**Power and Child Protection Practice: A Critical Framework**

Antony Schaffarczyk

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Department of Social Work

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**Declaration of Authorship**

I ................................................................ (Antony Schaffarczyk) hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Abstract**

This thesis is an analytic study that develops a critical framework of power in child protection. This framework performs two main functions. First, it is a case management tool that can be drawn upon in mapping out approaches to working with children and families. Second, it is intended as a tool to help social workers critically engage with and reflect on power, and the ethical and practical challenges of child protection to which power is central. To develop this framework, analysis of a range of theoretical perspectives and conceptual ideas is undertaken. The thesis first explores the history, and central roles and responsibilities of child protection. It then offers an analysis of the sociological and epistemological foundations of child protection on which understanding and engaging with power is built. An analytic study of theories and concepts of power is then offered, with a view to beginning to develop an approach that is specific to child protection work. These ideas are developed in relation to good practice in child protection in respect of power, with a particular focus on the relational dimensions of practice, where good practice is about working with children and families and the respectful use of power and authority. These ideas are then brought together in a conceptual and theoretical framework that looks to put power at the heart of child protection.

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**Introduction:**

**Researching Power and Doing Child Protection Practice**

**Starting Out**

There are things that stay with you as a social worker: key moments, and events that have a strong impact, where the magnitude of what you do really comes to the fore. Being involved in the potential removal of a child from their family home, although in this case it didn’t happen, is an experience that I always remember. Years later, I can still vividly recall standing in the family’s living room, and feeling struck by the enormity of the situation. At the time I was a student social worker and the decision wasn’t ultimately mine to make, however this experience really brought home what my presence could mean to children and families. It is one thing to know what social work can involve, another entirely to be in those situations and to have such authority. It was from this point that my interest in power began to take shape.

I had been asked to work with the family at the start of the week. We had received reports from neighbours about a baby girl and young boy living with their mother, that the baby was left to cry for extended periods and the young boy was often seen playing outside alone. There were also concerns raised about parties going on until late at night, lots of comings and goings from the home, and most concerning about the mothers drug use. I had gone out to begin initial enquiries and get permission for information checks with other agencies, but no one had answered the door, despite it seeming someone was in. Concerns about the child had increased over the week due to further reports from the neighbours. On the day in question, my fourth attempted visit that week, the door was answered by a woman who said she was a friend of the mother’s but wouldn’t give her name. I asked to come in, only to hear the mother shout through, “tell ‘im I’m not in”.

As the reports we did have were becoming more worrying, we decided to dispense with waiting for consent for information sharing and called the boy’s school, the baby girl’s health visitor and the police for further information. Things moved quickly from this point – as they often can in child protection. The boy’s school had also been getting worried as the boy, who had begun at the school only a few months back, was described as being often late, and looking tired and dishevelled, and recently he had been absent on a number of occasions. The health visitor had not been able to see the baby girl at all. My practice educator called the police, to find that they had also received reports about late parties and drugs. On this basis and the challenges I had in getting into the house that week, a joint visit with an officer was agreed. My practice educator and I arrived at the police station to find the on-duty sergeant had pulled together further information about the people it was reported were going round to the house. It turned out that it was suspected that the house was being used by local drug dealers given some of the names they had been and what the police knew about these people was worrying. It was felt that this significantly increased the potential risks of harm to the children, and agreed that we needed to get inside and establish whether the children were safe. The sergeant felt a significant police presence was needed because of the people who might be involved.

This was how I ended up at the family’s door, on a cold, dark winter’s night, with my practice educator, the duty sergeant and six more police officers. My practice educator and I, along with the duty sergeant and another officer went to the door. We were, unsurprisingly, let into the house this time. What I most remember is the scene as we entered: my Practice Educator and I in long, dark winter coats, with the police behind us. The mother was instantly fearful about why we were there with the police, and she was told in no uncertain times by the sergeant of the seriousness of the situation and that if he felt the children weren’t safe he would be using Police Powers of Protection. She began to cry and scream that we couldn’t take her children away, and took hold of the baby girl. Her friend was still there and began to shout too, and the older boy picking up on all this, also began to sob.

We had to assess the house for signs of drug use or other immediate safety concerns, and then talk to the family, including the children, about the concerns that had been raised. As it happened, there was no evidence of any drug use, and no one else was present. The home conditions were poor and the house was unclean to a degree that did raise concerns about the children’s welfare, but not to such an extent that there were immediate dangers or signs of substantive neglect. I spoke with the boy, who talked about things at home being ok but his mum and dad, who he saw at weekends, argued a lot. He said that his mum had friends round and some were men, but there was no signs in this discussion of him seeing drug use, and he did not know any of the names the police had given. We told the family as soon as the decision was made for the children to remain at home, and then had a frank discussion with the mother about what had been happening.

I recall being somewhat taken aback by how stern the sergeant was in his approach, having not spent much time with the police at this point. The mother denied using drugs, or that the people the police named came round to the house. She argued that she had problems with the neighbours that led to them making malicious reports to Children’s Services and to the police. She was asked, although she had little choice really, to sign a written agreement that she would work with us to address the worries professionals had about the children. It was agreed that I would go back the following day to speak to the mother further and would see the boy in school. This was to be the beginning of a longer-term period of work with the family.

Although I entered child protection social work knowing that you will have to exercise power in ways that will be coercive and have a huge significance, this was my first real experience of what it actually was like to do so. It was a situation that represents what families fear the most about ‘Social Services’: of social workers coming in and removing children (Ayre, 2001; Pond, 2011). One of the things I can distinctively recollect was wanting to say something comforting to the family when we came in, something to help calm the situation and to explain what was happening, but I also realised that I couldn’t offer false comfort. So I stood there not really knowing what to say, and feely both oddly helpless and in a position where we could exercise power in a hugely significant way.

Reflecting back on this situation, my practice educator and I discussed how, with the benefit of hindsight, the approach we had taken had not been required and had caused undue distress to the family. It could, rightly in many senses, be argued that our power as professionals was exercised an overly authoritarian way –even though it was the police who would have been using their powers in this instance, it was still very much a process which we as the social workers were central to.

Although I question it, I still to this day however, think that the decisions we made were the right ones at the time given the limited information we had and the potential risks to the children from some of the people thought to be going to the house. Later on, as my work with this family progressed, the mother openly said that she initially had no intention of letting me in, and the shock of that evenings events and the stark choice she was given was what made her change her mind. She always denied drug use, or having people known to be drug dealers at the house; but, to use her words, ‘it’s not like I’m gonna tell you everything is it, you’re the Social’. Without the power to get inside the house, it may have been that the concerns about the children’s safety would not have been addressed. Or it may have been actually the reports were malicious and things were not as bad as feared. It could also have been the case that with a bit more of an authoritative approach at the door earlier in the day I may have gotten in and avoided the need for the visit with the police; or with more time I may have been able to establish some kind of relationship and get into the house with a bit more persistence. I will never know what the ‘right’ answer is, and have to live with the decisions I have made in my work as a social worker: and more significantly, so will the children and families I have worked with.

The removal of a child is amongst one of the most powerful things any professional can do. Social worker’s day-to-day practice is however laden with many different circumstances where power is exercised in some way. Fundamentally, decision-making and relationships in child protection are about power, and the kinds of courses of action that are needed to effectively protect children. Social workers have to be willing to be authoritative and to make difficult decisions, and they have to do so in conditions of uncertainty where the outcomes are unclear. In these circumstances, the exercise of power can be constructive and protective, and central to achieving positive outcomes for children and families. But there are also concerns about how this plays out in a child protection system that can be seen to be dominated by a kind of systematised, ‘muscular authoritarianism’, where the threat of the exercise of power becomes a driving mechanism of interventions, with families receiving a lot of criticism and little support (Featherstone et al., 2014, p. 2). Questions about power in child protection are also questions about how we work with children and families. Child protection should be about helping families, and we don’t simply do this by telling people what to do, but through understanding, empathy, support and encouragement. This thesis is about my attempts to wrestle with these challenges of exercising power, and how we engage with power as a central, defining feature of child protection.

**Talking about Power: The Gap between Theory and Practice**

What particularly led me to this research was how, from my experiences of doing child protection work, there has appeared to be little discussion of power in practice, despite it being such a central part of child protection work. What is more, when starting out, I was struck by how unprepared I felt for the challenges of child protection in relation to the use of power and the professional authority. This was both about coming to terms with the importance of the role you have and decisions you make as a social worker, but it was also a discomfort of having authority and the need at times to be challenging and firm in dealing with people. In both of these respects, about the general lack of discussion and analysis of power, and in particular the way power is a fundamental part of the learning to do child protection, I also found that social work theory did not reflect my experiences. Power is a prevalent theme in social work theory, and it is addressed in some approaches to child protection, but there still seemed to be few approaches that really addressed the feelings and challenges of child protection – certainly at the time when this study was beginning to take shape – and none that offered a framework I could apply to my practice. It was this feeling that there is a gap between social work theory and child protection practice in how we understand and engage with power that particularly motivated this research.

In one respect, this gap is about the overarching challenges in the relationship between research, theory and practice in social work (Evans and Hardy, 2010; Trevithick, 2012a). One of the fundamental problems here is that the pressures social workers are under means they generally have little time and space to keep up-to-date with theory and research, and to develop ideas and formulations, and to quite basically think and reflect on their work (Munro, 2011b; Pithouse et al., 2012). Research into the relationship between theory, research and practice also suggests that challenges exist because of the wide range of differing theoretical approaches and areas of knowledge social workers are expected to draw upon (Trevithick, 2012b); a focus in doing social work on ‘practice wisdom’ and knowledge gained through experience, set in contrast to ‘theory’ (Sheppard 1995; Jones, 1996; Parton, 2000); and the way that contemporary social work is broken down into a series of procedural, often quite technical tasks (Parton, 2009; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Munro, 2011b).

In doing child protection work, I came to think that there is more to be said about a gap between theory and practice when it comes to understanding and exercising power, and that the problem is also about how discourse and analysis about power in social work theory is framed. The influence of critical social work and particularly anti-oppressive practice is significant here. Critical social work theory covers a whole range of ideas and approaches, but power is common theme, and many prominent approaches to critical social work focus on how social work should be about understanding how people’s lives are affected by discrimination, disadvantage and unequal, oppressive power relations, and empowering people and working with them towards challenging and changing these dynamics (Gray and Webb, 2012).

In the UK, anti-oppressive practice sits at the fore of these critical perspectives and it is often presented as a unifying approach to critical social work (Baines, 2007b; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Thompson, 2012; Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). Anti-oppressive practice is about challenging specific kinds of discrimination because of gender, ethnicity, class, age, disability, sexuality, religion and so forth; but it is also about recognising how oppression is fundamentally about the misuses and abuses of power, and establishing a fuller, holistic approach to understanding people’s experiences of prejudice, disadvantage and repression. It sets out an approach to social work practice that involves challenging the status quo and societal inequalities, and promoting social justice at every level of practice (Dominelli, 2002; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Thompson, 2012).

My experiences as a social work student engaging with anti-oppressive and critical social work ideas shaped my early formulations of this problem of the lack of discussion and analysis of power in child protection, and the gap here between theory and practice. Across my time training to be a social worker, anti-oppressive practice was central to everything we learned, and it was presented as an orientating value framework for social work (Dominelli, 2002; Tomlinson, 2002). For example, in the qualifying programme I completed, there was a specific course on anti-oppressive practice, alongside a course on critical social theory, and a course on identity and diversity; there was then also a section on the mark sheets for every assignment about anti-oppressive practice, and it featured prominently in reflective sessions and in our placement portfolios. There was much for this, and this learning made me question my own values and identity, and the work I do as a social worker, including being continually aware of how child protection interventions can be experienced as oppressive and disenfranchising. I hope I carry this questioning stance with me to this day.

But I was never able to satisfactorily tally these theoretical perspectives to my experiences of practice, where, like the situation I described at the outset of this chapter, the power and authority that social workers have is evident, and often this is a necessary and fundamental feature of areas like child protection. This kind of exercise of authority, and the complexities it evokes in questioning the right thing to do and how to achieve constructive outcomes when you have such potentially significant powers in respect of people’s lives, seems to be barely considered in the literature on anti-oppressive practice. The need for power to be used to challenge oppression, including abuse and violence is recognised, although there is little if any discussion of this or the exercise of power and authority. This then leads to the exercise of any power in social work practice to be too easily cast in pejorative terms, with power being cast a dubious and prohibitive force. As Gardner (2008, p. 50) argues in the context of social work with adults,

Within the terms of AOP, it is difficult to see these powers as anything but problematic, something we have to do, but which does not ‘fit’ the theory. But whilst our powers and responsibilities need to be handled with a critical awareness, it is not helpful only to see them in problematic terms. Power can easily be abused, but exercising power is not intrinsically oppressive.

This neatly reflected my concerns about how anti-oppressive and critical theory seemed to stymie engaging with power as a constructive and necessary part of child protection, and how authoritative practice can be good social work.

Another problem that I had with anti-oppressive theory and similar critical approaches to social work was how much they expect of social workers, and from the children and families they work with. In these perspectives social work interventions become nothing less than the instruments of social change: where social workers are expected to always work alongside people, to focus on understanding their experiences of oppression, and to challenge unjust social systems (Mullaly, 2002; Dumbrill, 2003; Strega, 2007; Nzira and Williams, 2009; Thompson, 2012). Social workers themselves are also expected to be politically active and engaged in struggles for equality, including inside their own organisations (Dominelli, 2004).

To me however, this seemed a lot to ask of social workers, especially when they already have such significant responsibilities in their work with individuals and families, including things like organising and gatekeeping of practical support, therapeutic work, protecting vulnerable people, case management and service provision, advocacy and a whole range of practical challenges. Further, anti-oppressive and other critical approaches seemed dismissive of these efforts, with practical help and therapeutic work with people being cast as helping people to manage and contributing towards the ‘maintenance’ of existing social systems and inequalities, and contrasted to ‘emancipatory’ practices (Dominelli, 2002; Thompson, 2012). Finally, what also struck me about these perspectives was how it could seem that they presume to speak for people in saying what people want from social work involvement in their lives and seeing them as oppressed and disempowered. There was little analysis of people who don’t want ‘emancipatory’ involvement in their lives, or who don’t agree with the kind of – ultimately left wing – social and political ideals espoused in anti-oppressive and critical theory. In this regard, overtly political and anti-oppressive approaches to social work can seem to demand adherence to particular beliefs and values, whilst talking about empowerment and partnership (Millar, 2008).

As I first qualified as a social worker and then gained experience as a practitioner in child protection, I also encountered a different yet related problem. Children have to be at the heart of everything we do in child protection, and there is a strong focus in child protection on risk and being ‘child-centred’ to ensure that child protection interventions remain focused on a child’s safety and welfare (Parton, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2014). This can include having a healthy air of scepticism, and being dogged and resolute in pursuing enquiries and courses of action to protect children (Welbourne, 2012; Tuck, 2013). The problem here is that this can mean that investigative, authoritarian methods become the modus operandi of child protection practice, accompanied by a perceived need to be ‘streetwise’, and a high level of cynicism and challenge towards families (Featherstone et al., 2014). This is especially the case when busy, overwhelmed social workers are struggling just to get by, and have to focus on assessment and intervention, narrowly conceived, and removed from ideas about family welfare and support (Lonne et al., 2009). Here, the problem of the gap between theory and practice can be considered from an alternative, contrasting perspective, with practice seemingly going its own way without proper critical analysis and reflection about power, or the potential for interventions to be overly authoritarian and harmful to families in their own right.

My experience of power in child protection was therefore that there was little to effectively help me to understand how to exercise power in constructive and authoritative ways. Indeed, prominent aspects of social work theory seemed to cast what I was doing – in terms of child protection being an activity that involves the exercise of power, professional authority, the supervision and regulation of family life, and imposing norms about parenting and childhood – as, at best, fundamentally problematic, and at worst, an anathema to social work’s core values and professional identity (Ferguson, 2008a; Okitikpi, 2011a). Yet as I continued to practice as a social worker, this gap between theory and practice also seemed to mean there was little meaningful engagement with how power could be exercised in rigid, excessive and heavy-handed ways (Pinkerton, 2009). The less we talk about power, it appeared, the less we shine a light on both its constructive and destructive possibilities.

**Surveying the Field: Theory and Research on Power in Social Work and Child Protection**

As I have undertaken this research and continued to develop my knowledge and skills as a social worker, my interests in power in child protection have shifted; and this has shaped the direction of this study. There have also been continuing developments in social work and child protection theory and research. To set out the changes in my thinking and in the field more generally, I will now offer a brief overview of the main areas of literature on power in social work theory and research, and use this discussion to subsequently outline my intentions and approach in this study.

The first major area of theory and research on power in social work is critical social work. As just noted, in the UK anti-oppressive practice is still the most prominent approach to critical social work. Although anti-oppressive practice represents a relatively cohesive set of ideas, there are important differences in perspectives. The ideas briefly outlined above can be regarded as the more classical or traditional approaches to anti-oppressive practice that define it as a distinctive emancipatory, overtly political approach to doing social work (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2002; Thompson, 2012). More recent approaches have taken a different line and anti-oppressive practice is often characterised as value-orientation for social work, and for engaging with the tensions and debates of practice. These approaches explore how what anti-oppressive practice consists of will vary in different practice settings and circumstances, including the exercise of power (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Clifford and Burke, 2009). The most important thing though is still that social work practice is about working towards social justice and understanding and challenging oppressive and dominating social power relations (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014).

These different approaches to anti-oppressive practice reflect wider distinctions within the field of critical social work. Some writers argue that social work should be an explicitly political activity that is focused on social change (Gray and Webb, 2013). As well as anti-oppressive practice, in the UK these positions often draw upon a radical tradition in social work theory, and seeing poverty, class and inequality as key features and determinants of social work interventions (Bailey and Brake, 1975; I. Ferguson, 2008; Lavalette, 2011; Garrett, 2014; Turbett, 2014). Yet, there are other approaches to critical social work that have a broader remit. These approaches can, like some approaches to anti-oppressive theory, seek to offer a values framework for social work, but others can define critical social work in broader terms as centred on reflective and analytic practice, and working with and enabling people rather than distinctive, politically activist concepts of social change. These kinds of perspectives are still concerned with key themes like power, discrimination and exclusion, but tend to differing ways of framing engagement with these themes through individualised social work practice (Parton and O’Bryne, 2000; Smale et al., 2000; Jones et al., 2008; Adams et al., 2009; Ife, 2012; Houston, 2013; Healy, 2014).

My interest in this field particularly developed through postmodern critical social work and other perspectives that drew on Foucault’s ideas about power and the social construction of knowledge (Ife, 1997; Healy, 2000; Pease, 2002; Allan, 2009a; Fook, 2012). I was interested in these perspectives because they look to develop contextual approaches to critical social work practice from your position as a practitioner in a specific setting, and the positions of the people you are working with. This appealed to me as a kind of approach that offered something different for engaging with power in child protection as it was precisely about reflecting on the challenges of exercising power, and the potential for this to be experienced in different ways, especially by children and differing family members. This was linked to seeing power as not necessarily good or bad, but as depending on the contexts in which it is exercised and how this is experienced from multiple perspectives (Healy, 1998, 2000; Fook, 2012).

The original intention in this research was to dive into these debates about critical social work, and to argue towards a Foucauldian and postmodern critical perspective. However, as the study developed I have stepped back from debates about what critical social work is, and the intended analysis of anti-oppressive and postmodern critical perspectives. This is because I would be covering ground that is, largely, already been well trodden and because I have decided to adopt a wider lens in my treatment of power. There continues to be interesting debates about anti-oppressive and critical social work, but positions on these debates are well established and well versed (Gray and Webb, 2012). Rather than rework these debates, I have instead moved to a study that is about developing a critical approach to power for child protection. In doing so, I continue to be interested in how we make use of ideas about power but coming from a position that is distinctively from and for child protection practice.

This brings me to the second main area of theory and research, which is that which directly pertains to child protection. One area of research is about how child protection systems operate, and the kinds of powers that are exercised, with how many families, and how often. This kind of research focuses on identifying overall patterns, often through the analysis of statistical data and the mapping of trends in child protection casework (Dingwall et al., 1983; Parton, 1985, 2006; 2014; Department of Health (DoH), 1995a; 2001; Lonne et al., 2009; CAFCASS, 2012, 2014). Another substantive body of research is that into how children, parents and other family members experience child protection interventions. This work has been significant in illustrating what children and their families find helpful and harmful about interventions, and particularly about their relationships with social workers: with power being a prominent theme (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Freeman and Hunt, 1998; Dale, 2004; Winter, 2009; Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OoCC), 2010; Buckley et al., 2011; Ghaffar et al. 2012).

A major area of theory and research relating to power in child protection is how social workers develop therapeutic, supportive relationships and look to work in partnership with children and families, and especially how they do so in the power-laden contexts of child protection interventions (Calder, 1995; Healy, 1998; Bell, 1999; Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Ruch, 2005; Lefevre, 2008; Connolly and Morris, 2011; Gaughan and Kalyniak, 2012; Healy et al., 2011; Turney, 2012). A particularly influential approach here for me is the ‘Signs of Safety’ model: which is about working cooperatively with families, recognising strengths, and building upon these strengths to develop safety and resilience whilst understanding the need for power and authority (Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Turnell et al., 2008; Turnell, 2011; Bunn, 2013).

A final major strand of theory and research on power in child protection is that which considers these relationships from the other side, examining how social workers should exercise power and be authoritative in child protection. These perspectives address working with ‘involuntary’ or ‘resistant’ families, and how social workers can most constructively manage circumstances where there is aggression, hostility and non-cooperation from family members, and do so in a way that is focused on a child’s safety and welfare (Ferguson, 2008a, 2009, 2011, 2014; Pearson, 2009; Fauth et al., 2010; Okitikpi, 2011b; Welbourne, 2012; Laird, 2013; Tuck, 2013).

This work has been directly applicable in my work with families, and it was through drawing on ideas like the Signs of Safety approach, and working with involuntary and resistant families that my practice and knowledge base about power in child protection really began to take shape. This has been helped by the increase in research in this area since I began this research, and the interest in ‘authoritative’ child protection in the UK. This particularly followed the death of Peter Connelly in 2007, and the criticism directed at the social workers involved for the lack of authority and challenge in their work with Peter’s family (Haringey Local Safeguarding Children’s Board (HLSCB), 2009). What these approaches especially offer are models or analysis of key principles for working with families. This provides social workers with a schema to follow or a set of principles to adhere to (good examples of this kind of approach include: Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Trotter, 2006, Turnell and Essex, 2006; Pearson, 2009; Ferguson, 2011; Laird, 2013). What this work does not do is set out a cohesive approach to power or a way of understanding and engaging with power as a central, organising feature of child protection practice. As I drew on this work, and moved on from my prior frustrations, I still found there to be a gap in theory and practice about power, and how we can continually look to develop good practice in child protection through analysis of the tensions and challenges of power in decision-making and relationships.

This leads to the final main area of theory and research on power in social work, which is literature that deals with power as a specific topic of theoretical and conceptual analysis. There is a relatively small body of work that focuses on power specifically. There are three main books which deal with power in social work (Hugman, 1991; Tew, 2002; Smith, 2008a), one edited collection on power in child protection (Okitikpi, 2010a), and it is addressed as a specific chapter or section in a few other texts (Taylor and White, 2000; Thompson, 2006; Sheppard, 2006; Hill, 2010; Beckett and Maynard, 2012; Sheedy, 2013). There are also a relatively small number of papers offering a theoretical and conceptual analysis of power (Hasenfield, 1987; Webb, 2000; Bar-On, 2002; Tew, 2006; Gilbert and Powell, 2010; Houston, 2010; Smith, 2010, 2013; Powell, 2012). Of this body of work, Smith (2008a, 2010, 2013) and Tew (2002, 2006; Tew and Nixon, 2010) particularly offer wide-ranging perspectives that draw upon multiple theoretical positions and concepts to explore the different forms and functions of power in social work.

This literature offers many things to our understanding of and engaging with power in social work, and I have drawn upon it across this study, but it does not address the gap in child protection between theory, research, and practice. This is because the works just mentioned do not consider power as a holistic, organising feature of child protection – nor, indeed was this their purpose – but this means they do not provide tools social workers need to really understand and engage with power in their day-to-day work. And it is this that I want to do here. My intention in this study is to bring out the ways in which the fundamental tensions and challenges of child protection are about power, and how interventions can be constructive and repressive, shared and imposed, and just or unjust, through the exercise of power. This is about the role power plays in the processes, decisions and outcomes of child protection, and how it shapes what social workers do every day, and in every interaction with a child and their family. It is to explore how every situation in child protection is unique, and requires social workers to adapt and interpret their knowledge, skills and value-base, and to manage power dynamics in different ways. I am also particularly interested in how social workers can continually develop their practice in relation to power.

**Towards a Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of Power: Research Focus and Methods**

This brings me now to the focus of this research, and to the methods by which I address this topic. From a starting point of the gap between theory and practice regarding power in child protection there were a range of research questions I could have taken forwards. To begin with I considered the key question I often seemed to be asking myself: how should power be exercised in the most constructive ways in child protection? This question seemed too vague however, and too open to interpretation about what the constructive exercise of power consists in. I also considered questioning my hypotheses, for example examining the impact of anti-oppressive and critical social work theory; or indeed, whether there is a problem about a lack of engagement with power in child protection. However, as I have just mentioned, I have moved away from focusing on anti-oppressive and critical social work, towards looking to develop a holistic approach to power. Other options involved working from my hypotheses to study how power and authority are actually exercised in child protection, and perhaps to do so with a focus on an area like decision-making, or relationships between social workers and children and families. I also thought about doing something more specific, and examining an aspect of child protection practice in which power is a central consideration, like Care Proceedings or how Section 47 enquiries are undertaken.

These questions offered different and interesting directions of enquiry. As I began to narrow things down though, I came to realise that the crux of what I wanted to research was the possibility of developing a framework for understanding and engaging with power in child protection to help social workers’ to explore its challenges and complexities in practice. I take the concept of a ‘framework’ of power to be particularly important because, as I have just discussed, it signifies a holistic approach that draws together its multifaceted nature and different dimensions. The purpose then is also to offer a structure for critically analysing and reflecting on the challenges social workers face in their work, and in learning and continuing to develop their knowledge and skills as practitioners. Such a framework would support the exploration of power at every level of child protection: from how power defines relationships between social workers and children and families, to decision-making in child protection systems, to the organisational cultures and contexts of child protection, to the ways power shapes individual identities, family life, and wider social milieus. Finally, for me a framework is about having a foundational set of concepts and ideas through which all subsequent work on power can be undertaken, a basis for cohesive analysis and reflection about power.

This led me to look at developing a cohesive set of ideas and concepts of power in child protection that can readily be taken on by social workers to help think through and understand the work they do. It was also important to me to keep my sense of myself as a practitioner at the heart of this enquiry, and to focus on developing a framework of power that might help social workers – myself included – to continually develop their knowledge and skills towards best practice. Instead of starting with a specific research question therefore, the approach I took here was somewhat broader. This was to examine how social workers can critically engage with power towards good practice in child protection, and what kind of framework they need to do so. I decided to approach my research agenda in these somewhat broader terms because though a specific question may have served to provide a clear, specific focus, I wanted to maintain this more wide-ranging scope of enquiry into good practice in child protection, and ideas and concepts of power.

My research focus and my reasons for approaching power in child protection in this way also led me to decide to do this research as a theoretical study. This was for two main reasons. First, the kind of research I wanted to undertake here requires an in-depth analysis of power, and of themes relating to the exercise of power in child protection: indeed this is the point of the study. Doing a theoretical and conceptual study enabled me to undertake a depth and breadth of enquiry that would not otherwise have been possible, and to engage with multiple strands of research and theory. This has opened a wide-ranging field of literature and knowledge, and enabled me to study power and child protection from different angles.

Second, in looking to develop a framework of power, this kind of depth and breadth of analysis is needed. One of the main limitations of this study is that it does not directly offer the perspectives of children and families, or social workers – other than my own – to test and explore these ideas. However, my intentions here could not have been readily accomplished through empirical research, as what I have wanted to explore is how we can understand and engage with power as a complex idea and multifaceted concept. Whilst aspects of practice and what social workers do and don’t do is obviously relevant, what I have sought to do here is also to explore foundational ideas and concepts about power in child protection. This will then, I hope, provide a basis for empirical work in the future to understand how power is exercised and experienced in child protection practice.

Lastly, turning to how this theoretical study has been undertaken, and the methods employed in doing so: the analysis I present here is drawn from two research methods, auto-ethnography of my experiences as a social worker in child protection, and reviewing the literature on power, child protection and social work, and then drawing these approaches together through theoretical and conceptual analysis. I will now go through these methods in turn, before summarising the approach I take to the analysis of theories and concepts through presenting an outline of the specific areas of analysis, and the study as a whole.

**Auto-ethnography and Case Analysis: Bringing Practice into the Study**

The theoretical and conceptual analysis I offer in this study is closely connected to my experiences of being a social worker, and so it is important to also consider the auto-ethnographic dimensions of this research. Auto-ethnography is a research method that uses personal experiences as first-hand data for research, and in doing so offers unique and distinctively in-depth qualitative accounts of a given topic (White, 2001; Fook, 2011; Witkin, 2014). Using personal experiences as data for research can offer depth and richness to findings, as being an ‘insider’ to the phenomenon being studied can help to draw out its lived experiences, the physical and psychological dimensions, and meanings and ways of making sense of things that would not be otherwise apparent. In social work, there have been a small number of interesting first-hand accounts by practitioners, and by people who have been recipients of social work interventions in their lives that show the contribution of this kind of approach (White, 1997, 2001; Kumsa, 2007; Davies, 2011; Leigh, 2014; Witkin, 2014).

Auto-ethnography is a contested research method, and those who advance auto-ethnographic research often present it as contrast to more traditional empirical methods (Spry, 2001; Ellis, 2002, 2004; Holman-Jones, 2005; Denzin, 2013; Witkin, 2014). Auto-ethnography is often linked to postmodern ideas about how we ought to treat universal or broad-ranging claims to knowledge with scepticism, especially in sociology and other fields that deal with human experiences and the social world. It is argued that traditional empirical research methods privilege rational analysis in a way that can generalize and flatten the phenomena studied and people’s experiences, within frameworks geared to producing overarching categories and distinctions (Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2006).

In contrast, it is argued that auto-ethnography is attentive to our unique experiences and how knowledge, ways of understanding the world around us, come from the distinctive positions we have in interpreting events. This draws out the often complex and messy ways that people define their identities and experiences, and that social systems function (White, 2001; Leigh, 2014). The evident drawbacks of auto-ethnographic methods is that they draw from only a single source of research data, and so can be criticised as being interpretative and open to bias, and so are lacking in analytic rigour, generalisability and reliability (Anderson, 2006; Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Denzin, 2013). There are also ethical concerns about how far people, groups or organisations that feature in ethnographic research are genuine research participants, the degree of confidentiality they have, and whether any research which is subjective as auto-ethnography can be said to be a fair representation of those subjects (Ellis, 2004; Tolich, 2010).

Advocates of auto-ethnographic methods often respond to these criticisms, particularly those about generalisability and reliability, by arguing that they are based on rational, scientific concepts of social research, and that auto-ethnographic methods look to subvert these concepts (Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Denzin, 2013). These points do raise differences in the approach and style of auto-ethnographic methods however: principally between those who see auto-ethnography as a distinctive method but also one that should be held up to the same standards of scrutiny as other research methods, and those who want to make sure that auto-ethnography remains an approach that challenges more traditional research methods.

This distinction has been characterised as being between ‘analytic’ and ‘evocative’ auto-ethnography, and is perhaps best characterised in papers by Anderson (2006) and Ellis and Bochner (2006). What is immediately apparent in the two articles is the difference of style and tone. Anderson (2006) is measured, and though he draws from his experiences, he does so towards an analysis of what he considers the key dimensions of auto-ethnography to be. These are that the researcher is a ‘full member’ of the research group or setting, that they have a clear narrative presence in the research, and that this contributes to theoretical understandings of the phenomena being researched. Ellis and Bochner (2006) offer an entirely personal account, telling a story of how Ellis felt reading Anderson’s paper and her discussions with Bochner about the concerns she has that Anderson’s approach moves away from the unique and rich storytelling that makes auto-ethnographic research distinctive. Furthermore, she argues that auto-ethnography does not need the legitimation of ‘analytic’ methods.

In this study, I would characterise my approach as an ‘analytic’ style of auto-ethnography, where I draw from my experiences with the intention of further analysing and developing theoretical perspectives. In this vein, a significant part of this analysis is not explicitly auto-ethnographic in the sense of recounting my experiences, but rather develops theoretical and conceptual analysis that is connected to my work as a social worker, and the points about power and the doing of practice that are drawn from that work. I am looking here to tell certain stories and offer an individual perspective that draws out the complexities and messy nature of child protection, and how the challenges of practice often belie neat analytic categories and generalisations. But I do so not simply to let these stories tell their own narrative, but towards the goal of theory development – in so doing fulfilling Anderson’s three requirements noted above.

In this auto-ethnographic work, I have drawn upon my experiences as a social worker in three main ways. First, my experiences as a social worker in child protection set the context of the analysis developed here, and they are at the heart of many of the arguments I develop and the overall line of enquiry that I offer. In developing this approach I have also sought to be mindful of White’s (2001) analysis of the importance of reflexivity in auto-ethnography – a concept I return to later but which can in brief be described as a means of questioning our experiences and actions in a way that connects them to wider social contexts and forms of knowledge and understanding. The arguments developed here are in many respects drawn from my own questionings about how child protection practice sits within systems and sets of ideas and meaning, and looking to question and explore these things, and to provide a framework for continuing to do so. Second, at points I make direct reference to my experiences as a social worker to develop and expand upon ideas or points. In particular, I use personal accounts to explore the complex and uncertain nature of child protection practice, and how this can often belie neat categorisations or theoretical positions.

Third, I have used case examples to further develop and illustrate the arguments made, and to show how the framework I develop here is intended to work. These case examples are fictional and do not represent real people or events, but I have sought the reflect aspects of families I have worked with and the kinds of situations I have encountered as a social worker in child protection. Where possible, I have also tried to capture the tone and talk of how child protection practices occur in these kinds of circumstances. This is to work through the detail of how child protection practice happens across this study, and in telling these stories of child protection practice I want to produce descriptively ‘thick’ accounts that do not simply neatly illustrate my points but show how understanding and engaging with power in child protection can be anything but straightforward. This is also why I do not look to reach neat or straightforward conclusions about the outcomes of these case examples. To be able to go into more detail I have only used two case examples, the Malone and the Sanderson families, who are introduced in chapters two and three respectively.

Finally, in drawing from my own experiences and developing case examples, there are ethical considerations to note, and I have been mindful of ethical guidelines around auto-ethnographic research (Tolich, 2010). First, there is confidentiality and levels of disclosure. To preserve confidentiality and in respect of levels of disclosure I have either been deliberately general or have altered information enough to remain true to the story being told but to change identifying detail within it. I have taken care to present information in a way that, though it may reflect on me to some extent, neither offers information shared privately with me nor reveals anything that could identifiably be about anyone I have worked with. The same applies to the fictional case studies, where I have taken care not to too closely reflect any real families with whom I have worked. I have not sought consent to share these stories for precisely these reasons, for they are not stories that are recognisably about real people except for myself. Finally, in respect of accuracy and truthfulness, given what I have just said the accounts of my experiences offered here do stray from the exact telling of what happened, however much more important I think is that they are stories or examples which are authentic, and remain true to the feel of child protection practice, and the kinds of situations which I have been involved with. Given the lack of specific representations of others, there should not be any concerns about misrepresenting them or distorting the things they have said or done.

**Use of Narrative Methods to Review and Analyse the Literature**

Alongside the auto-ethnographic dimensions of the research methods of this study, its other main methodological feature is my approach to searching for, identifying and evaluating relevant literature. Each chapter of this thesis provides a critical review and synthesis of the literature, which is the basis of analysis and arguments developed in that chapter – apart from the final chapter that is, which draws together the themes of the previous chapters to present the framework of power I develop.

Of the two main approaches to undertaking literature reviews, a narrative approach seemed a more natural fit for my intentions in this thesis than a systematic review. Narrative reviews are characterised by the authors following a line of enquiry to draw together a range of ideas and information from the literature in a way that develops across the process. As the word narrative suggests, this kind of approach tells a story about the literature; summarising and analysing identified themes to take the reader through the given area of research, with the particular story told being directed by the authors of the review (Hart, 1998; Jessen et al., 2011). The concerns about narrative methods are that they are open to the influences and agendas of their authors, and to what they want to say about the literature (Aveyard, 2014). This does not mean however, that a narrative review will be biased or that literature is not be evaluated in a rigorous way. This can of course happen, although when it does it is because the process of analysis is flawed or incomplete: where the story is poorly told, or full of holes. The upside of narrative reviews is the flexibility they offer, and how they offer the means to engage with a wide and varied scope of theory and research. Authors can also revisit or redo searches, develop new themes and areas of enquiry, and make decisions as they undertake the review about what to include or exclude, and what to focus on. It is also clear in this kind of review that a specific argument is being developed (Hart, 1998; Kiteley and Stogdon, 2014).

In contrast to the looser, author-led style of narrative approaches, systematic literature reviews are held to be a more controlled, focused process. In systematic reviews, the identified inclusion and exclusion criteria of the literature searches are established from the outset, the field is narrowed to a selected number of studies, and a comparative, step-by-step approach is used to analyse this literature. The findings from all of the studies considered are then presented in an organised and consistent way. This is taken to be a more objective, rigorous approach to analysing literature, to produce an analysis of key themes and findings from the most significant studies in that field (Aveyard, 2014). The idea also being that, unlike a narrative review being led by the story the authors want to tell, in a systematic review authors should come out with the same findings because of the systematic nature of the methods followed and transparency in setting these methods out (Aveyard, 2014; Kiteley and Stogdon, 2014). However, systemic reviews can also be inflexible and researchers cannot respond to emerging issues, and so are reliant on the original design of the research. This also means that systemic reviews tend to have a narrower scope (Hart, 1998).

I have used a narrative approach in this study because it is about developing a line of enquiry about power in child protection towards a framework of power. As just discussed, the analysis I offer here is connected to my experiences and interests as a social worker, and a narrative approach offers greater flexibility and scope to provide a distinctive and evolving analysis of power that is drawn from and reflects my own learning and development of ideas about power. What is more, across this process, I have been continually returning to and developing the themes and terms of reference of the study.

The strengths of adopting a narrative approach are that it has allowed for the ongoing development of themes and of the overall lines of enquiry (Hart, 1998; Jessen et al., 2011). This has meant that the framework of power that I develop here was able to emerge in a relatively organic and non-linear way, as I have continually developed ideas and reappraised the positions I adopt as I have moved through subject areas. This has been an important feature of the development of the overall arc of the study, and I have often gone back to earlier sections to revise and further develop lines of enquiry informed by analysis of subsequent themes. It has also been an approach that seems better suited to engaging with the many different strands of enquiry undertaken, and the range of literature to consider. A systemic approach would not have enabled me to undertake this kind of analysis, and instead would have corralled the study into a neater but less flexible style of enquiry. As well as being a potential issue with narrative reviews, I also would argue that making the rationale and basis for lines of argument explicit in a narrative review is a strength.

The other reason for adopting narrative methods was how this dovetailed with the auto-ethnographic dimensions of this research. As just outlined, this research has been shaped by my own experiences as a social worker. I have not been analysing literature from a neutral perspective, and nor have I wanted to, for this research is undertaken as someone who is immersed in the field and who is looking to tell a particular kind of story and to say particular things.

Moving now to the approach I took in adopting a narrative approach. When I began this study, I started with the three different areas of research into power in social work outlined earlier: critical social work theory, theory and research on power in child protection practice, and theoretical perspectives on power in social work. In addition to these themes, at the outset I sought to examine two further areas of research. First, literature on power in sociology, philosophy, social and political theory and other specific fields, in order to explore theories and concepts of power, and the literature which is foundational to theory and research on power in social work. Second, I examined wider theory and research on child protection practice, so that I could connect the ideas about power and the framework I look to develop here to analysis of what makes for good practice during interventions into children’s and families lives.

This gave me five initial main areas of literature. I then conducted initial literature searches to identify key themes, perspectives and areas of enquiry, and prominent authors and studies. This enabled me to develop an understanding of key themes and debates on power in child protection, on which the narrative of my arguments could start to take shape and through which I could develop analysis connected to my experiences. These initial literature searches were predominantly undertaken using Google Scholar, supplemented by Google itself. Although these are perhaps the easiest and most obvious search engines to use, and they lack the breadth or depth of more sophisticated tools, at this early stage I was not looking to cover all of the available literature just to develop broad understanding of key directions of theory and research, and of this study.

What became apparent as I undertook this work was that a more contextual examination of child protection was also required to provide a foundation for these enquiries. This led to two other areas of research, the history of child protection, and sociological and epistemological paradigms for social work – that is to say the social, political, economic and cultural contexts through which social work systems and practices can be understood, and how we construct knowledge in social work. This was to provide a stronger sense of the contested nature of power in child protection and how power is central to debates about the way child protection systems function and interventions into family life occur; and to the kind of activities social work and child protection are understood to be.

Having done these initial literature searches, and with seven broad areas of enquiry identified, I then undertook more detailed literature searches based on key search terms. I again used Google Scholar, alongside the following academic databases: Social Care Online, Web of Knowledge, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, and the Academic Search Complete electronic resource hosted by the University of London. I undertook a repeat set of searches across the main themes for each chapter between March and August 2015. Another key approach that I used, especially when moving from key to subsidiary themes, was snowball sampling: whereby at the end of each article read I would search the reference list for any relevant literature that I was unaware of (Hart, 2001).

A brief outline of specific search terms and the approach taken with regards to the seven main areas of literature reviewed is provided in the table on the following page. This table sets out the initial key search terms I used, and then the subsidiary themes that arose which I used to complement these searches. Although I have sought to undertake a methodical and comprehensive search strategy for these subject areas, as I have used narrative methods I have not sought to cover all of the literature on some subject areas, and certain lines of enquiry have been left on the cutting room floor. This is in the interests of the clarity of the argument and analysis, and to avoid weighing down the study with too many sections that were densely packed with references to the literature, without really developing the study. When conducting the searches, I sought to consider all of the available literature on the key search terms, but moving through to subsidiary terms, decision were made on a case by case basis about how thorough a coverage of the literature was needed. In each section I continued to search for and analyse literature until I had reached a point where no new substantive themes or lines of enquiry about power in child protection were emerging (Hart, 1998). At a minimum in each case I sought to go through the literature to identify key themes until no further such themes were emerging, or until I reached a point where I decided that this theme would not be a central part of my analysis. In these circumstances, I have then just looked to signpost to wider themes and debates. The specific inclusion and exclusion criteria also varied, although in general I sought to adopt an inclusive approach to the literature, and narrow down once I was moving from core themes to subsidiary ones, rather than have set exclusion criteria.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject area / Chapter** | **Key search terms****(use of Boolean AND/OR)** | **Themes identified and subsidiary search terms** | **Themes subsequently not developed in the study** |
| Power and child protection*Chapter 4* | * Power
* Child protection / Children’s social work
 | * Authority / Authoritative
* Resistance / Involuntary clients / Violence
* Relationships / Partnership
* Care Proceedings / Court
* Children’s / Parents Experiences (*please see chapter 4 for further discussion*)
 | * Statistics
 |
| Good practice in child protection*Chapter 2**Chapter 4* | * Good practice / Best practice
* Child protection / Children’s Social work
 | * Relationships
* Communication
* Assessment
* Decision-making / Professional judgement
* Family / Family systems
* Emotions / Experiences
 | * Systems theory / Ecological perspectives
* Relationship-based practice
* Interprofessional / Multi-agency working
 |
| Critical social work theory*Chapter 2**Chapter 3* | * Critical / Social work
 | * Anti-oppressive / Anti-discriminatory
* Postmodern / Postmodernism / Postmodernity
* Modernity / Modernism
* Politics / Political
* Radical / Radicalism
* Emancipatory
* Reflection / Reflexivity
 | * Anti-racist theory
* Feminist theory
* Empowerment
 |
| Theories and concepts of power in general and in social work theory*Chapter 3* | * Power
* Sociology / Philosophy / Social theory / Social work theory
 | * Domination / Dominating power
* Authority / Legitimacy
* Critical theory
* Knowledge
* ‘Power over’ / ‘Power with’ / ‘Power to’
* Indirect / Informal
* Key theorists, for example: Foucault / Lukes / Arendt / Haugaard / Clegg
 |  |
| History of child protection *Chapter 1**Chapter 2* | * History
* Child protection / Children’s Social Work / Social Work
 | * Welfare / Welfare state
* Nineteenth Century / Twentieth Century
* National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
* Family support / child welfare
* Child death scandals / tragedies
* Children’s departments
* Safeguarding
* New Labour / Thatcher / Coalition government
* Children Act 1989
 | * Philanthropy / Workhouses / Poor Laws / Charitable Organisation Society (COS)
 |
| Epistemological and Sociological foundations of child protection*Chapter 1**Chapter 2* | * Child protection / Social work
* Knowledge / Sociology / Epistemology
 | * Systems / Procedures / Processes
* Modernity / Late modernity / Reflexive modernity
* Postmodernism / Postmodernity / Poststructuralism
* Assessment
* Decision-making / Professional judgement
* Reflection / Reflexivity
* Pragmatism
 | * Praxis
* Social constructionism / Interpretivism
* Positivism / Postpositivism
* Objectivism / Subjectivism
 |

Figure 1: Table of search terms

**Overview and Contributions to Knowledge of this Study as a Conceptual and Theoretical Analysis of Power in Child Protection**

To close this introduction, I will now give an overview of its structure and its intended contribution to knowledge. In doing so, I will also outline how I have gone about the conceptual and theoretical analysis of power I have undertaken in this study. The main contribution to knowledge of this study lies in this framework of power developed, and this framework is presented in chapter five. However, my aim is that the four chapters before this also offer contributions to knowledge, and form part of a layered conceptual and theoretical analysis of power in child protection where significant features of the framework of power I present are developed. The framework and contributions of this study are therefore intended as a cohesive whole that presents an original synthesis of theory, research and practice.

Chapter one offers an historical analysis of child protection in the UK. This takes us from the beginnings of child protection casework in the late nineteenth century through to the present day. This chapter sets the context for the subsequent analysis and arguments developed in this study through drawing out how child protection practice can be seen to be organised by fundamental tensions and value conflicts that power is central to. Although this chapter largely follows a course laid out by existing histories of welfare, social work and child protection, I look to make a distinctive contribution through exploring this history with a view to understanding the key role that power plays in the functioning of child protection systems and how this has shaped interventions into family life over time. This analysis of the core themes and tensions of child protection provides the foundation for the subsequent lines of enquiry throughout the study, and demonstrates how the ways that we engage with power in child protection is shaped by these historical and social contexts.

Chapter two develops this argument by moving on to consider the sociological and epistemological foundations of child protection practice, and how power is found in the social, political, cultural, economic and ethical contexts of child protection, and our understanding and engagement with power is shaped by our approach to knowledge. This chapter begins where the previous one left off, by looking at how child protection can be seen as a fundamentally ‘modern’ activity that has been shaped by modernity and ideas of progress, the advancement of universalisable knowledge, and the organisation of the social world, across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I contrast these ideas of modernity with concepts of postmodernity, and argue that whilst this is in some senses an unhelpful distinction, it tells us many important things about how we understand and do child protection as an activity that requires both rationality and organised, analytic systems and working with uncertainty, ambiguity and the essentially human foibles. This connects to how power is exercised through rational and technical activities of assessment and decision-making, yet these are also potentially contingent, relational and unique processes. The originality and contribution of this chapter comes from how it synthesises a diverse range of literature to examine these ideas and how power is exercised through decision-making in child protection systems, and in the use of pragmatism to draw together different sociological and epistemological paradigms.

The third chapter moves on to theories and concepts of power. It offers an analysis of key concepts of power through exploring the ideas of key thinkers, before turning to the use of these ideas in social work theory. I consider the contributions of anti-oppressive practice, postmodern critical social work and other multi-aspect conceptual frameworks that explore the links between multiple concepts of power. In critiquing these perspectives and looking to develop a conceptual and theoretical framework of power for child protection practice, I argue that it is a multifaceted, dynamic and interactive concept. In looking to develop this approach and show the merits of an alternative framework, I examine ideas from contemporary theoretical approaches to power. This analysis is organised around three core dimensions of power for child protection: the relationship between consensual and oppositional power, the interconnected dynamics of agency, structure and relationships between people, and the legitimate and illegitimate functions and effects of power. This chapter looks to offer a contribution to social work literature on power through this analysis, and identifying ideas that are particularly significant and helpful for child protection. This then provides the conceptual and theoretical basis of the framework of power I present.

Chapter four then turns to the ways that power is actually exercised and experienced in child protection practice. I begin by considering the relational dimensions of child protection, and research into children and families experiences of child protection, and what these experiences are like and mean for families. I then consider how social workers can respect the deep meanings and complexities of family life, and the significance of power to these meanings and complexities. This establishes the context for exploring good practice in respect of power, and how social workers can constructively exercise power. The central theme of the chapter further develops concepts of power in child protection as a multifaceted force, and I argue that it is both partnership and working with children and families, and the proportionate and skilful exercise of authority that protects children. I also develop ideas about how social workers’ communication skills, and how they understand and deal with managing resistance and non-cooperation.

The specific contribution to knowledge from this chapter lies with the connections drawn between partnership and authority, and the analysis developed from this of how the exercise of power to protect children can take multiple forms, and involves multifaceted, dynamic and interactive power relations. This links this analysis of good practice in respect of power in child protection to the conceptual and theoretical approach to power I advance in the previous chapter; and it is these ideas drawn together that provide the foundations of the framework of power subsequently developed.

The final chapter then presents the framework of power for child protection practice that I offer here. It is this framework that is intended to be the main original contribution of this study, as the culmination of the themes explored in the previous chapters. Overall, this framework is intended to provide a theoretical approach to power that reflects its varying forms, functions and effects, and helps social workers to understand and engage with power in their decision-making and in their relationships with children and families. I first outline the foundations of this framework, and recap key ideas developed across the study, before describing the framework with particular emphasis being placed on a visual representation of these ideas so that it can be something that can be quite straightforwardly presented to social workers, but also as capturing a diverse range of concepts and significant features of good practice in child protection. I then outline the two main ways that the framework can be used in practice, first as a tool for case formulation and case management, and second as a framework for critical analysis and reflection on power, and how social workers exercise power in specific circumstances and how it is a central feature of their work more generally. This chapter draws together the case studies presented in the earlier chapters to develop and illustrate these ideas.

Overall, this framework is intended to provide a theoretical approach to power that reflects its varying forms, functions and effects of power in child protection, and the contested nature of decision-making and relationships with children and families in practice. This is intended to be a means both of conceptualising and reflexively engaging with good practice in the exercise of power. And it is about using a framework of concepts and ideas about power to help make often finely balanced decisions in uncertain circumstances, and to explore the challenges of developing relationships where authority has to be exercised to protect children, but recognising that it is generally what families do or don’t do that keeps children safe, or not, and this is about working with children and families as much as possible.

**Chapter One:**

**An Historical Analysis of Power in Child Protection: Key Themes and Tensions**

**Introduction**

To begin this analysis of power in child protection, I want to explore its history. This is to offer a sense of how it is that power has always been a central feature of child protection, and to develop an understanding of the key themes and tensions child protection systems and practices. This is particularly as an activity that is about protecting children, supporting families, and respecting children’s and parent’s rights; and as a form of social regulation and state intervention, and being about enabling people and promoting liberties, especially children’s. This analysis also shows how contemporary child protection systems and practices, and debates about those systems and practices, are founded on distinctive historical and social contexts. As I deal particularly with child protection in the UK in this study, this will be the focus of this historical analysis. Also, as the point here is to study themes and tensions concerning power across the history of child protection rather than the detail of particular eras, in developing this analysis I have mainly looked to secondary studies of the history of social work and child protection instead of primary historical sources. It should be acknowledged therefore that the analysis I offer here is dependent on these other histories, which have particular lines of enquiry and purposes. To provide balance, I have, however, sought to draw from a wide range of historical sources; and it is across these diverse histories that different themes about wider trends and shifts in child protection can be identified.

