

The construction of gender in child protection social work

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SUMMARY

The thesis is a discussion of child protection, gender relations and social work culture, the focus being the construction of men and women clients in the occupational culture of the social work office. The empirical basis is an ethnographic study of a child and family social work team in the UK, combining methods of participant observation, in-depth interviews and documentary analysis. The thesis structure is a conventional one. There is a review of the context of the study in theory and policy, a discussion of research methods, five empirical chapters, a theoretical discussion, and a conclusion that tackles the question of relevance to social work practice. The key theoretical perspectives are contextual constructionism and occupational culture as discourse. It is argued that while the concept of patriarchy is pertinent to the topic of the occupational construction of gendered clients, a post-structuralist understanding of the culture of the social work office most usefully explains the presence of multiple gendered discourses.

The ethnographic data show that client masculinity tends to be viewed negatively (men as a threat, as no use, as absent, as irrelevant), although there are also contrary discourses (men as no different, men as better than women). The defining discourses identified in relation to women clients are women as oppressed, women as responsible for protection, and women as making choices. The selection of child protection priorities is found to be highly gendered, the specific example in the local authority studied being the targeting of the physical neglect of children, a decision that increases the scrutiny of mothering. There is discussion in the thesis of the application of social work knowledge and values in practice. There are found to be tensions between the individual and the social, with implications for social work practice with men and women clients.

Declarations

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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This thesis is the result of my own investigations. Other sources used are acknowledged in explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

I find the men, er, a lot of macho about the men – the men are arrogant, very opinionated..... I don't deal with the men in a lot of cases, mainly with the wives, but that's often the case in any area, as men are less susceptible to social work (a social worker quoted in Pithouse, 1998: 134).

I had no worries about the difficulties of translating theory into practice; I was not suffering from overload or burn-out common to social workers who had been any length of time in the work; and I received excellent support from the team and allied agencies It was with some confidence, therefore, that I began retrospective analysis into the outcomes of my investigations and interventions for these families. This confidence quickly gave way to dismay as I discovered that the progress of the families through the child protection system was depressingly familiar and predictable. Despite all the favourable circumstances in which I was practising, I had unconsciously operated all the filters which serve to legitimate male authority over women (Milner, 1993: 56-57).

The author of the second of these excerpts, Judith Milner, is describing her experience of doing child protection social work as a feminist with a well-developed knowledge base in relevant research and social scientific theory. She found that despite her feminist perspective on her job, she had persisted in working in such a way as to make mothers responsible for protecting children, even where it was clearly men (fathers or mother's partners) who were the original cause for concern. She asks 'how.... is it that I spent most of my time.... working with mothers, particularly single mothers and ignoring fathers?' (Milner, 1993: 48-49). She seems genuinely surprised that a feminist consciousness did not change her practice. It is this persistence of gender bias in child protection social work, despite the increasing influence of anti-oppressive rhetoric in the profession, that the thesis sets out to explore. There is existing commentary on how the stages of child protection procedures serve to screen out men and scrutinise women (Milner, 1993; O'Hagan, 1997; O'Hagan and Dillenburg, 1995). My intention is not to repeat this inquiry, but rather to examine gender discourse in the occupational culture of a child care social work team.

1.1 Social work and the scrutiny of mothering

Social Services Departments are responsible under the Children Act 1989 for helping children in need and protecting children who are likely to suffer significant harm. They work both with families who have requested help and with those who have not. Many commentators on the work of Social Services Departments have discussed the tendency, referred to above, for social workers to focus almost exclusively on engaging with women in situations where there are also men around in the home (see, for example, Parton and Parton, 1989; Hooper, 1992a; Milner, 1993; Farmer and Owen, 1995; O'Hagan and Dillenburg, 1995; Swift, 1995; Parton *et al*, 1997; Edwards, 1998; Edleson, 1998; Daniel and Taylor, 1999). Farmer and Owen's recent study of child protection practice (1995, 1998) has showed that in two parent families, the focus of intervention tended to switch from abusing father-figure to the mother and to general child care and support. O'Hagan and Dillenburg (1995) label this process 'the abuse of women by avoiding men'. They observe that this process is documented, either explicitly or implicitly in the large majority of the high-profile child death enquiries, including those in to the deaths of Maria Colwell (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974), Jasmine Beckford (Brent, 1985), Kimberly Carlile (Greenwich, 1987), Tyra Henry (Lambeth, 1987) and Sukina Hammond (Bridge Child Care Consultancy, 1991).

Various reasons for this process are discussed in the social work literature. A dominant idea is that abusive men aggressively resist any intervention, and social workers avoid confronting them out of fear (Milner, 1993). My research sets aside questions of parental behaviour, and instead examines what social workers believe about their men and women clients, and how they respond to them. There does not seem to have been any qualitative study of this aspect of gender in child protection. This is a gap that this research hopes to fill. I conducted an ethnographic study of a child care social work team in the UK. The research focused on the ways in which social workers construct their adult clients as gendered, in relation to child protection cases in particular.

This failure to engage men is usually not seen in the social work literature as an issue of injustice to men, but rather as an injustice to women. It is not usually claimed that men are missing out on a supportive service (social work as empowerment, or even as welfare provision), but rather that women are bearing the brunt of state scrutiny of

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parenting. This emphasis perhaps reflects the current investigative climate of child and family social work (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995) and the critiques of social case work as based on social control (Bailey and Brake, 1974).

The publications cited above on the gendered nature of child protection provide thorough discussions of the gendered policy and practice frameworks of child and family social work. Some are based on the authors' practice experience and review of the social work literature (Parton and Parton, 1989; Milner, 1993; O'Hagan and Dillenberger, 1995; Edleson, 1998; Daniel and Taylor, 1999). Others are rooted in the authors' own empirical research in social service organisations (Farmer and Owen, 1995, 1998; Swift, 1995; Parton *et al*, 1997; Edwards, 1998) or historical records (Gordon, 1988; Tice, 1998). Some discussions of the gendered social work process have, therefore, been based on detailed observation of social work culture. The historical research of Gordon and Tice (both studying records from East Coast USA) is specifically about gender in social work practice, with child protection featuring large. However, none of the contemporary studies of Edwards, Farmer and Owen, or Parton *et al* was designed with gender in child protection work as its main focus. Swift's study concentrated on gender issues, but with specific reference to the construction of the category of 'child neglect', rather than also including institutional categories of 'abuse' to allow consideration of child protection more generally. The aim of my research is to build on this work, by conducting a qualitative study of one social work team to explore the construction of gender in all categories of child protection work, the analysis of which may generate some helpful sociological ideas about the problem.

1. 2 Research perspectives

My interest in the topic stems from an ongoing interest in social work with men (Scourfield, 1998; Scourfield and Dobash, 1999), from my encounters with child care social workers during my own time as a social work student and probation officer, and also from having a partner who worked in a child protection role for four years. In researching this topic, I am motivated by the belief that the failure to engage men should be seen as a problem. An assumption on the part of social workers that women will do most of the caring for children might be expected within a society that is structured

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according to this assumption. It might also be a realistic reflection of the division of labour in client families. The failure to engage men perhaps goes beyond this, though, since even where men are identified as abusers, it is often women whose parenting becomes scrutinised.

The relevance of the study to considerations of justice perhaps needs further explanation. The research set out to deconstruct the occupational culture of social work and explore the gendering of the child protection process. This exploration was not intended to be an evaluation in the sense of commenting on whether or not the social workers were constructing gender 'correctly'. I took for granted that organisational life is suffused with gender (Witz and Savage, 1992), and aimed to study the detail of this in the social work office through ethnography. The outcome of the research will not be a list of things that social workers need to change. At the same time, such research cannot be value-free. Inevitably the researcher brings assumptions which frame the design and the process, and a reflexive approach demands that these should be made explicit. In the case of this research, there are inherent assumptions both about gender and about statutory childcare.

Fox Harding (1997) has outlined the main paradigms in considerations of child care policy: laissez-faire and patriarchy, state paternalism and child protection, the modern defence of the birth family and parents' rights, and children's rights and child liberation. Inevitably researchers position themselves somewhere on this continuum. The issue that inspired my research was the concentration of child protection investigation and intervention on women, as an issue of justice to women in that they bear the brunt of scrutiny, rather than as an injustice to men because they are left out. In fact, as the material that follows will show, the picture is a little more complex than that. This is, though, a concern about parents' rights. That is not to say, of course, that children's rights have not been an issue in the research. It is to choose to study aspects of the system which put pressure on women as parents or carers rather than on men. As well as acknowledging my own value base, I have to accept that realistically some of the findings may be read by some people as implying criticism because these issues are politically highly charged in the context of the anti-discriminatory discourse of the last decade or so. The research is not, however, to repeat the assertion above, straightforwardly an

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evaluation of social work practice. Rather the aim is to explore how social workers understand men and women as parents, partners, carers or abusers.

The broad research question, then, is how and why is child protection work gendered. More specifically, I have chosen to look for the answer in the occupational culture of the social work office. This warrants detailed examination because despite the occupational culture being very influenced by the anti-discriminatory social work discourse of recent years (see, for example, Thompson, 1997), there still seems to be a concentration on women and little work with men. There are of course several aspects of gender in child protection work that could be studied. Social workers have their own gendered identities (Featherstone, 1997a; Christie, 1998a); there may be differences in dealings with boys and girls; there are interesting sociological issues to do with the organisation of social services departments, which are very often staffed mainly by women and managed mainly by men. Whilst this is not a study primarily of the dynamics of the organisation, of constructions of children, or of social workers' gendered identities, there will be some discussion of these issues at various points, as they become relevant to the discussion.

The prime focus is on parent clients as gendered through the occupational discourses of child protection social work. I will examine the various gendered discourses that impact on child protection work: discourses of family law, childhood, class and respectability, child abuse and neglect, and social work. Inevitably, a qualitative study of this kind feeds into major theoretical debates, and raises bigger questions than those it immediately set out to answer. This topic raises questions about current constructions of family life; childhood and child abuse; gender, class and sexuality; the transmission of knowledge; and the nature of the gender order.

Cheetham and Deakin commented that amongst the social work research submitted for the 1996 Research Assessment Exercise

there was a significant amount of work on anti-discriminatory and oppressive practice, some of which seemed assertive rather than analytical, and lacking robust theoretical and conceptual underpinning (Cheetham and Deakin, 1997: 440).

The research reported in this thesis has attempted to respond to these words, in recording what social workers say and write in everyday practice, and analysing these in relation to some relevant aspects of social theory. I believe the research can claim

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relevance to practice, not in the crude sense that it will conclude with a checklist for good practice, but in the sense that the reflections are rooted in observation of practitioners at work. I equally believe that an emphasis on the construction of gender in the culture of the social work office is justified. As Pithouse and Williamson argue

engaging users in contemporary welfare cannot be grasped analytically without recourse to the ways in which welfare workers routinely “construct” users through formal theory, policy, practice wisdom, practice evaluation, and their own values (Pithouse and Williamson, 1997: xii-xiii).

Parton (1996) makes a similar argument about child protection specifically. In discussing the limitations of the Department of Health commissioned studies (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995) he has called for qualitative research into child protection as *work*: how decisions take the form they do and how practitioners make sense of child abuse in the day-to-day routines of practice.

1.3 The thesis structure

Before describing in the next chapter the context of the research in policy and theory, I will outline the thesis structure. Chapter two will outline the contemporary policy context of child protection and summarise key recent debates about gender, in particular looking at gender in social work practice. This chapter will also explain my use of the concepts of social construction and occupational culture and summarise ideas about the family and social control. Chapter three will outline the methodological orientation of the work and trace the research process. Chapter four is the first of five chapters that present and discuss in detail the qualitative data. It will provide further context for the discussion on the construction of gender by highlighting some of the concepts that are central to the construction of ‘clienthood’ in child protection work. These are the dominant construction of childhood, the coercive tone of interventions, constructions of class, respectability and the social work ‘patch’, and ideal models of family life.

Chapters five and six in some respects form a central axis to the thesis. They offer overviews of the gendered discourse of child protection work, chapter five focusing on constructions of women and chapter six on constructions of men. Chapter seven offers a specific example of gendered practice by looking at how particular child protection

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problems are given priority in social services departments. The example discussed is that of child neglect. Chapter eight, the last of the chapters that foregrounds the qualitative data, looks at the connection between gendered discourse in child protection and the knowledge and value base of social work. As well as introducing new data, this chapter begins a process of reflecting back on all the empirical chapters, a process continued in chapter nine, which attempts to draw some theoretical conclusions from the study. This is followed by some concluding comments (chapter ten) on the relevance of the study to social work practitioners.

Chapter 2

GENDER, SOCIAL WORK AND OCCUPATIONAL CULTURE: THE CONTEXT IN POLICY AND THEORY

This aim of this chapter is to set the context for the research by outlining its theoretical base and relevant policy developments. The first section of the chapter deals with the policy framework, specifically key aspects of contemporary child protection policy and practice, including an overview of the commentary in the social work literature on gender issues in child protection. The rest of the chapter then sets out the central theoretical assumptions of the research, through discussion of the social control of family life (with some specific reference to child abuse) and theories of gender relations, social constructionism and occupational culture. I shall begin by locating child protection work in its social and political context.

2.1 Child protection policy and practice

Child protection is one of the most contested areas of social policy. The state sets out to intervene in some families to protect vulnerable children, whilst giving due regard to the privacy of families in general. This task is an inherently controversial one, and social services departments are often accused of failure and held up to public scrutiny through well-publicised inquiries (Parton, 1991). This has happened both because social workers are seen to have not intervened enough (the inquiries into the deaths of Jasmine Beckford, Kimberley Carlile and Ricky Neave, for example) and because they are seen to have intervened too much (the inquiries into child abuse investigations in Cleveland, Rochdale and Orkney).

In this part of the chapter I will outline some key aspects of the social and political configuration of contemporary child protection work. I begin with mention of the increasing recognition that child abuse is socially constructed. I then move on to map the late twentieth century shift from child welfare to child protection, whilst emphasising there is still disagreement among researchers (depending on their perspectives) as to whether intervention should be characterised as coercive or supportive. Next I shall

highlight the preoccupation with risk across the personal social services, but in work with children and families in particular. Finally I shall make the connection between the current state of child protection and the dominance of the New Right.

Not surprisingly, child protection has attracted a great deal of comment and research from the academic world. Much of this has been evaluation of the effectiveness of the system (e.g. Department of Health and Social Security, 1985; Department of Health, 1991; Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). More recently there has also been some attention given to the social construction of child abuse. Wattam (1996) points out that this perspective gained official recognition in the influential Department of Health document *Messages from Research*. This document asserts that

Society continually reconstructs definitions of maltreatment which sanction intervention (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995: 15).

Definitions of child abuse are so contested that Corby (1993) claims the only definition possible is that of a decision reached by a group of professionals after considering the circumstances of a child. Attention to the social construction of child abuse has included some very interesting qualitative research into the culture of the social work office and the organisational processes through which cases are constructed and decisions made about children (Wattam, 1992; Dingwall *et al*, 1995; Hall, 1997; Parton *et al*, 1997; White, 1997a; Pithouse, 1998). The chapters that follow will make reference to some of these studies.

It is generally agreed that there has been a shift in emphasis from child welfare to child protection over the last twenty-five or so years (Parker, 1995; Otway, 1996). By the time the Department of Health research studies were published in 1995 (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995), the predominant concern was 'dangerous families'. In particular, sexual abuse had become a major target of investigation (Parton *et al*, 1997). The conclusion of the Department of Health, in their summary of twenty research studies was that 'too much of the work undertaken comes under the banner of child protection' (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995: 54). This view was based strongly on Gibbons, Conroy and Bell's research (1995) which found that six out of seven children referred to the child protection system were filtered out of it without needing to be

placed on a child protection register, and that a high proportion of cases received neither protection nor any other family support service.

This emphasis on investigation of families, at the expense of family support, in response to a mushrooming of referrals alleging abuse, has similarly been recorded in North America and Australia (Lindsay, 1994; Parton *et al*, 1997). It seems there has been an explosion of child abuse referrals, with very many being unfounded or unsubstantiated, or found to be concerns about parenting style rather than harm to children (Parton *et al*, 1997). It is also generally agreed that the child protection system has become more legalistic and bureaucratic (Parton, 1991; Howe, 1992; Otway, 1996), although there has been disagreement about the demise of the 'psy' complex within this legalistic framework (White, 1998a). Most commentators agree that the current emphasis is more on the gathering of evidence than on finding ways to help people change, as in traditional social work (Howe, 1996). Parton (1996) summarises the message of the Department of Health Studies thus:

'What the research seems to demonstrate is that while there is little evidence that children are being missed and suffer harm unnecessarily at the hands of their parents, as implied by most child abuse inquiries, and (intervention) is thus 'successful' according to a narrow definition of child protection, this is at a cost. Many children and parents feel alienated and angry, and there is an over-emphasis on forensic concerns, with far too much time spent on investigations, and a failure to develop longer-term co-ordinated treatment, counselling and preventative strategies' (Parton, 1996: 5)

Not all commentators are in agreement about the tone that contemporary child protection services take in relation to their clients. Whilst Parton is generally of the view that social work has become more authoritarian rather than more liberal, Dingwall *et al*'s (1983) ethnographic research in the early 1980s, described a 'rule of optimism' in operation: the organisational culture was disposed towards expecting families to improve. This research was very influential, being cited by the Jasmine Beckford report (Brent, 1985). White's ethnography (1997a), a decade and a half later, found social workers employing routine scepticism about parental accounts. We could conclude that the tone of child protection changed substantially through the 1980s and 90s. However, Dingwall *et al* (1995), in their postscript to the second edition of their book, maintain that the rule of optimism is still operating, albeit in different ways. Corby (1987, 1991) steers a middle

way here, arguing that social workers are authoritative for the most part, but that the substance of intervention in the long term is fairly liberal. His research found that generally a psycho-social view holds sway with social workers which emphasises the effects on parents of emotional deprivation and a stressful environment, and that social workers believe friendly, supportive surveillance is the best they can offer. The discussion in chapter four on state control and family life will return to this question of liberalism and authoritarianism in child protection work, as will chapter nine.

To follow on from Corby's point about supportive surveillance, Howe (1992, 1996) has argued that mainstream social work is currently focused on the act, rather than the actor, that is, monitoring of observable behaviour rather than therapeutic interventions has become the principle task. Parton *et al's* research (1997) describes a child protection system based on monitoring of parental (which most often means maternal) behaviour, rather than of children, although it is the well-being of children that is officially the *raison d'être* of the system.

Several commentators have argued that a preoccupation with risk lies at the heart of child protection practice. Kemshall *et al* (1997) argue that a categorisation process of risk has emerged as a central organising principle across the personal social services. Parton *et al* (1997) draw on the work of Mary Douglas (1986; 1992) to demonstrate that the concept of risk has become increasingly associated with negative outcomes: hazard, danger, exposure, harm and loss. Douglas points out that the term 'risk' has overtaken 'danger', because danger does not have risk's aura of science and does not conjure the possibility of accurate prediction. She also comments that the major significance of the current emphasis on risk is its forensic functions, which are particularly important in the development of blaming systems. In the light of this risk-blame connection, Parton (1998) argues that audit becomes a key element in responding to the inherent uncertainty of risk. Social workers have to make themselves auditable. In this climate it is not the right decision that is important, but the defensible one. Ferguson's ideas (1997) on child protection in the risk society disagree with this emphasis on constraint and control. He argues that such writings are one-dimensional, and ignore how people actively make themselves the subjects and not just the objects of social processes. He draws heavily on various writings of Giddens (1990, 1991) and Beck (1992) on risk and reflexive

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modernisation, and sees subjects of social regulation as increasingly critical and reflexive with reference to these systems.

Child protection policy and practice also needs to be understood in terms of the recent hegemony of the New Right. The combination of economic liberalism and a strong state (Gamble, 1988) with attempts to strengthen the nuclear family and enforce individual responsibilities have inevitably impacted on the poorest people who are the clients of social workers and on child welfare professionals. Parton (1998) describes a range of new strategies of government, which he terms advanced liberalism, that have had a particular impact on the field of child welfare. These are the extension of market rationalities to domains where social, bureaucratic or professional logic previously reigned; governing at a distance by formally separating the activities of welfare professionals from the local state and the courts; governing welfare professionals by new systems of audit, devolved budgets, codes of practice and citizen's charters; and giving individuals new freedoms by making them responsible for their own present and future welfare and the relations they have with experts and institutions.

It can be argued that much of the political basis of the previous Conservative administration has not significantly altered since the change of government in 1997. Hall (1998) believes the Blair government has failed to reject neo-liberalism. Marquand (1998) argues, however, that although there has been economic continuity, there has also been tangible political change. He sees potential for radicalism as a long-term consequence of devolution. In terms of the welfare professionals, there is yet more regulation in the 1998 White Paper on social services (Department of Health, 1998a) and, despite changes in the NHS internal market, there is no sign of retreat from the marketisation of welfare.

This section has attempted to introduce some of the issues that will be important in any consideration of contemporary child protection. These surface throughout the rest of the thesis, but particularly in chapters four and seven. Having raised some issues of general relevance, I shall next devote some space to the critiques of the child protection system that are the main concern of this thesis: the feminist critiques.

2.2 Gender issues in child protection

This next section will firstly give an overview of the feminist critiques of the child protection system. I will then mention the different explanations for gendered practice in the existing literature and very briefly summarise existing knowledge about men and women as abusers of children, whilst explaining my position in relation to this issue.

Few commentators would dissent that contemporary child protection work maintains a long tradition of focusing on mothering. Tice's historical work (1998) on case recording in child welfare organisations in early twentieth century USA shows the highly gendered history of social work as the policing of the morality of poor families. The excerpt below is her summary of the portrayal of 'malignant clients':

In these menacing accounts, social workers social workers constructed a vast array of portentous signifiers to denote moral and sexual disorder, writing tales replete with signs of women's conduct disorders: vermilion lips and arched eyebrows, ruptured hymens, dirty kitchens, unsupervised children on city streets, liquor bottles, and mysterious men hanging about (Tice, 1998: 15).

The current preoccupation with child abuse as a social problem is often dated back to Kempe *et al's* work (1962) on battered child syndrome. It is telling that this research used a women-only research sample. Times have changed, and second-wave feminism has had a profound impact on the culture of social work, and, to a lesser extent on the family welfare professions in general. The scrutiny of mothering remains, however, a feature of professional interventions, as can be seen in recent research, such as that by Swift (1995), Farmer and Owen (1995; 1998) Parton *et al* (1997) and Edwards (1998).

In terms of the recent history of child protection, the NSPCC's Rochdale Child Protection Unit was highly influential in the late 1980s. For example, their ideas were a formative influence on the official guidelines on comprehensive child protection assessments (Department of Health, 1988). Their *Dangerous Families* text (Dale *et al*, 1986) recommends social workers see their relationship to parents as a 'transference of mothering'. Featherstone (1997b, 1999) has written that this and other similar rhetoric in the child welfare field rest on a misplaced optimism about mothers' natural affinity with child-rearing. Hearn (1990) takes up Dale *et al's* metaphor and points out that an

increasingly investigative and interventionist culture in child protection work could be seen as a move towards social work as the transference of fathering, that is, a traditional patriarchal model of the distant, disciplinarian father.

Contemporary studies of the culture of child protection work show that gendered constructions of women are mainstream organising principles. Parton *et al's* (1997) analysis of Australian data concluded that maternal response was more influential than harm to children in deciding whether or not cases moved into a 'child protection' category. The key process was one of moral categorisation of the mother. Hall *et al* (1997a) show how routine social work case talk appropriates and reinforces cultural formations of motherhood and family life. These formations will also be rooted in class-based assumptions. As Jones (1983), amongst others, asserts, clients of social workers do not represent a broad socio-economic spectrum, but are, in the main, the poorest of the poor working class.

It is often claimed that mainstream child protection practice fails to engage men. O'Hagan's overview article on this issue (1997) asserts that a particular problem is the failure to engage the male partners of women who are ostensibly 'single' parents. Lupton and Barclay (1997) observe that the family welfare literature assumes that fathering will be problematic. Child protection intervention in relation to men has been profoundly affected by the relatively recent discovery of sexual abuse as a social problem. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) describe the dominant view that equates child sexual abuse with masculinity as 'whole gender blaming'.

There is also research on what women clients say about their experience of the child protection process (Hooper, 1992a; Croghan and Miell, 1998). The mothers whose children had been sexually abused who talked to Hooper often wanted help from social services, and even legal action. However, they also often contested the degree of responsibility expected of them, and they resented the stigma and loss of control that could follow intervention, especially where no effective control was exercised against the abuser (Hooper, 1992a: 132). Croghan and Miell interviewed women who had effectively been labelled 'bad mothers' in the course of child care proceedings. They found that attempts to foreground social and economic factors were a consistent feature of mothers' accounts of their dealings with welfare professionals. The women tended to emphasise

the need for practical support rather than personal change. One described her attempt to flee a violent man and the interpretation put on her behaviour by social workers:

I was scared of him. I used to run and grab the baby and move on somewhere else but he'd always find me. That's why they took her away from me. They said it was an unstable life for her just moving from bed-sit to bed-sit. I stood up in court when she was 18 months old and I said, 'Look, it ain't me. He just keeps following me around' (Croghan and Miell, 1998: 451).

Chapter eight returns to this issue of how social workers understand the role of social and economic factors. The topic of gender in the child protection process is, of course, not without controversy. Gordon's historical research (1988) argues for a more complex understanding both of the nature of family violence and the role of child protection services than some feminist accounts have allowed. She stresses the fact that the case records she analysed showed many women asking the authorities to intervene, and that these authorities could be humane and helpful.

2.2.1 Understanding gendered practice

Various explanations have been given for gender bias in child protection work. There is the general critique that the organisations that co-ordinate the work are 'masculinist' (Harlow, 1996; Otway, 1996). Others have concentrated on specific elements of the system that screen out men (Milner, 1993; O'Hagan and Dillenburg, 1995; Farmer and Owen, 1998). On this theme, O'Hagan (1997: 28) writes that 'the structure, guidelines and procedures of the organisation may in fact make it extremely difficult for the worker *not* to avoid men'. Examples of gender bias in specific operations are women attending case conferences and not men, and fewer men attending court, and when they do so, not automatically being called to give evidence (King and Trowell, 1992; Thoburn, 1992, both cited in O'Hagan, 1997).

It is often assumed that social workers have traditional expectations of men and women and a functionalist approach to the family. For example, Maynard's research (1985) found social workers encouraging women to stay with violent men because the nuclear family was thought to be a good thing in itself. Dicks *et al*'s research (1998) on

service providers in ex-mining communities found there was an exclusive concern with male unemployment, although 50% of women were also unemployed. The Western ideology of motherhood has certainly been a dominant influence in the construction of women by professionals. The child welfare industry has historically focused on mothering rather than parenting. O'Hagan and Dillenburg (1995) summarise the ideas, including those from social work theory, that have contributed to the concentration on women in child care social work. Particularly prominent have been the enduring legacies of Freud (e.g. 1924) and Bowlby (e.g. 1953). Their writings on, respectively, the psychodynamics of the mother-infant dyad and the quality of maternal attachment have been interpreted as an argument for the necessity of women being primary carers.

Legal discourse is central to the construction of child protection clients. Child protection work has become increasingly dominated by a legal paradigm in recent years (Howe, 1992; White, 1998a). Both family law and criminal law constitute this discursive field. It could be argued that family law constructs ideal motherhood and criminal law the deviant woman. A consideration of the criminal justice field can illuminate the construction of deviant women within legal discourse. Worrall (1990) outlines how women law-breakers are constructed by the criminal justice system within the ideologies of domesticity, sexuality and pathology: They are represented as family members, as sexual objects, or as sick. As Carabine (1992) has observed, women are also constructed as heterosexual within social policy.

