraised.

Chapter Four provides a narrative of my journey through an exploration of the individual pieces of work submitted in this portfolio. It traces how my writing about practice becomes more influenced by critical theory and postmodern ideas as I grapple with the influence of changing policy and political contexts, and also my increasing recognition of the inadequacy of theories of relationship-based and anti-oppressive practice in supporting social workers to practise in socially just, humane and transformative ways. In my later work I explore the potential of the Capability Approach to provide a normative framework for social work practice that attends to issues of social justice and is able to accommodate an analysis of the complex interrelationship between psychological and social factors. In the final chapter, I look back in my summary of the coherence, contribution and originality of my work, and also look forward by concluding with discussion about the application of the Capability Approach to critical social work practice and future work developing these ideas.

## 1.3 The use of terminology

In this critical appraisal I make frequent reference to issues of 'social justice' and 'human rights', which require further clarification. The **social justice** value base of social work is often seen as a defining feature of the profession and is an integral part of the *Global Definition for Social Work* (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). However social justice is a complex and contested term that can represent social change and a progressive perspective; but can also be used by those with conservative viewpoints in ways that are contradictory to the value base of social work (Morgaine, 2014). In this critical appraisal and my published work I use the term to refer to the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities to live a life with dignity. However we live in societies and a world deeply riven with structural inequalities. Social work within a social justice framework locates individual experiences within wider social structures, seeks to challenge power dynamics that perpetuate oppression, domination and exploitation, and further societies that are more equal, humane and peaceful.

As with social justice, the promotion of **human rights** is viewed as a foundational principle of social work (Hugman, 2013). The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948) aims to define a standard of international relations and guide judgements about individuals and nation states, with regard to what a person should be inherently entitled to simply because she or he is a human being. However many aspects of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948) and the general concept of human rights remain contested (Gasper,

2007). Human rights are commonly categorised into the two groups of civil and political rights; and economic, social and cultural rights. The latter group of rights is subject to much debate and disagreement, 'as they rest on ideas not only about what it is to be human (such as 'to be free'), but also about what a decent human life might look like' (Hugman, 2013: 161). When discussing work in the family courts, I make reference to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) (Council of Europe, 1950) which was incorporated into domestic law in the United Kingdom through the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1989. However this is primarily concerned with civil and political rights, and when I refer to human rights more generally as a core principle of social work, I am referring to both categories of rights.

There has been much debate about balance between universalism and relativism in relation to human rights. In the social work literature this is demonstrated by the differing standpoints of Webb (2009) and Ife (2012). In this critical appraisal I approach human rights in a way that allows for consideration of what we have in common and share as human beings, while at the same time recognising that this is always subject to historical, cultural and other contingent interpretations and applications (Hugman, 2013). This is consistent with ideas of Sen (2005) and Nussbaum (2011) when they discuss the Capability Approach and its connections with human rights.

The title of this thesis includes the term '**child protection**' and much of my published work examines the child protection system in England. By using this

term in an English context I am referring to the laws, policies, and practices relating to children deemed at risk or likely to be at risk of abuse and neglect. However I acknowledge, as Waterhouse and McGhee (2015a: 13) do, that 'the same words are used to mean different things at different times and different words may be used to mean the same things'. Differences in use and understanding of the terminology around 'child protection' and 'child abuse and neglect' can be particularly divergent when working across professional and international boundaries (Pösö, 2015). Fook (2012), writing from a poststructural perspective, explains that the way we talk about phenomena and the language used determines what is emphasised, seen as important, and subsequently acted upon, often in unquestioned and taken-for-granted ways. These ideas are particularly relevant for the term 'child protection' and associated language such as 'frontline' and 'bombardment', which imply conflict and war (Cooper, 2015). It sets up an accusatory dynamic between parents and professionals, which Waterhouse and McGhee (2015b), drawing on the work of Judith Butler (2005), argue is counter-productive and at odds with an ethic of equality. Whilst I use the term 'child protection' because it is the common parlance in England, through my published work and in this critical appraisal I have sought to destablise and problematise the assumptions underpinning the term and associated policies and practices.

In his article *What's in a Name: 'Client', 'Patient', 'Customer', 'Consumer', 'Expert by Experience', 'Service User'—What's Next?*, McLaughlin (2009) critiques the different terms used for people who use social work services, and finds them all wanting in some way. Whilst the term **'service user'** is the most frequently used term at

present, McLaughlin (2009) argues that it is nevertheless problematic, unable to describe the complexities of the service–recipient relationship. On occasions in this critical appraisal I use the term 'service user', but most frequently, especially when referring to my work with ATD Fourth World, refer to 'family members'. The participants in both of the ATD Fourth World projects preferred to be known as 'family members'. As with some other service user groups, they felt the word 'user' has connotations of being a passive recipient of services (Levin, 2004), as well as being a person who misuses drugs or takes advantage of others.

A final term that needs to be defined in this section, as it reoccurs throughout this critical appraisal, is **neoliberalism.** Hall (2011) argues that the term 'neo-liberal' is not a satisfactory one as it is reductive, lumps too many things together, sacrifices consideration to internal complexities and lacks geopolitical specificity. However, he also argues that there are enough common features to warrant giving it provisional conceptual identity, and that naming neoliberalism is politically necessary to further resistance (Hall, 2011).   Harvey (2005: 2) defines neoliberalism as being:

> '…… in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices'.

'The long march of the Neoliberal Revolution', Hall (2011: 9) argues started in the 1970s and has continued unabated, albeit in different forms, since. In the following chapter I discuss changing policy and legal contexts for the provision of child protection services over this period. Key elements of neoliberalism that have had particular influence in relation to child protection are: the focus on lessening risk, not the meeting of need (Culpitt, 1999); the individualisation of responsibility irrespective of context and alongside the rise in more authoritarian social policies (Craddock, 2007); the privatisation of public services; and the dominance of managerialism (Parton, 2014).

The influence of neoliberal ideas came to prominence during the time Margaret Thatcher was prime minister, and she and President Reagan are often described as the architects of neoliberalism. The privatisation of key public services and free market ideals alongside a more authoritarian state were key features of successive Conservative Governments in the 1980s and 1990s (Hall, 2011). The Labour Government that came into power in 1997 defined itself as 'New Labour' in order to distance itself from 'Old' Labour's ideals of socialism and collectivism (Hall, 2011) The political philosophy of New Labour embraced the market economics of neoliberalism, but with continued concern for traditional Labour ideals of social justice (Parton, 2014). Influenced by the sociologist Anthony Gidden's 'Third Way', New Labour 're-articulated social reform, free enterprise and the market' (Hall, 2011: 19) to create a social investment state that sought to facilitate the integration of people in the market as a way of self-advancement (Featherstone et al., 2014a). The global financial crisis in 2008 preceded the election of a Conservative and

Liberal Democrat coalition government (Coalition Government) in 2010. Hall (2011: 21) argues that the banking crisis provided an 'alibi' for 'wide-ranging, radical and ambitious reforms' as part of an ideological project. The 'austerity' agenda fundamentally underpinned by neoliberal ideology has continued unabated following the election of the Conservative Government in 2015.

# CHAPTER 2

## SETTING THE CONTEXT - LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The influence of wider policy and legal contexts

In this chapter literature is reviewed in order to contextualise my published work, which is appraised in Chapter Four. In the first part of this chapter I examine the political influences, value perspectives, and policy and legal contexts that have framed child protection practice in England over the past few decades. In the second part I discuss theoretical and practice developments regarding how social work constructs the relationship between the individual and society.

The ways in which a society responds to its most vulnerable children is central to the debate about the relationship between children, families and the state. When and how to intervene in private family life where there are concerns about harm to a child are dilemmas that continually challenge policy makers and practitioners. Compulsory intervention by the state has life-long consequences and the permanent removal of a child from his or her birth family is one of the most draconian actions a state can take. Alternatively a lack of timely and appropriate responses to a child at risk of abuse and neglect can result in serious harm or even the death of the child. Whilst the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) provides a set of standards and obligations in relation to vulnerable children, the ways in which governments interpret these requirements reflect the particular historical, social, and political contexts of the country (Frost and Parton, 2009).

### 2.1.1 Value perspectives and policy orientations

A seminal work in relation to child welfare policy is that of Fox-Harding (1997). She explored the historical development of child care law and policies in England and Wales, and developed a four-fold typology: *laissez faire* and patriarchy*;* state paternalism and child protection; the modern defence of the birth family and parents' rights; and children's rights and child liberation. In recognition of the centrality of values and assumptions in relation to children, families and the role of the state, these categories are referred to as value perspectives. These value perspectives have been influential to different degrees in different historical periods. Whilst all four value perspectives 'must be credited with some genuine concern for the well-being and interests of children' (Fox-Harding, 1997: 158), there are a number of key points of divergence, including the understanding of child welfare and the relative importance of a child's birth family; the views about the origins of problems in families and poor parenting; the role of the state as supportive or coercive; and the competing (or not) rights of children and the adults in their lives.

In brief, the first perspective, *laissez faire* and patriarchy, takes the view that the role of the state should be a minimal one and power in the family should not normally be disturbed. In patriarchal societies the power of men within the family is left largely unfettered. In very extreme circumstances state intervention is acceptable and should be of a strong and authoritative kind, transferring the child to a secure placement with a new set of parent figures.

The second perspective, state paternalism and child protection, favours extensive state intervention to protect children from poor parental care. The rights and liberties of parents are given a low priority, and there is a tendency to be more punitive towards parents who fall short of particular norms and standards. The child is paramount, and this perspective tends to promote the idea of the 'rescue' of suffering children to other 'better' homes.

The third, modern defence of the birth family and parents' rights, perspective emphasises the importance of biological families to both parents and children. The role the state should play is neither paternalistic nor *laissez-faire*, but supportive of families, providing various services to enable them to remain together. Where children do, as a last resort, come into state care, considerable effort should be devoted to helping families deal with problems and maintaining links so that children can return home again. This perspective emphasises the importance of class, poverty, and deprivation in explaining the problems many families face.

 The fourth children's rights perspective, in its purest form, advances children's rights as indistinguishable from those of adults, but more generally promotes the rights and participation of children in decisions made about their lives. The emphasis is on the child's own viewpoint, feelings, wishes, definitions, freedoms and choices; rather than on the attribution by adults of what is best for the child (Fox-Harding, 1997).

Fox-Harding (1997) argues that in the 1980s both the paternalist and birth parent perspectives were in evidence, with *laissez-faire* and children's rights having a more marginal influence. The public inquiries into child abuse in the mid and late

eighties characterised concerns about social workers as agents of the state. On the one hand not acting authoritatively enough to protect children from parental abuse, for example the inquiries into the deaths of Jasmine Beckford and Kimberley Carlisle, and on the other hand doing too much too coercively, as in Cleveland (London Borough of Brent, 1985; London Borough of Greenwich, 1987; Secretary of State for Social Services, 1988). Fox-Harding's (1997) analysis ends in the early 1990s with the implementation of the Children Act 1989, which is described as an uneasy synthesis of different perspectives that attempts to proceed in two directions at once, 'adding to the power of parents here, strengthening the courts and local authorities there' (p. 186). These four value perspectives continue to be useful in analysing how child protection policies and practices have been influenced by wider political changes over the past twenty-five years in England, despite the core elements of the Children Act 1989 having remained largely unchanged. Much of my recent work has been to question the increasing marginalisation of family support provisions in neoliberal 'austerity' England, and to advocate for greater attention to policies aligned with the third modern defence of the birth family perspective.

Nigel Parton has over the past thirty years provided a highly influential commentary on policy developments in relation to child welfare and protection in England. His book, *The Politics of Child Abuse* (Parton, 1985), regarded the 'disease model' of child abuse that had developed as fundamentally flawed. The emphasis on parental pathology and responsibility, and failure to recognise the strong relationships with class, inequality and poverty was critiqued, as was the social

control role of social work. In later writings, Parton acknowledged the limitations of this early work for failing to address child sexual abuse in the analysis, however stressed the continuing need to locate individual experiences and causal roots of parenting problems in wider social structures (Parton, 1991). Parton's work has been influential in highlighting the social construction of child maltreatment; how the range of ways of explaining, identifying and categorising children's harm are fluid; and how problems become constituted through socially acquired and culturally specific meanings (Parton, 1998; 2014).

Over the past two decades the comparative study of how different countries respond to child abuse and neglect has increased, providing useful frameworks for understanding policy contexts and political influences. A mid-1990s study of child welfare arrangements in nine countries differentiated two general orientations to practice: child protection and family service (Gilbert, 1997). In this study England, the U.S.A. and Canada were grouped within the child protection orientation, and Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany came under the family service orientation. These orientations have similarities to Fox-Harding's (1997) second and third value perspectives. The child protection orientation primarily focuses on parental pathology and deviance requiring investigation and, when necessary, adversarial judicial systems to confer authority. In contrast the family service orientation perceives the problem as a manifestation of family dysfunction stemming from psychological difficulties, marital troubles, and socio-economic stress, which are amenable to therapeutic interventions. The family service approach promotes more partnership-based practice with parents,

including a focus on voluntary arrangements for children in out-of-home care (Gilbert, 1997).

A follow-up study fifteen years later, which included the original nine countries plus Norway, found that these approaches had begun to converge (Gilbert et al., 2011). Child protection systems, such as in the U.S.A. and England, had adopted features of the family service orientation. For example *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (Department of Health, 1995) and the subsequent 'refocusing' debate in England led to a shift in *Working Together* guidance on inter-agency co-operation from an emphasis on protecting children from abuse in 1991 to safeguarding and promoting their welfare in the 1999 version (Home Office et al., 1991; Department of Health et al., 1999). At the same time countries that had been characterised as family-service oriented began to establish policies and practices to respond to increasing concern about abuse to children (Pösö, 2011). In the context of shifting policy orientations that struggled with the complexities and tensions of attempting to achieve a constructive balance between supporting families and protecting children, Gilbert et al. (2011) identified a new child-focused orientation.