This analysis begins with the origins of child protection in the work of philanthropic organisations in the nineteenth century, and in particular, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). From here, I trace developments in the early twentieth century up to the formation of the welfare state and creation of statutory children’s departments. I then explore the preventative and family welfare emphasis of policy and practice in the 1960s and early 1970s, and how this was to change following the death of Maria Colwell in the mid-1970s. After this tragedy there was a shift once again towards more investigate and authoritative interventions into families lives, the 1980s and 1990s were also a time where key tensions and debates came to the fore regarding child protection interventions around how social workers can work to protect children, support families, and respect children’s and parent’s rights. These developments are linked to social, political, economic and cultural changes in the 1970s and 1980s, and I consider how power was an important theme in debates about the professional identity and functions of social work across this time. I move on to look at how the Children Act 1989 was meant to provide a legislative basis to manage these tensions, and how New Labour sought to bring child protection and family support together within a holistic child welfare system centred on ‘safeguarding’, yet still they remain. The chapter ends with an analysis of current themes and debates, and the direction of travel under a Conservative Government which has, up to recently, shown a relatively strong degree of interest in child protection, with a consideration of how power remains central to the challenges we face in child protection today.

**Philanthropy in the Nineteenth Century: Care and Control, and the ‘Liberal Compromise’ between Individual Rights and Social Responsibilities**

The beginnings of child protection can be found in the work of philanthropic organisations concerned with children’s welfare in the nineteenth century. These beginnings can be set against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, and the transformation of much of the Britain from a predominantly rural, agricultural society into an urban, industrialised one. This simultaneously created unprecedented levels of prosperity and hardship (Chinn, 2006). There was a huge growth in manufacturing and commerce, with technological advances paving the way for systems of mass production new enterprises and trade routes, and the rapid growth of industry. On the back of this, there was a burgeoning class of wealthy industrialists, businessmen and professionals. However, for many people the reality was much different. Rapid social and economic change meant there was no longer the need for such large numbers of agricultural workers, nor traditional skills and trades (Harris, 2004; Fraser, 2009). People flocked to towns and cities in search of employment in the new, emergent industries and factories, but there were not enough jobs to go around. This led to the growth of ‘slum’ districts characterised by high levels of poverty and destitution (Chinn, 2006). A consequence of such contrasting fortunes was the proliferation of charitable organisations and social activism in the mid-nineteenth century in particular, as the social problems of poverty and of ‘the poor’ became matters of moral and civic concern (Finlayson, 1994; Chinn, 2006).

Child welfare was an area where philanthropists were especially active. Across the nineteenth century, there was a developing understanding of childhood as a unique and special time characterised by innocence and vulnerability, and a growing interest in children’s physical wellbeing and moral development (Hendrick, 2003). Key movements and causes taken up included: tackling the cruelty and harsh conditions endured by child labourers, and by children living and working in workhouses or other large-scale institutions like orphanages; the care of children with disabilities; challenging the practice of ‘baby farming’, where wet nurses were paid to raise other people’s children; and the promotion of education especially those children most in need who could not afford it (Hopkins, 1994; Piper, 1999; Hendrick, 2003). Later in the nineteenth century, as the workhouses and other large-scale institutions became the subject of increasing controversy and public concern, philanthropic organisations such as Barnardo’s and the Waifs and Strays Society were also established to open smaller homes for orphans and ‘street’ children, and to do outreach and educational work (Hopkins, 1994).

The motivations and effects of this growth of philanthropy have been the subject of considerable debate, and diverse and contradictory dimensions of this early philanthropy can be identified (Himmelfarb, 1991; Harris, 2004; Chinn, 2006; Webb, 2007; Taylor, 2008; Fraser, 2009). On the one hand, philanthropy was motivated by compassion and civic responsibility, and reflected the enterprise and reformism of the times: with the desire being to provide care and practical support to those in need, and to create new laws and systems to address a range of social ills (Himmelfarb, 2001).

Nowhere was this more apparent than child welfare, as philanthropists challenged the cruel and unjust treatment of children, and sought to care for those who were most vulnerable, and make sure they were not abandoned or exploited. Equally, though, there was a clear controlling dimension to this philanthropy. Children were vulnerable, none more so than street children; but they were also a threat to the social order, liable to become juvenile delinquents, and later, paupers or criminals (Hendrick, 2003). This work was about children who were ‘out of place’ in society (Taylor, 2008, p. 683): too street-smart and adult in their outlook, and often lacking in discipline and civility. They needed to be physically rescued and given a safe place to live, and morally rescued, so that they might have the guidance and education they needed to become respectable members of society (Kidd, 1999; Piper, 1999; Hendrick, 2003).

This reflected wider criticism of the philanthropy of the Victorian era as being about fear and control, as the wealthy classes sought to address their fears of declining social standards and civil unrest. Accordingly, it has been argued that philanthropy was about giving enough to those without means that they could scrape by, and in doing so prevent them from becoming involved in crime, begging, vagrancy, alcoholism, prostitution and other social ills. Through new laws and systems, controls over people’s behaviour could be introduced; and through charitable giving, and the conditions attached to it, the wealthy Victorian middle and upper classes could engage with the ‘other’ to instil their values of self-sufficiency, thrift and decorum (Chinn, 2006; Fraser, 2009). Philanthropy was also about social status, and being seen to be civically engaged and benevolent (Harris, 2004).

These early forms of philanthropy concerned with child welfare dealt specifically with children and childcare in the public realm. Although there were some controversies, philanthropists and activists were generally able to garner widespread support (Piper, 1999; Taylor, 2008). Attempts to address the care of children within the family home were much more contentious however, as these were seen as an incursion on the ‘liberal compromise’ between the state and the family, and an attack on civil liberties and people’s individual rights and the sanctity of family life (Harris, 1993; Behlmer, 1998).

The work of the Society’s for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children thus represented a significant challenge in many respects to the established values and norms of the era, and this was significant in how they approached the problem of child cruelty. The first of these societies was founded in Liverpool in 1883, with its London counterpart following shortly after, and other societies subsequently being formed in major cities like Birmingham and Hull. Although many of these societies ran shelters for street children and took up causes relating to children’s welfare, the early role of the London society in particular – which was to unite many of these local bodies into the NSPCC in 1889 – was to campaign for new laws and powers to act on concerns about child cruelty. This was a much more significant form of intrusion into family life than prior interventions, effectively seeking the powers for state officials to directly involve themselves in family’s business (Hendrick, 2003).

This made the NSPCC a key organisation in reframing the ‘liberal compromise’ around the power of the state and social responsibilities, and individual rights and the sanctity of family (Harris, 1993; Parton, 2006). To be able to get such a law passed however, the NSPCC presented child cruelty and neglect as a moral and just cause about vulnerable children and degenerate parenting. Accordingly, this was a campaign about individual responsibilities, and not social problems about the conditions in which children grow up and their life opportunities (Ferguson, 2004; Flegel, 2009). Despite opposition, the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act passed in 1889, making child cruelty a criminal offence and giving the police and the courts powers to act to prosecute parents and place children in a place of safety. These tensions of when and how it is appropriate for the state to intervene in private family life, and the idea that child protection is concerned with individual rather than social responsibilities, remain at the heart of child protection practice today (Fox-Harding, 1997; Smith, 2005; Parton, 2006).

**Investigating Child Cruelty: The Power and Authority of the NSPCC Inspector**

The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act 1889 made child cruelty a distinct offence, and gave the police and the Courts the powers to remove children to a place of safety, and to arrest and prosecute parents for cruelty or neglect. It did not give specific powers to the NSPCC or any other organisations. What the Act did, however, was to give their work a statutory basis and legitimacy. Building upon its campaigning, following the 1889 Act the NSPCC was quick to assume a central role in child protection, increasing the numbers of its Inspectors, who would visit family’s to raise concerns and gather evidence to be used by the police and courts. The extent and scope of the legal powers NSPCC Inspectors could draw upon was then to increase with successive changes to the law, as powers to act upon concerns of child cruelty and prosecute parents were extended in the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act 1894, and Inspectors themselves were granted the legal powers to remove children to a place of safety in the Prevention of Cruelty to Child (Amendment) Act 1904.

In respect of how the NSPCC was able to carve out its role and its Inspectors to occupy positions of significant power in family life, it is important to consider how the NSPCC presented itself as not just a philanthropic society, but a public authority and specialist organisation in dealing with child cruelty (Ferguson, 1992, 2004; Hendrick, 2003). The conveyance of this authority was reflected in all aspects of Inspectors work: from their recruitment from the ranks of ex-servicemen, to the uniforms they wore, to their training that emphasised the need to be determined and shrewd in investigating cruelty (Ferguson, 2011). In particular however, what afforded Inspectors legitimacy and authority was how their work was to become a field of professionalism and expertise. This was founded upon the development of the NSPCC’s methodical, organised systems and ‘casework’ methods of visits to families being structured into rational, orderly interventions. This occurred through the detailed recording and classification of visits to families, with this information being drafted into case files where knowledge about families could be retained and shared (Ferguson, 1992, 2004; Flegel, 2009). As the NSPCC’s systems became more comprehensive, it could better reach and keep track of children and families, and coordinate how concerns about child cruelty and neglect were being investigated (Ferguson, 2004).

Data and case records from the NSPCC’s work also appear to show how the organisation developed, and how Inspectors roles changed in the years following the 1889 Act and into the twentieth century. In his study of the NSPCC, Ferguson (2004) argues that the use of legal powers to ‘rescue’ children from parental cruelty and neglectful homes was an important feature of the NSPCC’s work, but the emphasis was often on the moral reform of families rather than just the removal of children. Using statistics and case records, Ferguson shows that over time the NSPCC came to take fewer parents to court, and while children were temporarily placed in shelters and other forms of accommodation, only a relatively small proportion of these children remained away from their families. For example, in one NSPCC branch, of 5112 children the agency worked with between 1892 and 1903, only one percent were permanently separated from their families (ibid, pp. 33-34). What did change, Ferguson argues, is that Inspectors initially sought to impose parent’s responsibilities through the threat or reforming potential of prosecution, but as time went on and the NSPCC’s methods developed, Inspectors used their casework with families as a direct means of trying to enact change. This analysis is supported by Hendrick (2003), who similarly examines statistical changes to show how, over time, the NSPCC came to focus on neglect and sustained interventions into family’s lives rather than prosecutions.

Inspectors were therefore quintessential authority figures and legal powers were a prominent feature of their work, but this authority was not simply concerned with taking children away from their families, and instead was often about moral reform and delving into family’s lives. The manner in which the NSPCC sought to present the issue of child cruelty and neglect as an individual moral failing, also meant that it could claim a moral authority for its work, and made cruelty and neglect that the NSPCC could address with the right kind of expertise – in contrast to the wider social harms created by poverty and destitution (Piper, 1999). This kind of approach enacted a form of discipline and control over the behaviour of the poor through surveillance and moralising intervention; with a clear willingness to issue strong ‘warnings’, where the threat of court action and sanctions would still be used to bring families into line (Ferguson, 2004; Clapton, 2009; Flegel, 2009). Such supervision and regulation of parenting was based on the moral, social and cultural norms of the time, and was invariably about class distinctions, with the NSPCC’s work remaining focused on the poor and the slums (Ferguson, 2004; Flegel, 2009). Studies of the NSPCC’s and the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children’s (RSSPCC) archives show the extent to which home conditions, and cleanliness, dirt and disorder, were of particular concern (Hendrick, 2003; Ferguson, 2004; Taylor, 2008; Clapton, 2009; Flegel, 2009). In addition, Inspector’s intervention were often based on fixed gender roles and judgemental attitudes towards mothers, while children’s voices were often marginalised in decisions about their own lives (Flegel, 2009).

From a standpoint over a hundred years later, the NSPCC’s origins and work can appear reactionary and centred on policing the poor (Parton, 1985). Yet, the key themes and tensions of philanthropy and social activism work are found writ large in these early child protection practices, and there was also a clear altruistic and humanitarian dimension to the NSPCC’s work too. It offered a means of protecting children, which although often left children with little say, did mean their rights were recognised and that advanced their safety. Nor did Inspectors simply operate in a heavy-handed way. Their training emphasised the importance of: ‘determination and tact… Mere officialdom or bounce will unlock no door either of house or heart… Courtesy in a man with authority and power behind him has a wonderful effect.’ (NSPCC, 1904, pp. 7-8, cited in Ferguson, 2011, p. 20). Also, guidance outlined how recourse to the ‘strong arm of the law’ should be a last resort (NSPCC, 1901, cited in Clapton, 2009, p. 1048). As Clapton (2009, p. 1049) writes in relations to the RSSPCC, whilst taking account of the many problematic aspects of their work: ‘[t]here is much evidence to conclude that the Inspectors made thousands of children’s lives immeasurably better.’ Records also reflect how Inspectors did often provide material, practical and emotional support to families (Ferguson, 1992, 2004; Behlmer, 1998; Clapton, 2009; Flegel, 2009). This meant that children received protection and support where previously there was none (Himmelfarb, 1991; Ferguson, 2004; Clapton, 2008).

**Child Protection Before and After the Children Act 1948**

The NSPCC was to remain the key organisation for child welfare and protection throughout the early twentieth century, and its work is said to have continued in much the same vein as just described until the 1950s and 1960s. What did change was that this work, and child protection more generally, seemed to disappear from public view (Hendrick, 2003; Ferguson, 2004; Parton, 2006). Ferguson (2004, pp. 81-90) has argued that as the NSPCC’s activities do not appear to have changed, and rather, what seems to have happened is that its work became ‘sequestered’, and intentionally drawn back from the public gaze. Given how successful the NSPCC had been in establishing laws, systems and practices for child protection, it became much less publically engaged than it had been in its early days, particularly from 1914 onwards. Ferguson feels there was something further going on however that illustrates points about the currency of professionalism. He relates this ‘sequestering’ of the NSPCC’s work to child protection having become an activity managed by professionals, who guarded the preserve of their expertise. Not only was public debate no longer called for, it opened up the NSPCC to scrutiny. Ferguson specifically points to how the NSPCC stopped reporting child death statistics in 1936, and how this appears to reflect a desire to control information that could call the effectiveness of its systems into question.

This shift is perhaps more notable for how it appears to have occurred at a time, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, when there was increased debate about welfare, poverty, philanthropy and the Poor Laws (Finlayson, 1994; Harris, 2004; Fraser, 2009). Midwinter (1994) argues this was a period of piecemeal, incremental developments in welfare services and legislation. This did not reflect a consistent political ideology nor social consensus, and the First World War and the Great Depression had a significant impact on these developments, yet there were steady changes over time that were indicative of a ‘creeping collectivism’ (ibid, p. 68). This included legislation for old age pensions and national insurance payments for ill-health and unemployment, expanded public health, education and social services, and the continuing growth of a range of professions and fields of activity intended to provide care and support to those in need, such as psychology to health visiting.

It was here that forms of social work as professional activities began to really emerge too, with a range of activities being, such as probation, hospital almoning, support for children leaving institutional care, and support for psychiatric patients leaving hospital, being taken forwards by public and private bodies (Burnham, 2011). With these shifts came a broad decline in private philanthropy, and an increasingly decisive move away from the use of workhouses and directives of the Poor Laws (Midwinter, 1994; Harris, 2004; Fraser, 2009).

Although child protection was to remain the preserve of the NSPCC across this time, these developments did include some responsibilities being adopted by the state as part of an expanding range of services for children and families (Hendrick, 1997; Harris, 2004). Two particular changes were the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act 1904, which gave local authorities powers to remove children alongside those granted to NSPCC Inspectors; and the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, which gave Local Education Authorities a duty to respond to concerns about child cruelty and neglect (Burnham, 2011).

It was in the creation of the welfare state that these shifts towards state public services were to come to fruition. The welfare state was first set out in the Beveridge Report (1942), which sought to tackle the ‘Five Giants’ of squalor, ignorance, want, disease and idleness. Its creation was the key election pledge of the Atlee Labour government that won a surprise election victory in 1945, when it captured the national mood of a desire to build something lasting out the wreckage of the Second World War (Fraser, 2009). The functions of the welfare state were founded in a succession of acts between 1945 and 1948 that created a series of universal services, so that every British citizen was entitled to comprehensive medical care, a state education, housing, pension and social security payments. Additionally, the welfare state was comprised of auxiliary services to offer specific forms of intervention and assistance, and it was in these auxiliary services that many statutory professional social work roles came to be initially established (Payne, 2005; Pierson, 2011).

The key piece of legislation for child welfare and protection in this period was the Children Act 1948. This Act was driven by the Monckton Report (Home Office, 1945) into the death of Dennis O’Neill in foster care, and the subsequent Curtis Report (Care of Children Committee, 1946) into the general standard of fostering and residential care. These reports were highly critical of the care children received, and found that placements were often poorly regulated and inadequately supervised, with children experiencing neglect and exploitation. The Children Act 1948 legislated that children in care should receive the same standards of support and wellbeing as could be expected for all children, and where children could be safely returned to the care of their natural family, this should be done. It established statutory children’s departments staffed by Childcare Officers, the first statutory children’s social workers, to take this mandate forwards (Packman, 1981).

These new children’s departments moved quite quickly beyond this remit however, and in a manner akin to the early NSPCC, it is said that there was a clear sense of reforming purpose to this work and ambition about what could be achieved (Daniels and Ivatts, 1998). Childcare Officers sought to put professional skills and knowledge to use in offering practical, social, psychological and emotional support to children and families, and they ought to expand their remit so that they could intervene before children had come into care instead of only when things had already reached this point (Packman, 1981; Parton, 1985; Payne, 2005).

The means for this kind of preventative work was bolstered by the Children and Young Persons (Amendment) Act 1952, which gave local authorities limited powers to provide support to families to prevent a child from coming into care. Preventative work and family support were the emphases of statutory interventions and legislation across this time. This was also particularly based on research into delinquency and ‘problem families’ trapped in a cycle of negative functioning, poverty, and crime, where intensive support and intervention was seen to be necessary (Parton, 1985; Butler and Drakeford, 2011; Corby et al., 2012). Arguments for more robust systems of intervention and support to tackle delinquency at its root were a central feature of the Ingleby Report (Committee on Children and Young Persons, 1961), and the subsequent Children and Young Persons Acts 1963 and 1969. Both of these Acts had a strong emphasis on early intervention, and both extended the powers and responsibilities of children’s departments. The 1969 Act also incorporated youth justice into their remit.

The work undertaken by children’s departments initially aligned with that of the NSPCC, the former taking responsibility for children in care and the latter for investigating concerns about child cruelty and neglect. The changing mandate of children’s departments meant, though, that there was an increasing degree of overlap; and their statutory positioning, better resources, and their momentum as an expanding service saw them steadily supersede the NSPCC as the primary agency for delivering interventions into family life (Parton, 1985; Ferguson, 2004). This represented an important shift towards a more supportive and preventative orientation of services, with children’s departments focusing on neglect, poor family functioning and delinquency.

Childcare Officer’s work was, in many respects, less centred on legal powers or authoritative positioning, and much more about voluntary support and therapeutic casework to effect change (Packman, 1981; Corby et al., 2012). It is pertinent to recognise how this work retained dualistic features however, and there was still a significant control dynamic. In the context of the ethos of the post-war welfare state era, debates around the ‘liberal compromise’ between public authorities and private citizens had shifted, and state interventions into people’s private lives was often seen as a form of relatively benign paternalism (Packman, 1981; Parton, 1985, 1991; Ferguson, 2004). However benign the intentions may have been, and although social workers often sought to work with families on a voluntary basis, it has been argued that this was still very much about the regulation of family life, and monitoring and intervening in the lives of families on the margins of society (Donzelot, 1979; Parton, 1985; Corby et al., 2012). What is more, Childcare Officers could and did play a role in authoritative interventions, including removing children from their families when there were significant concerns about abuse and neglect (Packman, 1981; Butler and Drakeford, 2012).

**The Colwell Inquiry and the ‘Rediscovery’ of Child Abuse**

It has been argued that this era reflected the peak of optimism surrounding social work (Parton, 2006; Corby et al., 2012). This optimism was epitomised by the creation of unified Social Services Departments from 1970, following the Seebohm Report, drafted by a committee established to consider the functions of local authority social services (Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Services, 1968). Social Services Departments were to be the ‘fifth social service’ of the welfare state, and the intention was to offer wide-ranging and non-stigmatising support to individuals and families experiencing a wide-range of needs across the life cycle (Townsend, 1970).

This positivity was to prove relatively short-lived, however, and problems quickly emerged in these new unified departments. They required a wholesale restructuring of existing services that was neither properly planned nor delivered, and needed a whole range of different services and areas of expertise to be brought together (Satyamurti, 1981). There was a lack of infrastructure to accommodate these changes, and a lack of clarity about how the mandate to provide universal welfare support was to be put into practice, how this aligned with social workers’ statutory responsibilities, or how previously specialist practitioners were to be expected to work across the whole family (Satyamurti, 1981; Pierson, 2012). Further, the very problems the Seebohm Committee was set up to report on were about how social work departments were overloaded and struggling to cope with the expanding services that they were expected to provide, with problems of high caseloads, too much paperwork and excessive bureaucracy remaining (Satyamurti, 1981).

A specific criticism of these developments, especially as the focus turned towards unified service delivery, was the lack of specific attention being given to child abuse and neglect (Corby et al., 2012). Indeed, many histories argue that the early twentieth century up to this time – aside from some campaigning undertaken by the NSPCC into ‘battered baby syndrome’ as its role changed – was a period of almost complete silence on the subject in the public arena (Packman, 1981; Parton, 1985, 2006; Ferguson, 2004; Payne, 2005; Corby et al., 2012; Pierson, 2012).

The death of Maria Colwell in 1973, and the subsequent public inquiry, was to bring that child abuse and child protection to the fore of the public consciousness in a manner unlike anything that had gone before. Maria was killed at her family home, aged seven, by her stepfather. She had been fostered by her aunt for much of her life, however, the local authority had returned her to her mother’s care against the wishes of her aunt and other family members. Maria died thirteen months later, severely under-nourished, as a result of what was described as extreme physical violence (Secretary of State, 1974). At the time of her death, the family was being monitored by two social workers, one from the local authority and one from the NSPCC, and she had been seen by a number of professionals in the months leading up to her death; visits where the neglect and violence she experienced should have been apparent (ibid).

This was to become the first national scandal around the social work profession, and was to lead to strident questioning of the role of social work and Social Services Departments. It is argued that this was, in many respects, a turning point in the history of child protection (Parton, 1985, 2006; Ferguson, 2004; Butler and Drakeford, 2012; Corby et al., 2012). After a prolonged period where child protection had been in the background, an activity to be directed and governed by the professionals involved, it was thrust into the public gaze and the social work role was subjected to significant criticism, with the first real public debates about the new integrated Social Services Departments being about failure (Butler and Drakeford, 2012). This was also to begin the close association between child protection and social work in the eyes of the general public, even though this was then, and continues to be, only one aspect of a wide range of activities that social workers undertake (Parton, 2006; Pierson, 2011).

Both of Maria Colwell’s social workers were roundly condemned, although it was the statutory social worker who came in for particular censure (Butler and Drakeford, 2012). It was argued in the inquiry report that she did not adequately scrutinise what was going on in the family or respond to concerns raised by family members and neighbours, and that she had been overly trusting in her own opinions, too believing, and too focused on supporting Maria’s mother and stepfather. Overall, hers were perceived of failings of hubris and an unwillingness to draw the proper ‘common sense’ conclusions about the abuse Maria suffered and what life must have been like for her (Secretary of State, 1974). These failings were linked to a wider systemic critique of social work practice. The inquiry report maintained that these individual failings were representative of concerns about social workers being overly confident in their professional expertise and too focused on supporting and improving parenting at the expense of properly investigating child abuse and neglect (ibid).

What was evident in this critique was also a challenge towards the social, political and cultural contexts in which social work interventions took place, and the expertise that social workers laid claim to. What is more, this critique addressed tensions and value conflicts between the protection of children, supporting families in difficulty, and recognising the significance of family relationships. The inquiry’s conclusions were that there was not enough of the former, with insufficient regard for statutory responsibilities and an unwillingness to exercise statutory authority to place children in care, and too much respect for birth parents and emphasis on the social difficulties they faced (Butler and Drakeford, 2012).

The Colwell Inquiry was such a key point because it brought the issue of child abuse back to public attention, and there was a shift in statutory children’s social work from this point towards a more investigate and intervention led approach to child protection (Parton, 2006). Further, the Colwell Inquiry, and other subsequent inquiries into child deaths, established a cycle of blame and reform in child protection, which in many respects continues to the present day (Franklin and Parton, 1991; Littlechild, 2009; Corby et al., 2012, Jones, 2014a; Parton, 2014; Warner, 2015). The response was that ‘something must be done’, and that the individual and systemic failings behind Maria Colwell’s deaths be put right.

The outcome of this was a series of changes intended to establish a comprehensive and robust child protection system. In a series of Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) circulars, procedures and protocols were set out about how social workers should respond to concerns about child abuse and neglect. Most notably, these circulars introduced formal categorisations of child abuse, instituted more consistent and comprehensive procedures for assessing concerns and monitoring children who were at risk, created a national ‘Child Protection Register’, and sought to improve interprofessional working (DHSS, 1974; 1976a; 1976b; 1978; 1980). The Children Act 1975 was also intended to re-evaluate the legal frameworks for child welfare and protection: and in particular, it shifted the law in a more authoritative direction by making it easier for children to be removed to a place of safety, and for children to be permanently fostered or adopted. A shift in professional practice followed, and subsequent research documented an increase in the use of statutory powers such as ‘place of safety’ and other court orders, and showed that these orders were potentially being used earlier in interventions (Packman, 1981; Parton, 1985, 1986; Tunstill, 1986; Packman and Jordan, 1991).

**Debates about Social Work’s Professional and Political Identity in the 1970s and 1980s**

This shift towards a more investigative and authoritative style of practice should be set within a context of wider social, political, cultural and economic change, and debates within and about social work. This is also to establish how power and authority have been central features of these debates, and this influences the ways that power can be understood and engaged with in child protection. The period following the end of the Second World War and the advent of the Welfare State has been described as a time of broad social and political consensus, as people pulled together to meet the challenges of the post-war era. Under the surface, frictions bubbled however, and these were to become increasingly apparent in the 1960s and 1970s (Midwinter, 1994; Young, 1999; Lowe, 2005; Fraser, 2009). By the mid-to-late 1970s, these tensions had become open sores and source of conflict, as the UK economy slowed and then stagnated, and rising inflation and costs of living led to strident debates about policies of economic regulation and high levels of public spending and taxation. These economic problems were compounded by the global oil crises of 1973 and 1979, which sent the UK economy into recession (Lowe, 2005; Page, 2007).

The welfare state was a particular site of conflict (Lowe, 2005; Glennerster, 2007; Page, 2007). On the political right, there was a broad split between ‘one nation’ Conservatives in favour of the welfare state, though wanting reform and to reign in its excesses, and neoliberal Conservatives who supported the deregulation of economic markets, lower taxation, the privatisation of public services and cuts to spending (Page, 2007). Neoliberals argued that the high levels of social welfare in Britain encouraged dependency, led to intrusive state involvement in private family life, and epitomised inefficient, overly bureaucratic and wasteful public services (Raison, 1990; Pierson, 1994). On the left, there was vehement disagreement about cuts to public spending, wage freezes and changes to policies of economic regulation to make up for the increasing budget deficit. This included criticism of how the post-war consensus on state welfarism had not gone far enough in tackling poverty and inequality or redistributing wealth (Lowe, 2005). As successive Labour and Conservative governments made cuts in the 1970s, there was a growing militancy amongst the unions that deepened these divisions, and strikes undermined an already struggling economy (Page, 2007; Glennerster, 2007).

It was as the role of the welfare state was therefore being called into question in the 1970s that the social work profession was adapting to its new, broad and wide-ranging role in integrated Social Services Departments, and these departments were entering into an increasingly hostile political climate. It is in this context that the Colwell Inquiry should also be viewed as bringing questions about the function and purpose of social work sharply into focus (Butler and Drakeford, 2012). What is more, the inquiry engaged with wider social, political and cultural tensions about families who could not care for children and ‘problem families’. Though a clear distinction is stripped of nuance, the general criticism of Social Service Departments, and the social workers who worked in them, was that they focused too heavily on how the problems people experienced were about social responsibilities, poverty and disadvantage, and not enough on people’s responsibility for their actions (Butler and Drakeford, 2012; Parton, 2014).

This emphasis on individual responsibility was to be a major feature of the policies of Thatcher’s Conservative government following its election victory in 1979. This government was avowedly neoliberal, and introduced wide-ranging economic reforms that were intended to facilitate self-regulating, competitive free markets to encourage growth through enterprise and investment. There was a drive to ‘roll back’ the welfare state and the overreaching of the state into people’s private lives, so as to advance principles of individual responsibility and self-sufficiency (Raisin 1990; Lowe, 2007). In reality, welfare spending did not radically diminish, and although there was a lack of significant investment, there was not a significant retrenchment of the welfare state (Pierson, 1994). However, the functions and governance of welfare services were to change dramatically across this time as market principles and management ideologies were introduced in an attempt to increase their efficiency and tackle perceived wastefulness (Lowe, 2005; Glennerster, 2007). Over time, this was to lead to professional practices becoming increasingly regulated and proceduralised, and it is argued that control of welfare moved from professionals to managers and senior management in particular (Langan, 2000).

As social work was coming under criticism following the Colwell Inquiry, there were also significant debates within the profession about its nature and purposes. There was a strong critique of social work from the radical social work movement that emerged in the 1970s, and which remains a prominent voice in contemporary debates (Powell, 2001; Pierson, 2011). In brief, radical social work critique was grounded in Marxist and socialist analyses of how capitalist systems served to perpetuate economic and social inequalities, to the continuing benefit of the privileged and wealthy (Bailey and Brake, 1975, 1980; Simpkin, 1979; Statham, 1979; Jones, 1983; Langan and Lee, 1989). Radicals argued that welfare systems had come to function as an extension of capitalist economic systems, through helping people to maintain a basic level of subsistence rather than being part of meaningful social, political and economic reform, and the redistribution of wealth and opportunities (Leonard, 1975). Traditional social work practices based on therapeutic support was criticised for being paternalistic, and presenting the problems people experienced as matters of individual deficit rather than the consequences of the inequalities and poverty.

Power was central to this critique, as radicals characterised social work as reinforcing social power inequalities, and traditional therapeutic casework as being a form of social regulation and surveillance, where norms and values of the dominant social classes and capitalism could be imposed (Bailey and Brake, 1975; Jones, 1983; Simpkin, 1979). For radicals, in working with the poorest and most marginalised groups in society, social work was also however well placed to foster solidarity and collective action towards change (Leonard, 1975). Radical social work was explicitly about social workers aligning themselves with the people and communities they worked with, and bringing about wider social change through activism and mutual assistance (Bailey and Brake, 1975).

Although radical social work was a prominent feature of debates about the profession across the late 1960s and 1970s, and it has had a significant impact on social work theory, it was a diminished force by the 1980s and never actively taken up by the large majority of social workers (Payne, 2005; Pierson, 2011). One of the main impacts of radical theory, however, was its continued influence on social work theory, and on perspectives drawing attention to poverty, class, injustice and inequality in a way that put power at the centre of understanding social work and how it is experienced. Feminist theorists argued that gender inequalities were overlooked in social work, despite it being a profession mainly consisting of women, and that there was a need to challenge social work practices that reinforce discrimination and the marginalisation of women (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Langan and Day, 1992). Anti-racist perspectives offered a strong critique of how social work practices could perpetuate racism through direct discrimination, through reinforcing discriminatory systems or stereotypes and dominant norms based on ethnicity and culture, and through less overt ‘colour-blind’ practices that ignored ethnic and cultural differences, and racism (Dominelli, 1988; Ahmad, 1990). These perspectives, alongside radicalism provided the basis for the development of holistic anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive social work perspectives in the late 1980s and 1990s (Tomlinson, 2002; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006).

These positions formed part of a further set of debates about the nature and purposes of social work in the 1980s, as voices from within and outside of the profession responded to the increased scrutiny it faced, and to the professions changing role under a Conservative government largely antipathetic towards welfare services and people who were perceived to be dependent on those them. Two significant, connected debates from this time were, first, about whether social work ought to be a ‘generalist’ profession as it currently operated in integrated Social Services Departments or one that featured numerous ‘specialist’ roles and forms of knowledge to deliver targeted interventions, and how second, what made social work interventions effective, and where the evidence was for this. Calls for evidence about effectiveness and what works in practice was to be supported by voices within the profession (Sheldon, 1978; 1982; Davis, 1981; Pinker, 1982).

These contrasts were evident in the Barclay Report (Barclay Committee 1982), even though its remit was to define the professional identity of social work. The main report and one minority report (Brown et al., 1982) argued that social work should be about enhancing and enabling communities, based on a ‘generalist’ approach to social work skills and knowledge. This was sharply contrasted however by the other minority report, which supported the view that social workers should fulfil specialist roles, based on clear evidence on ‘what works’ and effectively helps people (Pinker, 1982).

I cover these debates and wider political themes because they show two key things. First, whilst indicating the diverse character of social work, these debates appear to have made it difficult to establish a mandate for the profession or to bring it together in the face of criticism and antipathy from the public and politicians (Hugman, 1991). This lack of unity and clarity, and the failure to define narratives surrounding social work by clearly putting forwards a position about what social workers do, appears to have left social work vulnerable to Conservative policies of introducing market principles and management ideology to welfare (Harris, 2003; Payne, 2005).

Although this happened in almost all areas of the public sector, in social work this seems to taken shape in the increased regulation and jurisdiction of social work interventions through systems and procedures to define what social workers do and when they do it (Harris and White, 2008; Parton, 2014). Social work practice was to become proceduralised and narrower in its scope, and the Seebohm idea of Social Services Departments and generalist social workers who supported the whole family was replaced by more fragmented and regulated interventions. It was also to introduce hierarchical management structures that operationalized increasing levels of management control over social workers’ practices (Langan, 2000; Harris, 2003; Parton, 2006). Second, in terms of analysing power, the themes considered here brought out further tensions in how power can be understood and engaged with. It introduced an important critique of the social work role and the potential for social work involvement – up to this point seemingly largely conceived as benign – to be a form of control and regulation.

**Before and After the Children Act 1989: Risk, the ‘Rule of Optimism’ and the Refocusing Debates**

Although the years following the Colwell Inquiry saw a shift in social work interventions into family life, it has been argued that this shift was the culmination of a successive series of changes rather than a straightforward reaction to the fallout of Maria Colwell’s death. It is also argued that these interventions retained characteristics of family support and preventative work. Corby’s (1987) analysis of this period, for example, suggests a difference between initial inquiries and assessments which became increasingly investigative and authoritative, and longer-term work with families, where social workers continued to try and work with families to make changes. Dingwall et al.’s (1983) ethnographic research into organisational decision-making found similar themes, insofar as the emphasis of interventions where there were concerns about abuse and neglect was initially placed on investigation and authoritative action, but that social workers did also often try to work with families. This research also looked to bring out the complexities of decision-making in child protection, and how social workers sought to balance keeping children safe with respecting their rights and the rights of their family. The authors outlined the concept of a ‘rule of optimism’ as being a key feature of child protection (ibid, pp. 79-102).

It is worth noting how the authors of this study have since clarified their use of the term as being an overall principle of decision-making, and not a psychological aspect of what social workers do or don’t do. Simply put, the ‘rule of optimism’ is intended to capture how professionals work from a presumption that a child is safe and they should not intervene in family life, or a child should remain with their family, unless they have demonstrable evidence that action is needed. This is to preserve the idea that the state should only interfere in people’s as much as is necessary, and to acknowledge how the more sceptical social workers are, the more families get unjustly caught up in the child protection system. The idea behind the rule is also to recognise that, in general, most children do not experience abuse or neglect (Dingwall, 2014).

A shift towards an investigative and risk-averse child protection system was to become increasingly apparent in the mid-1980s following a succession of high-profile child deaths where there were social work failings. In 1984, the death of Jasmine Beckford and the subsequent public inquiry was a national scandal that again placed the social work profession under scrutiny (Parton, 1986). This was closely followed by the deaths of three other children, Tyra Henry and Heidi Koseda, also in 1984 and Kimberley Carlisle in 1986, all of which received significant media coverage and opprobrium towards the social workers involved. Across these inquiries, criticism was directed at the social workers involved for failing to recognise signs of abuse and for being insufficiently focused on the child, and for being too accommodating and supportive towards parents or other family members. Damning criticisms were particularly made in the public inquiry into the death of Jasmine Beckford. Her social worker was lambasted for having shown a ‘naïveté almost beyond belief’ (London Borough of Brent, 1985, p. 38). The inquiry report referred to ‘rule of optimism’, but here this was now cast as a psychological characteristic of social workers who were liable to be overly trusting, too focused on keeping children with their families, and often unwilling to exercise the statutory authority that was central to their role (ibid, p. 217). This idea has been repeated in more recent inquiries and Serious Case Reviews (Ofsted, 2010).

This succession of child death tragedies embedded the changes that had followed the Colwell Inquiry (Parton, 1991; Ferguson, 2004; Corby et al., 2012). It is also argued that this period particularly saw a growing emphasis placed on accountability and showing that the correct procedures had been followed, and further moves to extend these processes to address systemic failing (Parton, 1991; Ferguson, 2004). These tragedies also create a powerful sense of anxiety about risks to children that is connected to these changes. Ferguson, borrowing from Giddens, describes this as a time where the ‘riskiness of risk’ in child protection came to the fore, with an almost ever-present fear about what could happen becoming a feature of social worker’s roles (Giddens, 1994, cited in Ferguson, 2004, p. 107).

This shift and the growing authoritarianism in child protection did not go unchallenged. There was criticism from academics and policy makers who questioned the impact of these changes and sought to challenge a culture that was seemingly leading to more and more children being removed from their families and taken into care (Parton, 1985, 1991; Allen, 2005). It was argued that Children Act 1975 had unbalanced the legislative basis for child protection work, and that families were often left feeling that social workers ran roughshod over their rights, and that they had no way of challenging professionals or seeing decisions overturned (Allen, 2005). Criticism was also directed at social workers by children and parents, in particular, the advocacy group Parents Againts Injustice (PAIN), who condemned the direction that child protection had taken, and argued that unnecessary, investigative and authoritarian interventions could themselves be abusive (Amphlett, 2000).

The ‘Cleveland Affair’ brought these challenges, and the tensions of child protection, to a head in the late 1980s. It happened when, over a period of four months, 121 children were removed from their families by the local authority (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1988). These actions were undertaken based particularly on the recommendations of two paediatricians, whose approach to uncovering sexual abuse in children was later shown to be flawed. Complaints by parents and local MPs attracted the attention of the media, and social workers were again condemned: although this time for being too quick to act, and for being overzealous, assessment-driven bureaucrats who were too concerned with covering their own backs instead of children’s and families’ wellbeing (Franklin and Parton, 1991). The subsequent public inquiry found that child protection systems were overly adversarial and investigative, at the expense of working with parents and respecting their rights (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1988). It was recommended that parent’s rights needed to be given a clearer legal mandate, and that statutory powers to intervene in family life should be rebalanced (ibid). The inquiry also sought to challenge professionals' certainty in their own expertise, and called for greater care and judiciousness in decision-making.

The Children Act 1989 was drafted, amongst other reasons, in an attempt to address concerns about child protection and welfare law (Tunstill, 1997; Parton, 1997). It was not a direct response to Cleveland, as the Act was already under consideration at the point the Cleveland Affair became known, however the desire to get the balance right between statutory powers and responsibilities to keep children safe, and children’s and parent’s rights, very much followed on from key criticisms made in the public inquiry. The purpose of the act was also to establish a clear legislative basis for the support children and families were entitled to. To this end, new threshold criteria and categories of intervention were introduced, drawing upon the concept of ‘significant harm’ as the cornerstone of understanding and acting on child protection concerns. The Act widened the scope of local authority’s responsibilities to provide support to families, using a definition of children ‘in need’ of support within their families. This was a significant shift from previous legislation, where local authorities only had responsibilities towards children at risk of coming into care (Packman and Jordan, 1991; Tunstill, 1997).

Another central feature of the Children Act 1989 was how it legislated for children’s and parent’s participation in child protection processes, and how the legal authority to override children’s and parents wishes should only be exercised when concerns cannot be managed through voluntary agreements or cooperative engagement (Daniel and Ivatts, 1998; Allen, 2005). Taken together, this represented a wholesale rethink of child protection and child welfare law. It was welcomed at the time for as providing a basis for refocusing of professional powers and achieving a middle ground between professionals having the powers to act effectively to protect children, and upholding children’s and parent’s rights (Packman and Jordan, 1991). Indeed, the Children Act 1989 remains the legal framework for child protection and child welfare today, and it continues to be regarded as offering a solid framework for child protection (Daniels and Ivatts, 1998; Franklin, 2002; Allen, 2005; Parton, 2006; Broadhurst and Holt, 2010).

In this period following the Colwell Inquiry and leading up to the Children Act 1989, the tensions and value conflicts of child protection appear to have come to the fore. Before this time, child protection and social work involvement in children’s and families’ lives, be it in the guise of the work of the NSPCC or statutory children’s departments, seems to have had a relatively settled sense of purpose. As described earlier, tensions and value conflicts of child protection were apparent from the outset in the work of the NSPCC. However, the NSPCC’s work also appears to have been clearly premised on the exercise of authority figures, and the regulation of parenting, especially amongst families living in poverty (Ferguson, 2004; Flegel, 2009). Before the Colwell Inquiry, the work of statutory children’s departments can be understood as similarly characterised by a relatively clear mandate, with state intervention in family life being at the time regarded as overall benign and unproblematic. There were still authoritative dimensions to this work, and social workers would act on child protection concerns, including the exercise of statutory power, but the principal concern was to support families and keep them together (Packman, 1981; Parton, 1985).

As social work came under scrutiny following the Colwell Inquiry, this relative clarity of purpose seemed to be replaced by an increased sense of anxiety and risk, and the social work role and exercise of statutory authority became increasingly contentious. As Hendrick (2003, p. 193) has argued, ‘The 1980s were the decade in which the long-smouldering tensions concerning the relationship between childcare, family responsibility and the jurisdiction of the state finally erupted’. Social work was buffeted on all sides, in a hostile political climate, with little clarity or direction within the profession, social workers were seen as failing to protect vulnerable children.

The response was for interventions to become anchored to systems and procedures that offered greater accountability, and to act more decisively on concerns about children’s safety and welfare. Yet social work was then also condemned for becoming overly bureaucratic, investigative and authoritarian; critiques which echoed calls from within that the profession that it was moving away from core helping and emancipatory values. In many respects, this has come to reflect the key themes and tensions of child protection as an activity that is concerned with protecting children, supporting families, and respecting children’s and parent’s rights, including a right to private family life. This resulted in significant pressure on social workers to get it right and to ensure that children were properly protected, whilst avoiding over-intervening or unnecessarily drawing families into child protection systems (Parton, 2006). As Munro (2008) has argued however, these goals can be at odds, insofar as to effectively protect children requires social workers to be more risk-averse, taking authoritative courses of action sooner and investigating concerns raised in more depth. This then draws in more families into the child protection system. In turn, however focusing on respecting rights to private family life and only intervening where it is necessary to do so runs the risk that children in need of protection will be missed.

The Children Act 1989 alone could not redress these problems, and despite this new legislative framework, the years that followed saw the focus remain resolutely on child protection. New responsibilities to offer support to families did become more embedded over time, but the main thrust of social work with children and families was still to identify and intervene in circumstances where there was the most risk (DoH, 1995; Parton, 1997b; Beckett, 2001; Hendrick, 2003). The refocusing debates of the 1990s highlighted these problems, most clearly in the publication of ‘Child Protection: Messages from Research’, which brought together twenty research projects commissioned following the Cleveland Inquiry (DoH, 1995). The findings of these projects presented a picture of child protection systems being overly procedural and bureaucratic, and acting as a filter where many families were investigated, but with few receiving support appropriate to their needs (Gibbons et al., 1995). Partnership and parental participation in child protection processes was also held to be limited, with children and families often feeling stigmatised and disempowered by social work involvement in their lives (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Thoburn et al., 1995). Overall, this was taken to show how the child protection system was geared to identify serious physical harm and sexual abuse, but did not adequately differentiate between such cases and families where there were enduring social, community and family problems. These families represented a high proportion of referrals for social work intervention, and were where these interventions were least effective (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Gibbons et al., 1995; Parton, 1997a).

**‘Safeguarding’ Children under New Labour**

The New Labour government, which achieved a landslide general election victory in 1997, was to promote a different approach to child protection that was intended to realise the aims of the Children Act 1989 and offer both protective and supportive services to children and families. These changes were a part of New Labour’s social and welfare policies, and commitment to the ‘third way’ political ideology (Powell, 1999; Newman, 2001; Lister, 2004). The ‘third way’ was conceived as a move beyond the conflicts of state socialism and neoliberalism (Giddens, 1994). Instead of seeing high public expenditure on welfare services and economic growth as mutually exclusive, this spending was viewed as a form of social investment to stimulate and maintain economic prosperity. Health, education, welfare and other public services were held to about investing in people, especially those who were socially excluded and marginalised, to produce active, socially and economically engaged citizens (Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Lister, 2004; Dobrowolsky and Lister, 2008). Alongside this, New Labour was keen to be seen as ‘tough’ on crime, but also on tackling social ills of unemployment, welfare dependency and anti-social behaviour (Newman, 2001; Charman and Savage, 2008). Its social and welfare policies were designed to enable people and to help them to take advantage of the opportunities available to them in a free market society; however there was a clear authoritarianism, and if people would not do so then their responsibilities as citizens would be enforced (Newman, 2001; Jordan, 2004; Dwyer, 2008).

Children and childhood occupied a particular space within this ideology, with children being viewed as the most deserving and apt for investment in their futures. Children were cast as being both blameless for their circumstances, innocent and deserving of opportunities, and as future active citizens, impressionable, and a potential threat to the social order where their individual and social responsibilities were not properly nurtured (Hendrick, 2003). New Labour policymakers sought to provide the conditions in which children could thrive, and in which they could be socialised into taking advantage of opportunities presented to them (Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Lister, 2001; Hendrick, 2003; Fawcett et al., 2004; Parton, 2006). Key commitments included eradicating child poverty, the promotion of ‘education, education, education’, tackling youth offending and anti-social behaviour, and the rapid expansion of Sure Start Children’s Centres and other targeted welfare services in communities where families faced particular socio-economic challenges (Fawcett et al., 2004; Parton, 2006).

These were all significant developments in isolation, but they were also part of a broader, integrated approach to policies and programmes for children and families. This was best reflected in New Labour’s ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda, which was about holistically meeting all children’s needs, and making sure that children were safe and can flourish (DfE, 2003). ‘Every Child Matters’ set out five key outcomes for all children: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic wellbeing. This drew in services across health, education and welfare, with a renewed emphasis placed on multi-agency support to meet children’s needs. The intention was also to provide a spectrum of services, moving from universal services for all children, through to coordinated support for more vulnerable children and families, to targeted multi-agency interventions where there was the greatest need. Child protection and social work involvement in children’s and families lives was seen as being part of these targeted multi-agency responses. These ranged from coordinated interventions for families where children were ‘in need’ and local authorities had responsibilities to offer support, through to rigorous interventions for children ‘in need of protection’ where concerns about their safety and welfare warranted the highest levels of intervention. Accordingly, child protection was to become part of a broader, ‘safeguarding’ mandate, where concerns about children’s safety and wellbeing could be addressed across a range of interventions and services (Penna, 2005; Frost and Parton, 2009).

These developments reshaped the landscape around which child protection interventions occurred, and meant that there were more services to offer support and early help for children and families. It was notable however that social work occupied a specific role within these wider safeguarding services, and social work involvement in families lives continued to be focused on those circumstances where the level of concern was highest, where many of the same challenges and criticisms remained (Parton, 2006). Child protection was quite early into the New Labour era, following the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000 and the subsequent public inquiry.

Victoria Climbié died, aged eight, after months of brutal and sustained abuse at the hands of her aunt and her aunt’s boyfriend. The family had a wide range of contact with many different professionals after moving to the UK, but over a period of eleven months, no professional was able to properly assess or understand Victoria’s life experiences, or her safety and wellbeing, and there were numerous missed opportunities to act on those concerns that had been raised. The inquiry report into her death by Lord Laming (2003) offered strong criticisms of both the failings of professionals, and of the wider child protection system, which were seen as indicative of an endemic failure to learn the lessons of the past or to address systemic problems in child protection. It made 108 recommendations, which addressed all levels of the organisation of child protection systems: from the lack of appropriate training and support for practitioners, through to the failures of senior leadership in developing accountable and cohesive child protection networks. Although broader and drawn from New Labour’s social and welfare policies, ‘Every Child Matters’ and the Children Act 2004 were also presented as a response to this tragedy and how it showed the need for a new approach to children’s care and safety.

The focus of Laming’s criticisms of child protection on addressing systemic and organisational failings across the board also fit in with another fundamental aspect of New Labour’s welfare reforms, which was the ‘modernisation’ of services (DoH, 1998; Powell, 2008a). In keeping with changes described here about the influence of market principles and managerialism on welfare services, including child protection, in the 1980s and 1990s, New Labour’s approach to ‘modernisation’ was very much about the incorporation of business and market principles into public services to drive improved standards and efficiency (Newman, 2001; Powell, 2008a). New Labour took this further however, and across it’s time in government the response to problems in welfare systems was to develop the level of regulation and central governance of those systems (Newman, 2001; Penna, 2005). Coupled with Laming’s reforms, the result was to add further layers of process and procedure to child protection systems, and to manage these systems through an emphasis on targets, timescales and performance indicators, monitored through audit processes (Webb, 2006; Parton, 2006; Garrett, 2009; Shaw et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2010). This process was furthered by the proposed introduction of comprehensive ICT systems, both to track work done with children and families more efficiently, and to organise and monitor interventions (Cleaver et al., 2008; Frost and Parton, 2009; Garrett, 2009).

What is particularly notable about this is that although ‘safeguarding’ sought to introduce a new way of thinking about interventions into family life, it could not escape the tensions at the heart of child protection. The intention was to create a system designed to provide a range of possible services to families at the right time and in so doing avoid the need for more intrusive levels of intervention and offer a different way of engaging with those with enduring social, community and family problems. In practice, implementing this system brought with it a continued reliance on assessment and investigative practices as social workers or other professionals had to determine what the problems were and the level of intervention required. What is more, the increased scope of these systems meant that more families were subject to state intervention and scrutiny, with all that this encompassed in terms of monitoring and recording information, especially given the introduction of more comprehensive ICT systems (Garrett, 2009). It was families who were experiencing poverty and exclusion who were most likely to experience this further level of intervention, and in the context of New Labour’s ‘tough’ approach to welfare and targeting of services, families would also often be aware of how non-engagement could lead to more authoritarian levels of professional involvement (Jordan, 2001; Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Parton, 2006; Garrett, 2009). Concerns were also raised about how child protection was subsumed within this wider field of activity and the language of safeguarding, with there being little recognition in government policy or guidance of the distinctive challenges and ways of working in child protection, or clarity about the need for authority in this field (Munro and Calder, 2005; Ferguson, 2011).