2.2.2 What do we know about child abuse and gender?

Whilst this thesis has not set out to establish any 'truth' about child abuse, the question of who is responsible for the maltreatment of children is a key gender controversy that has to be considered as part of the context for researching gender discourse in child protection work. Different research studies reach different conclusions, and the weight of evidence has to be carefully assessed. Pringle (1995: 40) citing Finkelhor (1984) and Kelly *et al* (1991) claims that 'the most methodologically sophisticated' of prevalence surveys in the UK and the USA have found that about 90% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by men. Some commentators have claimed that too much emphasis on men's sexual abuse can make us blinkered to the possibility of women sexually abusing

children (Elliott, 1993). There is relatively little dissent, however, from the general picture of sexual abuse being far more often perpetrated by men than by women. The evidence on physical abuse is mixed, but indicates less of a marked divergence between the frequency of assaults by men and by women (Martin, 1983). With reference to emotional abuse, Parton (1990) cites Creighton's research (1987) on UK child protection registers to show that more women than men are found to be responsible in this category. She goes on to argue that this can be related to the concentration of services on mothers and the gendered division of labour in the family. Mullender and Morley (1994) have drawn attention to the adverse emotional affects on children of witnessing violence against their mothers from men partners. Although it cannot be taken for granted that this is straightforwardly a problem of men's behaviour, the field of partner violence research being a very contested one (Gelles and Loseke, 1993), I have chosen to side with what I regard to be the majority view on this issue, supported by the most convincing methodology (Dobash *et al*, 1992) namely that men are responsible for initiating the majority of domestic violence.

Child neglect, as Swift (1995) has shown from her study of social work practice in Canada, is essentially a construction of bad mothering. It is overwhelmingly women who are found to have neglected children, because neglect is constructed as a lack of care, and women do most of the work of caring for children (Turney, forthcoming, 2000). Chapter seven discusses this category in detail. Whilst the simplistic equation of child abuse with masculinity has been rightly challenged (Carter, 1993; Featherstone, 1997b), and I would not seek to construct an idealised essential womanhood which is all-caring, there is certainly a great deal of abusive behaviour by men that has a negative impact on children's quality of life. In the light of contested definitions of what is meant by 'abuse', and contested research findings, it is not possible to assert with confidence whether or not men are *more* likely to cause harm to children than women, except perhaps in relation to sexual abuse. But in the context of men being responsible for a significant amount of abuse, it does seem that the weighting of child protection intervention towards mothers is unjust.

Whilst some of the observations above surface at points throughout the thesis, it is in chapters five and six that I provide dedicated analyses of discourses of masculinity and femininity in the social work office. Chapter seven builds on these by focusing on the

construction of organisational priorities in child protection services. Having focused specifically on the existing commentary on gender in child protection, I shall now move back to some of the more general historical and theoretical context for the study: writings on the social control of the family.

2.3 The family and social control

It is important to understand the contemporary child protection system in the light of the broader conceptualising of the state control of family life in the sociological literature; theorising that has not centred on gender, although encompassing important gender dimensions. This involves considering the development, at the end of the last century, of professional intervention in families, with particular reference to the important work of Foucault and Donzelot.

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) charts the transition in penal practice in the last century from the tortures, executions and public confessions of the Classical Age to the modern system of imprisonment and surveillance. He describes how the burgeoning population of industrialising societies provoked fears about the social order, resulting in new measures of social control that he refers to as 'bio-politics'; regulation of the health, welfare and productivity of individual bodies. New forms of knowledge provided discourses for technologies of intervention. Foucault describes the combined forces of these new human sciences (medicine, psychiatry, psychology, criminology) as the 'psy' complex. This powerful discourse created a regulatory framework of 'normalisation'; the spread of specific norms of living.

Donzelot's *The Policing of Families* (1980) relates more specifically to the development of social work (note that the summary of this work that follows draws on Parton's [1998]). Donzelot writes of the birth, in the last century, of the 'social', a discourse that developed in the space between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the state and society. The development of the 'social' saw philanthropists becoming involved in the judicial process in relation to children, and the psychiatric profession influencing the social workers who succeeded the philanthropists, thus bringing the notion of normalisation into the operation of the 'social'. Moralisation, normalisation and coercive intervention combined to form 'tutelage'. Moralisation is the use of material

resources to enable people to overcome moral failure. Normalisation can take place following entry to the family via complaints, which are usually made by women about men. All these elements, moralisation, normalisation and coercive intervention, are alive and well in contemporary child welfare work.

Parton (1998), drawing on Donzelot and Foucault, reminds us that child welfare both interrelates with and is dependent upon a number of other more established discourses, particularly law, health, psychiatry and education. It is inherently ambiguous, filling the gap between civil society, with its allegiance to families, and the state's responsibilities. He writes that social work is

a compromise between the early liberal ideas of unhindered private philanthropy and the vision of the all-pervasive and all-encompassing police or socialist state which would take responsibility for everyone's needs and hence undermine the responsibility and role of the family' (Parton, 1998: 10).

Philp (1979), writing of social work's origins in late 19th century, observes that it emerged in the space between poverty and wealth. Charity work represented the humanity of the privileged to the poor and the essential 'goodness' of the poor to the privileged. Social work came to occupy 'the space between the respectable and deviant' (p96).

There are some explicitly gendered dimensions to the work of Foucault and Donzelot. Donzelot (1980) describes a process of 'government through the family'. In the last century the medical profession enlisted women as accomplices in the disciplining of the family: 'the woman was brought out of the convent so that she would bring the man out of the cabaret' (p40). As Stenson (1993) points out, this focus on the mother was embarked upon in the hope that she would restrain and civilise poor boys and men – still the most recalcitrant and troublesome threats to a liberal social order. Foucault (1984) has described a process he calls the hysterisation of women's bodies, beginning in the last century, which included the giving to women of the biologico-moral responsibility of Motherhood. This process saw the 'creation' of the 'Mother'.

This explicit focus on the regulation of the body represents a new focus in sociological writing. Shilling (1993) and Turner (1996) are amongst the more prominent recent manifestations of this new perspective. It is argued that we now live in a 'somatic society', within which 'major political and personal problems are both problematized in the body and expressed through it' (Turner, 1996: 1), and that there is an increasing

preoccupation with the body in late modernity (Shilling, 1993). Close attention to the representation and regulation of the body is highly relevant to the study of child protection work. The requirement of the child protection system for parental change includes the regulation of women's bodies. Intake of alcohol and drugs is scrutinised, women's sexual behaviour can become a 'concern' and, above all, women are expected to be constantly available for children. As Lupton and Barclay's summary of recent research tells us (1997: 55ff), the work of feeding, cleaning and clothing children's bodies most often falls to women. When the child protection system puts this work under scrutiny it is in effect scrutinising women's performance of body maintenance work. This work is what Foucault (1986: 279) calls 'the permanent and exacting corporal relation between adults and their children'.

The child's body is the object of most state intervention in families, from universal health visiting through to targeted social work investigations. In contrast with the state's relatively low level of intervention when women's bodies might be at risk of harm from male partners' violence, perceived risks to children have, since the 1970s in particular, warranted a high level of state scrutiny. The social control of the body will be a theme throughout the thesis. Chapters five and six consider constructions of men and women clients as embodied, and chapters four and seven discuss the importance of the bodies of children in the culture of the social work office, and the implications of this for adult men and women as clients. Considering the body and social control leads us to debates on the nature of gender relations and gender identities, since feminist scholarship is the arena for some of the key debates about the status of the body. The section below will introduce some of the key gender debates and again I will attempt to position myself within these.

2.4 What is meant by 'gender'?

Social science perspectives on men and women have developed rapidly over the twentieth century. It is not necessary to attempt a thorough overview here (see Beasley, 1999 for a recent attempt at one), but rather to point up the central debates that form the background to my specific research project. I shall begin by briefly summarising key

developments in theorising gender, before going on to make connections between these debates and the feminist social work literature.

Biological explanations of the differences between men and women were challenged earlier in the century by the idea of sex role socialisation (usually credited to Mead, 1935). This perspective has in turn been challenged on the basis that it is overly rigid and does not take account of non-traditional identities and behaviours that resist the dominant sex role (see, for example, Connell, 1995). An emphasis on gender construction has attempted to provide a more flexible framework, but that too has been recently challenged by theorists who want to collapse the sex-gender distinction of Ann Oakley (1972), arguing that sex is also constructed, and can be seen to 'precede' gender (Delphy, 1993). Feminist studies of gender have arguably reached their most radically deconstructive in the work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993), who conceptualises gender as 'performance'.

These recent feminist writings, informed by post-structuralism and post-modernism, have been a challenge to the notion of patriarchy. This concept refers to men's domination of women in society. Walby's (1989, 1990) account of patriarchy is a relatively nuanced version, although it raised debate at the time of publication (Acker, 1989; Walby, 1989; Waters, 1989). She describes six structures of patriarchy: the patriarchal (household) mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, the patriarchal state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality and patriarchal culture. She argues there has been a shift from private patriarchy based on the household to public patriarchy based in sites such as the labour market and the state. The patriarchy idea has been criticised for not taking account of the power that women can wield against each other. Some authors have stressed the heterogeneity of women, and the importance of other power relations along the lines of class, race and sexuality (Williams, 1989; Brittan and Maynard, 1984; Hill Collins, 1990). Connell's (1987, 1995) framework of gender relations is a sophisticated and multi-faceted one, which uses the notion of patriarchy whilst also allowing for other aspects of power within the sexes as well as between them. He uses the idea of a hierarchy of masculinities, for example. He also allows for the dimension of subjectivity in identity formation.

The concept of patriarchy has to be an important one to consider when studying the regulation of women by a state agency. It may be difficult, however, to maintain any

simple notion of male power and dominance when most child protection social workers are themselves women and there are significant class differences between them and their clients. The chapters that follow use a post-structuralist emphasis on gender discourse. The theoretical basis of this term will be explained in the section on occupational culture below. The recent writings that argue sexed bodies are socially constructed (Gatens, 1995; Daly, 1997; Collier, 1998) will influence the analysis in the thesis in as much as the construction of gendered others will involve the 'imagining' (Young, 1996) of poor men and women clients as embodied. Theorists, such as Butler (1990, 1993) emphasise the fluidity of gender construction. As Bristow (1997) observes, she has been accused of voluntarism, that is, suggesting genders can be made and unmade at will. Bristow himself disputes this criticism, arguing that Butler does not see the performer as standing outside discursive structures. The analysis of my fieldwork will not assume that individual social workers are free to construct their clients as gendered in an infinite variety of ways. I am choosing to research occupational culture, so am necessarily exploring the constraints on knowledge about gender that are imposed by that culture.

If I were to define my use of the term 'gender' in the thesis in one sentence, the definition would be: the differences between men and women as understood by the research participants. This research project is about the occupational construction of gendered others rather than social workers' own gender identities (although clearly these topics overlap, to an extent). It is this dimension of the debates about theorising gender that is central to the research. I use the term 'gendered' often in the thesis (e.g. gendered practice, gendered discourse). It is important to note that this does not refer to differences between men and women social workers. It will be mentioned several times in the chapters to follow that I did not find there to be significant differences in the social work team I studied. When I write that something is gendered I mean it has very different implications for men and women clients.

Gender relations involve power relations, but gender is not, of course, the only power dimension at work in child protection social work. As many commentators have observed, there are also significant dimensions of class, sexuality and 'race' (Jones, 1983; Dominelli, 1997, Brown 1998). Chapter four of the thesis will discuss some of these other power relations as an introduction to the chapters that are centred on the construction of gender. But just as these other power relations are gendered, so also the

reverse is true – constructions of gender inevitably have a class and ‘race’ dimension (Brittan and Maynard, 1984; Skeggs, 1997). So, although gender is not everything, it could be said to be in everything. As Morgan (1996a:71) expresses it, ‘all social situations are gendered although few, if any, are purely a matter of gender’. Gender does not stand alone, but is affected by other social forces and in turn affects these others. Many of the observations made in the thesis are general ones about child protection work; aspects of the organisation of the child protection system that have implications for both men and women. But as soon as we start to think about implications for men and women we encounter ways in which the organisational construction of these clients is gendered. Similarly, observations are made about the theoretical basis of social work, which are not *solely* about gender, but do affect the picture of how men and women are worked with by social workers, and they are worked with as *men* and as *women*, not as sexless or genderless clients. The thesis sets out to correct the tendency in some social work and social policy literature, noted by Oakley and Rigby (1998), of constructing the users of welfare as non-gendered.

Up to a point the debates on sex/gender mentioned above are reflected in the social work literature, although, as Graham (1992) observes, the social work discipline has been rather slow to consider the implications of more recent developments in feminist thought. Early texts, such as Hanmer and Statham (1988) and Dominelli and MacLeod (1989) emphasised women’s common experience of being oppressed by men. More recently, some authors have represented the differences between women within a feminist framework (most notably in the UK see Featherstone, 1997a, 1997b; Featherstone and Trinder, 1997 and in the USA, amongst others, see Sands and Nuccio, 1992).

Not surprisingly, considering the breadth of theoretical influences, there are some very different emphases to be found in the literature on social work with women in relation to child protection. The perspective of many of those who have commented on the tendency to scrutinise mothering is that women are unfairly targeted and that many of the ‘problems’ attributed to them are not real but are the product of social work bias (for example, O’Hagan and Dillenburg, 1995). In opposition to this argument, Wise (1990, 1995) argues that there are often genuine conflicts between the interests of the mother and those of children in child protection work and that social work is rightly

about social control, because vulnerable children often need protection from the adults they are living with. Alanen (1994) has similarly argued that feminism tends to be adult-centric, marginalising the legitimate separate interests of children.

In the last few years, feminist thinking about social work has extended to consider work with men, and similar tensions and outright disagreements can be found in this field (Pringle, 1998). There has been rather more discussion of work with offenders in the criminal justice system (e.g. Newburn and Mair, 1996) than with men across the personal social services (though Christie, 1999, is a recent exception). Arguably the key tension in these writings is between a perspective which incorporates some kind of focus on the difficulties for men themselves of gender identity and one which concentrates on changing behaviour which causes problems for others (women, children and other men). Advocates of the former perspective have been accused of 'letting men off the hook', and advocates of the latter of 'giving men a hard time' (Scourfield and Dobash, 1999).

The terms 'constructing' and 'construction' have already been used many times, not least in the title of the thesis. It has been explained that the concern of the thesis is with the construction of gender in the occupational culture of child protection work, which implies that social constructionism is a perspective that shapes this research. The meaning of such terminology cannot, however, be taken for granted. There are multiple possible versions of constructionism. The next section will outline which version of social constructionism will inform the thesis.

2.5 Social constructionism

The term 'social construction' is generally credited to Berger and Luckmann (1967), but since their influential book was published, the field has greatly expanded. The terms 'constructionist' and 'constructivist' are often used interchangeably, although Payne (1999) argues that constructionism tends to imply a sociological approach and constructivism a social psychological one. Burr (1995) outlines four key assumptions of social constructionism: a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, a belief in the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge, a belief that knowledge is sustained by social processes, and a belief that knowledge and social action go together. As Craib (1997) points out, these assumptions would appropriate the whole of sociology to social

constructionism. More distinctive, Craib argues, are anti-essentialism and anti-realism: the assumption that there is no essence of people that can be objectively known. This contested assumption comprises an ontological statement – there is no essence of people – and an epistemological one – we cannot objectively know things. Atkinson (1995) seeks to separate methodological and ontological precepts, maintaining a position that there exists a material reality, which constrains social constructions:

a methodologically inspired scepticism about what we know and how we claim to know it does not necessarily lead to a nihilistic perspective. It is quite easy to confuse a methodological precept with an ontological position (Atkinson, 1995: 44).

Similarly, Turner (1996) argues it is possible to have a sceptical orientation towards knowledge about the body and also accept the ontologically given nature of the human body. Atkinson in fact prefers the term ‘production’ to ‘construction’ (in relation to medical knowledge). He sees this term as emphasising professional knowledge production as *work*, embedded in social and technical division of labour, grounded in material as well as cultural resources.

Another of Craib’s critiques of social constructionism is that it denies subjective agencies to those it studies. The researcher who studies people around her, and claims they are social constructs, is claiming subjectivity for herself in being able to deconstruct those she studies. This is an interesting challenge to constructionist research. In this case I, a social worker by training and recent experience, am claiming to be able to deconstruct the occupational culture of the social workers I study, whilst simultaneously claiming that their beliefs and their decisions are, to an extent, trapped within that culture. It is possible to sustain this divide on the basis that I am now based in a university, and am therefore able to spend considerable time reflecting on the culture of the social work office at a distance. I also have time to read the reflective writing of others on the topic. Some researchers working full-time as social workers (e.g. White, 1998b) have nonetheless been able to learn critical reflection on their own workplace culture again. Arguably the crucial factor here is, again, connection to external academic support. It is perhaps more difficult for the practitioner researcher who does not have this support to attain a critical distance on occupational constructions.

However, the term 'social construction' will not be used in the thesis to suggest that social workers' beliefs and practices are completely socially determined. I would seek a balanced stance on occupational discourse, as explained further in the section on occupational culture below. Equally, the thesis does not argue that any version of social reality is an equally valid one, without any recourse to material reality and the actual bodily practices of clients. The term 'social construction' remains a useful one because there is considerable scope for different ways of understanding and responding to men and women in relation to child welfare and child abuse. It is these interpretations and responses that the research focuses on. If social problems are socially constructed (Kitsuse and Spector, 1973), and social work is 'social problems work' (Holstein and Miller, 1993), then constructionism is an appropriate research perspective for the study of social work. I am working within what Best (1989) has called 'contextual social constructionism', focusing on the making of claims about social problems, but accepting that knowledge about social context and objective information can help explain how claims arise. So throughout the thesis there will be reference to material reality.

The research is concerned with knowledge about men and women, with the production of that knowledge in the culture of the social work office, and also with the practical interventions that follow. So the concern is with both cognitive and practical construction; the beliefs about clients that are permitted within the occupational discourse, and the consequent interventions. It is, moreover, the construction of others (or Others) that the research has prioritised. As previously stated, the issue of social workers' gendered identities has not been the primary concern, although exploring the occupational construction of clients as gendered should raise interesting questions about the social workers' sense of themselves as gendered. If, indeed, clients are constructed as 'Others', that will enhance our understanding of the social workers identities. Looking at what people think they are not can tell us about what they think they are. As Young (1996; 15) puts it, 'seeing the Other is a form of self-reproduction. Looking at or for the Other (the criminal) we represent ourselves to ourselves'.

I have so far attempted to explain what is meant in the thesis by the often-used terminology of gender and of social constructionism. Two other major sociological concepts remain whose use in the thesis needs to be clarified: occupational culture and

discourse. The following section will outline the use of each of these, starting with occupational culture.

2.6 Occupational culture

Studying occupational culture means putting the emphasis on social work as *work* (Atkinson, 1995; Parton 1996). This emphasis means paying close attention to the effects on what social workers do, and on the beliefs they profess, of the organisation of social services departments, their routines and bureaucracies. It means considering the influence of both the formal and the informal occupational knowledge base. Sociologists have long questioned research (allied to 'trait' approaches to the professions) which describes occupational socialisation as a process of learning an official curriculum. In the introduction to their classic study of the occupational socialisation of doctors in medical school which emphasised the independent culture of the students, Becker *et al* wrote :

We do not consider curriculum or subject matter, in which we have no competence, except as they become objects of attention, interpretation and action on the students' part. (Becker *et al*, 1961: 5).

The work of Becker *et al* (1961), and other interactionist studies, have been criticised by Atkinson (1983) for not taking knowledge seriously enough. This thesis will inevitably have to consider the formal professional knowledge that social workers draw upon, as well as the workplace interactions that translate this formal knowledge into practice. Workplace interaction is an essential element in the construction of gender in the social work office. Ideas about cases are tested out and developed in both formal supervision with managers and informal discussion with colleagues. Various meetings - core groups, case conferences, reviews, team meetings - form the context for decision-making, so interaction is a focus. Pithouse's description of his interactionist orientation is worth repeating, since I share his stated aims:

The aim is to display as fully as possible the ways that the social workers themselves perceive and create their occupational arenathe study focuses on the orderly and mundane way that social workers make sense of their daily tasks and problems (Pithouse 1998:7).

The concept of 'tacit knowledge' is an important one for social work. It refers to the taken for granted 'common sense' notions about the job and about clients that are rarely articulated but which are understood by all. Collins (forthcoming), writing from within the sociology of scientific knowledge, outlines three versions of tacit knowledge: the motor-skills metaphor, the rules regress model and the forms of life approach. He states the case for using the third of these, seeing tacit knowledge as rooted in specific social settings: common socialisation will lead to common solutions to problems. He writes:

If it is the case that the true sources of our beliefs are in large part the social contexts we inhabit, yet we think the sources of our beliefs (including beliefs about the natural world) are something else, then the sources of our beliefs are hidden from us. Our beliefs, then, are based on tacit knowledge (Collins, forthcoming: 4-5).

In the social work literature, the term 'practice wisdom' has a similar, though not identical meaning to the concept of tacit knowledge. Scott (1990) defines practice wisdom thus:

The practitioner 'has a feeling' about a particular case and its likely causes and outcome. Such cases can be understood as the function of 'incipient induction', or lengthy exposure to similar situations through which unconscious associations are established between certain features of cases (Scott, 1990: 565).

There is a risk in collapsing these terms together, and using them as if they are synonymous. Practice wisdom in social work is not necessarily tacit. Some social workers will happily claim to base their practice decisions on 'common sense' and others acknowledge the inherently contested nature of 'social problems work'. Chapter eight will return to these concerns.

The question of how social workers think about cases has been discussed by several authors. Howitt (1992) has described a threefold model of social workers' thinking about cases: 'templating', justificatory theorising and 'ratcheting'. Templating he describes as checking individual cases against a social template to see if they fit a particular pattern. Justificatory theorising refers to the ideas that make it difficult to question decisions already taken. An example would be the central importance of contrition; clients having to accept the social workers' line on an incident, which will often mean accepting

responsibility for harm caused to a child. Ratcheting refers to the tendency of the protection process to move in a single direction, and the difficulty of altering a previous decision. Sheppard (1995) argues that social work assessment should use techniques for analysing qualitative research. In particular, he recommends analytic induction, and he implies an optimistic view that this kind of approach is already mainstream practice. Dorothy Scott's research (1998) found the opposite, that the social workers she studied were 'verificationist' in their approach to cases, looking for evidence to support decisions already taken. There are, of course, organisational limits to what knowledge can be produced about a client. Handelman (1983: 3) has written that social workers build 'a case that "makes sense" within the context of a bureaucratic life world'. The routines and conventions of case talk (Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988) and case recording (Askeland and Payne, 1999) will limit the scope of knowledge production.

Dingwall (1977: 12) distinguishes a model of occupational socialisation as 'enculturation', which implies a process of 'passive internalisation of an external normative order in abstraction from any broader social or historical context' and socialisation as acculturation (as in Becker *et al*, 1961). This latter model is a process by which people who are new to a group work to make sense of their surroundings and come to acquire the kinds of knowledge and conduct which will lead to them being recognised as competent by established members of the group. I too should like to resist the idea that social workers take on an occupational culture through passive internalisation. However, as I shall explain below, my notion of organisational culture does imply constraints on what knowledge and practice are possible in a workplace. Harlow and Hearn's summary of theories of organisational culture (1995) outlines the breadth of different theoretical perspectives that have been applied to the topic. This thesis will use the perspective that Harlow and Hearn label 'culture as discourse'.

2.6.1 Occupational culture as discourse

The concept of 'discourse' has come to be somewhat over-used in the social sciences in the 1990s. A proliferation of meanings are attached to it, and very different emphases can be found within and between different academic disciplines. This thesis will draw on a Foucauldian interpretation of discourse. Whilst narrowing the field of potential

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interpretations, referencing Foucault does not provide immediate clarity, because of the wide range of interpretations of his work. As Ramazanoglu (1993a) points out, those attracted to his work tend to simplify and unify his thought. I will attempt to explain how I understand the application of a Foucauldian notion of discourse to child protection social work, whilst accepting that there are other possible interpretations.

In his overview of modern social theory, Craib defines a Foucauldian notion of discourse thus:

A discourse embodies knowledge (or, rather, what it defines as knowledge) and therefore embodies power. There are rules within a discourse concerning who can make statements and in what context, and these rules exclude some and include others. Those who have knowledge have the power to fix the flow of meaning and define others (Craib, 1992: 186).

The contribution of the Foucauldian idea of discourse to the study of social work has been neatly summarised by White:

Foucault's assertion is that through the medium of language (or discourse) 'regimes of truth' become constructed, which when harnessed to professional power, can function as apparently neutral 'knowledge' and as such are able to circumscribe the activities and formulations of health and welfare agencies (White, 1996: 69-70).

So the activities of social workers are circumscribed by discourse, which defines what can be spoken about and how client problems can be understood. But should we think in terms of one discourse, or many? Philp (1979), analysing social work knowledge as a structuralist, argues that there is *one* fundamental discourse underlying the profession; that of the production of knowledge about people as subjects. Some commentators on Foucault (e.g. Turner, 1996) have described him as a structuralist, drawing on his writings which emphasise the ways in which discourse constrains and limits knowledge. Foucault is more often, however, given the label 'post-structuralist' (e.g. Craib, 1992) because of his recognition of the interplay of multiple discursive elements:

We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies..... Discourse transmits and produces power; it

reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault, 1984: 100)

This brings us to Foucault's understanding of power, which again has been much debated. I am inclined to agree with O'Brien and Penna (1998) that Foucault's view is of power as the shifting and unstable political relations between actors, institution and discourses, rather than the establishment of the total dominance of one group over another. As White (1997b) has reminded us (citing Hoy) Power is, according to Foucault, 'not always suffered, but sometimes enjoyed'. To quote from *Power/Knowledge*,

What makes a power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (Foucault, 1980: 119).

This thesis encounters more than one layer of power relations. There is social workers' disciplinary power in relation to clients, and there is also the question of whether social workers are trapped within professional discourse or have the freedom to select the knowledge they use in their work. Foucault certainly does not lead us towards a view of social workers as trapped within a single discourse. Instead we ought perhaps to think in terms of occupational discourses, and discourses of child protection. Social work knowledge is less a coherent body of knowledge than other professional discourses, medicine for example, but there are nonetheless important discursive elements, some of which might be seen to be in tension with each other (e.g. sociology and psychology).

As Ferguson (1997) reminds us, the writings of theorists of reflexive modernisation (e.g. Beck *et al*, 1994) have had the effect of challenging the idea that expert discourse constrains and controls. These theorists can in fact be seen as anti-Foucauldian (Lash and Urry, 1994: 42 make this observation about aspects of Giddens' work). Giddens (1990: 144) believes that 'technical expertise is continuously reappropriated by lay agents as part of their routine dealings with abstract systems'. Ferguson (1997) is optimistic about the capacity for the clients of child protection services to challenge expert knowledge. I will return to debate this point in chapter nine. The ideas of reflexive modernisation could also be applied to social workers' use of knowledge, however. Social work draws on

more than one expert system: law, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, psychotherapy. Theories of reflexive modernisation perhaps imply that social workers are able to challenge and question these expert systems. The position of this thesis will be that social workers' constructions of clients are to a large extent limited by the discourses of their workplace. This is not to argue that the social work profession is homogenous in its construction of gender or that there is one coherent set of 'official' professional discourses. Clearly social work has a diverse knowledge base and, as chapter eight will argue, lay knowledge is an element of occupational discourse. But the widespread practice of reflexivity is questioned.

Foucault has been criticised for not recognising the importance of subjectivity (e.g. Lupton and Barclay, 1997). In general this would seem to be a fair criticism of his work, although McNay (1992) has argued that his later writings and interviews elaborate a notion of the self. As previously stated, this thesis is more concerned with the culture of the social work office than the identities of individual social workers, so the removal of the subject does not cause too much of a problem for the research. It is argued, for example, that occupational culture to a large extent overrides complex gendered identities. There will be some discussion, however, on the relation between self and discourse in the social work role, and some of the social worker's uncertainties and reservations.