The child-focused orientation suggests a focus on overall developmental outcomes, as well as protection from maltreatment, and envisages an active role for the state in promoting children's welfare from an early age. The child is viewed as an individual with a much more independent relationship with the state; an autonomous individual in relation to their family and a social investment for the future of society. Under the child-focused orientation the state advances

paternalistic policies, sometimes referred to as 'defamilialisation' that reduce the child's dependence on kinship networks (Esping-Andersen, 1999). This approach reflects a combination of Fox-Harding's (1997) child protection and children's rights perspectives (Featherstone et al., 2014a).

In the following sections I discuss in more detail policy developments under New Labour, the Coalition and Conservative Governments. Table 1 below provides a summary of key developments in the two decades prior to, as well as during these governments.

**TABLE 1 – Summary of Key Legislation, Policy and Events in relation to Child Protection**

| GOVERNMENT | KEY CHILD PROTECTION LEGISLATION AND POLICY CHANGES IN ENGLAND | KEY EVENTS IN RELATION TO CHILD PROTECTION |
|---|---|---|
| **Labour Government 1974 -1979**<br><br>**Prime Ministers:**<br>Harold Wilson (1974-1976)<br>James Callaghan (1976 – 1979) | DHSS circular- *Non-Accidental Injury to Children* (1974) | The Inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell - 1974<br><br>Introduction of Area Review Committees (later renamed Area Child Protection Committees), the case conference system and 'at risk' registers. |
| **Conservative Government 1979 – 1997**<br><br>**Prime Ministers:** | Child Care Act 1980<br><br>*Protecting Children: A Guide for Social Workers Undertaking a* | Child death inquiries in the mid 1980s, including Jasmine Beckford, Tyra Henry and Kimberly Carlisle |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Margaret Thatcher (1979 – 1990) John Major (1990 – 1997) | *Comprehensive Assessment* (DH, 1988)<br><br>Children Act 1989 | Cleveland Inquiry into child sexual abuse - 1988<br><br><br>*Child Protection: Messages from Research* (DH, 1995) and the refocusing debate |
| **Labour Government 1997 – 2010**<br><br>**Prime Ministers:**<br>Tony Blair (1997 – 2007)<br>Gordon Brown (2007 – 2010) | *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DH, 2000)<br><br>*Modernising Social Services* (DH, 1998)<br><br>Adoption and Children Act 2002<br><br>Children Act 2004<br><br>*Every Child Matters: Changes for Children* (DfES, 2004)<br><br>Children and Young Persons Act 2008 | Sure Start initiative – 1998<br><br>Tony Blair's initiative on adoption - 2000<br><br><br>The inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié - 2003<br><br><br><br>Publicity surrounding the death of Peter Connelly and two Serious Case Reviews - 2008 /2009 |
| **Coalition Government 2010 – 2015**<br><br>**Prime minster:**<br>David Cameron (2010 – 2015) | Children and Families Act 2014 | The Family Justice Review - 2011<br><br>The Munro review of children protection - 2010/2011<br><br>Inquiries into child sexual exploitation in |

| | | Rotherham – 2014/ 2015 |
|---|---|---|
| **Conservative Government (2015 – present time)** **Prime minister:** David Cameron (2015 – present time) | Children and Social Work Bill 2016 | Reform of Children's Social Care, including the promotion of adoption - 2016 |

### 2.1.2 Policy developments under New Labour

The period of time covered by the publications submitted as part of this portfolio spans the past decade. My first publications were written when the Labour Government was in power. During this time, the term 'safeguarding' replaced the term 'child protection' in order to signal a broader more ambitious remit for Children's Services. Attention was required to be paid to a wider range of harms than parental abuse and neglect, and also social work services were located within a broader project concerned with tackling social exclusion (Frost and Parton, 2009). Whilst some elements reflected a shift towards a family service orientation, a number of child death inquiries, notably the Victoria Climbié inquiry (Laming 2003), preserved the centrality of child protection. Featherstone et al. (2014a: 27) assert that 'New Labour maintained an uneasy and complex mix of child protection, and a broader focus on social exclusion and children's outcomes in a version of the child-focused orientation outlined by Gilbert et al. (2011)'.

The emphasis of New Labour was on 'transforming' and 'modernising' Children's Services, which Garrett (2009: 140) argues had neoliberalism at its 'dominant or,

hegemonic core'. Ideas about need were eclipsed by a preoccupation about lessening risk (Culpitt, 1999; Kemshall, 2002), with social work taking on the role of risk regulation and as expert mediator for problematic populations and vulnerable people (Webb, 2006). The use of individualised discourses to explain the sources of families' problems linked to neo-liberal politics of 'risk' reduced the complex, multifaceted causes of parental difficulties to one of individual deficit and responsibility (Kemshall, 2010; Parton, 2011). The New Public Management approach of New Labour led to the promulgation of a range of new performance targets, inspection regimes and league tables. These were built on positivist assumptions that performance and outputs can be measured in an objective and quantifiable manner, and in the process 'risk' managed (Tilbury 2004).

Parton (2009) argues that social workers were less concerned with trying to understand or explain behaviour and much more concerned with gathering information in order to classify clients for the purpose of judging the nature and level of risk and for allocating resources, thereby stripping the relationship 'of its social, cultural and professional significance' (p. 717). Depth explanations drawing on psychological and sociological theories were secondary to surface considerations (Howe, 1996). The distortion of what was considered 'good practice' within this command and control culture came in for considerable criticism, particularly following the introduction of new electronic Information Communication Technology (ICT) systems, such as the Integrated Children's System (ICS) (Parton, 2011; Munro 2010). It was argued that the ICS had the effect of increasing bureaucratic demands, taking front line practitioners from their core

task of working directly with children and parents, and encaging them in performance management regimes (Broadhurst et al., 2010; White et al., 2010). The call for a rethink of the dominant paradigm of child protection policy and practice, where services are characterised by complex procedures and policies to assess and manage risk, was not confined to England, but also discussed in relation to other 'Anglophone' countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S.A. (Lonne et al., 2009).

New Labour 'Third Way' policies were heavily influenced by the sociologist, Giddens (1998), who argued for a social investment state, which sought to facilitate the integration of people into the market. In relation to children, public spending, especially in their early years, was seen as insurance against future risks, such as criminal behaviour or unemployment. An instrumental approach to parents emerged in that they were constructed primarily as conduits to ensuring their children's welfare (Featherstone et al., 2014a). Whilst the discourse around child poverty was mobilised and legitimated, it was routinely disassociated from a rigorous discussion of wider family poverty and the impact on parents (Lister, 2006).

The early New Labour emphasis on universal family support services, such as Sure Start, were on a scale not witnessed before and within a tradition of helpful, negotiated support services (Featherstone et al., 2014a). Important learning emerged from national and local evaluations about developing easily accessible preventative provision and ways of engaging differing types of families (Tunstill et al., 2005; Garbers et al., 2006). Programmes as part of the 'Think Family' initiative,

such as the Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) and Think Family Pathfinders, that sought to develop more integrated working between professionals and a holistic approach to families with complex and enduring needs, were largely positively evaluated (White et al., 2008; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010). Although programmes in middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century reflected a more targeted approach towards 'anti-social' families (Frost and Parton, 2009), the political and media response in 2008 to the death of Peter Connelly heralded a marked shift back to a muscular child protection system focusing on the decisive use of the law to remove children from their birth families. Ever since the death of Maria Colwell some forty years ago, responses to the deaths of some children from abuse and neglect have been characterised by increasing levels of scapegoating and anger towards the social workers involved, alongside calls for change. *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004) was presented as the Labour Government's response to the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003), although Frost and Parton (2009) argue that it was used as a way of taking forward the Government's reforms that had been developed earlier. In England the hostility towards social workers following a child death reached its zenith with the political, media, and public responses to the death of Peter Connelly ('Baby P'), and wide-ranging reforms to social work and the child protection system followed (Jones, 2014). Although this was a very extreme and tragic case of child abuse, the numbers of children in care increased as a result of the 'Baby P' effect. New applications for care proceedings rose 36% between April 2009 and March 2010 (8,832 applications) as compared with the same period in

2008-2009 (6,488 applications) (CAFCASS, 2012). New care applications have continued to rise since, with 12,758 applications between April 2015 and March 2016, which represented a 14% increase from the previous year (CAFCASS, 2016). Drawing upon a qualitative document analysis of press reports about the death of Peter Connelly, Warner (2013) uses critical moral panic theory to highlight the 'emotionalisation' of politics. She argues that this has been a significant factor in driving the accelerating cycle of crisis and reform in child protection and the shift towards more authoritarian social work practice. The story of 'Baby P' was framed as a story of suffering, parental evil and catastrophic professional failings. Moral disturbance dominated accounts of the way Peter Connelly had lived, as much as the appalling nature of his death. Warner (2015) clearly links this phenomenon to the media and political responses that further perpetuated processes demonising and 'othering' families living in poverty and enabled more intensive moral regulation and social control of 'them'. This rationalisation was also constitutive of 'our' middle-class notions of 'respectable' family life and the accompanying socially constructed presumptions about what 'good' or 'bad' parenting entails. Reaction to the death of Peter Connelly, represented a key political event that helped facilitate policy reform under a Conservative led Coalition Government, the blueprints for which were already formed or under development (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2015). The cases of 'Baby P' and Shannon Matthews in 2008 were explicitly used by the Conservative Party as providing clear examples of the 'broken society' and the need for major welfare reform well beyond child protection (Parton, 2014).

### 2.1.3 Policy developments under the Coalition and Conservative Governments

In 2010 the Coalition Government of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties come into power and following on from the global financial crisis, implemented a tranche of public spending cuts in the name of 'austerity' that have continued unabated to date. The Coalition Government returned to the formal use of the term 'child protection' instead of 'safeguarding', and commissioned a review of the system by Professor Eileen Munro. Whilst the review provided an important critique of the blame-ridden, target culture, and made some recommendations about early help, relationship-based practice and an emphasis on a learning culture (Munro, 2011), it failed to address wider political contexts for families and professionals, and many of the recommendations have subsequently been ignored by Government (Parton, 2014).

Featherstone et al. (2014b: 1736) argue that a perfect storm ensued from the 'coming together of a number of developments around early intervention and child protection over the last decades'. The seeds were sown in the days of New Labour's social investment rationale, which saw parents' role as primarily to deliver parenting to children, and the child-focused orientation that viewed the child as having an independent relationship to the state (Featherstone et al., 2014a). What appears to have developed in the context of increasing poverty and inequality, and significant cuts in family support services is an unforgiving approach to parents: improve quickly and within set time limits or your children will be removed and placed for adoption.

Conservative politicians and government advisors have on a number of occasions spoken about the 'rescue' of children to 'loving' adoptive homes, and a need to speed up the process (Gove, 2013; Burns, 2015). This has been supported by use of neuroscience to argue that the first three years of a child's life are critical, and created a now-or-never imperative to intervene before irreparable damage is done to the developing infant brain (Brown and Ward, 2013), despite this interpretation of the scientific evidence having been widely critiqued (Bruer, 1999; Uttal, 2011; Wastell and White, 2012). Edwards et al. (2015: 180) argue that 'the cultural deficit model underpinning early years intervention and the focus on embracing change ensures disadvantaged families are automatically conceptualised in terms of risk, with little consideration given to wider structural and economic factors'. They suggest these claims are justifying gendered, racialised and other social inequalities, positioning poor mothers as architects of their children's deprivation (Edwards et al., 2015).

Although the Children Act 1989 remains in force, there have been a number of amendments and changes brought in by subsequent legislation. The Children and Families Act 2014 reflected the Government's priorities of speeding up the court process and promoting adoption by bringing in a twenty-six week target for care proceedings; foster to adopt provisions; and the lessening of the requirement for same race and cultural placements in adoption. However at the same time in 'austerity' England, many families are having their benefits cut, homelessness is increasing, children's centres and other family support services are closing, thresholds for services are rising, and the numbers of care proceedings is at an all

time high (Gupta et al., 2014; CAFCASS, 2016). A joint report of the four United Kingdom Children's Commissioners (United Kingdom Children's Commissioners, 2015) for the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child concluded that the imposition of austerity measures and changes to the welfare system has resulted in a failure to protect the most disadvantaged children from child poverty and reduced provision of a range of services that protect and fulfil children's rights. Pelton (2015) argues that poverty is the predominant context in which harm and endangerment to children thrive, and is multifaceted, involving direct and indirect relationships. Poverty impacts differentially on individual families, with particularly serious consequences for more vulnerable individuals and those without formal or informal sources of support (Hooper et al., 2007). The study by Bywaters (2015) is the most recent evidence of a clear link between social deprivation and a child's life chances in relation to their ability to live with their family of origin. He suggests a need to question the relationship between agency and structure. However in the English child protection system, individual parents are generally blamed for their problems and for the harm to their children, irrespective of their psychological needs and social contexts (Rogowski, 2015). The language of family support has all but disappeared from the dominant discourse, and we are in times that Parton (2014) describes as neoliberal authoritarianism. The 'small state' ideology of the Conservative Government is leading to more intensive and punitive interventions in the lives of some marginalised groups that is 'not a deviation from, but a constituent component of, the neo-liberal leviathan' (Wacquant, 2010: 201).