Towards the end of New Labour’s time in government, child protection was beset by further scandal, with the death of Peter Connolly in 2007 – known at the time as ‘Baby P’. Peter Connelly was 17 months old when he died. A post-mortem examination showed that he had suffered sustained abuse in the months before his death, despite being on the Child Protection Register and being regularly seen by professionals, including by a paediatrician and by his social worker in the days leading up to his death, when injuries including a broken spine should have been apparent. The second Serious Case Review into Peter Connolly’s death criticised the lack of ‘authoritative’ practice that contributed to professional failings, alongside other points about the poor analysis and decision-making, interprofessional communication and oversight (HLSCB, 2009).

The sense of lessons still not being learned and public anger at the failures of professionals was intensified given that Peter Connolly had lived in the same local authority as Victoria Climbié. The professionals involved were vilified in the media as responsible for failing to protect him (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2015). This impression of history repeating was furthered when Lord Laming was appointed to do a further review to examine the child protection system. Though making 58 further recommendations for the development of child protection systems, policies, training, he also argued that there was already an understanding of what needed to happen, what was left was to ‘NOW JUST DO IT’ (Laming, 2009, p. 7).

**The Conservative Government, Austerity and Child Protection: Where are we Now?**

The fallout of the death of Peter Connolly, when taken alongside social and political changes of the time, was to mark a return to a focus on child protection as a specific area of activity. In respects, this was a continuation of what had already been happening, with child protection interventions in family life under New Labour remaining focused on assessment and regulation. However, in another respect, this shift was to prompt a series of profound changes in the ways that child protection is understood and undertaken (Featherstone et al., 2014; Parton, 2014).

The context for these changes should be understood in relation to social, political and economic change. Towards the end of its time in office, New Labour’s ‘third way’ ideology and its welfare programmes were undermined in the fallout of the global financial crisis of 2008. In 2010 a coalition government led by the Conservative Party was elected, whose focus was to be on managing the economy and reducing the UK’s budget deficit, which was presented not only as a consequence of the financial crisis, but of the previous Labour government’s economic profligacy and high levels of public spending (Taylor-Gooby, 2012; Painter, 2013). This was not just about managing the economy, but was to be part of a substantive move away from the statist centralism of New Labour (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Parton, 2014). The current Conservative government has extended these cuts after it won the 2014 election outright.

The outcome of this extended period of 'austerity' has been a significant reduction in public spending, with inevitable consequences including a reduction or loss of public services. This has led to the retrenchment of the wide-ranging welfare reforms introduced by New Labour (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). Many local authorities have had to, and continue to have to, make significant cuts, which has meant that their ability to provide a wider range of early intervention and support services has been lost. This is of itself has seen child protection return to the fore, simply because there is no longer the money for much other than core statutory services like child protection (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012).

The death of Peter Connolly and furore which followed has also meant a greater degree of interest in social work and child protection, including from some senior figures within the Conservative Party who sought to tackle perceived endemic and systemic failings (Gove, 2012). The Coalition and subsequently the Conservative Government introduced a range of measures. Professor Eileen Munro was commissioned to undertake a further review of the child protection system (Munro, 2010; 2011a; 2011b). This review covered a wide-range of areas, but it specifically focused on children’s journeys and experiences, the challenges presented by the excessively bureaucratic and prescriptive nature of the child protection system, and the need to promote professional expertise and skills to engage with the complexities of practice. This report was almost universally well received, and built on changes to social work education and practice that had been recommended by the Social Work Reform Board (2010). Other developments have been more controversial. These developments have included increased private and third sector involvement in child protection, and the establishment of private trusts taking responsibility for the delivery of services away from failing local authorities (Le Grand et al. 2013). There has been a renewed emphasis on adoption as the preferred route of permanency for children removed from the care of their families (Ward and Smeeton, 2016). A new, ‘fast-track’ entry route towards social work qualification specific to children and families social work, undertaken in practice has been introduced. Also, there has been an increased focus on ‘innovations’ in child protection, and new models of service delivery (Spring Consortium, 2016).

Debates about these developments have been controversial because they are considered to have potentially huge consequences for child protection and social work more generally, and see a move away from a generalised, united social work profession found primarily in public services, towards a greater fragmentation and privatisation (Jones, 2015). This is seen as then having the potential to weaken the profession further and create silos where practice happens in a highly regulated way. This connects to wider continued concerns about the direction of child protection, with critics arguing that what we see is a continuation of shifts towards a ‘child rescue’ model of child protection that is strong on ‘muscular authoritarianism’ and lacking in meaningful support (Featherstone et al., 2014, p. 2).

These concerns lie particularly with the harmful individualism that is seen to pervade child protection at the expense of parent’s, and children’s rights; an appreciation of people’s individual selfhood and the complexities of family life subsumed within a system focused on the assessment of risk and the exercise of statutory powers. These themes have also been connected to wider public discourse about a ‘broken society’ and ‘strivers and skivers’ under the Conservative government, with punitive attitudes towards a perceived a residuum of ’troubled’ or problem families defined by violence, drugs, alcoholism, crime and unemployment, and where authoritative state intervention is justified. It has been argued that this kind of discourse fed into, and was reinforced by, the media response to the death of Peter Connolly (Jones, 2014; Parton, 2014; Warner, 2015).

Recent developments are also controversial given the climate in which they are happening, and the continued pressures and cuts to services that impact on social work practice. The increased demand for child protection has been an ongoing feature since the modern child protection system began to be established in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the past decade, there has been further significant increases in the numbers of families coming into contact with the child protection system, and numbers of children in care. There was a substantial increase in the numbers of referrals, applications to court and use of statutory powers following the death of Peter Connolly. Such an increase is a phenomenon known to have occurred after some of the other child deaths considered in this historical analysis, as this publicity leads to more referrals from the public and professionals, and decision-making becomes more risk-averse (Parton, 2014). What seems different here is that the trend has continued, and rather than settling, the numbers of referrals, children on Child Protection Plans and applications to court seemingly continues to rise (CAFCASS, 2012; CAFCASS, 2014). This has been connected to austerity and rising levels of poverty and inequality, alongside cuts to much needed support services, leading to an increase in associated social problems and reduced capacity in professional systems to deal with such an increase. This creates a constant cycle of high caseloads, significant levels of stress in workers, staff turnover, instability and churn in the workforce (BASW, 2013).

The developments and debates are fundamentally about the tensions and value conflicts of child protection. They are about the organisation of the child protection system, and the way in which it is a system that prioritises intervention premised on the investigation of abuse and neglect rather than support and help for families experiencing multiple social problems and forms of disadvantage (Lonne et al., 2009; Featherstone et al., 2014; Parton, 2014; Devine and Parker, 2015). This is a system that is also considered to remain rooted in reliance on systems and procedures, and have an unhelpful focus on performance indicators and targets as indicators of what is going on in practice (Lonne et al., 2009 Munro, 2011b; Chard and Ayre, 2010; Preston-Shoot, 2010). Whilst the conclusions of the Munro Review that child protection needs to be an activity founded on social worker’s expertise were well received, and have helped to facilitate a renewed emphasis on the development of relational and decision-making skills to engage with the complexity and contested nature of the work that social workers do, it has been argued that in reality, this has not changed how practice occurs or how child protection systems are organised (Parton, 2014).

This is a dispiriting picture. However, it is not all that there is to be said, and I want to finish with some points of progress and hope. Firstly, there has been this renewed emphasis on the relational dimensions of child protection, something which has remained a prominent theme in social work theory, and how this can shape assessment and decision-making in child protection interventions. This sits alongside a greater focus on the need for authority in child protection, but exercised in a manner that is founded on relationships, with care, empathy and respect for children and families, and recognition for the moral quandaries that result (Ferguson, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Okitikpi, 2011; Welbourne, 2012).

This connects to revitalised calls for a greater focus on family support, welfare, seeing the whole family and not just the risks, and developing wider social and community support networks, in child protection systems and practice (Featherstone et al., 2014). There is scepticism about the motives of focusing on innovations in approaches to child protection, but there is also a focus in many of the new things being tried on working in better, more cooperative ways with children and families, with projects supporting the implementation of the ‘Signs of Safety’ approach to child protection, the use of more systemic and whole family approaches, and to models like the Family Drug and Alcohol Courts and Pause that offer greater levels of intensive support (Harwin et al., 2011; Broadhurst and Mason, 2013). Underlying all of these developments is, I think, a fundamental recognition of the importance of what individual social workers do and how they do it, and helping social worker to continually grapple with the challenges of how best to protect children, but also to support and enable them and their families. It is to explore how an approach to understanding and engaging with power that takes ownership of the tensions and value conflicts I have explored in this historical analysis can help in this endeavour that I will consider in the rest of this study.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to capture how child protection has developed as a form of social and professional practice located within broader social, political, cultural and economic structures. I have particularly sought to reflect how there are tensions and value conflicts at the heart of child protection. Child protection has always been an activity of contrasts, from the moralising, regulatory and authoritative approach of the NSPCC as child protection systems and practices were first instituted, yet with these practices being also grounded in a strong ethos of care for children and a desire to make the social world better by creating systems to offer them protection; through to the more inclusive rationalities of early children’s departments, where intervention was focused on supporting families but were also still about governing the lives of families on the margins of society; (Ferguson, 2004; Parton, 2006; Corby et al., 2012). I have argued here that the tensions and value conflicts at the heart of child protection have been foregrounded as we move towards contemporary times, and as the pendulum has swung between family support and preventative work, child protection, safeguarding, and back again to child protection. It is because of where we are now in focusing on child protection that I use this term, rather than others like child welfare or children’s social work, throughout this study.

In practice, explicit analysis of these shifts and the tension and dualities they reflect may be subsumed within the daily whirl of visits, meetings, paperwork and increasingly targeted and performance-driven interventions. They are, however, reflected in debates about how child protection systems functions and how practice happens, the nature and purpose of social work, and through this, to how social workers exercise power. These debates draw out the challenges of child protection, an activity that often simultaneously involves balancing principles about protecting children and supporting families, state intervention and private family life, and children’s and parent’s rights (Fox-Harding, 1997; Hearn, 1997; Parton, 1997; Smith, 2005; Preston-Shoot, 2011). They also question where child protection has gotten to at the moment, and the impact of social work practice on children and families (Lonne et al., 2009; Rogowski, 2013; Featherstone et al., 2014; Parton, 2014).

Although this analysis has focused on systems and the broader brush strokes of the history of child protection, in practice these things are still fundamentally still about the decisions social workers make, and their relationships with children and families (Ferguson, 2011). My experience of doing child protection has been that the contexts and cultures where you work can have a strong influence on the way you work. But we are also responsible for what we do as social workers, and this is not just about organisational contexts and cultures, it is about how we actively situate our practice within the wider terrain and debates described here, and how we then go on to wrestle with and key themes and tensions of child protection, with power at the heart. It is this, and what we do as social workers in locating ourselves at the precipice of these social and historical contexts, and how these themes and tensions shape the lives of children and families that I now turn.

**Chapter Two:**

**The Sociological and Epistemological Foundations of Child Protection: Pragmatism, Reason and Reflexivity**

**Introduction**

The most obvious power that social workers have lies in the ability to make decisions that can have life-changing consequences for children and families. This power stems from their position within child protection systems and the way they construct knowledge and their decision-making. In this chapter, I explore these aspects of child protection practice and professional expertise. This is to consider how power can be exercised in fair and proportionate ways in decision-making, and to connect the use of power to the kinds of reasoning and critical thinking that go into child protection practice. To this end, I undertake an analysis of its epistemological and sociological foundations of child protection.

I begin by using the lens of theories of modernity and postmodernity to explore different approaches to the processes of understanding the construction of knowledge and decision-making within child protection systems. Drawing upon the historical themes of chapter one, I argue that child protection has developed as a distinctively modern enterprise, and that modernity is evident throughout contemporary child protection practice. I move on from these points to explore how child protection processes occur, and the ways that powers is exercised through social worker’s positioning within legal, organisational and professional systems. Following this, postmodernity is presented as an alternative epistemological perspective. I argue that postmodernity captures key themes in child protection about the uncertainties and fundamental tensions of child protection practices, and that these themes should be taken forwards the ways power and its exercise through the construction of knowledge and decision-making is conceptualised. However, postmodernity cannot provide a coherent epistemological foundation for child protection. This is because it leads to scepticism and relativism, or constructions are postmodernity actually remain embedded with modernist principles. This discussion is used to advance a pragmatic epistemological position that draws from themes from both modernity and postmodernity. This is to argue towards an epistemology for child protection that is centred on the usefulness of ideas to understanding child protection practice, and which draws from potentially multiple or contrasting perspectives towards the overall aim of advancing best practice, and judicious and proportionate decision-making. Finally, I develop these ideas in a discussion of decision-making as an activity that should be reasoned and analytic, and reflexive and contextual, including reflecting the fundamental tensions and value-conflicts of child protection.

**Child Protection in ‘Modern’ Times**

To examine the sociological and epistemological foundations of child protection, it is helpful to begin by returning to the historical themes of the previous chapter with a view to how this history has been analysed through the lens of ‘modernity’ (Ferguson, 2004; Parton, 2006; Webb, 2006). Modernity can be characterised as ideas that have been used to understand the emergence of a new, ‘modern’ world, radically different from to what had come before in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Wagner, 1994; Heller, 1999; Webb, 2007). Modernity was reflected the Enlightenment belief in what could be achieved through the use of science and reason to understand the world, and subsequently how this was taken forwards during the Industrial Revolution to reflect a belief in progress, and of a world fundamentally moving forwards. This modernity was apparent in the advances in science and industry; but it was also apparent in the growth of systems and structures through which the social world could be ordered and was experienced, and through which social problems could be tackled (Webb, 2007).

The work of philanthropists and organisations like the NSPCC fit neatly within this progressive ethos. Indeed, it has been argued that the NSPCC’s work and establishment of child protection systems can be understood as being a quintessentially ‘modern’ enterprise intended to advance the moral and social foundations of society (Ferguson, 2004; Flegel, 2009). What was particularly ‘modern’ about this work was how it established a new kind of social practice and expertise around the prevention of child cruelty. This was, in effect, to partition child protection as an arena that requires distinctive knowledge and skills, and specialist, increasingly better organised and more comprehensive systems. In turn, this was to promote the idea that through this work children could be effectively protected (Ferguson, 2004).

 Taking these ideas about modernity forwards, the advent of the welfare state in the mid-twentieth century has been regarded as epitomising of this trend towards an increasingly ‘organised’ modernity of the social world (Wagner, 1994). The mandate of statutory children’s departments within the welfare state to support children in care, and the subsequent extension of this work in unified Social Services Departments, can also be seen as indicative of this optimism and the continued drive for social progress (Parton, 2006). Moving on from this time however, theorists who develop ideas of modernity argue that it became more diverse and contested, reflecting the changing nature of social landscapes with globalisation, and the increasing pace of change, and with it greater emphasis than ever before on individuality, difference, mobility and challenging traditional ways of life (Bauman, 2000). New ideas and formulations of the conditions of ‘late’ (Giddens, 1991; Young, 2007), ‘reflexive’ (Beck, 1992), or ‘liquid’ (Bauman, 2000) modernity, have been developed, which reflect a questioning and reconfiguration of modernity, alongside a search for more sophisticated, advanced solutions to the challenges, failures and fears of the contemporary ‘modern’ world (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). I will return to these ideas shortly, but first I want to establish how contemporary child protection practice remains founded on core precepts and tenets of modernity.

 Social workers position within ‘modern’ rational systems of social organisation is central to exploring how they re able to exercise power. The most evident powers social workers can make use of come from their role within legal systems and the application of the law (Preston-Shoot, 2011). In many respects, legal systems can be regarded as fundamentally modernist insofar as they are grounded in principles of rational inquiry, standards of evidence and knowledge, and reasoned argument and analysis (Murphy, 1997). They are intended to function through the workings of laws that are a rational reflection of societal and ethical principles, which are continually tested and worked through by analysis and debate in the courtroom. In essence therefore, the law, and its use in child protection, is meant to be fundamentally rational.

The specific legal powers that social workers exercise are a central feature of general perceptions of child protection; and they encompass some of the most draconian courses of action available to any professional (Pond, 2011). More than this though, the law that establishes the mandate for social workers and other professionals to do child protection work (Preston-Shoot, 2011). It is not just that social workers and other professionals make use of certain legal powers to act in situations where they feel this is necessary, but how the law runs through child protection. It not only confers an ability to exercise specific powers, it also sets out responsibilities on local authorities and the social workers they employ, and establishes checks and balances, and the limits of these powers and responsibilities (*ibid*). Accordingly, even where specific powers are not called upon, they confer legitimacy to the work social workers do.

It is then also social workers’ position within statutory child protection systems, local authority organisations, and their professional role and status, which enables them to exercise such powers. Statutory policy and guidance sets out the core principles for the functioning of child protection systems and processes, and establishes the priorities placed on local authorities, other organisations and practitioners themselves (most recently set out in: Department for Education, 2015). This formalism is linked to the legal powers social workers can exercise, and the potential for the escalation of interventions where legal powers can be called upon (Spicker, 1991; Beckett and Maynard, 2005). This enables social workers to exercise specific powers like convening Child Protection Conferences, where there are formal processes which are enacted and an evident degree of authority and coercion. Like legal systems, the organisational systems and procedures of child protection are fundamentally rational. They are systems which are about giving a clear order and structure to how child protection happens and what social workers do; and where knowledge is constructed in an ordered and rational way (Ferguson, 2004). To this end, the child protection system is made up of a number of interlinking processes and systems, with workflows through which interventions and decision-making take place. These workflows also acts a filter, whereby families will experience different levels of intervention depending on assessment and threshold criteria (Department for Education, 2015). These processes are organised and monitored through ICT systems, which further embed the procedures that social workers are expected to follow, and that show work which has been done and how decisions have been made (Pithouse et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2010).

Social worker’s positioning within professional systems and their professional status and expertise is also significant. As professionals social workers are bound to the requisites of legal and organisational systems as described, and they are committed to professional standards and responsibilities. This confers authority and accountability for the work they do, and this is linked to ideas about the social roles and status professionals have, and to their knowledge, skills and experience (TCSW, 2012). Certain actions, tasks and decisions have to be undertaken by qualified social workers, who should be able to demonstrate these knowledge and skills. Rational, ordered codes of ethics and practice, which set out the key ethical and professional standards social workers are expected to adhere to, also supports these foundations of professionalism (BASW, 2012; HCPC, 2012).

The power that social workers exercise can thus be seen to be founded on institutional organised and expert systems that are characteristic of modernity. These systems legitimise professional practice, and they provide rational methodologies and ordered standards upon which social workers’ day-to-day work is built. There is hierarchical feel to this view of how power is exercised, with it flowing down through legal, organisational and professional systems to the individual practitioners who perform these practices, and from here to the children and families who experience these interventions. The exercise of power is supposed to be based on consistent, structured and accountable interventions into children’s and family’s lives, grounded in knowledge and expertise, and to be about the application of general principles into particular circumstances in a judicious and proportionate way (Department for Education, 2015). In the remainder of this chapter and in future chapters I will suggest that there is more to power than this, but first I want to see how these ideas about power can be applied to practice through introducing the first case illustration used in this thesis, the Malone family.

**Moving Through the Child Protection System: the Malone Family**

To consider the modernist premises of child protection, and how power is exercised in practice through assessment and decision-making, it is useful to follow through the process of a how a child protection intervention occurs. To do so, I want to introduce the first two case examples to be considered here: the Malone family.

 The Malone family consists of five children, Peter Jr. (14), twins Michael and Anne-Marie (10), Kelly (8) and Connor (3), and their parents, Peter (36) and Sally-Anne (34). They are an Irish Catholic Traveller family. They live in two caravans, a larger one shared by Peter, Sally-Anne, and Connor, and a smaller one which the other children live in. A number of other Traveler families also live on this site. The family have moved from a different local authority area around six months ago.

Social work involvement with the Malone family would begin when a professional, a member of local community or a family member themselves raises concerns about one or more of the children. An initial course of action would be determined based on the information provided and the level of concerns this information indicated about a child’s safety and wellbeing, and the family’s support needs. Within the child protection system, this would take the form of an initial contact where this information would be sorted and categorised. In this instance concerns were raised by Michael’s, Anne-Marie’s and Kelly’s new school, which they had attended for three months. The school reporting that Kelly had spoken to her teacher about her father smacking her brothers Peter Jr. and Michael when they were bad. The school also shared concerns about Michael’s aggressive behaviour, and that Michael, Anne-Marie and Kelly had already had a number of absences, and often looked disheveled when they did attend school.

The process of taking referrals and initial decision-making and responses to this information often now happens in a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) as a ‘front-door’ for children’s services. Here, professionals from social work, the police, health and potentially other organisations come together to share information and co-ordinate professional responses when concerns about a child are reported (Crockett et al., 2013). This is usually also an office-based process with any initial discussions taking place over the phone, and then being passed on to local area teams. The organising principles for decision-making about what happens would be considering whether any crime has occurred, and whether there is ‘reasonable cause’ to consider that a child is experiencing or likely to experience ‘significant harm’, the statutory threshold for child protection enquiries under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989. This would include consideration of a need for a joint response from the police and social workers, and any immediate action needed to protect a child. Second, a child may be considered to be ‘in need’ of support services to promote their welfare under Section 17 of the Act because without this support their welfare is likely to be ‘significantly impaired’, they are unlikely to have a ‘reasonable’ standard of health or development, or because they are disabled.

These judgements will determine the level and kind of intervention a family receives, who provides it, and whether this intervention will be voluntary or has a statutory basis. If it is considered that a child or children may fall into either of the above categories, further assessment will be required, often in the form of a social work single assessment, which has to be completed within at least 45 days. Within this process, concerns about ‘significant harm’ under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 require an immediate response, where a multi-agency Strategy Discussion is convened and follow up actions and timescales are agreed. In the Malone’s case, it was decided that these concerns needed to better understood by a social worker to assess the level of risk and need, yet based on the report from school there was not sufficient cause to determine whether the threshold of ‘significant harm’ was met. A social work assessment was undertaken, with this being handed to a duty social worker. An assessment of this type can result in a range of options once there is a better understanding: ranging from no further action at all; referral to a specific service or early help support; social work involvement as a ‘Child in Need’ as outlined above; child protection enquiries under Section 47 with consideration then given to the need for an Initial Child Protection Conference and a Child Protection Plan; or emergency action to safeguard including the use of legal powers and Care Proceeding. This reflects a scaling up or down of levels of intervention based on assessment and decision-making.

 During the social work assessment of children’s safety and wellbeing, a number of important things emerged. As information was gathered from the family, and from the school and the last local authority where the family had lived, it was established that the family had moved a number of times, and the limited school information available and children’s education levels indicated gaps in education and regular changes in school. Peter Jr. was not currently attending school having been previously excluded, and his last school reported serious worries about his aggressive behaviour. Education professionals had struggled to work with the family, and professionals from health reported very limited involvement. The previous local authority where the family had lived had some records of past referrals and an assessment they had undertaken where the family had subsequently refused support. They also had a record indicating other assessments from a different local authority, but no clear information on this.

A social worker went out to speak to the family. Peter and Sally-Anne were unhappy about this, and the referral that had been made. They felt there was no specific concerns and social workers were interfering in their family life. It was made clear to them that the assessment would need to be completed and that their lack of cooperation would make this more difficult. They agreed to this process and to information sharing, although they said that they and were only agreeing because they felt they had little choice and professionals ‘would just do what they want anyway’. They allowed the social worker to see and speak to the children when they were there, but refused permission for the children to be seen on their own at school. Following this, Sally-Anne had a confrontation with the head of the Primary School, and their attendance deteriorated further. A couple of weeks after this, after two failed visits when the family were not in for arranged visits, the school called the social worker with a further concern. Kelly had spoken to her teacher about how she wasn’t supposed to say anything about things at home, but she had been scared last night as her ‘da had whacked Micky, and he had cried a lot’.

It was decided that this report indicated concerns about ‘significant harm’ through physical abuse, and a Section 47 enquiry was undertaken. Because of the level of concern, and worries that the parents would prevent professionals from speaking to the children, it was decided to dispense with seeking consent, and the social worker and police collected Michael, Anne-Marie and Kelly from school to do a joint interview, at which stage parents were informed. Michael was then also taken for a medical examination. Michael said little when the police and the social worker spoke to him, only that he father would ‘get at’ him every now and again when he was naughty, and that he had a ‘clip’ for ‘giving his ma cheek’, describing an open handed cuff round the back of the head. Anne-Marie and Kelly talked a little more about life at home, and how all of them would get ‘a smack’ by their mother or father when they had been naughty, although it was mainly Peter Jr. and Michael who this happened to, usually about once a month. They had not seen their father smack Michael, only him coming into their caravan crying afterwards. Anne-Marie and Kelly were clear ‘a smack’ was with an open handed. They said there were not hit any more than this, and talked about things at home being generally good. The medical examination did not show any signs of injury.

Based on the above, it was decided not to arrest Peter; however when he and Sally-Anne arrived to collect the children, they were strongly warned about physical chastisement of their children. They were also told that because of the level of concern, an Initial Child Protection Conference woukd be convened and they were expected to work with social workers. A Child Protection Conference is intended to be a point where all professionals involved with a family can come together to share information and decide on what needs to happen to keep a child safe. Again this is intended to be a rational process based on getting as much information as possible and decision-making thresholds. It was agreed at the conference to place all of the children on Child Protection Plans because of concerns about physical abuse. Peter and Sally-Anne attended the conference, but said little, and Peter walked out half way through. The Child Protection Plan was developed which was intended to be SMART: with Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-limited outcomes and goals (Wilkins, 2013).

I will say more about this case example in due course. At this stage what I want to consider is the modernist foundations of this work. Social work involvement in family life as outlined here can be seen to broadly have a rational and technical style that follows the path of scientific enquiry: involving observation, data collection and information gathering, then reasoned analysis to establish patterns and draw inferences about this information, and then the development of a logical conclusion or theory. This relates to Shaw’s point (1999, p. 17) that social workers, 'will have been educated, unwittingly for the most part, in an instrumental, scientific viewpoint'. First, social workers will try to get hold of and organise information to establish as clear and accurate a picture as possible of what life is like for a child and their family. Underlying this process is the premise that social workers can work up as much of a ‘correct’ or ‘true’ picture as possible in the circumstances, and the fuller and more truthful the information they have, and the closer the come to such a picture, the more accurate their decision-making will be (Department of Health, 2000; Department for Education, 2015). This decision-making is thus characterised as a rational process of inference or deduction based on best information. This tends to assume that, as long as there is sufficient information and it is subject to proper, rigorous and methodical analysis, a clear and accurate understanding of things like a child’s welfare needs and risk can be developed; and this can then be used to offer an objective judgement (Shaw, 1999). For example, as above it could be inferred from the range of evidence that although there is not definitive evidence of regular physical abuse, the children’s testimony, the marks to Michael, the aggressive behaviour shown by Michael and Peter Junior, and how much is ‘hidden’ from professionals that there is a likelihood of regular inappropriate chastisement such to meet a threshold for the children being at risk of significant harm. Child protection systems can be thus characterised as directing and standardising these processes, and providing the analytic categories on which judgements can be made. It should also be noted that there are other rational aspects of this work, such as the use of particular assessment tools and research (Macdonald, 2001; Forrester, 2010; Gillingham and Humphreys, 2010; Barlow et al., 2012).

**Modernity and the Crises of Contemporary Child Protection**

There are many benefits to be found in the development of this kind of ‘modern’ child protection system. It is a system intended to make child protection interventions analytic, consistent and accountable, and to uphold standards through the regulation and scrutiny of professional practice. These systems gives social workers and other professionals a clear structure through which these interventions take place, and maps out what they should be doing at any given point, as well as offering a clear methodology for decision-making, which should lead to a certain degree of rigour of analysis. It is not enough to rely on opinions, hearsay or conjecture, social workers have to be able to demonstrate evidence and argue the case. In respect of the exercise of statutory powers in particular, social workers have to be able to show how certain thresholds are met in order to warrant specific kinds of intervention. This kind of analysis and decision-making comes especially to the fore in care proceedings (Brayne et al., 2015). This kind of standardisation, and having sets of processes to follow can be especially helpful for less experienced practitioners (Kemshall et al., 2013).

 The scope of the modern child protection system in the UK and in other countries with similar systems also means that in many ways we know more about children’s lives than at any point in history, and that steps will be taken to address concerns about children experiencing abuse and neglect. There have been continued attempts to understand and improve these child protection systems, often in response to their failings, creating a continued process of refinement and expansion (Parton, 2006). There is support for this idea found in research that indicates that, over time and particularly since the advent of features of the modern child protection system in the 1970s, fewer children die as a result of violence and abuse (Pritchard and Sharples, 2008). Different forms of abuse and harm are also now better understood and addressed, with there now being a clearer emphasis placed on issues like neglect, emotional abuse, and child sexual exploitation (Radford et al., 2011; Berelowitz, 2013; Parton, 2014).

Yet whilst there is a sense of child protection systems and practices moving forwards, it is also instructive to consider how child protection is a field that is beset with crisis, and to return to the fundamental tensions and dualities considered in the previous chapter, in the effort to better understand what it means for child protection to be a ‘modern’ enterprise (Ferguson, 2004; Lonne et al., 2009). To begin with, there are deeply embedded structural problems in child protection of its systems being overwhelmed by the demands placed on them. This leads to social workers having high caseloads and too much work to do, leading to poor morale, burnout, high turnover of staff and social workers leaving the profession, and a reliance on costly agency staff. This ‘churn’ and the high volume of work creates huge organisational pressures (BASW, 2013; McFadden et al., 2015).

As described in the previous chapter, in recent times these problems have been exacerbated by a seemingly continual rise in work coming into child protection systems, and by austerity and cuts to services which mean that essential support services are lost (Hood et al., 2016). With particular reference to modernity however, it is also worth reflecting on how these challenges are connected to demands on child protection systems to do more, the scope of child protection procedures and the demands they create, and the expectations to get it right (Parton, 2006, 2014; Webb, 2006). It is right that abuse, harm, neglect and exploitation should be better understood, but the demands this places on systems, especially at a time when there are significant cuts in the funding to address these challenges, has to be recognised. The regulation of more and more aspects of social worker’s practice through systems and procedures has also exacerbated workload pressures (BASW, 2013). For every process there is paperwork, audits, and performance targets to be met: creating a non-stop treadmill of demands on social worker’s time. The way this takes social workers away from spending time with children and families is a major problem in contemporary child protection (Munro Review, 2011b). It has also been argued that a focus on technical proceduralism has come at the expense of devaluing professional discretion and expertise as what social workers do day-to-day has become increasingly narrow and process driven (Parton, 2009; Chard and Ayre, 2010; Preston-Shoot, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Wastel et al., 2010; Rogowski, 2013; Featherstone et al., 2014). Decision-making and judgements about how to exercise power can thus be seen as potentially becoming tied to thresholds and categorisations of children in the child protection system (Featherstone et al., 2014).

The thrust of this argument is that these developments are actually a result of the influence of modernity on child protection, and how ideas about contemporary ‘late’ or ‘reflexive’ modernity, as the functioning of child protection systems, and indeed the social work profession as a whole, has been the subject of repeated scrutiny. The changes to statutory child protection systems and their increasing scope and regulation can be seen as the result. This is about both a drive towards progress and the continued development of child protection systems and practices; but also, it can be seen as an attempt to mediate the risks associated with child protection through expanding its systems and increasing the ways that interventions into family life are managed and controlled (Ferguson, 2004; Parton, 2006; Webb, 2006). What is particularly troubling about this is how it means the human dimensions of child protection are subsumed within the assessment and management of risk (Parton, 2009). There is thus little space for professional expertise and creativity, and relationships and therapeutic work with children and families are marginalised (Ruch, 2010; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Wastel et al., 2010).

**Alternative Sociological and Epistemological Perspectives on Child Protection: the Contributions of Postmodernity and Poststructuralism**

Given these points about the problematic nature of central features of modernity in child protection, there is merit in exploring alternative sociological and epistemological paradigms. One way of doing this is through considering ideas that represent a rejection or counterpoint of modernity, and perhaps the clearest contrast can be found in ideas about postmodernity and poststructuralism. For a time, these of significant influence in sociology, and have been drawn upon in many different subject areas and fields including social work (Howe, 1994; Parton, 1994; Leonard, 1997; Pease and Fook, 1999; Healy, 2000, 2014; Fawcett, 2009; Fook, 2012). It is first worth noting that interest in these ideas has significantly declined since the late twentieth century (Matthewman and Hoey, 2006). As I will go on to argue, I think this is largely for good reason; however I do think that there are still important things that can be taken from postmodern and poststructural ideas. I want to engage with these perspectives not because they of themselves are coherent and credible sociological and epistemological positions, as I do not think they are, but because they provide a lens for engaging with a range of important and worthwhile points about the kind of activity child protection is and how we construct knowledge in working with children and families.

Like concepts of ‘late’ or ‘reflexive’ modernity, postmodernity is about capturing the fast-moving, diverse and globalised nature of the world across the second half of twentieth century and beyond. It is also about stepping back offering neat or coherent accounts of how these changes occur and undermining singular or causal accounts of how the natural and social world comes to be as it is, and how it should be. Postmodernity thus reflects a brand of scepticism about notions of progress: and key postmodern theses were driven by a reaction to how technological advancement, staunch ideological commitments and mass social movements have led to the most horrific events in human history in the twentieth century (Lyotard, 1984; Harvey, 1990; Jameson, 1991; Benhabib, 1992; Rosenau, 1992; Bauman, 1993; Leonard, 1997; Sim, 2005). A specific concern of postmodernity is a disavowal of ‘grand’ or ‘meta’ narratives – the search for overarching stories, totalising belief systems, and complete and universalisable knowledge (Lyotard, 1984; Sim, 2005; Fawcett, 2012). Instead, postmodernity has been concerned with celebrating difference and uncertainty, and the virtues of being less certain and more open-minded. It is about understanding the ‘little narratives’ that make up our lives in specific circumstances, and the multitude of views about how the world is and how it should be (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernity is about recognising the diversity and pluralism of the world around us, and embracing difference cultures, identities and ways of being (Bordo, 1990; Giroux, 1991; Benhabib, 1992). This includes seeing attempts to create universal values and ways of life as reflecting the imposition of particular ways of seeing the world often in line with the interests of particular, privileged groups (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Leonard, 1997).

Postmodernity is closely linked to poststructuralism, which is about rejecting the idea that there is a deep, coherent and logical structure to knowledge and instead showing that knowledge is shaped by social context and by language. Poststructuralism has thus been described as doing the ‘spadework’ for postmodernism (Carter, 1998, p. 8). Although Foucault explicitly rejected the idea that his was a postmodernist position, his work on knowledge and power has been of particular importance in advancing poststructuralism (Sarup, 1988). In seeking to establish the entwined relationship of power and knowledge, Foucault sought to show that knowledge is always constructed in particular historical and socio-cultural contexts. He argued that we do not understand the world or construct knowledge from a neutral position, we do so from inside particular ‘discourses’ – patterns of ideas and ways of talking about and representing different phenonmenon (Foucault, 1970; Rabinow, 1984). Knowledge is accordingly interconnected to power as a defining feature of our social and historical positions, especially in respect of how some points-of-view and forms of knowledge are privileged and others marginalised (Foucault, 1980, 2002). Other poststructural and postmodern thinkers similarly sought to show that how we understand and engage with the world is contingent on our positions and the social contexts around us, and on the ways we express and represent ideas through discourse (Derrida, 1976; Lyotard, 1984; Sarup, 1988; Harvey, 1990; Rosenau, 1992; Carter, 1998). This is to say, it shows how our way of understanding the world are based upon our positions and worldviews. This make any claims to knowledge or truth contingent and fallible, and only having meaning from within the frames of reference we occupy (Sim, 2005).

These ideas about postmodernity and poststructuralism are significant in the way they capture the human, subjective and contested aspects of child protection practice, and how professional judgements and actions are situated within relationships and social contexts. This is connected to how social workers negotiate the tensions and value conflicts of their work, and make decisions in circumstances that are often characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity about what has happened and what the right ways forward are.

A social worker may be trying to work through to the truth of the matter and the best course of action based on the information and evidence available to them. A part of this challenge is that they are often dealing with limited information, and so have limited evidence for analysis and decision-making. But there are two key points here that connect to further, postmodern ideas about the situated and contextual nature of knowledge. First, this information will never give us a full picture, and social workers are often making future orientated decisions about what could happen rather than just what has happened, and so there will always be a level of incompleteness and uncertainty. Second, information gathering, analysis and decision-making is fundamentally contextual and interpreted.

The information people share will be based on how they experienced things that have happened and the stories they tell about those things; and this is also in turn about people’s own unique positions in the world around them and their life experiences. This sharing of information is also a relational act, and the dynamics between a social worker and a person they are talking to shape how much and what is said, and how this information is received (Holland, 2000). In turn, how a social worker interprets and analyses information is also framed by their own contexts and experiences, both as professionals and in their personal lives. White (2003) also argues that there is much about the way accounts are given by professionals and family members in child protection that either explicitly or tacitly involves the doing of moral judgement, and attempts to establish the moral status of their account. Other sources of information are not neutral either, indeed other professional’s accounts and assessments will be shaped by the positions and interpretations offered by those professionals at the time. I can, for example, recall talked to a parent about their mental health, and previous records about how they managed their difficulties with drugs and alcohol. The parent in question was angry as this was based on telling a previous social worker they liked ‘a spliff and a drink every now and again’. This information, and the parent’s reaction to my questioning can be itself interpreted in multiple ways.

Postmodernity also then connects to ideas about the tensions and value conflicts of child protection. Decision-making often involves a number of potential outcomes which may have differing positives and negatives, and indeed all options may potentially be imperfect. Bauman’s (1993, p. 8) notion of the ‘aporetic’ condition of a postmodern ethics is helpful here. ‘Aporia’ is taken to mean circumstances where there is an inherent conflict or contradiction, a tension that cannot be resolved. This encapsulates the challenges social workers often face in child protection when there are clear value conflicts, and no neat conclusions or ways of balancing the responsibilities they have. Bauman argues that it is a characteristic of modernity that to seek a resolution to such contested circumstances, whereas postmodernity entails working with the ambivalence of there not being a right answer. He argues that a postmodern ethics is pragmatic and uncertain, and this helps us to see morality as being about messy realities, and unsettling, difficult choices. Part of working in child protection is learning to manage these uncertainties, and to make them an explicit feature of our decision-making. What, for example, to do with a young person who has run away from home and refuses to return, but who is staying somewhere unsafe? I have been faced with decisions about whether to manage this level of lack of safety or to try and disrupt this arrangement at the risk of driving that young person further away and potentially to places where the risks are even greater. Assessment of the level of safety of each option is significant here, but so is ownership of the ambiguity of such decisions and how there may not be a ‘right’ or safe outcome. I will now develop this analysis of postmodernity in relation to the case example of the Malone family.

**Back to the Malone Family: Postmodernity and Constructing Knowledge in Child Protection Practice**

A postmodern stance provides a fundamentally different way of understanding how child protection happens and what social workers do in their work with children and families. Postmodernity emphasises the importance of contextualising knowledge and exploring the way that our identities and positions shape how we understand and engage with the world around us, and thus the importance of recognising different perspectives and ways of seeing things. To begin with, this kind of approach can be used to see information gathering, assessment, intervention and decision-making in child protection not simply as a way of determining facts and uncovering neutral, objective knowledge toward a definitive account of what has happened and what needs to be done. Instead, this can be seen as a process of actively constructing knowledge, one that is laden with layers of interpretation and meaning, and reflects multiple perspectives and voices. This is also to consider how these interpretation and perspectives are influenced by relationships, and individual personalities, experiences and identities.

 With the Malone family, even with the disclosure of harm to Michael, there are multiple potential interpretations and explanations about what has been happening, and about the nature and seriousness of concerns about his safety and that of the other children. It is not clear to what extent the children have been physically chastised or the degree of harm, and though partly about the limited information available, this is also because what information has been shared is framed by context, and individual experiences and beliefs. Following the joint police and social work interviews with the children, there are multiple accounts of what happened and these accounts are not neutral tellings, they reflect individual and unique positions and voices which may indicate a range of things: that the children fear their parents and potential further disciple, a desire to please and tell important grown-ups things, Michael wanting to be ‘tough’ and to show how smacking doesn’t bother him, or that he considers this ‘normal’, and different views about how the children each experiences life at home. As the social worker continued their enquiries after the police interview, they will have spoken to Peter and Sally-Anne, and to Peter Jr. They too will offer further accounts and interpretations. Some of these things may be manifestly true or false. If for instance, Peter and Sally-Anne were to say that they never hit the children this would patently contradict the children’s accounts. But these accounts will also be individual, different experiences of those events – who is smacked, how often and how serious this is – and of family life more generally. This all points to the difficulty of establishing a linear ‘true’ account of what happened.

 These accounts and each family member’s individual experiences, personality and positions will also organise how they respond to this situation. We know, for example that the family have had past social work involvement, and this is likely to shape how Peter and Sally-Anne respond in this situation, for example with Anne-Marie being particularly distrustful given previous things that have been said about her parenting. Michael’s reluctance to talk may be a result of him having spoken to social workers in the past and not liking him or her, whereas Anne-Marie and Kelly have had a more positive relationship.

As a social worker in this situation, we will also be organised by our own experiences, personality and positions. For example, how social workers analyse information about the nature of risks and capacity for things to change may likely be influenced by personal and professinoal experiences, and relationships. Social positions are important here too, and the degree of conflict or congruence in people’s identities can be very relevant: for example class distinctions may shape perceptions about the suitability of the home environment, or such distinctions may lead Peter and Sally-Anne to feel even more judged and put up barriers, which then shapes future relationships, and how those subsequent relationships are interpreted. Other professionals too will be influenced by their experiences. In this case, teachers at the school may have emphasised the seriousness of the reports because they have a poor relationship with the family and perceive Peter and Sally-Anne as aggressive. Things like class and gender may play a role here too. This will have framed the way the concerns were reported and dealt with, and how for example the initial referral to Children’s Services was made and how decisions were taken to undertake the Section 47 inquiry and medical, where another incident may have been treated differently. In turn, there will further levels of interpretation as the social worker and school liaise, and other professionals become involved. Such inter-agency processes, based on the experiences of the family, ways of talking, and past relationships, again involve the active construction of knowledge and not just the neutral sharing of information (Taylor and White, 2001).

A further consideration here is debates about smacking and physical chastisement. There may be some consensus about physical abuse being something which, in the law, involves the leaving of a bruise, welt or other injury, but there is greater debate when considering smacking more broadly (Phillips and Anderson, 2003). The responses by individuals involved in this situation will thus be partly shaped by their different views about this relatively controversial topic; and it is important to note that as social workers even though we may have professional positions on these matters, we are still likely to be deeply influenced by our own personal experiences and views. Peter and Sally-Anne also talk about feeling victimised about smacking, and that professional responses would be different for another family.

The overarching point here is that as a social worker involved with the Malone family, intervention not simply a linear, rational process. It involves mediating across a range of interpretations which reflect layers of meaning, belief and experience; and constructing knowledge and reaching judgements that draw together varying perspectives and positions. This includes your own and those of other professionals, which in turn are influenced by professional and organisational cultures. Assessment and decision-making should therefore be seen as circular processes involving multiple constructions of knowledge, and these are constructions that evolve and change as people’s experiences, identities and relationships change (Parton and O’Bryne, 2000).

Another key feature of postmodernity that follows on from recognising alternative perspectives and ways of looking at things, is accepting and working with uncertainty and ambiguity (Fook, 2012). It cannot be clearly established what happened, and a social worker is in a position of making a judgement that could leave the children open to further physical harm, especially given the limited understanding of the family’s background and knowing that there has been previous social work involvement. On the other hand, to intervene in a stronger, more decisive way could be punitive given what is known at this time. Social workers often have to make decisions that are about balancing individual rights to privacy and to family life with concerns about children’s safety and wellbeing. One of the most important things ideas about postmodernity offer here is to get us to unsettle the idea, implicit in the orderliness and systemisation of child protection that these decisions can be gotten right all of the time and it is simply a matter of meeting thresholds. Decision-making in child protection is often about weighing up different potential consequences and kinds of harm, based on different social and ethical principles; and there may be no clear way of resolving these contentious issues. This connects to a further point that concepts which are central to decision-making in child protection, like harm, abuse and neglect, children’s welfare and development needs, and standards of behaviour and parenting, are themselves normative and ethically, socially and culturally situated (Ferguson, 2004; Corby et al., 2012).

Ideas from postmodernity therefore have the potential to add a modesty and challenge to social worker’s analysis and decision-making in circumstances like with the Malone family, drawing out different angles and perspectives and their influence on the construction of knowledge. This includes reflecting on the significance of power dynamics in these processes as well as an outcome of decision-making. Power is a feature throughout assessment and decision-making processes insofar as how situations are experienced and interpreted, whose interpretations are privileged, and in the contexts in which professionals and families are positioned. With the Malones for example, it could be argued that it is the children’s relative powerlessness compared to their parents that shapes what they say to professionals. Alternatively it could be argued that the family’s voices about their experiences are not heard in the same way and professionals considerations and processes are privileged because of the power that professionals can exercise. Peter and Sally-Anne may experience themselves as being powerless and not listened to, leading to their hostility. There are also social power relations concerning their status and experiences of prejudice and disenfranchisement as Travelers; or indeed explicit discrimination in how their actions are interpreted by professionals. All of these kinds of power dynamics may occur in shaping the construction of knowledge and decision-making (Taylor and White, 2000).

**The Problems with Postmodernity**

I will briefly return to this case example later in this chapter, and then continue to analyse how we can understand and engage with power in working with the Malones in chapters four and five. Here, I want to now turn to problems with postmodernity, and where this leads in terms of paradigms for organising child protection systems and practices.

The main problem with the key tenets of postmodernity is that any way of understanding the world around us and our place in it, and constructing knowledge, is based on our individual positions and social contexts, and the discourses through which we think and talk about things. This means that all claims to knowledge and truth are, in fact, contingent and context specific. This leads to scepticism and relativism. There are no generalisable or universal principles or right or wrong ways of seeing things, and no facts of the matter; instead all there are is interpretations of the world at particular times and points (Norris, 1990; Eagleton, 1996). Different forms of knowledge and truths about the world are therefore equally legitimate because they reflect how the world is to people that advance those positions. As there is no substantive basis, independent of us, on which to establish truths, universal principles or facts of the matter, there are no clear standards of knowledge and ways of establishing right from wrong, and how things are and how they should be. All that disagreements in science, ethics, politics, society and so on amounts to are differences of opinion and perspective (Rosenau, 1992; Blackburn, 2005).

This offers no grounds other than our own personal likes and dislikes, and the likes and dislikes of those around us, on which to establish social structures and systems of ideas, values and norms, nor to criticise such structures and systems. And all our knowledge and ways of understanding and engaging with the world amounts to, is situated ways of seeing things at particular times and points, which have no inherent meaning only the meaning we give to them (Habermas, 1987).

These points are considered by many critics to offer a damning indictment of postmodernity as undermining knowledge and values we all hold dear, and offering no basis for ethical, political and social enquiry or constructing systems and forms of practices (Habermas, 1987; Norris, 1990; Eagleton, 1996). To use child protection as an example, from a postmodern perspective it would seem that there is no grounds for saying that certain kinds of behaviour towards children is wrong, and we only do so because those are the relative beliefs of the societies we live in and the discourses about things like childhood, physical harm and punishment, sexual activity, neglect and living conditions, that we hold. This would seem to undermine the grounds or for intervening in children’s and families lives, and strip child protection, or indeed any kind of similar activity, or any kind of meaningful ethical and social purpose. It would also make things practically unworkable. For example, in circumstances where there are more finely balanced decisions to be made, say regarding levels of neglect, if our positions are entirely subjective and based on our own experiences and positions, there is can be no conclusions or reasons to say one way or the other about what is harmful or otherwise.

Thus whilst it may be a good thing to introduce a stronger degree of questioning and nuance in making claims about right and wrong, and judgements about people’s lives, and we should acknowledge our own positions, beliefs and biases in doing so, we still need to have some grounds for making those kinds of judgements: and this needs to be more than just, ‘this is how we do things round here’. This brings out an important distinction in postmodern theory between postmodernity as a rejection of modernity, and postmodernity as an evolution and a step back from the excesses of modernity (Rosenau, 1992). This distinction has been captured in varying ways, such as between ‘sceptical’ and ‘affirmative’ postmodernity (Rosenau, 1992), ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ postmodernity (Benhabib, 1992), and ‘reactionary’ and ‘progressive’ postmodernity (Giroux, 1992).

The former are the hard-line positions, which argue for postmodernity and all that goes with it – these are simply the consequences for seeing our understanding and engagement with the world around us for what it is. All there is are contingent, local meanings and ways of seeing things at given points (Derrida, 1976; Baudrillard, 1983). The other, less strident and more pragmatic approach to postmodernity involves accepting that we ought to be concerned about scepticism and relativism, but argue that postmodernity can be conceptualised in a way that does not undermine truth and reason. The point of postmodern ideas is to question, subvert and unsettle our ways of looking at the world and this kind of approach emphasises the pluralism of knowledge, however this is not taken to mean that all interpretations or forms of knowledge are equal or that any way of understanding the world around us will do (Benhabib, 1992; Giroux, 1992; Rosenau, 1992; Bauman, 1993). Specifically, knowledge and truth can be things that being inter-subjectively, socially constructed, and take on meaning as such (Rosenau, 1992).

This second kind of stance can seemingly retain many of those things we want from postmodernity, whilst seeming to respond to the problems of scepticism and relativism. However, I would argue that in fact neither kind of postmodernity is tenable. Stronger perspectives on postmodernity commit us to scepticism and relativism, and what is more, they face an inconsistency saying that there are no generalisable and true ways of seeing the world, and that all knowledge is contingent and dependent on context, except that is for the truths of postmodernity (Eagleton, 1996). Weaker or affirmative approaches face a different kind of dilemma, of maintaining a commitment to postmodernity whilst accepting that there are essential or deep principles and knowledge. To disavow scepticism and relativism requires meaningful standards of truth, fact and principle on which claims to knowledge can be built and judgements made about right and wrong, and how the world is. This need not be through appeal to universal or absolute forms of truth and knowledge, but there has to be a non-trivial basis for such concepts. It is here that the dilemma of such analyses becomes apparent. Any such basis – like arguments about how ideas of knowledge and truth can be socially constructed – seems to either fall back into stronger postmodern commitments, where such constructions are still situated, contingent interpretations of the world in different times and places; or these arguments are successful in establishing standards of truth and knowledge, which seems to move decisively away from postmodern commitments to the plurality and contextuality of knowledge (Rosenau, 1992).

Another significant point, connected to this, is about postmodern theorists set postmodernity in contrast to modernity, with the latter being characterised by ‘grand’ narratives and theorising towards complete and cohesive forms of knowledge about the world (Sim, 2005; Fawcett, 2009). Yet this seems an over-simplistic and reductive view. ‘Grand narratives’ are a feature of different areas of enquiry, and a rigid adherence to a certain way of understanding the world, with facts and evidence being shaped to fits this worldview, should be avoided: especially when such staunch commitments involve beliefs systems that exclude and marginalise, and are imposed onto others. However, this is far from the only defining feature of social or scientific inquiry, and the construction of knowledge.

As Blackburn (2005, p. 97) argues in his analysis of knowledge and truth, and the challenges of philosophical scepticism,

There can be ‘better’ and ‘worse’ without an endpoint. ‘Better’ does not have to mean: ‘nearer to God’s truth, truth written in the book of the world, truth told in the right vocabulary, truth leaving nothing more to be said’. It can mean something less than this, but still give us an idea of progress.

Blackburn is not specifically referring to modernity here, but he makes the point well that how we understand and engage with the world can involve commitments to progress and reason, without need completeness or coherence. Much intellectual endeavour seems to actually be taken up with trying to understand things better, to understand what the best evidence or judgements are, without presuming a neat finishing point where our knowledge and understanding will be complete. This certainly seems to be the way with the diversity of practices of constructing knowledge in social work theory (Evans and Hardy, 2010). Nor is such an end-point a feature of many accounts of modernity, which seek instead to track the seemingly inexorable processes of change and the remaking of the new without presuming this to be a linear or cohesive endeavour (Wagner, 2013). This point relates to ideas of ‘late’ or ‘reflexive’ modernity that are about theorising modernity in respect of a changing, globalised world (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992).