Despite some theoretical opposition to Foucault's work from feminists (see Ramazanoglu, 1993b), post-structuralist feminists (e.g. Weedon, 1997) have built on a Foucauldian notion of discourse to render the fluidity of contemporary gender relations and also the possibility for resistance. The idea that there are multiple gendered discourses allows for recognition of change and shift in the gender order. Also, the Foucauldian understanding of power (see above) can encompass women's resistance to oppression. The importance of discourse analysis to social work practice has been argued by Rojek *et al* (1988), Ellermann (1998) and Parton and Marshall (1998). Others have conducted detailed research into the discourse of social worker-client interaction (Stenson, 1993; Hall *et al*, 1999). Both Jack (1997) and Merrick (1996) have commented on the discourse of child protection, but not on the basis of research in the social work office.

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The use of the concept of discourse in the thesis will not be the socio-linguistic one of Hall *et al* (1997a, 1997b, 1999), although there will be some detailed comment on certain data extracts. Neither is there any claim made that the thesis is an ethnomethodological project. Rather, it is a broad overview of gendered discourses in the case talk and case recording of social workers. In particular, it is a study of the construction of gendered others, for which the concept of discourse is a useful one. As Lupton and Barclay put it:

People are positioned by others in discursive interactions as particular types of individuals. The use of discourse, therefore, is constitutive of the self and of others (Lupton and Barclay, 1997: 9).

I do not draw on concepts from the literature on organisations. There are fruitful possibilities for study of the social services department in terms of organisation sexuality (Hearn and Parkin, 1987) or violence in organisations (Hearn, 1996). Rather than studying the dynamics of the organisation, I have chosen instead to focus on the occupational culture of the social workers as it reflects wider discourse on gender, class, the family, childhood, violence and sexuality. I discuss in the empirical chapters (four to eight) the lay and professional discourses that the social workers draw on in their formulations of clients' lives and the appropriate responses to them. My use of 'discourse' is not restricted to what social workers say and write. It is not the intention to separate 'knowledge' from 'practice'. As Haraway (1992: 111) writes, 'discourse is a material practice'. Where I have heard social workers talking to clients on the telephone, read case recording of actions taken, or observed the forming of decisions in the office, I have reflected on this practice as occupational culture, from the perspective of understanding occupational culture as discourse.

As well as the theoretical debate referred to above between a structuralist notion of a unitary professional discourse and a post-structuralist understanding of multiple discourses co-existing, there is also a variety of semantic usage in academia. The singular term 'discourse' is often used where plurality is meant, the idea being that the existence of several different discursive elements should best be labelled with the more elegant term *discourse* rather than the potentially clumsy *discourses*. I compromise in the thesis, and use both terms. There are times when the singular term is used to mean plurality, in deference to considerations of style. Where the plural *discourses* is used, this is usually to

emphasise the existence of multiple discursive elements. Usually the singular term is used to denote a specific discursive field.

2.7 Conclusion

I have attempted in this chapter to outline what I see as the key policy developments that frame this research, as well as explaining my theoretical base in the writing of the thesis. This has meant drawing out relevant themes in child protection policy. Particularly important were the shift from child welfare to child protection, the preoccupation with risk and the concentration on mothers. I went on to locate the research within the wider picture of the social control of family life, and then explained which aspect of gender relations the research is to focus on. This focus led into more extended discussions of social constructionism and the concept of occupational culture. I ended by positioning myself within a post-structuralist understanding of occupational culture as discourse. Whilst the existing literature on gender issues in child protection offers many helpful insights, there is no example of a research project that has set out to explore the construction of gender in the occupational culture of the social work office. The research on which this thesis is based aims to fill that gap. The next chapter will follow on from this theoretical framing this chapter has provided by explaining the process and methodology of the research.

Chapter 3

RESEARCHING OCCUPATIONAL CULTURE

The existence of competing paradigms of social research and very different traditions of enquiry require any researcher to explain the process of their work and its rationale in some detail. This chapter will discuss methodology and process; the epistemological stance of the study and the relationship between researcher and researched. The intention has been to write about the research in the reflexive tradition. This involves making explicit that every stage of a project, from formulating a research question to publication, is unavoidably affected by the researcher's personal history and social context. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) summarise the notion of reflexivity thus:

Reflexivity ... implies that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them. What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 16).

The chapter is structured chronologically, from design through to dissemination. Although theoretical perspectives are given specific space early in the chapter, there will be references to dilemmas of theory and methodology throughout.

3.1 Research design

At an early stage it became clear that my approach to studying social workers' constructions of gender needed to be qualitative. A quantitative design did not seem appropriate for the research. Evidence already exists from quantitative studies and from child abuse enquiries that men are not usually engaged by social workers (see O'Hagan and Dillenburger, 1995, for a summary of this evidence and also Farmer and Owen, 1995). The aim of my research was to add to the existing literature through building sociological theory about the gendering of child protection work. I aimed for the research to reflect on both formal and substantive theory as defined by Glaser and Straus

(1967). Qualitative research seemed uniquely suited to an attempt to unpick and critically reflect on a process which is already widely acknowledged, though not necessarily well understood. Qualitative methods offer the researcher the opportunity to get beneath what is taken for granted and allow exploration and interpretation of rich detail, complexity, process, meaning and context.

A research agenda of exploring social workers' constructions of gender requires a research design that is appropriate for the different layers of gender construction in occupational culture. Formal occupational knowledge can be studied through analysis of formal documents and, to an extent, in interviews. There is also, in any organisation, tacit knowledge that is gendered. Since, as Altheide and Johnson (1994: 492) point out, this is 'largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances', the research design had to include observation of social workers' interactions.

I decided to carry out a detailed ethnographic case study of a local authority social work office specialising in children's services. The qualitative researcher's justification for detailed focus on a small-scale sample or setting is that 'less is more' (Mc Cracken, 1988), that is, depth of understanding and critical reflection can be gained through concentration on a specific local representation of social phenomena. Ethnographic methods have been used successfully by several researchers to illuminate questions of the process and social organisation of child care social work (Dingwall *et al*, 1983; Corby, 1987; Pithouse, 1987; Wattam, 1992; Hough, 1996; Day, 1997; Hall, 1997; Radcliffe, 1997; White, 1997a; McMahon, 1998). The ethnography involved three elements: participant observation, in-depth interviews and documentary analysis. The idea of this combination was to allow exploration of both formal, public constructions of clienthood and informal, tacit constructions. It was a form of triangulation. I do not use this term to mean a combination of research methods to produce a closer version of reality, in the sense that positivist researchers use it. Rather, I would see a variety of methods as an opportunity to investigate whether different occupational interactions and tasks, and different forms of professional rhetoric for different audiences, can reflect different gender discourses.

3.2 Methodology

Like many ethnographers I aimed for 'thick description', to use Geertz's (1973) oft-cited label. I hoped my reflections on fieldwork would lead to a description of child protection social work setting that would provide theoretical insights as well a readable account of some of the dilemmas of practice faced in routine social work. Although I attempted to embark on the research with a sociological open-mindedness, there were inevitably some theoretical influences, which it is important to acknowledge. As Sara Scott (1998: 6.3) expresses it, 'I was committed to approaching my research with an open - but not an empty - mind'. As explained in the last chapter, the theoretical framework drew on several traditions. A basic premise was contextual constructionism; the assumption that there are multiple possible interpretations of social phenomena, and that these interpretations will be formed in specific social settings and will be constrained by the material reality encountered. An interactionist understanding of the culture of the workplace also informed the research, and I was also predisposed to analyse occupational constructions of men, women and child clients in terms of a post-structuralist emphasis on the discourses the social workers had to negotiate. These discourses frame what can and cannot be said and written in the social work office, but different discourses can exist which are in tension with each other.

The relationship between social construction and material reality mentioned above was discussed in the last chapter in relation to social workers' construction of clients. In addition, the tension between construction and materiality in the research process warrants attention at this point. It is important to state that I did not approach this case study with a naive realist's expectation of discovering the way things 'really are' in child protection. I expected rather to find my own interpretation of social workers' interpretations of their clients. Whilst I would argue it is not possible to uncover the definitive truth about a research setting, because there are inevitably multiple truths, I would also reject an extreme constructionism which denies the relevance of questions of material reality. Hammersley's (1992a) position is helpful here. He outlines a position of 'subtle realism', that recognises the existence of material reality whilst also acknowledging that the research processes of observation, analysis and writing will inevitably result in only a partial construction of this reality. He maintains that the question of the validity of

research is an important one, pointing out that if one takes an extreme constructionist stance, then a fictional account can be as reliable a representation of a setting as any empirical research. The terms 'valid' and 'reliable' do not imply getting closer to the one attainable truth. Rather than discovering the definitive truth, my aim was to be a reflexive researcher. In writing an account of the fieldwork below I have been aware of Altheide and Johnson's (1994) concept of validity as reflexive accounting. They write that 'the more the reader can engage in a symbolic dialogue with the author about a host of routinely encountered problems that compromise ethnographic work, the more our confidence increases' (p494). Validity and reliability can also lie in the thoroughness of fieldwork.

It is important to distinguish validity and reliability on the one hand from generalisability on the other. Research findings from a case study can obviously not be generalised in the crude sense that the social phenomena observed would be straightforwardly replicated in a similar setting elsewhere. I would hope rather that my ethnographic research might highlight dominant discourses of gender and clienthood in a specific social work setting. It is likely that these findings will reflect the dominant discourses in the occupational culture of child care work, particularly since there is a common professional training, legislation and increasing central government guidance. Wattam (1992), in discussing research on child protection decision-making, writes:

practitioners... do not begin from a standpoint of knowing that only a few (local) people will understand what it is they are saying and will see it in the same way. Rather, they utilise 'rules' that are shared in common in much the same way as the rules of language are. That the 'rules' or methods are generalisable, is their rationale for use (Wattam, 1992: 13-14).

It has been claimed, for example in the enquiry into the death of the child Tyra Henry (Lambeth, 1987), that there can be idiosyncratic local office cultures in social services. However, Gordon and Gibbons's recent survey (1998) of 1,752 referrals in 8 English authorities found that indicators of child and family vulnerability were more important than local area in explaining selection for initial child protection conference and placement on registers, which suggests a common culture of constructing child abuse. To make some defence against the possibility of a very partial perspective from an unusual

local office culture I conducted a two 'pilot' interviews in another local authority, which I have also drawn on in the analysis presented in the chapters that follow.

In researching gender it is essential to consider debates about feminist methodology (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Harding, 1987; Olesen, 1994; a prominent critic is Hammersley, 1992b). This field reflects the diversity of feminist thought, but as Olesen observes, the various different feminisms in social research

share the outlook that it is important to center and make problematic women's diverse situations and the institutions and frames that influence those situations, and then to refer the examination of that problematic to theoretical, policy or action frameworks in the interest of realizing social justice for women (Olesen, 1994: 300)

Perhaps the most important question to be asked of my research in the light of feminist approaches is 'who is it for?' This is a complex question to consider. There are several groups of people who could be considered beneficiaries of the research; men, women or child clients, social workers, social services managers, and myself and my university department. Mainstream feminist standpoint research claims to have an emancipatory goal, which it achieves in part by privileging women's accounts of their lives (see, for example, Hester and Radford, 1996). My research topic raises the question of which women's standpoint should be privileged. Most child care social workers are women and a large proportion of the clients of those social workers are also women (Hallett, 1989). There is, inevitably, a power differential and a class divide between these women (see chapter four). There is also often conflict between women clients and women social workers over differing views on the child's welfare (Croghan and Miell, 1998). So this topic highlights the importance of debates within feminism in recent years about the heterogeneity of women's experiences (see, for example, Williams, 1989).

The other key question in terms of feminist methodology is 'can a man do feminist ethnography?' (Levinson, 1998). There are several sub-questions here. Can men be feminists? (Blyth, 1999). Can men have a feminist consciousness? (Liddle, 1996). For this specific research, questions arise as to whether I as a man can conduct sensitive research in an occupational setting that is arguable a woman's culture (see Day, 1997) and whether it is the business of a man to research the construction of gender and clienthood? Is it

my place, as a man, to research what (mainly) women say they do for and with other women?

Blyth (1999) has argued that men have a fundamentally problematic relationship with feminism, because they cannot be its subjects. As Beasley's (1999) summary of feminist thought reminds us, feminism has traditionally been associated with a specific body of experience, a woman's body. It is also true, as Beasley goes on to show, that post-modern feminism has called into question the very categories of 'woman' and 'man' (e.g. Butler, 1990 and 1993). I do not draw heavily on this post-modernist work in the thesis, and agree with Walby (1992) and Oakley (1998) that such writings tend to have the effect of distracting researchers from material inequality between sexes. However, these writings have successfully challenged the idea that there is a connection between female sex characteristics and a particular way of thinking about the world. Liddle (1996) argues that men can, in some senses, acquire feminist knowledge, although their routes to this knowledge are very different because of women's experience of everyday subordination. Jones (1996) argues that it *is* possible for men to do feminist research with women and flatten the hierarchy of the researcher and the researched. He writes, however, as a nurse, and therefore in a somewhat less powerful position in relation to other nurses who are women than I was as an academic researching social workers.

Any case of a man attempting feminist ethnography is bound to be fraught with tension (Levinson, 1998). In my defence, I can only state that I believe this research needed to be done. So far no man or woman has conducted a study quite like it, and deconstructing the gendering of clienthood, including the complex power differentials involved, should be liberating for women clients and social workers. It is not liberating for gendered child protection work to be left unquestioned, and for gender to be taken for granted yet again. My research design did not include hearing the accounts of clients, because of the difficulty of access, sensitivity and confidentiality, and also because I chose to target my interest on social workers' constructions of their work. However, the clients' hopes, fears and struggles were ever present in social workers' accounts. I was aware from my own encounters with child care social work of some of the pressures these clients (mainly women) face, and of how these pressures can be greatly increased by the intervention of social workers. I was also aware of the tangible harm that has been caused to some of the children social workers encounter, and how this can be either

reduced or increased by social workers' interventions. The issue of who the research is for is therefore very complex. As explained in the introductory chapter, however, I was originally motivated by concern about what I saw as an injustice to women that resulted from the child protection system's concentration on mothering and avoidance of men. I am aiming to empower women, albeit not primarily those I am researching directly. I am also not disinterested in empowering social workers. Chapter ten explains further how I see the research as informing practice. I believe my original motivation for the research, and the selection of a research question on gender, do place the thesis within the feminist research tradition. I return later in the chapter to the question of my position as a man researching a gender topic.

3.3 Preparation

McCracken (1988) recommends that researchers conduct reviews of analytic categories (through reading) and of their own cultural assumptions before beginning fieldwork. I attempted to follow his advice. I carried out two pilot interviews with childcare social workers in a different local authority from that where my main case study was based. This was intended to check that my style of questioning and chosen topics were appropriate, and to raise some initial issues that could be carried forward into the main fieldwork phase in River County Social Services. The pilot interviews resulted in only slight changes to the interview topics. Most importantly they helped identify some of my assumptions about the way childcare social workers constructed their work and their clients. These assumptions have developed through my own brief experience of working in such a setting (a student placement) and of having lived with a partner who worked in this kind of setting or similar for four years. There is further discussion of relevant features of my personal biography below in the section on field relations. Despite having some knowledge of the field setting before starting the research, I do not believe I held rigid views about the occupation or had very specific expectations about what I might find. Rather my critical perspective on child protection developed through doing the research and through my reading. I did need, however, to 'manufacture distance' (McCracken, 1988: 22) in the field because of my existing knowledge and experience of the child protection workplace. The cultural review aided this process. My analytic review

consisted of reading around the kind of topic headings that featured in the previous chapter. This was a process of making myself aware of some relevant ideas and comparable research, to sensitise me to some of the theoretical context of the study.

3.4 Access

Welfare provision for children tends to be organised into separate divisions within social services departments, which are usually then further divided into teams, each covering a discrete geographical area; the 'patch'. I started from a point of needing access for an ethnographic study in one of these teams. A university colleague furnished me with names of some research-friendly individuals in management positions in local authorities within travelling distance of my home. At a very early stage, I wrote to one of these individuals, a senior manager who I will refer to as Peter Norden, in 'Docktown' Social Services, asking for a meeting to discuss research access. When we first met, his approach to me was very interesting. The tone of the meeting was very polite. Despite the politeness, however, and his extremely nervous manner, he made it quite clear that his main concern was that my request to research work with men raised the possibility that I might be a 'paedophile' wanting to use the research to contact other abusers. The meeting provided some very valuable data on constructions of gender in child protection social work that the discussion of the fieldwork findings will return to. We parted with him promising to consider my request.

In fact it took seven months from this initial meeting to me getting started, in a different authority. My experience was markedly similar to that of Pithouse (1984) who was effectively denied access for many months for ethnographic research in a Social Services Department through the gatekeepers' prevarication and perhaps disorganisation rather than their refusal. Peter Norden continued to say encouraging, though cautious, things about my proposal, but after six months it had still not been formally approved. It is difficult to explain this delay, since Peter was deliberately evasive as to the nature of any discussions about my proposal within the organisation. I suspect there was a combination of Peter not making my proposal a priority worthy of his time, and therefore not doing anything about it for many months, and his colleagues being wary of researchers. This wariness can most obviously be explained in terms of the climate of

blame surrounding child protection social work, which has in part been created by child abuse enquiries (Parton, 1991), and an assumption that research is necessarily akin to inspection of practice and the apportioning of blame for any failure. Despite Peter's concentration on sex offending in the initial meeting, I do not believe this was an important reason for his delay. My impression was that when I phoned (altogether I phoned or wrote to chase him up ten times over the six month period) he was embarrassed because he had not done anything about my request. So lack of organisation or a view of the research proposal as unimportant are the most likely explanations for the delay. Although I approached other authorities for access for the ethnography, I was able to negotiate interviews with Docketown social workers, and these remained an important part of my research design.

The gatekeeper's concern about sexual abuse raises some interesting questions about risk. The 1990s have seen heightened awareness of sexual abuse by care workers, particularly men working in residential homes for children. The most notable example has been the multiple abuse of children in the care of the former Clwyd County Council that the Waterhouse Inquiry is due to report on during 1999. It is scandals such as this that are increasingly preoccupying managers such as Peter Norden. As well as this new awareness of a previously under-predicted risk, however, the gatekeeper's concern cannot be separated from an analysis of the 'risk society'; a climate of preoccupation with managing risks that the same society has artificially created (Beck, 1992). I return to this preoccupation with risk in the analysis chapters below. The gatekeeper's concerns also illustrate graphically Lee's observation (1993) that where research is potentially threatening, the arranging of access revolves around the 'politics of distrust'.

Altogether I contacted three other authorities. One refused immediately and the other two readily accepted. I decided not to continue negotiations with one of the authorities that accepted, since I needed one main site for an ethnographic study, and I still had an opportunity to do some interviews in Docketown for the purposes of piloting and sensitizing my data. It was interesting to note that both authorities which immediately accepted my proposal had recent or ongoing research contracts with my university department, and the mention of specific colleagues' names seemed to help a great deal. It was not clear to what extent my own social work background was a factor in their acceptance. I described myself as understanding important boundaries such as

confidentiality, but also having a lot to learn about children and families work, it not being my own area of practice specialism.

My initial letter for gatekeepers and the summary proposal for both gatekeepers and front-line staff are attached in appendix 1 and 2. In approaching each local authority I was explicit about wanting to study 'social work with men'. This was a deliberate strategy. It did not accurately represent the complexity of the research question, though that is impossible to do in such a brief document as a request for research access. It was a form of shorthand that I calculated might introduce my work in a way that would be helpful to both me and the organisation. My original research interest had been in child and family social workers' work with men, but I had, by the time I contacted the local authorities, decided that it was not theoretically justifiable to study constructions of men in isolation from constructions of women, and indeed children to some extent, since gender is inherently relational (Connell, 1987). However, I did not use the term 'gender' in correspondence with gatekeepers, for several reasons.

I made an assumption, based on my own experience of social work in this locality (and I believe the assumption was born out by fieldwork), that ordinary social work culture is wary of the perceived 'political correctness' of anti-discriminatory discourse, particularly that associated with university social work departments. The word 'gender' is, for many social workers, strongly associated with this discourse, and is perhaps more often taken to mean discussion of anti-sexist work with women than a consideration of the complexities of social work with both men and women (Graham, 1992). I thought they might see it as a topic they have already tackled fairly thoroughly both in college and in work-based training, whereas a focus on the widely recognised but, perhaps, less widely discussed difficulties of working with men might seem of more practical use to them because of its novelty. I also hoped that social workers' initial reactions to the topic of work with men might provide interesting data.

Clearly it was difficult to predict how exactly social workers would interpret my interest. They might make all sorts of assumptions about why I was interested in studying work with men. I might have a pro-feminist approach that concentrated on men's avoiding of responsibility for abusive behaviour, or I might believe men are badly treated by social services. Peter Norden had assumed that studying 'men' meant studying sex offenders. Anything I wrote or said about the topic could be interpreted according to the

ideological orientation of the listener or reader. Since I expected front-line social work culture to be one of the child as client, in line with the Children Act 1989, and also one of scepticism about parental accounts (White, 1997a), I was careful not to antagonise by giving the impression of questioning this culture through my research question. I wrote in my summary for staff (see appendix 2) that 'difficulties in engaging men' are 'particularly cause for concern when men who are responsible for some kind of abuse of women or children are not worked with'. I hoped that this would make it clear I was not saying 'men are hard done by' although some interactions in the field suggested that some social workers took it this way anyway. Initial reactions to my stated topic, from managers and from social workers, provided fruitful data and therefore, I believe, justified the strategy of being fairly open about my research agenda.

This level of openness about the research agenda must have attendant risks. It is possible that if participants know your specific topic they might try to tell you what they think you want to hear. I considered this risk at the outset, but decided to continue the strategy on the basis that research participants will always respond according to their assumptions about you on the basis of your university affiliation, gender, age, ethnic origin, and apparent class background and sexuality anyway, and that the advantages of observing initial responses to mention of the topic should outweigh any perceived disadvantages. There was also an ethical dimension to this decision. A level of openness can be seen as more respectful to research participants than a covert agenda in as much as it ensures that their consent to participate is as informed as possible. Access clearly is not only an issue before the start of fieldwork. I return to the course of negotiating ongoing access in the sections on observation and field relations below.

3.5 Ethics

There are several other ethical dilemmas raised by the research that should be raised at this point. I shall firstly deal with ethical dilemmas as regards the social workers, and then with ethical issues in relation to their clients. The British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (1993) stresses the importance of the informed consent of research participants. Much of the discussion below relates to this.

The issue of respect to research participants mentioned in the previous section leads to the question of the purpose of the research. A particularly important issue is whether or not I was evaluating the social workers and how open I was about this. The research was not intended as an evaluation of social work practice in the crude sense that its outcome would be lists of things that social workers need to change. Rather the aim was to explore how social workers understand men and women as parents, partners, carers or abusers. I had to accept from the outset that realistically some of the findings may be read by some as implying criticism, since these issues are politically highly charged in the context of the anti-discriminatory discourse of the last decade or so. On beginning the fieldwork my fear was that they would take the findings as criticism, no matter how I packaged them, because my analysis would be critically discussing their accounts of their work in terms of gender relations. I use the term 'critical' here to mean intellectual questioning, in the light of gender theory. This, however, to many social workers, might be understood as me telling them they are not doing their job properly. The discussion of research findings with social worker participants cannot be separated from the culture of blame of front-line workers that has hung over child protection work in the last two decades (Parton, 1991).

My tactic was to stress to the participants both before beginning the fieldwork and during it that I was not setting out to evaluate their work. During the fieldwork a government inspection team arrived to look at their work with accommodated children. In conversation with participants I contrasted my approach with that of the inspection team. It could be argued that in denying I was evaluating, I was not being entirely honest, in the light of my expectation that the participants may well experience my findings as evaluative. I believe, however, that my approach was the right one. I was not inspecting their practice and was never going to conclude with a list of rights and wrongs. Above all, I was seeking to understand, though this understanding would not be value-free, since the research problem is, in part, one of injustice. I was aware of the climate of blame surrounding the participants' role, and was therefore anxious to reduce anxiety. I was also, more cynically, anxious to maintain good field relations for the sake of data quality.

My contact with the clients of the social services department was minimal. I had deliberately not asked to talk to clients, or observe any interactions with social workers. I took this decision in part because I thought the presence of yet another middle class

professional might be distressing for people whose parenting was already under state scrutiny, and in part because the first gatekeeper I met, Peter Norden from Docketown, was very edgy at the prospect of me having any direct contact with clients. Also, I had decided to target my enquiry on what social workers think and feel about their clients. It seemed simpler and fairer, therefore, to only ask for contact with social workers. In fact on one occasion I did, on a social worker's suggestion, accompany him to a clients' home, with their permission, but this happened once only and was not significant in terms of my data analysis. Although I did not ask for face-to-face access to clients, I did read personal information in their files, overhear conversations about them, and discuss their situations with their social workers. I did this without asking their consent. This was regrettable, but was, I believe, a necessary decision.

I calculated that I had experienced such problems with access in Docketown that I could not afford to slow my progress any longer, since I was in danger of running out of time. I knew from a colleague's experience in a similar setting that the question of clients' permission, particularly when relying on social workers to remember to ask them, can slow progress to such an extent that the research can cease to become viable. I would justify my prioritising of my research timetable over clients' informed consent in terms of my research rationale. I was not actually studying the clients themselves, but only the social workers' attitude towards them and work with them, and, as explained in the section on methodology above, I was motivated by a concern about injustice towards women clients. The question of whether an emancipatory goal justifies unauthorised access to personal information is fraught with ethical difficulties, but on balance I would stand by my decision.

I kept all information as confidential as possible. I recorded only clients' initials in my fieldnotes, and where I was allowed to photocopy a few documents I blanked out all identifying details and photocopied again before taking them out of the building. The authorities have not been identified in any way. I have used pseudonyms and not specified any region of the UK. Ideally it would have been more useful to me to have cited a region, since there were some very interesting data about constructions of local masculinities and femininities, and of local identities. It was not possible to do so and maintain anonymity, however, particularly because of the local prominence of a child death which is referred to in the chapters below.

3.6 Research strategy

My case study was based in The 'Uplands' team of the River County Social Services children and families division. The Uplands 'patch' is around half an hour's drive away from the social services office. It represents an area founded in the last century around a specific industry that barely now exists, except in its cultural significance. It is an area of social deprivation according to all the standard indices.

Apart from the meeting with senior managers to negotiate access, my first contact was directly with the research participants, in their team meeting. Although I went there not knowing whether or not I was finally allowed in, they seemed to assume that I would be starting, having been sold the idea by managers as a *fait accompli*.

I visited the Uplands team office for three mornings a week for three months. Although in some ways daily observation might have allowed me to follow through social workers' talk about particular cases in a more consistent fashion, this was not possible because of my domestic commitments. Also, I calculated that total continuity of observation would not be possible anyway, as I could never be in a position to observe every interaction relevant to a social worker's construction of a case. In particular, I did not have access to social workers' direct contact with clients. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue, it is more important to devote time to thoroughly recording and thoroughly analysing the data you have than it is to spend a very long time gathering the raw material for ethnographic study.