Parton's (2004) comparison between the inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974) in the mid 1970's and the Climbié Inquiry (Laming, 2003) in the early 2000's highlighted the social changes that had occurred in the intervening thirty years. It illustrated the impact of increased global mobility in relation to the families and workers involved with the child protection system in the early twenty-first century, leading to 'incredible complexity and fluidity', which occurred alongside the broadening of the responsibilities and tasks of the relevant agencies, particularly social work services (Parton, 2004: 85). Over the past decade transnational issues have continued to be of increasing relevance in the child protection and family court systems, and not without controversy. For example in November 2015 the Prime Minister called for a speeding up of the adoption process to end the 'tragedy' of children waiting to be placed in a 'loving home as soon as possible' (Burns, 2015). However at the same time Members of the European Parliament were conducting an inquiry into the non-consensual adoption in England of children who are nationals of other European Union countries, following a series of petitions to the European Parliament (Fenton-Glynn, 2015).

In addition there has been increasing recognition of other forms of harm to children. Inquiries and research studies have highlighted the widespread occurrence of child sexual exploitation (Berelowitz et al., 2013; Pearce, 2014). It has been argued that the dominant focus of the child protection system on abuse of younger children in families has been at the expense of teenagers vulnerable to exploitation (Jay, 2014). Some other harms to children can be linked directly to

technological advances (e.g. on-line abuse) and globalisation. The responses to some of these issues, in particular the risk of radicalisation, have been criticised for serving particular political purposes (Stanley and Guru, 2015).

In the context of increasing complexity, rising referrals and significantly diminishing resources, social work is being increasingly defined as a narrow child protection service. With services being increasingly focused on protection from harm rather than the promotion of wellbeing, families fear rather than seek professional help when struggling with parenting in adverse social circumstances (Featherstone et al, 2014a; Gupta et al., 2016). Whilst there are some innovative initiatives that have been positively evaluated, such as Reclaim Social Work and Signs of Safety (Cross et al., 2010; Bunn, 2013), many local authorities are struggling to retain social work staff and provide adequate services for vulnerable children and their families (Jones, 2015). As with families involved in the child protection system, the Government's response is not to contextualise problems in relation to wider external factors, but to publically shame individual councils. According to Jones (2015) these narratives of blame and failure of public services have a clear political purpose and are being used to further accelerate policies promoting the marketisation and privatisation of children's social work services and social work education.


### 2.1.4 Linking social policy to social work in my publications

The work presented in this portfolio examines different aspects of how social work in the child protection arena in England is practised within the changing contexts

of the past decade. Social policy and social work are mutually interlinked, and the connections between theory, practice, policy and legislation are themes recurring throughout my publications. A critical examination of how social workers' and families' experiences are influenced by contextual factors and dominant discourses is central to my work. The current political and policy contexts have provided the backdrop to my recent work. I explore how families and child care social work are being constructed as a result, and consider the situated position of social workers as part of wider systems that constrain their function and role. However social work does not have to take a subordinate role to policy and social workers are not bereft of agency (Keating, 2015). This is a central argument of my work, which seeks to examine what this role might involve and how it can be implemented in practice.

A key defining feature of social work is that it operates in the intermediary zone between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the state and the wider society (Parton, 2012), and as such is concerned with trying to represent and mediate between the essential subjectivities of individuals and the objectifying functions of the state and systems of governance (Philp, 1979). Parton (1991: 5) states that:

> 'We need to identify 'the conditions of possibility' of the discourse of child
> protection and demonstrate the 'space', which had to exist for this form of
> knowledge to develop. The space is both theoretical and practical. It is this
> space which can be said to provide the rules for the formation of statements
> and it is through this space that the discourse is related to social, economic

and political factors. For the space itself arises from shifts in these structures'.

Throughout my work I explore how a critical approach to social policy and social work can open up the possibilities for challenging hegemonic discourses to resist potentially oppressive constructions of clients and their problems (Fook, 2012; Fine and Teram, 2013). I consider how social workers can use their discretionary power in micro level practice as a method of enacting commitments to social justice, despite the limitations of policy and organisational constraints. In the next section I review key social work theories that frame the individual within their social contexts.

## 2.2 Theories for social work practice - The dynamic between the individual and the social

In this second part of the context setting chapter, I review key theories that have informed social work perspectives on how individuals' lives are situated within their environments, and the different emphases given to psychological and social factors. Social work has always been defined by its focus on individuals within their social contexts. However the relationship between an individual and society, and whether personal problems should be understood as a consequence of individual factors, social problems or a combination of the two has been and continues to be highly contested (Pease, 2013). Hardy (2015) argues that individualism and social reform has vied for prominence throughout the history of social work, and debates have been influenced by wider policies (as discussed in the section above). Evans

(2015), drawing on the work of Wright Mills (1959), traces this back to debates surrounding the origins of social work in the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century when the Charities Organisation Society (COS) viewed poverty as a private problem, a tragedy or personal failing requiring individualised support or guidance; whereas the Settlement Movement saw poverty as a public issue, a reflection of social disadvantage amenable to social and political action.

### 2.2.1 The influence of psychological theories

In the 1920's and 1930's theories influenced by psychological and psychiatric approaches came to dominate social work practice in the United Kingdom, with Freudian ideas being prominent (Hardy, 2015). The 1950s and 1960s saw the psychosocial model widely adopted as the most appropriate adaptation of psychoanalytic theory and principles for social work (Hollis, 1964). This model focused attention on the diagnosis and treatment of the individual's difficulties and the relationship between the practitioner and the client was seen as central to the potential effectiveness of this approach (Biestek, 1961). Social problems came to be seen as underpinned by the psychological needs of individuals (Rose, 1989).

However in the 1970's this increasingly was challenged from within the profession by the radical social work movement, which drawing on Marxist analyses reignited debates about social class and links between individual and community experiences of oppression and wider economic and social conditions (Bailey and Brake, 1975; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978). Although radical social work was to challenge orthodox views about the profession (as discussed in sections below),

overall it was to have a limited influence on how social work practices were undertaken. A greater threat to psychosocial approaches came from the neoliberal project commenced under the Government led by Margaret Thatcher, underpinned by the doctrine of individual responsibility and self-sufficiency, reducing the welfare state and opening up opportunities for competition in a free market (Hardy, 2015). Increasing attention was paid to managerialism and the associated development of an 'audit culture' that continued under New Labour. Behavioural approaches with a short-term outcome focus, and claims to greater efficiency and cheaper costs than traditional case work were perceived to be more responsive to the demands for certainty and absolutes, associated with the prevailing political, policy and practice environments (Ruch, 2005). Hardy (2015:19) states that 'many critics regarded the efficacy of such approaches as overstated and ethically suspect, but claims of rationalism, responsibility, applicability, effectiveness, and efficiency ensured that the cognitive model rose to prominence as a means of enhancing the legitimacy of social work practice'.

In the 2000s, there was a resurgence of interest in psychoanalytic ideas and their relevance to contemporary social work practice through the development of relationship-based practice (RBP). Ruch (2005), a key proponent of RBP, argues that it developed as a challenge to the managerialist culture that emphasised reductionist understandings of human behavior, and narrowly conceived audit cultures and bureaucratic responses to complex problems. The central premise of RBP is the emphasis placed on the professional relationship as the medium through which the social worker can engage with the complexity of an individual's internal

and external worlds, and intervene effectively in their lives (Ruch, 2005). Psychoanalytic concepts are complemented by ideas from attachment and systems theory (Ruch et al., 2010). The attention to relationships has been welcomed, including in the Munro review (2011). Ferguson's (2011) ethnographic work has been particularly useful in recognising the interpretative nature of practice. The focus on the affective dimensions of practice that require social workers to have a conscious awareness of the interrelated nature of their own and family members' internal and external worlds have highlighted the need for reflexive, self-aware practitioners (Trevithick, 2003; Ruch et al., 2010).

Whilst writers on contemporary RBP have emphasised the importance of an integrated understanding of individual and structural causes of social distress and practice within an anti-oppressive framework (Turney and Tanner, 2001; Trevithick, 2003), theorising has primarily focused on interpersonal dynamics (see for example Ruch et al., 2010 and Megele, 2015). RBP and other models of practice with individuals and families, including strengths-based approaches, can reinforce a process of individualisation and pathologisation, if the social, political, and economic contexts within which the families exist are not explicitly recognised and addressed (Gray, 2009; Roose et al., 2014). In a similar vein, the ability of social workers to develop effective relationships needs to be critically examined within the political, organisational, and resource contexts in which they practise.

### 2.2.2 The influence of structural theories

Structural theories in social work stress the connections between individual and community experiences of oppression and wider economic and social conditions. In this section I consider the influence of structural theories on social work primarily within a British context. Radical social work ideas, which developed in the 1970's, were linked to social class, and questioned social work power, roles and responsibilities. Casework was specifically criticised as individualising and pathologising people's problems so that the focus was on their inability to cope and their deficits, not the circumstances in which they found themselves (Jones, 1983). Radicalism was explicitly about social workers aligning themselves with social work 'clients' and challenging the systems that served to disadvantage and marginalise them (Bailey and Brake, 1975), in order to provide the basis for political activism and collective action towards social change (Leonard, 1975). However some commentators argued it offered limited guidance to social workers whose primary role was to address individual clients' needs (Davies, 1994). Wide professional interest in radicalism was to decline in the late 1970s, however, as Woodward (2013) argues, it had an enduring influence on social work ideas and theories of anti-racist, anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practice during the 1980s and 1990s, laying the foundations for debates about critical social work in the 2000s that continue to date. Discussion about the development of critical social work and what it means in practice are included later in this context setting chapter.

Alongside the rise of Thatcherism in the 1980s and the associated influence on social work, there was a continuing affirmation of social work's critical values that

represented both a continuation of and a reaction against radical themes. Whilst there were areas of convergence, the women's movement argued that radicalism was rooted in a white, male, working-class worldview, and that it focused on class inequalities to the exclusion of other forms of dominating power relations (Langan and Lee, 1989). Feminist theorists criticised how gender inequalities were overlooked in social work, and argued that there was a need to challenge the way that social work practices reinforced the discrimination and marginalisation of women (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Day and Langan, 1993). Anti-racist criticism had a powerful influence in arguing that social work could perpetuate racism through direct discrimination, and via less overt 'colour-blind' practices that ignored ethnic and cultural differences and people's experiences of racism and injustice (Dominelli, 1988; Ahmad, 1990). The social control dimension of social work practice was seen as particularly problematic, not only imposing class distinctions, but also perpetuating dominant ethnic and cultural norms (Dominelli, 1998).

In this period 'identity politics' was very influential and the later influence of the disability movement and other service user representations led to the development of anti-oppressive practice (AOP) that drew on ideas from the Black feminist movement to articulate the intersecting nature of oppression (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006). In the same period Thompson (2001) developed, along with others, ideas about anti-discriminatory practice (ADP), which highlights links between the personal, social and cultural. Whilst considerable debate occurred about the similarities and differences between ADP and AOP (see for example

Dalrymple and Burke, 1995), the terms have often been used interchangeably or jointly. For example Rogowski (2014: 46) uses the term 'anti-discrimination/oppression (AD/O)'.

Dominelli (1996: 170 – 171), a key proponent, defined AOP as:

> 'A form of social work practice which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with people whether they be users ('clients') or workers. AOP aims to provide more appropriate and sensitive services by responding to people's needs regardless of their social status. AOP embodies a person centred philosophy; an egalitarian value system concerned with reducing the deleterious effects of structural inequalities upon people's lives; a methodology focusing on both process and outcome; and a way of structuring relationships between individuals that aims to empower users by reducing the negative effects of social hierarchies on their interaction and the work they do together'.

There have been a number of versions and adaptations of what anti-oppressive practice is, and the work of Dalrymple and Burke (1995; 2006) demonstrates the increasing influence of ideas about critical social work from Australia and North America. Their second edition draws on critical postmodern ideas, particularly the works of Fook (2002) and Healy (2005), which will be discussed later in this section.

Anti-oppressive practice has been criticised from various perspectives. Anti-oppressive theories provide a basis for understanding dominating power relations, and forcefully articulate core social work values about partnership and social

justice. However Proctor (2002: 40) argues that the conceptualisation of power as 'monolithic, unidirectional and oppressive' can lead to services users being seen as passive victims of social oppression, and paradoxically recreating the very paternalistic relations of power between a practitioner and service user which radical workers have sought to challenge. Fawcett and Featherstone (2000) suggest that AOP's tendency towards 'oppositional discourses' (e.g. oppression/emancipation; racism/anti-racism; masculinity/femininity) can in fact 'often extend the very relations of domination that they are resisting' (p. 13). A commitment to anti-oppressive practice can make it difficult to negotiate the 'grey areas' of social work practices and recognise local contextual power relations, for example the value conflicts inherent in child protection work (Healy, 2005). Practitioners have noted the dissonance between emancipatory values and the day-to-day reality of practice (Blewett et al., 2007). The emphasis on oppression seemingly makes it clear how social workers should seek to avoid perpetuating unequal and unjust social power relations, but this tells us little about the legitimate authority that social workers have, and how this power can and should be exercised in proportionate and respectful ways.

Anti-oppressive practice has, on the one hand, been critiqued for being too abstract and offering little guidance about practice in statutory settings, and, on the other hand, of limited relevance as a radical theory because of its co-option into the mainstream. McLaughlin (2005: 284-285) argues that:

> 'rather than being a challenge to the state, anti-oppressive practice has conversely allowed the state to reposition itself as a benign provider of

welfare, as the solution to the problems of the oppressed, and via the anti-oppressive social worker is able to enforce new moral codes of behaviour on the recipients of welfare'.