**Pragmatism as a Paradigm for Child Protection Practice**

It is questionable therefore that there is such a neat line on modernity, and indeed such a fixed approach on the issue seems itself to be indicative of the kind of ‘grand narratives’ that postmodern thinkers disavow. Taking these arguments together seems to offer a clear refutation of the theoretical consistency of postmodernity. On the one hand, postmodern thinkers maintain a staunch commitment to postmodernity, accepting concerns about scepticism and relativism, but it is very difficult to see how this kind of approach provides a practical way of understanding and engaging with the world around us, and further, it sets postmodernity up as the very thing it abjures, a totalising belief system. On the other hand, a ‘weak’ or ‘affirmative’ postmodernity is more nuanced, but to be able to maintain commitments to using knowledge in certain ways and saying things are right and wrong, this kind of approach begins to look less like a distinctive strand of postmodern thinking at all, especially taking into account how it sets itself up in contrast to a distinctive conception of ‘modernity’. I will now go on to argue that instead of setting modernity and postmodernity as irreconcilable positions, they both tell us contribute valuable things to understanding the sociological and epistemological foundations of child protection, and that a middle ground of sorts is possible that offers a more refined and nuanced position.

This kind of approach, rather than just foisting together two wholly different worldviews, actually reflects a not uncommon desire to try and make sense of how there seems to be something fundamental in both viewpoint that modernity and postmodernity can be seen to reflect. And indeed, it seems that we do think and act in ways that draw upon both types of position. Battles over truth, between absolutism – the idea that we can have truths, laws of nature, absolute forms of knowledge about the world – and scepticism or relativism are unhelpful (Blackburn, 2005). There is no ‘view from nowhere’, an independent perspectives from which to observe the real, true nature of things; and we do understand the world from our subjective position in it; yet we still clearly understand and engage with a mind-independent real world that is ‘out there’, and exists beyond our interpretations of it; and look to make claims to knowledge and truth about that world (Nagel, 1989). Rationality, intellectual rigour and clarity of thinking should be valued, and based upon standards of knowledge and enduring ethical, social, political and cultural principles. But this search for fuller, more coherent and consistent knowledge does not mean that singular, complete or entirely coherent and consistent knowledge is possible, or indeed desirable. Often standards of knowledge and principles we hold contrast or come into conflict, and this creates fundamental tensions and ambiguities, especially when it comes to value-laden positions about what is right and wrong in the world we live in. This should lead us to have a degree of modesty and challenge towards claims to truth and knowledge, and hold a respectful openness to different points of view and a willingness to engage in dialogue. Certainty and singular convictions can lead away from, rather than towards reason and critical thinking (Taylor and White, 2000).

 Indeed, although less discussed in respect of modernity and postmodernity, it is not uncommon for theorists to look to bridge the ground between different approaches to knowledge and ways of understanding the world around us. In philosophy debates about realism and anti-realism – the positions that there world can be understood in an objective and mind-independent way, or that our understanding and engagement with the world is based on our subjective experience of it to us – have long sought to explore how there seems to something to both sets of ideas (Dancy, 1985; Audi, 2003). Attempts to consider how these ideas come together are also a theme of within sociological analysis, there being a shift from a ‘naïve’ realism about the clear and indubitable existence of an external world, which knowledge and truth then serve to represent, towards a ‘critical’ (Bhaskar, 1997), ‘realistic’ (Latour, 1999, p. 15) realism. These forms of realism involve upholding commitments a real mind-independent world, and to truth and standards of knowledge, whilst recognising that we do so through our subjective worldviews, and in a way that is mediated by existing knowledge, society, culture, and so forth. In social work theory, these ideas have been taken forwards, or similar positions develop in an attempt to understand how knowledge might be subjective and socially constructed, and yet also refer to an external world, about which there can be settled knowledge, and standards of fact, evidence and truth (Shaw, 1999; Taylor and White, 2000; Houston, 2001; Sheppard, 2006; Evans and White, 2010). This brings me to pragmatism. Philosophical pragmatism is distinctive about moving beyond stark distinctions in systems of thought, and particularly in epistemology and the ways we understand and engage with the world around us (Rorty, 1982; Thayer, 1982). There are different uses and meanings behind this concept, but the overall theme is that it is about taking on a view of knowledge about the world which begins with how we do engage with the world around us and producing useful knowledge (Thayer, 1982; Rorty, 1982; Stuhr, 2003; Baert, 2004, 2005; Evans and Hardy, 2010). This is about not become lost in debates between opposing epistemological positions, when they each tell us something valuable about how we think and engage with the world around us. Evans and Hardy (2010, p. 172) make this point, when they are argue that ‘[t]here is a need for a philosophy of practice which is meaningful, adequate and useful, and which sidesteps some of the irresolvable tensions in paradigmatic debate.’ They argue that a pragmatic stance can offer a basis for some rapprochement between contrasting views, like those of modernity and postmodernity, whilst remaining attentive to the tensions that remain. We can and should start with how we do think and reason, and how knowledge is useful in understanding and engaging with the world around us.

A particular point here lies in the importance from a pragmatic standpoint of not adopting a settled or fixed point about knowledge, but looking to continually draw from and bring in useful ways of understanding the construction of knowledge and its implications. This call for practicality seems particularly apt in applications of these debates like the one considered here, where what matters most is how reasoning and the construction of knowledge happen for child protection practice. In advancing this argument for pragmatism, I now want to suggest how pragmatism can be drawn upon in child protection practice, with particular attention to the judicious and proportionate exercise of power in assessment and decision-making.

**The Judicious and Proportionate Exercise of Power: Reason and Reflexivity in Assessment and Decision-Making**

Having argued that we need to hold in mind both a search for clarity, consistency and correctness, and to engage with uncertainty, multiple perspectives and ambiguity, I will now return to the exercise of power in child protection practice, and to how these ideas about pragmatism can be taken forwards in assessment and decision-making. Good decision-making is essential if power is to be exercised in fair and proportionate ways (Munro, 2011). The argument presented in this chapter have sought to recommend a balance between the need for social workers to be decisive in their decision-making, and to make judgements that are evidenced, rational and based on clear and accountable standards and processes, and recognising how decision-making is future orientated, and often involves value conflicts and multiple perspectives. Social workers have to try and correctly identify the likelihood and seriousness of harm to a child, kinds of abuse, children’s welfare and development needs, parenting capacity, family strengths and resilience and support needs, whilst also recognising that these are normative, value orientated and socially situated judgements. They also look to establish what has happened, and might happen, and the possibilities for change, yet they deal with the complexities and intricacies of family life, and the vagaries human behaviour. Decision-making in child protection is therefore about clarity, consistency and rigour of analysis, and engaging with uncertainty and ambiguity (Munro, 2008).

I have argued here that taking pragmatism as an organising paradigm for child protection fosters this kind of approach to assessment, intervention and decision-making because it about rationality, working within systems and analytic skills, and taking ownership of the contestedness, uncertainties and vagaries of child protection interventions, and how they are fundamentally subjective and relational processes. This is an approach that seeks to avoid either being too definite and certain, and getting caught up in particular views about people and situations, and seeing ambiguity everywhere, leading to indecision, vagueness, and a lack of clarity and confidence in our thinking. This leads to the question of how such a stance can be adopted in practice, and how social workers can balance these styles of thought. This bears further discussion given that it seems to be asking social workers to do contradictory things at the same time: both using of facts, evidence and principles to say how things are and make judgements, and validating different interpretations and multiple perspectives to unsettle those same facts, evidence and principles.

Consider trying to understand a serious argument at a family’s home, leading to a young person taking an overdose, and getting three different versions of those events from the mother, father and young person. Say the mother and young person give contrasting accounts about what the mother said to the young person before this happened, whilst the father’s account is somewhere in the middle. In essence, what the approach I advance here asks of a social worker is to simultaneously look for an accurate account of what happened, as this is needed to establish a pattern of potential significant emotional harm from the mother, but at the same time to acknowledge the uncertainties and to respect all three interpretations of those events. Although this is challenging, I think this can be seen as a healthy tension that encourages a deeply critical style of thinking. This is an active, dynamic process of engaging both with what is going, and thinking through how we do so.

In considering this process in more detail, I would propose that there are two interconnected things going on: reasoning and reflexivity. In their assessment and decision-making, social workers should endeavour to be analytic thinkers who process information and draw conclusions in reasoned ways. This is about going through a sequential process of gathering and sorting through information, being attentive to what constitutes evidence, opinion, conjecture and facts, and beginning to build an analysis of what is going on. It involves looking at strengths and risks, sources of resilience and vulnerability as well as a rounded picture of a child’s needs, parenting, and what is going on in their lives and who is around them (DoH, 2000; Munro, 2009, 2011a; Kemshall et al., 2013). It also means being open-minded, checking our thinking, and reformulating views based on new information or ways of looking at things. Then, this kind of analytic approach is about bringing all this together and being clear about the reasons for adopting a particular position, as well as looking for inconsistencies in our thinking, and considering counterarguments and alternative positions (Munro, 2009). Decisions about what kinds of interventions and courses of action are needed will then follow from these conclusions.

Reasoning involves a questioning curiosity, open-mind and willingness to be wrong, to suggest things and test ideas, and to think creatively about children’s and family’s lives. Being analytic also means recognising how there are often not easy or singular answers to the problems children and families experience, and explicitly engaging with contested value positions and unknown outcomes so that the quandaries and complexities of decision-making can be made clear. This leads to reflexivity, which is a counterpart rather than a contrast to reason. As I use the term here, reflexivity involves the acts of problematising ideas and assumptions, and examining how we construct and make use of knowledge (D’Cruz, 2007). It is about opening up and problematising the taken-for-granted: the assumptions and underlying ideas and discourses that shape our lives (Sheppard et al., 2000; Taylor and White, 2000).

This is to explore how we as individuals think and act, and how we do so in ways that are shaped by layers of experience, identity, relationships, social location, and wider societal contexts (Dominelli, 2002; Smith, 2008a; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Morley and Macfarlane, 2012; Fook, 2012). It is also to consider the how power differences relations can shape these areas of our lives. Here, reflexivity is used in a broader sense to define being continually curious about what we do and how we do it. It can be understood as an extension of reflection: as a way of thinking things through and looking at them in a different light or from different angles, but also as involving a further level of questioning or challenge (Fook, 2012).

Reflexivity involves working with multiple perspectives and narratives, both in terms of the often deeply rooted and complex stories through which children’s and family’s lives are constructed, and how social workers and other professional construct their own narratives. This includes being aware of how that child protection practice and decision-making occurs within contexts shaped by personal, professional and organisational cultures, and wider social systems; and that social workers are able to take responsibility for understanding what they bring to their practice (Taylor and White, 2000).

What is perhaps most helpful about this is that reflexivity as thinking about the forms of knowledge used in child protection draws us to question reasoning and evidence, and analysis. Reflexivity is about making sure that the relevant aspects of assessment and decision-making have been borne in mind, and this includes drawing upon relevant evidence, and using research and evidence where possible to test and challenge our own perspectives and decisions. A reflexive approach is precisely about engaging with such evidence in a critical way that sees the value in opening up knowledge to question as a means of developing better, and perhaps more modest, claims to knowledge. Bringing these different aspects of thinking together offers a firm analytic and critical foundation for reasoning and reflection in child protection when reaching judgements and making decisions; and in turn, in choosing how to exercise power in different situations.

In bringing this discussion to a close, I want to explore two specific ideas that are helpful in applying a paradigm of pragmatism in practice, and developing judicious and proportionate assessment and decision-making. I will return to these two ideas in presenting the framework of power I develop here in chapter five. First, is the concept of hypothesising, which involves practitioners seeing their ideas and formulations in assessment and decision-making as open-ended and fallible (Cecchin, 1987). Hypotheses remain open to development, adjustment and change as further information and different perspectives are developed, and as they are to be continually examined and tested (*ibid*).

This is important to judicious and proportionate assessment and decision-making because, first, it encourages us to see our judgements not as solid or fixed, but as our best hypothesis, as a more tentative form of knowledge, based on what we know, the perspectives we adopt and the questions we ask at a given point (Hurst, 2011). This is not to undermine our judgements, or to encourage hesitancy and timidity in decision-making; but it is to remain open-minded about possibilities and to continually look for other angles and ways of seeing things. In assessment and decision-making, there might also therefore be different hypotheses that are considered, and some which are cast aside or reformulated; and multiple differing hypotheses can be held at once. This encourages reflexivity insofar as it involves both constructing but also unsettling knowledge. Further, in child protection for example, hypotheses need not just be about a child and a family, we can hypothesise about our own role and influence as professionals, what leads us to think in certain ways and so forth. This brings out how our ways of understanding and engaging with particular circumstances can have a number of layers (Mason, 1993; Hurst, 2011).

The second idea here is Reder and Duncan’s concept of the ‘dialectic mindset’ in child protection (1999, pp. 97-102). They refer to the dialectic as the development of knowledge through the Socratic method of dialogue and argument: that is, by continually looking to consider the positions that differ from and challenge our own. In particular, this is to consider an alternative position, an antithesis, to the one we adopt, to explore views which contrast our own hypotheses. For Reder and Duncan, this forms part of a cycle of analysis during the assessment process, and represents a way of developing formulations of what is happening in particular circumstances, or about possible courses of action and intervention in child protection. The process of developing a hypothesis about what is happening and courses of action, and then examining contrasting views, is likely to lead to a position that is a synthesis of these views, or we may come back to our initial formulation refreshed for having challenged that view. This style of analysis forms a cycle that offers greater rigour and scrutiny in assessment and decision-making (*ibid*). What particular interests me about this idea is that it being able to hold onto and examine different perspectives and ways of seeing things as developing reasoning into reflexivity. Also, in respect of assessment and decision-making about the exercise of power, it encourages us to consider different possibilities amongst the tensions and value conflicts of child protection.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is helpful to reconsider the approach being adopted towards power here and the intentions of this thesis in providing a pragmatic and compassionate critical framework that draws from both modernity and postmodernity. I have argued here that ideas about modernity could help frame the challenges in contemporary child protection about how practice is organised by heavily proceduralised and prescriptive systems. Whilst these systems are an essential part of child protection, and as has subsequently been argued they support structured, methodical analytic reasoning and decision-making, they have come to exert an excessive influence to the extent that they dominate how practice occurs. In contrast, postmodernity offers scope for an approach to knowledge in child protection that is based on exploring where knowledge comes from, and seeing knowledge as about interpretations, as constructing in different contexts, and as not aimed towards singular or linear accounts of the way things are, but multiple, contested or ambiguous positions.

My argument here, and in developing a critical framework of power is that both kinds of thinking are required, and that the intellectual work that child protection requires involves both reasoning and reflexivity towards the judicious exercise of power in decision-making. To this end, pragmatism can be seen as a helpful epistemological foundation for child protection practice that values different kinds of thinking and what they can contribute to practice. The challenge for social workers therefore is to be aware of and draw upon different kinds of thinking processes. This is in the effort to be both rational, and to examine the quality of information and evidence, to carefully weigh up this evidence, and to make sure that their judgements are the subject of rigorous analysis; and to be reflexive, and aware of the contexts in which this knowledge is constructed and what influences it, to see their judgements as not fixed accounts of how things are, but hypotheses based on the best information available to them, and to engage with the fundamental tensions and uncertainties of decision-making.

**Chapter Three:**

**Theories and Concepts of Power: Laying the Foundations of a Framework for Child Protection Practice**

**Introduction**

For social workers to be able to engage with power in a critical way it is important that they have the right tools to do so. In this chapter I will move on from analysis of the basis on which we engage with power in child protection, to theories and concepts of power from which a framework of power in practice can be developed. What quickly becomes apparent when reviewing the literature on power is the scope and variety of perspectives across philosophy, sociology, social and political theory, and a range of specific fields (Haugaard and Clegg, 2009). In order to produce a focused and manageable line of enquiry, what I have sought to do is identify key concepts and theoretical approaches, and to explore how these ideas have been applied in social work theory, before starting to outline the approach I offer in this study.

In developing this line of inquiry, it is helpful to initially also discuss how I engage with concepts and theories of power here. Power is a concept that is central to who we are and how we live in the world. It is central to questions about how we act of and define their identities and free will, how we are influenced or effected by others, and the structure and fairness of the worlds we live in (Westwood, 2002; Haugaard and Clegg, 2009a; Hearn, 2012). As Hearn argues, ‘All human experience is inextricably tied to feelings of power and control over one’s life, which in turn are tied to actual circumstances. Power… is at the core of who we are, as a species and as individual persons’ (Hearn, 2012, pp. 3-4).

Yet for all its significance, power is intangible and difficult to quantify. It is not something that exists ‘out there’ in the world, and we cannot see, touch or otherwise sense it. Rather, power is a ‘conceptual tool’ (Haugaard and Clegg, 2009a, p.4). We take observable phenomena to illuminate the mechanisms of power, and demonstrate its functions and effects (Hindress, 1996; Scott, 2001; Morriss, 2002; Westwood, 2002; Haugaard and Clegg, 2009a). Because of both its significance and its intangibility, power is a diverse and contentious phenomenon, and enquiries into the nature of power are intrinsically value-laden and connected to social, political, cultural, organisational, relational, personal and ethical considerations. To analyse concepts of power is therefore to explore what work power does in illustrating these considerations and what theorists who engage with power are looking to do with concepts of power.

This is relevant both to analysis of concepts and theoretical approaches to power, and to what I am looking to do here in analysing power towards a framework for child protection practice. The usefulness of concepts of power in child protection lies in how we can understand the exercise of power on children’s and family’s lives, and whether this is a good or bad thing, and is enabling constructive, enabling and protective, or repressive, illegitimate and unsafe. It is also about how child protection and social work practices are situated in and impact on the wider social world. Some theorists argue that we ought to look for a fundamental, definitive meaning of power, on which analysis of power in different settings can be based (Morris, 2002). Given the scope of enquiry that understand and engaging with power in child protection seems to demand however, I adopt a more diverse line of enquiry, drawing on a range of differing and potentially contrasting concepts and theoretical positions. This is to see power as essentially multifarious and open to interpretations, albeit around a core sets of themes or a ‘family’ of ideas and concepts (Haugaard, 1997; Haugaard, and Clegg, 2009a; Hearn, 2012).

To this end, the chapter starts with three sections considering approaches to power provided by notable theorists on the subject, and identify key concepts of hierarchical power, governance and dominating power, consensual and collaborative power, and enabling or constitutive power. I then consider how these ideas have been developed in social work theory, in particular looking at anti-oppressive practice and postmodern critical social work theory, before turning to wider, multi-aspect theoretical perspectives on power, in particular those provided by Tew (2002), Houston (2010) and Smith (2008a). The analysis of these approaches is used to explore how we can make use key concepts of power in child protection, and to argue towards a conceptualisation of power as multifaceted, interactive and dynamic. I then outline three core dynamics by which this kind of approaching be developed: considering the ways that power can be exercised and the forms that power relations take across a spectrum of consensus and conflict (Haugaard, 1997); the interconnections of agency and structure, and how these are enacted in relationships (Clegg, 1989; Smith, 2008a); and how we engage with power as an inherently ethical and social phenomenon.

**Key Concepts of Power: ‘Power Over’, Governance and Oppression**

To examine concepts of power in more detail, a good starting point is the way that we view power as something that is exercised over people, or that is found in how people can exercise their will in ways that others cannot. This takes power to be a hierarchical force, which enables some people to exercise control over others, or to make decisions and be able to do things that have a significant impact on the world around them. This kind of concept appears to be a central feature of how we think and talk about power (Hindress, 1996; Scott, 2001; Lukes, 2005; Göhler, 2009). Returning to the point about how we engage with power through observable things about the world around us, it seems that pay particular attention to this kind of power because it is readily observable and felt by all of us at some points in our lives, and often leaves a significant impression (Hearn, 2012).

 This view of power as a hierarchical and controlling force is typified in the work of Hobbes. Hobbes lived from 1588 to 1679, across times of political and religious turmoil that included the English Civil War. This shaped his views about the legitimate functions of the monarchy and sovereign rule, set out in his book ‘The Leviathan’ (Hobbes, 2003). The sovereignty of the monarch was, for Hobbes, premised on a social contract where the people accept their rule because it established the social order required for civilisation to flourish. Hobbes saw this contract as maintaining social stability, and avoiding a descent into barbarism, anarchy, and a world divided by constant conflicts of power (*ibid*). This in effect was to see power as a controlling force that gave some figures the ability to exercise their will and jurisdiction over others. The hierarchical nature of Hobbes’ idealised social contract was apparent, with power stemming from the monarch, through tiers of government, aristocracy, judiciary and administration, down to the common woman and man. It was also, though, to see this power as a generally positive, civilising influence, needed to preside over humankind’s baser instincts.

 This idea that power is a central feature of governance, and as a hierarchical, imposed force that is legitimised through the advancement of social order and the collective good, is a significant feature of concepts of power, and authority in particular (Hearn, 2012). A broadly similar way of understanding and engaging with power can be found in Dahl’s work, writing in the context of social and political debates on power and democracy in America in the 1950s and 1960s. Dahl (1958; 1961) and his student Polsby (1963) sought to show through their work on power in local communities that democracy led to effective governance and decision-making. A central feature of Dahl’s approach is that he too conceived power in terms of governance, and saw this as a necessary and relatively benign feature of social and political systems. He argued that power is centralised within systems of governance and could be exercised by relatively small groups of decision-makers, but he felt that it is was crucial to recognise how power is pluralised and only extends so far and often in discrete areas.

Dahl offered a relatively simple definition of power to provide a basis for this argument and to ground his empirical work in this area. He defined power the ability of an actor A to get another actor B to do something that they would not otherwise do (Dahl, 1957, pp. 202-203). This straightforward concept of ‘power over’ provided the basis on which Dahl argued that in the local systems and networks he studied, democratic structures created space for competing interests and agendas. This was because there are often many different ways that power was exercised, by different people and for different reasons. People who were consistently able to exercise power tended to do so only in specific areas of social, political or cultural life. What is more, within democratic systems voters can, and often did, displace elected officials and their appointees. For Dahl, these points show how power, though a hierarchical and imposed force, diversifies across democratic systems and social arenas (Dahl, 1961).

 In advancing this view, Dahl was in part responding to Mills’ critique of how the United States was controlled by a small, homogeneous ‘power elite’ (Mills, 1956). Mills had argued that the ideal of America as an egalitarian society founded on principles of liberalism, capitalism and democracy was an illusion, and that power was in fact held by a privileged minority who perpetuated their control and wealth through self-perpetuating social, political and economic structures. In contrast, Dahl argued that his more empirically rigorous work demonstrated that power was more varied and diffuse than this. Dahl was criticised in turn however for failing to recognise the subtler mechanisms of power and governance, and for overlooking the self-perpetuating ways that those who could exercise power sought to maintain their influence, resources and status.

These arguments took issue with the very way that Dahl defined power; for whilst there is a virtue in the simplicity of his approach it appears to overlook the many ways that control and influence are not just overt processes. For example, people will often change how they act or not do certain things in the face of the potential for power to be exercised (Wrong, 2002). What is more, power is found in who gets to speak, what issues are matters of discussion and debate, and which are not, and the contexts in which people are or are not able to exert influence (Barach and Baratz, 1962). Those in power are often able to maintain that power through networks of influence, control of the systems and functions of governance, and through being able to determine the ‘rules of the game’ (Barach and Baratz, 1970, p. 43).

This critique and these debates about power was taken forwards by Lukes, who sought to develop a critical, ‘three-dimensional’ approach to power (Lukes, 1973, 2005). Lukes used the above debates as the point of departure for his theoretical analysis of power. He takes Dahl’s approach to be a one-dimensional view, where power is understood through observable behaviour, overt conflict of interests and decision-making. More nuanced accounts of indirect power, like that of Barach and Baratz, are then said to offer a two-dimensional view that also captures how power functions in the background, and is exercised in non-directive, veiled and subtle ways. In proposing a three-dimensional view, Lukes sought to argue that hierarchical and controlling power can be an even more pervasive force, exercised in the ways that people can be influenced and directed in their attitudes and beliefs, and consequently in how they think and act. For Lukes (ibid, p. 28) this is, ‘The most insidious exercise of power… by shaping people’s perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things.’ This argument sees power in the ways people are influenced to understand the world around them and act in ways that they would not otherwise do. In this way, networks of privilege and dominating power can be embedded in the social world, as people with the resources and influence to do so are able to shape other people’s very autonomy and agency. Here, Lukes has much in common with the critical theorist Gramsci (1971), who explored how unequal and dominating power is legitimised through social, political and cultural processes that shape the prevailing attitudes and norms of a society and its members.

 In focusing on how the social world is stratified by networks of power that marginalise and oppress some groups and which privilege others, Mills, Lukes and Gramsci offer distinctively critical approaches to as an oppressive or dominating force (Held, 1980; Westwood, 2002). These critical approaches focus on how power can be a repressive and stratifying force that creates networks of conflictual relationships and unjust social divisions. These approaches to power have their roots in Marx (1976, 1978), who analysed how structures of domination arise through capitalist processes that enabled the ‘bourgeoisie’ to enjoy the benefits of the labour of the ‘proletariat’ through capitalist social structures and ideology (Marx, 1978). For Marx, any kind of social change would require solidarity amongst the working majority to recognise this, and through resistance particularly in the collective power workers had to withdraw their labour (Marx and Engels, 1978). Marx thus characterised power in a way that primarily characterises it as a divisive force, exercised to reinforce the status and resources of the privileged at the expense of the majority, and in turn found in strategies of resistance and conflict.

**Key Concepts of Power: ‘Power with’, Consensus and Collaboration**

A different set of key concepts and ideas about power can be found in approaches that define it as a consensual and collaborative force, found in the ways that people come together to achieve things they would not be able to do individually. These ideas about power are found in some of the concepts just considered, for it is in people’s collective acceptance or cooperation within systems of governance or domination that these hierarchical social systems are maintained. Alternatively, in Marx for example, it is through people coming together and establishing networks of solidarity and social action that can be challenged. However, in the accounts I now want to go on to consider in the work of Parsons and Arendt, cooperation, cohesion and togetherness are taken to be the very foundations of how power is conceived, rather than as a subsidiary feature of hierarchical networks.

Parsons was another who sought to defend American democracy following Mills’ critique; and like Dahl, Parsons grounded his work on a specific conceptual approach to power. Where he differed was in seeing power as a collaborative and systemic force, rather than a property of control and decision-making. Parsons (1957, 1963) explicitly rejected a ‘zero-sum’ view of power, where for some people to have power others must have less. This approach to power has received widespread attention because of how Parsons distinctively characterised power as a constructive phenomenon (Giddens, 1968; Clegg, 1989; Hindress, 1996 ; Haugaard, 1997; 2002; Scott, 2001; Hearn, 2012). For Parsons, power is about how people work together to achieve things and live collectively, and it is about maximising capacities to get things done (Parson, 1963). He conceptualised power as central to the functioning of society and social order, and to mediating and minimising conflict between people, but did so in a way that represented it a circulating and consensual force that creates the conditions for maximising how people realise goals and to act efficaciously. Using this account of power, Parsons (1957) argued that democratic systems offer the best way of maximising shared power and social functioning through providing conditions to define collective interests and for people’s voices to be heard on social and political matters of importance.

Two further features of this approach are how it deals with authority and domination. Parsons offers an account of authority and control as being features of wider social networks of productive power to maximise collective interests and maintain the conditions of social order. Authority is therefore a subsidiary function of power, as a consensual force, and the exercise of authority is inherently legitimate as it serves the wider functioning of the social collective (Parson, 1963). Parsons’ treatment of domination follows on from this idea. A key criticism of Parsons’ work is that he did not adequately account for how domination occurs and how social functioning can be embedded with networks of privilege and repression (Giddens, 1968; Clegg, 1989; Lukes, 2005). However, Parsons did offer an account of domination, and how those with greater influence and status can distort systems in their favour, as reflecting the ‘incomplete institutionalization’ of power (Parsons, 1957, p. 87). Domination thus entails the inhibiting or misappropriating power, and the lack of an appropriately functioning system or institution to mediate social relation towards the collective good.

This view of power as a consensual and collaborative force is brought out in a different and perhaps more fundamental way by Arendt (1998). She argues that power is a basic good and human need, which is exercised through people coming together, sharing themselves with others and finding ways to work in unison. This kind of power may help people work towards individual and collective interests, but Arendt does not see power as being a systemic force or requiring functional ends. Instead, togetherness and collaboration are to be intrinsically valued. Arendt’s focus is on common humanity, and the ways that people relate to others, and in doing so enhance their own lives. This conception also presents power as a dynamic process, with power relations and networks continually evolving, as people interact and develop new forms of shared understanding and consensus (*ibid*).

Arendt did not overlook conflict, control and oppression, but instead of conceiving of these as features of a concept of power, she defined these things through separate concepts of strength, force, authority and violence (Arendt, 1970). In particular, Arendt used the concept of authority to capture how social hierarchies exist, and people can be drawn into relations of obedience and deference because of their position within these hierarchies; and violence to capture how people seek to achieve ends through control, coercion, aggression, and at its extreme, brutality. She argued that violence most of all represents a negation of power, and even lesser acts of control and regulation are acts of violence when they have detrimental impact on the capacity people have to collaborate and better understand one another. It is a criticism of Arendt’s approach to power though that is a relatively ‘thin’ conception of hierarchical and controlling power, and these other concepts do not provide a cohesive account of hierarchical social systems of governance or domination (Haugaard, 2009; Hearn, 2012).

It is important to recognise though that this was not Arendt’s intention. She defined her ideas against the backdrop of Nazism and Stalinism, and sought to articulate the violence that flows from a lack of empathy and understanding, and losing our connections with our common humanity – especially when people are too certain, unquestioning and willing to impose their vision for the world by any means necessary (Arendt, 1998; Frazer, 2014). For Arendt, her concept of power is narrow and well defined because it is togetherness, dialogue and consensus between people that offers a more hopeful vision for future. This is why Arendt’s ideas have been used to develop critical approaches to social action and change, for her dynamic approach to power reflects how change can occur when people are always learning, and seeking new understandings and ways of being together. There is then always creates scope for new social relations, and for change in social networks and systems (Surrey, 1991; Allen, 1999; Frazer, 2014).

**Key Concepts: Power as Enabling and Constitutive**

The final key concepts of power I want to examine here are how it can be considered to be a fundamental feature of our autonomy and selfhood, including in particular Foucault’s approach to power as a constitutive force. What unites these ideas is how they take power to be foundational to people’s identities, relationships and how selfhood is constructed in social worlds. This differs from the other key concepts considered thus far, as it defines power as an inimical part of our lives, rather than a force that is exercised in specific ways.

 It has been argued that this fundamental kind of power can be characterised as ‘power to’, which reflects the basic ability that people have to do something, and to act in accordance with their will (Göhler, 2009). Over time, this kind of power is then found in how we are able to define who we are, our beliefs and identities, and our place in the world. This reflects the way that can be seen as an essential feature of human functioning, autonomy and wellbeing (Lindley, 1986). This analysis of power has been taken forwards by Morriss (2002), who argues that power is a ‘dispositional capacity’ that lies in the ability people have to do something, and to effect the world around them in a substantive manner in different circumstances and contexts. Morriss see this definition of power as axiomatic. This is because it is the manner in which this ‘power to’ act and influence the world that is found in the exercise of ‘power over’, where one person or organisation is effectively able to exercise their ‘power to’ in ways others cannot or over others, and in turn it is the ‘power to’ act that is limited when people are subject to such power (*ibid*, pp. 32-35). It is for this reason that Morriss also argues that this concept of ‘power to’ offers the foundation for analysis and research into power, at it can be captured through observation of how people do and don’t act, and from this more complex pictures of the reasons why, and networks and systems of power, can be developed. It is ‘power to’ that is also produced by collective action and collaboration, which can maximise people’s individual capacities and autonomy, and the ability of social groups to achieve particular ends (Göhler, 2009).

The other foundational approach to power I want to consider here is Foucault’s work on how power is a constitutive force. The way Foucault engaged with and conceptualised power evolved across his work, and he emphasised that he sought to offer an ‘analytics’ of power rather than providing a specific sets of concepts about what power is or is not (Foucault, 2002). This means that care ought to be taken in offering a definitive Foucauldian approach to power, although there are clear themes across his work. The most prominent of these themes is how Foucault sought to establish an essential connection between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983; Haugaard, 1997; Hearn, 2012).

As discussed in the previous chapter, Foucault adopted a poststructuralist approach where knowledge is not simply something that is discovered, it is actively made and remade within social contexts, and accordingly so our shaped by our identities and social positions (Foucault, 1979, 1980; Haugaard, 1997; Flyvberg, 2001). Unlike more strident postmodern thinkers, Foucault argued that there are general forms of knowledge and ways of understanding the world, but these discourses are constructed in distinctive social and historical milieus. Accordingly, we ought to continually question how knowledge is constructed and to what ends, and how knowledge is shaped by and shapes power dynamics and structures (Foucault, 1980, 2002). For Foucault, whenever we speak of knowledge we speak of power, and when we talk about power we talk about knowledge: and furthermore these connections of power and knowledge are found in all aspects of our lives and in the constitution of the world around us.

Foucault first developed these themes about the interconnecting relationships between knowledge and power in his analysis of systems of social control and regulation. Perhaps the best known of these analyses is in ‘Discipline and Punish’, where Foucault charted a shift in practices and ideas of prison and punishment for crime from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1979). He begins by considering the throwbacks of medieval traditions and punishments directed principally at criminal’s bodies through physical torture or execution, and then moves on to explore growth of prisons and other systems of regulation like the workhouses. His argument is that there was a change from cruel punishments that were principally intended as a social spectacle to serve as a deterrent to criminals, to systems that were designed to exert a different kind regulation over behaviour through control, surveillance and the inculcation of norms and beliefs. In the prison, the purpose of incarceration thus is not just about punishment and control over people’s bodies, though this remains significant, it is about imprinting ways of acting over time, through systems where people come to accept imposed order and regulate their own behaviour. It is this self-regulation that Foucault refers to as the growth of mechanisms of ‘discipline’.

As Foucault’s work developed, he came to reflect on the ways that power was central to his analysis of these social phenomena, and to develop his ‘analytics’ of power in relation to the intrinsic connection between power and knowledge, and his view of power as a constitutive force. For Foucault, if power is found in all of the ways understanding the constructing knowledge, and how this shapes our identities, and how we relate to others and the world around us, then it is constitutive of all aspects of our lives, running through the ‘capillaries’ of social life (Foucault, 2002, p. 94). As these ideas about power developed so did Foucault’s understanding of processes of ‘discipline’ as this imposition of self-regulation, with this becoming a wider concern with ‘governmentality’ and the ways people are shaped by the worlds around them, and by embedded social practices and systems where regulation occurs through the definition of social standards norms (Rose and Miller, 1992). In many respects, child protection can be considered archetypal of these kinds of activities, in terms of how it has developed as a way of first defining norms about child welfare and parenting, and establishing systems and methods to monitor and govern family life seen to fall outside of social conventions and rules (Parton, 1999).

Where Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ develops this analysis is first in moving from the functions and effects of specific systems to wider social conventions and norms, like how concepts of gender and sexuality are embedded across varying social and cultural milieus (Foucault, 1990). Second, governmentality is also about recognising the positive dimensions of these processes, and how social regulation can be malign and restrict people’s selfhood, but it can also enable people to develop more constructive identities and establish controls over destructive behaviour. This depends on the contexts in which such regulation occurs and the specific ways that power is exercised. Third, governmentality is concerned with the ‘biopolitics’ or ‘micropolitics’ of daily life and how these processes are not unitary or singular, and they play out in multiple, often small and constantly changing ways (Foucault, 2002).

**Power in Social Work Theory: The Contributions of Anti-oppressive Practice**

Having set out these key concepts of power, I will now turn to examine their development in social work theory, starting as my enquiries into this topic did with anti-oppressive practice. In doing so I will consider what these concepts offer in understanding and engaging with power in child protection, and offer some criticisms in order to look at why an alternative theoretical and conceptual framework is needed.

 The key concepts just outlined sit at the heart of many anti-oppressive perspectives, albeit drawing upon these ideas through a distinctive lens. A major feature of anti-oppressive practice is the focus on dominating power relations that enact and reinforce oppression and injustice, and how to challenging these forces to achieve social change through partnership and collective action. ‘Power over’ is problematised in the ways that dominating power pervades social systems and relationships; ‘power with’ is about how people can develop relationships to challenge these forces and create authentic relationships between people across differences; and ‘power to’ reflects fundamental principles of empowerment and autonomy. This threefold analysis of power is, for example, set out by both Thompson and Dominelli, two of the main advocates of anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002, 2009; Thompson, 2006, 2012). Some theorists also draw explicitly on further theoretical work, like Lukes’ ‘three-dimensional view’ to advance and develop this analysis of dominating power (Clifford and Burke, 2009). Anti-oppressive theory then extends this analysis though to consider how people can occupy multiple positions in networks of power, and be simultaneously in more powerful and powerless positions (Dominelli, 2002; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Baines, 2007b; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Thompson, 2012; Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). For example, racism is likely to something experienced by both a black-African man who was an economic migrant to the UK in the 1950s and a Muslim woman who was born in the UK in the 1980s and has spent her life here, but these experiences and their impact will be very different. These experiences will also be shaped by gender, family and social roles, community, culture and professional status – and by people’s own unique life experiences and the impact they have had on them.

 In offering a framework to understand these unique networks of power and oppression, some advocates of anti-oppressive provide models for locating people in their different roles and relationships, and understanding the social, political, cultural and economic forces, and ideas and belief systems, that effect their lives. Perhaps the best known of these models is Thompson’s ‘PCS’ approach (Thompson, 2012), which he uses to illustrate the ‘Personal’, ‘Cultural’ and Structural’ levels at which discrimination and dominating power can operate. A more nuanced and comprehensive model is provided by Dominelli (2002, pp. 181-185). She sets out four interlinking domains which shape people’s experiences: the physical environment, social and cultural relationships, political and economic forces, and spirituality, faith and values. Across these four domains, Dominelli then explores the different levels at which these influences operate. She begins with people’s individual identities, moving to family relationships and dynamics, through to community networks, then to wider social systems, and then to national and international contexts.

 Following on from this kind of model, it is apparent how anti-oppressive theory can help social workers to engage with power. Anti-oppressive practice promotes an open, respectful and inquisitive stance towards issues of identity, and to understanding how children and families are uniquely located within wider social contexts and cultures (Barnoff and Coleman, 2007; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Nzira and Williams, 2009). It encourages analysis of the immediate power dynamics that shape relationships, and how those relationships and child protection interventions occur within networks of organisational and structural power relations (Clifford, 1992; Dumbrill, 2003; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Strega, 2007). An anti-oppressive approach is centred on partnership, and helping social workers to explore how they can best work with children and families. In particular, anti-oppressive practice encourages us to explore how child protection interventions can be experienced as oppressive, and how professional power can be misused and have unintended effects and consequences (Dominelli, 2004; Dumbrill, 2006; Dumbrill and Lo, 2009; Strega, 2009). In this regard, it draws attention to the wider organisational, social and political dimensions of child protection, and how interventions can reinforce social divisions and people’s experiences of marginalisation, powerlessness and ‘othering’ (Dumbrill, 2003; Dominelli, 2004; Strega, 2007). To illustrate these points, and to show how Dominelli model can be drawn upon I will now turn to a second case example, the Sanderson family.

**Power in Social Work Theory: Anti-oppressive Practice and the Sanderson Family**

The Sanderson family are three children, Jordan (6), Kyle (5), and Ellie (2), and their mother Amy (23). Jordan and Kyle stay with their father Jason (28) every other weekend. Amy is currently in a relationship with Ellie’s father Steve (27). Amy is white English and has grown up and lived in a economically marginalised medium sized town all of her life, as have the children. This is also where her wider family are from. Jason is black Caribbean, and has also grown up and spent most of his life in the same town, although he often works away. Steve is white English, although little is known about his background, other than that it appears he has moved around a lot, and lived in a city with his ex-partner before moving to this same town where he quickly met and settled with Amy. The family have gone through a similar assessment process to that described in the previous chapter, and now have a social worker in a longer-term team because of concerns about domestic abuse towards Amy from Steve, and substance misuse by Steve. Steve has just been released from prison and returned to live at the family home, having served a year sentence for possession of drugs and for a violent assault on a man in a nightclub. Steve has a history of violent offending behaviour and drugs offences. There were reports of domestic violence in Amy and Steve’s relationship before he was imprisoned, including a serious assault which he was never prosecuted for, and Steve has two convictions for assault towards his ex-partner who is the mother of his two older children. There was social worker involvement in this family before Steve’s ex-partner ended their relationship. The level of these concerns about Jordan, Kyle and Ellie experiencing emotional harm through witnessing violence has meant that on Steve’s release from prison there has been a Child Protection Conference where all of the children were placed on Child Protection Plans. Jason is angry about this, and increasingly confrontational towards Amy and Steve.

 In using anti-oppressive and critical social work perspectives to help understand what could be going on in this situation, it is helpful to first draw out the different dynamics of power and oppression. The most immediate concerns here appear to be about oppressive relationships and gender, especially in terms of violence between Steve and Amy, and the impact of this on the children. Amy and Steve have talked about how they wanted a fresh start, and that Steve is looking to stop using drugs, which he and Amy state has been a major cause of previous violence. However, Steve tends to act in an overbearing and confrontational way with professionals and generally accepts little responsibility for his convictions, instead arguing that he only gets violent when provoked. This sits alongside comments that Amy has made that she has been to blame for problems between them, and comments that Steve has made seemingly indicating fixed, domineering attitudes about gender roles. There is a central concern about how these attitudes play out in Steve’s relationships with the children, and how he perceives Jordan and Kyle as another man’s children. Jason’s role, and the power dynamics between him and Amy and Steve, is also significant here. Jason has told Amy he will seek custody of Jordan and Kyle because she has continued her relationship with Steve, whilst Amy has said that Jason was controlling and abusive towards her when they were in a relationship, which Jason denies.

 These issues around power and gender also raise points about how child protection interventions are are often predominantly directed at women, and it is a mother’s behaviour and responsibilities that tend to be emphasised. This has led to criticism of child protection practices for perpetuating gender divisions, and how there can be strong messages of blame towards mothers for failing to care for or protect their children, even though where there is domestic abuse and they are subjected to abuse themselves (Featherstone, 2004; Scourfield, 2004; Hestor et al., 2007; Strega, 2007; Lapierre, 2008; Humphreys and Absler, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2012). The gendered nature of child protection interventions can also mean that fathers and other male family members can often be marginalised from interventions (Featherstone, 2009; Strega et al., 2009; Maxell et al., 2012).

 Other concerns about power and oppression can be found in the impact of poverty. The town that the family live in has a strong industrial history, but with factory closures towards the end of the twentieth century many of its residents experience entrenched poverty and social problems. Anti-oppressive and critical social work theory is connected to the challenges of child protection systems where families in poverty are much more likely to experience child protection intervention (Gibbons et al., 1995; Tuck, 2000; Hooper, 2005; Bywaters et al., 2014; Bywaters, 2015). Critics argue that these interventions often feature little by the way of practical help, and that standards of parenting and child welfare often give insufficient attention to the problems of poverty and deprivation in communities (Bostock, 2002; Rogowski, 2012; Featherstone et al., 2012; Jack and Gill, 2013). In this example, Amy and her family in particular have been impacted by a lack of jobs and dependence on welfare support with intergenerational problems of drinking, drug use, and domestic abuse in her parent’s relationship. For Jason, his own and his family’s experiences in this community are also linked to being black-Caribbean, and are have been of overt racism and continued, subtler or indirect forms of prejudice. Similarly he is concerned about his children’s experiences of being dual heritage in this town, and racism towards them from Steve. Anti-racist and anti-oppressive perspectives also raise important challenges about the potential needs in child protection interventions for stereotyping or failing to properly recognise people’s cultural identity and, and regarding to the over-representation of some ethnicities in child protection systems, for example of black-African and black-Caribbean children, and children of a dual heritage (Chand, 2000; Connelly et al., 2006 Barn, 2007; Bernard and Gupta, 2008; Owen and Statham, 2009).

 Dominelli’s model for anti-oppressive practice helps pull these themes together, and offers a framework for understanding oppressive forces in people’s lives. In this case, the children may experience interconnected forms of oppression through witnessing violence, but also through the conflictual family dynamics that they are caught in the middle of. Jordan and Kyle in particular experience a combination of feeling caught in the conflict between their mother and father, Steve’s violence towards their mother, and there are risks of him being violent or abusive towards them. Amy’s experiences of domestic abuse and powerlessness can then also be linked to her family life and experiences of family relationships and narratives. Her family have ambivalent feelings towards both Jason and Steve, leaving Amy and the children somewhat isolated, and in the past there has been a time where her father, in the past a heavy drinker, was abusive towards her mother, who in turn herself drank. This led to their separation. Amy may therefore have grown up in an environment where gender violence and dominating power were normalised and appeased with through a culture of silence. Amy will have learned from this, and she simultaneously expects little support from her family.

 The community and wider social contexts of this family’s life are also highly significant. A silent knowledge of a violent relationship could add another dimension to experiences of abuse and powerlessness, or community relationships can be important in challenging such relationships. Community relations can be a source of shame for people who experience domestic violence. At other times, going to her local toddlers group with Ellie can be a significant source of support for Amy. For Jordan and Kyle, school is also a place where they may feel different to other children, in a largely white-English community; although on the other hand, their friendships can be a time of fun and freedom compared to life at home.

Dominelli’s analysis draws our attention to these diverse dynamics, and to the social and cultural meanings that underlie them and the political and economic forces in play. Dominelli also connects these ideas to physical environments: for instance, the dominating power the children experience may be connected to parts of the house they are not allowed in when Steve is angry or connection to where and when violence happens. This sense of place may also be a key factor in Amy not wanting to leave Steve if this means leaving the area she has known her entire life or him living nearby and this being a constant threat. The wider influencing social factors should then also be considered, with social attitudes and systemic and organisational responses to domestic abuse being part of how it is challenged or condoned. The wider national and international domains may also reflect awareness and willingness to tackle domestic abuse as a crime and a social problem, and how this sits alongside wider problems about violence towards women and gender discrimination, and intersects with issues of class, ethnicity, age and so forth (Hestor et al., 2007). Lastly, economic factors determine the availability and accessibility of support, the availability of places in refuges and so forth, with austerity and cuts to these services having a significant impact on people who experience violence and abuse (Towers and Walby, 2012).

**Power in Social Work Theory: The Problems with Anti-oppressive Practice**

As these points show, anti-oppressive practice makes a range of helpful contributions to understanding and engaging with power in social work; and especially, the multidimensional model Dominelli provides is helpful in locating people within networks of power relations. However, there are fundamental problems with taking anti-oppressive practice as a framework for social work practice and as a framework for understanding and engaging with power. This relates to the criticisms I noted when presenting my own encounters with anti-oppressive practice in the introduction to this study. These criticisms are particularly about the ways that anti-oppressive practice appears to place unrealistic expectations on social workers and people who experience social work involvement in their lives, and about the critical, negative stance anti-oppressive perspectives adopt towards ‘mainstream’ social work practices and the negative discourse around power that this fosters.

The first criticisms of anti-oppressive practice I would offer here are that it is too much to expect that social work interventions should primarily be an instrument of emancipatory social change. We should have high aspirations for social work and hopefulness about what might be achieved, but it these kinds of expectations are unrealistic given how much is already going on in most social work interventions into people’s lives, the stress of circumstances where social workers often work people, and nor is it clear that this kind of politically minded engagement is what most people actually want from social workers (Gardener, 2008; Millar, 2008). Indeed, such aspirations towards specific formulations of social justice and social change seem to reflect a particular kind of left-wing political values, which may neither reflect the beliefs and values of children and families, nor the kinds of help and support they feel they need. I would generally ascribe to such values myself, but my concern is with how far they can be taken forwards in practice, and how this can appear to impose certain values and beliefs (Millar, 2008).

This is highly significant when engaging with power, and taking into account existing power dynamics and inequalities in social work interventions, as with child protection. As Wise (1995, p. 110) asks, discussing her work with a female victim of domestic violence, ‘To put this succinctly, what if I think a woman is oppressed and she does not?’ There appears to be little recognition across much of anti-oppressive theory about how people may not identify with or accept its key themes and tenets. Instead it seems to be accepted that anti-oppressive principles are a fundamental good, and categorically reflect service users’ voices and interests (Wilson and Beresford, 2000; McLaughlin, 2005). These points chime with critique about how anti-oppressive practice serves as a professional ideology, and can represent another means by which professional agendas are advanced (Wise, 1995; Wilson and Beresford, 2000; McLaughlin, 2005; Millar, 2008; Gardener, 2008).

Following on from this, a second major area of criticism of anti-oppressive and similar critical perspectives is that they often adopt a pejorative position towards ‘mainstream’ social work, to which ‘emancipatory’ practices are set in contrast (Dominelli, 2002; Thompson, 2012). This seems to devalue much of day-to-day work that social workers do, with practical support or therapeutic help taking on a secondary role to political activism. This is most apparent in respect of the social control dimensions of social work practice and the exercise of power, which appear to often be presented as antithetical to core social work values and anti-oppressive concepts of social justice (Dominelli, 2002, 2009; Dumbrill, 2003; Baines, 2007b; Thompson, 2012; Webb and Gray, 2013b; Garrett, 2013, 2014). Any kind of social work that disempowers people or reinforces social norms, even where this is a necessary and inherent feature of interventions into people’s lives, is cast as not what social work should be about, an aberration. This minimises proper critical examination of the day-to-day complexities of social work interventions (Wise, 1995; Ferguson, 2008a; Gardener, 2008; Okitikpi, 2011a)

In engaging with power almost exclusively through a rubric of oppression, it is also difficult to get much sense of what the positive and constructive dimensions of power are (Tew, 2006; Beckett and Maynard, 2012). This is apparent in the ways that anti-oppressive theorists draw upon key concepts of power, with ‘power over’ and hierarchical concepts of power being fundamentally tied up with domination, control, and the perpetuation of inequality and prejudice. Concepts of ‘power with’ and ‘power to’ are then framed as contrasting concepts found in resistance to and emancipation from dominating power (for example: Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2002; Thompson, 2006). This makes it difficult to advance positive concepts of authority and governance, and to develop fully realised accounts of how power can be exercised to protect vulnerable people (Wise, 1995; Tew, 2002, 2006; Healy, 2005; Gardner, 2008; Ferguson, 2008). This is especially concerning in child protection if it fosters a tentative and uncertain approach to power and authority (Ferguson, 2008; Okitikpi, 2011b; Tuck, 2013; Healy, 2014). It also means that cooperative and enabling relations are presented as polar opposites to such power, instead of being part of a more complex and nuanced field of power relations and social functioning.

These points are relevant in thinking about the Sanderson family, and in particular about how Amy experiences social work involvement. Amy states that she does not see herself as a victim of violence or abuse. Care needs to be taken that as a social worker we do not further reinforce her potential experiences by imposing a construction of her identity or experiences, defining the character of her relationships, or by insisting on engaging in a politicised discourse in discussions with her. However, this does need to be contrasted with the exercise of power to assess and understand concerns about what may be going on, and recognising the necessary and constructive role authority could play in working with the family. This includes being clear that there are concerns about the children’s safety and welfare, and Amy’s wellbeing, from a professional position, and that these concerns need to be properly understood and addressed. Anti-oppressive perspectives would seem to require a more politically minded and liberatory approach to working with Amy, but at the same time an emphasis on being anti-oppressive could be interpreted as minimising these authoritative dimensions, especially given concerns about how Amy is already in a position of relative powerlessness. Good practice in this kind of situation involves not challenging power inequalities in the relationship between Amy and her social worker, but taking ownership of the exercise of power and the dynamics this creates whilst also being clearly attentive to the disenfranchising and abusive relations Amy experiences in her life.