I was given a desk of my own adjoining two social workers. The office was large and open plan with the Uplands team filling only around a quarter of the space. Other social work teams and administrative staff filled the rest. The Uplands team acted as a fairly separate entity. Although they knew the other staff in the large room, interaction with them was fairly infrequent. The Uplands team consisted of a team manager and nine social workers. During the period of my fieldwork, one of these was promoted to be the team's senior practitioner. This involves responsibility for particularly challenging cases and some specific time-limited pieces of work. The team manager and six of the social workers are women, and three social workers, including the senior practitioner, men. I was allocated to this team (one of a possible three) by the senior managers partly on the

basis of there being more men than usual in this particular team. They thought this would help me with my topic. This connection of male social workers with the issue of working with male clients will be discussed further in chapter six. The office was usually sparsely populated while I was there, and not infrequently empty. Child and family social workers tend to do much of their client contact work in clients' homes, and this was particularly unavoidable in the Uplands area because of the distance between the office and the patch. It made Pithouse's (1987) description of social work as an 'invisible trade' a visual reality to me. There was a tangible sense of the patch being 'out there'. Chapter four takes up this theme of the clients and the patch as 'Other'.

As well as observing interactions and telephone work in the office, I observed five 'supervisions', where social workers discuss the progress of cases with the team manager, and I interviewed the ten Uplands staff, including the manager. I decided not to interview the two Uplands clerical staff as they work in a separate part of the room and did not seem to be highly integrated into the team culture. I had permission to tape record all but two of the interviews and all the supervisions I observed. These were transcribed, using a word-processing package. I observed and noted three team meetings, at which most of the discussion was about organisational matters rather than individual clients. I read and noted in some detail the files of children that were currently on the Child Protection Register or had been subjects of case conferences within the last eighteen months. For each of these ten families I was able to photocopy the report of the child's social worker to the initial case conference and take these copies away for more detailed analysis. I also read several other case files before deciding on the strategy of focusing on the ten families, in order to orient myself on entering the field. The observation, interviews and reading of case files gave me access to most of what Wattam (1992; 14-15) calls the 'sites of "articulation"' of child protection knowledge.

3.6.1 Observation

Of the time I spent in the Uplands team office, the large majority of was spent sat at my desk, usually with a case file in front of me. I was able to observe and note down social workers' collegial talk and telephone work from my desk, often under the pretence of reading a file. Pithouse (1984) describes a similar strategy in his ethnography of a social

work office. The open-plan office geography had some implications for ongoing research access. As Hornsby-Smith (1994) points out, research access is a continuing negotiation. Sometimes I could not hear social workers' talk from as close as the next desk if there were several conversations going on in the Uplands section of the room. It often did not seem possible to 'mingle' in the office. Social workers tended to stay at their desks for much of the time, talking to those within reach when not writing or on the phone. There were some conversations held in mid-office, with a few social workers gathered to chat. This was as likely to be case talk as it was to be a conversation about matters not directly related to the job. If these conversations were difficult to overhear because of the layout of the office, it did not usually feel comfortable for me to move to be within earshot and join in. I was concerned about intruding, and my presence effecting the course of the conversation. I did not seem respectful to do so. Of course it could be argued that it is less respectful to listen covertly. Having been clear from the outset, however, about my intention to observe them at work, I do not think there are substantial ethical problems with this. It would perhaps have been more intrusive and less fair to the participants to make my observation more obvious by moving to join in each time two or more of them struck up a conversation. Observation from my desk, whilst ostensibly engaged in some reading, is likely to provide data which is less cluttered by their performance for me as a researcher.

As explained above, the research did not study actual worker-client interactions, except for the workers' contributions to some telephone talk. The social work office was the setting. My role in the office was, according to the continuum between participant and observer described by Gold (1958), one of 'participant-as-observer'. I believe I merged successfully into the office, both in as much as I *appeared* to be engaged in much the same kinds of desk-based activities as the social workers (the visual aspect being important) and in terms of having established a rapport with the team (see section below on field relations). However, I was clearly a researcher, not a social worker, and did not participate at all in the day-to-day responsibilities of an employee of the department.

In the office I wrote rough notes, and each afternoon following a morning's fieldwork I word-processed an extended and more reflexive version of the morning's observation. At times the notes taken in the office were minimal. This was particularly true of occasions when several exchanges closely followed each other during which it was

important to maintain eye contact rather than looking down to write. At other times I was able to record social workers' talk in some detail, in particular when covertly noting down overheard office conversations or telephone talk. It was not possible to record these verbatim because of the speed of conversation. I aimed for my recording to represent a sense overall message of a conversation and record verbatim at least alternate utterances.

As well as fieldnotes I kept two other separate records of the ethnography; analytic memos and a methods diary. The former consisted of a series of notes of significant ideas about the data as they developed. This then formed an important starting point for systematic analysis at a later stage. The methods diary recorded progress on access and then notes about field relations or difficulties with specific methods during the period of fieldwork. Much of the methods diary has found its way into this chapter. There is a dedicated discussion on field relations below, at section 3.7.

3.6.2 Interviews

Social workers are arguably one of the easiest professional groups to interview. Theirs is a talking job, they believe talking helps people. They demonstrate their competence to colleagues through 'telling the case', so they tell a good story (Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988). Grillo (1985: 21) writes of interviewing social workers that 'my role as investigator fitted exactly their role as informants'. In certain respects the interviews were the least challenging aspect of the research. I had conducted semi-structured research interviews previously, and as a social worker myself had spent many hours asking questions of people, often people who were upset, extremely inarticulate or reluctant to talk. But that is not to say that a social work interview is the same as an ethnographic interview. There are connections between the skills of social work and those of qualitative research (Sheppard, 1995) but significant differences too. In order to manufacture distance for myself as an interviewer I consulted a couple of practical guides to asking questions and analysing responses (Spradley, 1979; Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

One challenge I faced was how to ask them specific questions that were puzzling me with regard to something I had overheard in the office or read in one of their files without them taking this as criticism of their performance. I decided to ask very general

questions (see appendix 3) in the main, though I did ask those with cases on the child protection register to talk about these specific families, since these related to the files I had chosen to study in detail. The questions reproduced in appendix 3 were in fact more of a reminder to me of topics to cover than actual wording used, since the flow of conversation usually required extemporising. In many cases I followed Spradley's (1979) advice of asking fairly long questions with plenty of clarifying clauses, to allow respondents time to prepare their answers. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, I conducted two pilot interviews in 'Docktown' to test out my prepared questions. I drew on data from these as well as the Uplands interviews in my analysis. All but two interviews were tape-recorded. In the case of these two I found it more helpful to write down individual utterances verbatim, rather than making notes in summary. This strategy inevitably meant missing some of the social workers' words, but I was satisfied that where I did record what was said I was recording their actual words. I found it possible to get across the overall sense of what was being said, because they would talk at some length on one topic.

It is important to consider the issue of professional rhetoric in interviews. Some research would suggest there is a gap between what people say they do and what they actually do in practice. Lever's work on sex differences in children's play (1981, cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) is an example of this. She found that children's versions of what they 'usually do' in response to questionnaires showed greater difference between boys and girls than the evidence of the diaries the children kept about day-to-day play activities. Interviews are obviously a forum where the 'official version' of professional work might dominate. As Parton (1999, WWW page) puts it, 'what people do and what they say they do, and how people think in action and how people reflect on the way they think in action, are not necessarily the same things'. The context and content of professional rhetoric is of course interesting in itself, and this will be discussed in the chapters below. Some of the interviews I conducted were heavy on social work rhetoric about clients. These accounts are interesting alongside some of the more irreverent exchanges that I took part in or observed in the office. As stated above in the section on methodology, I did not see triangulation of methods as leading me to a truer picture of what really goes on. Rather I saw it as illustrating how social workers use

different rhetoric in different circumstances and how different discourses dominate according to the task at hand.

3.6.3 Documents

Social work files tend to be very fat. The most daunting aspect of the documentary analysis was the sheer quantity of paperwork, most of which was potentially very relevant and interesting. Many files have over 200 typed or densely handwritten pages. Some cover ten years or more of social work contact with a family. After a few days of finding my way around the files, I was faced with the need to choose a manageable portion of file data to read in earnest. I decided to focus on cases where there had been a child on the child protection register during the course of my fieldwork. There were fourteen such children, from ten families. I read two files in their entirety and with the others I attempted to follow the events of the case in outline, whilst reading formal reports closely. I photocopied the social worker's report for the initial case conference in all ten cases. These reports are the summary of an initial investigation when serious concern has first been raised about a family, although there may have been social work involvement and indeed child protection concern in the past. These reports are written for an audience of all the health and welfare professionals involved with the family, and the parents themselves. They are presented at a formal inter-disciplinary conference.

In analysing the documentary data I needed above all to consider how they are produced. In researching gender construction I was concerned not only to focus on the meaning of what social workers were writing about clients, but also how they were putting together their accounts of their lives. I was concerned with the structure and rhetorical techniques of the writing and the organisational context of the production of the files; who writes what, when and for whom. As Silverman writes, qualitative researchers

are not primarily concerned with whether files are 'true' or 'false'. Instead, they focus on how such files reveal the practical decision-making of employees in the context of the constraints and contingencies of their work' (Silverman, 1993: 65).

Askeland and Payne (1999) have observed that social work case recording is a social relationship between authors and audiences, and represents power relations between them, as well as being a system of information storage and retrieval. As the previous chapter noted, both Gordon (1988) and Tice (1998) have used the records of social workers to study historical representations of gender relations. Because I was conducting a contemporary study, I was able to put documentary analysis into an organisational context, through observation of routine office interactions and interviews with staff.

3.7 Field relations

My relationships with the social workers were very amicable and relaxed. After around a month of fieldwork, it was commented in a team meeting that it seemed as though I had 'been there forever' and that I had settled in better than most students (who do a social worker's job and spend several months in the office full-time). However, I would not claim to have been accepted as a colleague like Pithouse (1984), who spent a year in a social work office and writes of being awarded 'club rights' by the team or White (1997a) who was simultaneously ethnographer and team manager. Spending considerable time in the setting, or having cases of my own to discuss might have led to more collegial relationships, but neither was possible.

In the first few weeks I had better rapport with the two social workers with whom I shared a desk, because I had spent far more time talking to them than to the others. One of these two felt comfortable enough with me after several weeks to tell me about a particularly distressing recent bereavement. As the fieldwork progressed, however, my rapport levelled out across the team. Since, as explained above, the office was empty at times, and there was often only one social worker present, I had opportunities for extended conversations with each of them in turn, usually when I was alone in the office with them.

On the whole the participants did not seem anxious about being scrutinised. When the government inspection was taking place, they seemed to see this as very different, and much more threatening, than my presence observing them. One social worker made one or two statements that might have implied he was wary of me. Interestingly, he had some research background of his own. He was clearly uncomfortable with anything he

said being tape recorded, and he made an analogy with a previous inspection when he felt he had been misquoted from a taped interview. This exchange was interesting in making explicit the tensions about research as inspection that were perhaps inevitable.

I took something of a risk over halfway through the period of fieldwork by telling the team manager about some of my preliminary ideas for research findings. She asked me directly and was clearly very keen to have some feedback. I took the decision that it was fairer to her for me to respond. I did not want to seem imperious or mysterious about my research. I was also curious to hear what she thought about some issues, such as, for example, the fact that the social workers did not see working with men to prevent violence against their partners to be part of their job. Her response was rather defensive, so I was careful to explain that I was not challenging that decision, merely seeking to understand it. Although I worried afterwards that my rapport with her, and through her the rest of the team, would become difficult, field relations in general did not change as a result. In terms of that discussion affecting what was subsequently said to me about the work, I was not worried because I had already gained the impression that the child protection social work culture should be strong enough to resist me. I concluded that the research would not be affected any more by this discussion than it already had been by me announcing my topic and the participants making assumptions about my motivations.

3.7.1 My biography and the research

My starting point for the research has been to accept that my biography, my own values and beliefs, and my personal conduct would be intrinsically bound up with the progress of the fieldwork and my gathering of and analysis of the data. This next section will review some aspects of my biography that have seemed particularly relevant to field relations, although these aspects have also been important to every stage of the research.

I approached the team as a university tutor doing a PhD. To avoid being taken as some kind of expert because of this status, I was careful to assure participants that child care work is not my field, in the sense that I do not have either a research or practice background in this area of work. Also, as explained above in the discussion on access, there was a possibility that participants might associate my university social work affiliation with a rather severe and punitive approach to anti-discrimination. It seemed

important, therefore, to be seen to laugh when, for example, there was mildly sexist but (in my opinion) harmless joking, or when, as happened quite frequently, irreverent comment was made about clients. On one occasion, when I gave a genuine belly laugh in response to something said at a team meeting, several of the team turned towards me, evidently pleased that I could show appreciation at the humour.

My social work background profoundly affected the research process. In terms of field relations, there was a certain rapport established due to participants' perceptions of common strands in work background and training, although I could not share the distinctive identity of a background in child care work. Also, I found myself wanting to join in as a colleague at times; in discussion of cases or in team meetings. The temptation was to participate as a social worker rather than as a researcher. I found myself starting to judge and evaluate accounts of practice as a social worker. Although there are connections between ethnographic and social work skills (Fortune, 1994), it was important for me to keep a constant check on this slide into social work. It is difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to critically reflect on the culture of an occupation whilst immersed in it. As well as the temptation to think like a social worker, fellow-feeling based on common professional background made me nervous about presenting the findings, in the light of the culture of blame of social workers already mentioned.

As well as bringing my current and previous work to the research, I brought my gender. The importance of the gendered body of the researcher (Coffey, 1999) has already been graphically illustrated by the access meeting at Docktown, described above. Though much has been written about a gendered understanding of women researchers' effect on the field and the field's effect on them, there has been less reflection in the research methods literature on men as researchers (McKeganey and Bloor, 1991). In my case, others' perceptions of my masculinity varied considerably, often because of other mediating factors such as my age, assumed class background, educational status and university affiliation. People generally think I am younger than I am. I look to be perhaps in my mid-twenties. My accent is middle class, I speak with received pronunciation. These factors inevitably effect the way the participants viewed me. Perceptions of me as a man varied from Peter Norden's fear of possible paedophilic intent to the assumption of some social workers that I was a 'new' man, partly because of their assumptions about my motivation to research such a topic.

Several authors have pointed to the difference in interview responses according to the sex of the interviewer (e.g. Padfield and Proctor, 1996). Most often the conclusion is that women researchers are seen as more sympathetic and can therefore prompt more depth of response from informants. Although I was not aware of any respondent obviously holding back, it is possible that my gender adversely affected their willingness to be frank about their views on their work. It was evident that the body language of interviews was gendered. One man in particular was confident and expansive, sitting with a very open posture, whilst I recall one of the women looking down, momentarily embarrassed, on my asking about working with cases of sexual abuse. It is not possible to eliminate such gendered effects. It is, however, important to acknowledge them, at the time of fieldwork and subsequently when analysing and writing. As Morgan (1981: 95) writes, 'the male researcher needs, as it were, a small voice at his shoulder reminding him at each point that he is a man'.

As well as presenting as a young, educated, middle class white man, I presented as married and therefore apparently heterosexual, and as a father. Within a few days of starting fieldwork, in the course of small talk with social workers, these aspects of my life had come to light. My fatherhood certainly improved rapport with some, since the social workers' own children were often discussed. As far as I was aware, all but two of them had children of their own, so this was a point of contact with the majority, though only the majority. This shared life experience perhaps added to the assumed common concern for children seen to be 'endangered' (see chapter four). Research with any proximity to the abuse of children will have an emotional impact on the researcher (Moran-Ellis, 1996; S. Scott, 1998). My fatherhood affected my emotional reactions to the data, in two very different ways. I found some of the descriptions of alleged abuse of children more difficult to read than I think I would have done before parenthood (see also Moran-Ellis, 1996). I also found, though, that my experience of the stresses and strains of looking after a child made me question some of the expectations being made of clients, particularly in relation to standards of cleanliness and hygiene.

Another issue that must be mentioned in connection with my biography is my relationship with my partner. Whilst it has not overtly affected field relations, it has very much affected my developing ideas about the data. The three years of PhD study have coincided with my partner's own doctoral research. We have inevitably shared our

thoughts about our research, which has in both cases been qualitative and in the child protection field. We have swapped tips about reading, discussed the research process and reflected on our fieldwork together. In many ways we bring similar worldviews to our research work, and as our separate theses have evolved there has been some cross-fertilisation of ideas.

3.8 Analysis

My approach to the analysis of the Uplands team data was based on the idea of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As Strauss (1987) reminds us, this is not a specific technique, but rather a methodological orientation that seeks to base theorising in the data rather than imposing a pre-determined hypothesis. As already mentioned, a reflexive stance requires acknowledgement of the knowledge the researcher inevitably brings to the data. A reflexive grounded theory approach is possible, however. Such an approach involves examining the data with existing influences made explicit, but with an openness to the theoretical implications of the raw data.

The idea of 'pure' grounded theory denies the pre-knowledge of the researcher who has been active in the production of her data, and has a lifetime of ideas, theories and hunches which she brings to the task of 'making sense' (S. Scott, 1998: 6.3).

In discussing analysis of data it is important to distinguish procedures from the imaginative work of interpretation, a distinction made by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), although these are also connected in various ways. The procedure I followed was coding, with the use of the computer software NUD*IST 4. NUD*IST stands for Non-numerical, Unstructured, Data: Indexing, Searching and Theorising, and its use will be discussed further below. Tesch (1990) defines the process of coding as the de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation of data: data are moved from their original location and regrouped thematically. Strauss (1987) has identified 'open' coding, 'axial' coding and 'selective' coding as distinct elements of the process. I cannot claim to have carried out totally open coding, since the first few codes I tried out had their origins in analytic memos noted as the fieldwork progressed. Having constructed an initial NUD*IST coding 'tree', which is a structure that represents relationships between codes,

I read and coded all data, adding to the basic tree structure where necessary. I then proceeded to axial coding – an intense analysis around one category at a time – combined with a selective coding – limiting data coded to those which relate to the core codes in a sufficiently significant way.

NUD*IST has been widely used by qualitative researchers in recent years (see, for example, Buston, 1997), and was arguably the most sophisticated package available when I started coding in 1997, although this is no longer the case, since its makers have begun marketing an upgraded package. The use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) has been the subject of debate. An example of an exchange is that between Coffey *et al* (1996) and Lee and Fielding (1996). Coffey *et al* contrast the welcome diversity of contemporary ethnographic practice with an increasing convergence on a uniform mode of data analysis and representation through CAQDAS. They argue that available packages force the user into a strategy based on coding, loosely justified as ‘grounded theory’, and that coding is overemphasised, given that a large part of the qualitative researcher’s work consists of interpretation and fine-grained hermeneutic analysis. Lee and Fielding retort that Coffey *et al*’s assertion of an enforced link between existing CAQDAS packages and grounded theory is overdrawn and that software tools for approaches not based on coding are less invisible than they suggest.

Buston (1997), despite being an advocate of using NUD*IST, records other potential problems. She acknowledges that retrieving segments of data to another context can distance the researcher from the original context (this is a pitfall of any coding strategy). She also writes (citing Richards, 1997) that the ease of coding with NUD*IST can lead to a ‘coding fetishism’, with the user indexing anything and everything obsessively and unnecessarily, treating indexing as an end in itself and leaving little time for retrieval and ‘real’ analysis. I did experience the temptation to code excessively, but succeeded, I believe, in keeping the level of coding manageable and appropriate, especially through the selectivity mentioned above. Buston concludes that the speed of coding the software provides is justification in itself for using it. I agree, and I also found it to have the clear advantage over coding on paper that it is very straightforward to code one data extract several times. Buston’s overall conclusion is that all of NUD*IST’s facilities should be seen as distinct from the creative act of interpretation, which no technology can provide. As mentioned above, the process of interpretation is rooted in my own historical and

social location, as is the whole of the research process. As Dorothy Smith has written, 'our analysis of texts finds in them only what we know how to read from them' (Smith, 1990: 156, cited in S. Scott, 1998).

3.9 Writing

Atkinson, in discussing Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943), makes the following observation about the writing of an ethnography:

the monograph itself is, in the best sense, an artful product. The narratives and descriptions, the examples, the characters and the interpretative commentary are woven together in a highly contrived product (Atkinson, 1990: 2).

I shall comment on some of the decisions I took about constructing the 'artful product' of the thesis. I have structured the thesis in a conventional way, with an introduction, followed by a literature review, methods chapter, five empirical chapters, a discussion of theoretical implications and a conclusion. The literature review has preceded the methods chapter in recognition that I approached the fieldwork after an 'analytic review' (McCracken, 1988) had already been carried out. This conventional structure felt familiar and straightforward to me and potentially to the reader. I have tended to present frequent and relatively brief data excerpts. My intention was show that the data supported my assertions, rather than my ideas being flights of fancy based on single utterances. In places, however, I present more lengthy excerpts for fuller discussion.

Some specific decisions about language need to be described. Sex-specific pronouns tend to be used as appropriate for men and women social workers, but where a generic subject is denoted I have alternated between male and female pronouns. I use the term 'client', rather than the available alternatives, in recognition of the Uplands social workers' own terminology. The next chapter discusses the question of who the client is. The term tends to be used in thesis to denote adult men and women, because it is they who are the principal concern of research. The term 'parents' is often used to mean care givers, even if a client (more typically a man) is not a biological parent. Obviously all the 'names' of clients and social workers used are pseudonyms.

There is almost exclusive reference in thesis to heterosexual men and women. All the clients I heard spoken of or read about were *apparently* heterosexual. There were no lesbian or gay clients that I was aware of. Heterosexuality is an important aspect of the construction of gender in the Uplands team; women are constructed in relation to men and vice versa. Some comparative analysis of the construction of heterosexual and gay and lesbian clients would have been an interesting dimension (Hardman, 1997 has begun to explore this area), but one that not feasible in the light of the data I was presented with. The clients were also apparently all white. There was no ethnic monitoring visible in files that would have given me some evidence for this, but conversations with the social workers suggested in fact that the cases I was looking at in detail were all white. According to the 1991 census, the population of River County is 99% white, so this apparently all-white client profile is very likely to be accurate. Again, this does not mean that social constructions of ethnicity can be ignored. As commentators such as Dyer (1998) have asserted, we need to examine the way that whiteness is constructed and negotiated. Whilst I recognise the importance of constructions of Others as 'raced' as well as gendered and classed, there is not a particular focus on whiteness in the thesis. It is a topic that warrants a different fieldwork focus.

It is important to make clear at this point that there is little discussion in the thesis of data on how social workers understand themselves as gendered individuals. There were some interesting data on this issue, to which I could return in future, but crucially there was found to be far more common ground between women and men social workers' constructions of clients as gendered than there were differences. This fits with my theoretical emphasis on the power of occupational culture. Gendered occupational discourses tend to override individual social workers' histories and complex gendered identities.

As well as a submission for a university degree, it is hoped that the research will be published in the form of academic and professional journals, and presented at conferences. I shall not discuss in any depth the question of how the research can be of relevance to practitioners at this point. Some initial comment on the uses of ethnographic research on occupational constructions was made in chapter one, and I return to this theme in more depth in chapter ten. It is worth noting, though, that I intend to present my analysis to the Uplands team, but despite several overtures on my

part, the offer has not yet been taken up. Child protection work can be extremely busy, and there is often a perception that 'extra' elements to the working week such as research presentations have to be cut back if time is tight. It remains my intention to arrange a presentation to the team, but if this continues to prove difficult I shall at the very least send a summary of the work which is brief enough as to be accessible to busy practitioners.

3.10 Conclusion

The aim of the chapter has been to explain the principles behind the research and give a reflexive account of the research process. To summarise, I conducted an ethnographic case study of a social work team, 'the Uplands', where I conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews, and read case files. The perspectives I brought to the research were a 'subtle realist' approach and an interest in contextual constructionism, interactionist approaches to the workplace and a post-structuralist emphasis on multiple discourses. In as much as I was motivated by a concern about social justice for women, and made gender by central topic, the research could be broadly described as in a feminist tradition. The data were analysed according to the principles of grounded theory, and coded with the aid of computer software. The next five chapters will present my reflections on the data, arranged around discrete themes. The first of these chapters is not primarily about the construction of gender, but focuses on the other crucial categorisations of clients that form the context of gendered practice.

Chapter 4

BEING A CLIENT

Before proceeding to the central question of how men and women clients are constructed there needs to be some attempt to answer questions such as who are the clients in child protection work? and what is the nature of the social worker-client relationship? The process of referral, and the process by which people become categorised as clients over time have been the topic of several interesting research studies, including those of Handelman (1983) in Canada, Thorpe (1994) in Australia and Wattam (1992) in the UK. The chapter does not deal with categorisation over time, but rather describes the necessary pre-requisites to being identified as a client. It is concerned with the way that the potential client population is divided according to criteria *other than gender*. In that sense, it serves as an essential introduction to the substantive discussions on constructions of men and women clients that follow in chapters five and six. It will outline the *context* of constructing gendered clienthood in child protection work.

The chapter follows on from the previous two chapters, which presented the theoretical and methodological context of the research, by presenting data on aspects of the Uplands team culture that need to be discussed prior to a sustained examination of gender. Gender is, of course, not the only concept used to categorise and differentiate clients. Other concepts are employed to make sense of the mass of allegations and evidence of child abuse that workers encounter on a daily basis. This chapter will focus on the construction of childhood, social control in the social work role, the significance of class and community, and ideas about desirable models of family life. None of these will be examined as a major theme for analysis, but it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of each as the context of gender construction. The chapter will explore what it means to be a client, what is involved in ascribing to someone the status of 'clienthood' (Payne, 1991). Central to the argument is that some people become clients in a stronger sense than others.

Pithouse's (1987) interactionist account of a social work team in the early 1980s tackled the question of the occupational construction of clients in a child care team. He found that clients were simultaneously revered as the object of service and morally judged: 'both worthy and unworthy; a supernal abstraction and simultaneously a morally

defunct and discredited species' (Pithouse, 1987: 85). His analysis does not particularly distinguish constructions of men, women, boys and girls as clients in social work talk. He returned more than ten years later to interview social workers in the same team about the observations in his earlier book, and found changes in how clients were perceived (Pithouse, 1998). Parents were still seen as problematic, but were also thought to deserve an open and honest approach. This openness, was also seen, however, as leading to more conflict. The social workers were very clear that the principle client was now the child and not the family. The communities they worked in were seen as hostile to their essential task of investigating harm to children. His summarises the nature of child care work in the late 1990s thus:

It appeared far more embattled, more stressful, more interventionist, yet far more conscious of ethical imperatives around anti-discriminatory practice and partnership working. Clients - parents and children – enjoyed a more open relationship but one that sought to gather facts in order to satisfy concern over safety rather than a relationship that might, if time allowed, seek more lasting solutions to family needs (Pithouse, 1998: 155).

I cite Pithouse's follow-up research at some length because its findings are close to those I shall describe below. The first issue to be discussed is the matter of who counts as the client: family, parents or children? This next section will cover three aspects of the construction of children within the family and in relation to welfare services: the occupational rhetoric of child-centredness, the preoccupation with the child's vulnerable body, and the idea that it is children who make the job worthwhile.

4.1 Who is the client?

4.1.1 'We are child-centred'

If asked 'who is the client?' social workers will clearly state that it is, of course, the child.

I think also something to remember is that the child is our client, we are child centred. You know, first and foremost we are looking at the child's needs (interview with Margaret).

They claim their child-centredness differentiates them from other professions, including those in the wider world of social work.

We have an overall responsibility to the overall well being of the children. There are other agencies involved with the children. There is education and people like health visitors. In both cases I suppose their role is quite specific. I mean health visitors visit up to a certain age and most teachers do take an interest in the wider welfare issues, but really see that in the context of attendance and non-attendance of school. We have an overall sort of role. We can be involved in families where there are problems with education, problems with health care. Other agencies might be involved with families like, say, probation, but they are going to be involved primarily with the adults, you know they will co-operate with us but I mean their essential duty is towards the adults, who have maybe offended in some way. I think quite what the task of social work is is quite an enormous question, in that it varies so much from case to case, but certainly a child and family social worker has to be linked with the welfare of the children in some way, protection from significant harm and promotion of well being you know (interview with Mike).