Humphries (2004) suggests that individualised and unpoliticised views of 'values' concerned with being anti-oppressive means that social workers can persuade themselves that 'anti-oppressive' means what they say it means, despite having to enact the Government's 'neo-liberal economic and morally repressive policies' (p.95).

More recently in his review of social work education, a government policy advisor Sir Martin Narey (2014: 10) criticised social worker educators for focusing too much on theories of 'non-oppressive' practice, empowerment, and partnership. The Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Social Work (Department for Education, 2014) developed by the Chief Social Worker for Children in England makes no reference to anti-oppressive or anti-discriminatory practice or, indeed, to the social justice ideals of social work. It would seem that even the incorporation of ideas from AOP into mainstream social work guidance (such as the Professional Capabilities Framework) is being lost as social work, and particularly child protection social work, becomes reconstructed within the hegemonic neoliberal authoritarian project.


### 2.2.3 Developing critical social work

The first five articles included in this portfolio were written towards the end of the last decade and reference is made to AOP and RBP in these papers. The remaining

seven articles were written in the last three years, when my focus had shifted to developing ideas about critical social work practice. The development of critical social work originated primarily from the work of academics in Australia, such as Fook (2002) and Healy (2005), out of concerns about the limitations of radical social work and 'a rather large disparity between expressed empowering ideals of the radical tradition, and how people lived and experienced it' (Fook, 2012:12). A search for alternatives drew on postmodern and poststructural ideas to develop critical perspectives for social work. These ideas have since spread, although in the United Kingdom this has not been without controversy. Ferguson (2008) criticises postmodernism for its moral relativism and anti-realism, and Webb (2010) argues that these ideas are inconsistent with emancipatory models concerned with social justice. However Fook (2012) and Pease (2013), among others, have advocated for combining structural analysis with critical postmodernism to frame practice that promotes social justice. Fook (2012:18) defines a postmodern and critical approach to social work practice as being:

> 'primarily concerned with practicising in ways which further a society without domination, exploitation and oppression. It will focus both on how structures dominate, but also on how people construct and are constructed by changing social structures and relations, recognising that there may be multiple and diverse constructions of ostensibly similar situations. Such an understanding of social relations can be used to disrupt dominant understandings and structures, and as a basis for changing these so that they are more inclusive of different interest groups'.

Whilst debates continue about emphasis to be given to the ideas of Marx or Foucault, there has been a resurgence of interest in radical and critical social work in the United Kingdom and abroad, particularly in response to implementation of 'austerity' policies and growing levels of poverty and inequality (Woodward, 2013). Gray and Webb (2013:10) argue for the development of a 'new politics of social work' and suggest that critical social work reflects a '"zone of political engagement" for students, researchers and practitioners enabling them to take a stance of resistance or defiance'; however they take a dismissive view of postmodern ideas. Pease (2013), on the other hand, argues that Marxism and neo-Marxist analyses have important contributions to make to the resurgence of critical social work, particularly the way in which class and economic relations might be impacting on social and political outcomes, but this does not have to be at the expense of other critical forms of knowledge.

Numerous writers have demonstrated the usefulness of Foucault in articulating a radical and progressive vision of social work practice, and the ways in which dominant discourses and regimes of power and knowledge provide insight into relations at the micro level of practice (Chambon et al., 1999; Fook, 2012). For Ife (2012) a critical postmodern view of social work critiques the 'dominant social, economic and political order, with its patriarchal capitalist Western assumptions, and therefore provides the means for creating the alternatives that are so clearly needed in the blatantly unjust and unsustainable world' (p.170). Briskman et al. (2009) understand critical postmodernism as combining a structural analysis of

the material conditions of people's lives with a social constructionist analysis to connect people with a personal sense of agency.

In a thematic engagement with the origins of critical social work, Pease (2013) identifies a number of questions relating to future directions for critical social work incorporating structural, postmodern, and poststructural ideas to develop a progressive agenda that relates to the daily experiences of social workers. Pease (2013) argues that linking structural and socio-cultural analyses to the lived experiences of individuals has been challenging, and has plagued social work since its inception. It is a struggle about how to address the individual without succumbing to the pathology of liberal individualism. Pease (2013) raises some pertinent questions that are central to my recent work. These include: How can we move away from the dualism of the psychological and social, and develop our understanding of and the ability to address the subjective experiences of oppression and psychic effects of social injustice? How can we establish an integrated model of social justice for social work that avoids dichotomising cultural and economic injustices? How can we develop critical theoretical frameworks for social workers that problematise the power of state and impact of neoliberalism and create spaces for progressive and humane relational practices that promote social justice?

# CHAPTER 3

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS - DEVELOPING VARIED SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

### 3.1 A Critical Paradigm

My ideas about epistemology have developed considerably over the past decade and my recent work is more explicitly situated within a critical paradigm, which Cohen et al. (2007: 26) describe as being conducted for 'the emancipation of individuals and groups in an egalitarian society'. Critical methodology is directed at interrogating values and assumptions and seeks to address issues of social justice (Crotty, 1998), which is consistent with my developing ideas about critical social work practice, as discussed above. Knowledge is viewed as both socially constructed and influenced by power relations from within society. The notion of neutral or value-free knowledge is rejected and consideration given to how knowledge is situated and sustained by social processes that privilege particular understandings over others (Witkin, 2012). As knowledge claims are always embedded in regimes of truth, consideration should be given to domination, exclusion, privilege and marginalisation (Ceci et al., 2002). Contextual and socially generated dominant discourses cause certain ways of assigning meaning to events to be viewed as right, proper and correct within certain communities or societies (Gergen, 2001). These are expressed in the language we use, as well as the institutions that organise and regulate our lives, their assumptions and their values

(Witkin, 2012). This approach is especially important for child protection work, as it interrogates the socially constructed nature of claims regarding harm to children, ways in which people's behaviour comes to be known as abusive or problematic, the causes attributed and interventions based on such 'knowledge' (Keddell, 2015).

## 3.2 Methodologies

### 3.2.1 Focus groups and workshops

Qualitative methods are often, but not exclusively, associated with the critical paradigm. Realities are critically examined from a cultural, historical and political stance (Scotland, 2012). The articles included in this portfolio include theoretical papers, as well as articles based on small-scale empirical case study research (Yin, 2009). In the Gupta and Blewett (2007) article focus groups with social workers were conducted, and analysed using a 'thematic framework' approach (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Shaw (1996) identifies an advantage of focus groups as being establishing the nature and extent of consensus around a subject. Data is generated by interaction between group participants, which Ritchie and Lewis (2003: 171) suggest can lead to individual responses becoming sharpened and refined, and moving 'to a deeper and more considered level'.

This study used convenience sampling, as the participants were students on the post-qualifying programme we were co-ordinating. Whilst there are limitations to this sampling method (Shaw and Holland, 2014), the participants were a diverse group from different local authorities in the London area, and having them 'in situ' did enable the experiences of very busy practitioners to be documented relatively

easily. For this project James Blewett and I were particularly aware of the power dynamics inherent in us being both researchers and lecturers on the academic programme that the students were attending (Scotland, 2012). Ethical approval was obtained from our university. Participation was entirely voluntary and given the additional purpose of contributing to a government consultation most students agreed. Whilst I would not situate this project centrally within a critical paradigm, ideas that inquiry is inseparable from politics, and the aim to give voice to perspectives not often heard in dominant discourses were central to our aims. Humphries et al. (1999) draw on critical approaches to develop ideas in relation to emancipatory research for social work. It is my work with ATD Fourth World that is most consistent with the aims of critical and emancipatory research to promote dialogical relations of equality between the researchers and participants, and create an agenda for change or reform (Scotland, 2012). ATD Fourth World is an international anti-poverty human rights organisation. The two ATD Fourth World projects used a participatory approach to research and the co-construction of knowledge that Shaw and Holland (2014) identify as commonly associated with social justice. Holland et al. (2010) assert that research labeled as 'participatory' can be placed across a broad spectrum from those entirely designed and conducted by academics to those initiated and led by non-academics, including service users. Both projects were hybrid, designed and conducted by myself, and in the first project James Blewett, in partnership with ATD Fourth World workers and families. Humphries (2003: 89) suggests that 'participatory approaches arguably increase the validity of evidence, since they attempt to identify the concerns that

matter to people directly affected by public policy'. A clear aim was to include the voices of family members who live in poverty and have experience of child protection interventions; a group that are marginalised by class and further 'othered' by their construction as 'underserving' through their involvement with child protection services.

The underlying principle in participatory research is the emphasis on participants and researchers attempting to collaborate as equals, through sharing power in decision-making and by drawing on each others' knowledge and insights (Humphries, 2003).  How power imbalances could effect meaningful participation in the diverse workshop groups was clearly of importance, and attention was paid to ensure the process did not replicate oppressive power dynamics, but was in itself an empowering process enabling capability building. A clear benefit of working with ATD Fourth World is that they have an egalitarian ethos and long tradition of working alongside people in poverty. Ethical approval was gained and the on-going consent of participants reaffirmed at the beginning of each workshop. Family members were prepared and supported beforehand to think about the topic under discussion, and some small group discussions took place in separate groups, i.e. one for family members, one for academics and one for practitioners. ATD Fourth World workers and I co-facilitated the workshops and were attentive to the need to enable parity of participation, with the aim of the voices of all to be heard. In the second project, the workshops involved large and small group discussions that were, with the permission of participants audio-taped, and then transcribed and coded separately by myself and an ATD Fourth World worker. We then

compared our analyses and together developed drafts, which were discussed with a small group of ATD Fourth World workers and families before the final version of the articles were produced. This iterative process added to the trustworthiness of the analysis in reflecting the meanings of the participants rather than interpretations of the researchers that might be distorting the participants' meanings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The empirical studies on which my articles are based do have their limitations, including the small-scale nature of the studies. Yin (2009) notes that case study approaches have been criticised for providing little basis for generalisation. Through these qualitative studies I am not seeking to make any claims about being able to generalise across populations or frequencies, but instead am raising theoretical propositions, or what Yin (2009: 15) refers to as 'analytic generalisation'. This too is my goal in my writing based on case material obtained through work in the family courts, which I discuss in the following section.

### 3.2.2 Critical Reflection and practitioner research

Three of the articles included in this portfolio draw upon case studies from my work in the family courts. Whilst realising the richness of the data generated from practice, I have struggled with theorising and writing using case study material. I have been plagued with doubts about whether it is 'proper' research and worthy of publication. However over the years as my understanding of different epistemological theories developed, I increasingly recognised the importance of knowledge driven by a commitment to social transformation. I also realised the

value of multiple sources of knowledge and how family members' stories add depth of understanding and 'thick' data. Broadhurst (2012: 306) explains that:

> 'To consider the small stories of family support is to tread lightly trodden conceptual ground – in that such work may be seen to depart from the conventions of evidence based social science. However, in highlighting the small stories of family support, I give some profile to moral repertories that are generated bottom up. It is important to nurture such stories, such that over time they may serve to colonise and disrupt normative neoliberal formulations of welfare and its subjects'.

My growing acknowledgement of the utility of qualitative practitioner research in social work, which Fook (2001: 131) suggests 'must therefore be inclusive enough to embrace reflexive methods, used by practitioners themselves, focusing on their own practice', developed alongside my increasing disturbance at witnessing the lived experiences of children and families involved in the child protection and family court systems. Briskman (2013) argues that, as practice ethnographers, social workers are privileged by a proximate relationship in the lives of marginalised people and thus well placed to bear witness to such lives by exposing 'wicked' and unjust policies and challenging dominant discourses. White (2001) discusses practitioner research on one's own work and argues that it can be of benefit if reflexivity is employed to destabilise or problematise taken for granted knowledge, and it 'becomes a process of looking *inward* and *outward*, to the social and cultural artefacts and forms of thought which saturate our practices' (p. 102). The analysis of case study material is also consistent with the overall aim of my

work to explore the spaces and possibilities for social workers to practise in ways that promote social justice and human rights, despite constraining contexts. Undoubtedly both an acceptance of the legitimacy of the endeavour and the process of learning from practice have been influenced by my exposure to ideas about critical reflection. Over the past seven years I have been learning about, teaching and practicising critical reflection, and have been particularly influenced by the work of Professor Jan Fook. I was privileged to have worked with Jan Fook as a colleague and now to have her as my supervisor. The critical reflection framework provided by Fook and Gardner (2007) outlines a process of interrogating implicit values, beliefs and assumptions and identifies how these may be infused with ideas that support dominant power relations and structures through a two-stage deconstruction and reconstruction process. The Fook and Gardner (2007) model of critical reflection incorporates theoretical perspectives from reflective practice; reflexivity; postmodernism; and critical social theories. Critical reflection provides a useful way of self-researching experience (Fook, 2003). Whilst this model of critical reflection has been used widely in educational settings, it has not as yet been well developed as a methodology for academic research (Morley, 2012). I did not use a formal two stage process of deconstructing cases and developing a theory for practice through a reconstruction process, however the internalisation of the critical reflection process has led me to not only incorporate these ideas into my practice, but also to identify themes and link to wider theoretical ideas and debates that subsequently informed my writing. D'Cruz and Jones (2014) argue that researchers need to develop a theory of power. Critical

reflection has assisted me to enhance my understanding of the application of a critical postmodern theory of power to my research and practice (Fook, 2012). Ethical considerations have also been crucial in my deliberations about whether to use case study material in my academic writing. The material was retrospective and I was very aware of not having the permission of family members or, indeed professionals, to use information about them. I had no means of contacting most of the individuals involved in the cases. There was also the question of who to ask permission from. Was it sufficient to just ask the parents and older children, or did I need to seek out the professionals involved as well? What about younger children, and generally the complex power relationships to be negotiated with all? When eventually deciding to use the case material, I was influenced by the literature on clinical work in therapeutic contexts. The use of case studies has been crucial in the development of psychoanalysis. Analysts are encouraged to engage in writing and issues of consent and confidentiality debated in the literature (Kantrowitz, 2004). It is generally accepted that many writers will not be able to obtain consent and using disguised data that ensures the confidentiality of the individuals, while at the same time providing clinical data accurate enough to support the ideas is regarded as a valuable and ethically-sound approach (Kantrowitz, 2004). My main priority was to ensure that the case material used would not enable identification of the families involved. Although individual case studies were used to illustrate ideas in my articles, these were generated from themes that had arisen in my work, for example the treatment of some black fathers in the family courts. I therefore felt confident about being able to change details of the cases that might identify the

family members, and in my autoethnography article create composite case studies, whilst still maintaining the core ideas and themes.