This isn’t simply to criticise anti-oppressive practice and critical perspectives for focusing on oppression. Evidently that is their purpose. It should also be recognised that the exercise of power to challenge oppression in the form of violence or abuse towards children is part of an anti-oppressive framework of power. My criticisms here are more about how anti-oppressive practice and similar critical social work perspectives can be presented as synonymous with social work values, and in particular as universal theoretical frameworks. The vigour with which these perspectives are often advanced further reinforces the ground they seek to claim at the heart of social work ethics and practice. Yet this not only seems to be pejorative towards much day-to-day social work practice that is not overtly political or emancipatory, it is also to flatten concepts of power. Oppression and dominating power are important themes in understanding and engaging with power, but they are only part of the story. We need to have concepts of power as a positive and constructive force too, especially in child protection; and not be pulled back to seeing these things only through what is least oppressive or most anti-oppressive. If power is conceived through a rubric of what is oppressive or anti-oppressive, dominating or emancipatory, this leaves little space for nuances in exploring its functions and effects.

This then reflects broader concerns about critical approaches to power, and how they offer only a limited conceptual framework of power as oppression, dominating power and resistance. To return to the key concepts of power set out here, whilst critical perspectives provide a detailed treatment of oppressive and dominating power, they also consistently critique alternative conceptions of power for overlooking the embedded nature of networks of dominating power (Westwood, 2002; Lukes, 2005). Critical theorists emphasise how views of analyses of power as benign and functioning in the best interests of the majority are naïve to the ways that dominating and discriminatory power is reproduced in social relations and systems (Held, 1980; Westwood, 2002). But this kind of engagement with power seems to see domination and hidden, manipulative networks of power everywhere; and it is indicative of ‘deep distrust’ of power (Hearn, 2012, p. 32). If analysis of power is constantly pulled towards critique and scepticism about the exercise of power and about those in a position to exercise power, then this can significantly inhibit the conceptual resources available to us (Giddens, 1984; Haugaard, 2009; Hearn, 2012). This is especially apparent when dealing with governance and authority, but it can also apply to consensual and enabling power. It is to say little about how people can legitimately accept social regulation and governance over their lives, or how authority and consensus themselves can connect as well being potentially oppositional forces. The problem is not that anti-oppressive and critical perspectives focus on oppression and domination, it is how this inhibits a more rounded and fully realised rendering of the subject.

**Power in Social Work Theory: Postmodern Critical Social Work**

My argument in respect of anti-oppressive and critical approaches to power is therefore that they fundamentally engage with power in predominantly oppositional and negative ways. This is not a new criticism, and alternative critical social work perspectives have been developed that look to expand concepts of power and critical practices. My first encounter with these alternative perspectives came with postmodern critical social work theory, and it is to these ideas I now turn.

 Postmodern critical social work has been mainly advanced by theorists from Australia and Canada (Ife, 1997, 2012; Pease and Fook, 1999; Healy, 2000, 2014; Mullaly, 2002; Hicks et al., 2005; Allan et al., 2009a; Fook, 2012), although similar ideas have been developed by some UK theorists also (O’Brien and Penna, 1998; Parton and O’Bryne, 2002). Advocates of postmodern critical perspectives argue that they provide a different approach to critical social work because they adopt a distinctive postmodern epistemological framework and a Foucauldian approach to power. This is because they remain critical perspectives that are about social justice, and understanding the impacts of disadvantage and inequality on people’s lives, however they do not look to offer ‘grand narratives’ of oppression and inequality, and how the social world as stratified by embedded structural inequalities (Fook and Pease, 1999; Allan, 2009b; Fawcett, 2009; Fook, 2012; Healy, 2014). In contrast, a postmodern epistemology helps to unsettle and explore distinctions of gender, ethnicity, disability, and so on, to establish a more rounded view of people’s identities and the way they are effected by social power relations (Crinall, 1999; Hick, 2005; Morley and Macfarlane, 2012).

Returning to the ideas discussed in the previous chapter, postmodern critical social work is founded upon an affirmative conception of postmodernity as a reflective and questioning approach to knowledge, recognising the value of localised ‘little narratives’ (Ife, 1997; Fook and Pease, 1999; Allan, 2009a; Fawcett, 2012). Postmodern critical social work is therefore about understanding specific circumstances, and continually reconstructing ideas about critical practice (Allan et al., 2009b; Fook, 2012; Healy, 2014). The focus on language in postmodern theory is also considered, with the importance of the narratives people have and the ways that they see themselves and their places in the social contexts around being revealed through the way they talk and stories they tell (Fook, 2012).

Power is a central theme in postmodern critical social work, and postmodern critical theory is also presented as an approach that explores the need for social workers to exercise power in different ways. Most postmodern critical theorists adopt a Foucauldian approach to power to this end (Healy, 2000, 2014; Pease, 2002; Fook, 2005, 2012; Allan, 2009a). The main themes that postmodern critical theorists develop from Foucault’s work on power are that it can be a constructive as well repressive force, that is exercised in relationships between people, and is exercised from the ‘bottom up’ and is not just a ‘top-down’, hierarchical force (Healy, 2000; Fook, 2012). It is argued that this offers a different approach to power, because of the way Foucault’s ideas open up greater possibilities for engaging with the day-to-day ‘micro-politics’ of power, and for recognising the enabling and constructive potential of power (Healy, 2014, p. 216). Given a Foucauldian approach sees power as constitutive, it is argued that it can be found in all aspects of our lives, and that power is exercised in all relationships and ways that people engage with the world around them. This means that people always have the potential to exercise power in all situations. This is not to deny the effects of dominating power, but it is argued that it creates possibilities for exploring the formation of new social relations and networks of power from the ‘bottom up’ (Healy, 2000). This is especially important in social work practice, rather than seeing power inequalities between social workers and families as fixed and immutable (Pease and Fook, 1999).

The Sanderson family can again be used to illustrate some of these themes. A postmodern critical approach to power encourages us to understand the specific power relations that shape people’s lives, but it also emphasises how the understanding of these things should be co-constructed. This means for example, recognising Amy’s stated view that her problems are not her relationship with Steve, they are social work involvement and her ex-partner Jason, and validating those experiences to show her that she will be listened to. This could for example lead to a discussion of Amy’s relationship with Jason and how she experienced this relationship as abusive to better understand her identity and the narratives she has about relationships, family, parenthood and domestic violence and abuse. Picking up on Amy’s resilience in the face of the pressures she experiences could itself then be a critical act directed at subtly altering meanings and the power dynamics that underlie them, and reframing Amy not only as a ‘victim’ of violence. This, in turn, may help to reduce the feelings that Amy may have of feeling trapped between the authority of an abusive partner – if indeed she continues to experience violence and abuse – and the child protection system (Humphreys and Absler, 2011).

This would not mean simply accepting Amy’s account and ignoring the domestic violence from Steve towards Amy, or the harm the children experience, but it is about holding multiple perspectives about what is going on whilst maintaining a critical focus on understanding and challenging dominating power. This is to look to move away from conflict with Amy or Steve about the truth of what is happening, and to explore different interpretations and experiences. However, if power does need to be exercised more forcefully to protect the children and Amy, it is about recognising the potential for this too to be constructive (Healy, 2005). The emphasis placed on the ‘micro-politics’ of practice in postmodern critical social work encourages us to play close attention to the detail of the ways this challenge occurs and how it is experienced, and to explore the potential for this authoritative practice to be a form of critical practice (Healy, 2000).

It was a Foucauldian approach to power that particularly interested me about postmodern critical social work, alongside the need for a more pragmatic approach to how critical social work ideas can be applied in practice. In child protection, social workers can have different, potentially contrasting responsibilities to empower and work with people whilst having a primary duty to assess and respond to concerns about children’s safety and welfare. This means there are often limits to what can be achieved in respect of enabling children and family members whose needs may be very different. Postmodern critical ideas seemed to acknowledge these challenges better than more avowed politically active and emancipatory approaches like anti-oppressive practice. In respect of power, postmodern critical perspectives seem to further develop ideas about how social work interventions involve multifaceted networks of power. This helps to explore statutory powers can have diverse effects and be experienced as both liberating and oppressive by different family members. The use of Foucault’s ideas gave these ideas a framework in terms of considering how these powers are exercised in the ‘micro-politics’ of day-to-day exchanges with children and family members, and how power can be constructive, even when exercised in regulatory and authoritative ways.

However, over time what I took to be liberating about postmodern critical social work became a source of frustration and I began to find these perspectives rather abstruse. As the analysis of modernity and postmodernity in the previous chapter indicates, I take issue with the use of postmodern theory as an epistemological foundation for social work. Given that it is an approach that eschews all generalisations, it is far from clear how postmodernism can be seen to advance critical social work values, or indeed any kind of ethical principles or positions on good practice in social work (McBeath and Webb, 1991; Gray and Webb, 2012). Nor is it clear how postmodern critical social work sits alongside the use of reasoning and rational methods in social work. As I argued previously, the concept of an ‘affirmative’ postmodernism does not get away from these problems, as postmodernists seemingly either must embrace postmodernism and what follows that all claims to knowledge are nothing more than contingent and relativistic ways of understanding the world, or they continue to argue that there are general principles and stable, enduring foundations for knowledge. This latter approach, though, is to continue to set significant store by reason and rational analysis and to make claims that run counter to what it is that postmodern ideas are supposed to represent. In continuing to advocate for critical perspectives and values, and to make claims about good practice and the kind of profession social work should be, it seems that postmodern critical theorists adopt an inconsistent position. Or, I would argue, theirs is not really adopting a postmodern position at all, instead it is a stance that simply makes use of postmodern ideas to offer ways of reflecting on and contextualising social work practice.

This does devalue the contributions of postmodern critical social work theory as a set of ideas and tools for critically engaging with and reflecting on social work practice. The problem is that whilst helping to contextualise knowledge and reflect on how ideas apply in specific circumstances, because of its commitment to postmodernity this kind of critical approach actually says little about what good social work looks like. These problems become further apparent in relation to the application of Foucauldian ideas about power, as though it initially seemed these ideas opened up new avenues of enquiry about power, when it came to applying them to practice do not really say anything new. This seems to be because a Foucauldian approach to power sees it as constituting all aspects of our identities, interpersonal lives and the social world around us: as Foucault states, ‘power is everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere and everything’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). But seeing power as a constitutive force in this way, actually tells us little about what it is that power constitutes or how it is exercised, or what makes power enabling or repressive.

For example, with the Sanderson family, unlike anti-oppressive models, postmodern critical theory does not actually offer a framework for exploring how individual family members are located within layers of social context and relationships. Nor does it offer much detail about how oppressive power relations take hold, or what the constructive exercise of power in working with the family involves and how as a social worker we ought to exercise authority.

A Foucauldian approach to power seems to make a ubiquitous and ever-present force and always there, yet this actually then says little about how we can understand and engage with it. As Smith (2009, pp. 47-48) argues, ‘if power is everything, it is nothing. Foucault defines power so widely that its analytical purchase is diminished.’ Hearn (2012, p. 210) similarly describes Foucault’s approach to power as ‘chronically vague’ and lacking theoretical and conceptual utility. In treating power as omnipresent, a Foucauldian approach actually tells us little about it, and is dependent on other theories and ideas to explore the ways power functions, and its constructive and oppressive potential.

**Power in Social Work Theory: Multi-aspect Approaches to Power**

Having explored the contributions of anti-oppressive practice and postmodern critical perspectives, I now want to move on to analyse three further approaches power in social work theory. I have critiqued anti-oppressive practice for conceptualising with power in a manner that ultimately inhibits a more rounded and nuanced way of framing key concepts. Postmodern critical perspectives look to offer a more varied and fluid approach to power grounded in Foucauldian ideas, but this ends up offering an ambiguous conceptual framework. The three approaches to power in social work theory I now examine look to retain and respond to these critical influences, whilst offering more comprehensive approaches that have multiple conceptual and theoretical aspects.

 The first of these approaches is provided by Tew (2002, 2006), whose analysis draws together theoretical approaches to power, including principally those from anti-oppressive practice and postmodern critical theory. He sets out the core features of his approach in a ‘conceptual matrix of power relations’. In this matrix and the arguments leading to its presentation, Tew raises concern about how discourse on power has been framed in social work theory, and that, ‘[w]hen much that is written about power over has tended to focus on its destructive and discriminatory aspects, it can be hard for social workers to have confidence and clarity in the use of power for positive purposes’ (Tew, 2006, p. 46). Tew draws on Foucauldian concepts about how power is a multifaceted phenomenon that is both enabling and repressive. Alongside the productive dimensions of cooperative power, he advances the category of ‘protective power’ to capture the ways that power can promote the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable people. Drawing from anti-oppressive and other critical approaches to social work, he also argues that power should be engaged with in a critical way that explores the impact of oppressive power relations on the lives of many people who experience social work intervention, and how those interventions themselves can be disempowering and disenfranchising. Tew also provides a distinctive contribution to this analysis through developing a concept of ‘collusive power’ intended to reflect how cooperative and collective power relations can exclude and marginalise others, and perpetuate systems of privilege and power (Tew, 2002, pp. 164-165).

Tew presents this matrix as a grid of connected mode of power:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Power over | Power together |
| Productive modes of power | **Protective Power**Deploying power in order to safeguard vulnerable people and their possibilities for advancement | **Cooperative Power**Collective action, sharing, mutual support and challenge – through valuing commonality *and* difference |
| Limiting modes of power | **Oppressive Power**Exploiting differences to enhance own position and resources at the expense of others | **Collusive Power**Banding together to exclude or suppress ‘otherness’ whether internal or external |

(Tew, 2002, p. 166)

Figure 2: Tew’s matrix of power relations

As a critical framework for analysing power relations in different circumstances, Tew’s purpose in introducing this matrix is to provide a ‘tentative’ framework’, and not establish fixed categories. For Tew, one of the defining features of this matrix is that it encourages us to consider how these forms of power can ‘slide’ into one another. This moves from thinking about singular forms of power to a multi-aspect view of interconnected and changing power relationships. So whilst protective power can be productive in preventing harm and promoting people’s welfare, it has the potential for example to become oppressive where it disempowers and denies a voice to those who are meant to be protected. Accordingly, for protective power to be enabling, it should over time, shift to more cooperative power dynamics, where social work interventions are undertaken alongside rather imposed onto people. On the other hand however, a failure to exercise power to protect vulnerable people is to allow oppressive power relations to go unchecked. Tew also explicitly draws a link between oppression and collusion, and how discrimination and prejudice are fostered when people do nothing to challenge inequality and injustice.

 A similar approach and topography has been provided by Houston, as part of a debate with Garrett about the contributions of Habermas’ ideas to critical social work, and to the use of Family Group Conferences in child protection (Hayes and Houston, 2007; Garrett, 2009, 2010; Houston, 2010). It is interesting to see how Houston’s use of Habermas’ ideas leads him to develop to a similar fourfold grid as Tew, whose work draws from Foucault. This is because Habermas and Foucault offered seemingly dissimilar approaches to power. Habermas has been a prominent critic of postmodernity and poststructuralism, which he saw as undermining truth and reason, and he sought to offer a defence of reason and rationality as the foundations of critical theory (Kelly, 1994). Habermas wanted to offer a dynamic approach to truth and knowledge as things of the world, and in so doing to acknowledge, in part at least, aspects of Foucault’s arguments about the socially constructed nature of how we understand and engage with the world around us. Habermas’ arguments have been influential because he sought to do this whilst maintaining that we have enduring, universalisable commitments to ethics and social justice (Habermas, 1987). Habermas did this through the concept of ‘communicative action’, and the ways that people come together to genuinely share knowledge and understanding, and to engage in debate and seek consensus about matters of social, political and public life (Habermas, 1984, 1987).

In taking this analysis on in respect of power Houston represents these ideas as a grid with four domains:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | ‘Lifeworld’ | ‘System’ |
| Enabling (positive) | *Communicative power* | *Administrative power* |
| Constraining (negative) | *Pathogenic power* | *Colonising power* |

(Houston, 2010, p. 1737)

Figure 3: Houston’s typology of power based on Habermas’ ideas

In Habermas’ analysis, power is a wide-ranging force, found across social relationships and systems. Habermas distinguished between the ‘lifeworld’ and the ‘system’, to identify different spheres of social life, and the interactive relationship between these two categories reflects the way people’s selfhood and relationships sit within wider social networks and systems (Habermas, 1984). The lifeworld represents people’s daily interactions: and where there is a positive kind of communication, an attempt to genuinely convey something or understand another, to share ourselves with those around us, and to act in ways that enable and enfranchise ourselves and others, there is ‘communicative reason’ and an enabling power. Houston (2010) takes this forward to contrast this kind of power with a negative, ‘pathogenic’ kind of power, where our interactions are cold, hostile and seek to impose unto others or deny their worth in a way that constrains their personhood.

Taking this up to the ‘system’, administrative power is then found in policies, laws, organisations and so forth that foster communicative reason, and ways of drawing people together that foster agency and selfhood. This can include the law and forms of authority to enforce rights, especially to regulate ‘pathogenic’, dehumanising actions and forms of communication (*ibid*). Where administrative power becomes dehumanising, the ‘lifeworld’ can become colonised by the ‘system’: where social systems become pervaded by their own logics and means-ends rationality towards specific functions and not human flourishing (Habermas, 1984). This colonising power can then be found in across social organisations and functioning which serves to dehumanise and constrain people.

 Despite their different theoretical underpinnings, Tew’s and Houston’s approaches share a concern to represent the diverse and multifaceted character of power. Tew’s approach to ‘power over’ focuses on how it can be rightfully exercised to protect vulnerable people, whilst Houston’s use of the concept of ‘administrative power’ similarly explores the systems and safeguards needed to regulate the disempowering and dehumanising aspects of ‘pathogenic power’. Both approaches combine this with an analysis that still emphasises the importance of ‘cooperative power’ and relationships.

In working with the Sanderson family, this offers a rounded way to explore the multiple power relations that occur. It emphasises the dominating and harmful forms of power Amy and the children are subject to, and how Amy experiences social worker involvement as repressive and coercive. It also however, combines this with an understanding of how power may need to be exercised to protect the children and to challenge the ‘pathogenic’ or ‘oppressive power’ they could experience, and that Amy may also be subject to from Steve. What is more, in order to manage the potential for this kind of imposed power to become disempowering, or ‘colonising power’ to be enacted where systematic procedures are followed but this has little meaningful positive impact for Amy and the children, a social worker should look to foster cooperative and communicative relationships. Finally, there is a relevance to Tew’s concept of ‘collusive power’, and how it is silence about Amy’s experiences of domestic violence and abuse, and the potential for further violence and abuse in her relationship with Steve, that allows such ‘oppressive power’ towards her and the children to fester.

 What is particularly helpful about these frameworks is that they help us to understand and engage with these different forms of power as occurring simultaneously, and represent the ways power relations can shift. However, there are still limitations to both of these approaches about how they deal with these key concepts of power, and I think there further work to be done in conceptualising the multifaceted and interconnected nature of power relations. Though capturing one of the main features of authority to protect people, this remains a narrow concept that focuses on how it is a negation of ‘oppressive’ or ‘pathogenic power’. This underplays how governance and hierarchical power can be exercised in constructive ways in their own right to enable selfhood and create the conditions for social functioning and human flourishing. Also, because both frameworks focus on ‘cooperative’ and ‘communicative power’, neither really provides much clarity about what this authoritative power involves or how it should be exercised. It is the representation of power as a grid that seems to particularly limit these approaches thouh. They conceptualise power as multi-aspect and interconnected, but neither approach really draws out how power relations can often be both imposed and authoritative, and consensual, at the same time and to differing degrees. Similarly, the representation of this idea as a grid, and notions of shifting from one mode of power to another, is still indicative of clear conceptual distinctions which does not necessarily reflect the incongruence, messiness and multifaceted nature of real world situations where power can seemingly function in multiple ways at once.

**Smith’s Meanings, Sites and Modes of Power for Social Work Practice**

To develop these points further, I want to move on to show how further conceptual and theoretical resources can be drawn upon with reference to contemporary theoretical approaches to power, and in so doing to outline the core dynamics of the framework of power that I will go on to develop. To do so, I will first turn to the third multi-aspect approach to power in social work theory I consider here, found in Smith’s (2008a, 2010) ‘meanings’, ‘sites’ and ‘modes’ of power.

Smith’s (2008a, 2010, 2013) conceptual approach to power draws across three interconnected dimensions, the ‘meanings’, ‘sites’ and ‘modes’ of power to not only capture how power can be exercised in different ways and how power relations can take different forms, but also to offer a layered account of its functions and effects in shaping identities, relationships and wider social contexts and discourses.

Drawing upon a range of theories and influences, Smith (2008a, 2010) analyses four categories of definition, or ‘meanings’ of power. First, power can be seen as ‘potential’, as a capacity to act based upon a person’s position within social systems and networks, but which does not necessary have to be directly called into play to influence people’s actions. Second, people can ‘possess’ power, in virtue of having capacities or resources that enable them to act in particular ways and to influence others. This can particularly be related to people’s positions within social, political, economic and cultural systems. Third, power can be seen to flow through systems, and is brought out as a ‘process’ of diverse exchanges within those systems. Finally, power can be a ‘product’, where its exercise produces outcomes in constantly remaking social roles, relationships and networks.

The second part of Smith’s approach to power is an analysis of the ‘sites’ of power across different levels. This is similar to Dominelli’s model for anti-oppressive practice already described – although Smith offers a separate formulation of these ideas that is specific to the child’s world (Smith, 2008a, p. 64). Third, and following this, Smith goes on to develop a tripartite analysis of the ‘modes’ of power: the personal aspects of power, and how it shapes our agency and identity; the positional aspect of power, and the social roles we adopt and our location in systems and organisations; and the relational aspect, and our exchanges and relationships with others. Smith presents these three ‘modes’ of power as interconnected. Power exercised in one mode will be influenced by and fundamentally linked to the other modes. Thus our individual identity and personality shapes the ways we relate to others, and the social positions we adopt, how we interpret social roles, and how we accept, challenge and remake wider structural influences. Our position within social systems and organisations, and how we perceive discourses and ideas around us, will in turn affect our identity and sense of self, and how we relate to people. Finally, the relational mode of power sits between the personal and position modes. Relationships shape and redefine individual identities; but it is also in relationships between people that social roles and positions play out, and where structures and systems of ideas, values and norms are enacted.

 In this way, Smith develops a framework that reflects a range of different conceptual and theoretical ideas about power: what it is, the levels at which it functions and how it is exercised. What is especially interesting about this approach is that Smith does not look to offer a definitive concept of what power is or how we should look to conceptualise power. His approach offers a wide-ranging means of understanding and engaging with power in different settings, through providing a conceptual toolkit that can be applied in a range of ways, and that can be used to unpack the ideas about power, and its functions and effects on people’s lives and on the world around us. In choosing not to privilege a particular conceptualisation of power, Smith opens up multiple avenues of inquiry whilst creating a distinctively critical framework which remains about situating ourselves and others within networks of power relationships, and continually looking to understand and exercise power in fairer, more just ways. The efficacy of this approach can be demonstrated by returning once more to the Sanderson family.

One way of understanding Smith’s approach is to consider the ways ‘meanings’ and ‘modes’ of power can be applied. From Amy’s and Steve’s perspective, and the perspective of the children, social workers may be seen to ‘possess’ power though their professional status and position with legal, organisational and professional systems, which enables them to act in certain ways and exercise authority. They are also likely to be acutely aware of the ‘potential’ for this power to be used and the threat this could represent to their family life. Here, the connection between the ‘positional’ and ‘personal’ modes of power is apparent, and particularly social worker’s these connections result in power being exercised in ‘relational’ ways that affects children’s and family member’s own ‘personal’ and ‘positional’ power. These power relations, viewed more broadly, are a kind of process and network of dynamics and power relation. Certain outcomes and effects across the ‘personal’, ‘positional’ and ‘relational’ modes are then also ‘produced’. For example, Amy and Steve’s response to the power a social worker is seen to ‘possess’ and how this is exercised, has as described so far been to resist this power, either through non-cooperation and challenge behaviour. Their perceptions and fears about the imposition of power have been meant that social work involvement is perceived as a threat, and responded to as such.

 Smith’s multi-aspect approach can also be used however to explore how different kinds of power within these meanings and modes can be brought to bear. As Smith (2010) argues, social workers in child protection can feel obliged to practice in certain ways because of the ways their ‘position’ in those systems is often defined by the assessment and management of risk. Yet social workers can occupy a more contested ‘position’, where their own ‘personal’ values and beliefs, lead them to seek to different kinds of ‘relational’ modes of power. This involves working with children and families, and to appreciate their wishes and feelings, and create a more constructive dialogue that seeks to ‘produce’ new power relations. This is both in respect of how Amy and Steve, and the children, perceive and engage with professional involvement in their lives, and then in the ‘potential’ for power to be exercised in enabling ways that help them to promote their wellbeing as individuals and as a family unit. This then creates a shift from a predominantly ‘positional’ kind of relationship to explore the ‘personal’ modes of power in Amy’s, Steve’s and the children’s lives, and their ‘positions’ within different levels of social context and meaning. It is also to emphasise the ‘personal’ dimensions of a social worker’s power alongside the authority they have to exercise in their professional ‘position’. Although the positional dimensions of power remain, and a social workers will often inherently ‘possess’ and have the ‘potential’ to exercise power, this kind of dialogue can then reframe the ‘processes’ of how power is exercised across professional and family systems, and the ‘products’ of those relations.

This example illustrates how Smith’s framework of power across three interconnected dimensions opens up different ways of conceptualising power, and offers a vocabulary with which to understand and engage with power as having the capacity to both constrain and enable on personal, relational and systemic levels. I will draw from these ideas in two ways. First, in making explicit use of the ‘levels’ of social context across which power can be understood, and in seeing relationships as the key connector of agency and structure in social work practice. Second, and more generally, in how Smith’s approach to power shows the value of not looking to provide a straightforward definition of power, but rather to unpack different ideas about how we use concepts of power. This is significant in looking to open up our thinking about power, and providing a vocabulary with which to do so that can then be used in a flexible and open-ended way.

**Conceptualising Power as a Multifaceted, Dynamic and Interactive Force: Power as Consensus and Conflict**

I will now go on to establish the basis for the framework I develop here, and in doing so I want to consider some further, contemporary conceptual and theoretical approaches to power that explore how power can have multiple, interconnecting forms. As with social work theory, this is common theme within contemporary theoretical work on power, which often conceptualises power as having multiple dimensions and draws together ideas about how power can enable and liberate, and repress and marginalise (Giddens, 1984; Mann, 1986; Clegg, 1989; Davis, 1991; Hindress, 1996; Haugaard, 1997; Westwood, 2002; Smith, 2008a). To develop my analysis of power in child protection further, I will now examine how power can be understood and engaged with across three core dynamics: consensus and opposition, agency and structure, and as constructive and repressive. This analysis will begin with Haugaard’s theoretical model of power as exercised across a spectrum of conflict and consensus (Haugaard, 1997, 2002).

The theoretical approach to power that Haugaard develops presents power as a ‘scalar phenomenon’, operating across a spectrum of conflict and consensus (Haugaard, 1997, p. 146). On one side of this spectrum, conflictual power is about conflicts of interest and contested power dynamics that are resolved through strategies of control, authority, domination and conflict. On the other side, consensual power is found in negotiation, cooperation and consensus seeking towards shared agendas and goals. Haugaard suggests that there can be times where power is exercised in relations of ‘pure’ conflict or consensus: where there is just an oppositional relationship and the total imposition of control from one person towards other, or where there is complete agreement and alignment of purpose between people. These relations are rare however, and more commonly power relations feature degrees of both conflict and consensus. For example, even where there is clear and apparent conflict in relationships, or controls and restrictions are placed up on people, there will often be some common ground or compromise. Likewise, even where there is collaboration and solidarity, there will be differences, conflicts of interest, and the subtle operations of control and authority. As relationships move towards the centre of this spectrum, the possibilities for power to operate in multifaceted ways become more apparent, as relationships and social exchanges are continually negotiated as parties try to enact their interests but also to find common ground and ways of working together.

Haugaard argues that there are two key reasons why he deals with power in this way. First, we are often actually not entirely in favour nor against something, and we change our minds: and so we do not always approach things with a clear position of looking to work with or oppose something (*ibid*, p. 137). We often change or adapt our position in line with what we see as being our views or interests at a given point, or because we are influenced by others. If we have mixed feelings about something, and are not completely in favour or against it, then interactions may be shaped by varied power dynamics as our diverging attitudes and goals manifest themselves. This can then lead us to adopt more challenging and conflictual stances towards others, or more open and agreeable ones, in different circumstances.

The second key reason Haugaard gives for adopting this approach argument is to reflect the relationship between power at the personal and interpersonal level, and at a structural level (1997, pp. 138-142). He offers this visual representation to draw together these ideas:

Consensus

 Conflict

2

Goals = Conflict

Structures = Consensus

Structures override goals

6

Goals = Conflict

Structures = Conflict

1

Goals = Consensus

Structures = Consensus

3

Goals = Consensus

Structures = Conflict

Goals override structures

4

Goals = Conflict

Structures = Consensus

Goals override structures

5

Goals = Consensus

Structures = Conflict

Structures override goals

(Haugaard, 1997, p. 144)

Figure 4: Haugaard’s representation of power as conflict and consensus

Haugaard argues that our individual goals can, but do not necessarily align with those of the structures in which we are positioned, and this then leads to different levels of consensus or conflict in power dynamics. Where our individual goals align with structures in which we are positioned, there is clear consensus in power relations; and where our individual goals sit in opposition to the structures in which we are positioned, and furthermore those structures lead to imposed courses of action and outcomes, there is clear conflict in power relations. For example, where two social workers are working together and agree about a particular course of action, they are likely to largely agree not only at an interpersonal level but also about particular social structures and norms that guide their practice. At the other end of the spectrum, there would be a significant level of conflict in power relations where a parent does not want their child to be taken into care, and see this course of action is imposed and seen as the workings of an unjust system.

 There is diverse territory between these two poles, where our individual goals do not align with structures, or when we are working towards individual goals even though they reinforce structure we do not agree with or accept. This the usefulness of these ideas can best be explained through considering their application in practice. To take the notion that our individual goals run counter to structures, an example of this might be a parent who goes along with a Child Protection Plan, not because they value the plan or its outcomes, which they think are unnecessary, but because they don’t want social work involvement in their life. This would be a primarily consensual power relationship if the parent actively accepted the plan and worked with professionals, but would still involve a conflictual power relationship at a structural level. An example of a situation where we may work towards individual goals even though we do not want to reinforce structures could be a social worker meeting with a family where a misogynistic comment is made. The social worker may overlook this even though he or she disagrees with what is said and what it represents, deciding to prioritise other goals in the interests of having a productive meeting because of this importance of the shared goals. This would overall still lead to primarily consensual power relations. On the other hand, they may decide they cannot let the comment stand and challenge it, whilst still emphasising the shared goal of the meeting. This could overall lead to more conflictual power relations.

These ideas and concepts can be adapted to different situations, and offer a degree of depth and complexity in understanding multifaceted power relations. The particular contribution of this approach for child protection lies in how this way of conceptualising power seems to capture the interplay that is common to most social exchanges and relationships, and to how organisations and wider social systems function. In child protection, even in some of the most conflictual circumstances, where power is strongly imposed and authoritative, there will often still be the potential for some, small forms of cooperation and negotiation. For example, even when a child has been removed from their family, there will still be some basis for consensus with things like agreeing about how their health and educational needs are best met. Similarly, even where there is a strong degree of consensus, say between two social workers working together to try and safeguard and young person at risk of sexual exploitation, who agree on the main issues and course of action, they are still likely to have differences in opinion about specific ways of dealing with particular circumstances. In other circumstances, like a multi-agency meeting for a family, where there will be varying professionals and family members involved, there is likely to a combination of conflict, negotiation, challenge, disagreement and resolution as people negotiate different agendas, goals and priorities. There will also then be a range of further power dynamics, as hierarchies, group dynamics, individual personalities and experiences, and different meanings and interpretations of events, all feed into what happens.

A point that Haugaard does not make which I also think is significant here, is how this kind of approach also reflects the interactive nature of power dynamics. Returning to his point about how we change our minds, we may do this not only because our feelings or views change, but also because of what other people do and how they influence us. This includes how they exercise power and show a willingness to work cooperatively and compromise, or challenge and try to impose their will. This seems to reflect how consensus and compromise often begets further opportunities for working together, whilst conflict and oppositional power is likely to lead to further conflict in the future. In child protection, this is perhaps simplest described in how attempts to work cooperatively by professionals can lead to cooperation by a child or parent, when they had intended to resist professional authority (Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Welbourne, 2012).

I think that there is much to be said for these ideas in capturing how power is a diverse, contested and multifaceted phenomenon. Rather than being an attempt to corral distinct concepts of power together, this approach seems to reflect the interconnected and variable ways that power actually shapes relationships between people, and how they take on social positions and roles. Haugaard’s model offers the scope to bring together analysis of different kinds of power relations that draws in both how people work together and how there are conflicts of interest, challenge, and the imposition of interests and agendas.

**Agency and Structure: Locating Ourselves in Social Contexts**

Following on from Haugaard’s observations, we come to the interconnection of agency and structure in understanding and engaging with power. This connection is about how selfhood and agency are shaped by social contexts and by systems of ideas, values and norms; but also, how people create their own unique, autonomous selves in these contexts. This dynamic is also about the ways that it is what people think and do that actually constitutes social structures, and reinforces, challenges or reframes those structures.

 The dynamic of agency and structure first represents how it is through people’s positions within social structures that they are often able to exercise power, and do so in ways that bring particular capacities and resources to bear. For example, as discussed in chapter two, social workers in child protection predominantly exercise power through their structural positions within legal, organisational and professional systems. The relationship between agency and structure is not just one-way though, and people are not automata who simply enact the structures they are positioned within. Rather, we actively interpret our roles within these social contexts, and think and act in autonomous and unique ways. For example, social workers will occupy roles within child protection systems, but they will also do so in individual ways that reflect their own identities, personalities and experiences, and the intersections of their other social roles and characteristics. The same can be said for children and family members, who will actively define their social roles and individual beliefs and actions within wider social contexts (Ferguson, 2001; Smith, 2008a).

An important theoretical approach this relationship between agency and structure has been provided by Giddens (Giddens, 1979, 1984; Stones, 2009). Giddens uses the concept of structuration to capture how agency and structure are intrinsically interconnected (Giddens, 1979). One of the main ideas he draws upon here is the ‘duality of structure’ (*ibid*, p. 5). This represents the way that structures serve both as the ‘medium’ of social actions, as they provide the basis through which people understand and engage with the world around them, and they are the ‘outcome’ of these actions, as it is through what people do that such structures are enacted, and are reinforced or remade by this process. Giddens argues that power sits at the heart of this process, and he conceived of power as both an enabling and a constraining force (Giddens, 1979, 1984). The key point for Giddens is that there is always space for people to exercise power in the ways that they actively make themselves within structures, and in turn can remake those structures themselves. However, Giddens also sought to recognise the ways that structures can place significant constraints on people. This extends to ‘structures of domination’, whereby embedded social processes serve to impose networks of power onto individual people’s lives which consistently limit their freedoms and their ability to act of their will (Giddens, 1984).

Structuration has been much debated and criticised. I do not intend to go into these considerations in detail, but in brief, the main criticisms have been about how Giddens places too much emphasis on human freedom and agency, and about the lack of clarity regarding the process of structuration and how it happens (Wessel, 1992; Parker, 2000; Stones, 2009). Instead of getting caught up in debates about the detail of structuration, I want to suggest it provides a helpful basis for engaging with agency and structure again because of the way it draws out how we can conceptualise power across structure and agency as a multidirectional force, and avoids focusing either on how power is a hierarchical force that is exercised down from structures to individuals, or is constitutive and is found in all social relations from the ground up (Davies, 1991; Stones, 2009). Taking forwards the kind of approach Giddens advocates, we can look at engaging with ideas about power as both producing and constraining individual agency within systems; and how it is in enabling people to act effectively within systems, that wider contextual social forces can be challenged and reframed (Ferguson, 2001). This is helpful in understanding and engaging with power in child protection as it moves us on from just focusing on how power is exercised from structure to agency, to exploring how this power can be produce further kinds of relationships and forms of power, good and bad, as people are enabled or constricted by this power. An example of this would be in the way that statutory authority can be experienced by a parent as repressive, but this goes on to serve as a form of leverage towards stopping using drugs, and redefining their agency in a way they find enabling and that is enabling for their child.

 There is more to be said about the way that agency and structure interconnect however; and here, first, the kind of multidimensional approach to the levels of social context across which power functions provided by Dominelli (2002) and Smith (2008a) is helpful. A feature of this analysis is that it provides a clear way of considering different levels at which people are positioned within structures, and how they experience power within these wider contextual forces. What I want to add to this kind of analysis, is to consider how these connections between agency and structure, between people and the social contexts around them, occur primarily through relationships between people. This relates to how Smith (2008a, 2010) draws on both the ‘levels and ‘modes’ of power in his framework of power in social work. I want to suggest a further development of these ideas can be drawn from Clegg’s (1989) analysis of ‘circuits’ of power.

 The approach to power that Clegg develops is essentially about connecting agency and structure across three circuits or levels (*ibid*, p. 214). The first ‘circuit of power’ Clegg considers is the level of agency and episodic power relations, those which happen to people on a day-to-day basis. The second and third types of circuit are ‘social integration’ and ‘system integration’ respectively, and these encompass the functioning of structures and organisations, and systems of ideas, values and norms. Clegg is influenced by Foucault’s approach to power as a circulating force found in social relations, structures and in the construction of knowledge and meaning, and he looks to develop a framework of power that theorises the connections between day-to-day episodic power relations and wider structures and social contexts.

What I particularly want to consider about Clegg’s framework is how he takes it to be in relationships, as part of the first circuit of power, where structural power relations and forms of knowledge and meaning are enacted. For Clegg, It is through relationships that these contextual forces are channelled to influence agency. One of the most distinctive things about this framework is the use of the idea of ‘passage points’ to characterise how this process happens. These are the conduits or channels between relationships and social exchanges, and the structural and forms of knowledge and meaning (*ibid*, p. 204-205). They are the significant moments or events where something happens to bring about the shaping of a person’s sense of self and understanding of their place in wider social contexts; or where the structures or forms of knowledge and meaning are enacted in a way that reinforces or refines them. Passage points do not have to be important events, they could equally be something relatively minor that still is a moment that bears an impact on a person or on the social contexts around them. An example of this could be a social worker turning up late to a visit with no apology, and how this may subtly yet significantly reinforce a parent’s view of ‘social workers’ as a wider construct or their feelings or marginalisation in professional systems (Smith, 2008a). Both of these things, ideas about ‘social workers’ and experiences of child protection are meanings comprised of many, many seemingly minor incidents like this. The overall point here thus is that passage points are fundamental times where something clicks, and that have an impact on a person and on the world around them.

**The Ethical and Normative Character of Power**

The third and final core dynamic of the framework of power I develop here is its ethical and normative character, that is to say what makes the exercise of power good or bad, and an enabling or repressive force. As discussed at the start of this chapter, how we understand and engage with power is intrinsically value-laden because it connects with the freedoms we have or lack, our selfhood and autonomy to define our lives, the types of relationships we have with others, and the social contexts we live in and the state of the world around us. What I want to consider now, is how these discussions about the forms power takes and its exercise in consensual and oppositional relations, and the interconnections of agency, relationships and structure, provides a basis for exploring the ethical and normative dimensions of power.

In analysing key concepts of power and different ways power can be understood earlier in this chapter, the intention was also to reflect how there are things that are seemingly fundamental to analysis of power, including analysis of its ethical and normative character. There is something intrinsically valuable in people genuinely coming together and the exercise of consensual forms of power on which these relationships and exchanges are based. This kind of approach to power, for example as particularly found in Arendt (1998) and Habermas (1984), reflects how there does seem to a fundamental good to be found in our seeking to understand one another, and to foster social relationships and bonds. Similarly, our being able to autonomously define who we are and act in accordance with our selfhood is to be essentially valued (Lindley, 1981). Critical theorists are right to argue that there is something dehumanising about oppositional, imposed power too, as it constrains people’s freedoms and agency, and splits and divides people: especially when these power dynamics become institutionalised and embedded in social contexts (Lukes, 2005). These things should be part of our conceptual understandings and engagement with power. As I have argued here though, there is more to concepts and meanings of power. People forging bonds of common understanding and purpose, or acting of their free will, is not good when it leads them to do bad things, and to be violent, marginalising or hurtful towards others. Equally, imposed and oppositional power can be a good thing when it creates the conditions for agency and genuine relationships to flourish, promotes common goods, protects people, especially people who are vulnerable and marginalised, and is exercised to challenge violence and discrimination.

One of the main criticisms I have made here of conceptual and theoretical approaches to power, is that an emphasis on saying particular things about power relations and the kinds of social worlds we live in has meant they are lacking in offering a fuller, rounded analysis of power. Here, debate about power appears to reach a sticking point (Hearn, 2012). Approaches to power as a constructive or cooperative force look to move away from a cycle of negative analysis of power, where the exercise of power to advance individual agency and collective goods is seen as skewed towards the interests of the privileged, and where everything comes back to dominating and oppressive power. This links to the kinds of criticisms I discussed earlier about Lukes’ ‘three-dimensional’ view and other critical approaches to power, where dominating power becomes all pervasive. Yet as critical theorists point out, value-neutral and constructive conceptions of power, which concentrate on how it is generally a positive feature of the social world, and people’s agency and relationships, overlooks the deeply embedded nature of dominating power to preserve systems of privilege.

This sticking point is connected to concepts of power where there are clear ethical and normative connotations, like dominating power and oppression, but also with alternative ideas like authority and legitimacy. As Hearn (*ibid*, p. 28) argues, these terms and ideas can be regarded as representing a ‘common sense view’, where,

If authority is defined by the presence of legitimacy, domination is defined by the lack of legitimacy. If authority at least has the potential to be regarded as morally right and justified, domination is precisely that power is unjustified. Furthermore, we normally use the term to imply that the condition of domination is somehow harmful to those who are subject to it – it is inherently wrong.

Hearn’s main point here is that many theoretical approaches to power end up reinforcing conceptual divisions in how we understand and engage with power, precisely because the terms themselves are value-laden. Yet these terms and ideas are embedded in how we think and talk about power, and furthermore, they are important and necessary in order to have a vocabulary to ethically and normatively conceptualise how power is exercised and its functions and effects. What we should to do therefore, is not to avoid value-laden terms and ideas, but to continually open up these concepts for analysis and to problematise them.

To do this, and to move beyond this kind of polarising dynamic between concepts of power as a constructive and repressive force, it again seems that what is needed is a multifaceted approach to power. What I want to suggest here is that a conceptual framework of power needs to recognise the significance of value-laden ideas of power, whilst offering multiple concepts with which to open up and problematise the ethical and normative character of power. A brief aside on Weber’s use of concepts of authority and dominance is instructive here. In sum, Weber did not conceive of authority or dominance in singular terms (Gordon, 2009; Hearn, 2012). His use of ideas of authority reflected ‘formally sanctioned’ authority that could be imposed in the interests of social order, but also he used this term to capture a subtler way that people consciously come to accept and comply with authority because they agree with social norms and the systems that uphold them (Weber, 1978). Weber uses the notion of ‘structures of dominancy’ to mean subjugation and repression, and at other times uses this to represent ideas that appear to be ‘formally sanctioned’ authority (*ibid*).

Issues of translation have been noted, but it has also been argued that Weber is defining authority and dominance in a different way than how we have tended to construct use concepts. It is argued that Weber sought to loosen the distinction between authority and dominance to show how the legitimacy of authority cannot simply be taken for granted, but has to be earned through analysis of specific structures and relations (Clegg, 1989; Flyvberg, 1998; Gordon, 2009). This then overlaps with concepts of dominance, which reflects embedded power differences and hierarchies, but not all of these are bad, again this has to be shown through analysis of specific networks of power and their effects.

This kind of approach to authority and dominance seems to illustrate how a more nuanced analysis of the ethical and normative character of power might be undertaken. We need concepts that reflect the significance of the ways that power is exercised and forms it takes. However, we also need to problematise and open up these concepts, and to recognise the potentially thin lines between authority and dominance, and how power relationships can be both constructive and repressive, or experienced differently by different people. As with Weber’s analysis of authority and dominance, we have to do the hard work of engaging with the particular social contexts of power, the way social structures and systems of ideas, values and norms function, the effects of these things on individual people and how they are able to act of their will and realise their selfhood. It is only through engaging with the particular dynamics of power in different contexts that this work can done. Returning to points made when analysing Smith’s approach of power in social work, a particularly helpful feature of a framework in doing this is to develop a wide-ranging vocabulary of ideas about power through which we can open up key concepts to engage with their value-laden nature. What I want to do is explore what this kind of terminology should be in a way that is specific to child protection practice, and to the exercise of power in relationships, and I will now do this in the next two chapters.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to analyse key concepts and theoretical ideas about power, and their development in social work theory to set out the foundations of the framework of power that I come to offer here. I have considered three different kinds of key concepts of power as and oppositional and hierarchical force, and consensual force, and an enabling and constitutive one. In considering how these concepts have been taken forwards in social work theory I have sought to critique the use of singular concepts and theories as limiting, and to argue towards conceptualising power as a multifaceted, dynamic and interactive phenomenon. This critique has been particularly applied to anti-oppressive practice and postmodern critical social work theory. Although I reject anti-oppressive practice as a framework of power for child protection, I also argue that Dominelli’s model provides a layered approach that to understanding the levels at which power across social contexts, and in exploring how people are situated within those contexts and networks of power. In moving forwards I have examined multi-aspect approaches in social work, in particular the approaches of Tew (2002), Houston (2010), and Smith (2008a). There is much to be said about how these approaches conceptualise power as a multiple and interconnected phenomenon, however in developing a framework of power for child protection practice a more structured approach that reflects the multifaceted, dynamic and interactive character of power relation. Smith’s (2008a, 2010) approach is considered to be especially informative in conceptualising power across three interconnected dimensions and multiple ‘meanings’, ‘levels’ and ‘modes’ of power. Smith does not look to provide a cohesive conceptualisation of power, but rather to provide a vocabulary and set of interconnecting paradigms through which the exercise of power relations can be unpacked and analysed in specific circumstances. These ideas about having a vocabulary for unpacking concepts and ideas about power appears to be especially helpful in moving towards a critical framework.

My intentions in developing a framework of power for child protection are more specific, but I have sought to do something similar insofar as looking to posit three core dynamics for understanding and engaging with power in child protection. Drawing from Haugaard’s (1997) work, I suggest that the first core dynamic consists in the forms that power takes across a spectrum of consensual and conflictual power relations. Second,

Although they offer wide-ranging approaches to power, I have also argued that these specific aspects of Haugaard’s and Clegg’s work can be applied well to understanding and engaging with power in child protection. Third, I sought to consider the ethical and normative character of power, and sought to unsettle the idea that the form power relations take as authority or domination defines whether power is exercised in constructive and enabling ways or repressive ways. This then provides the basis for a more nuanced understanding of the ethical and normative character of power relations, and these judgements must be earned through considered the specific functions and effects of the exercise of power. I argue that taken together, these three core dynamics provide a comprehensive package of ideas for understanding and engaging with power in child protection. I will explore how this approach can be applied when present the framework of power developed here in final chapter. What I want to do before this, and following points made here about the importance of the relational dimensions of power, is look at the exercise of power in child protection practice, and in particular how power is exercised and experienced in relationships between social workers, children and family members.

**Chapter Four:**

**Partnership, Authority and the Exercise of Power in Relationships**

**Introduction**

Having discussed varying aspects of how power can be understood and engaged with in child protection, I will now turn to the most fundamental aspects of power and child protection practice, the relationships where it is enacted and experienced. For all that the power which social workers exercise is founded upon their position within legal and organisational systems, and shaped by processes that structure decision-making and courses of action that are undertaken, it is through human relationships that power is brought into being and has tangible effects on people’s lives. It comes to life in what people say and do, and its influence on relationships between social workers and children and families, and also between family members themselves. Accordingly relationships sit at the heart of analysis of good practice in child protection, and any framework for understanding and engaging with power (Ruch et al., 2010).

 In this chapter I focus on the dual aspects of power in child protection as an activity that is concerned with partnership and authority: building on ideas discussed up to this point about the key themes and tensions of child protection and how we understand and engage with power. I begin with a further discussion of relationships and the challenges of partnership in child protection practice. Research findings on children and families’ experiences of child protection interventions are then reviewed to consider how many of these experiences are defined by powerlessness and exclusion. I explore what child protection interventions may feel like and mean for families, before moving on to the influence of power on the deep meanings and complexities of family life and family relationships in their own right. The analysis offered here then turns to the exercise of power and statutory authority in child protection practice, and how power can be exercised in constructive ways to protect children who experience harm and neglect. This analysis is linked to resistance and non-cooperation from children and family members. I examine how child protection involves both partnership and authority, and argue that the ways of exercising power, and power dynamics in child protection practice, sit across a spectrum of consensual and oppositional power. This reflects the concepts of power considered in the previous chapter. These ideas are developed by exploring ways that power can be exercised that draw on authority and partnership, or that sit between poles of consensus and conflict. Finally, I consider how communication shapes the exercise and experience of power in child protection, and to how social workers are able, or not, to relate to children and families in ways that can convey and mitigate power.

**Putting Relationships at the Heart of Child Protection**

Good practice in child protection is fundamentally about relationships. Decisions that are made are often based on an understanding of family life that is built on relationships, and on how social workers will or will not be able to work with families. What happens when power is exercised is then about how this is experienced by children and families through relationships. Further, even when significant statutory powers are exercised, in most occasions social workers will still continue to try work with families and have to try and maintain relationships. The exercise of power is therefore not just about trying to do the right things at the right times, it is about how those things are done, and how social workers are able to relate to children and families in changing and challenging circumstances. This is partly about social worker’s individual style and how they try to build relationships and communicate with people, but there are overarching principles about how we relate to one another in respectful, empathetic and mindful ways, and what people value in relationships, that establish the ethical and professional character of social work practice. These principles are often characterised through the principles of working in partnership.

There are varying ideas about partnership between social workers and the people they work with (Healy, 1998). Broadly, partnership is about developing cooperative relationships so that children, parents and other family members are significantly involved in all stages of the child protection process, and that their wishes and feelings are meaningfully reflected in assessments, decision-making and plans. This reflects principles of autonomy and recognition, so that people’s selfhood is respected, and their choices and agency are promoted. In this vein, partnership can be understood as a basic moral premise for child protection that children’s and family member’s voices should be at the heart of interventions that are about their lives (Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Pinkerton, 2008; Connolly and Morris, 2012).

This moral case for partnership aligns with compelling practical reasons to see it as a foundation of good practice. If children and family members feel their views have been heard and that there is a shared understanding of what the problems are and how they can be addressed, then they are much more likely to feel invested in working with professionals and to take ownership of plans and interventions (Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Turnell and Essex, 2006; Trotter, 2006). As Weakland and Jordan (1990, p. 53, cited in Turnell and Edwards, 1999, p. 20) clearly put it,

The only avenue toward lasting protection of children – except the extreme measure of permanently removing them from the home – depends on establishing a cooperative relationship between the parent(s) and case worker.

This point is a simple but powerful one. Unless concerns about a child’s safety and wellbeing are so serious that there is a need to remove a child from the family home and look for permanence in their lives elsewhere, child protection interventions are about promoting lasting safety and wellbeing within the family. Parents, other family members, and children themselves, are much more likely to work with professionals and to make changes to make things better at home, where they feel included, respected and that plans reflect what they want rather than being simply imposed upon them (Maiter et al., 2006; de Boer and Coady, 2007; OoCC, 2010; Buckley et al., 2011).