As far as the police are concerned, and we have got a very good working relationship with the child protection unit, they work from a totally different angle to us. They are there to convict and to get evidence and to get a conviction for the main perpetrator that has been involved with the child. Obviously we are more concerned with the welfare of the child (Sarah from Docktown).

In the first excerpt, Mike is identifying the social work role as necessarily generalist and, unlike other professions, centred on the child's overall functioning. Whilst he is not criticising the other professions, he is speaking with some pride of the child care team's philosophy in contrast to these others. Sarah, in the second excerpt, identifies the police role as forensic and implies that the concerns of social workers are broader and, again, focused on what is best for the child. In both excerpts there is a sense in which other professions are respected as having their own niche and their own specific responsibility, whereas it is only child care social workers who see the whole picture of what is needed to secure a child's welfare.

This rhetorical emphasis on the 'welfare of the child' is to be expected in the light of government guidance since the Children Act 1989. The definition of client does not stop there, however. Much of the time the social workers use the term 'client' in an ostensibly generic sense and very often this usage in fact refers to parents, unsurprisingly, because

most of their contact is with adult caregivers. As Parton *et al's* research (1997) shows, in routine child protection work the assessment and monitoring of parental behaviour is more important to decision-making than the views of children, who are often 'silent' in case records. The Uplands social workers' use of 'clients' to mean parents is interesting. It often refers to women *and* men, although it is women that social workers spend a good deal more time working with. This is likely to be an example of the rhetoric of equal treatment – both men and women should be involved. Williams (1998) has commented that the language of 'parental' involvement with children in the Children Act 1989 obscures gender inequalities.

Fundamental to the argument of this thesis is that 'child' tends to be a unified concept in the Uplands team (boys and girls are equally vulnerable), whereas 'parent' is not, because women and men are in fact strongly differentiated (see chapters five and six). There are gendered constructions of boys and girls that could have been explored, but the research set out from the start to limit its scope to examining the construction of parents as gendered. This strategy was vindicated by finding that there were considerably more common factors in the construction of boys and girls than between constructions of men and women. The construction of children will, however, be explained briefly at this point, since adult men and women clients are constructed in relation to children in the social work office.

Fernandez (1996) suggests that phrases such as 'child-centred', 'the child's needs', 'risk to the child' and 'in the best interests of child' are important rhetoric in social work talk, and are used as if they are universally understood terms, without any analysis of who decides the meanings of such phrases for an individual child. As research such as that by Butler and Williamson (1994) has shown, a child-centred doctrine does not necessarily lead to children's wishes being followed. There were instances in the Uplands team of children's wishes being ignored when social workers had decided these wishes were clearly in opposition to the safest option for the children. Assertion of the primacy of the child's needs often has the effect of setting the interests of children against the interests of birth families. Being primarily concerned with the welfare of children could lead to a strategy of supporting birth parents as the people with whom the children would ideally most likely to live. In practice, it is often employed to contrast an idealised notion of the child's welfare with that currently on offer from birth parents. This is an important

aspect of the construction of families, and will be returned to at the end of the chapter, in the sub-section about putting children's needs before your own. Next I consider the importance of the child's body within the culture of child care social work.

4.1.2 The child's vulnerable body

Children are constructed in social work as everywhere else. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992: 8) write that 'all children are "manufactured"... via a process of representational labour'. In contemporary culture, children are seen as both vulnerable and dangerous. Collier (1998) has observed that the child of post-modernity has come to symbolise both nostalgia for lost innocence and also, particularly in the form of the criminality of boys and young men, social breakdown and moral dislocation. Also, as Scott *et al* (1998: 695) tell us, 'children are often characterised in everyday talk as little devils in one breath and little angels in the next'. In professional child welfare services, however, it is the discourse of children as innocent and vulnerable that predominates. This reflects legal discourse. King and Piper (1995) have summarised how the law 'thinks about children'. They identify the child as victim, the child as witness, the child as a bundle of needs, and the child as a bearer of rights.

In child protection work the child as a vulnerable body is a powerful discourse. White's study of social workers' case talk describes the affirmation of occupational identity through the 'invocation of the child's wounded, damaged or precariously endangered body' (White, 1997c: 7-8). Ferguson (1997), writing on child protection, has commented on the symbolic importance of the death of children, connecting this with Giddens's notion (1991) of the sequestration of death in late modern society. He also cites Shilling's idea (1993) that the inability to confront the reality of the death of our own bodies makes us anxious about the presence of death in the bodies of others. Scott *et al* (1998) use the concept of 'risk anxiety' to describe contemporary fears about children and childhood. For child protection workers risk anxiety is particularly powerful, because they have responsibility for the safety of their child clients. A child client dying is a social worker's greatest fear. Newspaper clippings about the Rikki Neave case pinned up next to the kettle remind the Uplands social workers of this ever-present fear (as if

they needed reminding). The fieldnote below illustrates how child death can be invoked in routine office talk, usually to argue for intervention.

Janet, a social worker from another child protection team, was talking to Mary about a case they both seemed familiar with. Janet said 'I reckon someone's going to go out of that house in a box. I've told them that. I just hope it's not the kids' (from fieldnotes, 3 July)

The ethnographic data from the Uplands team suggest that certain constructions of embodied children have particular power in the organisational culture of the social work office. In the Uplands team, an interest had developed recently in the neglected child. The neglected child is dirty, smelly, hungry and inadequately clothed. This construction is, in part, a local phenomenon arising from their reaction to a child death, and is discussed in more detail in chapter seven. Also evident was an abiding interest in the sexualised child. Other research (e.g. Parton *et al*, 1997) would suggest that the attention to child sexual abuse is not just a local phenomenon. Corby (1993) tells us that there was a 58-fold increase in cases registered for sexual abuse in the UK between 1978 and 1991. I return to the issue of sexual abuse in chapters five and six.

Despite the rhetorical and symbolic importance of the child's body, however, Parton *et al*'s analysis (1997) of case recording in Australia and the UK shows that social workers' attention is focused on parents, and most often mothers, whose behaviour is assessed according to expected moral standards. Also, Kähkönen (1999) has observed from child welfare case records in Finland that parents' problems were the focus of practice rather than problems in parenting or the qualities of the parent-child relationship. The work of the Uplands team gives qualified support to these findings. Attention is indeed focused on parents, but the child's body is often used as a means of judging parents, (see chapter seven).

The dominance of a discourse of children as vulnerable was vividly illustrated by a conversation with Debbie on the last day of my fieldwork. She had just begun extra work as an out-of-hours 'duty' social worker, being called on for crisis work during the night. She recounted being called out to see a sixteen-year-old boy who was being remanded in custody. She did not know exactly what offence he was charged with, though it must have been seen as a serious offence for the police to keep him in the cells overnight. She said she was angry with police because 'he was just a child'. Whereas much popular

discourse on youth crime in the 1990s has emphasised the danger of young men, and argued for treating teenage offenders like adults, Debbie saw this offender as a boy who could be psychologically damaged by the experience of being locked in a cell during part of the night.

Children are nearly always to be believed in the course of child protection work. There is a recognition that children will sometimes say things that are untrue, but when it comes to the most controversial and difficult area of competing truths, sexual abuse against children, it is a matter of faith that children do not lie. It is often asserted about very young children that they could not make up sexual stories because they would not know how to unless something had happened to give them that knowledge.

I think where a child makes a disclosure, I mean we start on the premise that we believe the child and then look at what the child is saying often there are clear disclosures which a child of a young age couldn't possibly know but it would have happened to them (interview with Margaret).

conference needs to be mindful that two year olds do not generally make things up (from case conference minutes, Richards family)

So children are generally regarded as vulnerable and child protection concern tends to be focused on the child's body, although, as the chapters which follow will show, it is the behaviour of parents that comes under scrutiny. I shall now discuss working with children in terms of job satisfaction.

4.1.3 Children make the job worthwhile

The rewards in the job are good outcomes for children. Successful adoptions are often cited as rewarding, but so too are birth families that make major changes and so allow children to stay at home and flourish. The passage below from an interview with Lorraine sees her talk about why she thinks the job is worthwhile. Although she is referring to a client who is a mother, she sees her as the child she has known for several years, through the care system.

I suppose I could over estimate my importance to them, but the fact that you have been there for six or seven years, you know. For one girl I was dealing

with this morning who has a baby, I am the longest established person in her life really, because she has changed placements, foster placements and she has little contact with family. So you take on that role and that then brings difficulties because as a good trade unionist or whatever you should be working your hours, you shouldn't be working extra hours, you shouldn't be expected to work at weekends. That brings a dilemma because I still feel that for children particularly on a care order, in long term care, children who are in that system, we should be available you know, within reason. The emergency team should be able to contact you first and say, even if you are not prepared to go out at night time, but at least to say well tell us a bit about what is going on (interview with Lorraine).

So children deserve commitment, even above and beyond contracted hours, even as a trade unionist that believes staff should not exceed their contracts.

'Direct work with children' is a highlight of the job. During the fieldwork, a glass-fronted cupboard next to the team manager's desk was cleared out and rearranged. I was told it would be divided into 'direct work with children stuff' and 'general stuff' on separate shelves. Several social workers said that direct work with children was the most rewarding part of the job. The specification that this is 'direct work' illustrates how the social work role has moved away from the workers using their own therapeutic interventions in families, towards something of a case manager role. Whilst some authorities have a formal purchaser-provider split in child and family services (Hood, 1997), the Uplands team is perhaps more typical in operating a less formal case management system. Social workers in the Uplands team assess risk and need and then tend to arrange for relevant services to be provided by other agencies. Having the opportunity to do 'direct work' is a therapeutic treat for the worker.

I asked Margaret, the team manager, what kinds of things the social workers in her team were particularly good at that helped families change. Her answer was:

I think some social workers in the team have done very good direct work with children, working with them on behaviour difficulties or in counselling around abuse or around sort of life story work, helping children come to terms with what has happened to them, there is some very good work there (interview with Margaret).

She also went on to mention mediation between parents. I found, though, that direct work with children was a specialism with particular cachet in the team. Work with parents for its own sake is not considered to be part of the social work task. Even work

with parents that might impact on the children is arguably seen as secondary in import and status to direct work with children. Hall *et al* (1999) cite a data extract where a social worker sees counselling for a father as the within domain of other professions, and not social work, whereas talking to a child *is* social work. This division existed in the Uplands team too. There exists a form of parent-child dichotomy. The next section will take discussion of this dichotomy further, in focusing on constraints in the relationship between social workers and parents.

4.2 Social control

Concern about the scrutiny of mothering in feminist literature has stemmed from the critique of child protection as social control. Gordon (1988) disagrees that child protection work is simply controlling, in that her historical research found many women choosing to seek help from protective agencies. She also argues that social control is not necessarily a bad thing anyway because protecting children has to sometimes mean going against the wishes of parents, and that means mothers too (Gordon, 1986). Wise (1990, 1995) argues a similar point from her own experience of working in child protection. Fieldwork in the Uplands team suggests there is in fact overt control in much routine practice. That is not to argue that there is no support or help for clients. It may well be that many clients regard their social worker very positively, but clients' accounts of their experiences are beyond the scope of the research design. In the section that follows, I simply intend to draw out some of the important aspects of social control in the child protection role, because these fundamentally affect how clients are constructed.

The relationship between worker and client in child protection social work is inherently problematic, and the difficulties in the relationship form the context of the construction of clients in the office culture. Local authority children's services in the 1990s have been increasingly preoccupied with responding to allegations of child abuse (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). Not all abuse investigated is familial. Allegations are made against other parties, including family friends, neighbours, strangers, and people with professional contact with children, such as teachers. The Uplands team cases that I read about in files or discussed with social workers were, however, all cases of alleged familial abuse, using that term in its broadest sense to include, for example, the boyfriend

of a child's mother who does not live in the home full-time. Investigating familial abuse and neglect cannot be done in the context of a straightforwardly warm and trusting relationship between social worker and all family members. Some parties may well have asked for social services intervention: perhaps a child directly asking for help, or confiding in someone who then contacts the social services department, or one parent making an allegation against another. Also some parties may already have an established bond with a social worker. But conflict, on one level or another, is inevitable. There is an atmosphere of coercion surrounding the child protection role. Social control is very explicit. Lorraine acknowledges the trend by labelling child protection as authoritarian:

Lorraine: You know there is less of this sort of welfare work I suppose.

Jonathan: Right, right.

Lorraine: And it is more sort of child protection and authoritarian if you like (interview with Lorraine).

The authority role does not mean that all adult clients are seen as equally difficult. I found the picture to be more complex than that, as would be expected from my stated emphasis on multiple discourses. Chapters five and six will discuss the various different ways in which men and women are regarded by the social workers. But the possibility of coercion is inherent in a relationship with such a power differential. Client self-determination has been an important element of traditional social work values, although more recent statements of the ethical base of the profession have incorporated an acknowledgement that the use of authority to override client's wishes can be necessary (see, for example, British Association of Social Workers, 1996). The Uplands team staff manage the challenge that overt social control poses to their social work identity by deciding that in order to be fair to their clients they must be overt about the power differential. They speak of the importance of being clear with clients, that this is good social work and thoroughly compatible with their occupational identity.

I spell it out...if we don't do ABC we'll be going back to court. If things don't change there'll be consequences.... spelling it out - this is the situation (interview with Claire).

I think that from what Graham was saying, it was very much presented to her as 'this is your last chance, you know, if we find the kid's are still not

going to the school and that you're still leading the same sort of lifestyle as before we're going to start looking at care'. (Mike's supervision with Margaret)

This is very concerning as I thought you were doing much better than before. I am worried that this may mean that your standards have slipped and that you are returning to the way things used to be when living in Woodlands. As you know I do not like making threats or giving people ultimatums but I have to consider the children's needs. The children are still subject to care orders (except Leanne of course) and as such we still have shared parental responsibility and the right to remove them to a safe place if necessary (letter from Pete to the Brown family, in their case file).

Making power overt seems to acquire the status of a social work intervention. As Howe (1992, 1996) amongst others have observed, traditional therapeutic social work intervention does not form a very significant part of the contemporary social work role, and child protection workers have become care managers, as was noted above. The traditional idea of helping clients to learn strategies that will lead to change in their lives has faded. It has not disappeared. There are referrals made to specialist agencies for this traditional social work help, and some workers try some strategies with some clients. There is a great deal of support in the form of day care for children, to ease stress on parents. But many of the 'redeemable' clients are, in the last analysis, expected to change solely in response to the threat of losing the care of their children. In practice, for the Uplands team social workers, 'working with' clients usually means monitoring the quality of their parenting and telling them what they have to change. As Howe puts it,

Clients are expected to comply and conform; they are not diagnosed, treated or cured. If they know the rules, it's up to them to decide whether or not to abide by them (Howe, 1996: 88).

The extent to which 'being clear about concerns' has achieved the status of a social work intervention is illustrated by the two pilot interviews in Docktown. The respondents were asked 'what do you think helps people change? what kinds of things that social workers do are more likely to help?' The responses are reproduced below.

I think it very much depends on the family themselves and how they see the problem. The family, as I was saying earlier, the family need to recognise that there has been a difficulty or a problem and that that difficulty needs to be

overcome, and that they want to change to move forward. And unless the family recognise that, then change will not happen and obviously then that is where we start going down the road of care proceedings or whatever. I mean that is the last resort. You usually try sort of all sorts of family support systems first to try and get change going as soon as possible, but we can only allow so long for that to happen, and if there isn't any movement towards making improvements and I think as long as you are open and honest with the family all the way through, that makes life easier for the social worker to say 'right this is the cut off point, you haven't done this that and the other as expected and which you agreed to do, therefore we go along the lines of care proceedings and will work against your wishes if necessary, to sort of gain what we think is best for this child'. (interview with Sarah, Docktown)

I think that the best policy is to be open with them and not to have a hidden agenda. If you put your cards on the table and not hold things back and say look these are the concerns, these are the choices we have got, this is what we would like to do, this is how we think we can achieve that and involving them in that process, they may think that it is a totally different problem, you know. I have always worked in a way that, I have never hidden issues. I have always been completely honest with the clients and I think they respond to that. I don't what else to say really (interview with Lynne, Docktown)

These two social workers are in effect choosing this approach as their favoured social work intervention: the thing we do which most helps people to change is telling them they have to. I wonder whether Lynne's 'I don't know what else to say really' is effectively an admission that this is all that is on offer; that traditional social work helping strategies are just not part of the job. There are many accounts of cases that suggest most, if not all clients are aware of the social worker's ultimate authority.

I did a visit to a family up in Meadow Vale, but having kind of established that I wasn't going to take their daughter into care they said they didn't actually require any other service (Mike's supervision with Margaret)

He is like, you can't get hold of him because he thinks that we are to do with the police, you see (Lisa's supervision with Margaret).

Mike mentioned a visit he had just done to an 11 year old boy with learning difficulties. Mike said, 'I'm no expert but I think he was functioning as a 5 year old'. On a previous visit, the boy had hidden under the table because he thought Mike had come to take him away. Mike said that because he is in local authority care he associated social workers arriving with him having to move to another placement (from fieldnotes, 8 July)

It could be argued, of course, that clients are well aware of the power differential anyway. It should be stressed that making power overt does not necessarily lead to a uniformly conflictual situation. Many worker-client relationships continue to be very warm and, arguably, a generally positive experience. An example of where power is potentially subverted through humour is that of the Brown family. This was the only family I met during my fieldwork. As previously explained, the decision was taken to study only the social work office, but I took the chance when it was offered to accompany Pete on a visit to their home. The Browns received an overtly threatening letter from Pete, their social worker (see above) but continued to have a relationship with him that seemed genuinely warm. During a formal meeting in their home that the team manager also attended, the story was told (not for the first time, I gathered) of how Dean Brown had previously joked that Tracey, his wife, needed a diary for meetings like this since all the social workers had one. He had gone the next day to buy her one for 35p in Poundstretcher, a local budget shop. The price and the chosen shop contrasted sharply with the origins of the social workers' thick institutional diaries, serving to illustrate the difference of class and income, as well as poking fun at the trappings of authority.

Protecting children is the highest status role in the Uplands team. Although other work goes on, such as general family support and contact with children in long-term care, child protection will always take priority. In particular, a child protection emergency overrides everything. Although it is the most used phrase in this thesis, and therefore becomes somewhat mundane, in fact the words 'child protection' have a great deal of power in the social work office culture. That was one of the reasons I decided to focus on this aspect of the work of the child care team. An example of its power is the sheet of paper pinned to the office noticeboard that explains the idea of 'prime time'. This is protected time for written work - two hours each week away from the office - that can be interrupted 'for child protection or personal emergency only'. On one occasion during the fieldwork I arrived in the office to find a fully-fledged child protection emergency. A young child on Lisa's caseload, from the Jones family, had sustained a broken leg, and a doctor thought it may have been caused by the man in the house, Jason, the mother's boyfriend and father of the youngest child. Lisa and Margaret were spending all their time on the case that day, and there was a palpable air of excitement in the office. There was a sense in which this kind of crisis work was as important as it gets in the team. The

metaphors used for child protection further illustrate its special status. In supervision, Joan talks of a case 'teetering on the brink of child protection'. The category 'child protection' is a distinct place that family problems move into. Joan also illustrates the emergency nature of child protection status when she talks of the same case 'ringing alarm bells'.

There is also some awareness in the team of the idea that child and family services should be 'refocused' away from child protection and towards more emphasis on children in need (Little, 1997). Brian shows his familiarity the 'refocusing' debate when he says:

J - interesting that unlike the others you didn't mention child protection

B- I think of it in terms of the family, not just a child with a bruise. To see child protection as a child with a bruise doesn't get you very far. They're a child in need really. I know different social workers have different perspectives (interview with Brian).

In the context of a broad discussion of the theoretical implications of the research, chapter nine will return to the question of to what extent contemporary child protection entails constraint and control. The next part of the necessary context for gender construction to be discussed is the question of class.

4.3 Social class and community

Although the thesis topic is gender, this is of course not the only social division that affects the culture of the social work office. Although ethnicity has been found to be an important factor influencing the construction of child abuse and neglect (see, for example, Thorpe, 1994 and Swift, 1995), there were not significant ethnic divisions represented in the work of the Uplands team. As the last chapter explained, the local population is overwhelmingly white, and those clients whose files I studied were all white. They were all ostensibly heterosexual, and gender constructions are in many ways founded on an assumption of heterosexuality. The client population is also living in poverty, and class is an important issue in the Uplands team. It is almost a truism of much contemporary feminist writing to state that gender relations cannot be considered

separately from questions of class (see, for example, Brittan and Maynard, 1984; Skeggs, 1997). The next two chapters will consider constructions of men and women, and will include a class dimension. First, this section will introduce the issue of class and clienthood.

In the 1970s and 80s, class was a major issue in academic social work discourse. A widely articulated perspective held that class structure was the key determinant of the nature of social work; it shaped the social 'problems' that social work was meant to solve, and determined the power relation of workers and clients (see, for example, Jones, 1983). More recently this emphasis on class has been replaced by a concentration on discrimination and oppression, with particular attention paid to racism and sexism. Whilst many have been keen to maintain a focus on structural disadvantage, which would include an appreciation of economic factors, the centrality of class has undoubtedly faded. There is still some mention of poverty, but class, however defined, does not feature strongly in contemporary social work literature (an example of an exceptions is Kennedy, 1999).

Most of the clients of social workers are amongst the poorest in society (Becker and Macpherson, 1986). Child welfare work is no different. Parton writes that this work takes place at:

the junction of the self-managed world of the affiliated and the twilight world of the socially and economically marginalized and excluded, particularly those sections of the poor who make up the biggest proportion of the 'clients' of child welfare services, such as single parent households, substance misusers, homeless families and certain ethnic groups (Parton, 1998: 20).

As well as operating at the junction Parton describes, Philp (1979) has also observed that social work occupies the space between the respectable and the deviant. This position is crucial to understanding how clients are constructed. There is recognition from all the Uplands social workers of the socio-economic status of most clients. At my very first meeting with the team, Brian told me that they only really work with poor working class clients. Another colleague interjected that child protection can involve middle class clients too, particularly with sexual abuse cases, but Brian maintained his argument, saying that they only really encountered middle class people through adoption work.

Both Brian and Margaret, the team leader, told me in interviews that an important part of their motivation to become social workers was wanting to be of use to working class people.

I came through in a working class area and when I came of age I wanted to put something back into the area (interview with Brian).

In a loose sense, the culture of the social work office is politicised. There is certainly a belief that somewhere along the line, political decisions in the last couple of decades have adversely affected their clients.

I also believe that in the last 18 years we have had a government in power that has created an under class if you like, and that we have got families out there that their children have now grown up and know nothing different to being on income support, don't know the work culture. It is the norm to be at home, it is the norm to apply to DSS, to buy a fridge or whatever (Judith, Docktown).

There is a general consensus in the Uplands team that they are working with people from an underclass. The underclass idea has been articulated in many different ways in academic discourse (see Morris's summary, 1994). Gallie (1994) has summarised these different perspectives as 'conservative' and 'radical'. The conservative approach concentrates on the moral deficit of poor communities, and poor people's own responsibility for social problems. This discourse finds support in much of the popular press in the UK, with the use of censorious labels such as 'teenage mum' and 'feckless father'. In academic writings there is, for example, Murray's work (1990). Bagguley and Mann (1992) caricature such work as portraying poor working class people as 'idle thieving bastards'. The other discourse, that Gallie calls the 'radical' approach, speaks of economic marginalisation, claiming that a distinction should be made between the quality of life of working class people in general and the poorest group within the working class. People in this poorest group are seen as victims of the development of the labour market in advanced capitalism. The Uplands social workers make reference to both discourses in their talk about their patch.

As stated above, there is an appreciation of the structural and economic roots of poverty. Pete, in a passage from an interview that is both too long to reproduce and also difficult to quote without the risk of identifying the region, lists the deprivation factors which he identifies, many of which were cited at various times by other colleagues. He took me on an oral tour of the Uplands patch, which is summarised below.

- One estate has an 'award winning' design with mid floor entry to houses. There was initially no central heating, and downstairs bedrooms are damp. Forty per cent of houses are boarded up. Only people with problems end up living there. There is a transient population.
- On another estate, police only enter in twos and threes, or in cars. Recently some workers cut through an electricity cable and extinguished the streetlights, and left them not working because they decided it looked better in the dark. A while ago people were setting fire to their houses to get moved out. Now a tenants' association has been formed, social services have less work to do.
- Another estate is in two sections - new re-built red brick houses and other non-brick ones – most child care referrals come from the latter.
- Others estates have no facilities (except a Spar shop and a social club in one case) and poor transport to local towns. In the case of one estate only, this is because most people live in private housing and have cars. In the others there are few cars. Geographical isolation and expensive shops lead to a poverty trap.

The deprivation outlined here is not seen as of the residents' own making. These are clearly seen as problems with a political and economic cause, but there is also a belief in the Uplands team that deprivation creates a distinctive patch culture, a cycle of poverty, a power deficit.

You can get a patch culture, low incomes, poor housing, people out of work, school not seen as important and children out in the street all day (county child protection officer, from fieldnotes 21 August).

Poverty.....I think in many respects it is cyclic as well in that I am a great believer in expectations and aspirations and children having parental role models. Some children break out of it, but a lot of children just get caught up in the same sort of spiral, the same spiral that their parents have been caught up in. This is the bit about not a particularly high value on school and of education, leading to not a particular effort, leading to few qualifications, leading to lack of employment, leading to benefits, leading to the same sort

of cycle of deprivation and poverty really. And a lot of our clients are clients that have been around for a while and we are seeing children of clients and children of children of clients (interview with Pete).

Disciplining. I try to talk about making bedtime a pleasureable time, but they can't read stories to them because they can't read. Discipline is the only way they've got of having power over someone, I suppose (interview with Debbie).

This power deficit Debbie alludes to is a concept employed to explain Uplands men in particular. They do not have access to opportunities for conventional male power (job, house, property) so they seek power in other ways which can be damaging to those around them, particularly women and children. Chapter six will return to this issue. The culture bred from deprivation is not regarded as vibrant and resilient, as working class communities are often described in popular discourse. Rather the effects of deprivation are seen to include cruelty, as shown by this example cited by Lisa of cruel humour in a local community.

she's victimised, mind..... she hung herself and her little girl found her. They call her Nicola Choker up there (Lisa from fieldnotes)

Vibrancy and resilience do not form part of the construction of clients precisely because these are not regarded as people from the traditional working class. The excerpts above illustrate that both discourses of the underclass are present in the Uplands team. The New Right extreme of the moral failure discourse is not represented, but there is a belief that politically created deprivation does affects people's moral framework.

The language of community is very important in the social workers' talk about class and locality. Dicks (1997) describes two important academic and popular discourses of community, the 'good community' and the 'vanishing community'. The former is a political usage entailing the potential for communal resistance or self-reliance. The latter is a nostalgia for a way of life found only in 'tight-knit' communities, and typically in the past. In the Uplands there are thought to be traditional communities with relatively few social problems and newer ones that provide the raw material for most of the child protection work.

I mean I suppose there are areas of rural deprivation in many ways..... stuck in a bit of a time warp, but also meeting, particularly some of the areas north of Markettown, meeting the 20th century with, sort of, picking up all the wrong bits. The kids are getting into car crime, there is a tremendous drug problem in the estates. There is very little for young people to do, very little in terms of employment unless you come out of the valley. Um... pretty hopeless actually, but within the Uplands still, I mean in a way it is two separate lots of people. There are still very close knit families and communities who have been there for generations and who social services have never heard of and probably never will and who never want to move outside the Uplands, totally self sufficient, it is quite a mixture (interview with Margaret).