When thinking about the ethical issues associated with using case study material, a crucial aspect is the purpose of using this material. I was also drawn to the work of Rossiter (2011: 992-993), who inspired by the philosopher Levinas, suggests that ethical practice involves analysing:

- what is left out from the discourses that construct the people we work with;

- what opinions are disguised as facts and the power those carry;

- whose stories are dominant and whose are not;

- the work that assessment does and who it builds a case for;

- how personal stories are an effect of social and political conditions.

Ultimately I decided that the use of disguised and composite case studies, even without the consent of the individuals involved, was a legitimate and ethical endeavor within the context of a critical paradigm that aimed to tell the stories of people marginalised by hegemonic narratives for the purpose of challenging and resisting the impact of neoliberal policies.

### 3.2.3 Autoethnography

Ideas from autoethnography have informed the writing of this critical appraisal and one of my articles that draws on case study material. Autoethnography appealed to me, as it can help us to explore the 'multiple interpretive possibilities' and 'discourses existing beneath or alongside the primary narrative' (King,

1998:1). Witkin (2014) argues that there are two basic subtypes of autoethnography that have been recognised: analytic and evocative, although there is not a rigid duality. In analytic autoethnography the emphasis is on 'improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena' (Anderson 2006: 375), whereas in evocative autoethnography 'understanding is sought through one's personal story and the emotionality it invokes in readers' (Witkin, 2014: 8). This appraisal is based on the former type of autoethnography, which is consistent with both the process and aims of my work within a critical paradigm.

Anderson (2006) explains that analytic autoethnography requires a dual role as a member in the social world under study and as a researcher of that world. He suggests that the autoethnographer 'should openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships over the course of fieldwork, thus vividly revealing themselves as people grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds' (Anderson, 2006: 384). The self-narrative of analytic autoethnography is used to develop, revise and refine theoretical understandings of social processes and provides distinctively grounded opportunities to pursue the connections between biography and social structure (Anderson, 2006). Laslett (1999) claims that it is the intersection of the personal and the societal that offers a new vantage point from which to make a unique contribution to social science, and explains that 'personal narratives can address several key theoretical debates in contemporary sociology: macro and micro linkages; structure, agency and their intersection; [and] social reproduction and social change' (p. 392).

Autoethnography can be a transformative research method (Custer, 2014) and a way of facilitating exposure to stories of people whose lives have been underrepresented in order to 'help us reduce their marginalisation, show us how partial and situated our understanding of the world is', with the goal of encouraging compassion and generating dialogue (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 748). However as Wall (2008) explains, autoethnography requires attention to issues of representation, objectivity, generalisability and ethics. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013: 4) suggest that instead of trying to keep a façade of objectivity, autoethnographers need to recognise the authenticity of their 'situatedness' and the role they play in creating and shaping knowledge. Generalisability is also important but not in the traditional sense. The focus moves from respondents to readers, and is tested by readers as they determine whether the story speaks to them about their experiences or about the lives of others; 'it is determined by whether the (specific) autoethnographer is able to illuminate (general) unfamiliar cultural processes' (Ellis et al., 2011: 280).

Relational concerns are a crucial dimension of autoethnographic inquiry and must be attended to throughout the process (Ellis et al., 2011). Key actors in my autoethnographic writing are the families described in the case studies, and as indicated above, identifying characteristics were altered to ensure anonymity. Holman Jones' (2005: 764) sums up the reasons for choosing to use this approach: 'Autoethnographers view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better'.

### 3.3 Contextualising my narrative

In Chapter Four I present an autoethnographic narrative of my intellectual journey developing ideas about critical social work practice through the academic writing presented in this portfolio. With autoethnography authors not only are present in their texts, but also are reflexively present by striving to be self-aware of how their assumptions, beliefs, understandings, values and commitments influence their descriptions, analyses and representations (Witkin, 2014). So what is it about my biography that influences the choices I have made when undertaking my academic work and the writing of this critical appraisal?

Being a person of mixed parentage, multiple and contingent identities as both an insider and outsider have framed my life experiences. As a child growing up in India until eleven years of age, 'race' was not a feature of my life. I was Indian. Although in subtle ways not evident to a child, my white maternal heritage privileged me. In Australia, where my family emigrated to it was different and for the first time I witnessed racism. However being able to 'pass as white' or at least in an Australian context of immigration, Italian or Greek, the racism was more 'by proxy'. I observed the micro aggressions towards my beloved father with his dark skin. Often he was deemed 'alright' because he was not Aboriginal and was a scientist, but I knew it was not right. However my most shocking exposure to racism in Australia came not as a result of my own identity but by witnessing the treatment of indigenous people when I became a social worker in inner city Melbourne. It was one factor in my

decision to move to live in London, where racism certainly exists, but at least is talked about more.

Other social divisions have also framed my life. In the context of being middle class and brought up in a position of privilege in a deeply unequal society by socialist parents, especially my politically active father, class and poverty also figured prominently in my childhood and subsequent life. In terms of the relationship between structure and agency, a 'family script' of mine was that we had to use the agency gained by our privileged structural position to challenge social injustice. It is why I came into social work and the type of social work that I still believe in. It is the reason why I have struggled with what child protection social work in England has become and why I am now writing about it.

A primary reason for continuing to work on an independent basis in the family courts has been to maintain my practice skills and first hand experience of policy and practice developments. Increasingly, however, in the last few years my work in the family courts has felt more like human rights activism. I came into social work to change the world, and soon realised that my youthful ideals were somewhat over-ambitious. Whilst I strive in my academic work to continue this endeavor, through teaching and writing about the role of the state and social work with marginalised people, my direct practice gives me opportunities to exercise my power and agency as a social worker to directly influence individual people's lives in ways that I believe are socially just and humane. This does on occasions involve recommending the permanent removal of children from their parents' care. I have to critically reflect upon and grapple with the complexities of care and control, and

how to use my power to make the process as fair and respectful as possible, in an inherently oppressive context.

Importantly I witness the lived experiences of families who are involved in the child protection and family court systems, most of who are living in poverty and at the receiving end of other structural injustices. As indicated in sections above, what has spurred me on to increasing 'moral outrage' is the context of child protection practice in 'austerity' England. Williams and Briskman (2015) draw on the concept of 'moral outrage' to argue that the translation of personal distress into public issues is at the heart of the political project of social work. Being able to contribute to the debate on poverty and inequality, and its impact on families and social work practice is not only a privilege, but feels like 'coming home' for me.

# CHAPTER 4

## DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES – A NARRATIVE OF MY JOURNEY THROUGH ACADEMIC WRITING

In this chapter I critically appraise each of the twelve articles included in my portfolio individually. I did consider examining the articles according to themes, but decided that critically appraising my articles individually and in chronological order better reflected an autoethnographic approach that documented my intellectual journey and contribution to the changing landscape of child protection policy and practice. For each of my articles I provide a brief description of the context and content, critically appraise the contribution made, and highlight key themes that run throughout my work.

### 4.1 Gupta, A. and Blewett, J. (2007) 'Change for Children? The challenges and opportunities for the children's social work workforce', _Child and Family Social Work_, 12 (2): 172-181

Whilst I had previously published one journal article and several book chapters, I have chosen to start my portfolio with this article as it marks the beginning of one of two periods of concerted attention to my academic writing. It is also the first article where I directly critique the policy and political contexts in England and the influence of these on social work practice with children and families. It is the start

of my journey in which I try to grapple with what is happening to social work in England, a profession based on principles of social justice and the promotion of human rights (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

This article was written mid-way through New Labour, when there was increasing awareness of the impact of the 'modernisation' agenda for public services, and concern about the effect of targets and an audit culture on social work and the construction of 'good practice'. Social workers studying on the post-qualifying child care programme that I was co-ordinating were frequently expressing concerns about the distortion caused by the expectation of slavish adherence to performance indicators that measured what was measurable, but not necessarily what should be measured. I was also reminded of this in my role as a children's guardian, when a looked after child's review went ahead without the social worker, parent, child or foster carer present, as it was 'due' and the form had to be completed, irrespective of whether it served any benefit to the child.

This article discusses the findings of a series of focus group discussions with social workers undertaking the London Post Qualifying Child Care Award. The semi-structured focus group discussions were organised around three main questions contained in the *Children's Workforce Strategy* (Department for Education and Skills, 2005) document. This consultation process sought views on how to achieve the Government's vision for a 'world-class children's workforce' in the context of chronic problems with the recruitment and retention of local authority social workers (Department for Education and Skills, 2005: 3). My colleague, James Blewett, and I felt we had a unique opportunity running post-qualifying social work

programme with workers from all over London to collate the perspectives of a wide range of practitioners and feed this back to the Government. The responses of participants were submitted to the consultation process.

Four key themes are identified, namely: the image of social work; bureaucracy; professional authority; and defensive/reflective practice. These themes are then discussed within the context of the wider literature on social work practice and workforce development. We argue that central to the debate on how to sustain a competent and stable social work workforce should be consideration of the consequences of initiatives to audit and assess performance. We also make the case for relationship-based social work, and a wider role for social work in preventative family support services. The research process and writing up of this paper was shared equally between James Blewett and myself.

In this article we promote relationship-based practice as being part of the process of resistance to the bureacratisation and target culture, and argue the case for reclaiming the centrality of relationships that focus on process not outcomes. Our ideas about relationship-based practice are consistent with psychosocial approaches that focus on the characteristics and quality of individual workers' relationships with service users. In my later work I critique the limitations of such an approach for failing to attend to structural power relationships and wider social contexts. At the time, however, this paper contributed to a growing critique of the bureaucratisation and impact of an audit culture on how social work practice was being constructed, which was later highlighted in the Munro (2011) review of child protection services.

One theme identified in this paper that I return to in many of my subsequent articles is the importance of preventative family support services and how social work is being increasingly defined by the centrality of child protection. In this paper we call for social work to be embraced as a central part of the preventative agenda as outlined in *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), instead of remaining or further retreating into the narrow role of 'risk assessors'. A decade later, and one which has seen the global economic crisis, the media and political fallout from the death of Peter Connelly and five years of a Conservative-led 'austerity' policies, my work now reflects a more urgent, possibly existential, crisis in relation to supportive state services in general and social work in particular. Whilst themes in this article recur in my later work, I don't at this stage articulate these ideas in terms of the social justice goals of social work. This reflects my increasing understanding of theories of social justice over the subsequent years, but also, despite many faults, a less harsh and punitive society under New Labour and the *Every Child Matters* policy agenda (Department for Education and Skills, 2004)*.*

## 4.2 Bernard, C. and Gupta, A. (2008) 'Black African Children and the Child Protection System', *British Journal of Social Work*, 38 (3): 476-492

Attention to issues of race and ethnicity has always been an interest of mine. My first published work was a chapter on black children, child sexual abuse and the *Memorandum of Good Practice* (Gupta, 1997). This interest can be directly related to my identity as a mixed parentage person and, in my view, heightened

consciousness of the situated experiences of being on the 'inside', the 'outside', and the boundaries between these. During my work as a local authority child protection social worker, manager and then children's guardian, I was aware of differences between black and minority ethnic families and communities that were receiving very limited attention in the social work literature. This article is a review of the literature on black African children and the child protection process written with Professor Claudia Bernard. The work preparing and writing this paper was shared equally between us both. It grew out of recognition, through discussion with Claudia Bernard and my work at the university and in the family courts, that the differences pertaining to black African and Caribbean children were not sufficiently being acknowledged in practice. Whilst in the academic literature there were increasing attempts to differentiate the experiences of black and other minority ethnic children and families, particularly from the Indian sub-continent, African and Caribbean families tended to be grouped together in research (Thoburn et al., 2005). Given increasing global mobility and the changing pattern of migration to Britain, we felt it particularly important to focus on the specific needs and experiences of African children and families in the English child welfare system.

Whilst acknowledging that black African children and families represented a hugely heterogeneous group, whose lived experiences are differentiated by their histories, cultures, ethnicities and social circumstances, we sought to review the literature to develop our understanding of some of the similarities and differences between their experiences and those of other black and minority ethnic children

and families. Three areas explored in the article are: the social circumstances and environmental influences affecting many black African families involved in the child protection system; specific parenting practices and caregiving environments; and social work decision-making aimed at safeguarding and promoting the needs of black African children.

In this article a number of themes that I address in my later work are raised. The social contexts of families' lives, including issues of intersectionality in relation to poverty and immigration status, are highlighted. In a more recent article on black fathers, I explore these issues in relation to three case studies, two involving black African men. The influences on social work decision-making of cultural relativism, as well as racist stereotypical and pathological assumptions are also discussed in both of these articles. The challenges of getting a balance between universal standards and respect for pluralist values in child protection work, and between protecting children at risk of significant harm, whilst at the same time ensuring minimal coercive professional intervention in the lives of children and families are grappled with in this article on black African children, as they are in later ones.