Partnership can also improve the quality of assessments, and relationships play an essential role in our thinking and decision-making as social workers. As discussed in chapter two, assessment and decision-making are not simple objective processes of gathering information and reasoning. The way information is gathered, what kinds of information are gathered, and how all this is interpreted, is about social workers’ relationships with children and families. Relationships can significantly influence the scope and depth of information social workers have, as children and families will often talk with social workers more openly about their lives where they feel there is a positive relationship and a level of trust (Holland, 2000). Indeed, it may be only when children feel safe enough in their relationships with professionals that they tell them about harm and abuse they have experienced (Allnock and Miller, 2005).

Relationships then inherently frame how social workers organise their thinking and how they assess circumstances. This reflects both how we are naturally inclined to certain dispositions in our thinking based upon how we perceive people, and that relationships can offer a deeper perspective or alternate views that can shape our thinking (Taylor and White, 2000; Pearce, 2007). Partnership can lead social workers to more nuanced and informed decision-making, as they know a situation better or are able to relate to a young person or family member in a way that offers different options or potential to understand and address problems. However, relationships can also lead to biases in our thinking (Munro, 2008). It may also be that if we are more positively disposed to a person and have a better relationship with them, then we may be inclined to trust what they say, even if there is limited evidence for a particular view, or visa versa in the case of poor relationships. I can remember working with a mother who was facing violent behaviour from her daughter, and for the first few months being less challenging than I should of her parenting because of her seemingly open, cooperative and heartfelt manner. It was only over time that the child’s stories about how her mother treated her came out. Negative relationships can also push social workers away from enquiring about things as they should – something that will be considered later in the chapter in respect of resistance and non-cooperation. The fundamental point here is that relationships in child protection, like all human relationships, inherently organise and set the tone for how we view things and form judgements (Pearce, 2007; Munro, 2008; Holland, 2010).

 Partnership and positive, helping relationships, are also the foundation of the practical and emotional support that social workers provide to children and families, and for therapeutic work to help them achieve change. This has long been a central idea underpinning social work, as notably set out in Bietstek’s (1957) ‘The Casework Relationship’, through to more recent relationship-based and relational approaches to social work (Trevithick, 2003; Ruch, 2005, 2007a, 2013; Howe, 2008; Ruch et al., 2010; Megele, 2014). Here, relationship principles are articulated as central to the ways social workers are able to understand people’s lives and help them to mobilise their capacities to manage and make changes, especially given how social work interventions are about people’s personal lives and private worlds. It is through relationships that social workers can understand what is going on in a family enough to be able to suggest or indeed state more clearly what needs to change, and crucially for children and family to have enough trust and openness for this to be considered helpful advice and not being told what to do, and for there to then be shared thinking about how these changes can be achieved.

 Finally, partnership is often considered to be about equalising power relationships in social work so interventions are not simply imposed and can be a genuinely collaborative process (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Thompson, 2012). In child protection, this picture is more complicated by the statutory authority social workers exercise, and ideas about partnership need to be reframed to take account of these power dynamics (Healy, 1998; Bell, 1999b; Corby and Petrie, 2003; Broadhurst and Holt, 2010). To explore this further, I want to now consider research findings which show that many children and families feel powerless and marginalised by social work involvement in their lives.

**Research into Children’s and Family Member’s Experiences of Non-participation and Powerlessness during Child Protection Interventions**

Partnership and relationships may sit at the heart of child protection practice, but research presents a problematic portrayal of many children’s and family member’s experiences. There is something of a mixed picture, with many studies outlining good practice and positive relationships with social workers, findings I will return to later in this chapter. However overall, it has consistently identified findings across many studies that children and family members often discuss experiencing child protection interventions as marginalising, oppositional and disempowering.

 In reviewing this research evidence here, it is pertinent to make a few points about the methodologies of the studies and how I have engaged with them. Following the approach set out in the introduction about how literature has been searched for and analysed, a narrative approach was adopted in considering these studies, although to make this process as robust as possible, I have sought to identity and analyse a wide-ranging body of research. I have focused on research into children’s and family member’s experiences of ‘child protection’ and ‘safeguarding’, and excluded studies where there was not a specific child protection dimension. I have tried to incorporate and draw substantively from all recent studies from the UK that do meet this criteria, drawing mainly from studies from the 1990s onwards, after the Children Act 1989 established the legal structures and systems of contemporary child protection. I have also drawn upon more recent studies from other countries where there is a similar emphasis on organised ‘child protection’ systems and processes, including the United States, Canada, Australia and Ireland.

It should also be noted that the majority of the studies considered here used qualitative methods, mainly direct research interviews; and many have drawn from a relatively small sample group. Therefore, most of the studies considered here are not generalisable, and the themes drawn out are shaped by the distinctive interpretations and messages that the children and families spoken to want to get across. This leaves the potential for bias, or at least a fair degree of subjectivity, in what is reported by children and families. That said, the research is still an important reflection of their experiences, and taken together as a body of research, this conveys a strong message about the lasting impressions and experiences people have of child protection.

One of the clearest messages in the research is that many children and family members feel that social workers do not meaningfully take their wishes, feelings and worries into account (Baistow and Hetherington, 1998; Brandon et al., 1999; Dale, 2004; Tregeagle and Mason, 2008; OoCC, 2010; Bailey, 2011; Broadhurst et al., 2011; Buckley et al., 2011; Davies, 2011; Ghaffar et al. 2012; BCC, 2014). Social workers were often seen as not listening, having preconceived views about things, and being judgemental. This meant they were perceived as adopting a narrow focus on ‘official’ concerns and not appreciating the broader picture of family life or what mattered to children or family members (Freeman and Hunt, 1998; Baistow and Hetherington, 1998; Dale, 2004; de Boar and Coady, 2007; Harris, 2012). This is experienced as disempowering, and power is a common theme raised by children and families, who feel that what they say does not matter and will not effect how decisions are made (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Brandon et al., 1999; Dumbrill, 2006; Palmer et al., 2006; Maiter et al., 2006; OoCC, 2010, 2011; Davies, 2011; BCC, 2014). As one young person in an older study stated: ‘They talk about what they want to talk about. They don’t ask if we want to talk about anything else. They didn’t ask that. They just got on with what they wanted to talk about and that was it’ (Farmer and Owen, 1995, p. 195).

Parents have spoken about how they felt powerless to challenge professionals or to really engage in dialogue with them for fear of being seen as confrontational or obstructive (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Dumbrill, 2006; Buckley et al., 2011). Some parents and family members talked about feeling like they had been treated as a ‘guilty’ party, culpable for harming their child, without themselves being heard (Freeman and Hunt, 1995; Spratt and Callan, 2004; OoCC, 2010; Buckley et al., 2011). Others also talked about feeling that social workers used power in a confrontational, coercive and controlling way through the ‘threat’ or ‘blackmail’ of the removal of children (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Dale, 2004; de Boer and Coady, 2007; Maiter et al., 2007; Bailey, 2011; Buckley et al., 2011; Harris, 2012).

These feelings of powerlessness, being judged and not being heard were exacerbated by the experiences a number of children and families described of not knowing what was going on during child protection interventions (OoCC, 2010; Bailey, 2011; Ghaffar et al., 2012; BCC, 2014). This left people feeling helpless, and part of an obscure system they did not understand, increasing the power differences between themselves and professionals. This contributed to some families feeling that involvement in their lives was arbitrary and inconsistent, and they could not get a clear answer on why decisions were being made, decisions which they had no choice but to adhere to (Dale, 2004; Buckley, 2011). This arbitrariness included being held up to standards that social workers themselves did not meet through their own inconsistent or disorganised behaviour (Harris, 2011). This was compounded in a number of people’s eyes by the way they felt they received little or no support, especially with the practical things that really mattered to them (Baistow and Hetherington, 1998; Whitfield and Harwood, 1999; Dale, 2004; Dominelli et al., 2005; Palmer et al., 2006; OoCC, 2010, 2011).

Children and family members have spoken particularly about finding meetings and other formal processes difficult. Research into Child Protection Conferences has regularly identified how families find them daunting, and feel that they are being held to account by professionals rather than meaningful participants (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Bell, 1996, 1999, 2007; Whitfield and Harwood, 1999; Dale, 2004; OoCC, 2010, 2011; Ghaffar et al., 2012; BCC, 2014). This feeling of marginalisation was again compounded by a lack of clarity about the conference process and what it involved, and by professionals not taking the time to discuss things or provide reports in advance (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Bell, 1999, 2007; Dale, 2004; Ghaffar et al., 2012; BCC, 2014). The experience is again one of a significant power difference, or of the acute manifestation of power dynamics. As a parent evocatively recounted in one study, they found the conference process as having to listen to, ‘A lot of difficult stuff about you, whilst everyone looked on, nodding their heads, agreeing with everything. I have never felt so alone. I had gone asking for help and here I was before a jury…’ (OoCC, 2010, p. 14).

These power dynamics are further heightened in other formal processes, especially those involving statutory legal powers. A study of the relatively recent introduction of the Public Law Outline, and Pre-proceedings meetings – where there is a formal review between the local authority and a family with both sides having legal representation, enacted as a step before going to Care Proceedings – these were found to be one-sided affairs where parents were told what was expected of them in prescriptive terms (Broadhurst and Holt, 2010; Broadhurst, Holt and Doherty, 2011). Although this is evidently an authoritative process, this research suggested that there was little emphasis on promoting children’s and family member’s participation. This was even more evident during Care Proceedings. By its nature, this is an oppositional process. Yet parents have spoken about how the strain of Care Proceedings was worsened by being given little information about what is happening or local authority plans, and getting no support to deal with the potentially profound implications and challenges of these proceedings (Freeman and Hunt, 1998; Brophy et al., 2005; Boxall and Smeeton, 2011). A major issue for parents was the lack of support when their child has been permanently removed from their care, and that they spend many years trying to deal with this loss (Alpert, 2005; Cossar and Neil, 2010; Boxall and Smeeton, 2011; Broadhurst and Mason, 2013).

Children and young people themselves also report significant ambivalence about their involvement with social workers. Many children and young people have described feeling that they were not able to adequately participate in decision-making about their lives (Munro, 2001; Mudaly and Goddard, 2006; McLeod, 2006, 2007, 2008; Leeson, 2007; Winter, 2009, 2011; Bell, 2011; OoCC, 2011). They often talked about how social workers and other professionals don’t properly take their views, and the things that are important to them, into account: especially when it comes to their family. Instead, they feel that professionals all too often presume to speak for them (Bell, 2002; Mudaly and Goddard, 2006; Winter, 2009; OoCC, 2011). Some children and young people believe that social workers exaggerate things, as Sadie said of her social worker, ‘Well, like when I say something, she’d try and twist it around so make it sound like stuff going on…. like make them look better and us look worse’ (OoCC, 2011, p. 56). ‘Looked After’ children and young people in particular have described feeling ignored and let down by social workers, who often change, with whom they have inconsistent contact, and who they experience as not following through with the things they say they will. Being let down by such key figures in their lives further marginalises them (Leeson, 2007; McLeod, 2008; Winter, 2009; Bell, 2011; OoCC, 2011).

**What does it Mean and Feel like to have a Social Worker Involved in Your Family’s Life?**

This research provides a strong critique of how children and family member’s experience child protection interventions in their lives and their relationships with social workers, and highlights the importance of understanding and engaging with power not only in the decisions that are made and what is done, but as a foundation of relationships. It demonstrates how many children and family members experience child protection interventions as judgemental and deficit-focused, and based on their compliance rather than meaningful partnership. I will now build on the discussion of these research findings to explore the dimensions of child protection interventions as a lived experience that have significant meanings and elicit powerful emotions for children and family members.

Child protection interventions can have severe and potentially life-changing consequences for families, and there is a powerful stigma associated with being a family in the child protection ‘system’ (OoCC, 2010; Davies, 2011). The abiding public images of child protection are the removal of children from their families, and scandals where professional failings are blamed for the death of a child (Pond, 2011; Butler and Drakeford, 2012; Warner, 2015). These two influential negative associations in many respects carry through to families’ experiences. Fears about the removal of a child loom over child protection practice, and create profound feelings of vulnerability and anxiety for parents, family members, and children themselves (Dale, 2004; Dominelli et al., 2005; Buckley et al., 2011; Davies, 2011). These feelings are evocatively captured by a parent in Buckley et al.’s study, who stated that (2011, p. 104): ‘I just have that about them… that they can come at any time, and they can do what they like to my family.’ There is a shame and stigma of having a social worker too, in particular in respect of the connotations of being investigated for child abuse and being a ‘bad’ parent (OoCC, 2010, p. 19). Families experiencing child protection interventions are, in a sense, cast as ‘other’, as different, unable to cope, and as having a question mark hanging over them about what is really going on at home (Davies, 2011). This is linked to social attitudes and negative media portrayal of families in the child protection system (Warner, 2015). These feelings are about powerlessness, marginalisation, and a lack of control over family life.

The feelings of shock, fear, and anger that can accompany child protection interventions are also related to what social workers do, and the kinds of conversations they need to have with families. Child protection interventions involve raising concerns about parenting, child abuse and neglect, and intimate family relationships. These are highly emotive and sensitive topics. They matter deeply to who we are, to the relationships that shape our lives, and to our social identities and roles. In a reflective piece, Davies (2011) presents her experience of a child protection enquiry following an injury to her son as a deeply unsettling one that remains with her. She describes the assessment process as: ‘inherently unpleasant… inquisitorial, invasive and challenging’ (p. 203), and leaving her ‘fragile, frightened and utterly powerless’ (p. 205).

The experiences and meanings of child protection interventions can be further brought out by considering where and how they happen. Home visits are, and have always been, at the heart of child protection work (Ferguson, 2009). It is during home visits that social workers see families in their natural environment, and are able to get a glimpse into family life; and it is the very nature of these visits and the interactions they are premised that can make child protection such an ‘intimate’ activity, about people’s personal spaces and personal lives (Ferguson, 2011). For families however, the home visit can represent an outsider being inside of, and scrutinising, their personal world. Homes are places laden with meanings, and which are central to a family’s sense of being and place (Marcus, 1995). They can be a haven: a place of security, shelter and separation from the outside world. In child protection interventions, families are required to open up these personal spaces, and to allow their home to be seen and possibly to be judged: with this being done by a professional who represents the state with the authority and associations this entails. This is especially intrusive when it involves social workers actively checking round the home, including typically private areas like bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchen cupboards.

My point here is that these acts of the doing of child protection, of having certain kinds of conversations, and where these conversations are had, are laden with power and meaning for families. The other places child protection work mainly happens can be equally power-laden too. Parents can be called into the social work office for discussion, with the formal environment actively reflecting the professionals status and authority social workers have, and the act of calling a parent into a meeting they may feel they have little option but to attend being authoritative. This is intensified during professional meetings, as family life and people’s individual stories and problems, are opened up to scrutiny and judgement (Bell, 2007; OoCC, 2010; Ghaffar et al., 2012). One parent in Ghaffar et al.’s study evocatively likened their experience of a Child Protection Conference to, ‘walking into a Lion’s den, like being thrown to the wolves’ (2012, p. 898). These processes of having personal and family matters laid out and disseminated by a group of professionals, some who may not even know you, others who may be part of your local community, is likely to be a source of stress and shame. What is more, children and family members are often acutely aware that all this information goes somewhere, and that there is a record or a file on them. In Dominelli et al.’s study, Donna neatly captures this discomfort: ‘I don’t even know who they [professionals] are. But they know all about me. It’s kind of freaky’ (2005, p. 1132). Other environments can be better or equally disenfranchising, with public spaces being uncomfortable venues for such personal discussions, and schools or other community buildings being important places away from home to talk, but they can also be an impingement on young people’s spaces and mark them as different (Lefevre, 2010).

The overarching point here is that power may be a complex phenomenon, but it doesn’t necessarily feel that way to children, parents and family members (Dumbrill, 2006; 2011). They may experience a gamut of emotions, both towards social workers and about themselves during child protection interventions: from shame, anxiety, fear, uncertainty and vulnerability to resentment, bewilderment, frustration, turmoil and anger, to detachment, apathy and passivity (Parkinson, 2010; M. Smith, 2010). Paradoxically, for social workers the uncommon and often highly charged situations of child protection become their everyday work. The challenge for practitioners is thus to be aware of and attuned to these emotions and meanings, and how many children and family members experience child protection interventions as disempowering and marginalising, and it is to recognise that the impact that child protection interventions have is a part of their work with families (Howe, 2006).

**The Experience of a Child Protection Intervention: The Malone Family**

I will now go on to examine these points in further detail by returning to the Malone family, who were introduced in chapter two. We left the Malones at the point of an Initial Child Protection Conference being convened and all five children being placed on Child Protection Plans because of concerns about physical harm. Depending on how local authority teams are organised this may act as a handover point from a Referral and Assessment Team to a longer-term locality Child and Family Team, and this is what has happened in this instance. This means another professional becoming involved with the family, which may be a further source of frustration, although it also offers the opportunity to develop new relationships.

 The experience of social work involvement is central to working with the Malone family, and it is helpful to consider what this may have felt like for the family thus far. The Malone’s, and especially the parents Peter and Sally-Anne, are likely to have experienced intervention as imposed unto them and coercive, with them having little say in the things that have happened. The first they have known about the concerns that have been raised was a social worker turning up at their home. Going back to the referral outlined in chapter two, all the information discussed about the family was negative and phrased in terms of concerns. In many respects, this to be expected given that the purpose of a referral is to raise concerns, but it is important to recognise how this will structure the first conversation between the social worker who goes out in the first instance and the family. How this conversation takes place will be significant, but also these discussions will be framed by the family’s past contact with social workers and other professionals.

In these circumstances, the conversation did not go well and Peter and Sally-Anne were generally unhappy with the visit and uncooperative. This could be for numerous reasons but it can be suggested that contributing factors may include: resentment at the intrusion into family life; fears about what social work involvement could mean, especially for members of the Traveller community and from stories they have heard from other members of their community; feeling judged and discriminated against; difficulties with other professionals; past experiences; the social worker’s approach or other personal difficulties; guilt, insecurity and self-reproach about the care the children do receive; or indeed because there is serious physical abuse occurring. These feelings will then have been acutely revisited when Michael, Anne-Marie and Kelly were taken from the school a police interview without Peter and Sally-Anne’s consent. This may well have been an act that seemed to confirm Peter and Sally-Anne’s fears, both about how they will be treated and the potential consequences of social work involvement.

 Drawing from the concepts of power in the previous chapter, this analysis of the experiences of child protection can be developed further. First, a model of levels of social context and meaning like that offered by Dominelli (2002) or Smith (2008a) can be drawn upon. Little is known about family relationships at this stage, but from has been said up to this point, it seems apparent that the Malones feel unwanted in their local community and ostracised from key community organisations in particular the children’s school. This may be reinforced by having moved often and past feelings of exclusion. They may have a strong sense of community with the other Traveller family’s they live with. This sits within a wider social and national context where Traveller culture and ways of life are socially, politically, culturally and economically devalued and undermined by systems geared towards stationary ways of life (Cemlyn, 2000; Garrett, 2004; Power, 2004; Quarmby, 2013). This also sits alongside open cultural prejudice and discrimination (Helleiner, 2000; Power, 2004). This might make it difficult for Peter and Sally-Anne to get steady work or benefits, meaning they struggle to get by, and this poverty and the marginalisation they experience being reflected in the physical environment of the site they live in – although it should be noted that during all visits, the two caravans have been clean and well presented inside.

 These levels of social context can then be understood alongside the involvement of professional systems with the family. It should be borne in mind the level of imposed and coercive power that Peter, Sally-Anne and children may experience through social work involvement in their lives, especially taking into account their feelings of marginalisation. Exploring this idea across a spectrum of consensual and oppositional power relations, taking into account the agency, structure and relationship dynamic, it can be suggested that they experience child protection interventions as imposed and authoritarian, where their positioning relative to that of professionals means they have very little say in what happens, and are denied their agency and voice. This may then reinforce wider feelings of disenfranchisement and the exclusion from ‘mainstream’ society. These relationships then take the form of key ‘passage points’, where at every turn, these feelings are reinforced, as with what has happened with the initial contact with the social worker turning up, the joint police interview, and the Child Protection Conference. Each of these would be a pertinent example of such ‘passage points’, and at present they have all been negative experiences. Balanced against this however, a social worker also has to retain a questioning approach to these repeated moves, and whether the most recent incident is part of a pattern of physical abuse, with the family trying to avoid professional scrutiny and challenge.

 As the new social worker coming into working with the family, there is the potential for a shift, over time, in these dynamics which would offer indications towards either of these types of hypothesis. This would involve continuing to be clear with the family about the concerns for the children’s safety and wellbeing, and explicit about the exercise of statutory authority under the auspices of the Child Protection Plans. This includes having frank conversations about what is non-negotiable about your work with the family, such as seeing and speaking to the children alone, and being able to do visits and talk to Peter and Sally-Anne without feeling threatened or intimidated (Trotter, 2006; Turnell and Essex, 2006; Ferguson, 2011). In beginning to work with the family, it is essential to focus on understanding what life is like for all of the children, and to develop relationships where they can feel able to share these experiences and know they will be heard.

But working with the family and trying to protect the children is also about showing that you want to work with them, and not simply an expectation they work with you. This is about looking to exercise consensual power in agreeing shared goals and plans, likely including no more social work involvement, and also collaborative power in trying to form an authentic connection by getting to know each of the family members as a person in their own right. Getting this kind of approach off to the right start will be crucial given the potential ‘passage points’ that have come before. This would be about, from the outset, being personable and authentic, talking about positives and other more mundane aspects of family life, and likely discussing what child protection intervention feels like and what your presence in the family’s life feels like to. It involves showing that you are willing to listen and look to understand individual family member’s experiences, and that you will be frank and upfront about inconsistencies. This may help to redefine the boundaries of relationships towards greater consensual power relations, and these these conversations or actions may themselves serve as ‘passage points’ towards redefining family member’s experiences of encounters with professional systems. The challenge is to do this whilst still addressing the concerns about physical chastisement and other issues raised like school attendance; but doing so in this way is likely to give a better indication of what may underlie the current resistance Peter and Anne-Marie seem to show to workers and whether they are genuinely invested in things being different.

**The Deep Meanings of Family Relationships and Family Life**

Before turning further to social worker’s practice more specifically, I want to consider the exercise of power within family relationships and the fundamental connections and deep meanings of those relationships. It is family relationships and dynamics that social workers have to try to understand in their interventions to get a sense of what life is like for a child and for family members, in order to assess concerns about safety and harm, and what needs to change.

Family life is complex, and family relationships are laden with emotional currents and experiences that define who we are and how we live our lives. Our sense of being and place in the world is closely connected to family; and for many people, family represents the unique ties and sustained bonds that give us a sense of permanence. Family is who we grow up with and come to spend our lives with, and it sits at the heart of our personal and interpersonal narratives, our life planning, and our hopes for the future (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Featherstone, 2004; McCarthy et al., 2012). Family also plays an important part of the structure and routines of everyday life: what people do, where they do it, and who they do it with (Smart, 2007). Lastly, there are social meanings to family. It reflects how people are members of distinctive social units, and family roles can play a huge part in shaping people’s identities, and their interpersonal and social roles (McCarthy et al., 2012).

In understanding the depth and meaning of family, it is also pertinent to consider the way that family is something of a fluid concept. Notions of what constitutes family can differ across cultural, international and generational milieus. In the UK for example, it is argued that there has been a continued shift from the post-war era concept of the normative, ‘nuclear family’ – consisting of a heterosexual married couple and their children – to more diverse family forms and practices (Featherstone, 2004; Cutas and Chan, 2012; McCarthy et al., 2012). This is interconnected to changing ideas about relationships and marriage, single parenthood, gender, same-sex relationships and how people live together. There is also a personal dimension to this, as we come to define our own, individual family lives and practices. Accordingly, family is not only a kind of social category, it is something that we actively ‘do’ in constructing our own meanings and identities in relation to what family means to us and our individual experiences of family (McCarthy et al., 2012).

Understanding the importance of family involves recognising how the nature and meanings of family relationships are shaped by the challenges, insecurities and conflicts that arise with such close relationships. In almost all families there are arguments, resentments, entrenched scripts, and contrasting beliefs and worldviews (Byng-Hall, 1996). Indeed, some family relationships can fragment, fester, or never really get off the ground. In child protection, social workers deal particularly with situations where there are significant problems in family life. Family can be a source of security, stability and comfort, but family can also be a place where relationships are dangerous, ambivalent or absent, and the family home, instead of being a private and safe space, can be a place characterised by fear, anger, instability and anxiety (Ferguson, 2009).

Child protection interventions get to the heart of these notions of family, potentially covering things from daily routines through to the deepest aspects of our identities and life histories. Interventions will bring many aspects of family to the fore, and they can also be a perceived or indeed real threat to family ways of life and autonomy. As just described, power is central to children and family member’s experiences of child protection, but it should also be at the fore of our minds that social workers intervene in family life because the misuse, abuse or absence of power in family relationships. Also though, even painful or ambivalent family relationships often still hold a great deal of significance for people, and there can also be moments of love, tenderness and care in even the most destructive of circumstances (Stevenson, 2008; Featherstone et al., 2014). People often do not, for instance, simply remain in violent or abusive relationships because of fear, though this will be a significant feature of such relationships, they may do so because of love, shared histories, continued good times, a belief a person will change and so on (Kearney, 2001; Hester et al., 2007). If we are going to really help people in those circumstances, we have to understand these things too.

The complexity and depth of ‘family’ means that there is often a lot going on underneath the surface which family members themselves may not be able to recognise. Social workers should not be expected to be able to apprehend all the inner workings of family life, however whilst fulfilling their professional responsibilities to understand family relationships and dynamics, and to assess concerns about harm to a child, they should adopt a stance of curiosity and compassion for what those relationships mean. This includes doing so even when those relationships are far from ideal (Turnell and Essex, 2006; Taylor and White, 2006; Hestor, 2007; Stevenson, 2008).

**Power and Family Life: Negotiating the Complexities**

The better we seek to understand and engage with power, the better our ability to explore these meanings and complexities of family life and family relationships will be. The ideas discussed earlier about consensual and oppositional power, and how power is a multifaceted and interactive concept that is a feature of all social acts and relationships, are helpful in exploring power in family life. On the one hand, power is a fundamental and often positive feature of family relationships. It is found in the shared, supportive and interdependent nature of those relationships, and in the nurture, guidance and support that family members offer each other. Family life is a shared, collaborative endeavour and consensual power is central to what it is to be a member of a family unit whose members enhance one another’s selfhood, autonomy and capacities (Davis, 1991; Layder, 2009). Power is also exercised in authoritative and constructive ways in family life, as family members influence and challenge one another. This is perhaps most evident in parent and child relationships, where parents need to be able to effectively assert their authority as the carers and guardians of their children (Minuchin, 1974). On the other hand, power can be a damaging and negative feature of family relationships, especially where there is control or dominance being exerted by some family members over others. It is also important to note that the misuse and misappropriation of power in family relationships can include the disavowal of responsibilities, and disregard for properly exercising power and taking on roles to care for or protect family members.

Taking this idea of consensual and oppositional power as being a significant feature of family life, these dynamics can be seen as involving a range of forms of power, as family relationships are negotiated and there is a continued interplay of collaboration, challenge, control and change in relationships. Layder provides a helpful analysis of these themes in respect of power and intimacy (Layder, 2009). He argues that power is often a subtle and prevalent force that ranges across all manner of social exchanges and relations, and that all intimate relationships are fundamentally shaped by what he calls ‘benign’ control. These kinds of power relations occur when people get others to do things or act in certain ways, generally through quite subtle strategies or manoeuvrings, yet which still amount to a means of presiding over how they act of their will. This can be found for example in how couples will subtly look to convey to each other their views about what they really do or don’t want to do, incorporating tactics of which they are often not explicitly aware like obduracy, persuasion or mild manipulation. Layder suggests that benign control can equally be found though in a parent scolding a child for running near a busy road, convincing an older person to lock their house securely at night, or getting someone to go on a date with you (*ibid*, p. 52). What makes these interactions benign is that they are generally positive, or at worst relatively harmless. Such relations can be characterised by their, ‘ ‘to and fro’, ‘give and take nature’ (*ibid*, p. 56). They are about how we negotiate our lives together, develop shared goals and ways of being, and negotiate differing identities, interests and viewpoints. Layder contrasts this to ‘malign’ control, where such strategies have limiting effects, and are detrimental and harmful to our wellbeing and selfhood.

The purpose of introducing these points is to consider the range of ways that power can shape family life across these kinds of relationship dynamics. A point that follows on from this is how all family relationships are reciprocal and dynamic: they are two-way relationships that are always changing and evolving. One salient point here n is how, although child protection focuses on children’s vulnerability, children and young people can also exercise power themselves, and can do so in risky or harmful ways towards other family members (Tew and Nixon, 2010). This can be a significant feature of child protection work, where a child may act in abusive or harmful ways towards other children, or towards their parents. In my current role, I work with a number of families where older children are at risk of coming into care, often because their parents cannot manage their behaviour and this places the child themselves and other family members in danger. These situations reflect a child’s own vulnerabilities and lack of control, but also ways that they look to exercise dominating power to assert their independence and get what they, superficially at least, want. Here, the hierarchical structure of the family and parent and child relations is often inverted or flattened (Minuchin, 1974).

A final key feature of power in family life is how family relationships sit in wider socio-cultural and political contexts. Like all social relationships, family roles and dynamics are shaped by norms and differences of status and power. Whilst recognising the individuality of family life, the significance should also be recognised of gender, ethnicity, age, class, religion, sexuality, disability, class, and things like employment, education and other markers of socio-economic status (McGoldrick and Hardy, 2008; Cutas and Chan, 2012). These identity markers often play a significant function in shaping family roles and practices. Gender is perhaps the clearest illustration of this, with expectations, norms and positions within families still often strongly influenced by gendered expectations regarding male and female roles and responsibilities (Featherstone, 2004; Layder, 2009). Family can thus become a site where wider societal inequalities are reinforced, or where they are redefined.

Child protection interventions are about understanding a child’s world and making sure that they are safe and their needs are sufficiently met. The point I have sought to make here is that to really understand this, social workers need to develop as full a view as they can of the family system, and what needs to change within that system for things to get better. It also means decision-making about whether this kind of change is realistic, and if not what are the alternatives and if significant, and imposed, changes to the family system are required, including potentially taking a child into care. This means not solely focusing on an individual child’s or parents behaviour, but seeing that behaviour as part of a broader whole: as part of an interconnected network where there are likely to be deep and enduring meanings, and embedded scripts about how family members perceive and respond to one another (Dallos and Vetere, 2009). Power comes into this picture as a part of understanding family systems and relationships, but more than this is about understanding how social workers do not play a neutral role when they become involved in those systems. Rather, social workers themselves enter at least in some ways into the family system, and what they do is at least partially organised by and adapts to family scripts and dynamics; and what social workers do can act as an external drive and stressor on families to bring about difference (Pearce, 2007; Dallos and Vetere, 2009).

**The Sanderson Family: Family Meanings, Power, and Domestic Violence and Abuse**

I want to illustrate some of these points about the deep meanings and complexity of family life, and the exercise of power in family relationships with reference to the case example of the Sanderson family introduced in chapter three. As the wider contextual ways that power could influence family life were discussed then, here I will focus on immediate family relationships. The Sanderson family reflect points made here about the more diverse and fluid nature of modern concepts of family life, with there being two interconnecting family units and complex relationship dynamics. The children have two different fathers, Jason and Steven, and Jordan and Kyle are of dual heritage. In this case, they seem to experience direct racism and prejudice from within their own family from their maternal grandfather, and possibly from Steve as well. This not only reflects different dynamics within a family, but also tensions that are likely to occur in intergenerational relations and when there are new people coming into family units.

This could reinforce Jordan and Kyle’s potential feelings of marginalisation and dominating power, and feelings of ambivalence about their positions in their family. They may see themselves as being ‘in between’ two families and not completely fitting in either, especially given how they split their time with their parents and the conflict between Jason, and Amy and Steve. Not only this, but Steve is a man who they know has previously hurt their mum, and this will create strong feelings of confusion about their family relationships and identity, and about acceptable behaviour. This will be exacerbated given the arguments and physical conflict that both Amy and Jason have said has happened previously in their relationship, and especially if there was domestic violence and abuse. Jordan and Kyle may also feel afraid that Steve may hurt them, with physical harm representing a particularly harmful aspect of a range of oppressive and disempowering power relations towards them from Steve, making home a place where they feel unsafe and unwanted. If this is what is happening, the boys are likely to also have confusion about their family given that Steve is the father of their sister and a supposed father figure. As a social worker beginning to work with the family, these multitude of feelings that Jordan and Kyle have may be evident when speaking to them, and how in this instance they both come across as guarded and not wanting to talk about their family, especially life at home with mum and Steve.

Ambivalence and uncertainty may also be significant features of Amy’s feelings and experiences of family life. Power is prominent theme in the literature on domestic abuse, which explores abusive relationships that are founded on the coercive exercise of power: from physical violence and intimidation, through to a range of strategies of control and manipulation (Johnson, 2001; Houghton, 2006; Hestor, 2007; Humphreys and Absler, 2011; Featherstone and Fraser, 2012). Amy has experienced dominating and coercive power, and may continue to do so from Steve, and this may be the case even if there has not been any physical violence since his release from prison.

However, there may also be a duality in Amy’s position, as she both experiences dominating and coercive power, whilst actively engaging with this relationship because of what she wants for herself and her family. Amy may see herself as actively authoring her own role as a partner and mother, choosing to continue a relationship with the man she loves and is the father of her child, and who she believes has changed or at least who she believes can and will change. This would account for why she remains in a relationship with Steve despite the potential for her children to experience harm. Amy may well not see her remaining with Steve as a ‘failure to protect’ the children or to prioritise their needs, and rather she may see Steve as someone who is good for the children, provides for them, and she does not want Ellie to grow up without her father – a fear that is shaped by her own parent’s relationship and separation. These ambiguities are reinforced by the way that Amy appears to be a caring and loving parent, and how she comes across in social work visits and contact with other professionals as available and emotionally warm towards each of the children.

The other key roles in these family power relationships are those of Steve and Jason. It appears that Steve has a powerful position within the family, and coupled with how he exercises power towards professionals in hostile and confrontational ways makes it difficult to develop a more nuanced understanding of his experiences of family and power. What is known is that from Steve’s previous relationship there is a pattern of domestic violence and abuse, indicating that this may be a feature of how Steve views relationships and his prerogatives in those relationships; or at least that Steve does not appear able to exercise control over his own actions. The other thing that comes to light during social work involvement is that Steve was a Looked After Child in local authority care for much of his childhood. This could offer some further reasons as to why he struggles to manage relationships and family life in positive ways or to control his anger. It also indicates why he may struggle with social worker involvement in his life as an adult if this was not a positive experience for him as a child. What can also be said however is that should a cycle of non-engagement continue with Steve seeing social work interventional as confrontational, the current pattern of relationships with professionals and in the family is unlikely to change.

Jason’s role is also a crucial one. He is now in a new relationship where things have settled for him, and there are no reports or concerns raised about violent or abusive behaviour in this relationship. Jason is open about his violent behaviour towards Amy, but argues that this was mutual violence in fights between them, which he puts down to their young ages and drinking when they were together. Jason is now in a more contested position where he exercises power and control towards Amy as part of their disputes about the children, and this sits within a context of past violence between them. Yet Jason also finds himself experiencing feelings of powerlessness and frustration that Amy has resumed her relationship with Steve, and the dangers he considers this poses towards all of the children, and especially Jordan and Kyle. These feelings of powerlessness and frustration also have the potential to reinforce existing patterns of relationships in the family.

**Statutory Authority and Authoritative Practice in Child Protection**

For social workers practising in child protection settings however, the centrality of partnership, and of exploring children’s and family member’s experiences of child protection and of family life, has to sit alongside their principal responsibility to protect children and the statutory authority this necessitates. As discussed in chapter two, there is an essential authority to child protection systems. This creates clear power inequalities in relationships between social workers, children and families, especially given the significant powers can be brought to bear and how many families are involuntary ‘clients’ who don’t want social workers involved in their lives (Trotter, 2006; Calder, 2008a; Ferguson, 2011). Authority in child protection and these involuntary dynamics has more recently been the subject of increased attention in social work theory (Ferguson, 2005, 2009, 2011; Turnell and Essex, 2005; Trotter, 2006; Calder, 2008a; Pearson, 2009; Fauth et al., 2010; Okitikpi, 2011a; Welbourne, 2012; Laird, 2013; Tuck, 2013). Here I will pick out some key themes of this work, but also to suggest that there can be problematic dimensions to how work on authority in child protection can be taken forwards if it is detached from consideration of partnership.

What comes to the fore in the literature on authority and ‘authoritative child protection’ is how this is founded upon clarity about social worker’s statutory role and responsibilities (Calder, 2008a; Ferguson, 2011; Welbourne, 2012; Laird, 2013; Tuck, 2013). As Ferguson (2011, p. 173) states, ‘A child protection practitioner who is unprepared (in every sense) to use authority should not be doing the work.’ Authoritative practice is about keeping the child clearly in focus, and making sure that their safety and needs are at the fore at all times (Ferguson, 2011; Tuck, 2013). In particular, this is about a practice culture where social workers will challenge parents and family members as and when they have to do so, and will not be deterred in their enquiries or in the actions needed to address concerns about children’s safety and wellbeing. This is linked to the need for robust plans, so that it is clear what changes have to be made, by whom and when, and what will happen if things do not change (Laird, 2013).

Work on authoritative practice is in part drawn from analysis in Public Inquiries and Serious Case Reviews of how a lack of authority and challenge has been a prominent feature of child deaths. This analysis has consistently shown the dangers of social workers being too focused on maintaining relationships with parents, and being unable or unwilling to challenge robustly challenge and monitor concerns about children’s safety (Reder et al., 1993; Reder and Duncan, 1999; Brandon et al. 2008; Brandon et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2011; Laird, 2013). The recent second Serious Case Review into the death of Peter Connolly is particularly strong on this point, with twenty-one explicit references the lack of or need for ‘authority’ and ‘authoritative practice’ in professional dealings with Peter’s mother Tracey and her partner (HLSCB, 2009). It summarises authoritative practice in this way:

The authoritative intervention is urgent, thorough, challenging, with a low threshold of concern, keeping the focus on the child, and with high expectations of parenting and of what services should expect of themselves. (*ibid*, para. 4.3)

Throughout the review, missed opportunities to understand more about Peter’s life or to properly understand whether his mother was willing or able to make changes are identified, often connected to an apparent an unwillingness to challenge her or ask intrusive questions, or lack of proper scepticism towards the accounts she gave of injuries to Peter. This highlights the worrisome nature of relationships where social workers continually back down or fail to resolutely follow up on concerns about a child, and how this can become a worrisome trend of placatory or non-confrontational practice (Barter, 2008; Okitikpi, 2011b; Ferguson, 2011).

The literature on authority and inquiries and Serious Case Reviews has rightly placed the onus on a judicious or healthy scepticism and doggedness in child protection practice; in particular when social workers are dealing with resistance, hostility and non-cooperation. Before continuing with these points however, and following on from themes explored already in this chapter, I want to consider a tension in this literature and how social workers engage with children and families. This once leads back to the tensions and value conflicts of child protection. Both authority and partnership are central to the child protection role: and just as I have taken issue with adopting concepts and approaches to power that are pejorative and do not fully theorise the necessary and constructive functions of authority, I would also be cautious about moving too far towards concepts of ‘authoritative practice’ that see this as sitting in contrast to working with families. An emphasis on being authoritative can mean that social workers come to focus almost exclusively on challenging parents and problem-saturated narratives of family life (Fauth et al., 2010). This closes off opportunities to work together and develop relationships with children and families, and can impact on social worker’s ability to engage with families in working towards keeping children safe and meeting their needs.

This is particularly pertinent with respect of critique that has been offered of solution-focused and strengths-based approaches to child protection, where it has been argued that these can contribute to a lack of proper challenge and poor decision-making (HLSCB, 2009; Tuck, 2013). The use of these kinds of approaches should be tempered with a resolute focus on children’s safety and wellbeing, but these approaches are not antithetical to the proper exercise of power and authority. Indeed, as I will now go on to argue, it is in bringing together concepts of partnership and authority, to explore the contrasts and connections between these principles, that good practice in child protection can best be advanced.

**Resistance and Non-cooperation: the Challenges for Practice**

To develop this analysis of the contrasts and connections between authority and partnership, it is instructive to consider the ‘involuntary’ nature of many child protection interventions and how the need for social work authority increases where there is resistance and non-cooperation from families. The first thing to say about resistance and non-cooperation is that they are actions and behaviour that are a means of exercising power (Smith, 2008a). They are ways of exercising conflictual or coercive power in their own right, and the purpose behind these acts is to shift the power dynamics of relationships to challenge or undermine social worker’s authority, or so that people can assert their independence and autonomy from child protection interventions (Stanley and Goddard, 2002; Fauth et al., 2010).

The most forceful type of resistance social workers will encounter is violence and aggressive behaviour. Although direct physical attacks on practitioners are not a common occurrence, the reality is that they do happen; and this, combined with more regular experiences of intimidation, threats and verbal aggression, makes the risk of violence a potentially pervasive feature of work with some children and families (Stanley and Goddard, 2002; Littlechild, 2003, 2005). Overt resistance can also be found in consistent belligerence towards practitioners. In these circumstances, although family members do not act in a directly threatening manner, they continually seek to disrupt things through challenging everything, a direct refusal to engage, looking to dominate discussions, complaints, and discrimination or belittling of social workers (Smith, 2008a).

I have been lucky enough to never experience any actual violence in my time as a social worker, but I have had threats and intimidation, verbal aggression and abuse, and dealt with people who will at every turn try to take control of situations. These are all quite personally unpleasant, and they can have a strong impact on how you feel as a social worker, and how you are able to be authoritative and challenging (Ferguson, 2005, 2009, 2011). It can create an environment of uncertainty and fear in which you do not feel safe. This also makes visits to families a constant, exhausting sort of skirmish, and often undermines any kind of productive conversation you may try to have. It is important that social workers are able to get emotional support to manage their feelings, and to be aware of how these behaviours can impact on their ability to do their work with families and lead them to respond differently than they otherwise might (Littlechild, 2005). It is in dealing with aggression and a high level of hostility that the kind of challenging practice highlighted in the literature on authority is most needed, as such behaviours can prevent professionals from assessing children’s safety and wellbeing, and mean that any plans made to address concerns are likely to fail (Littlechild, 2003; Fauth et al., 2010). Overt resistance should be understood as a potentially serious risk factor, and it is a key feature of many Serious Case Reviews when a child has died or been seriously injured (Reder et al., 1993; Reder and Duncan, 1999; Brandon et al., 2008, 2009). Social workers should also treat their own feelings as something of a barometer, with a sensitivity to a child’s day-to-day experiences of life at home, and to the idea that ‘if this is what it’s like for me, what is it like for the child living here’ (Welbourne, 2012).

 Resistance and non-cooperation can also be indirect. Hostility can be channelled through unpredictable behaviour or persistent minor antagonisms that make it clear to the social worker that they are not welcome in a family’s home, and again make it difficult for any kind of constructive dialogue (Ferguson, 2011; Laird, 2013). Ferguson uses the notion of ‘pathological communication’ to capture such interactions, where parents or other family members project an unsettling level of antipathy at social workers through rudeness, challenge and disruption, but this also often remains at a level often just below something that can be clearly named at the time (Ferguson, 2011, pp. 168-170). This has a similar impact to more overt resistance in trying to unsettle social workers, and get them to ‘back off’ or to stay within safe areas and topics of discussion.

Another major theme here is ‘disguised compliance’ (Reder et al., 1993). This occurs when children and family members work with professionals in a superficial manner but a pattern of inconsistency emerges and little changes, or where people pretend that they are working with professionals when actually they do not. Although disguised compliance is not as obvious as other forms of resistance, it is a significant concern as it serves to mask what may be really going on in family life, and can lead professionals to be overly attentive to positive signs of change when there is in fact little if any progress (Brandon et al., 2008; Fauth et al., 2010). This is a particular worry where such apparent compliance leads social workers to not challenge families or take action as they otherwise might, when in fact a child continues to be at risk of or experiencing harm. This is another prominent feature of Serious Case reviews where a child has died or been seriously harmed (Reder et al., 1993; Reder and Duncan, 1999; Brandon et al., 2008, 2009; HLSCB, 2009).

 Social worker should keep the dangers of resistance and non-cooperation at the fore of their minds when dealing with these challenges, yet these responses to child protection intervention should also be understood in a layered way that is attentive to the emotional impacts and meanings of social work involvement in family life. As Turnell and Edwards (1999, p. 40) note: ‘In our experience it is amazing how frequently workers underestimate the amount of stress their intervention creates and also misjudge a service recipient’s sense of powerlessness to be a lack of motivation’. A degree of resistance and challenge are things that social workers should expect to encounter given how family will naturally feel defensive, confused, worried, angry or upset during child protection interventions (Smith, 2008a; Ferguson, 2011). Confrontation and challenge towards social workers can appear, from a parental perspective, as part of their right to autonomy in family life, and to challenge aspects of child protection processes they disagree with. People may also be resistant towards social workers as a direct response to what they perceive as authoritarian and judgemental practices, or because they have had negative past experiences of child protection (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Farmer and Owen, 1995; Calder, 2008b). In these situations, a predominantly authoritative response create more harm than good, especially when a more nuanced approach may be more constructive. The challenge for social workers in managing resistance and non-cooperation lies therefore not only in dealing with what parents, family members and children do or do not do, but understanding the reasons why these responses occur, and what needs to happen for power to be exercised in more constructive ways (Smith, 2008a; Fauth et al., 2010).

**The Power to Protect Children: Advancing Multifaceted Conceptions of Authority and Partnership in Child Protection Practice**

My main concern in this analysis of the exercise of power in child protection up to this point has been to advance an approach that sees both partnership and authority as essential features of good practice. The extent to which authority is called upon and the possibilities for cooperative relationships and partnership will vary in different circumstances, considering the unique dynamics and relationships in a child’s life. The thrust of this argument has been partnership and authority represent the two sides of a spectrum of ways of exercising power in child protection. This can be seen to map across to the concepts of power as a spectrum of consensual and oppositional relationships considered in the previous chapter. There are fuller partnership relationships where there is mainly consensual power between social workers, children and families, and on the other side, imposed and coercive authority and resistance from family members, reflecting hierarchical and oppositional power. In this section, I want to consider the exercise of power towards either side of this spectrum, before going on in the following section to explore the range of negotiated relations that sit in between.

Turning first to authority, the exercise of authority in child protection is necessary precisely because circumstances require social workers to exercise hierarchical and oppositional power to override family member’s wishes or to impose particular restrictions or courses of action because of the level of concern about a child’s safety and wellbeing. This kind of power is particularly likely to be required when family members are resistant towards professionals, and so concerns about children’s safety and welfare cannot be properly understood or addressed (Fauth et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Tuck, 2013). This kind of statutory authority encompasses a range of interventions and courses of action, but its defining feature is that such authority is founded on legal and organisational powers drawn from social worker’s position in child protection systems (Preston-Shoot, 2010). This kind of authority will also be connected to social worker’s professional status, expertise and accountability. These processes will happen even where family members refuse to participate, there is generally a formal process that is followed, and there is a clear degree of leverage and expectations of compliance on families, with potentially significant consequences in terms of the legal powers that will then be sought if they refuse to do so.

This kind of exercise of statutory authority will particularly include:

* Requirements for families to engage with assessments.
* Formal written agreements outlining expectations on families or particular family members.
* Section 47 enquiries into suspected abuse and harm to a child.
* Children who are deemed to be at risk of significant harm being placed on Child Protection Plans, which families are expected to adhere to.
* Pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline, where social workers set out what a family must do to, and a timeframe where if this does not happen care proceeding will be started.
* Joint investigations with the police into suspected criminal offences, often particularly connected to child abuse and neglect.
* Care Proceedings where legal orders may be sought either in emergency circumstances or as a planned course of action to place children in local authority care, or to determine where children can safely live with family members.
* Adoption, and the legal severance of birth parent and child relationships.

This is not an exhaustive list, but what it reflects is how this exercise of statutory authority can involve increasing degrees of hierarchical and coercive power. In these circumstances, and especially where court sanctioned legal powers are called upon, it can be a misnomer to suggest that relationships are founded on partnership. Indeed, the language of partnership and participation is likely to feel highly disingenuous to children and families when potentially life-changing decisions they oppose are being made (Maynard and Beckett, 2012; Smeeton, 2012). There are also many significant ways that statutory authority has an indirect or tacit impact on children and family members, or where social workers can draw this authority in informal and relational ways to still exercise hierarchical and coercive power and to get children and family members to do things they would not otherwise do.

Even in these kinds of situations however, there is still a fundamental level of respect and empathy that should form the basis of relationships, and social workers should look to minimise the degree of hierarchical and coercive power in relationships. Further, there are still opportunities for some forms of cooperation and shared power in all relationships, even though these are relatively minor (Turnell and Edwards, 1999). For example, even when a child has been removed from their family, where possible their parents should be included in many decisions about their lives, and be involved in agreeing things like where contact sessions happen and meeting times and venues. Within a context of imposed, conflictual power, these things can take on a lot of significance, and they can help maintain some form of communication and relationship.

Although at the highest levels of authority opportunities for partnership will be limited, in other circumstances there will be greater opportunities for consensus seeking and shared plans. There may be a high level of concern about a child’s safety and welfare, and potential resistance or antipathy from some family members, but if there is enough buy in from key family members, then it may be possible to work more cooperatively. One of the key themes of the approach to power I advocate here is that the exercise of power is often shaped by the changing, interactive and potentially capricious way that people relate to one another; and there may simultaneously be statutory authority and ways of mobilising consensual power relations. It is a social worker’s job to make the most of these opportunities where it is possible to do so, and to try and develop them into more significant forms of cooperation towards children’s safety. This is also to recognise that authority can be a form of ‘leverage’ to encourage family members engage with professionals towards longer-term cooperative work to make children safer and meet their needs (Turnell and Essex, 2006).

This kind of approach is a central feature of the ‘Signs of Safety’ model to child protection (Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Turnell et al., 2008; Turnell, 2011; Bunn, 2013), and other approaches to working with families where there is resistance or ambivalence towards social work involvement (Trotter, 2006; Calder, 2008c; Yatchmenoff, 2008; Ferguson, 2011). This requires the exercise of ‘good’ authority (Ferguson, 2004, 2008, 2011) to resolutely place children’s safety and welfare at the heart of child protection, but it is also about respect, openness and empathy. In the ‘Signs of Safety’ approach in particular, this kind of practice involves reframing interventions, where possible, to be about the shared goals of children’s safety (Turnell and Edward, 1999). This keeps the risks of harm firmly in mind, but also moves away from a focus on deficits and what people are not doing to develop a shared language and emphasis on safety, which in turn makes it easier for children and families to be included in decision-making and planning. This then means these plans are more likely to be something a family can get behind towards children’s longer-term safety at home (Bell, 1999; Ghaffar et al., 2012).

 These ideas include recognising the dangers of resistance and non-cooperation, but as just discussed are also about recognising how these responses to child protection intervention can have varied forms and meanings. A clear and boundaried approach to effectively manage resistance and non-cooperation is needed, as social workers cannot afford to be disempowered in their dealings with children and families (Stanley and Goddard, 2002; Welbourne, 2012). In considering the diverse functions and meanings of resistance, though, consensus-seeking within a context of statutory authority can reframe interventions to mobilise multiple forms of power. This can include actively placing an emphasis on authority and resistance, and discussing why family members are resistant and uncooperative towards social workers as a basis for shared understanding and ways of working together or looking to work around resistance by focusing on what can be agreed and cooperative goals about children’s safety (Turnell and Essex, 2006; Ferguson, 2011).