This represents a crucial discursive distinction between the respectable traditional working class and the unrespectables, albeit a distinction described here in social-political terms. It is a distinction that affects which cases are referred to the team and influences all professionals working in the field. As Skeggs (1997) has shown from her research into the intersection of class and gender identities, respectability is a central factor of identity formation, especially for working class women. Many of the professionals involved in the wider child protection process, such as health visitors, family carers and social workers, are women from lower middle or working class backgrounds. In the context of my research many of this wider group will have been brought up in the Uplands area.

The office is not situated in the Uplands, but in the county town of River County. The 'patch' is therefore geographically distant. The social workers studied by Pithouse spoke of:

the need for physical and social space between themselves and the twilight world of families on run-down council estates and the tightly packed terraced homes of the dock and sea-front areas they visit (Pithouse, 1987: 87).

The Uplands social workers did not particularly speak of the need to keep distance between themselves and their clients, but in fact a definite physical distance is created by the position of their office. The distance may, in part, contribute to the attribution of particular characteristics to the region of which the Uplands is part. The attribution of particular qualities to clients on the basis of their local identity is a fascinating feature, but not one that can be analysed in any depth without abandoning the anonymity of the region. It is important, however, to note that the ascription of class status and regional culture intersect in the construction of clients.

There is a general feeling that the parts of the Uplands where most clients live, the estates, are a very unpleasant environment. There is genuine sympathy for people who have no choice but to live on such estates. Debbie declares that she could not live there herself.

The houses are damp, I wouldn't want to live there. I suppose if I had to I could, but I can't imagine it. I definitely wouldn't want to live there' (interview with Debbie).

In the face of this unpleasant environment, in which social workers spend a good deal of their day, one of the coping strategies is humour. This is a shared humour of those who know the area, know the stories that are told about different estates and different villages, and, in some cases either live in the Uplands themselves or were brought up there. Lisa, the team member most likely to use humour in this way, gives a typical example below. She sets a client's inflated talk against the reality of his poverty and the poverty of the general area.

he (a client) keeps talking about a plot of land he's inherited. It's probably an allotment or something (Lisa, from fieldnotes).

So clients are the underclass. It is fully expected that clients will come from certain districts and share an experience of poverty, with associated factors such as unemployment, little education and poor housing. The roots of this are economic, but the resulting problems are moral and emotional as well as material. Newer areas are much more likely to provide clientele than traditional working class areas. Next, for the final section of this chapter on the context of achieving clienthood, the discussion will move beyond age, class and social control to look at ideas about family life and child-rearing and the question of against what standards are adult clients judged. Although this chapter is primarily intended to cover the aspects of differentiating and categorising clients that are not overtly gendered, the discussion that follows does inevitably stray into more overt gender territory.

4.4 Desired models of family life

Howitt (1992) has written that social workers assess parents against a culturally-informed prototype; a process he calls 'templating'. At this point I shall consider briefly some aspects of what this template might be in the Uplands team, focusing on how men and women clients are constructed within accepted notions of family life. Any template of family life will be informed by dominant discourse of family life in wider British culture. Glenn provides a helpful overview of constructions of mothering. Whilst she is writing about the USA, her work resonates for British culture as well. She writes that for most of the 20th century, an idealised model of motherhood has been projected as universal, a model in which

responsibility for mothering rests almost exclusively on one woman (the biological mother), for whom it constitutes the primary if not sole mission during the child's formative years. The corollary view of children is that they require constant care and attention from one caretaker (the biological mother)' (Glenn, 1994: 3).

Similarly Collier (1995) in his work on masculinity in family law, has observed that the father as breadwinner is the enduring version of men in families in British society. Connell (1987) emphasises the importance to social relations of gender of assumed heterosexuality and the reproductive division of people into male and female, both of which are central to the dominant discourse of family life (I also accept that there exist alternative but subordinated discourses; of gay families for example). In this wider cultural context, the following aspects of constructions of family life in the Uplands team will be outlined: the gendered division of child care, the need for both practical and emotional support, and putting the children's needs before your own.

4.4.1 The gendered division of child care

In summary, there is an expectation that men and women will both be involved with childcare, but not on an equal basis. It is expected that they will have different roles. Women are expected to be a constant presence and to be the providers of physical care for children. It is also considered to be good for men to be present. Men are expected to

share the work of child care when at home. They are not, however, expected to be constantly available in the same way as women. It is acceptable for men to be absent from the home for officially declared, legitimate work. The excerpt below illustrates these expectations.

'The baby will need food, warmth, food and dry clothes. The baby will need his/her emotional, physical and material needs met by his/her mother, Diane Wilson.....

Diane to work with all parties involved in the child protection plan and to seek help/support when needed at any time.....

Tony works between 6.30 a.m. and 3.30 p.m.

Tony to agree to the following:

- a) Continue to support and encourage Diane as regards her care of the baby.
- b) Tony to share the care of the baby during the times when not in work
- c) Tony to feed back any problems and also work in partnership with all parties involved in the child protection plan.'

(Extracts from child protection plan in Wilson family file)

Mr. Wilson here is employed. Most of the men who are clients of the Uplands team are not in work. Dicks *et al's* research (1998) found service providers (including social workers) talking of unemployed men as a problem; often described as hanging around the house without contributing much to the household. The Uplands social workers were more likely to describe a man's looking for work as problematic than his presence in his house, since it was often presumed to be a spurious excuse to avoid domestic responsibility. A non-abusing man's presence in the house tends to be considered as a positive feature.

4.4.2 The need for practical and emotional support

Children are seen to need both practical and emotional support. There is an expectation that parents will, to use Graham's (1983) distinction, both care for them and care about them. The parents' failure to provide either aspect of care can result in categorisation as a 'child protection' case. The following excerpts illustrate both dimensions of care: the former emotional and the latter practical/physical.

Ruth, she came back from her first day at Lowtown Comp and I was there. It was lovely. It really was lovely ... especially for Ruth because it was so

important for her and Tracey asked all the right questions, it was lovely it really was. (Pete's supervision with Margaret)

The six identified areas of concern include

'(ii) issues around Ian's inconsistent weight gain, poor diet and inconsistent feeding routines.

(iii) the poor standard of hygiene in the home and the possible risk this presents to Ian's health.

(iv) the standard of safety in the home.

(v) the need to ensure that Ian is properly supervised at all times.'

In summary:

'The objectives of the plan are to ensure that Ian's needs are met in a safe environment.'

(Smith child file)

Chapter seven will address in detail the issue of the balance between practical and emotional care in child protection decision-making, since it is a highly topical issue in River County. To summarise, although government guidance (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995) asserts the primary importance of emotional warmth, it has become acceptable in the River County office culture to question the welfare of children in a household with emotional warmth but without standards of body maintenance and environmental cleanliness that are considered acceptable.

In a somewhat abstract sense, in the occupational rhetoric, the responsibility for child care lies with both parents. But as a great deal of research from Oakley (1974) onwards has shown, in practice it is women who do most of the child care and other domestic work on a daily basis. Hence, in the Uplands team, it is women who are looked to as the responsible parent.

4.4.3 Putting the children's needs before your own

Putting the children's needs before your own is a constant reference point in case talk and case recording. As Twigg and Atkin (1994), amongst others, have argued, need is an irredeemably contested concept. It can be invoked in defence of ideological or pragmatic positions. Within child welfare discourse, as King and Piper (1995) have pointed out, the child is constructed as a 'bundle of needs'. The background to this is what Zelizer (1985) has called the 'sacralisation' of the child in the West. As Lawler's (1999) research on 'needs talk' describes, the dominant idea seems to be that 'children need, mothers only

want'. As stated earlier in the chapter, the rhetoric of 'the child's needs' and 'the welfare of the child' is often employed to contrast an idealised notion of the child's welfare with that currently on offer from birth parents. The data extracts below illustrate this.

Before the meeting started, Debbie referred to a case where the mother wanted more contact with her children in care, and she had to tell her it would be reduced to once a year. They are being adopted. She said, with surprise, that the probation officer 'thinks the kids should go back to Laura (mother)', when 'we have to consider the children's welfare. These kids keep saying to me "when are you going to find me a new mum and dad?"' (from fieldnotes, 2 September).

I think the children had been emotionally neglected in hindsight, they were never registered for that and we never really dealt with that but that is a key thing really. They have suffered emotionally. Physically they haven't wanted for anything but emotionally there has been neglect there, because Jane was unable to fulfil their needs. She was unable to meet their needs not because she didn't want to but she just didn't have the skills or the resources (interview with Pete).

Quite often it (neglect) is about adults with emotional needs which tend to take precedence over the children (interview with Mike).

Helen Warren seems unable to put Cathy's needs and welfare before her own. It has been suggested to me that she appears jealous of Cathy at times. Mrs Warren has shown a lack of interest in Cathy's health needs, e.g., preferring to stay in bed rather than attend a hospital appointment with her daughter. Her reluctance to visit Cathy on a regular basis and to take an active role in her care has identified her inability to put Cathy's needs and welfare before her own (case conference report, Warren family file).

The ideal of putting your children's needs before anything else is used as a standard against which parental behaviour can be matched. Again, the occupational rhetoric would suggest this principle is applied to both men and women as parents or carers.

(under heading 'areas of concern')

Both Mr and Mrs Warren's egocentric and immature personalities and this affecting their ability to place Cathy's needs before their own. (Warren family file)

In practice, however, the concept is frequently invoked in relation to mothers. In particular, it is invoked in relation to mothers who choose bad men. The excerpt below from a social worker - team manager supervision concerns a woman, Nicola, who is seen as putting her children at risk by continuing to live with a violent partner, Jason.

Lisa: And plus the fact that Nicola is putting Jason's needs first.

Margaret: Yeah.

Lisa: And not able to protect the children.

Margaret: She putting Jason's needs but she is also putting her own needs first as well, isn't she? because she needs to have a partner, doesn't she? I don't know whether I go as far as saying that she needs Jason in particular.

Lisa: Well she needs a partner.

Margaret: Because she has got seven kids I suppose to share the burden.

Lisa: Yeah, I mean saying that I think she, I think the situation as it stands now is that she, she really wants him to stay around because she is pregnant with his child.

(Lisa's supervision with Margaret)

The ideal response for a woman in this situation, and the one that would demonstrate prioritising of the children's needs, would be to free herself of him. That is seen to be the natural response. The women referred to in the passages below both exhibited this natural response.

But I am reassured by Karen's position because she would passionately defend her children, and if she had an inkling, and you know her suspicions were raised um... she was very angry with him for what he had done to Thomas (Pete, in supervision with Margaret).

'When they're faced with losing their kids, you expect people to put up a bit of a fight. She did that.' (interview with Claire)

This expectation that women should do what is 'natural' is perhaps based on a fundamental optimism about mothering. What Dingwall *et al* (1983) described as the rule of optimism in child care social work they found to be applied to women in particular. Featherstone (1999) has claimed that optimism about mothering is mainstream in social work culture. These themes, amongst others, will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

4.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to complete the context of gender construction in the Uplands team. Not every aspect of child protection work is *explicitly* gendered. There are other important divisions of the potential consumer population which fundamentally affect the construction of the client and will overlap with the gendered aspects covered in the next few chapters. Firstly, the local population is divided in to likely potential clients and those who are unlikely to require a service because of social class and location, which are inseparable from the notion of respectability. It will be seen in chapters five and six that constructions of men and women clients are fundamentally constructions of marginal class status. It was also shown above that family members do not have equal client status. Children are the rhetorical object of concern, they are claimed to be the principal (or only) client, but in fact everyday reference to 'clients' tends to mean parents because it is parents the workers focus on in day-to-day practice. The separation of children's clienthood from that of parents is a recurring theme, especially in the next chapter.

It was argued above that the parent-worker relationship is an inherently difficult one, where the power differential is deliberately made explicit, this openness itself achieving the status of a social work intervention. It will be seen in the chapters that follow that making authority explicit, in the shape of the giving of ultimatums, is, again, gender-specific. Men and women can both be given ultimatums, but of very different kinds. Finally, it was explained above that within the client population of the unrespectable underclass, templates of family life are used to assess standards, and decide which fall into the child protection net. The next few chapters will describe how men and women clients are seen to match up against these templates.

Although most of this chapter has dealt with aspects of child protection work that are not explicitly gendered, a consistent theme of the thesis is that even ostensibly gender neutral aspects of the construction of child protection work impact more on women because women are there with the children. The next chapter will go on to explore the issue of women as clients in detail.

Chapter 5

CONSTRUCTING WOMEN

This chapter begins to explore the process of gender construction in the social work office, by focusing on the construction of women as clients. There are many dimensions of gender construction in occupational culture that could be explored, including ethnomethodological study of talk about men and women, and detailed analysis of how accounts of clients are constructed for particular audiences. In this chapter I am choosing to present an overview of social workers' expressed opinions about women in collegial talk, research interviews and case records. At the end of the chapter I will identify some defining discourses of femininity.

Whilst the chapter will focus in particular on constructions of women, it is clear that, as previously asserted, these cannot be considered in isolation from constructions of men and of children. There is a sense in which this chapter and the one that follows are not separate discussions. The construction of clients in the culture of the social work office assumes a framework of gender relations, and this assumed framework is predicated on heterosexuality. Clienthood is thoroughly gendered, and men and women clients are understood in direct relation to constructions of the other sex. As Connell (1987) has observed, the concept of gender is inherently relational. Men and women clients are also constructed as distinct categories, with often strikingly different attitudes and behaviour. Because child abuse is the primary concern of the child protection system and more of this abuse is committed by men, constructions of men influence how women are constructed. Equally, the dominant construction of family life in the West is based on women's work as primary carers (Glenn, 1994; Dalley, 1996; Turney, forthcoming). There is, inevitably, an underlying dichotomy of men as abusers, and women as carers. Interestingly, there is also simultaneously a notion of equality that sees all clients as deserving to be regarded and responded to in the same way (see chapter eight).

The previous chapter noted some historically dominant family ideologies, namely the mother as primary carer and father as breadwinner. It is as mothers or grandmothers in the main that women clients feature in child protection work in the Uplands team. There are foster carers who are women, but they are not regarded as clients. I shall introduce this chapter with some mention of the historical construction of motherhood, and of

women in social work. As chapter two noted, Foucault (1984) describes the creation of the modern mother in the last century through the hysterisation of women's bodies. Oakley (cited in Glenn, 1994: 186) has written that the contemporary 'myth of motherhood' rests on three beliefs: 'that all women need to be mothers, that all mothers need their children and that all children need their mothers'. Women are assumed to know what to do with children because they are seen as more embodied and emotional (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Women have historically been subordinated in families to the extent that men's violence against their wives was regarded as legitimate until relatively recently (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). In the later twentieth century there have clearly been shifts in mothering, with more women employed outside the home (Walby, 1997) and alternative family formations such as lesbians bringing up children (Sullivan, 1996).

As Hallett (1989), amongst others, has reminded us, the majority of both clients and staff of social services departments are women. So 'social work is an activity carried out in the main by women with women' (Featherstone, 1997a: 175). Day's ethnographic research (1997) found that the staff themselves perceived child care social work to be a woman's culture. Bella (1995) argues that social work is, to use Witz's term (1992), a 'successful female professional project'. It is also, however, an arena in which the commonality of women is lost through categorisations of child welfare where poor and minority women become clients (Swift, 1995).

Mothering is central to occupational constructions of women in child protection work. The focus on the child as client described in the previous chapter has resulted in a tendency for social workers to respond to mothers only in relation to their impact on children, not as complex subjects in their own right (Featherstone, 1999). Parton *et al's* research (1997) found that maternal response as classified by the social worker was one of the most influential factors in deciding whether family situations would be classified as child protection cases warranting further action, including substitute care. Decisions about children's futures were made with reference to moral statements about maternal identity. In relation to sexual abuse cases, the necessary maternal attributes that social workers looked for were as follows:

that they did not know about the abuse, and that when they were informed they responded in a way which was wholly maternal. That is, they made

themselves available (to the child, and others in relation to the child such as the investigators, the courts, education and health professionals), their actions could always be interpreted as supportive of the child, providing for and nurturing the child, and their insight or knowledge was articulated to show that they knew they must do this (Parton *et al*, 1997: 215).

In the material that follows, I shall attempt to trace the process of social workers' construction of women clients. Firstly some aspects of the professionals' ideal family model will be outlined, and then their perceptions of the reality of women clients' lives. The third section will focus on women being seen as responsible for protection, and finally the issue of worker empathy with clients will be discussed.

5.1 The reality of women clients' lives

In the Uplands team the tension that Pithouse (1987) describes between the abstract notion of the client as the object of service and the experience of encountering actual clients can also be found. It is hardly surprising, given the emphasis in contemporary child and family social work on investigation of alleged abuse, the experience of the social workers is that the reality of women clients' lives does not usually conform to the ideal of family life outlined in the last chapter. Women often 'fail' as mothers. This section will describe the perceptions in the Uplands team of the reality of women clients' lives: the reality of family structures, the effects of oppression, the influence of traditional judgements, women who choosing to transgress, and the capacity for change.

5.1.1 The perceived reality of local family structures

Some recent sociological work by eminent scholars on current developments in gender relations and intimate relationships is optimistic about the extent to which change is underway (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Ferguson summarises the change in the gender order outlined by this work: 'a reconstruction of family morality, gender destinies and taboos relating to marriage, parenthood, childhood and sexuality that were at the core of the triumph of simple modernity' (Ferguson, 1997: 229-230). The Uplands team social workers are not so up-beat about the reality of gender relations on their patch.

The children tend to be with the women. Where there are men around they tend not to have the caring role. It's a cultural thing round here.....I think there's a feeling around that it's worse if a woman doesn't look after the kids than if a man doesn't (interview with Brian).

There is a macho culture in the Uplands particularly, I don't know whether it is as strong in other areas but it is noticeable in the Uplands (interview with Lorraine).

I suppose this is the Uplands, and I would think probably that the majority of day to day physical caring of children still falls upon the woman. I don't think the new man has reached the Uplands yet (interview with Margaret)

There is a shared assumption in the team that the gender inequalities in the patch are severe; that women reluctantly bear all domestic responsibility and men both dominate women and opt out of child care work. It is also assumed, as all three of the excerpts above illustrate, that in the Uplands area, gender roles are more traditional than elsewhere (see also chapter four).

5.1.2 The effects of oppression on women clients

In contrast with some research, for example Swift's (1995) encounter with social work practice in Canada, the Uplands social workers are, to an extent, influenced by some of the messages of second wave feminism. This traditional family set-up is seen to be oppressive for women and to often have profoundly negative effects on them. So, for example, women's 'not coping' is often connected with the absence of help from the men in their lives. This failure to cope can be in relation to the practical demands of child care and housework, or failure to manage children's behaviour. Pete, in the excerpt below, sees responsibility for mothers' difficulties as being located with partners and those who live nearby.

A lot of women feel as if they are on their own, as if they can't cope anymore because there is no help, they are not getting enough help. Well that is not a matter of social work help. It is a matter of community help, partner etc. Some have their husbands as the disciplinarians and they are kept to one side

and then wheeled in as and when necessary to administer punishment to the children. But over so much of the problems that the women are presenting is the fact of just not being able to cope anymore with the behaviour of the children (interview with Pete).

The experience of having been abused is seen as leaving women with very low expectations of quality of life. Debbie, in an interview, told me 'our women clients don't expect anything'. Mike, in the following interview extract makes the general point that he is struck by how much his women clients put up with. He describes a particular case in illustration where the woman finally asserted herself with her partner over something Mike considered to be a fairly minor offence in comparison with the physical abuse she has suffered. There is a cultural gulf here. Mike is sympathetic to the woman's oppressive situation, but cannot understand her at all.

Certainly there is a fair number of women on my case load who aren't even really able to meet their own needs in terms of relationships, putting themselves first occasionally. A fairly common experience is women who for instance won't go to the doctor when they are feeling ill, or won't go to the doctor when they are obviously under an awful lot of stress and perhaps do need to go and see the doctor about that. I suppose another example of that kind of behaviour is women whose expectations from their partners seem kind of surprisingly low in terms of putting up with an awful lot, right up to physical abuse from their partners on a fairly frequent kind of basis. The most surprising thing that I ever encountered was someone who put up with years of really quite bad beatings from her partner and I went around there one day and she said I have chucked him out. And the reason why she had finally chucked him out was because he had bought this car and there were an awful lot of difficulties with it because it wasn't taxed or MOTd. It was sitting outside and the police came around and happened to pick that one up and they ended up going to court and having a load of fines and things like that. She chucked him out then. She got cross about that and chucked him out, but she hadn't at all got cross about having to hide black eyes and bruises around the neck and things for years and years. That surprised me, but I think there certainly are quite a large number of women who will put up with an awful lot in terms of what happens to them (interview with Mike).

Social workers talk of patterns that women get into. Swift's research (1995) found frequent reference to the idea of cycles of abuse: the abused becoming the abuser. In the Uplands team, the notion of a cycle was much more often invoked in relation to men and child sexual abuse (see the next chapter). The pattern the social workers described in relation to some women involves abuse begetting abuse, but in the sense that being a

victim of one form of abuse will make it more likely that you will be a victim again in a different situation, not that it will necessarily turn you into an abuser. In particular the pattern concept is invoked in relation to living with bad men.

The mother has low self esteem, a poor self image. She's grown up with a father who's violent, got herself into that kind of relationship (interview with Claire)

The same pattern. All the women hooked up with men at a young age. Her sister is with a dominating man. (Mary to Mike, from fieldnotes).

Occasionally, there are hints that social workers think women clients are attracted by bad men. The excerpts below imply this interpretation.

Janice sort of says that she doesn't want Darren but then is doing things to try and attract him. And I don't know whether Darren is up to the same things. So I am not sure, that is just feelings I have (Pete supervision with Margaret).

What is it about Lynne? Is she intimidated, is she frightened of him? It sounds like he's got some kind of hold over her' (Claire on the phone, from fieldnotes, 31 July).

In the first excerpt, Pete is explicit that he sees the woman client as attracted to a man who he has described as abusive to her in various ways. Claire, in the extract from my fieldnotes, is acknowledging the possibility that fear explains the continuing relationship, but her genuine puzzlement about the woman's motives implies she is questioning whether the 'hold' the man has over the woman is intimidation or sexual attraction.

The reality of the lives of many of the women clients is understood to involve living with bad men. The priority of the social workers, though, as is constantly repeated, is 'the welfare of the child' (see chapter four). So although there is an appreciation of how an experience of oppression has negative outcomes for women, there is more practical concern about the effects of this on the children than on women themselves. The following excerpt illustrates how a social worker sees the effects on the children of living with a man who is violent towards their mother.

That can sometimes have two different effects on sort of child care. One is that partners who are abusive towards them are more likely to be abusive towards the children as well, and their own abilities to cope with the kids obviously get knocked back if they are being abused themselves or if they are not looking after themselves. To look after your kids you have got to look after yourself (interview with Mike).

The Uplands social workers are aware of the potential for gender bias in service provision. Most recounted anecdotes about men clients being offered help with ironing or babysitting (see also Edwards, 1998), providing these as illustrations of unfairness to women, for whom such 'non-essentials' would not be considered.

5.1.3 The influence of traditional judgements

As well as aspects in the construction of women clients that could be seen as influenced by feminism, namely the acknowledgement of how oppressive relationships can adversely affect women's functioning, fairly frequent use was also made of concepts which could be seen as embedded in a traditional discourse of unrespectable motherhood. These concepts are the 'single parent' with many partners, and the importance of domestic skills (keeping a tidy house). To draw attention to a traditional discourse of unrespectable motherhood is not to suggest that the social workers have traditional views of the women they work with, but rather it is to put the data in the context of wider discourses of femininity. It is important to acknowledge that even where evaluations of mothers are sympathetic, traditional influences can run alongside feminist ones. When social workers make reference to the large numbers of 'single parents' on their caseloads, they are not necessarily intending to imply moral censure, in fact they are more likely to imply that these are women who have been treated badly by men. However, they do notice their 'singleness' and the number of partners they have had. This could be understood simply as information relevant to a researcher's questions about gender and practice. It is, however, arguably not possible to use the term 'single parent' without evoking a recently revitalised discourse of moral censure. This discourse was a central feature of the Conservative government's 'back to basics' campaign and was, to an extent, continued through some early decisions of the Labour government; in particular with regard to social security policy. Equally, any mention of 'several partners'

or children 'with different fathers' again unavoidably evokes the unrespectable promiscuous woman.

The importance of a tidy house and acceptable maintenance of children's bodies are both part of an ideology of regulating women. For some other child protection professionals, traditional judgements of women can be quite overt. The following excerpt from a health visitor's report is an example of this:

I attempted to give a period of intensive visiting to Tracey, and to try to improve her knowledge, skill and motivation, as a mother and housewife, but after a few visits I failed to get access to the home, and eventually Trudy made it quite plain that my visits were not welcome (health visitor's report to case conference, Brown family).

Such traditional notions of femininity are not so overt amongst social workers, who are no doubt aware of feminist critiques of housework. However, the scrutiny of women's domestic performance is in fact routine in social work practice. The category of 'home conditions' appears as a standing item on forms for monitoring children on the child protection register. Women's responsibility for servicing the bodies of children also hangs over all cases, but is particularly acute in 'neglect' cases, which are fundamentally about failure to reach acceptable standards of body maintenance. This will be further discussed in chapter seven, which addresses the construction of child neglect.

5.1.4 Choosing to transgress

As well as the influence of feminist insights and reference to a traditional discourse of unrespectable motherhood, there are also some women who are clearly judged to have chosen to transgress expected standards of motherhood. It has been claimed that women's failures as mothers are punished by the authorities in a way that men's are not. For example, Swift's research (1995) in Canada found that virtually any child care performed by a man produced a positive view of him, whereas for mothers who are under scrutiny, much of the routine work of caring for children disappeared in social work accounts, while failures were highlighted. Tice's historical analysis of social work case files in the USA found that

Women's transgressions were typically treated more harshly than men's because of the serious consequences thought to ensue when women neglected what were perceived as their primary obligations: scrubbing their homes and shielding their children (Tice, 1998: 111).

I shall discuss several examples of women being seen to transgress in the Uplands team. These are broadly grouped as choosing not to put children first and being an abuser.

5.1.4.1 *Choosing not to put children first*

Under this heading I shall discuss women choosing bad men, choosing drink or drugs, and being aggressive to social workers rather than co-operating. Howe (1992, 1996) has claimed that contemporary social work practice, purged of psychodynamic influences, views clients as making free rational choices to act in the ways they do. I deliberately use the word 'choose' because a traditional social work emphasis on the social and economic context of client's problems seems to be balanced by an ethic of ultimate individual responsibility (see also chapter eight on this). This balance is to be expected in a policy climate that has prioritised the targeting of dangerous families rather broader social interventions (Parton, 1991). The following excerpt illustrates this. It is Mary's view that social policy can help many but not all.

I think there is a hell of a lot that can be done in wider social policy, you know like housing, education, community services like play schemes, after school clubs, there are loads and loads of things. Benefits as well is the other thing. If a lot of those things were changed, a lot of the work that we do wouldn't be necessary. But that is not to say, I mean there was one point where I thought that would be the whole answer but I don't think that now. I think there are people who have got deeper problems and would always need some sort of social services (interview with Mary).

The most overt way in which women choose not to put their children first is in choosing a bad man. This is an aspect that this chapter returns to more than once. It is a very interesting and important aspect of the construction of gender because it illustrates the process (highlighted by Farmer and Owen, 1995, 1998) of attention moving from abusive men onto the women who 'allow them' to stay around and abuse them or their children. This 'choice' will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter.

Another example of women choosing to prioritise something other than their children is through use of alcohol and drugs. As Ettorre (1992: 139) writes, women substance users are seen as 'unfit mothers' and 'polluted women'. Brian gives an example of such a case here:

We couldn't get mum to see the risks. Drugs take over. You give up your independence. You become dependent on how the drugs react in your system. It's difficult. You've got to put the welfare of the child first. There's nothing to be gained if the child is injured or killed, you've got to protect them. The mother accepted the child should go into care. She signed the forms. She recognised that what she could offer wasn't enough (interview with Brian).