This paper on Black African children was important in the development of my thinking about how to apply anti-oppressive principles in practice. My later work develops these ideas drawing upon critical social theories and postmodern and poststructural ways of thinking about power. At the time this paper was published it was one of only a few articles on African children and child protection practice in England, and remains so.

**4.3** <u>**Gupta, A. and Blewett, J. (2008) 'Involving Services Users in Social Work Training on the Reality of Family Poverty: A case study of a collaborative project', *Social Work Education,* 27 (5): 459 – 473**</u>

This article is the first of my articles that specifically focuses on poverty and the child protection system. It is also reports on the first collaborative project with ATD Fourth World; a collaboration that has involved me working alongside service users (or as they prefer to be referred to 'families') in the co-construction of knowledge about social work practice within the child protection system. This article addresses relationships between social workers and families; the impact of structural inequalities; and social workers' use of power.

Using a case study approach, this article discusses a project that brought together families who had experienced poverty and child protection interventions, academics and practitioners to jointly develop a training programme for social workers to be delivered by the family members. Both the process of working collaboratively with service users and the content of the teaching relating to the impact of poverty on families' lives and social work interventions are discussed, and the paper concludes with a reflective evaluation of lessons learnt for both social work educators and practitioners. The work to produce this paper was shared equally between James Blewett and myself.

Importantly this article identified that the overwhelming message coming from the group was that poverty is not just about lack of money, but also the consequent impact on people's dignity and self-respect. When discussing how poverty affects family life, participants identified a range of far reaching consequences with

emotional as well as practical significance for their parenting capacity and children's development. Family member participants called this form of discrimination 'povertyism' and links were made to other forms of oppression, such as racism, in relation to how power relationships are maintained and families' experiences of powerlessness compounded. At the time the psychological impacts of poverty were less well recognised, and arguably this article was pioneering in this respect, at least in relation to social work practice with children and families.

I return to the theme of how discourses about poverty and inequality can impact on families' lives and social work practice in my later work, including with ATD Fourth World, and have been able to deepen my understanding of the affective dimension of poverty, through the Capability Approach and Ruth Lister's work on 'othering' processes. Lister (2015) argues that we must listen to people living in poverty and develop our conceptualisation of poverty's impact through their lived experiences. Only then can we begin to create anti-poverty policies and practices that are both effective and respectful. She singled out this first project with ATD Fourth World as an exemplar of how we can develop poverty awareness amongst professionals (Lister, 2006; 2013).

The project discussed in this article involves family members' participation in social work education. In the few years prior to this project there had been increasing recognition of the contribution of service user perspectives to social work education and a requirement to include these perspectives in qualifying and post-qualifying programmes (Department of Health, 2002; Levin, 2004). However parents who had involvement with child protection services were not usually the

voices of service users who were sought, in part reflecting their stigmatised identities and 'undeserving' status. In this respect the project on which this article is based was innovative for its time. Power issues are also discussed in relation to the process of involving service users in a respectful and meaningful ways thereby avoiding tokenism, a risk identified in other writings about service user involvement (see for example Beresford and Croft, 2004). The importance of reflexivity on the part of academics and needing to 'walk the talk' in relation use of power are also highlighted in the article.

This article, as with the first article in this portfolio, discusses the importance of relationship-based practice as a way of counteracting the increasingly procedurally driven, bureaucratic and risk averse nature of social work practice in England. The article identifies the need to incorporate structural as well as individual explanations as contributing to families' difficulties. However with the benefit of hindsight, I was over optimistic about how these two aspects were being developed within the literature on relationship-based practice, as discussed in sections above. I was also limited in my exploration of what anti-oppressive practice means in day-to-day practice, falling foul of the logocentric nature to the term 'anti-oppressive' as highlighted by McLaughlin (2005). I address these issues in my later work that develops ideas about critical social work.

**4.4 <u>Gupta, A. and Lloyd-Jones, E. (2010) 'The Representation of Children and their Parents in Public Law Proceedings since the Children Act 1989: High Hopes and Lost Opportunities?', *Journal of Children's Services*, 5 (2): 64-72</u>**

This *Independent Representation* article is the first of three in this portfolio that specifically examines work within the public law family justice system. I have in addition written a book chapter on this subject (Gupta, 2014). My interest in children's and parents' rights, especially their rights to get their voices heard in accordance with Article 6 (right to a fair trial) of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), developed directly out of critical reflection on my work in the family courts. This article and a later publication are co-written with a barrister, Edward Lloyd-Jones, who I worked with as a children's guardian in the family courts. I have found this inter-disciplinary collaboration very instructive and it has contributed to my understanding of human rights and their application to social work practice, particularly in respect of care proceedings.  Whilst we both contributed equally to the planning of this paper, I primarily wrote the article.

Drawing upon academic, legal and policy literature, in this article we critically analyse the changing nature and context for the representation of children and parents since the implementation of the Children Act 1989 over two decades earlier. Developments that strengthened the representation of children and parents and their rights under the ECHR and UNCRC are identified, however it is also argued that changes may have the effect of subverting the positive

developments introduced by the Children Act 1989. The influence of New Labour's 'modernising' of public services, including the focus on procedures, measurement and centrally defined targets, discussed in the first article in this portfolio in relation to local authority social workers, is identified as also framing the work of children's guardians and state funded lawyers.

The impact of politics and resultant social policies on social work practice with children and families is a theme running through my academic work. I return in later articles to more recent developments within the family justice system, particularly in the article on *Re B-S*, also written with Lloyd-Jones. In this *Independent Representation* article we discuss the impact of neoliberal ideas and resource driven, performance management processes on court systems, and warn of the undermining of many benefits and rights-based practices that arose following the implementation of the Children Act 1989. It would seem that many of our predictions have occurred, as we explain in our later *Re B-S* article.

Despite the constraints of the political and policy contexts for practice, in this as in my other two articles on the family justice system, I explore the opportunities offered by child welfare law to promote social justice in practice. In this article the focus being on getting the voices of children and parents, so often marginalised, heard within the family justice system. There are always complicated ways in which power plays out in the child protection context, including opportunities for both oppression and empowerment (Healy, 1999).

**4.5 <u>Gupta, A. (2010) 'Critical Reflection and Decision-Making in the Family Courts: A case study involving siblings with competing interests', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 24 (2): 197 -208</u>**

This article on siblings is the second of the three papers on work in the family justice system. It takes a different approach from the previous article, focusing on one case that I was involved with as a children's guardian. It is the first article in which I critically reflect on the use of power in my own social work practice. With the benefit of hindsight and greater understanding of the concepts of 'critical reflection' and 'analysis', I should have demarcated these to a greater extent. The article was not about 'my interpretation of critical reflection **and** analysis in practice' (p. 206, emphasis added), but critical reflection **on** my assessment and analysis in the case.

The case involves the competing needs of siblings in substitute care. Whilst this is a subject I have only written about once, I have for a number of years presented at conferences on sibling separation and contact within the care system, where I have challenged the ease with which many brothers and sisters are separated and lose contact in the pursuit of adoption for one or more of the sibling group. I can directly relate, and often do in presentations, my interest in sibling groups to my own experiences as a parent. A number of my presentations have been titled '*Children like Ours*?'. My work as a children's guardian occurred in parallel with my journey as a parent of two children. I witnessed the joys and conflicts that my two children experienced in their relationship with each other, within the context where the other was always 'there'. I felt reassured that if anything happened to their father

and myself, at least my children would have each other; a relationship that is likely to be the longest in their lifetimes. Yet at the same time, as a children's guardian, I was often placed in the position of appraising care plans for the separation of siblings. Were the needs and experiences of other people's children so different from mine? Whilst in some situations the children's emotional and behavioural needs required them to be placed separately, in other circumstances it seemed that the adults' agendas, both professionals and carers, dominated at the expense of the children's relationships with each other.

The case discussed in this article highlighted the on-going challenges of maintaining a relationship between a separated brother and sister, with one placed in an adoptive home and the other in foster care. Drawing upon the concept of reflexivity, in this article I discuss the influence of my personal values and the lens through which I see the world, in relation to my analysis of the children's situation and future planning. The influence of wider policy discourses and power dynamics on my own and others' professional practice is explored, as is the ability to exercise discretion and agency in within these contexts. Walsh (2013) argues that a social constructionist approach provides flexibility; possibilities for reframing concerns and finding different solutions than those presented by parties in adversarial family proceedings. In this article I discuss how I challenged the binary initially presented to me based on the powerful prevailing view of the primacy of the adopters' perspectives and that there should be no interference in their exercise of parental responsibility, and drew upon theory and research to provide an alternative view.

Although there has since been more, albeit still fairly limited, attention to the relationships of siblings in care (see for example Ashley and Roth, 2015), at the time this article was published, very little had been written on the subject in England. I have since received direct correspondence from academics (for example from the University of Sheffield) and practitioners in the family courts about how this paper helped illuminate for them the experiences of siblings in substitute care and inform their decision-making.

***Summary of themes in my early work:***

This narrative of my intellectual journey is in two parts: my articles from 2007 – 2010 and then my work from 2014 -2016. During the interval between these two periods of time I was Head of Department and my academic writing curtailed by the demands of my management responsibilities. My early work outlined above covered a range of subjects, some which at the time were innovative and original, most notably my work with ATD Fourth World, but also my writing about Black African children and siblings in care. The articles discussed above also have connecting themes that I develop further in my later works demonstrating the coherence in my academic writing. These themes can be summarised as:

- Exploring the changing contexts of child welfare policy and legislation, how social work practice is constructed within these contexts, and the challenges and opportunities offered to develop humane practice with children and families.

- Developing our understanding of the psychological and social impacts of material hardship on the lives of children and families in a deeply unequal society, and how social workers can respond in respectful and empowering ways.

- Exploring how poverty, race and other macro level power relationships intersect and influence the lives of children and families and the work of social workers, including the potential for micro level exertions of power and agency that challenge dominant policy and political contexts and discourses in order to promote rights-based, socially just practice.

- Learning from the experience of 'others', through hearing directly from marginalised families who have experienced child protection social work interventions and through critical reflection on practice.

## 4.6    Gupta, A. and Lloyd-Jones, E. (2014) 'Re B-S: a glass half full? An exploration of the implications of the Re B-S judgment on practice in the family courts', *Child and Family Social Work*, early online publication – first published: 28th August 2014

In the four years between the publication of the *Independent Representation* article and this second paper co-written with Lloyd-Jones, the main piece of child care legislation, the Children Act 1989, remained the same, but the context of practice in the family courts changed considerably. The Children and Families Act 2014 incorporated into legislation recommendations from the *Family Justice Review* (Ministry of Justice et al., 2011) that included measures to speed up the process of

care proceedings. This occurred alongside significant cuts to family support services and government policy initiatives to increase the number of adoptions of children from care. From my work in the family courts and discussions with students and other professionals, I had a growing disquiet about the implications of these changes for children's and their parents' Article 6 (right to a fair trial) and Article 8 (respect for private and family life) rights under the ECHR. Senior members of the judiciary also had similar concerns. In September 2013, Sir James Munby, President of the Family Division sitting in the Court of Appeal handed down a judgment, *Re B-S (Children)* [2013] EWCA Civ. 813 (*Re B-S*) that challenged the policy direction and provided guidance about what is required before courts can make orders separating children from their birth families, particularly in cases of non-consensual adoption.

In this article we draw upon research and policy literature to analyse the implications of the *Re B-S* judgment for practice in the family courts. As with my previous article co-written with Lloyd-Jones, we both contributed equally to the planning of the paper, however I did most of the writing. We argue that *Re B-S* provides welcome and timely guidance regarding decision-making in the family courts and a counter-balance to the neoliberal authoritarian policy direction of the Coalition Government (Parton, 2014). *Re B-S,* we suggest, sets a standard of practice and decision-making, which is consistent with social work values and the promotion of human rights. The need to support birth families to care for their children wherever possible and that permanent separation, especially adoption, should only be considered as a 'last resort' is restated in the court judgement.

However in the article we suggest that the standards set by *Re B-S* are unlikely to be fully implemented without much further attention to the complexities posed by the policy and practice context of social work with children and their families involved in care proceedings. In particular we highlight the influence of dominant political and policy discourses, including 'early intervention' based on neuroscience and the promotion of adoption as the 'gold standard'; resource constraints, especially cuts to preventative services and the high caseloads for social workers; and the bureaucratic demands of the various systems.

In relation to contributing to the coherence of my body of work, this article, as others, situates social work practice within changing wider social, policy and legislative contexts, especially in relation to the balance between supportive and coercive interventions. It is the first of a number of my articles that highlight the marked shift in the tone and substance of the settlement between families and the state in contemporary England since the Coalition Government, with this being played out in child protection work (Parton, 2014: Featherstone et al., 2014a). Two other less obvious, but nevertheless present, themes in this article that I return to are the importance for social workers to attend to the influence of wider policy discourses that demonise poor families and promote the 'rescue' of children to 'loving' adoptive homes; and the potential for social workers to exercise their power and agency, in this case by drawing upon case law to promote rights-based practice.

**4.7 Gupta, A., Featherstone, B. and White, S. (2014) 'Reclaiming Humanity: From Capacities to Capabilities in Understanding Parenting in Adversity', *British Journal of Social Work*, early online publication – first published: 23rd November 2014**

This article is the first to explore the relevance of the Capability Approach (CA) for social work practice. My co-authors contributed to the planning and development of this paper, however I wrote the majority of the article. As I am using ideas from autoethnography to frame this narrative, I need to acknowledge that my interest in the CA was not initially sparked by an academic study of the literature, but through curiosity about my family history.  Professor Amartya Sen, who developed the CA, is a relative of mine, and I was interested in finding out more about his work. My initial reading of *Development as Freedom* (Sen, 1999) sparked my interest in thinking about poverty as an 'unfreedom' or capability deprivator, and the role of social institutions to contribute to the development of individual freedoms or 'capabilities' to live the life the person values and has reason to value. Whilst widely used in other disciplines, the CA is gaining increasing attention in the social sciences in Europe, but its relevance to social work is under theorised.  I met with Amartya Sen and discussed my ideas about using the CA as a framework to analyse child protection policy and practice in England, particularly in relation to child neglect. Whilst acknowledging that he knew little about the child protection system, he was encouraging and the idea for this article developed from that discussion.