Finally, at the other end of the spectrum and dealing with circumstances where there is the potential for cooperation and collaboration with children and families without statutory authority being exercised, it is still helpful to be attentive to the multifaceted nature of power relations in child protection. These kinds of situations will especially arise when children and families are voluntarily working with social workers and other professionals. These are likely to be circumstances where the social work role is primarily supportive and therapeutic, rather than investigative or focused on immediate protection. However, just as there is always space for cooperation and shared power even when there is significant formal authority in play, these kinds of partnership relations in child protection circumstances will still be influenced by statutory authority. As Sheppard (2006, p. 106) argues,

 The problem, however, is that these supportive functions do not exist in a vacuum, insulated from more authority-based- coercive powers. Indeed, even where social workers are carrying out their tasks to support the family, with every intention of maintaining the child with their family, their authority role remains. The potential for (external constraint) coercive action can hang like a sword of Damocles over the conduct of their practice.

The professional status social workers have, and their position within legal and organisational child protection systems, remains a significant reminder to families of how social workers can exercise statutory authority. This includes the capacity to escalate their interventions into family life if this is considered to be necessary. Families are likely to be highly aware of this, and though not formally exercised, statutory authority will therefore continue to have informal and indirect influences on relationships (Spicker, 1991; Wilks, 2010; Beckett and Maynard, 2012).

I was recently reminded of this when talking to a father who seemed to be doing everything possible to help his son who has Down’s Syndrome where my role was primarily supportive at a voluntary ‘Child in Need’ level. He pulled me aside after a meeting to ask about the danger he might be prosecuted, and the children removed, if his son hurt his brother. This was not something even close to consideration at this stage in my work with the family.

**Negotiated and Informal Power Relations**

If statutory authority and partnership can be seen as the two sides of a spectrum, there is then a range of ways that power can be exercised and forms that power relations can take where both partnership and authority feature, or in the least where there is scope for consensus seeking and the negotiation of power relations. It is here that a range of different strategies and approaches to power in child protection come to the fore.

 The first point here, following on from the analysis of statutory power and partnership just provided, is that much of the power that social workers exercise, and the ways that power dynamics play out in relationships between social workers and families, is informal and indirect (Hill, 2010; Wilks, 2011; Beckett and Maynard, 2012). This kind of power occurs not through regulated decision-making within statutory legal or organisational processes, but in what is said and done in relationships and how power as authority and partnership is exercised in relational ways.

This analysis can be developed to consider how social workers can exercise this kind of informal power in a range of ways that lead to negotiated power relations. This will particularly include a range of strategies, such as persuasion, negotiation, encouragement, the giving of advice and direction, motivational techniques, and the use of inducements, to get children and family members to do or not do certain things (Stephenson, 1989; Beckett and Maynard, 2012). These strategies are fundamentally about power, and occur in power-laden contexts, and often draw upon the leverage of statutory authority. This can be explicit ways, but is often also in tacit communication and what is left unsaid (Wilks, 2011). This can be an important part of effective work to protect children and help children and families make changes. Indeed, it can be these kinds of approaches that social workers are able to exercise power in gentler and subtler ways to make it clear that there are concerns and the changes that are needed to keep children safe, but which also does so through understanding and avoids more hierarchical and coercive forms of statutory authority further down the line.

There are issues with this kind of informal and indirect power that also need to be recognised however, in particular in relation to how it is experienced by children and families. Concerns about informal and indirect power are most prominently highlighted in the literature on coercion in mental health practice (Fennel, 1996; Curtis and Diamond, 1997; O’Brien and Golding, 2003; Davidson and Campbell, 2007; Campbell and Davison, 2009). It is argued that mental health practice regularly involves informal power, including inducements and leverage about treatment options and medication, the reporting of non-compliance, and explicit forewarnings or ‘threats’ of the use of statutory power. Concerns about this kind of power centre on how people with mental health problems often experience indirect coercion in a way that exacerbates feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness in the mental health system (Fennel, 1996; O’Brien and Golding, 2003; Davidson and Campbell, 2007). This is exacerbated by the lack of regulation and accountability surrounding this type of power, or analysis and reflection amongst professionals about the skills it requires, and the ethical challenges it throws up (O’Brien and Golding, 2003; Davidson and Campbell, 2007).

There are clear parallels to child protection here. As Stevenson (1989) has argued, although a vital tool in child protection, this kind of relational and informal power is exercised outside of formal legal, organisational or professional processes. This means there is little protection for families or recourse to challenge when relational and informal power is used in excessive or indiscriminate ways. This is a particular concern when the threat of child protection measures or Care Proceedings is used to continually secure compliance, or to compel, coax and coerce children and families (Dale, 2004; Bailey, 2011; Buckley et al., 2011; Harris, 2012).

This links to a further point about how the distinction between voluntary and involuntary engagement within child protection interventions can be blurred (Hill, 2010). Spicker (1990, p. 225) makes this point well:

Normally, within the context of preventative work with families, the social worker acts by persuasion, negotiation and nominal agreement: but parents who are under supervision know that if they do not co-operate with the social worker, the social worker may be able to initiate procedures which will lead to control. It is absurd to pretend that parents have much choice.

Even where social workers think that they are looking to work with children and family members, they have to be mindful that the experience of these relationships from the other side may be very different. This can be a particular consideration where informal power is being exercised, or where the potential for statutory powers to be exercised means there may be a strong degree of hierarchical power in relationships. It is worth reflecting also that just because it may not feel that way to us as professionals, this may not mean it does not feel that way for a child or family member.

In considering the positive potential of informal and negotiated power relations however, it is helpful to again consider Layder’s (2009, p. 52) reference to strategies of ‘benign control’, and what distinguishes such ways of exercising power from ‘malign control’. What Layder draws attention to is both how this power is exercised and its effects. In order to be ‘benign’ these approaches fundamentally have to enable, or in the least do no harm; and they have to be employed with care and respect, and a degree of ‘to and fro’ or ‘give and take’, and a willingness to compromise, negotiate, and listen. In child protection, this is about how shared goals and ways of working together and understanding one another can be found within a context of unequal power dynamics between professionals and families. ‘Benign’ control does not limit our selfhood, it helps to foster it through creating opportunities and new ways of thinking and acting. It should also be recognised that children and family members will draw upon their own strategies of power in how they engage with social workers, and engage with, ignore, negotiate, persuade and so forth. What is crucial, therefore, in understanding these forms of informal and negotiated power is that they are just that, a negotiation of power dynamics and influence, and not simply another means of coercion.

**Communicating Power: What Social Workers Say and Do**

To conclude this analysis of power and relationships in child protection practice, I want to turn to social worker’s communication skills. As the research studies considered earlier showed, unfortunately children and family member’s often feel that social worker’s communication can leave a lot to be desired, with many experiencing social workers as deficit focused, detached and not really listening to them or engaging with them as people (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Dale, 2004; de Boer and Coady, 2007; Maiter et al., 2007; Bailey, 2011; Buckley et al., 2011; Harris, 2012). Similar concerns have been highlighted in an experimental study conducted by Forrester et al. (2008). In this research, actors played the role of a parent in a simulated social work interview. Forrester et al. (2008) found that a number of the social workers observed lacked basic communication skills, such as asking open questions or using reflective statements to show listening and understanding of what has been said. Whilst almost all of the social workers observed were clear in raising concerns about harm and parenting, most did so in a manner that was mainly negative and antagonistic, showing few evident signs of empathy or compassion. This was then more likely to engender resistance in the actors playing the roles as parents.

The picture is not entirely a negative one however, and there were also positive things raised across the research studies considered earlier. This can help us to consider what social workers do right as well as what they can do wrong. A consistent factor in positive outcomes for children and families across the research studies was the quality of the relationships that people had with their social workers (Maiter et al., 2006; de Boer and Coady, 2007). This was the case even in circumstances where power was clearly being exercised, with families where children were on Child Protection Plans or where there had been Care Proceedings describing how relationships play a significant role in mitigating the stress of these processes (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Freeman and Hunt, 1998; Dale, 2004; de Boer and Coady, 2007; Yatchmenoff, 2008; Buckley et al., 2008, 2011; OoCC, 2010; Ghaffar et al., 2012; BCC, 2014). This reinforces the key message in this chapter: that despite the degree to which child protection practice is closely regulated, what social workers do and how they do it in managing relationships with children and families really does matter.

This research consistently demonstrates the importance of openness and honesty, empathy, listening, social worker’s being ‘human’ and down to earth, and competent. Children and parents spoke about the value they placed in social workers who would be upfront and candid with them, and that this could provide the foundations of trust on which relationships could be built (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Freeman and Hunt, 1998; Dale, 2004; Maiter et al., 2006; de Boer and Coady, 2007; OoCC, 2010; Buckley et al., 2011; Ghaffar et al., 2012). This is linked to transparency about what is happening in the child protection processes, and how important it is that social workers are clear about their role, explain what is happening, and are consistent in what they say. One parent in de Boer and Coady’s (2007, p. 36) study was clear about the impact that this had on their relationship, ’She [worker] clarified things by telling me the guidelines and stuff I had to do. She was really honest and that is why everything worked out. If she hadn’t been honest with me… [I would have thought] “I am not going to cooperate with you”.

 Being upfront and frank can be problematic, especially where this is perceived as demeaning or as a threat. As a report by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (2010, p. 42) notes, ‘straight talk’ by social workers can be experienced as a ‘telling off’ and as disempowering and disrespectful. It is for this reason that communication also needs to be grounded in empathy, and an attempt to start to understand what it feels like to be in another person’s shoes. Empathy, respect and recognition are central to building trust and positive relationships (Lefevre, 2008; Turney, 2012; Ruch, 2014). This includes social workers showing that they are listening to children and families, and talking through feelings and worries: and showing an interest in them as individual people and taking the time to get to know them rather than as objects in a process (Brandon et al., 1999; Dale, 2004; Maiter et al., 2007; de Boer and Coady, 2007; Ghaffar et al., 2012). This is linked to relating to people in a human way. Children and families almost always spoke about the importance of a personable approach, and social workers being ‘real’ and relating to them in a genuine and ‘down to earth’ way (Dale, 2004, p. 149). The considered use of ‘small talk’, and the appropriate use of humour and self-disclosure were also themes that were noted as helping to build relationships (Trotter, 2006; de Boer and Coady, 2007, p. 38).

Social workers communication is not simply about what they say or how they say it, it is also about what they do and the meanings this conveys. Basic courtesies are important, and demonstrate the respect or lack thereof with which children and families feel they are treated (Maiter et al., 2006; Buckley et al., 2011). Not returning calls, being late, rushing through visits or meetings, and practical and supportive tasks not being completed in a timely way, are all things that have been raised by families as important markers of how they feel treated by social workers and the messages this gives them (Freeman and Hunt, 1998; Dale, 2004; OoCC, 2010, 2011). As Dumbrill (2006) argues, the power differences in child protection mean that seemingly small things are often of considerable importance for children and parents who find themselves caught up in child protection processes. Even relatively small gestures, acts and words or forms of support can be really significant for families. What is particularly appreciated is social workers who show their competence through their knowledgeability and clear communication, providing information in a timely way, and doing the things they say they are going to do, or at least being clear and upfront with families when this will not be possible (Buckley et al., 2011; Harris, 2012).

 Many of these points relate back to the relational and interactive exercise of power, and how this is both significant in its own right, and in shaping relationships in contexts where statutory authority is exercised. Rather than considering further theoretical perspectives on communication, I want to finish here by illustrating these points with a case example used by Turnell et al. (2008) to begin a chapter on the Signs of Safety approach and its use in working with people are may be resistant or confrontational. This briefly outlines an exchange between a social worker, Miriam, and the father of an eight-year-old girl who had attended school with bruises on her arms. The girl had told her teachers that her father had caused the bruises. This is how the initial exchange is described (*ibid*, p. 104):

After introducing herself to the father, who lived on the 17th floor of a

housing estate block of flats, the man began to yell at Miriam, finishing

off by screaming at her that she should ‘f\*\*\* off!’ Miriam paused for a

moment and replied ‘okay I f\*\*\* off, but we have to talk, so when can

I f\*\*\* back?’ The man was momentarily taken aback but then laughed.

‘Ah well,’ he said, ‘you’d better come in luv’

As Turnell et al. note (*ibid*), this exchange represents what may be a social worker’s ‘worst fears’ during a visit: an encounter in a potentially unsafe environment with a hostile and potentially aggressive person. They point out that this exchange could easily have led to a strongly authoritative response, where the man’s lack of cooperation could have necessitated the removal of the girl to ensure that she was safe whilst harm and risk could be assessed. This would likely have made him even more antagonistic, and led to him being, ‘framed as resistant and possibly ‘untreatable’ ’ (*ibid*).

It is worth noting that in some situations where people are hostile, there is nothing a social worker can do, and nor should they place themselves in a situation where they feel in danger. That said, I think Miriam’s described handling of this situation illustrates some interesting things about managing power relations and communicating about power. First, she was simultaneously able to step away from and affirm her professional authority. In swearing and offering a retort to the man, Miriam was able to present herself in a human and down to earth way. Miriam reaffirmed this when, after being invited inside and sitting down with the man, she asked him about how he had lost half of his ear: starting a conversation with an unusual and quite frank question to begin to build a rapport. There is also something rather comical, or at least cheeky, about Miriam’s initial response to the man, a humour that cuts through a tense situation, and demonstrates that she has a personable nature and in turn would likely treat the man as an ordinary person, rather with a detached and seemingly colder style of professionalism.

In these responses what Miriam was also doing, however, was laying out clear markers about her authority and role. She was demonstrating that she would have to return and deal with the concerns, and that she would not simply go away because of the man’s hostility. In a sense here, Miriam was establishing a boundary of what was non-negotiable, insofar as there would be a professional response and the concerns about harm would be addressed. What is more, she was presenting herself as something of a ‘no nonsense’ figure, and as someone who would not be easily intimidated, something she did again by asking this potentially quite intimidating looking man about what happened to the other half of his ear. This also started to lay the groundwork for asking personal questions.

Although it cannot say what went on to happen in this example, and it may well be that things went dramatically wrong from this point, as an opening gambit in a difficult situation it vividly illustrates sides of the spectrum of skills in respect of power I have been discussing here. On the one hand, Miriam is clear about her authority and resolute in following up on the concerns that have been raised. She communicates both her authority and resolution in a subtle yet effective manner that exercises power but does not place her and the man in overt conflict. Miriam also shows how useful it is to show people that you will try to work with them, not just through what is said but by your demeanour. Her approach illustrates how we can look to work in open, respectful and ultimately consensual ways even within a context where the need for authority is clear and there is a potentially significant level of child protection concerns.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has drawn on relevant research and theoretical positions to identify and evaluate the use of power in child protection practice. This closer focus on key themes of partnership and authority further highlights the complex nature of power dynamics between social workers and children, young people, parents and other family members. I have sought here to set out the core skills that social workers require to exercise power effectively in their relationships with children and families, and to explore how partnership still involves attention being given to the authoritative nature of child protection interventions, whilst the best use of the authority is still about working with families as much as possible in specific situations (Turnell and Edwards, 1999; de Boar and Coady, 2007; Ferguson, 2011).

 I will go on to develop the concept of protective power in the final chapter, where it is a central feature of the framework of power I advance. The key points here are that social workers need to engage with protective power in a contextualised and analytic way that it attentive to authority and partnership, conflictual and consensual power, as circumstances dictate. At this stage, I want to emphasise that what is particularly important about how social workers engage with power is that they do so in a critical way that recognises the tensions and dualities of child protection. Also, social workers should not simply see power in terms of what they do and the systems they work in, as crucial as these things are, but as about how power shapes family life, and is exercised by children, young people, parents and family members. This includes in their relationships with social workers, and in critically engaging with power, it is important to recognise the interactive nature of relationships and power dynamics between social workers, children and families.

**Chapter Five:**

**A Critical Framework of Power for Child Protection Practice**

**Introduction**

Across this study, I have explored how power sits at the heart of child protection. I have developed this analysis through showing how power has always been central to child protection; and how tensions and value conflicts reflected in the ethos of social work practice to protect children and work with families at different times, and the organisation of child protection systems and processes, are fundamentally about power. These tensions and value conflicts, and the ways that they play out shapes how child protection interventions happen day-by-day and how they are experienced by children and family members. This is about social work decision-making and how it is that social workers, and other professionals, exercise formal legal, organisational and professional authority in interventions and judgements about what courses of action are required; and do so in ways that assess what is necessary and proportionate given the level of concern they have for a child’s safety and wellbeing. It is also about how social workers and other professionals relate to children and family members, and how power is exercised through working together and consensus-seeking, and through the effects of statutory authority and ways this is applied in relationships.

In this analysis, these ideas about the exercise of power in child protection have been connected to how conceptually and theoretically engage with power. This then provides the basis for the framework of power I have developed, which I now present. This framework is presented here as an overarching conceptual and theoretical approach to power in child protection. That is not to say that it comprehensively covers everything, but rather that it is a framework that reflects the core dimensions of power and how it can be understood and engaged with. First, power is presented as a multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon, but in terms of child protection in particular, I focus on how can be seen as taking a range of forms across a spectrum: with the consensual exercise of power, cooperation and partnership at one end, the oppositional exercise of power, the exercise of authority and imposed power, and resistance, at the other. Between these points, power can be exercised in many different ways where there are consensual and oppositional power dynamics in play. Second, the ethical and normative character of power is considered, and concepts and ideas about power are put forwards to provide a structure to explore the ethical and unethical, legitimate and unjust exercises of power, and how power is a feature of good and bad practice in child protection. Third, this connects to the relationship between agency and structure, and to a focus on these relational dimensions of power as the key points where it is exercised in child protection, and where structural roles and positions are enacted and shape people’s lives and their beliefs and actions, but also where what people do matters to these structures and social contexts. This is also about how we are all located within levels of social context, and how social workers understand the positions of the children and family members they work with, and their own roles within child protection systems and their teams.

 To present this framework of power, I first outline its foundations and the key ideas and themes considered across the study up to this point. The framework itself is then presented, and I discuss the rationale for portraying power in this way and the main features of the framework as it is intended to be used. The remainder of the chapter then explores how the framework can be applied in child protection practice, returning to the case examples of the Malone and Sanderson families, and considering the two distinctive functions of the framework. First, I consider how it can be used as a tool in case formulation and case management. This involves mapping power relations at different points during child protection interventions, and exploring the options, possibilities and challenges of working with families over time as part of a cycle of analysis, action and evaluation. Second, it is a framework for critical analysis and reflection on power. This is about the wider way this framework helps us to understand and engage with power in child protection, offering a set of concepts to explore the exercise of power and the power dynamics that occur between social workers, children and family members, and within families. This is also about how we reflect upon and reflexively encounter power in practice, learn about ourselves as practitioners and our strengths and the challenges we experience, and how we question power as part of engaging with the tensions and value conflicts of child protection practice, and difficult decisions we are often called upon to make.

**The Foundations of a Framework: A Pragmatic Approach to the Tensions and Value Conflicts of Child Protection**

To present the framework of power in child protection, I will first set out its foundation. In doing so, I will also recap key themes presented across this study and show the stages of my thinking through which this framework has been constructed. To begin with I will consider how this framework looks to provide a pragmatic approach to child protection.

The first feature of this framework of power is that it reflects how power is central to the tensions and value conflicts of child protection. In chapter one I sought to bring out these tensions and value conflicts through analysis of the history of child protection. I argued that child protection is an activity that is fundamentally about protecting children, supporting families, and respecting parent’s and children’s rights to family life; and it is a form of social regulation and state intervention into people’s lives, but is also fundamentally about human liberties and enabling people (Fox-Harding, 1997; Smith, 2005). The tensions and value conflicts arise because of how these aspects of child protection and the principles that underlie them can contrast one another, and the paramountcy of safeguarding children and meeting their needs can be far from straightforward. Interventions to safeguard children often represent an imposition unto private family life and can be experienced as constraining people’s liberties, with courses of action taken to protect going against the wishes of their parents or other family members, or indeed the wishes of children themselves. In chapter one, I examined these themes primarily in relation to the overall functioning and ethos of child protection and family welfare systems, but this was also with a view to showing how they shape the ways that social workers go about their work with children and families.

 The second feature of this framework, following the arguments developed in chapter two, is that it is founded on a pragmatic approach to child protection, and to how we can engage with these tensions and the conflicts, and the complexities they raise. As I use the notion, there are two connected ways that ideas about pragmatism are used in adopting it as a foundational paradigm for child protection. The first is in the use of multiple concepts and theoretical frameworks, and not getting caught up in seemingly intransigent theoretical or ideological debates. And also, because the world can be a complex and unpredictable place, it often belies the application of singular, neat theoretical models or categories. This then relates to the second feature of pragmatism, which is that what is most significant about pragmatism is about starting with practice, and looking to develop theories and knowledge from a perspective of what is most helpful to practice (Evans and Hardy, 2010).

 I have drawn upon this approach of drawing from multiple concepts and theoretical frameworks here in thinking about the sociological and epistemological foundations of child protection: the nature and functions of child protection systems in their social contexts, and how we construct knowledge about child protection, and in interventions into children’s and family’s lives. Here, I have argued towards pragmatism through considering ideas about modernity and postmodernity and how they can be applied to child protection – although this analysis draws in other similar ideas about how we analyse social systems and contexts, and construct knowledge. In respect of ideas modernity, this is explore how child protection systems and practices can be continually improved, and knowledge can be developed about how child protection happens and how it can be done better. During child protection interventions, notions connected to modernity come to the fore wanting to establish the truth about what is happening in a child’s life, and in rational systems and processes to facilitate just and proportionate decision-making about the right course of action through established principles and thresholds for intervention. Ideas about postmodernity, in contrast, lead towards an analysis of the construction of knowledge about child protection systems and practices as contextual, and about the positions through which we understand and engage with the tensions and value conflicts of child protection. In child protection practice, this is about recognising the positions that social workers and other professionals adopt when engage with children and families, and how this shapes the way they work and how they construct knowledge about a child’s and their family’s life, including things like assessment and decision-making about safety and harm. This kind of approach involves recognises the subjective and human nature of these decision-making processes, and how they are grounded in the relationships that social workers have with children and family members. This kind of approach is also not about looking for certainties or the ‘right’ course of action, and instead recognising the fundamental uncertainties and value conflicts of assessment and decision-making.

I have argued that there are strengths and flaws for both of these positions. Accordingly, pragmatism is about moving past a theoretical standoff to draw from both sets of ideas and to recognise how assessment, decision-making and intervention requires social workers to seek the best understanding they can of a child’s life and the level of concern about their safety and wellbeing, but also that they should explore the positions from which these judgements are made and how they can involve multiple interpretations of events and voices. This includes recognising how there can multiple explanations and potential courses of actions in different circumstances, each with different merits and pitfalls. Accordingly, whilst ideas about good practice are of fundamental value in understanding social work involvement in people’s lives and develop key principles around which interventions can be undertaken, we also often encounter circumstances that cannot neatly be resolved through the application of those principles. I have argued that seeing critical thinking in child protection as founded on reasoning and reflexivity can be helpful in building on this kind of pragmatic approach: with rigorous and structured analysis and supported by a questioning approach that draws out tensions and value conflicts, different perspectives and our own positions when constructing knowledge.

These points can now be directly applied to a framework of power. The idea here is to develop a framework that reflects key principles about good practice in child protection in respect of power, and which can be used to identify good, bad or indifferent practice. It is also a framework that is premised on the idea that proportionate, judicious and just decisions can be made and that there are more or less constructive ways of exercising power in relationships. This is to offer a structure for reasoning and thinking through interventions in children’s and family member’s lives, and that is attentive to how social workers have to make decision, often quite quickly about what to do in different circumstances. There is also something equally important, however, about opening up power to continued questioning and recognising the challenges and complexity of the decisions that social worker do make. Social workers often have to make finely balanced judgements where there are no clear answers, only different possibilities and courses of action that have positives and drawbacks. This includes accepting that often the tensions and value conflicts of child protection mean that there are no neat resolutions about best practice, and that there can be multiple perspectives on the exercise and experience of power. The pragmatism of this framework is to be found, therefore, in the way it fosters reason and reflexivity about power, and does so through starting with practice and what is going on in particular situations.

**The Foundations of a Framework: Three Core Dynamics for Critically Engaging with Power**

In considering the foundations of the framework of power I present here, the second set of key themes concern how we conceptually and theoretically engage with power, drawing on the analysis provided in chapter three. In developing this analysis, I argued that it is best not to offer a singular definition or conceptualisation of power. In furtherance of the points just made about how I have adopt a pragmatic approach to knowledge, what I have sought to do is work from an understanding that there a many different ways of conceptually and theoretically engaging with power, and that what I want to do is provide an approach that explores ideas about power from a perspective of what helps to conceptualise power in child protection practice. Following analysis of key concepts of power and theoretical approaches in social work, I identified three core dynamics for understanding and engaging with power in child protection practice: consensual and oppositional power; agency, structure and relationships; and the constructive and repressive functions and effects of power.

The first core dynamic on which this framework is based, is the forms that power takes and the ways that it is exercised in relationships, drawing on well-established key concepts of power as an oppositional and hierarchical force, and as a consensual, cooperative one. These concepts are advanced here through Haugaard’s (1997) representation of power as a scalar phenomenon of conflict and consensus. This characterises power dynamics as having potentially multiple dimensions, where people look to impose their will unto others and there are conflicts of interest and oppositional power dynamics, but they will also look to establish forms of consensus and cooperate with one another: with the specific character of power relations varying in different circumstances. This approach is especially helpful in reflecting how power is a multifaceted, dynamic and interactive phenomenon. Power is multifaceted insofar as there are potentially multiple different forms of power being simultaneously exercised in social relationships and exchanges, and these dynamics can be both overt, and subtle and indirect. Alongside this, to say that power is dynamic and interactive is to explore how power relationships frequently change, for example as people change their own views and responses to the world around them, because something happens in a relationship to change those dynamics, or because of wider systemic changes. What is more, the interactive part of these shifts comes with how we inevitably alter our responses to others based on how they are with us; and this happens not least because of how people get into oppositional dynamics and seek to impose power, and how they seek consensus and shared understanding.

The second core dynamic of the framework I propose here is the relationship between agency and structure. This particularly draws out how child protection interventions are key times in people’s lives with potentially huge consequences that can have significant impacts on people’s identity and selfhood, their hopes and aspirations, and how they see themselves and their place in the world around them. This is also about exploring how children and family members are situated within family systems, that interconnect with wider community and social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Understanding the dynamics between agency and structure is therefore essential to understanding and engaging with power in child protection, for power is evident across these relationships and connections. What happens in particular circumstances during child protection interventions will then reinforce or reshape these wider structural contexts, both in respect of what social workers do and how child protection systems function, and children’s and family’s own lives in their social contexts.

There has been significant work already done on this aspect of power in social work theory, and in particular I have presented Dominelli’s (2002) model for anti-oppressive practice and Smith’s (2008a) multi-aspect framework in chapter three. The framework I offer here looks to complement this work with a focus on relationships as the key juncture and moments where agency and structure come together (Clegg, 1989; Smith, 2008a). It is in relationships between people that social roles or positions are enacted, and this then shapes people’s agency. Simultaneously, it is in what people do in relating to each other, and how these relationships become embedded patterns and structures that wider social contexts are created and change occurs in them. An important feature of the framework presented here therefore is that it is a relational approach to power. Drawing on Clegg’s (1989) concept of ‘passage points’, relationships are often points where power is exercised in ways that have notable effects on people, and influences their selfhood, shapes future relationships, and reinforces or changes their positioning in wider social contexts and adherence to systems of ideas, values and norms. Power may be a feature of all areas of child protection, but there are also specific actions and occasions that really bring it to the fore and which define how interventions happen and are experienced by children and family members, and that has these effects. It is these occasions that are really the focus of how we understand and engage with power in child protection practice.

 The final core dynamic I advance in conceptualising power is how we understand and engage with its ethical and normative character, and between the constructive and repressive functions and effects of power. Many concepts like domination, oppression, authority, collaboration are intrinsically value-laden and confer a sense of the legitimacy or lack thereof in the exercise of power. As discussed in the previous section, what I look to do in this framework is to advance concepts of power that reflect social work values and ideas about good practice and how power should and should not be exercised. This requires concepts that confer certain meanings, this framework is intended to delineate between the ethical and unethical, good and bad exercise of power. However, this is also a framework that is about critically engaging with and questioning power relations and the exercise of power, and so the intention is not to offer fixed categories but to explore how power is exercised and experienced in specific circumstances.

**The Foundations of a Framework: The Constructive Exercise of Power**

The final main foundation of a framework of power in child protection involves exploring how ideas about power can be taken forwards in practice through decision-making and relationships. A key feature of this argument is therefore that the exercise of power to protect children is multifaceted, and is about the ways that social workers are able to work in partnership with children and families and how they exercise authority. This dynamic can also be applied to assessment and decision-making about what courses of action are needed to keep children safe and meet their needs, and how far this requires statutory powers and interventions, and whether these aims can be achieved working with families on a more voluntary basis. This relationship between partnership and authority then involves a whole range of negotiated power relations. This includes times where formal authority is apparent but there is still a level of consensus and mediation, where authority is exercised in informal or indirect ways, or where strategies that involve both consensus seeking and challenge are employed, such as through negotiation, persuasion, and inducement. What emerges is therefore a spectrum of power relations, aligning with a conceptual spectrum of power as consensual and oppositional.

This argument can be developed here through a visual representation of how power can be exercised in constructive and protective ways as a Venn diagram, which reflects the multifaceted nature of this kind of power, and how it is exercised across a spectrum of consensual and oppositional power relations:

Authority

Negotiated / Informal Power

Partnership

**Consensual Power**

**Oppositional Power**

Figure 5: The constructive exercise of power

In some circumstances, particularly in early help settings where there are not significant concerns about a child’s safety and welfare, and where interventions are voluntarily, there is the potential for fuller partnership relationships. Here there are opportunities for power to be exercised in ways that are predominantly consensual and collaborative, and where there are shared aims and understanding. However, the continued significance of statutory authority and potential for power to be exercised in indirect ways in these setting should be recognised. Other circumstances will call for the significant exercise of statutory authority, and at these times, especially when the level of risk to a child requires legal powers and the removal of children from the family home, talk of partnership is likely to be disingenuous given the hierarchical power involved (Healy, 1999). Even in these circumstances, there is still a need to look at how authority can be exercised in respectful ways that are attentive to its disempowering effects. This is particularly about exploring opportunities for even small forms of cooperative and compromise through the exercise of consensual power (Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Turnell and Essex, 2006; Ferguson, 2011). Between these two poles, there are a range of are negotiated power dynamics can take on many different forms, where there are authoritative dynamics and where social workers look to get children and families to do or not do certain things, but where there are also ways of working together, establishing consensus, and looking to develop shared goals and plans.

Taking these ideas forwards, the outlines of a framework can begin to be drawn through considered the scaling up and scaling down of child protection interventions, and how circumstances call for different kinds of responses and ways of exercising power. The scaling up and down of child protection interventions is about the level of concern for a child’s safety and about harm, and about family wellbeing. I deliberately use these terms safety, harm and family wellbeing instead of risk in order to identify this framework of power with a systemic understanding of a child’s experiences. Although the assessment of risk is central to child protection, a focus on risk can narrow the focus of a child’s world away from a more comprehensive understanding of a their welfare and lived experiences, including the wellbeing of their family, and can lead to negatives being continually emphasised life (Smith, 2002; Smeeton, 2012).

The scaling up and down of child protection interventions can be visually represented as a pyramid and an inverted pyramid, as follows:

**Higher level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing**

Partnership

Authority

Negotiated / Informal Power

**Lower level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing**

Partnership

Authority

Negotiated / Informal Power

Figure 6: Scaling up and down of power relations

This captures the relatively simple idea that where there is a lower level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing, social workers and other professionals will have the time and space, and likely the buy in from children and family members, to be able to work more collaboratively. Alternatively, where there is a high level of concern, there is likely to be a need for more authoritative interventions, and courses of action that draw on statutory authority. This is especially likely if there is a strong degree of oppositional power being exercised through resistance or non-cooperation from family members, as this is a risk factor, and often requires the exercise of authority to ensure that social workers are able to properly assess and address concerns about a child’s safety and wellbeing.

The final foundational aspects of this framework of power is then to consider the vocabulary through which concepts and ideas about power are represented, and the ways that power can be a repressive, illegitimate and unsafe force as well how it can exercised in constructive, enabling and protective ways. In drawing on Haugaard’s (1997) conceptual approach to power as multifaceted relations of consensus and conflict, I will use a slightly different terminology here of consensual, and oppositional and hierarchical power. This is to reflect how the exercise of power in relations of conflict can involve both overt conflict of interests, but also subtler and more varied dynamics of opposition and challenge where the result is general a form of imposed power. Also, the notion of oppositional and hierarchical power is intended of itself to be evaluatively neutral, and draws in the legitimate exercise of authority, dominating and oppressive power, and resistance or challenge. I would also note that the notion of consensual power used here also reflects multiple forms of power relations. Consensual power can be exercised towards specific ends and as a good thing of in and of itself. This is essentially the two different strands of consensual power developed through analysis of Parsons’ and Arendt’s conceptual approaches to power discussed in chapter three.

It is finally worth saying a little more about how power can be repressive, illegitimate and unsafe force in child protection. This would seem to occur when power is exercised oppositional and hierarchical ways that are disproportionate and excessive, where it excludes children and family members from having a say about their own lives, where there is discrimination and prejudice, or where power is abused by professionals. There is another kind of power relation that is significant here too however, to characterise how consensual power can also be subverted or distorted. Earlier when analysing Tew’s (2002, 2006) conceptual matrix of power, I argued that his idea of collusive power as a limiting form of consensual power was an important contribution, but his definition of this idea served to essentially make this a subsidiary form of oppressive power relations. Taking this argument on, I want to suggest than this kind of collusive power forms part of a wider set of concepts: where what is most significant about this kind of power is that it is an ambivalent or deficient kind of power relation. Whereas consensual power is something that is actively exercised towards individual and social benefits, what I will term ‘insecure’ power relations occur when there is an abdication of responsibilities, a lack of care, active neglect, and where vulnerable people are failed. There is a wider category here, where power is exercised, or not, in ways that discount or are deleterious to selfhood and agency, without being actively exercised over others.

**A Critical Framework of Power for Child Protection Practice**

From these foundations, the critical framework of power I develop here can now be presented. To do so, I take the two pyramids presented in the previous section to represent the scaling up and down of child protection interventions, and overlay these with the interconnections of authority and partnership. This creates a further visual representation of the constructive, enabling and protective exercise of power across a horizontal axis of the level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing, and a vertical axis of consensual and oppositional / hierarchical power:

**Level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing**

Authority

Partnership

Negotiated / Informal Power

**Consensual Power**

**Oppositional / Hierarchical Power**

Figure 7: Scaling the constructive exercise of power

This reflects how, broadly, the nature of child protection interventions into family life should change with assessment of the level of concern about safety, harm, and family wellbeing, and this should in turn shape how we understand and engage with power to keep children safe and enable children and family members (Healy, 1998; Beckett and Maynard, 2012; Welbourne, 2012).

In short, this represents how, at a higher level of concern, child protection interventions will fundamentally involve the exercise of statutory authority and oppositional and hierarchical power as these interventions and courses of actions are imposed onto children and family members. The multifaceted nature of power is still reflected here, illustrating how good practice involves exercising statutory authority with respect and empathy, and making the most of opportunities to work with families, but this kind of involvement in their lives will sit in towards the top-right of this spectrum depending on particular circumstances. The point here is also that power relations are not fixed and immutable no matter how authority is exercised; and rather, power relations are multifaceted, dynamic and interactive. Whilst statutory authority can preclude fuller partnership relations, there remain opportunities for cooperation and negotiated power. These opportunities increase as we move down the levels of concern about children’s safety, harm and family wellbeing. Further, the purpose of this statutory authority is not just to impose courses of action unto families, it is to create the leverage for change towards more constructive ends. Particularly when working with families where children remain at home, their safety and needs are best met through working with family members to develop a shared understanding of the problems and shared goals about how they can be addressed.

In this manner, the dynamic and interactive nature of power comes to the fore as the framework captures how good practice in child protection often involves evolving power relations. In these circumstances, it is hoped that statutory authority can create a momentum for change which, over time, leads to consensus seeking, negotiation and cooperation. This way of representing the interconnected nature of power dynamics in child protection also reflects how authority a remains significant feature, even where interventions are voluntarily agreed and primarily occur through working with families and consensual power.

This diagram can then be developed, and notions of power as a repressive, illegitimate and unsafe force can be introduced to set out a framework of power. This represents the tensions and value conflicts of exercising power in constructive, enabling and protective ways. On the one hand, there is the manner in which power can be exercised in disproportionate and excessive ways, and how power relations can become disempowering and oppressive; on the other, the manner in which power relations can be insecure, where power is improperly or inadequately exercised, and attempts to work with families lead to appeasement or collusion in a way that fails to safeguard children and family members. The framework reflects how, as concerns about children’s safety and harm lessen, the scope for power to be exercised in disempowering oppressive ways increases as there is not the same justification for statutory authority, and other forms of oppositional and hierarchical power. There is still space for the excessive and unjust exercise of power even at the highest levels of concern for children safety and wellbeing though. This particularly happens when statutory authority is required, but exercised in an uncaring or callous manner, when there is unnecessary coercion, or where there is prejudice and discrimination.

Challenge on the other side occur where attempts to work with children and family members lead social workers to become drawn into placating or appeasing relationships. This means they do not end up exercising authority and challenging concerns about children’s safety and wellbeing as they should. This can be most likely to happen when working with families where there is resistance and non-cooperation, where social workers may become intimidated and feel unsafe themselves, leading to insecurity, avoidance and appeasing relationship dynamics. These power dynamics can also occur when there is a focus on maintaining relationships at all costs, a lack of practice skills and misgivings about exercising statutory authority, or when small changes are over-emphasised as showing progress when really little has changed (Pearson, 2009;

**High level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing**

**Low level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing**

**Consensual Power**

**Oppositional / Hierarchical Power**

**Insecure Power**

**Oppressive Power**

**Authority**

**Partnership**

**Negotiated / Informal Power**

Figure 8: A Framework of power for practice – first iteration

Ferguson, 2011; Okitikpi, 2011). This can be connected to ‘disguised compliance’ and family members pretending to work with professionals or telling them what they want to hear (Reder and Duncan, 1999). Where this kind of practice occurs with families where there is a long history of concern is overlooked, this has become referred to ‘start-again syndrome’, and has been a significant feature of Serious Case Reviews where opportunities have been missed to safeguard a child who has subsequently been seriously injured or killed (Brandon et al., ref).

This framework is intended to reflect how resistance and non-cooperation are themselves ways of exercising oppositional and hierarchical power, and this should also be mapped across the horizontal axis. Doing this encourages us to reflect on the need to exercise statutory authority to manage this kind of power, and the dangers of not doing so, whilst remaining highly attentive to what can be achieved as well as the risks, through exercising consensual power. Further, the scope for insecure power relations to occur lessens at lower levels of concern about a child’s safety and wellbeing; although again there is still the potential for insecure power in such contexts.

Overall, what I have sought to do here is capture how child protection practice involves a constant balancing act in exercising authority to keep children safe, and doing so in respectful and empathetic ways that make the most of opportunities to work together with children and families. This also involves being mindful not only of statutory authority, but indirect and informal power too. The counterweight to too much authority in child protection is working with children and families, and recognising how they need to be central to plans for children’s long-term safety at home. Yet the proportionate exercise of power is also about managing the potential for power relations to become insecure, especially when social workers focus too much on building or maintaining relationships and lose focus on the child. This is where I think the framework of power I develop here is particularly helpful, as it shows how the constructive, enabling and protective exercise of power is about charting a course between these tensions in a way that emphasises the need for continued critical analysis and reflection.

To further develop these ideas, I want to present a second iteration of this framework with a wider range of concepts and ideas about power. These are not categorisations to be adopted in rigid ways, but rather markers to develop ways of understanding power as a multifaceted, dynamics and interactive phenomenon. Moreover, the point here is that many of these forms of power relationship can occur together, or they reflect gradations across the spectrum of power relations as consensual and conflictual. This second iteration of the framework is presented on the following page, along with a key outlining what different terms are intended to reflect.

**High level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing**

**Low level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing**

**Consensual Power**

**Oppositional / Hierarchical Power**

**Insecure Power**

**Oppressive Power**

**Authority**

**Partnership**

**Negotiated / Informal Power**

Collaborative

Compromise

Cooperative

Acquiescence

Conciliatory Actions

Strategies of Influence

Mediated

Relational Authority

Statutory Authority

Indirect Authority

Appeasement

Placating

Complicity

Over-Identification

Negligence

Uncaring or Excessive Authority

Dominating

Manipulating

Discriminatory

Abusive

Neglectful

Disabling

Figure 9: A framework of power for practice – second iteration

**Constructive, Enabling and Protective Power Relations**

***Collaborative Relations***

People working together and reaching a shared understanding as an end of itself. Genuine sharing of self with others, and receptive to understanding other points of views and experiences. Disagreement and conflict minimised and dealt with candidly.

***Cooperative Relations***

Working together towards shared goals and outcomes. Generally means-end directed and cooperating for a purpose, but also based on genuine relationships. Can include hierarchical relationships and potential for conflict, but with emphasis on consensus seeking and worked through differences.

***Compromise Relations***

Working together towards shared goals and outcomes as with cooperative relations, but stronger degrees of oppositional power and potential sources of conflict.

***Conciliatory Actions***

Where one or more actors in relationships cedes ground or accepts things that they would not otherwise accept in the interests of maintaining relationships and working towards goals. Does not become a pattern of relations.

***Acquiescence Relations***

Stronger hierarchical relationship and degree of oppositional power from an individual or group onto others, however this accepted by those subject to such exercise of power. There are things that are clearly non-negotiable, but people involved are still able to work together and agree some shared goals.

***Mediated Relations***

As with acquiescence relations, there is a clear degree of conflict in power dynamics, but there is greater room for negotiation and working together.

***Strategies of Influence***

Explicit attempts to influence what others think and do through strategies including persuasion, argument, negotiation, guidance, offering inducements and leverage. This is considered to be beneficial to those subject to such strategies, and is grounded in working them.

***Relational Authority***

Authority is exercised but this is about what is said and done between people, and with attentiveness to the experience of such authority and the limitations it places on those subject to it.

***Indirect Authority***

The potential for authority to be exercised, means that people choose to change their behaviour. Alternatively found in who gets to make certain decisions, ‘rules of the game’, and who gets to speak or has the ability to shape what is said or does or does not happen.

***Statutory Authority***

The exercise of powers that come from positions within social systems or structures that allow agents of those systems to impose courses of action onto others.

**Insecure Power Relations**

***Relations of Complicity***

Working with some people even when it means that significant harm may occur to them or others. This means responsibilities towards people are actively or inadvertently overlooked.

***Relations of Over-identification***

Adopting a stance that empathises or identifies with a person or group in a way that hinders proper understanding and assessment of circumstances.

***Placating Relations***

As with conciliatory actions, where one or more actors in relationships cedes ground or accepts things that they otherwise would not, but where over time this becomes a pattern of relationships, and can leads to the deferral of responsibilities and people not acting as they should in those circumstances.

***Appeasing Relations***

Where placating relations or relations of over-identification becomes a pattern of significant failings to address or challenge another person’s behavior, leading to them harming themselves or others.

***Negligent Relations***

Lack of consideration for consequences or disregard for responsibilities means there is a significant failure to act as needed. This can lead to a person coming to harm, or harms themselves or others.

**Oppressive Power Relations**

***Uncaring or Excessive Authority***

The exercise of authority in necessary ways, but where this authority is applied too forcefully. Alternatively, authority is exercised in a cold or callous way where there is a lack of empathy and a disregard for the impact on people.

***Manipulating Relations***

Lies and deception to achieve ends. The maneuvering use of situations to the advantage of one actor or group at the expense of others. Can include the misappropriation or misuse of strategies of influence

***Collusive Relations***

People come together and form bonds or work towards shared goals that marginalize or exclude others.

***Discriminatory Relations***

Saying or doing things that hurt or disempower people, or which mean their selfhood is overlooked. The ignoring or marginalizing of people’s needs, or efforts to deliberately separate and exclude people because of differences.

***Dominating Relations***

Courses of action that leave people powerless or consistently unable to act of their wishes without due reason. Often involves things that have a degrading or dehumanising impact.

***Abusive Relations***

Causing direct harm or injury others, and imposition of a person’s will in a way that causes pain or is degrading.

***Disabling Relations***

Actions are taken which presume to speak for others and prevent them from acting in autonomous and independent ways. Can be linked with attempts to support and help people.

***Neglectful Relations***

As with negligent relations, there is lack of consideration for consequences or disregard for responsibilities which means there is a significant failure to act as needed. This can lead to a person coming to harm, or harms themselves or others. When neglectful this is an active process of

**Using this Framework as a Tool for Case Formulation and Case Management**

To take this ideas forward I will now turn to how the framework can be applied to child protection work, outlining two main ways it can be used in practice: as a tool for case formulation and case management, and in critically engaging with and critically reflecting on power. I will consider these two uses of the framework in more detail, and then return to case examples of the Malone and Sanderson families to demonstrate how this framework can be applied in practice.

 As a tool for case formulation and case management, this framework of power is intended to help social workers explore the options available to them in assessment and decision-making, and to map how power has been and could be exercised. One key theme here is that the exercise of power should be proportionate to the level of concern about children’s safety, harm, and family wellbeing. A second theme is that power should be exercised in a directed and purposeful way. That is to say that our focus should be on what the exercise of power is supposed to achieve for a child and their family (Ferguson, 2011; Welbourne, 2012). Interventions should not simply be undertaken and power exercised for its own sake or because procedures demand it. Rather, there should be a degree of clarity about what doing things in a certain way and exercising power is supposed to achieve, and how this leads to a child being safer and their needs being met.

To this end, concerns about safety, harm and family wellbeing, and ways of exercising power, can be mapped onto this framework. This process begins by plotting the level of concerns about safety and harm to a child, and family wellbeing, along the vertical axis of the framework. In the visual representations of the framework provided in the previous section I have deliberately not specified where particular kinds of interventions fall. This is because I do not want the framework to be overly prescriptive and the point of the framework is that there are not delineated answers to how power should be exercised or what should be done, as these things have to be explored in the context of work with individual children and their families. In starting from the level of concern at a given time, existing power relations can be identified, and ways that power can be exercised can be explored through mapping across the horizontal axis of consensual power, and oppositional and hierarchical power.

This leads me back to the notions of hypothesising and a ‘dialectic mindset’ introduced in chapter two (Reder and Duncan, 1999, pp. 97-102). Hypothesising is important to judicious and proportionate assessment and decision-making because it encourages us to see our judgements about what is going on in a family as tentative formulations open to further development; and to consider alternate hypotheses. In this manner, we can hold potentially multiple hypotheses about what is going on, and about possible courses of action and ways of exercising power. Hypotheses can then be further developed or cast aside as we learn more about a family and as events unfold. This then facilitates a ‘dialectic’ process of considering different possible explanations, perspectives and courses of action. In respect of this framework, this means continually reflecting on the different possible ways power relations can be understood and how power might be exercised, and what the potential benefits and consequences of different approaches could be. This creates a process of ongoing hypothesising, and analysis and scrutiny of our reasoning, including different options and possibilities. This can lead us to try new things and approaches to working with a family, or it can strengthen our thinking as we return to formulations and ideas bolstered by analysis of the alternatives.

 Drawing upon a dialectic approach, once the level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing has been plotted, and power relations of consensual and oppositional and hierarchical power have been considered, different options in exercising power can be explored. A key feature of this approach is then tracking what happens as work with a family progresses and events unfold. If interventions are not alleviating the level of concern about safety and harm to a child, change is not sustained over time, or new information comes to light or circumstances change increasing this level of concern about harm, then it is likely that a more authoritative approach will required (Welbourne, 2012). There should be a clear analysis though of what increasing the level of oppositional and hierarchical power achieves. In considering the exercise of statutory authority, or indeed any form of authority or oppositional power, there should be a focused plan for what this authority is meant to achieve, when this will happen, and what is non-negotiable. This should include analysis of the degree of authority that is required, and how the outcomes sought can be achieved in the least coercive and restrictive ways, whilst making sure that the things that need to be done to protect a child are being done. It may be that concerns about safety, harm and family wellbeing reached a point where significant levels of statutory authority are required through the exercise of legal powers. In this kind of situation, analysis turns back to how to undertake this kind of intervention in the least harmful way to avoid unnecessary and oppressive power relations.

 An alternative form of analysis here may be that the level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing increases, but the decision is to continue with a current approach or to try different kinds of negotiated and informal ways of exercising power in working with a family. Using this framework as an approach to case formulation and management in these situations is helpful because it means that this approach is undertaken with consideration given to alternatives, and a clear rationale can be set out as to why a decision has been made why a more relational approach is being tried, and not to escalate the level of intervention.

 Further, using this framework for case formulation and case management is also about understanding what to do when things are going well and concerns about safety, harm and family wellbeing are reducing. This framework encourages analysis of why this is, and also responding accordingly and considering whether the level of statutory authority and professional authority ought to be reduced. First, the question of why things are improving is crucial, because this then leads to consideration of how to further support these changes. It may be because of factors not directly associated with a child protection intervention, such as changes in family relationships and dynamics, or the work of other professionals. These might, therefore, be things that social workers have little influence over; although understanding this can still help to shape thinking through the options about what happens next. On the other hand, if changes are linked to aspects of child protection interventions, the question turns on how these changes can be sustained. If things have been improved because of the leverage created by the exercise of authority, this about considering what will happen when this level of oppositional and hierarchical power is reduced, and what grounds there are to think changes will be sustained. In particular, this involves considering whether a family are meaningfully invested in things being different, and whether the leverage created by authority has, or could, foster consensual power relations. If this has already happened, or social work involvement was always based on negotiated and informal power and partnership, the next stage is thinking about the continued support a family needs, and stepping down the level of professional involvement, so that power continues to be exercised in a proportionate way. This kind of analysis includes ongoing questioning of oppositional and hierarchical dynamics in play.

The final main feature of using this framework as a tool for case formulation and case management is in analysis of resistance and non-cooperation. In thinking through the options of how to manage resistance and non-engagement, social workers should consider how these things can require a strong, ‘boundaried’ approach which necessitates authority and challenge towards family members. This is to make sure that there are clear expectations about what needs to change and when, and what could happen if concerns about children’s safety and welfare continue or increase. It can also serve to establish that aggression, antagonism and a refusal to work with professionals will not prevent social workers from assessing and acting on these concerns, and to send a message about the unacceptable nature of some forms of behaviour (Fauth et al., 2010; Tuck, 2013).

All forms of resistance and non-cooperation should not be treated the same however, and seemingly similar behaviours can be best dealt with by very different responses in different circumstances. Social workers should consider the contextual and relational dimensions of resistance and non-cooperation, and question why children, and family members may respond to their involvement in these ways (Smith, 2008a). This includes exploring whether authority begets further conflict, and whether there are possibilities for working around resistance, and whether consensual power can be exercised to understand people’s actions and to show a continued willingness to work with them. This can be particularly important in avoiding becoming trapped in a potentially destructive cycle of increased authority and conflict (Turnell and Essex, 2006). Social workers need carefully weigh up such interventions though so that they do not veer into appeasing or collusive power relations, yet the potential for consensus seeking should be explored, even in very difficult circumstances (Trotter, 2006; Turnell et al., 2008; Fauth et al., 2010).

**A Framework for Critical Engaging With and Reflecting on Power**

The second function of this framework is to support critical engagement with and critical reflection on power. This is about how the concepts and ideas about power contained in the framework can be used to understand and engage with power as a force that shapes agency and social context. There are three main ways that this kind of critical engagement with and reflection on power is taken forwards here. First, in relation to how children and family members exercise power and how power is central to family relationships and dynamics. Second, in terms of social worker’s themselves and their positions within organisations and structural contexts. Third, this is a framework for critically engaging with and reflecting on the wider tensions and value conflicts and tensions of child protection.