Some women are experienced as aggressive. Margaret makes reference to such women in the course of arguing that not only men clients are aggressive:

I can think of a bloke who had me pinned up against the door once, but I can also think of a seventeen year old girl who had me pinned up against a wall once, so I don't automatically look at blokes as being the aggressive ones. I can think of very aggressive women, screaming down the phone, in fact I think women are probably more aggressive down the phone than men actually, but then again there are more of them (interview with Margaret).

This aggression is, in a sense, seen as a choice too. Although one possible interpretation of aggression is as an attempt to ward off interfering professionals and protect your custody of your children, it is more likely to be seen as damaging a mother's case because she is choosing to fight rather than co-operate with social services. Putting your children first means co-operating. Behind this is the assumption that if your own relationship with your children were threatened you would do anything that would work in getting them back. Allowances are not made for clients' lack of pragmatism and inability to read the professionals' etiquette.

When children are separated from their mothers, through enforced accommodation in the care of the local authority, there are still judgements made about the extent to which the women put their children's needs first. The appropriate response to separation is, again, one of total co-operation with the social services plans. Parents need to conform to the plans for contact that the authority has dictated in order to meet their children's needs. The excerpts below concern women who failed to conform, either, in the case of

Janice, by demanding more contact than was on offer or, in the case of the mother Mike describes, by not attending enough contact sessions.

Pete: Even despite the fact that Sian has said, and Janice knows, that Sian doesn't want overnight stays, Janice

Margaret: That is certainly putting pressure. Why is she doing that? You know I can imagine the scenario on a Sunday, taking her to the bedroom and saying look this is the bedroom that you could have if you stay here. (Pete's supervision with Margaret)

They went into care. They were one and a half and two, and mum never really built up a satisfactory pattern of contact. Seeing mum was always on the cards but it had never actually happened. She would disappear for months on end and so she didn't appear in these children's lives. She would begin to sort of build up expectations, start visiting regularly, and it is 'oh you know you are coming back to live with me', and then she would disappear. This happened a number of times and eventually to get the kids out of this pattern, the build up of hopes and then dashing the hopes that we eventually decided we would place them for adoption. (interview with Mike)

It seems Helen Warren has not been able to comprehend the importance for her to visit and bond with Cathy but will visit because she feels that it is what core group members want to hear. She has little motivation herself..... Helen Warren seems unable to put Cathy's needs and welfare before her own. (core group minutes, Warren file).

Because the children's welfare is the only real consideration, there is apparently little concern about the potential emotional impact of separation on mothers (Howe *et al* 1992). There does not seem to be any consideration of the possible emotional implications for mothers in seeing the children at all, or in seeing them as little as social services allow. Mothers have to follow the rules, and wanting too much contact or not wanting enough are both regarded as transgressions.

5.1.4.2 *Being an abuser*

As Coward (1997) has observed in her commentary on the popular media, maternal abuse tends to be portrayed as particularly horrifying. It violates the image of the nurturing mother. An example of this from the social work office is the case file on a family in which the father was convicted of attempting to murder the mother. The

original referral related to his complaint to the police that his wife had tried to 'drown' his son. Although it was seemingly accepted by all professionals that the incident involved holding the boy's head under the bath water for a few seconds in exasperation, and did not constitute an ongoing risk to the boy's safety, the 'drowning' reappeared in documents for many years, even though awareness of the father's violence had overtaken it as perceived risk to the child. The mother was reconstructed as victim of the father's violence, but the horror of the 'drowning' was evident from the ongoing reference to the event.

There are also cases where the woman is not seen as sole abuser, but as contributing to an abusive family situation. These are cases where she is 'as bad as he is'. This construction of family violence and abuse is also discussed in the next chapter, but the following data extracts give a flavour of the construction of such cases. Mike recounts his experience of working with couples who are in the process of separating. He regards these as a 'type of case' where the problems are interactive and intractable. Sarah, although from a different social work office, shows a similar tendency to cast doubt on a woman's assertion that she is straightforwardly a victim of violence as I found in relation to some cases in the Uplands.

It's matrimonial stuff- horrible! They have their own agendas. There are two very plausible people and who the hell do you believe? I hated it. Somebody is lying. It could be both. If you do a few you get to know who's lying (Mike, from fieldnotes, 8 July).

It is perceived by the partner, the female partner that is, that the male partner is the one causing the problems. How sure that is I don't know. I mean there are certainly difficulties with both female and male partners but certainly the arguments in the household have increased (interview with Sarah, Docketown)

5.1.5 The capacity to change

The Uplands social workers are generally not very optimistic about their success rate in helping parents change. There is an expectation that family situations will remain much the same, any improvements being gradual and fairly subtle.

Often with cases on the child protection register there's drift, and no change, you wonder why bother? (interview with Claire).

There is, however, the 'exceptional client' (Pithouse, 1987). In the Uplands team this is someone who shows dramatic change. This is much more likely to be a woman than a man.

What stood out was the dramatic change. Often there's no progress at all. Quite quickly there was change in the children's behaviour, her self-esteem, the home conditions, the school noticed a change in the children, her commitment to working with us changed. There was a real threat the children would be removed. Often it's fight or flight, but often people don't change I don't think he will ever change. I was impressed by her (interview with Claire).

I don't know what keeps you in it (the job). I suppose it is the individual, just if you feel that sort of, not your personal intervention, but that the interactions with this person has made a positive difference, and the long term difference probably does keep you going. (interview with Lorraine).

It is this exceptional client that tips the balance towards the job being a rewarding one for Lorraine. The case Claire described was out of the ordinary precisely because there was observable change in the woman, though not in the man. There is perhaps an underlying assumption in the team that men are unlikely to change, whereas women can. This leads to the expectation that when there is a problematic man around, it is the woman's responsibility to act to change the situation. This responsibility will be discussed in the next section.

5.2 Women's responsibility for protection

Hooper (1992b) has written that the child protection system has always sought to enforce rather than replace parental responsibility for children, and in doing so has reflected and perpetuated gendered definitions of proper parenting. She argues that child protection discourse is preoccupied not with causality but with parental responsibility, so rather than looking to intervene with abusers, officials look to strengthen the protection of the child by non-abusing parents. Since it is men who are more often responsible for

abuse, mothers are the main alternative source of child protection. It is they who are bodily present in families. Some of the Uplands social workers were overt about this:

More of my work has been with children in long term care, and also with trying to keep children out of the care system, so there is a lot of intensive work with families and families generally means mothers (interview with Lorraine).

I think also something to remember is that the child is our client. We are child centred. First and foremost we are looking at the child's needs, and radiating out from the child's needs are the primary carers and the people involved, and invariably the woman is the primary carer (interview with Margaret).

Working with women is also so deep-rooted in the culture of child protection social work as to be unquestioned, to an extent. Despite my stated interest in working with men, Claire, in the more lengthy extract below, seems to only be able to conceive of women as the parental clients when men are violent in the home.

Claire:

I've got strong views on domestic violence. My feeling is that with domestic violence on all levels, children are affected. Even if not physically abused it stays with them for life. I think it should become a child protection issue. In the first case domestic violence and drinking was the main issue. Families, mothers, sometimes don't realise how serious it is. We should never ignore or play down violence.

Jonathan:

What do you think social workers should do about it?

Claire:

Educating people, perhaps in groups, mothers' groups, play groups, parenting classes. It becomes the norm - he hits me but only when he has a drink. There are two classic myths, the other is he hits me, but that's OK because he never touches the kids. Quite often children are caught up in it, intentionally or not. Apart from education, liaising with family support. It should be high on the agenda, there should be more training for social workers. I've been on course, things like how women get into a cycle of violence, how it becomes a way of life - they have a violent father, then a violent partner. It's never acceptable, there are never any excuses. Not all social workers think it should be that high profile. I do. Often neighbours, extended family, friends know it's going on. They say well it's nothing to do with me, or he can be nice.

Claire starts by using the rhetoric of 'domestic violence is bad for children' that is relatively new to child care social work (Mullender, 1996). She immediately gives away that she believes this is an issue for mothers by slipping from 'families' to 'mothers', and then goes on after my question to reveal that she can only encompass the possibility of working with women on the issue of violence. She implies that by 'parenting classes' she in fact means the previously stated 'mothers' groups' when she describes the content of such a group as addressed to women who believe myths about violent men. It is the *women* who are caught in a cycle of violence, and it is women who you engage on the topic. It seems that the possibility of addressing a violent man about his behaviour is not on the agenda.

5.2.1 Failure to protect

Women's responsibility for protecting children against men is a recurring theme in the ethnographic data. Working with abusive men in any way is not an option. The response is to put pressure on her to get him out. This is the case with both sexual abusers and men who violently abuse their women partners (Hooper, 1992a; Mullender, 1997; Humphries, 1999). Women are held responsible for protecting their children from men's bodily excesses. The key concept that reinforces women's responsibility for men is the 'failure to protect'. It is explicitly used in the following data:

'Well, failing to protect is usually around where there is another in the household. The mother is not putting the child's needs before her own basically. She wants a relationship; she therefore is blinkered to the fact that the man in the relationship could pose a threat. (interview with Margaret)

Jonathan:

What's the issue with the six children?

Lisa:

Escalating violence in the home. Mother's failure to protect the children.
(from fieldnotes, 24 July)

Mother was supporting the father and saying he couldn't have done it, so we were in a situation where we had to look at the possibility of mother protecting these children, and she wasn't (interview with Lynne, Docktown).

In cases where the woman is expected to protect the children by getting the man out of the house, there does tend to be a clear understanding that the violence is coming from him. She is a victim, but to maintain an untainted position of the innocent victim she needs to act immediately. If she does not, she can be tainted in some way, either as unable to escape because abuse is all she has ever known or, less often, as attracted to bad men. As mentioned above, there are other cases where the woman is constructed as 'as bad as he is'. The excerpt below relates to one such case. Here the woman is expected to do the protecting, but with the man still present in the house. The statement effectively asserts that she has a role in the violence.

It was agreed that Ms Faulkner would, for the sake of the children, try to diffuse any altercations before they lead to violence. (child protection plan, Faulkner family file)

As Hooper (1992a), amongst others, has shown, there is a tradition within academic and professional commentary on sexual abuse of viewing some women as colluding with sexual abuse. As Parton and Parton (1989) point out, this tradition is reflected in the most high profile document on sexual abuse in recent years, the Cleveland report (Secretary of State, 1988). Brian conveys this theory about some situations of sexual abuse when he relays the content of his recent Faithfull Foundation course to colleagues:

Sometimes the man is authoritarian, but sometimes the mother is matriarchal and still allows the man to carry on his tricks underneath. (Brian, from fieldnotes, 28 August).

Outside of the criminal justice process there is no provision in the law for the enforced removal of a perpetrator. The Children Act 1989 (in paragraph 2 of section 5) allows only for authorities to assist perpetrators of child abuse to leave the home. Social workers in the Uplands team operate on the principle that the only realistic way of removing an abuser in the absence of a criminal charge or conviction is to entreat a woman to issue him with an ultimatum that will force him out. O'Hagan and Dillenburger (1995:172-3) argue that this is mainstream practice.

5.2.3 They have to choose

Women's responsibility for protection against abusive men is expressed as a clear choice: him or the kids.

If domestic violence has a high profile within the family I am sure that as a department we would be saying to the woman that you must make a choice about whether you want to stay with this man or leave him (interview with Margaret)

Where women are faced with the choice "it's your children or your partner" quite often they don't make the choice. They choose the partner (interview with Claire)

Margaret: I mean we have asked Nicola to make the decision about

Lisa: Jason or the children.

Margaret: Exactly.

Lisa: And she has chosen Jason.

Margaret: Well she is choosing both isn't she, she won't make that decision. She is choosing the both (Lisa supervision with Margaret).

The child is actually with an adoptive family and to see her now, and how she has glossed and developed confidence, stature, that is rewarding. She is not a sad little girl now; she is brave and bubbly. It is sad for her mother, but her mother had choices and chose her partner. That's the kind of process that you go through. It is not always as clear cut as that (Lynne, Docktown).

Lynne, in the last of these extracts, acknowledges there is not always a clear cut 'choice'. Claire's view that women often 'don't make the choice' and Margaret's comment that Nicola is 'choosing both' also accept that women do not necessarily make a calm, rational choice to give up their children. Despite these notes of caution, there is a strong culture of laying down ultimatums to women living with abusive men: if it is bad for the children, you have to get him out. Farmer and Owen's research (1998) has shown that many women living with violent men are afraid to go to social services departments for help, for fear their children will be taken into care. Coming forward for help is viewed positively, but failure then to throw the man out can indeed result in these fears being realised. Ultimatums do not consider the complex reasons why women may want men to stay, or be persuaded or coerced into letting them stay. This approach to the presence of

violent or abusive men fits with Howe's observations that in contemporary social work, change in clients is expected in response to the laying down of rules, rather than any therapeutic intervention (see p.74 in chapter four).

5.2.4 Coercion

To enforce responsibility, the authority of the statutory social worker is often invoked (also see the previous chapter).

We used to have a very good relationship. Then they slipped considerably. We had to start threatening really. You'll have seen some threatening letters, pleading letters. Requests become pleas become threats (Pete, from fieldnotes, 3 July).

Brian said..... it is not their role to work with men who abuse, but rather to make sure children are protected by getting the man out. He repeated the point later and it became clear that he took 'abuse' only to mean child sexual abuse. I asked on the second occasion whether they were often involved in getting men out of the house. The answer implied that this was not often, but that he was referring to a particular recent situation, and in this one case there were not any statutes used. Margaret said, 'let's face it, we usually do it by threatening to case conference' (team meeting, from fieldnotes, 1 July).

Coercion can be presented as 'concern'. This is a term which signifies risk, which Parton (1998), amongst others, has claimed is the rationale for most of the interventions of local authority child and family social work in the late 1990s. The term 'concern' is inseparable from the possibility of coercion, because investigations into children at risk are conducted with parents fully aware of the context of the child protection register and legal orders.

I wasn't sure how, if he started pleading with her, 'look I've got nowhere to live, I'm an innocent man', this, that and the other, I wasn't quite sure how well she'd stand up to that sort of theme. So it was as though she ought to know the score if he did come to live with her, which was basically that we'd get very, very concerned (Mike supervision with Margaret).

As much of the material presented thus far has implied, child protection work is emotionally highly charged for the staff involved (Morrison, 1990; McMahan, 1998). The

chapter will now go on to consider the issue of empathy with women clients, which includes consideration of some aspects of the emotional reactions of social workers.

5.3 Empathy

Corby and Millar (1997) cast doubts on the possibility for social workers to combine the demands of implementing child protection procedures with traditional social work roles of empathy, sensitivity and support. There are certainly tensions to be observed in the Uplands team; tensions which could be seen as inherent in the child protection role. It seems appropriate at this point to describe some of the important tensions that can be found in relation to the construction of women clients.

5.3.1 Victims of circumstances

As explained above in section two, there is a strong sense in which women clients are constructed as victims of difficult circumstances. Corby (1987, 1991) found social workers to have a general psychosocial view of clients' problems, making reference to emotional deprivation and stressful environments. As the first section of this chapter outlined, as well as recourse to general environmental factors to explain women clients' circumstances, the influence of feminism can also be seen in the social workers' case talk. This construction of women clients provokes an empathetic response from both men and women social workers, who seem broadly in agreement about the oppressed state of the women they work with and the responsibility of the men around them for much of this oppression. The genuine difficulties they cite as causal, explanatory factors encompass trauma from both past and present. The excerpts below, for example, cite experience of childhood neglect, sexual abuse and coercion from a male partner as relevant to explaining current difficulties.

she had always found it particularly difficult to cope with all the demands of being a lone parent and having had a, she had a care history herself, she has had a very abusive childhood at the age of three she was left for three days in a flat on her own with her younger brother who spent the whole three days in a cot, whom she basically kept alive by feeding biscuits and pop. At the age of three, which is how old my son is now (interview with Pete)

She has had really difficult background, childhood herself, had a stepfather who's in prison for sexually abusing her and her three sisters which went on for years (interview with Mary).

He got his own way. He stayed. There was complete denial on his part. I think the mother acted out of fear. I felt angry at him, but sympathy for her, what must have been going through her mind - he'll come back and beat me up. Often people think 'anything for a quiet life'. But she didn't realise the damage it would do to her daughter. I don't know the outcome. When I left she was accommodated (interview with Claire).

5.3.2 Working with women

Working with women clients forms part of the occupational identity of child care social workers, and women workers in particular. When asked in interviews about a memorable rewarding case, the respondents all either talked of a child with a happy outcome or a mother who had changed for the better. One of the social workers, Lorraine, was very clear that her motivation for doing social work in the first place had been a strong interest in working with women. Despite this, when asked what kept her in the job, she spoke of only child clients. When asked to reflect on this potential paradox, she said:

I think I was probably being optimistic, that you could do some work that had benefits for women, that would have long lasting benefits for women. Sometimes I get depressed about the whole thing and wonder actually how much good the work actually does (interview with Lorraine).

This echoes White's research (1995), which found women speaking of their difficulty in reconciling private feminism with jobs as state social workers. In the field of education, Stanworth (1983) found a similar mis-match between teachers' beliefs about gender and actual practices in the classroom. Lorraine refers directly to this difficulty, as does Mary:

I have to admit in this job I have felt quite often what are we doing to women, you know. I mean, quite often it does feel like you are sort of persecuting women for the inadequacies of society (interview with Mary).

There are inevitable tensions involved for feminists working in child protection (Wise, 1990; 1995). Situations will arise where there are conflicts between the interests of women and of children, and situations where the worker will have to oppose the woman client. The personal tensions involved in working with women cannot be avoided by women social workers, since many of them are deliberately assigned to work with women and girls. In particular it is a shibboleth of social work culture that only women should work with sexually abused girls.

5.3.3 Exasperating women

Women who cannot act when a particular action would make all the difference to their future with their children can exasperate social workers. The reaction seems to be one of 'why couldn't she just do it?' There seems to be a lack of empathy with women whose behaviour is incomprehensible. In particular, it seems that women social workers find it difficult, if not impossible, to empathise with women clients remaining in situations that they themselves would not tolerate. The excerpts below illustrate this. Mary cannot really understand why something as simple as keeping the house clean and safe should be so paralysing. Lisa and Margaret both show their disdain for a woman's inconsistency in failing to keep to her resolve in breaking with her violent boyfriend.

The obstacles to her having the child back are really quite minor and yet somehow or another her attitude is not allowing her to kind of overcome them, you know so it is really frustrating sometimes. You feel like shaking her, you know, if you just clean up this house and keep it that way that is one major obstacle gone (interview with Mary).

Lisa:

Jason went out and got drunk the next night and came back and she wouldn't let him in, and basically phoned the emergency services at twenty to four in the morning and said 'sort me out with somewhere to go'. Nothing came of that. And she then said that she was okay that she could stop Jason from coming into the house, which lasted (her body language says 'a very short time').

Margaret:

Yeah, I mean basically she wasn't offered a refuge basically because she said she had thrown him out and then she would have the house and she was advised that if he tried to get in then she must call the police.

Lisa:

I mean she had him up the next morning (Lisa's supervision with Margaret).

Whilst there does seem to be a lack of empathy in terms of a failure to imagine how women could let themselves live in such bad situations, there is empathy on another level. The background to Mary's frustration with her client is Mary's desire for this woman to keep her child living with her, and the knowledge that the woman's failings will count against her when her performance is evaluated through child protection procedures. So the frustration is perhaps inspired by her imagining the trauma of having a child removed.

The lack of empathy with women who fail is linked to the ideology of mothering as natural, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Women who cannot simply do what the social services department tells them they have to do in order to keep their children safe from harm are constructed as unnatural, when the necessary action is seen to be straightforward. You would simply tidy the house, or make sure he did not come back, if you were behaving like a natural mother. Other qualitative research has found similar recourse to the natural motherhood ideology. For example, Hall *et al's* work (1999) on social work talk claims there is a parent-mother dichotomy. You can learn how to parent, whereas motherhood is a natural bond, and a woman who is seen to reject it is a 'monster'.

5.3.4 Difficult women

As discussed in section two above, in the context of women who 'choose' to transgress, some women clients are experienced as aggressive. These women are amongst those cited as 'difficult'. The social workers were specifically asked in the interviews about women and men clients they had found difficult for any reason. Aggression creates barriers to communication, and serves to mark the client out as transgressing both informal rules of social working and gendered expectations of women's behaviour, although aggression does fit a popular expectation of 'rough' working class women. Women who present in other ways can be constructed as difficult too. The excerpts below are examples of such women. The first concerns a woman who is superficially co-operative ('saying the right things'), but is thought to be deceptive, or concealing important information. The second extract is someone who followed the rules of

interaction with a social worker up to a point, but was found wanting by not fully accepting the official line on her failings (not confessing her wrong) and by not showing observable change in her behaviour. Mike says that aggression is easier to handle because it is more straightforward.

I mean going back to what you were saying originally she is saying the right things. However, we were saying this after the core meeting yesterday about how she was saying the right things but there are lots of hidden agendas there really that we are aware of. (Lisa supervision with Margaret).

I think the most difficult thing to deal with really is evasiveness. I can certainly think of one person who at times of crisis will get in touch with me, usually for financial help, to deal with that immediate crisis. But there are a lot of concerns around; a lot of concerns being expressed from school and police about standards of child care. In terms of actually trying to deal with those issues she is very, very evasive, and either simply won't be there with quite alarming regularity, or else will minimise everything. Even if you can actually get her to acknowledge the existence of a problem, she'll then say 'everything is going to be all right now, yes I will sort that out, yes the kid will go to school every day from now on' or whatever. You know full well that nothing is actually going to change, and you can't get past that level of interaction where you are never actually communicating, it is all about what can I do to get rid of this busy body from the welfare. It never gets any further than that really. I think that is perhaps the most difficult reaction to deal with. You get other people who will react with aggression towards you, but at least there is a communication there. At least you can actually have a discussion, even if the discussions in part are being conducted in a very high volume. You can actually get somewhere with that kind of a response. Evasiveness is very difficult to deal with (interview with Mike).

Although, as will be reiterated throughout the thesis, all the social workers were seen to operate within common gendered occupational discourses, it may be that the social workers' empathy with clients is connected to their own biography to an extent. Mary stood out as someone with serious reservations about the effect of her work within the child protection system on clients in general:

Jonathan:

Do you think they balance out though, the difficulties and rewards on balance?

Mary:

I don't think so at the moment, I don't think so. The longer I am here, I went through a phase a couple of months ago where I was really thinking

'what am I doing here' you know. I just felt that I wasn't being helpful to anybody. And it does feel like quite often you are poking your nose in or you know you are being very judgmental on people (interview with Mary).

In particular, she seemed uneasy about the way mothers experience the process of investigation and intervention. I wondered whether her unease might be linked to her pregnancy during the fieldwork, which may have heightened her identification with mothers she worked with.

5.4 Conclusion

The picture of the construction of women in the social work office is a complex one with conflicting perspectives influencing practice. Whereas the next chapter is explicitly structured around 'discourses of masculinity', I chose not to structure this chapter in a similar fashion. In some respects the picture of constructions of women is more complex than that of constructions of men. As will be seen, much of the masculinity discourse is negative (although there are also some important contrary influences). Constructions of women are, however, more genuinely mixed between positives and negatives. More is expected of women, but when they fall they fall from a greater height. Not much is expected of men anyway. Traditional notions of respectable femininity exist alongside more recent ideas derived from feminism. Both the traditional and the newer discourses feed into an occupational culture that can only really conceive of women as the adult clients. Men are simply not as much clients as women are. Despite the complex and conflicting picture of women's clienthood, it is possible to identify some defining discourses of femininity. These are women as oppressed, women as responsible for protection, and women as making choices.

Women are seen as oppressed by the men they live with, the wider community they live in, and potentially by welfare services. This belief, however, is overridden by the powerful discourse of women as responsible for protecting children. It is women who have to be the protectors, even if very difficult family situations are seen to be caused by other individuals, by the woman's oppressive history, or by socio-economic conditions. This protection of children is seen as the natural course of action in response to the demands of the authorities for change. This change is regarded as within a woman's

grasp because she can choose to change. Stenson (1993) has commented that what he calls the 'educative' discourse in social work aims to produce a client who is a unitary subject, the author of her actions; a client who can change, and not get stuck in the same old patterns. Clients are, in the last analysis regarded as able to change if they have to.

Many of the *outcomes* of the child protection process are gendered, but obviously not all aspects of the *process itself* are explicitly gendered. The effect of some aspects of organisational procedures and professional practice are only indirectly gendered. Others are not particularly gendered at all, arguably impacting equally on men and women. The key insight to hold onto is that the system is set up to assess and manage risk, and where perceptions of risk differ between parent and professionals, inevitably some coercive practices are used, so those subject to the system, the 'clients', will experience coercion. The adults in the front line are far more often women. Given the continuing gendered division of labour in the care of children, any system set up to scrutinise child-rearing will inevitably bear down on women, since it is women that do the work (Parton and Parton, 1989).

As stated at the outset, the construction of gendered others is inherently relational. Social workers construct others in relation to their self-perception. This can be seen throughout the chapter above where women, and to an extent, men social workers are both implicitly and explicitly comparing women clients' expectations, beliefs and actions with their own. Women clients are also constructed in relation to a notion of client masculinity. The next chapter will move on to discuss this. There will be reference back to the themes of this chapter and continued reflection on the implications of constructing gendered others for the social workers sense of self.

Chapter 6

CONSTRUCTING MEN

The discussion of the construction of men clients in this chapter will be structured as follows. I shall introduce the topic by summarising how the 'problem of men' has come to be a matter for social policy development in the UK. I shall then explain my use of the term 'discourses' of masculinity, and, thereafter, the rest of the chapter will be taken up with a description of six different discourses of masculinity in the social work office. The chapter will conclude with some comparative discussion of these discourses and comment on the significance of the construction of men clients for the social workers themselves.

6.1 Masculinities in social policy discourse

There has been some recent attention to the intersection of masculinities and social welfare in the UK (Cavanagh and Cree, 1996; Pringle, 1995). Hearn (1998) has written that masculinity is now, 'just about', on political and policy agendas. The 1998 Green paper on the family, *Supporting Families* specifies the need for attention to 'the needs of young men and the support available to fathers' (Home Office, 1998a: 48). A Ministerial Seminar in November of the same year was dedicated to discussion of these same groups of men (Home Office, 1998b). A recent example of a politician explicitly referring to debates on masculinity is this comment from the Home Secretary, when in discussion with an ex-offender. He makes direct reference to some of the arguments of Beatrix Campbell on crime and disorder that were well-publicised in the mid-1990s (Campbell, 1993).

I have seen plenty of examples on estates like yours where it's the women, the mums, who've had enough and are setting up homework classes and so on. Trying to get men more involved in community action is important. In so many cases of young men who get into serious trouble there is a problem with their dad or their father figure (Jack Straw in Turner, 1998)

The excerpt is interesting in many different respects; the important ones here being that it raises two substantial concerns about men and masculinity that have come to the fore in the UK in recent years and have featured to differing degrees in academic, political, media and popular discourse. The two concerns are dangerous young men and dangerous fathers. Interesting overviews of these debates are provided by Hearn (1998) and Williams (1998). The issue of fatherhood is particularly pertinent to the ethnographic data described below. Williams's chapter outlines the debates about fatherhood that form the context to social workers' constructions of men as clients.

She divides social policy discourse on fatherhood into concerns about absence and concerns about distance. The concern about absence is often accompanied by fears about the 'dangerous' masculinities of socially marginalised men who are leaving women with delinquent children; Charles Murray's 'underclass' (Murray, 1990). The concern about distance is expressed by a wide range of different commentators, but is usually sympathetic with the feminist goal of reducing sex inequality through men spending more time on childcare. Williams divides this group according to whether they seek to achieve their goal by increasing men's rights or by challenging men's lack of active involvement in child care.