This article provides a new theoretical perspective to facilitate theory building and elucidate professional issues (Watts, 2011). It is the first article to explore the relevance and application of the CA to child protection policy in England, and one of only a few articles that consider the use of the CA in social work practice in the Global North. In this paper the CA is briefly outlined and its links to social work values of social justice and the promotion of human dignity highlighted. Drawing on the CA to analyse the current child protection policy and practice context, we argue that policies increasing poverty and inequalities serve to reduce the 'means' available to families, whilst cuts to local authority and community- based family support services are at the same time diminishing 'conversion' factors that would enhance capabilities in these adverse circumstances. Families involved in the child protection and family court systems then face a 'triple jeopardy' of punitive practices that fail to recognise the socio-economic context of their lives.

Whilst the CA offers much to different aspects of social work practice and areas of work, it has particularly helped my thinking on poverty, parenting and the child protection system. The CA offers a framework that clearly establishes the structural basis for poverty and challenges neoliberal ideas that blame individuals for their socio-economic circumstances. Being able to draw upon a highly regarded and influential approach developed by a Nobel Prize winning economist and used in an array of other disciplines helps to challenge the narrative of the former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, and the government advisor on Children's Social Care, Martin Narey. They have contended that social work

educators focus too much on poverty and inequality and teach students to excuse parents in poverty for their 'bad choices' (Gove, 2013; Narey, 2014).

According to the CA, poverty is regarded as a capability deprivator because it interferes with a person's ability to make valued choices and participate fully in society (Sen, 1999). It is a theory of social justice that stresses the intrinsic importance of people's capabilities, and requires poverty to be central to an evaluation of a person's capabilities and well-being. Poverty is not just about material resources, although these are important, but leads to the deprivation of certain basic capabilities, and these can vary, as Sen (1995: 15) has argued, 'from such elementary physical ones as being well nourished, being adequately clothed and sheltered, avoiding preventable morbidity, and so forth, to more complex social achievements such as taking part in the life of the community, being able to appear in public without shame, and so on'. These ideas resonated with my work with ATD Fourth World and the psychological impact of poverty highlighted in the third article in this portfolio. The dynamics perpetuating shame and stigma in ways that blight the lives of families living in poverty are considered further in my subsequent writing.

The CA adopts a broad perspective on the many kinds of constraints that can limit people's lives, including personal, socio-structural and cultural, and institutional factors (Robeyns, 2005). A framework based on the CA stresses the importance of multidimensional assessments that analyse the interaction of individual, relational and social factors on a person's combined capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). These ideas are consistent with much recent research on parenting and poverty that

argues that poverty impacts differentially on individual families, with particularly serious consequences for more vulnerable individuals who lack informal and formal sources of support (Ghate and Hazel, 2002). Hooper et al. (2007) stress the need for multi-factorial social work assessments. The CA recognises both the material and psychological impacts of low income in a deeply unequal society, as well as cultural sources of injustice that limit a person's capability set (Robeyns, 2003). Intersections with other social inequalities, such as those highlighted in my earlier article on black African children and the child protection system, are recognised and tackling these central to the CA's theory of social justice.

It is also argued that the CA provides a way for operationalising human rights (Nussbaum, 2011). Parental difficulties should not be ignored, and there is also an acknowledgement of the need for the state to impose limits on some parental rights and freedoms in order to protect the capabilities and rights of children (Nussbaum and Dixon, 2012). However families' lives, as well as policy and practice responses, need to be contextualised. A person's ability to exercise agency within situated structural constraints is relevant to us all, and the CA offers a framework for social workers to consider their use of power to strengthen or diminish family members' capabilities, as well as reflect critically on factors that promote or hinder their own capabilities to practice in socially just and humane ways. The work to produce this article enabled me to develop conceptual understanding of the CA that has been further explored in relation to social work practice in my subsequent work.

**4.8 Gupta, A. (2015) 'Poverty and Child Neglect – The Elephant in the Room?'. _Families, Relationships and Societies_ – early on-line publication – first published: 15ᵗʰ January 2015**

This theoretical article builds on my work on poverty and social work. In this paper I critically analyse the political and policy discourse regarding child protection practice in relation to neglect, including appraisal of two reports on child neglect published in March 2004. One is by Ofsted (2014) and the other an Action for Children (2014) report.  The argument I make is that the messages are similar in what they say and, more crucially, what they don't say. I assert that attention to issues of poverty and related inequalities, and the impact on families and services of government cuts in welfare spending, are largely absent from the dominant child protection discourse in relation to neglect.

Neglect is the most common category for children being made subject to child protection plans and care proceedings, and these concerns are most often taking place in a context of social deprivation and chronic poverty (Bywaters, 2015). However I argue in the article that in child protection policy and practice, child neglect is largely framed in terms of the individual pathology of parents, disregarding the substantial body of research on the effects of poverty on parenting, the complex inter-relationships between poverty and neglect, and the importance of effective family support services (Hooper et al, 2007; Burgess et al., 2014; Pelton, 2015). I also challenge the unhelpful polarisation in the debates surrounding the relationship between neglect and poverty. On the one hand minimising the impact of poverty because most poor people don't neglect their

children or alternatively focusing solely on material poverty. The former perspective is currently dominant, and is reflected in the review of social work education conducted Sir Martin Narey, a government advisor (Narey, 2014). However consideration of the latter perspective is insufficient and, drawing upon the CA and the work of Lister, I argue for the need for more nuanced analyses of the complex inter-relationship between the psychological and social impacts of living in poverty.

Lister's work on poverty complements the Capability Approach and enhances our understanding of the material as well as non-material manifestations of poverty. Lister, like Sen, argues that poverty has to be understood not just as a disadvantaged and insecure economic condition but also 'a shameful social relation, corrosive of human dignity and flourishing' (Lister, 2013: 112). She argues for a structural analysis to the causes of poverty and challenges the dominant discourses that employ individualistic explanations. She calls for a human rights approach to poverty and suggests that the CA 'enhances a human rights approach from shifting the focus from formal rights to the ability of people to exercise those rights' (Lister, 2013: 116).

A theme through much of my work is understanding how intersecting macro level power relationships influence the lives of children and families and the work of social workers on micro levels, in order to explore the potential for social workers to disrupt and challenge hegemonic narratives and promote rights-based, socially just practice. The work of Lister, which is discussed in this paper on poverty and neglect, has helped me develop my understanding of how discursive processes of

'othering' can shape how families in poverty are treated at institutional and inter-personal levels in the child protection system. Lister's work resonated with what family members from ATD Fourth World described as 'povertyism', as discussed previously. The political response and media reporting following the death of Peter Connelly is a particularly salient example of the 'othering' of families living in poverty, leading to more intensive moral regulation and social control of 'them', and in the process justifying more punitive child protection responses (Warner, 2015). These ideas have contributed to my developing understanding of how political ideology and policy contexts influence social work practice not only in relation to legal frameworks and organisational arrangements, but also with regard to how families living in poverty are framed.

Although not specifically addressed in either paper, my work on this article and the preceding one contributed considerably to my questioning of contemporary ideas about relationship-based practice, particularly in relation to families living in poverty. The centrality of poverty as a capability deprivator, with both material and psychological consequences, highlights the limitations of relationship-based practice approaches that privilege psychodynamic and attachment theories as ways of understanding families' problems and perpetuate individualised risk and blame discourses.

My increased exploration of postmodern and poststructuralist theories of power, through particularly the work of Jan Fook, has led me to also recognise the limitations of anti-oppressive practice theorists who have tended to focus on dualisms (e.g. oppressor and oppressed) and less on the exploration of social

workers' complex use of power within the political context of practice (Humphries, 2004). When thinking about poverty and child protection acknowledgement of the influence of dominant discourses is essential to understand how poor families are constructed and their subjective experiences; social workers' roles in these processes; as well as the possibilities for deconstruction and disruption in ways that challenge domination and oppression.  For me theorising critical social work builds on the social justice ideals of anti-oppressive practice, but offers a more useful understanding of the relationship between structure and agency and how both social workers and families can exercise agency, albeit within contexts constrained by structural power relationships.


### 4.9 <u>Gupta, A. and ATD Fourth World (2015) 'Poverty and Shame – Messages for Social Work', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 3 (1): 131-139</u>

This *Poverty and Shame* paper once again draws upon my work with ATD Fourth World. Ten years after the original work we decided to repeat the project in order to involve a wider range of family members, academics and practitioners and incorporate developments in theoretical and research knowledge, as well as changes in policy and practice contexts. This time the aims were somewhat more ambitious. Not only were we wanting to update the curriculum of the training programme that had been delivered each year to students on social work programmes at Royal Holloway, but also to contribute more widely to the development of critical social work practice. Rising levels of poverty and inequality, severe cuts to family support services and more punitive responses to families

involved in the child protection and family justice systems, consistent themes in my more recent work, motivated us to undertake this project.

The *Giving Poverty a Voice – Social Worker Training Project* involves half day workshops to which family members, practitioners and academics are invited. At the time of writing this critical appraisal, six workshops have been held. This paper explores the themes discussed in the first workshop on poverty and shame. The decision to start the series with a workshop on poverty and shame was influenced by reports of family members in the first project, as discussed in my earlier article on work with ATD Fourth World, that living in poverty was more than just lack of resources, but was also about being treated with a lack of dignity and respect. In the intervening years increasing attention had been paid to understanding shame as a socially constructed emotion with damaging psychological consequences for individuals. The growing body of research that emphasises the affective dimensions of poverty and inequality include the works of Frost and Hoggett (2008) and Wilkinson and Pickett (2010).

Chase and Walker (2012: 740) describe poverty as 'a meta-arena for the emergence of shame especially in contemporary British society where success is largely measured according to the attainment of economic goals'. They suggest that shame is almost always co-constructed; combining a subjective judgment of one's own inabilities; anticipation of how one will be judged by others; and the actual interactions with others, including professionals and bureaucracy that compounded feelings of inferiority and unworthiness (Chase and Walker, 2012). The workshop discussed in the article offered a unique opportunity to explore

these ideas from different perspectives and consider the relevance for child protection practice.

In the article we discuss the key themes identified in the workshop and through the use of direct quotes illustrate family members' and others' experiences and perspectives in their own words. Family members spoke about feelings of shame and stigma from simply having child protection professionals involved in their lives. These feelings were compounded by perceptions of pre-judgment and blame. They gave examples of feeling disrespected; often being disbelieved and treated as a liar; automatic assumptions that they had done something wrong; and being blamed for their poverty. The complex interactions between the shame of poverty and being involved in the child protection systems were highlighted in the families' stories, as were the possible consequences of increased social withdrawal, exclusion and reduced self-esteem culminating in a sense of being controlled and dehumanised (Chase and Walker, 2012). Participants also spoke of ways in which professionals can challenge shaming practices and minimise distress.

Lister (2006: 96) argues that '[e]nabling the voices of people with experience of poverty to be heard is one way of counteracting the lack of recognition and respect accorded to them'. She calls for professionals and academics to respect individuals, particularly their status as the key experts on their own lives and experiences (Lister, 2013). The on-going involvement of family members and other participants in the series of workshops, feedback provided to ATD Fourth World workers and myself, and my own reflections on the workshops suggest the process has been positively experienced.

My work with ATD Fourth World has been extremely powerful in helping me understand how macro level power dynamics, particularly in relation to poverty, are played out on micro levels and subjectively experienced by family members. This learning has not been gained just in the workshops, but also through working alongside family members on joint presentations and teaching. Hearing and reflecting on the stories of parents has contributed much to my understanding of how social workers' use of power can confirm or disconfirm feelings of shame, humiliation and powerlessness that families experience as a result of wider discourses that perpetuate the deep inequalities in our society (Dorling, 2015). It has helped me learn about 'what what we do does' (Foucault, cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:187)

An appreciation of the emotional harm of living in poverty in a deeply unequal society facilitates a better understanding of families' experiences, and how their lives are 'tales of structure – limiting and damaging – on the one hand, and of subjectivity and agency – rich and human – on the other' (Krumer-Nevo, 2009: 318). I am privileged to have been able to develop personal relationships with family members, to hear their stories, and get behind the stigmatising labels. This has led me to increasingly challenge dehumanising practices and 'othering' processes that negatively construct families involved in the child protection system through my practice in the courts, teaching and writing. It has strengthened my belief that any effective relational based work must view families' lives and social work responses within wider political and policy contexts. It also demonstrates the possibilities for social work practice to deconstruct hegemonic narratives and

reconstruct in ways that are experienced as transformative, humane and socially just. This article is the first of a series based on the *Giving Poverty a Voice – Social Worker Training Project.* One further paper based on subsequent workshops is included in this portfolio. Another has been submitted for publication, but at the time of writing is still under review.