Child protection interventions represent the coming together of professional and family systems. Thus far I have explored the ways that power can be exercised by social workers, but this framework is intended to also help us consider how power is exercised and experienced by children and family members within their own family systems. As I have already argued there are already helpful models and conceptual frameworks to explore the ways that people are positioned within levels or sites of social context (Dominelli, 2002; Smith, 2008a). The framework I present here looks to complement this work in specific ways.

In considering how this framework can be applied, it is important to recognise how the ways that people experience power will be unique to them, and shaped by their own identities, experiences, backgrounds and positions within family and wider social contexts. What it means to say that power can be exercised in constructive, enabling and protective ways is about placing the child at the centre of this analysis. A significant point here is that often, what can be protective and enabling for one family member, may be experienced as disempowering and oppressive by another (Wise, 1995). This is perhaps most evident in respect of interventions that protect a child, but where a parent’s experience is one of significant oppositional and hierarchical power. The paramountcy principle that a child’s safety and wellbeing always takes precedence is a core ethical and professional tenet, and with good reason. There is something of a more nuanced picture to also be developed though about what the paramountcy of a child’s safety and wellbeing means in practice. There are two key considerations here. One is that children themselves may feel significant ambivalence about child protection interventions and the impact on their lives and their family life (Turnell and Essex, 2006; Smith, 2008b). The other is that family and family life are hugely significant things in considering children’s selfhood, identity and needs (Featherstone, 2004; Featherstone et al., 2014). Even when it is not possible for a child to safely remain in their family, their identification with and membership of their family unit will often sit at the heart of their lives (Brophy et al., 2006).

When looking to understand and engage with power in child protection, and to exercise power in a child’s best interests and in keeping them safe, it is therefore essential that this work situates children within their family systems. This draws on ideas about the deep meanings and complexities of family life considered in chapter four about understanding how individual family’s function and the unique nature of all family relationships. The concepts and ideas in the framework I present here do not map across to family relationships in the same way as they do in respect of how social worker’s exercise power, but they can still be applied to understand and engage with power in family systems as they are concepts and ideas that can apply to all human relationships. Thus, relations in family life can feature a combination of relationship dynamics across a spectrum of consensual and oppositional / hierarchical power. For example, child and parent relationships can be nurturing and protective through a combination of partnership and authority. However these relationships can also become oppressive, with parental authority becoming overbearing and excessive, or where some family members collude in ways that exclude others. Family relationships can also involve insecure power relations where some family members look to appease others, or through their own troubles are negligent in meeting their responsibilities.

Another feature of this framework in respect of critically engaging with and reflecting on power is about how social workers can use it to reflect on their own practice, and to look for themes and patterns about how they work with children and families. This can then be used to identify our individual strengths and weaknesses as practitioners, and to think about what we need to do about these. As I discussed at the start of this study, it was inspired to undertake this research in significant part by my own struggles in learning to practice in child protection. Initially I felt uncomfortable with the authority of the child protection role, and this did not sit entirely comfortably with my personality. To be able to exercise authority and challenge people effectively was something I had to learn, and continue to reflect on to this day. I did this primarily through reflecting on my practice in particular circumstances, and learning about myself as a practitioner and understanding what I would want to do differently next time and how to play to my strengths and address things I found difficult.

This kind of analysis is also about how who we are as individuals and how we position ourselves as professionals within organisational cultures and the wider contexts of debates about child protection. As individuals we will have particular beliefs attitudes and feelings connected to our identities, social locations and relationships, and given the power dynamics found in these aspects of our lives. These processes of critical engagement and reflection also though involve actively positioning ourselves and our practice as social workers in the tensions and value conflicts of child protection. As discussed in chapter one, the child protection system in the UK or indeed in other countries is actively constructed in certain ways in relations to conflict and tensions about how child protection should be done. What we do as individual social workers feeds into this, and matters both to the children and families we work with, and the organisational contexts we work in and the child protection system more broadly. In turn, we will also be affected by those contexts and by social, political and cultural norms and ideas that are presented to us. Our job as social workers is however to question these things and not just uncritically question what happens around us and how that influences what we do.

 The framework I develop here is designed to explicitly draw out these questions about ourselves and our professional identities and how our practice is shaped by and shapes wider organisational cultures and systems, as it encourages us to reflect on the different options and ways of acting in different circumstances. In turn, this represents the tensions and value conflicts of child protection in practice, and the ethical and normative challenges of how to protect children and work with and support families, between state intervention and individual liberties, and how safeguarding child and adults, whilst respecting their rights and autonomy. Further, the framework I advance here looks to hold onto these tensions and locate child protection practice within them, instead of looking for resolutions one way or the other. This is about acknowledging the often finely balanced, difficult nature of the decisions social workers make, and often the uncertainties of the courses of action they undertake (Munro, 2008; Kemshall, 2013). This can often mean ‘dirty’ solutions to messy realities, where there may not be a clear or unstarnished way forwards, especially given the challenging circumstances that many children and families who experience child protection intervention face (Turnell and Essex, p. 47).

**The Malone Family: Mapping out the Options**

I will now return to the case example of the Malone family to develop these ideas about how this framework can be used as a tool for case formulation and case management. In the previous chapter I began to consider ways in which a social worker from a longer-term locality Child and Family Team might look to create more consensual power relationships through engaging with the family in a more open and cooperative way. To develop this example further, it can be said that over a three to four month period, there have been some initial positive signs of this approach working. The social worker has been able to build seemingly positive relationships with Michael (10), Anne-Marie (10) and Kelly (8), although Peter Jr. (14) remains cautious and says little during visits. Connor (3) is more playful now, and whilst initially unwelcoming and willing to give little away, Sally-Anne (34) is now happier with these visits going ahead. Peter (36) still generally stays on the periphery, but there have been a couple of discussions where he has said more. Since the Initial Child Protection Conference, the children’s attendance at school has improved – though frictions remain in the relationships between Peter, Sally-Anne and staff at the school. Peter Jr. is still not in any education. Sally-Anne has attended each of the monthly Core Group meetings to review the Child Protection Plan, and Peter came to the most recent meeting. The couple they have spoken about wanting to make a go of things and to stay in the area so that the younger children can get an education, even if this means accepting social work involvement. They have appreciated the social worker’s efforts to organise some practical support with food and utilities, and in trying to organise something with Peter Jr.’s education even though this has not yet come to anything.

 Although things have been broadly positive, there have been notes of concern. Further background information has been provided, and whist there have been no serious allegations of physical assault, there is a clearer chronology of three known assessments because of concerns about physical harm through chastisement. When concerns have been further explored with the children, they continue to say that their father has only ever hit them with an open hand but it is still not clear how often this has happened, and the children give different and somewhat ambiguous accounts. Now there has been a further incident, and Michael has been seen at school with marks across the back of his legs. He initially said this had happened ‘playing’, but eventually became upset and told his teacher his father had given him some ‘whacks’ after he swore at his mum. The marks seemed consistent with being hit with an open hand, and where of sufficient force that bruises were starting to show.

 In undertaking case formulation and thinking about what to do next, it is helpful to first use the framework to map the intervention and hypotheses to this point. From the initial intervention, the social worker’s hypotheses about the family experiencing statutory authority and relationships as oppressive and marginalising have been borne out by what family members have said. It appears the pressure of these assessments has been combined with what has been described as informal, relational authority in what is said and done has led family members to feel judged and not listened to. In the past this has led to relationships between the professional and family systems becoming characterised predominantly by oppositional and hierarchical power relations, with statutory and relational authority leading to resistance and non-cooperation from Peter and Sally-Anne. Attempts to work in a more cooperative and collaborative way seems to have led to initial positive signs of engagement from the family, potentially stepping away from this cycle of increased conflict and oppositional power. This work still sits within the realm of statutory and relational authority, but consensual power is exercised through mediation and compromise, with the social worker showing some conciliatory actions resulting in acquiescence and compromise from family members. The constructive role of statutory and relational authority exercised in this way as leverage to get the family to agree to social work involvement and seemingly make some changes should also be recognised.

 Taking the idea of critically understanding and engaging with power through adopting a ‘dialectic mindset’ though, further hypotheses should be considered. A t hypothesis that should be kept to the fore of all social worker’s minds in situations like this one is that there may be more serious physical harm occurring, and that Peter and Sally-Anne are looking to keep the professional system out. Alternatively, that they are staunch in seeing physically chastisement as an appropriate form of punishment, and will continue to do this no matter the interference of social workers and other professionals. With these hypotheses is a point about how attempts to mobilise negotiated and informal power towards more consensual power relations could become insecure. The most recent report about physical harm to Michael indicates a lack of change, from Peter in particular. It may well be that he and Sally-Anne have been engaged in relationships of ‘disguised compliance’ and only accepting intervention on their terms. The social worker’s approach could therefore led to over-identification and placating relations, and ultimately to appeasement. This could be linked to the idea of ‘start-again syndrome’ and a belief that a fresh start can be made despite a historical pattern of repeated concerns (Brandon et al., 2009).

To respond to this latest incident, the current circumstances and relationship dynamics can be explicitly mapped onto the framework of power developed here. To start with the overall level of concern about the safety, harm and family wellbeing, should be considered. I would argue that in this situation the family sit on the upper half of this spectrum, with concerns which establish a likelihood of significant harm to the children. This is not at the highest levels at this time; however, the latest incident does increase the level of concern as it demonstrates the potential ineffectiveness of professional intervention to achieve change and how this pattern of physical harm will continue. With this in mind, this mapping exercise can then be taken forward to consider where to go from this point. In developing the hypotheses just outlined, it could be argued that there is already statutory authority being exercised, but now there is a need for a more authoritative approach yet to reflect the increased level of concern. This could be either through an escalation of professional intervention – for example through consideration of whether to enter into Pre-proceedings to establish a clear legal basis for work with the family and a stronger form of leverage. Alternatively, this could be through the exercise of informal authority to give Peter and Sally-Anne a very clear warning that further physical harm will lead to this course of action being undertaken.

This would likely be the response undertaken through focusing on the exercise of power in a more procedural manner, with the question turning on whether the threshold for Pre-proceedings is met. This kind of approach is an important part of a response to these concerns, and would be entirely justified in this situation. I want to suggest here though that the ideas contained in this framework connect this case formulation and management to a broader and more relational view of power, which I will now go on to consider with reference to critically engaging with the broader contexts of power and understanding the children’s world and experiences of family life. In doing so, I will also consider these procedural and relational responses to this latest incident in further detail.

**The Malone Family: Moving Forwards in Conditions of Uncertainty**

To develop this analysis of power further, it is instructive to consider critical engagement with and reflection on power in respect of family relationships, and the children’s voices and experiences of family life. In exploring family relationships, it is helpful to reflect on how Peter and Sally-Anne define their family’s life within a wider set of meanings of family within Traveller systems and culture. The family dynamics are broadly patriarchal, with Peter being the ‘head of the house’, and he and Sally-Anne adopting traditional, defined gender roles with respect to daily family living and the parenting of the children (Helleiner, 2000). This places Peter in a strong hierarchical position in the family, and this is reflected in how he physically punishes the children for wrongdoing – with these patriarchal ideas also being reflected in Peter Jr. and Michael being the ones who are the ones punished through physical harm. There are nuances to this picture however, reflecting the individual identities and relations within the family. To begin with Sally-Anne is a formidable figure in her own right, and does not seem to have any truck with professional’s ideas that she might be otherwise. This indicates both a potential further concern and a safety factor. It may be that Sally-Anne explicitly endorses the use of physical chastisement, and hides this from professionals; or it may be her feelings are more ambivalent, and she could be encouraged to be a protective factor in challenging Peter. Secondly, though Peter misuses his parental authority to physically punish Peter Jr. and Michael, he also speaks of – and the children all talk about him as – being a generally protective and caring figure. From this it could be suggested that Peter wants to exercise power in an authoritative way, and indeed thinks he is doing so, rather than an abusive one. This point is also supported by the way that the abusive use of physical punishment does not seem to be accompanied by wider forms of dominating, oppressive or neglectful power in the family.

 The children’s voices and experiences should be placed at the heart of this work with the family, and here there are further salient points both about what they say and understanding their needs. All of the children talk about loving their parents and this comes across in visits to see them. The fact that this physical chastisement is, in the main, a specific concern also seems to support this understanding of the family as generally a system that functions well enough within its own contexts. This relates to the second cultural aspect of these relations, which is how as being Travellers and moving around, family relations are close-knit, and all of the family members identify with a distinctive identity. This is highly significant, as it raises potential concerns about the detrimental impact a high level of authoritative intervention to remove the children would have. It would potentially separate the children from their ethnicity and cultural roots and lead to the imposition of a different way of life not of their choosing (Garrett, 2000). This does not mean that the abuse the children do experience should be accepted, however it adds an important dimension to case planning and decision-making as a social worker abut what options are in the best interests of the children’s safety and wellbeing.

 These points lead to a further analysis of the options and hypotheses about the exercise of power. There is a level of uncertainty about what is going on in the children’s life, which makes it then difficult to clearly establish the level of concern about safety, harm and family wellbeing. There is also uncertainty about how these concerns can be addressed and whether Peter and Sally-Anne are going along with professional intervention with no intention of making changes to their parenting to address these concerns. Exercising further statutory authority may, however, drive them away from professional systems once again, and make it even more difficult to assess and act upon such concerns. It should also be recognised that even the course of action that would seemingly guarantee the children’s safety through removal from the family home – and it should be stated that concerns about their safety and wellbeing are not of that level yet – does not necessarily meet their needs in a broader sense of their agency and selfhood, and membership of their family and wider cultural identity.

 Within these contexts of uncertainty, we again come to what to do in this situation. I have already noted one option through consideration being given to Pre-proceedings. Another issue here is the need to act on this latest report of physical harm as a concern about ‘significant harm’, and whether this requires an organisational chid protection response and is a crime committed towards Michael. Although there are relatively clear guidelines about when such courses of action are required, these are mutable and contingent on judgements about the level and seriousness of the incident, and also planning about what such responses would achieve. The social worker in this situation could push for a police investigation and joint interview. The professional response could also include setting out a written agreement with the family for Peter to leave the family home whilst such enquiries are undertaken. Again though, there is a need for careful consideration of these options, and the detrimental impact this could have on family life, and on relationships between the family and professional systems. It could be envisaged that if this course of action were pursued Peter and Sally-Anne would refuse this, and there would be a stand-off, again with increased levels of conflict and oppositional and hierarchical power. Another consideration here is the ethical justification for the exercise of power in this way, and whether this would then become an excessive form of authority that unduly impinges on the children’s and their parent’s rights. This kind of judgement would include considering the need for a medical examination, given the intrusive nature of such a process, especially given how Michael has also said what happened and this is consistent with what has been observed.

 An alternative response here would be to remain focused on the need to assertively respond to this concern and liaise with the police, but to consider a different approach of the social worker going out to speak to Michael and the family. If there is no evidence of an even more serious injury to Michael, thought could be given to being very clear with Peter and Sally-Anne about these concerns as an exercise of informal authority; but keeping professional intervention at this level, or doing a similar kind of visit alongside the police. This would be in effect to continue the approach being taken, with this work continuing under the auspices of the Child Protection Plan, albeit with this plan updating and with explicit analysis of the risks, including for the exercise of power to be insecure in this instance.

Also, we could explore how negotiated authority could lead to further engagement. The crucial feature of this approach is moving from challenging Peter and Sally-Anne but also maintaining relationships with them to a clear plan about how physical harm of the children will be addressed. There would be the warning and leverage of the escalation of statutory authority here, but more may well be needed, and this could be through negotiated and informal power to look at how Peter manages the children’s behaviour, with specific attention to what to do when Peter Jr. and Michael do misbehave. This approach would include strategies of influence to offer parenting support and tools for managing behaviour, and mediation and compromise to come up with a joint plan with Peter and Sally-Anne, albeit with not resorting to physical harm being non-negotiable. Finally, this kind of approach could also include collaborative dynamics, in having sessions with Peter and Sally-Anne to understand what defines their beliefs about physical chastisement, and looking to question them about what the experience of this is really like for Peter Jr. and Michael.

**The Sanderson Family: Imperfect Options in Worsening Circumstances**

Looking at this process of case formulation and case management with the Sanderson family now, we return to the family at the point where a new social worker from a longer-term locality Child and Family Team has become involved following the Initial Child Protection Conference. Here, Jordan (6), Kyle (5) and Ellie (2) were placed on Child Protection Plans because of concerns about emotional harm through witnessing domestic violence. The social worker has begun to begin to work with the family, and has spoken to Jordan and Kyle, although they have not wanted to talk much. The children’s mother Amy (23) has begun to engage with the social worker, although she is generally cagey and insists things are ok. Her partner Steve (27) has not been as confrontational as he had been during initial visits to the family after his release from prison, however he has not been in for many visits. Jason (28), the father of Jordan and Kyle, remains unhappy with the situation, and has spoken about going through court with private law proceedings to seek custody of Jordan and Kyle, although he has not yet done this.

 From this point, things deteriorate for the family, and I will consider the imperfect options available to the social worker and ways of constructively looking to exercise power through mapping these changes as part of a process of case formulation and case management. This begins with further known incidents of violent and abusive towards Amy from Steve. The first of these known incidents happens during a social work visit where Steve was present. Despite a period where reduced hostility, during this visit he immediately became confrontational and aggressive, challenging the social worker about interfering in his life and wanting to take his child away from him. Amy sought to calm Steve down and usher him away but he was seen to push her away in a rough way. He also began to shout loudly in front of the children, making Ellie cry, at which point Steve picked her up, but was rocking her forcefully as he continued to shout. At this point the social worker left. After this there were two unsuccessful visits, and a few weeks later, a referral from the police. A neighbour had complained of arguments, and when the police arrived they found Amy with a swollen eye and Steve gone. Amy maintained that her eye had been hurt after Ellie hit her by accident with a toy, and that her and Steve had just been shouting at one another.

Given Steve’s history of violence and aggression, including domestic violence and abuse in his relationship with Amy, there appear to be serious worries that these incidents are only a part of the picture of a wider pattern of violence and abuse. Concerns about the children witnessing domestic abuse, especially in the context of previous violence in their lives, will position the family in the upper half of the framework presented here. The current intervention, under the auspices of a Child Protection Plan, is seemingly not effective in protecting the children. Using the framework, different options can be considered about how power can be understood and exercised in this situation. The Child Protection Plan already involves the exercise of statutory authority, and the concern is that Amy is not in a position where the leverage of this is effective in helping her to achieve change. Steve does not seem to care about this authority and clearly remains resistance to social work intervention. Although Amy has agreed to work with professionals, her engagement can also be characterised as a relatively superficial level of compliance or ‘disguised compliance’. In this instance the term should be used with care though, taking into account how Amy’s responses to professionals will be influenced by the dominating and oppressive power she experiences from Steve.

 The potential for consensual power to be exercised in this situation, including a combination of forms of negotiated and informal power, can first be considered. As with the Malone family, this approach would be about looking to explore with Amy and Steve in particular the circular power relationships that may engender resistance and non-cooperation through their responses to authority and hierarchical and oppositional power. This could involve mobilising consensual, negotiated and informal power to try and create new relationship dynamics and explore the meanings of child protection intervention with Amy and Steve, it could be hoped towards more constructive relationships between the family and professional systems. This kind of approach would have the benefit of adopting a softer stance in respect of the exercise of authority, and could help mitigate Amy and Steve’s feelings of vulnerability and imposed or coercive power through the child protection intervention. It may particularly draw on cooperative and compromise power relations to develop a shared plan with Amy and Steve, although this will have to include what is non-negotiable, like seeing the children regularly and on their own and Steve working with professionals and not acting in a threatening or intimidating way. Collaborative power relations could also be drawn upon to try and develop more meaningful relationships through trying to get to know Amy and Steve.

The problem is that these non-negotiable aspects of this intervention, reinforced through the statutory authority of the Child Protection Plan and potentially through informal power as well, are things that may prove challenging for the couple. Yet unless they are willing to work with professionals, consensual, negotiated and informal power are unlikely to succeed. An alternative approach could be to focus on developing a relationship with Amy working with her around how she perceives her life and the children’s lives within the contexts of family meanings and dynamics, and supporting her to make changes. Significant care would need to be taken in putting the emphasis on Amy however, when the main challenge she appears to face seem to be because she is subject to dominating and abusive power. Further, the deep meanings and complexities of family life need to be recognised, and how Amy remains committed to a relationship with Steve. A focus on consensual power could easily become insecure therefore, with placating dynamics leading over time to appeasement and complicity, and to a failure to address concerns about the children’s safety and wellbeing.

Alternatively, a more authoritative approach could be used. This would involve increasing the degree of oppositional and hierarchical power being exercised. For example, further statutory powers could be exercised, such as with a written agreement stating that Steve should not be living at the family home until he feels able to work with professionals to address his abusive behaviour, or consideration of a Pre-proceedings Meeting to bring in a legal dimension to the child protection intervention. This is likely to give the family a stark option, with these courses of action potentially acting as leverage for things to change. Alternatively, informal authority could be applied to talk through these options or to offer a more general note of caution or warning about the level of concern for the children to see if this had an effect. This increase in the exercise of oppositional and hierarchical power would in effect be about overcoming Steve and Amy’s resistance, and compelling them to work with professionals and make changes in their lives, either together or separately.

The problems here is that from Steve’s behaviour and background, this kind of statutory or informal power is likely to be ineffective, and lead to him also trying to exercise further oppositional and hierarchical power. Further, signs that Amy is not in alignment with Steve could mean that this oppositional and hierarchical power is displaced into their relationship, putting her and the children more at risk of violence and abuse. This could also further alienate Amy from professional networks; and if not exercised with care and attention, could become excessive or dominating. The overarching challenge here, therefore, is that all of the options for trying to work with the family are imperfect and there is no clear way forwards that necessarily keeps the children safe.

**The Sanderson Family: The ‘Double Bind’ of Power where there is Domestic Violence and Abuse, and Child Protection Intervention**

In considering the how to move forwards in working with the Sanderson family, the experiences and the wishes and feelings of the children need to be continually placed within the centre of the networks of power and options being explored. As described in the previous chapter, Jordan, Kyle and Ellie are likely to have feelings of ambivalence and confusion about their family life. As Smith (2008b, p. 150) observes,

Similarly perhaps to cases of domestic violence… this does not mean simply imposing a ‘professional’ analysis, since the young person’s feelings towards the abuser must be recognised as genuine. The process of engagement and building trust is not simply a matter of inherent good practice, but also part of providing the young person with alternative perspectives, and the practical and emotional resources to make changes.

To be able to understand how family relationships can change to make it safer for children, social workers should try to understand their feelings, and how they can be highly conflicted: for example when what may keep them safer through talking to professionals can increase the problems their mother experiences. The way that Jordan and Kyle are positioned within two conflictual family systems exacerbates these considerations.

 A central feature in understanding the children’s lives is the dominating and oppressive power they experience. Another key part of the children’s family relationships is Amy’s insecure power relations with the children. This includes Amy does try to safeguard them but feels unable to do so, further increasing her powerlessness, and because she is continually focused on her relationship with Steve and fears and anxieties about this relationship, she is often unable to effectively exercise her authority as a parent. In this situation, Jason also seems to oscillate between oppositional and hierarchical power and challenge to Amy and Steve, and insecure power relations where he does not feel able to protect his sons.

One further significant feature of the way power is exercised in this case example is the impact that child protection intervention has on Amy, and the contextual power relations that are constructed around people who experience domestic violence and abuse in the child protection ‘system’ (Humphreys and Absler, 2011). Amy is placed in a position where she is likely to feel trapped, being in a relationship with an abusive and controlling partner who she may be scared to leave and where any actions to do so possibly place her and the children in significant danger. Yet, Steve is also the father of one of her children, and her main source of support. In addition to this, there is the sustained pressure from her previous partner where there was also domestic abuse, and from the child protection system which in effect can be seen as pushing her to end her relationship with Steve if he refuses to make changes. From Amy’s perspective, it seems she is in a position where she cannot win. If she remains in the relationship, she continues to experience violence and abuse, and faces the prospect of increasing levels of child protection intervention, with the ultimate threat that she could lose her children. If she leaves, she potentially places herself and the children at even greater risk, and loses the relationship with the man she loves and the father of her youngest child.

The framework of power developed here helps to understand the power relations that are part of this situation. Amy is subject to two forms of hierarchical and imposed power, pulling her in two different directions. Although from the children’s safety and wellbeing is the overriding priority of a social worker in this situation, it should be recognised that, for Amy, the experience of this power is likely to as dominating power, and a position where she is powerless. In developing this point here, it could also be considered that there is a deeper ‘double-bind’ of meanings communicated about power (Bateson et al., 1956; Sluzki and Ransom, 1977). For Amy, it seems that there is a message both that she is caught up in a coercive and controlling relationship with Steve, and a child protection intervention exerts a similar kind of dominating power dynamic (Hester, 2011; Humphreys and Absler, 2011). In terms of communicated meanings, it should also be noted that Steve is likely to also experience a similar kind of implicit message about coercive power, with his power and status being undermined through the use of coercive power.

Coming lastly to what can be done in such a difficult situation where the imperfect nature of the courses of action a social worker could undertake has already been considered. Ultimately, from a child protection perspective, the children’s safety and wellbeing needs to be the paramount concern, and if the violence and abuse towards Amy continues then further authoritative options and an escalation of intervention will be necessary. Steve’s violent and abusive behaviour also poses a risk of physical harm to the children, and this is a noted risk factor (Houston, 2006; Hestor et al., 2007). This may be of particular concern with Jordan and Kyle in particular, given Steve’s antipathy towards them and conflict with Jason. However, to best try to make a difference a resolute focus is needed on relational power, and working through these challenges with Amy to recognise the multiple sources of marginalisation and disempowerment she experiences, including because itself of child protection intervention. This work would involve continuing to be clear about the foundation of authoritative power relations on which this work is built, but exploring with Amy, in a way that is empathetic to her circumstances, how she can change the power relations around her. This would include encouraging her to explore what these relations look like and mean for the children.

**The Hawkins Family: Being In and Out of Control**

I began this study with one of my early experiences as a social worker, and now in coming towards its end, I want to describe a piece of work I have undertaken using this framework in my most recent role. This has been working with young people at high risk of coming into care. As discussed at the start of this thesis, in offering this example I have changed numerous details so that the people and events described here are not recognisable, and this case example is a composite illustration of practice rather than work undertaken with a specific family. This is to make sure that information given to me in confidence as a practitioner is not shared in a research context.

 The Hawkins family are Carla (14), her two younger sisters Georgie (11) and Abby (10), and their mother Sarah (36). Carla, Georgie and Abby have never had much contact with her father Tom (40), and there were concerns about domestic abuse and drinking in the children’s lives when they were younger, and Sarah and Tom were together. Sarah does not want the girls to have anything to do with Tom. The family moved a number of years ago so Sarah could get out of this relationship, but this means she has little contact with her own wider family now. There have been significant concerns over the last year about Carla’s behaviour and how she has been in situations where she is vulnerable and could experience harm or child sexual exploitation. Sarah has described struggling to manage Carla’s temper from a young age, however recently things have become much worse. Carla has been described by Sarah as quick to become violent and aggressive, with these incidents becoming more frequent and including violence directed towards Sarah, and intimidating behaviour towards Georgie and Abby. They talk about being increasingly scared of their sister. Sarah has also shared with professionals that Carla goes out every day until late and often comes back ‘stinking of cannabis’. Sarah has seen references on social media to other drugs, and is worried that Carla is now drinking regularly. Carla has begun to stay out more and more, and has refused to say where she is staying. She often refuses to go to school, and she is at increasing risk of permanent exclusion. There have also been some recent incidents of self-harm.

Sarah has called her social worker to say that Georgie has now told her she knows that a group of local young people, including Carla, often stay over at the house of an older local man. Georgie doesn’t know any more details about the man.

Sarah has become increasingly frustrated with Carla, and has reached a point where she has said she is close to having had enough and does not think she can manage Carla’s behaviour. Sarah has said she has slapped Carla in the past, and is worried she will ‘just lose it with her’ one day. Whereas she has previously actively tried to find Carla and get her home, Sarah now says she cannot keep doing this as it makes no difference and has too much impact on her and the younger girls. Carla will talk when professionals can get hold of her, although she is often out and refuses to wait in to meet with people. She finds social workers to be ‘a pain in the arse’, who ‘ask loads of questions about everything’. Carla does not see herself as being at risk of harm or exploitation, and says that these are just worries of people who don’t understand her life.

Some initial ideas about why Carla acts in the way she does are about the pull of her peers and enjoying her lifestyle, combined with a number of things that leave her angry towards her mother Sarah. These are particularly that she doesn’t know her father, early life experiences of domestic violence and abuse, feeling that her mum has let her down at times in her life, and her mum’s drinking – Sarah says she no longer drinks, but Carla says that she does. Further, it seems that Carla has learnt to act in certain ways because it means she can then do as she wants to do, and this gives her feelings of control and independence; whilst at the same time it can be suggested that Carla is in many ways, ‘out of control’, and her life has little sense of direction, structure or purpose.

 To consider options about working with the family, it is helpful to briefly consider how the framework can be applied to understanding Carla’s relationship with her mum. First, Sarah has lost her parental ‘authority’ with Carla, and is unable to effectively act to get her to change her behaviour. When she does try to impose her authority, Carla responds with oppositional power of her own and she will escalate situations. Sarah then either backs down and reinforces the way that Carla will exercise this oppositional power in the future as she knows it works, or Sarah escalates her own responses and they end up in a confrontation, like the time Sarah slapped Carla. This kind of excessive exercise or abusive power relation only serves to deeper the fractures in their relationship, and Sarah’s guilt, alongside the threat of social worker involvement, means that she will be more likely to back down in the future. Also, Sarah will often try to exercise consensual power and negotiate, bargain or plead with Carla, but as Carla is not receptive to this consensual power or just uses it to get what she wants rather than it being mobilised towards shared goals, these kinds of power relations are ineffective. Overall, this reflects the very difficult circumstances Sarah and Carla face, and the seeming lack of options to Sarah in effectively parenting Carla, leading to these power relations eventually becoming insecure, and Sarah at times giving up trying. This kind of approach also offers a relational and dynamic, interactive explanation of the power relations that occur in Sarah and Carla’s relationship, rather than a singular, causal account.

Within a context of the mapping onto the framework I have presented here, to begin with there are significant concerns about Carla’s safety and welfare, and family wellbeing with the potential for the breakdown of family relationships. This would place Carla towards the upper end of the vertical axis of this framework, and then it is a case of exploring potential options and ways forwards. To begin with, what this example illustrates is how circumstances where young people at risk of harm primarily through their own actions and vulnerability can sit awkwardly within child protection systems designed predominantly for investigating and acting upon concerns about abuse and harm (Smith, 2008b). In this situation, there is a limited amount that statutory authority exercised as leverage achieves to keep Carla safe, as Sarah is already trying to do so, and Carla does not care about this authority. This is not to say that such authority is entirely ineffective, and in this situation, a Child Protection Plan may be helpful in drawing all agencies working with the family together and making sure that there is a clear plan for how concerns about Carla’s safety and wellbeing will be addressed. This kind of statutory authority may also be required to try and compel Sarah to continue to act to try and safeguard Carla by looking for her when she is missing, and contacting the police; or indeed by considering the option of placing Carla in care, should something happen and her vulnerability to harm and exploitation should spiral.

 In considering the options for working with the family, the main thing here is to consider how Carla may be experiencing oppressive and abusive power in the form of abuse and exploitation; and to be robust in tackling this through statutory authority and working with the police to try and find out who the man Carla is staying with and tackle this using strategies to try and disrupt young people going there. More generally however, increased authority and challenge towards Sarah or Carla is unlikely to be helpful and may well push either or both of them away from professionals. To effectively support the family and try to keep Carla safer, a social worker needs to try to work with them. This is to mobilise resources through negotiated and informal power. This would be to draw on some authority and be persistent in trying to engage with Carla and build a relationship to understand her life and her experiences better. It may also be helpful to recognise that as a social worker, you may not be best placed to do this because of your statutory role, and that another professional such as a youth worker may be in a better position to engage with Carla. With Sarah, the ideas of the framework of power advanced here can be applied through a range of power relations, and drawing upon a combination of negotiation, strategies of influence, relational authority, cooperation, negotiation, mediation and compromise to understand how she feels and her experiences, and to offer guidance, support and challenge facilitated through more cooperative dynamics. This would also involve some aspects of collaboration and getting to know Sarah in her own right and not just as Carla’s mother.

This would be to try and shift Sarah from a position of perceived powerlessness and an ability to act to explore different options and ways of doing things. This would be to build on her authority as a parent by getting her to be assertive in challenging Carla’s behaviour and establishing her right and responsibilities to parent Carla, without this leading to conflict. Here, again professional guidance and support would be essential to work with Sarah to prompt her to explore different ways of managing situations to avoid escalation, but without ‘giving in’ to Carla. This would also be about cooperation and negotiation to develop shared goals with Sarah and Carla that all parties can work towards. Another feature of this work would be to try and get Sarah and Carla to reframe their relationship, and remember positives and good times, and how they can have collaborative relations even though things are difficult. This work could move on to exploring their deeper relationship issues, with you as a social worker acting as a mediator between them and getting them to talk to each other in a meaningful way. Child protection in this instance, through a resolute focus on negotiating complex power dynamics, could help Carla and Sarah find new ways of being together, and to support Sarah to feel able to effectively respond to Carla’s behaviour.

**Conclusion**

In presenting this framework, I have sought to develop an approach to help social workers explore how they make decisions about power and exercise power in relationships with children and families. This has been to encourage an approach that is continually questioning power, and always mindful of the significance of child protection interventions into family life. It is a framework to capture the multifaceted, dynamic and interactive nature of power, and to consider how it can be understood and engaged with as an ethical and normative concept. I have suggested that this framework has two main functions in practice, and sought to illustrate these functions through developing the case examples considered across this study to their – messy and uncertain, as is the nature of child protection practice – conclusions.

First, I consider how the framework can be used as a tool in case formulation and case management, and the mapping of power relations, potential courses of action, and complexities about the exercise of power in practice. Second, it is a framework for critical analysis and reflection on power, to explore how power is a feature of family life and relationships, and an essential feature of learning to do social protection, and how we positions ourselves within the wider organisational and social contexts of child protection. This framework offers both key concepts and is prescriptive in offering specific ideas about what good practice in exercising power in child protection consists in, but it is also exploring how child protection practice happens in ways that are often uncertain and where ideal solutions are not possible. Instead, this approach is about bringing out these tensions so that they may be subjected to proper critical scrutiny.

**Conclusion:**

**Power and Critical Practice in Child Protection**

**Developing a Critical Framework of Power for Child Protection Practice**

I started this thesis wanting to explore how social workers understand and engage with power in child protection, drawing on my experiences as a social worker to critique existing conceptual and theoretical approaches to power, in particular those found in anti-oppressive practice. The intention of this study was to develop concepts and ideas about power that could be applied towards good practice, and to think through both specific circumstances and our practice in its wider contexts. This led me to focus on developing a conceptual and theoretical framework of power for child protection practice.

I have argued that a framework of power is for child protection is needed because it provides a foundation for critical reflection and analysis as a central feature of both decision-making and the relationships social workers have with children and families, and this defines how child protection interventions happen and how they are experienced. A critical framework is thus about advancing analytic and reflective practice, and promoting respectful and collaborative relationships with families whilst recognising the need for authority in child protection. In developing a critical framework, I also wanted to explore the options and potential for practicing as a social worker in ways that are focused on enabling people, establishing meaningful human connections and promoting social justice in the child protection context. This includes situating interventions within the social, political, cultural, organisational, practical and moral contexts of child protection.

 The way these intentions have been addressed is through an extended theoretical and conceptual analysis of child protection practice and of power. I have considered this to be needed and helpful for although there is much discussion and analysis of power in social work theory, there is no integrated analysis of power in child protection, and most general frameworks focus on emancipatory in a way that is unhelpful for rounded critical reflection and analysis that includes the central authoritative dimensions of the child protection role. This is what I have sought to do here by drawing together a range of themes and subject areas.

First, I have sought to bring out the key themes and tensions of power in child protection through an historical analysis, and using this to develop an overview of the contemporary contexts of child protection. Second, I have analysed the epistemological and sociological basis for child protection: and used this analysis to examine how the construction of knowledge in child protection work. I have then gone on to explore key sociological and philosophical ideas about power to draw together the theoretical and conceptual foundations for a framework of power. The study then turned to analysis of good practice in respect of power in child protection, and importance of the relational dimensions of power.

This analysis of theory and research on power has then been drawn together to construct a framework where I have sought to develop a series of concepts to help understand and engage with power in child protection practice. The foundation of these ideas has been the idea of power as sitting across a spectrum of consensual, and oppositional and hierarchical relations, encompassing a range of forms, strategies and dynamics in between. This is connected to a spectrum of power relationships and dynamics drawing together authority and partnership in child protection. With authority and partnership mapping across the spectrum of consensual, and oppositional and hierarchical power advanced, the framework I introduce here explores how power can be exercised in more or less imposed, authoritative and coercive ways, and can be a cooperative and collaborative force.

Power can also be a property of both formal systems and processes, and informal and relational. This kind of both/and, singular and multiple, nuanced approach is also helpful in advancing different kinds of moral and social concepts of power. In this framework what I have tried to do is to provide an overarching set of ideas for morally and socially engaging with power, and doing so in child protection where power can be constructive, enabling and protective, and repressive, dominating and unsafe. The aim has been to reflect the complexity of the territory when it comes to engaging with power in decision-making and relationships in child protection.

In developing this framework I have focused on some topics, especially around decision-making and working with families, which has meant others have been largely left to the side. Decisions about the omission of these topics have been taken in order to provide a cohesive line of analysis that is focused on how power is exercised and experienced in child protection practice with children and families, rather than trying to cover all areas of analysis at the expense of depth and cogency. Two particular topics that are not covered in detail here are power in inter-professional relationships and multi-agency systems, and power in the organisational cultures of child protection agencies. I have sought to argue that professional and organisational culture plays a key role in understanding power in child protection, and should be central to any critical reflection and analysis on power, and whilst there is not a sustained engagement with these topics I hope to develop this aspect of the framework in future through extending the concepts of power explored here to the organisational and inter-professional arenas. The framework developed here and the analysis leading up to it also does not consider overall trends and data about how specific kinds of legal and organisational powers are exercised across child protection systems. This is because my focus here is on critical engagement with power in practice rather than this kind of wider examination of child protection systems. Further, though power relations within family life are discussed in chapters four and five, there remains more to be said about this. The framework as it is developed does not fully address the vagaries of power across different kinds of family connections and relationships.

The strengths of this framework lay in how it helps us to understand the ways that power can have primary functions and effects, but also is a multifaceted, dynamic and interactive and phenomenon, which can be exercised in significant and overt ways but also can often be subtle and informal. This is to develop a more nuanced and textured view of the forms of power relations in child protection take, and how power contributes to and is enacted in practice through decision-making. It also helps us consider different kinds of ethical and social perspectives on power, and how these can frame our understanding of child protection interventions and the role of power. The framework looks to offer a structure for engaging with these things, and a vocabulary for unpacking and further exploring power relations. This is a framework that is about reflecting the tensions and challenges of power in child protection, and that seeks to draw these points out, and to support social work reflection on the multiple power dynamics at play in decision-making and in professional relationships with families.

**Future Directions in Research and Practice**

In discussing the outcomes and contributions of this study, it is pertinent to also consider future directions for research and practice. As a framework that is intended to be used in practice, the future directions of this study will be grounded foremost in its potential application. The clearest indications of the usefulness and contributions of the framework of power will therefore lay in whether or not it is something that can be used by social workers, and by other involved in managing and developing child protection practice.

Given this, the framework presented here is open to continued reinterpretation and reconstruction in practice. From my perspective as a practitioner, my own critical reflection and practice is not only informed by this overview – and is something that I endeavour to apply in my day-to-day work – but it does simultaneously reform how I see these ideas and how they can be used. For example, one idea that my current practice in my team draws upon consistently is how families feel able to ‘buy into’ professional intervention, and there have been instances recently where in order to help families make longer-term changes you have to be willing to go with family’ members views and narratives in a way that can run counter to your professional perspective about what is in a child’s best interests. Properly analysed and planned, this idea fits into the framework, and has been applied in the concept of ‘conciliatory actions’. This has been a relatively recent addition. This kind of approach, using experiences of practice to continually develop theory, is to apply critical reflection to construct and reshape knowledge, and to use it as a tool for practice but also a research method (White, 2001; Fook, 2011b).

 In addition to the continued learning and development of this framework in practice, I also want to consider future directions in terms of empirical research. As I discussed when introducing this thesis, there is significant scope and use for empirical research on power in child protection. However, my judgment at the start of this study was that before embarking on any empirical work, I felt it important to develop a clear framework and map of the issues – not only as a practitioner, but also as a researcher. Having now reached the point of having developed a conceptual and theoretical framework, the next step for me is very much to undertake this research. There are three broad areas of research that are of particular interest to me, and are linked to the enquiries undertaken in this thesis.

First, I want to test the framework of power developed here. This is to explore whether it is something that really can help social workers to understand and engage with power as a complex phenomenon, and whether the framework fulfils its stated aims as a tool for case formulation and case management, and critically engaging with and reflecting on power. Second, this is connected to questions about what social workers want in terms of engaging with power, and how practitioners can develop ways of exploring and sharing good practice about power from the ‘ground up’. This could be to particularly think about ways that the ‘micro-politics’ of power – the significant or small and subtle things that social workers do on a day-to-day basis – can be drawn out and disseminated, and how social workers can learn from one another’s experiences. This would seem an area of research that would be ripe for participatory or action research approaches that are shaped by social workers themselves (McIntyre, 2008). To return to points about how ‘practice wisdom’ is central to developing knowledge and critically engaging with power, this kind of research could also involve the analysis and sharing of this kind of experiential, and critically reflective and reflexive, learning.

Finally, there are more specific areas of research that I intend to move on to once this thesis is completed as ways of extending the depth or scope of this research on power in child protection. There are a number of themes in child protection that I would like to study, and to use the framework developed here to structure further enquiry and analysis into how power is exercised in practice. Some examples that particularly interest me include: the use of Section 20 powers by local authorities in England – although this has already changed significant recently following changes in case law; the exercise what I have called here informal authority; and the ways that the child protection system works and interventions occur with older young people, including in particular when their behaviour puts them at risk of harm. There are also two topics that I now will now consider in more detail.

**The Interactive and Subtle Dynamics of Power**

One area of research about power that I have referred to throughout this thesis is the interactive and often subtle ways that power functions in relationships. The framework developed here has been intended to offer an analysis of power in relations between social workers, children and families as a dynamic force that is exercised in different ways and has multiple contextual influences on what happens.

 This area of research into practice would be highly relevant to understanding child protection practice and exploring the use of power because the finer details of what is said and done in the practice of child protection is still an emergent area of study (Cooper, 2008a; 2008b; Ferguson, 2014a, 2014b). The detail of the functions and effects of power, and the ‘micro-politics’ of relationships would be of significant interest in developing understandings of how child protection practice happens and is experienced. The framework I have sought to develop here could offer a theoretical and conceptual foundation for this kind of study. Empirical research observing social workers, children and families would help us understand whether social workers are able to manage these power dynamics productively, and how they could do so. This could include considering seemingly minor forms of action and communication and how these express power in significant ways (Smith, 2008a).

 A key feature of this research into power in the doing of child protection, as discussed in chapter four, is communication; and how different parties both communicate about power and communicate power in what they do. There have been some interesting studies of the detail of communication in child protection. This includes the experimental actor-interview based design adopted by Forrester et al. (2008a), and in-depth studies of forms of communication in meetings between professionals and families, such as Cooper’s overview of an interview between a social worker and a parent (Cooper, 2008a, 2008b), White and Taylor’s work on the socially constructed nature of meanings and moral judgements (Taylor and White, 2000, White, 2003) and the work of Hall, Slembrouck and others into communication and discourse in child protection (Hall and Slembrouck, 2001, 2009; Hall, et al., 2006, 2013). I am keen to develop a further understanding of this field and these approaches to research into communication and meaning, and especially to use this as a basis for exploring how social workers, children, parents and family members use different kinds of strategies of power to exercise authority and work cooperatively, and how this is often found in different kinds of speech acts, discourses, gestures and styles of communication.

 The foundation of this kind of research is the idea that what social workers do when they work with families in order to exercise protective power is highly skilled. It involves exercising authority and challenging families when required, but it is also often about doing this in careful and empathetic ways, and finding ways of working with families and understanding with them how changes can be made. These communication and conversational skills take time and experience to develop, and the things that work in one situation do not necessarily work in others. Social workers have to be experts at thinking on their feet, and using reflexivity to constantly develop and react to what is happening. This research into communication therefore links into the themes I have developed here about critical reflection and reflexivity. Another aspect of the research agenda I propose is to explore what strategies, styles of communication and speech acts help to manage the exercise of power in the most constructive ways. A possible approach to research in this area could be through discourse analysis to try and understand patterns of communication and meaning that reflect power relations. The concepts and analytic categories that have been established here in the framework of power I develop could be used as helpful a starting point for this kind of analysis.

 This research into specific conversations or interactions between people is closely connected to research into how power is more broadly communicated in the doing of child protection work. This involves the fundamental physical and embodied aspects of communication, and how it is not simply what is said, but also how and where communication happens. This incorporates everything from body language to seating positions to movement during meetings and home visits. This would further contribute to the research agenda discussed above about the acts and interactions that comprise the doing of child protection work. This kind of research into power should, if possible, also be about observations of practice, and attempts to explore the phenomenological experience of how power is exercised and experienced. The set of concepts and categories developed in the framework presented here could contribute to organising the analysis of these processes.

**The Removal of a Child from their Family**

A second area of empirical research that I will look to develop from this study is with regard to the exercise of power in the removal of a child from her or his family. It is crucial that attention is given to this in understanding power in child protection given how it is such a significant and consequential course of action, and is one of the most potent uses of power by any public authority. It is also a redolent image of child protection, and closely associated with the public perception of social workers and child protection practice (Ayre, 2001; Pond, 2011). The removal of a child is something that I have sought to address here in relation to understanding this as an area of child protection practice where power is exercised in a highly hierarchical and oppositional way, where social workers have to be closely attentive to the boundaries between the exercise of legitimate authority and the excessive or oppressive authoritarianism. This is foremost about proportionate and rigorous decision-making, and how social workers relate to a family in dealing with such an emotive and upsetting issue. From the perspective of the framework I offer here, further, the exercise of power to remove a child is a clear exercise of oppositional and hierarchical power, yet social workers can still look for opportunities to work cooperatively, and in ways that look to maintain relationships.

There have a small number of informative studies into parents’ experiences of care proceedings (Mason and Selman, 1997; Freeman and Hunt, 1998; Alpert, 2005; Smeeton and Boxall, 2011). However, there is relatively little other analysis research into the decision-making and practice that occurs in respect of the removal of a child from her or his family. The complexities of empirical research in this area are clear, with there being significant ethical and practical challenges about how research into circumstances where a child has been removed from their family could be conducted. These challenges include the emotional impact of research in such an already highly charged setting; and, obtaining agreement for and access when doing research in such a sensitive area, where what happens is so consequential for families and where local authorities may be open to criticism. There is potential for research to be conducted though: for example based on an exploration of how removal happens as a decision and course of action, or analysis of decision-making during Care Proceedings. I am especially keen to study what shapes social worker’s decisions to seek the removal of a child, and how different options are considered; how decision-making thresholds are applied in different circumstances, and who makes these decisions. This links to the framework I have developed here in relation to the ethical use of power, and exploration of decision-making and consideration of the options when it comes to exercising power.

 If the ethical and practical challenges could be negotiated, for example by a study design that explored events a substantive time after they happened to mitigate the emotional impact, or that focused on social worker experiences only, I would also be keen to undertake empirical research on relationships between social workers and families at this high end of oppositional and hierarchical power in child protection. This would be to better understand how it is that power is exercised in these circumstances, and what does and does not appear to make a difference to people’s lived experiences. It would also be helpful to explore what it is that made a difference in those situations where similar legal powers have been exercised, and the extent to which relationships and social worker style effect these outcomes.

**Putting Power at the Heart of Child Protection**

In coming to a close, I want to return to the contributions of this thesis to knowledge and practice. As I discussed back at the start of this thesis, there is already a wide range of theory and analysis that either directly or indirectly deals with power in child protection. There is not, however, anything that draws together ideas and concepts of power into a holistic framework that can be applied to practice, or to help understand and engage specifically with power in child protection. First and foremost therefore, the contribution of this thesis lies with the framework of power developed: which is designed to be applicable to practice and something that social workers in child protection can pick up and use, and also looks to advance theory and research on power through developing a way of structuring analysis of power in child protection, and concepts and ideas to question and unpack notions of power as they are currently used.

As discussed in chapter five, there are two central practice functions of the framework. First, it is a tool for case formulation and case management. It is something that can be used to consider how power has been exercised in the past, and could be exercised in order to work effectively to keep children safe. This is to help social workers critically reflect on and analyse different potential courses of action and possibilities in particular circumstances. This is not to suggest that there is necessarily a right route that social workers should follow every circumstances, but it is helpful to map the different options and their strengths and drawbacks. Second, this is a practice framework for critical engaging with and reflecting about power. The framework offers concepts and ideas to help social workers to structure their thinking about power, but also to question and unsettle notions of power. This is to support continual critical engagement with power in family life, how social workers exercise power in different ways as individual professionals in specific organisational and professional contexts, themselves, and the tensions and value conflicts of child protection.

This then connects to the wider contribution of this thesis to knowledge and the development of theory. The primary contribution of this thesis lies in the critical framework of power developed, but each of the constituent sections of study which contributed to the development of the framework is also intended to offer a critical synthesis of the literature and to explore new directions and ideas about power in child protection. In chapters one, two and four, I considered how power is central to the functioning of child protection systems, how social workers are able to exercise power from within those systems, and how they do so in decision-making and relationships. I have sought to offer particular distinctive contributions in this analysis through reconsidering how power is a defining feature of the tensions and value conflicts of child protection; through the use of pragmatism an epistemological and sociological foundation for child protection systems and decision-making; and in the development of the ideas about conceptualising relations of partnership and authority across a spectrum of consensual and oppositional / hierarchical power. In chapter two, I have looked to develop an analysis that builds on key sociological and philosophical ideas, and perspectives in the social work literature, but that also offers a distinctive focus on theory building and concepts specifically for child protection practice.

Overall, the point which draws together and really captures the crux of this study and its contribution to knowledge and practice is that it is about putting power at the heart of child protection. This thesis has developed a framework that recognises that power is absolutely fundamental to the doing of child protection practice. From its clear functions in big decisions about issues like adoption and the removal of a child, through to where a person sits and their body language, power effects what social workers do and how child protection interventions can shape children’s and family’s lives. Good practice in child protection demands a thoughtful and just approach to power: one that draws in the complexity and challenges of what social workers do and the lives of the people they work with, and that does not seek singular positions or easy answers (Taylor and White, 2005; Ferguson, 2008; Munro, 2011b; Smeeton, 2012). The critical analysis of power in this thesis seeks to move beyond either/or positions. The exercise of fair and judicious power in practice requires that social workers are not simply authoritative, ‘streetwise’ and challenging, and do not seek to simply ‘rescue’ children from their families, nor that they just see themselves as a helper, ally and advocate, there to work with and support families; rather practice should remain engaged with the constant challenges of seeking to protect children and put children and their families at the heart of this process. Power in child protection can be about difficult and life changing decisions made for children, but it is also about, where possible, working together with families, and recognising that the stresses and challenges they experience, including those created by child protection interventions. Good practice in child protection in respect of power is questioning, exploring different options, respectful yet uncertain, and curious. And it is about always undertaking child protection practice with an approach that is founded on empathy, respect and recognition of children’s, parent’s and family member’s lived experiences.

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