## 4.10 Gupta, A. and Featherstone, B. (2015) *What about my dad?* Black Fathers and the Child Protection System, *Critical and Radical Social Work* early on-line publication – first published: 21st December 2015

This *Black Fathers* article is the second in this portfolio that is based on an analysis of case study material from my work in the family courts. The idea for the article came about through dialogue with Professor Brid Featherstone, who has undertaken research and written extensively about the engagement of men in the child protection system. We both recognised the literature in this area has largely overlooked the intersections between gender, race, class and immigration status. Through critical reflection on my experiences in the family courts in England I have become increasingly aware of the marginalisation and, in my view, unjust treatment of some black fathers. I have found that links with fathers' socio-economic circumstances and consideration of ethical issues in relation to irregular immigration status are absent from much of the debate and decision-making processes in care proceedings. The writing of this paper was shared equally between Brid Featherstone and myself.

Briskman's (2013) article provided vital encouragement for me to think about my role as a ' courageous ethnographer' bearing witness to oppression and the policies and processes that perpetuate injustice. My work as academic and independent practitioner offers me a privileged position to have my voice heard more easily and with far less courage needed than a social worker working for a local authority. Reading the court documentation and hearing the stories of many black fathers over the years, it was clear to me that these men's experiences were not just about individual social work practice, but wider systemic processes often perpetuated by workers believing they are ' "doing good" without critically reflecting on underlying ideologies that perpetuate inequalities and injustices' (Briskman, 2013: 51).

The critical reflection framework provided by Fook and Gardner (2007) helped me learn from my experience by facilitating my understanding of the social dimensions and political functions of experience and meaning making, and apply these to work in social contexts. It enabled me to recognise the possibilities for exercising agency in transformative ways in my practice in the family courts, as well as legitimising my role as a practitioner and researcher. This article on black fathers came from using personal critical reflection to learn from my experiences of working with black fathers that I often found troubling, and to link research (especially through dialogue with my co-author Brid Featherstone) with personal learning in order to develop possibilities for change within a social justice framework.

This article brings together a number of themes from my earlier work: human rights and how these are promoted (or not) within the family courts; influence of

macro structural level inequalities on micro level interactions; the intersections between different power relationships; and the influence of the wider child protection policy context on practice. Ideas from Critical Race Theory (CRT) helped us conceptualise how macro level structural power relationships intersected and impacted on micro level social work practices and the lives of Trevor, Frank and Abdul, the three black fathers discussed in the article. Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional view of social justice, that encompasses economic, cultural and political considerations, and treats redistribution, recognition, and representation as three analytically distinct but practically intertwined facets of justice, was also used in our analysis of the case studies. In the next article considered in this critical appraisal, I return to the work of Nancy Fraser and how it can be used to complement the Capability Approach.

 A central question, particularly in my later work, is how can we deconstruct the child protection project characterised by neoliberal authoritarianism towards multiply deprived families, and reconstruct more humane and socially just practices. By drawing upon case study material I have been able to explore discretionary spaces (Evans and Harris, 2004) and provide an original contribution to the development of critical social work practice.

**4.11 <u>Gupta, A. (2015) '_Learning from Others:_ An autoethnographic exploration of children and families social work, poverty and the Capability Approach', _Qualitative Social Work_ – early on-line publication – first published 16th December 2015</u>**

Although published on-line a few days earlier, this article was written after my previous article on black fathers. It is the third article in which I draw upon case study material from my work in the family courts. In this paper I use ideas from autoethnography to present my analysis. Early in 2015 I was fortunate to be asked to present a keynote lecture at the Joint Social Work Education Conference (JSWEC) to be held at the Open University in July 2015. I was given a very broad brief, which was to have a social justice focus and be consistent with the conference theme of 'social work education and research across boundaries'. After much deliberation and dialogue with colleagues, I presented on the topic of *'Social Work, Social Justice and The Capability Approach'*. My lecture drew upon theoretical material, research literature on the affects of austerity on families in poverty, and reflections on composite case studies from my court work. It was a privilege (and terrifying) to be able to present this lecture about social justice and social work to a wide audience. The lecture was subsequently placed on the JSWEC website, and was very well received, including considerable positive feedback on social media. This provided encouragement for me to write up the lecture in to this article that has been published in *Qualitative Social Work.*

In the lecture and in this article I cross a number of traditional boundaries. An autoethnographic approach using my own case material traverses the boundaries between research and practice, highlighting the importance of an iterative process that learns from the other. 'Learning from Others' is the subtitle of the article in recognition of the importance of challenging 'othering' processes that devalue the experiences and silence the voices of parents living in poverty who are involved in

the child protection and family court systems. When thinking about the application of the CA to social work, a number of discipline boundaries are crossed, as it brings together ideas from philosophy, economics, sociology, and development studies. The fundamental principles of the CA recognise the interrelationship between psychological and social factors when considering an individual's capabilities, and, in my view, challenge child protection social workers to think differently about the balance between structure and agency.

In her book, *PhD by Published Work*, Smith (2015: 78) talks about writing a capstone paper, which 'covers the essence of your core thematic content'. This article comes closest to being by my capstone paper. The themes from my earlier work have coalesced in this article. The paper explores the impact of dominant discourses and policies on social work practices and the lives of marginalised families. I discuss issues of human rights within the family courts and question how just our systems are for families facing multiple disadvantages. I also further develop my thinking around the application of the CA to direct practice and how it can be complemented by the work of other social theorists, particularly Nancy Fraser and Ruth Lister.

**4.12 <u>Gupta, A., Blumhardt, H. and ATD Fourth World (2016) '*Giving Poverty a Voice:* Families' experiences of social work practice in a risk-averse system', *Families, Relationships and Societies,* early on-line publication – first published 1st February 2016</u>**

This final article in my portfolio is the third paper that draws upon my work with ATD Fourth World. The paper is part of an Open Space section of the journal *Families, Relationships and Societies* that explores issues in relation to poverty and child welfare. Whereas our *Poverty and Shame* article focused on one workshop, this paper discusses themes that have cut across five of the *Giving Poverty a Voice* project workshops. These workshops were centred round the topics of poverty and shame; the impact of material deprivation; the politics of 'recognition and respect' (Lister, 2004); social work expectations and home visits; and re-imagining child protection. Hannah Blumhardt and I undertook the analysis of the transcriptions from the workshops, initially separately and then together, and we both contributed equally to the writing of the paper.

 A theme that family members highlighted throughout the workshops was the shift in local authority social work services from support to policing. The article provides an important contribution to our understanding of the effects of the acceleration of neoliberal ideology and 'austerity' policies under the Coalition and Conservative Governments. Parents described feeling judged without reference to the socioeconomic contexts of their lives, being blamed and viewed as if they were entirely responsible for their problems. Workshop participants acknowledged that some children do require protective action, however it was noted that the distortion of relationships caused by a risk-saturated system militates against effective work to support families, as well as the identification of situations where children are at risk of significant harm.

The discussions in the workshops resonated with the narratives of parents and other family members who I have worked with in the courts, as well as my reflections on my experiences of practice, adding to the triangulation of data informing my recent writing. The workshops have also helped me develop my ideas about the application of the CA to social work practice. The themes identified support the contention that a person's capabilities are determined by a complex relationship between resources and conversion factors, individual and social (Nussbaum, 2011). Agency, both for children and adults, is context specific and achieved through interrelationships with people in this context (Stoecklin, 2013). In child protection work relationships with professionals and how power is exercised on discursive levels and in the interactions between individuals are crucial to the promotion of children's and parents' capabilities. Whilst there is a need for the state to impose limits on some parental rights and freedoms in order to protect the capabilities and rights of children, my work with ATD Fourth World leads me to support Reynaert and Roose's (2014: 179) contention that:

> 'We should aim to advance a perspective on children's rights and the CA starting from a human rights framework that strives for the respect of human dignity for all people, including both children and adults, and acknowledges the necessary interrelatedness'.

# CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Summary of themes

In this critical appraisal I have explored the coherence, contribution and originality of the published work included in this portfolio. Through my published work I have analysed the changing contexts of child welfare policy and legislation over the past decade, and made a unique contribution to our understanding of how political ideology and government policies have influenced social work practice and the lives of children and families involved in the child protection system, particularly over the past five years in 'austerity' England.

My work on poverty and child protection practice, especially the incorporation of families' perspectives and application of the CA is, in my view, my most original contribution and on a personal level has been the most fulfilling. I have contributed to the construction of knowledge about the psychological and social impacts of material hardship and inequality on the lives of families involved with child protection services, and how social workers can respond in respectful, humane and empowering ways.

In my publications I have explored how class, race and other macro level power relationships intersect and influence the lives of children and families and the work of social workers, and identified potential spaces for micro-level exertions of power and agency that challenge dominant policy and political contexts and discourses to promote critical social work practice. I have argued that relationships

between social workers and families must be conceptualised within an understanding of social contexts and to do otherwise is to perpetuate the individualisation of risk and the blaming of families for problems that have more complex, including structural, causes. The current child protection system, I have concluded, not only fails to adequately safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of many children, but also is feared and distrusted by many families. A paradigm shift is urgently required in policy and practice. Whilst this is unlikely to occur anytime soon in England and it is easy to become fatalistic in the face of neoliberalism, I argue for the continuing and increasingly urgent need for social work to hold on to and further develop its social justice ideals and critical practices. At times when writing this critical appraisal I have questioned whether the voice and perspectives of the child is lacking. Whilst the focus of my later work, particularly my analyses of cases and research with ATD Fourth World, has been on the adult members of families, the children have been 'present'. Children and their parents' lives are deeply intertwined and the common binary juxtaposing children and parents' rights is, in my view, unhelpful. Thinking about parents in humane ways should not necessarily eclipse the needs of some children for protection from harmful parental care. Whilst my analyses have particular relevance for some forms of child maltreatment, particularly neglect, and a poverty perspective is less relevant when considering child sexual abuse, this does not negate the necessity to consider all children and their families' lives holistically within their social contexts, or question how social work practice with different

forms of harm is impacted upon by dominant discourses, organisational priorities and resource constraints.

## 5.2 Social Work and the Capability Approach

The process of writing this critical appraisal has contributed much to the consolidation of my current thinking and provides a useful opportunity to 'stock take' where my journey has taken me to date and where I go from here in my endeavours to develop and promote critical social work practice. A unique contribution of mine has been the exploration of the CA to social work practice with children and families in England. As a normative framework for social work practice consistent with the *Global Definition of Social Work* (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), I would suggest that the CA has the potential to offer the following:

- ***A conceptual framework for social work*** – the goal of social work being the promotion of well-being, capabilities and human dignity, not just a narrow remit of protection from harm.

- ***A theory for ethical practice*** - facilitating questioning and dialogue by social workers such as: Why am I doing what I am doing? How does my use of power promote or diminish capabilities?

- ***A qualitative - evaluative instrument*** - Is what I am doing in practice effective in terms of improving well-being and capabilities?

- ***A multi-dimensional framework predicated upon a contextual notion of causality*** – a framework that incorporates both individual and social causes into social analysis.

- ***Relational rather than individualistic thinking about people and their capabilities –*** an understanding that capabilities are dynamically shaped by interactions between individuals and their environments, including their social relationships.

Whilst the CA is an overarching framework it is open to much interpretation and varied uses. Robeyns (2015) makes the distinction between the CA and a capability account or theory. She introduces the idea of capabilitarian theories that are based on core elements of Sen's work, but develop in many and varied directions, drawing upon different ontological, methodological and theoretical ideas. In order to strengthen the application of the CA to social work within a critical paradigm, I have found it useful to draw upon other social theories that incorporate critical and postmodern ideas about power, including the works of Fraser and Lister. When considering how the broad principles outlined above can be translated into social work practice within the current child protection system in England, I have utilised my theoretical research, critical reflections on my practice in the family courts, and participatory research with families to develop the following ideas about what a Critical Capability Approach for social work with children and families would need to include:

  ➢ Dialogue and critical reflection that questions and challenges the impact of political ideology, dominant discourses and the policy

context on service delivery and social workers' own values, assumptions and practice, including 'othering' processes and the individualising of risk and blame.

➤ The centrality of an analysis of poverty and the complex multi-dimensional (psychological and social) impacts on families' lives and capabilities.

➤ An intersectional approach to understanding how macro level structural inequalities influence families' lives and social work practice on micro levels.

➤ An approach that works with families to develop strengths and capabilities in a relational context, whilst not minimising vulnerabilities and risks.

➤ Acknowledgement of the need to impose limits on some individual rights to protect others, for example limits on parental rights and freedoms in order to protect rights and capabilities of children.

➤ Recognition of the power of the professionals to promote strengths and enhance capabilities, as well as diminish and destroy (including power to shame)

➤ Commitment to principles of human rights, social justice and the transformative potential of social work

## 5.3 Future journeys

Much further theorising and empirical work is necessary to develop the application of the CA to critical social work research and practice. Whilst I have described my

narrative as a journey, it is by no means at an end, although this critical appraisal has been a very useful 'pit stop'. Many exciting opportunities beckon. I have started an empirical study with parents, young people and social workers that specifically addresses the question of how an awareness and analysis of capabilities can inform the development of critical social work practice. I am also pursuing my interest in analysing the intersections of class, race, gender and immigration status, and how these power relationships frame the lives of black fathers involved with child protection services and professional responses through a developing research proposal with Brid Featherstone. We have been discussing the use of the CA and Fraser's work on parity of participation as a conceptual framework for the analysis of our data.

The writing of this critical appraisal has been an enjoyable and extremely useful exercise. It has enabled me to critically reflect upon my intellectual journey, consolidate my work by drawing together themes from a seemingly disparate range of articles, and demonstrate the coherence of my work, conceptual and methodological rigour, and significant original contribution to knowledge about child protection social work. My goal of developing and promoting critical social work practice with children and families is, of course, an on-going one; an infinite journey but one that is well worth pursuing.  As a family member from ATD Fourth World (Gupta and ATD Fourth World, 2015: 138) explains:

*'I think this is important – the humanity should be brought back'*

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