The key legislation that frames childcare social work in the UK is The Children Act 1989. This holds the 'welfare of the child' (inevitably loosely defined) to be paramount. As previously stated, this concept is crucial to the occupational culture of social work, and is often used as professional justification where the interests of parents and children are seen to conflict. There are ambiguous messages about masculinity in the Children Act 1989. Williams (1998) claims it draws on a relatively new discourse of shared parenting. She observes that term 'parent' is used, providing apparent gender neutrality that obscures the reality of the gendered division of domestic labour in most households. However, the central concept of parental responsibility on which the act is based is only available as an automatic right to married fathers. The unmarried father has to apply for legal parental responsibility.

The position of men in work with children, and in caring work in general, has been up for debate in recent years (see, for example, Pringle, 1992; Carter, 1993). Hearn (1990) has pointed to a major tension, that the call for more men to work with children conflicts with a much higher degree of awareness that some men pose a risk of abuse. As Christie

(1998b) observes, the European Union Council of Ministers has committed itself to increasing men's involvement in the care of children, and in some European countries this increase is seen as relatively unproblematic. In the UK, however, scandals of child abuse in residential care have led some to question whether or not men should be employed at all in certain roles with children (Pringle, 1992).

These and other debates on men and parenting are reflected in the occupational culture of social work that I shall now go on to discuss.

6.2 Discourses of masculinity in the social work office

The concept of discourses of masculinity will be used in the chapter. Middleton writes that 'to speak legitimately of a discourse of masculinity it would be necessary to show that a particular set of usages was located structurally within a clearly defined institution with its own methods, objects and practices' (Middleton, 1992: 142). It can be argued that child protection social workers do have to negotiate discourses of masculinity according to Middleton's definition. Knowledge about men is located in institutional practices such as case conference decisions, use of the law, reference to social scientific concepts and research evidence.

To set the context for a typology of constructions of men, some introductory comments about the profile of the client group are needed. The male clients of child care social workers either come into the category 'children', or the category 'parent/carer'. This chapter will not discuss how boys are constructed. My concern is with the construction of men as parents or carers. With a few exceptions, these men have a socially and economically marginal class status. They are usually unemployed or working very casually and probably illegally. Most live in stigmatised social housing estates, which are relatively remote from public services and shops. A high proportion seem to have criminal records.

Because I chose to focus on 'child protection' cases (not all clients are thus categorised), inevitably there is a high proportion of men in this system that are suspected of, or found to be responsible for, some form of child abuse or neglect. As might be expected, therefore, a dominant discourse that influences much of the representation of men in office talk, interview and case files is that of dangerous

masculinities. It is important to repeat the observation that one would not expect an infinite number of different gender constructions, since social workers are responding to material reality, or men's actual bodily practices. However, notions of masculinity, femininity and childhood are socially constructed. The material realities of poverty and men's bodily practices feed into wider discourse about dangerous underclass men. Collier (1995) tells us that the notion of the 'good father' in family law is set against the idea of the unrespectable men of the dangerous classes. Lupton and Barclay (1997), in their discussion of discourse on fatherhood, have pointed out, the 'dangerous' father, who has become a figure of moral panic, is a poor, working class, perhaps non-European father. They write in an Australian context. The Uplands fathers are white, and in fact much of the popular British underclass imagery is of whiteness (Collier, 1998).

There are exceptions to the class profile of men clients summarised above. It was explained to me early on that within the children and families service the place where middle class men were most often encountered was in advocating, often in highly articulate fashion, for their disabled offspring. Also, it seems to be accepted wisdom on sex offending that it goes on across class boundaries. Other types of abusive behaviour are understood as being more class-specific in the sense that they can be responses to social stress. It was noted in chapter three that I was allocated to this particular social work team (one of a possible three) by the senior managers partly on the basis of there being more men than usual in this particular team. They thought this would help me with my topic. This connection of male social workers with the issue of working with male clients is not discussed further here, but there is a connection made in social work culture between the sex of the worker and the sex of the client, as with the idea of women working with women (see also Christie, 1998b). The discourses of masculinity that will outlined below are as follows: men as a threat, men as no use, men as irrelevant, men as absent, men as no different from women, and men as better than women.

6.2.1 Men as a threat

There is not one unified discourse on men clients in the social work office. There are some tensions and contradictions. However, the discourse of men as a threat is a particularly powerful one. There is, therefore, considerably more space given to

discussion of this discourse. Men are seen as a potential threat to children, social workers and women clients. Social workers are very frequently faced with reports of men's violence against women, and, less often, with tales of their violence towards children. The possibility of sexual abuse is also a very important influence on the discourse of men as a threat. A women social worker explained her general expectation that men clients would be a threat to the well-being of women and children:

I find that working in the area I am working in, which is usually sexual or physical abuse, emotional abuse, and at the high end of the scale as well, most of my mothers are victims in their own lives and have been targeted by manipulative men with their own agenda that would target vulnerable women. So my experience of working with men is probably tainted by that; the fact that their agenda for being there is not conducive for the best for the children or for the mother (interview with Lynne from Docktown).

The discourse of 'men as a threat' will be discussed in two parts: firstly discourse on sexually abusing men, and secondly discourse on violent men. Whilst recognising that sexual abuse can be seen as a form of violence, in the discussion that follows it is necessary to distinguish occupational constructions of physical violence from those of sexual abuse. This is necessary because of the notable differences in how the social workers understand these two categories of behaviour.

6.2.1.1 *Sexual abuse*

The 'discovery' of sexual abuse in recent years has been a major influence on the culture of social work (Parton *et al*, 1997). It has been so all-pervasive that the general terms 'abuse', 'abuser' or 'abused' are sometimes used to refer to specifically sexual abuse. Popular discourse on sexual abuse in the UK can be summarised in two main strands: the predatory 'paedophile' and the abusing male relative. Social workers make reference to both. The former has been particularly prominent in the British media in the last couple of years, with many stories of offenders being hounded from communities. The predatory paedophile is seen as coming into families from outside, preying on children in public spaces, or inviting them into his home. The discourse of the male relative as abuser is less rooted in the popular imagination, but its acceptance as mainstream social work knowledge demonstrates the success of feminism in convincing the profession of

the ordinariness of child sexual abuse. In social services there is the added dimension of recent scandals of abuse by staff in residential homes for children, some of which, it is alleged, may have been organised through sophisticated networks. These men are both predatory, in that they seek out positions where they can abuse vulnerable children, and 'familial' in a sense, because they are part of the organisation.

There was experience within the team both of cases of fathers, stepfathers or other male relatives sexually abusing children, and also cases of child victims of abuse by an 'outsider'. The potential for discovering sexual abuse is thought to be ever present. This became vivid to me during negotiation of research access, when a gatekeeper expressed his concern that I might be a 'paedophile' wanting to make contact with like-minded people through my research (see chapter two). His concern is based in the predatory paedophile discourse, but also illustrates the extent to which the threat is seen to be close at hand, and potentially within the organisation. It also illustrates the extent to which the 'discovery' of sexual abuse has influenced organisational constructions of masculinity in general. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) use the term 'whole gender blaming' in connection with the new focus on men as potential sexual abusers. This gatekeeper's concern was triggered by a one page summary of my research questions that simply stated I was interested in studying work with men. There had been no mention of sex offenders.

Unlike other men responsible for abuse of children, sex offenders are constructed as a homogenous group in the Uplands team. Featherstone and Lancaster (1997) argue that the range of masculinities amongst men who sexually abuse children in fact makes them indistinguishable from other men, but there has developed an agreed set of assumptions about offenders which has achieved hegemonic status in the culture of social work. This, they argue, has come about because the issue of child sexual abuse is much less open to question than other areas of child protection intervention (see also Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992).

The Faithfull Foundation, formerly the Gracewell Clinic, (see Wyre, 1990) has been a particularly influential UK organisation in reaching social workers with these messages. During my fieldwork, a social worker presented to the team a summary of one of their courses that he had attended, and the ideas were clearly very familiar to them. There were several references to the same concepts during the rest of the fieldwork period. The key

concepts are as follows: an offence is 'never a one-off', but is deliberate, and planned; the offence is committed as part of a 'cycle' which involves fantasising about the child and self-justifying beliefs; the child is 'groomed', that is, gradually introduced into abusive situations and persuaded to keep quiet; abusers will minimise and deny their abuse, so are generally not to be believed, whereas children are always to be believed if they apparently disclose abuse; abusers are often clever and charming; you would not expect them to change their behaviour, at least not without intensive therapeutic input such as that provided by the Faithfull Foundation. The following extract is from Brian's summary of the Faithfull Foundation course he had attended. The passage illustrates many of the main tenets of faith in sex offender work. It was not transcribed from a tape, but consists of notes written during a team meeting. The passage is, in a sense, a summary. All the words quoted are the worker's own words, but inevitably some of his words were also missed. All of his main points are recorded.

I'll need to set the context for people who weren't here last time. I'll talk in particular about assessment. We're not into treatment as much. It comes up from time to time, but we do have to do assessments (list of examples of when as per last time). We've got a number of cases at the moment that are quite relevant. In Joan's case, a older girl was groomed. When we go out to do assessments, we must have some assumptions in our minds. There's a cycle of offending - accepted wisdom of how men offend. The course looked at males. As far as we know most are men. The first assumption to make is that it is never a one-off. You know, she came past the bathroom and I touched her. The second assumption is that quite a lot of planning has gone into it. If there's a conviction we're obliged to operate on the assumption he did it. I had a case where there was a good video but the court case fell down and he moved home again. I was interested in how he did the grooming. We all groom children. There was an exercise on the course about getting a child to take medicine. Persuading them to do things when their better instincts say not to. In school I was told 'all good boys tell the truth' and if you told the truth you got a smack (laughter). We all groom children. In sexual abuse the grooming is as sophisticated as that and probably more so. The offender has to think about how to stop the child telling people. You need to look at the grooming process when you're doing assessments. It's a horrible thing to say but I've heard it said that wherever there are groups of children there will be paedophiles, schools, scout clubs. There are different family dynamics (goes on to describe four family structures in which abuse can thrive). (Brian, from fieldnotes, 2 September)

Social workers do not expect to spend time working with sex offenders. The only acceptable strategy, if it is decided that abuse has taken place, is to get the man out of the home. In practice, the social workers testify, this is done either through imprisonment or by pressure being applied through the threat of legal action if he does not leave. In many cases this involves the woman having to 'choose' him or the children.

There is only one strategy really to start with and that is him leaving the home..... so really you are talking of separation then. It is very difficult to work with a family when there are children in the family when you know about the abusive cycle (interview with Lynne from Docktown).

Imagining seems particularly important in constructing sexual abuse. There is often a suspicion that secrets lurk in families; possibly secrets about men's dangerous sexuality. Social workers will talk of having strong suspicions that a man is abusing a child, even in the absence of any evidence. The following excerpts are examples of this.

It's only when there's a smell of sexual abuse, you get a feeling about it (Brian, from fieldnotes, 7 August).

I don't know but the kid reckons he was locked in the car boot at one stage. I don't know. I think what was probably going on was that he was a very possessive man and I think wanted to develop a relationship with the boy especially, and just wasn't prepared to actually put the work in. He really thought that he could have the relationship just like that. So I think that is the most charitable explanation of what he was doing really. I mean there were a lot of other possibilities, but I really don't know, and I don't think we will get to the bottom of what went on (interview with Mike).

Talk of this kind of suspicion is specific to sexual abuse. There is not the same discussion of lurking secrets in relation to other forms of abuse. This must be in part due to the hidden nature of the abuse. There is also, perhaps, an assumption that sexual abuse is necessarily more traumatic to children than other forms of abuse, a perception that would be supported by research such as that undertaken by Kelly *et al* (1991). It also seems that sexuality has cultural power in the organisation (Hearn and Parkin, 1987). Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) have observed that the topic of sexual abuse creates a profound emotional reaction in people, what they call a 'visceral clutch'.

A case that vividly illustrates the role of the imagination and the emotions in relation to sexual abuse was described by Lynne in one of the pilot interviews in Docktown. She described a family where despite no mention from the daughter of her stepfather having sexually abused her in any way, she became convinced that there were secrets of sexual abuse to be unearthed. She said 'I'm ninety-nine per cent certain that he is abusing this girl'. One of the main reasons for this belief was that the man had sent letters to a former employer that were 'full of religious intimidation in a way, witchcraft, Satan and God'. This case is the only one I heard of during the fieldwork with any mention of satanic links, and I do not intend to digress onto a major discussion of satanic abuse on the basis of one social worker's mention of one case. It is an interesting example, however, of how sexual abuse is associated with fears that are culturally deep-rooted. La Fontaine (1998) has argued that allegations of satanic abuse need to be understood as contemporary manifestation of the traditional societal belief in witchcraft. Her work is highly controversial. The 'discourse of disbelief' she represents has been challenged by Sara Scott (1998), for example. Whatever the material reality of this case, Lynne's firm belief in the reality of sexual abuse without any allegation of such from any party indicates to me the connection in the popular imagination between sexual abuse and 'dark forces'. I shall move on to address another aspect of the discourse of men as a threat, namely men's violence against women and children.

6.2.1.2 Violence

Violence against women is regarded as dangerous to women and children alike. Again, the message of feminism that it is serious and damaging has become accepted in mainstream child protection knowledge. If a case is categorised as a child protection case because of a man's violence towards the children's mother, it is typically labelled as a situation of likely physical or emotional abuse of the children. It is often stressed that the risk of physical abuse is not direct, but that the children might get 'caught up' in the violence towards their mother. Although it is regarded as damaging to women and children, 'domestic' violence is also seen as fairly routine, and is often not the target of intervention if there are thought to be other problems in a family (see also Swift, 1995). Neither is there the consistency in explanations of violence that we find with

constructions of sexual abuse. Social workers' explanations reflect the diversity of academic discourse on violence in the home.

Featherstone and Trinder (1997) have claimed that the feminist explanation that men's violence is a tactic for gaining control over women (they label this 'radical feminist') has attained hegemonic status in the culture of social work. This assertion is not supported from the Uplands team data. Violence as men controlling women does form *part* of the repertoire of explanations in the social work office, but alongside this, sometimes as part of the same assessment of a family, run other interpretations. These include the notion of a cycle of violence that the *woman* is trapped in, the idea that alcohol is a causal factor, and the idea that in some families the man and woman are 'both as bad as each other' (see the previous chapter, p.101). Usually, however, the responsibility for the violence is attached to the man. Violent men are variously described as possessive, controlling, heartless, obsessive, resentful of women, and not safe to look after children. Responsibility for the children's safety, however, is firmly with the mother. It is children that are the priority.

Mullender's recent article (1997) is interesting to note here. She describes the shift from social workers trying to keep families together in the 70s and 80s (see Maynard, 1985) to the current orthodoxy, which is to expect the woman to remove him from the home (see also Humphries, 1999). The approach in child care teams has changed as the man's violence has come to be seen as a threat to the children's safety, rather than a threat to the stability of the relationship. So a successful outcome is the woman 'choosing' the children rather than the man, and leaving home, or insisting that he leaves. If she does not do this she is 'failing to protect' the children. This aspect is discussed in more detail in the previous chapter.

There is not any common construction of domestic violence across the social work profession. For example, Hester and Radford (1996) found that in the court welfare practice they investigated, a man's history of violence was not seen as jeopardising his contact with his children, regardless of the quality of that contact. I found in researching probation culture (Scourfield, 1998) that although social-work trained officers referred in interviews to men using violence to control women, in court reports the dominant constructions were of 'volatile relationships', and the orientation was to mitigation of men's behaviour; the discourse reflected the task and the audience. In the Uplands team

what we find is diverse explanations of violence, but an orthodoxy of institutional response.

Men clients who are known to be violent towards women partners are also assumed to be a threat to women social workers. In such situations, male social workers are seen to provide protection.

I wouldn't go and see him in his own house because he was very aggressive, I mean he never threatened me, other than when I stood between them in the court, he never threatened me personally but such was my knowledge of his violence, I would never sort of go and see him in his house. (interview with Margaret).

Claire on phone:

He won't let social workers in the door. Very violent is he? What is it about Tanya ? Is she intimidated, is she frightened of him? It sounds like he's got some kind of hold over her..... I'm sure I won't meet him on my own either (laughs)

Later to Joan, re. same call: 'definitely one for going in twos'.

Joan: I'd go in 3s (fieldnotes 31 July).

Lisa has always done joint visits, either with health visitor or with Pete. The health visitor feels intimidated but has to go on her own. Lisa says they see her as 'the nosey social worker going in to whip the children' and the health visitor as there to help. She says 'at the end of the day you've got to protect yourself haven't you?' (fieldnotes, 2 July)

Interestingly, both these assumptions are questioned by recent research. O'Hagan and Dillenburg (1995, citing research by Rowett and by Norris) point out that most assaults on social workers are in fact from women clients. Balloch *et al's* recent research (1998) into assaults on social workers found that men were much more likely to be assaulted than women. Women's greater fear of violence, and the material reality of the threat to women is well documented (e.g. Stanko, 1990). In the following excerpt, Lorraine recounts an example of an assault on her car which she saw as a result of challenging a man.

You can quite understand as well, you know, I think probably half of us have been threatened in fairly serious ways by men. I mean I have had my car scraped from head to tail once - absolutely scraped - and the windscreen

smashed. And it was never proved, but I had a good idea who did it. And that was directly as a result of challenging this man (interview with Lorraine).

Unknown men are thought to pose a potential threat to children if they have some kind of negative connection, or suspicious history of their own. An example is the case of the children accommodated by the local authority because of risk of physical abuse (an infant's leg had been broken, apparently by the stepfather) when the father of the violent boyfriend was willing to take them instead. Use of the extended family is standard procedure in these situations, but this man was not trusted because he was unknown and had a violent son.

Nicola and Jason had wanted the children to go Jason's father's Margaret - 'but we don't know Jason's father'. He has a girlfriend. They're not sure if she lives with him or not. He'll now be assessed. (fieldnotes, 30 September)

Another man, who had not been met by social workers because he had been in prison, was assumed to pose a risk to a child because of reports of his violent and controlling behaviour in the recent past, was well regarded when he was actually met:

It's the same pattern. All the women hooked up with men at a young age. Her sister is with a dominating man but it turned out OK. If Dave could cool his head it could be OK. If he didn't get into trouble it would be OK (Mary, from fieldnotes).

The discourse of men as a threat rests on images of embodied masculinity. On one occasion a senior manager used the expression 'hairy beast' to describe a hypothetical violent man. This is a stark image, and does not accurately represent the manager's visual construction of the client. It does, however, indicate the importance of spectral as well as iconic imagery in the construction of clients. Swift (1995) found in her Canadian research, that social workers were making overt judgements about client's bodies, with reference to excess weight and lack of care to physical appearance. In the Uplands team, there was little evidence of such overt judgements, but on the basis of comments such as the 'hairy beast' remark cited above, I would speculate that physically and sexually violent men conjure powerful embodied images.

6.2.2 Men as no use

Another powerful discourse of masculinity in the social work office is that of men as no use. These are men who are not seen as usefully employed in any activity, either legitimate paid employment or help with child-rearing and house-keeping. Dicks *et al* (1998) found in their research service providers talking of an unemployed man's presence in the house all day creating problems for women and children. In the Uplands team, whilst some women clients are described as viewing the men in their lives as no use to them if they are unemployed, this view is not shared by the social workers. There is not such a direct connection between paid employment and worthwhile male activity. Men spending their time looking after children are highly regarded. Such men are only rarely, however, seen to feature in the caseload. Men clients are more generally described by the social workers as not contributing to child care, not helping with work around the house, and spending all the money. This contrasts with Swift's (1995) research, where she found fathers' failure to care generally producing no comment from social workers. Men are also often described as being always away from the home. Their time tends not to be taken up with legitimate working, which would be considered an acceptable absence from home, but with either looking for work, working illegally or socialising. The implication is that these activities are probably excuses for avoiding family responsibility. Lorraine illustrates this view. The term 'hobble' she uses is a local term for work that is undeclared, carried on while the man is also claiming benefits. In the second excerpt, Pete sees the phenomenon of men being out of the house while women do the child care as a national trend, but one that is particularly strong in the local area.

Hobbles exist really only for men not women. So men would just clear off on a hobble, just helping a friend. Women would be seen to be neglecting the children if they did. More in the eyes of the community than this department now, but I am thinking of couples where the pattern is that he is not there when you call. He goes off and he does hobbles or he goes off with his friends but, you know, that is acceptable in their community. Whereas I think if she was just to go off with her friends you have to make a case for it (interview with Lorraine).

I mean in some cases the male is out of the house either working on the alternative economy or legitimately. And that again is quite a cultural thing around here that the male is the person that goes out and earns or is the first

name on the claims. Unless it is child benefit in which case it's the mothers' name that appears first. I know that is nationally common, but it is considered very much that the woman is at home looking after the children while the man, even if he is not employed, is out and about with his friends (interview with Pete).

There is a certain exasperation expressed about men's incompetence as carers and as clients. They are variously described as unable to cope, childlike, deluded, obsessive and stubborn. They are difficult to work with. They refuse to take responsibility for problems that are of their own making, blaming instead their partner or the social worker. They lack commitment to the social work plan, which means they lack commitment to their children. Although they are of little practical use in terms of family life, it is difficult to talk to them about problems with their behaviour, because they only want to talk about practical matters, such as housing. 'Hopeless' men can be the butt of office humour and irreverent comment. The excerpts below illustrate some of the ways in which men clients are described as of little or no use to families.

Mike is on phone to a fellow professional of some kind. He is exasperated by one of the fathers he is working with. The boy in the house was fiddling with a 'chainsaw' the man had left lying around. 'Chainsaw, he called it a hedge trimmer, I'm not sure where a hedge trimmer becomes a chainsaw but we're forever advising him to put things away. I said to her (the mother) 'do you think things are reaching a point where you can't have Mr. Watkins around in the house because he's too dangerous?' (from fieldnotes, 29 July)

I mean if you can persuade him to look after the two younger ones while Jade is going to the hospital to be monitored he thinks he is doing you a big favour, you know. The last day that I was arranging this he was sort of saying to me 'well what will you do for me for this?' I said nothing, they are your children so you look after them, it is as simple as that. He obviously thought that she was going to owe him a big favour for doing this. If he is there then that is fine but she doesn't expect him to be there (interview with Lorraine).

Women tend to be into service provision and men into care management. If he has the kids for the weekend he's more likely to take them round his new partner's or to the funfair. I've always been interested in these issues, that the man opts out. I'm a man. They want to talk about work or something like that. If you give them specific tasks they can carry them out. They'll take him out for a burger, they'll do what you tell them to do. They have to be tasks that are acceptable to them as men. Women tend to meet other women and there's lots of kids around. It doesn't tend to be like that for men. When

they've got their kids they tend to do things with them. (Pete, from fieldnotes, 4 July)

The domestic incompetence of the man Mike describes makes him a ridiculous figure. Lorraine describes a man who she regards as reluctant to help with the children, rather than opting out all together; he doesn't really see it as his job. Pete then outlines what he sees as differences in style between men as fathers and women as mothers. He does not so much see men as of no use, but sees their involvement with children as limited by 'what is acceptable to them as men'. In general, the discourse of men as no use portrays fatherhood as a fundamentally problematic experience. This echoes the representations of fatherhood that Lupton and Barclay (1997) found in the 'expert discourse' of the family health and welfare literature.

6.2.3 Men as irrelevant

There is a sense in which men can be non-clients. The concept in the Children Act 1989 of parental responsibility is a crucial one for the organisation's definition of who is and is not a client. It seems that many of the men that the social workers encounter do not have this status in law, because they are not married to the children's mother. In this situation, they will not necessarily be involved in the child protection process. There seem to be occasions where it does not occur to a social worker to involve a man without parental responsibility, and also occasions where it is convenient to have recourse to this legal concept to avoid involving a man who is, for whatever reason, undesirable. Social workers also spoke of situations where a man was not relevant to their work because the children's mother did not want him involved.

I think the term parental responsibility perhaps discriminates a little bit against men. Mothers automatically have parental responsibility. Men only have that if they are married to the mother or if they have taken steps to acquire it. I suppose as a, oh, I have just thought of this actually, as a team, or as a department not just as a team, as a department, as a profession I think we are very aware of who has and who hasn't parental responsibility (interview with Margaret).

There were various ways in which it was explained that working with men is not always part of the job. If a man is in prison, it is not part of the job to go and see him. Pragmatic considerations can mean that men are not worked with. For example, in the case of a man who is violent to his woman partner, it is not considered part of the job to work with him to change his behaviour, but rather to pressurise the woman to leave him, thus protecting the children.

I mean you have got to be working with a woman to say do you want to, why are you staying with this man, do you want to stay with this man, do you want help in moving away from this man. I have yet to meet a social worker who would say let's you and me and your husband or partner look at the violence that is going on between you. I don't think a social worker is actually trained for that, I don't think that they have got the resources to do that, in terms of time and I think that you know, there are too many other demands (interview with Margaret)

The priority is child safety, and that can mean deciding to concentrate on the children's mother, because it is her that spends time with them and does most, perhaps all, of the work of caring.

Sometimes we work with the woman to get to the children quicker. If you can't change the actual childcare you work with the women because they're the actual providers of childcare (Lorraine, from fieldnotes)

6.2.4 Men as absent

As well as men whose legal status or behaviour renders them non-clients, there are men who are potential clients but are thought to avoid engaging with social workers through their absence. They are seen to often absent themselves when social workers come to call. They may well either not live with the family full-time or at least not declare themselves as living there because of their assumption that a reduction in welfare benefits would follow. Men are also absent through imprisonment, and moving on to new partners and new families. Some of the ways in which men are constructed as absent are portrayed in the following excerpts.

In some families, the stable figure is the mother who is there with the children, and over the years there have been several partners. I suppose you can't generalise. Or you just have the mother figure, and he has left, and she is on her own, battling with everybody; battling to get any kind of support and that kind of thing with the benefits agency, battling with us, battling for the kids in school. There are quite a few where the father is actually living at home but where the father will always attempt to go out when he knows that you are coming (interview with Lorraine).

You do get men who take the attitude 'right the social worker is here love, so we are going next door to talk to me mate' (interview with Mike).

If you contact a family, the wife is usually there. You'll ask for the husband and he's tinkering with the car. He comes in and stands sheepishly and wonders why he's there. The more you try and involve him the worse it can be (interview with Brian).

the child is our client, and in cases where there is a single parent family, where perhaps there is a boyfriend but he doesn't live there, um... he may not enter into the dimension at all (interview with Margaret).

Despite the negative constructions of men as a threat and as useless, their absence is usually considered to be a bad thing (see also Edwards, 1998). Men should be there for the children, and to help the mother with the work of caring. A man's abdication of responsibility can contribute to a neglect categorisation. There is general sympathy with women clients who are left to do the work themselves. Absent men can 'make themselves look good' as prospective parents, without having the daily struggle of caring work. There are echoes here of the concern in social policy discourse about father absence described by Williams (1998).

at the time of the last conference and for some time afterwards, Mr. Wheeler was working fairly regularly. More recently he has been at home more and helping with the children. In recent weeks Mrs Wheeler has seemed happier and plays with the children more. (case conference report, Wheeler family)

It's not fair on the kids. He's out before they're up and back after they've gone to bed. I'm going to write and lay it on the line to him (Pete, from fieldnotes, 11 September)

They tend to be single parent families and usually female carers, the families, the men tend to move on and sort of join the family unit for a little while

and then move on elsewhere. So very often when we are working with a family it is more often than not just with the mum and dad is gone, or certainly doesn't have an awful lot to do with the family anymore (Sarah, from Docketown)

The tone of the discourses of masculinity outlined so far has generally been pejorative. Constructions of men in the Uplands team are not, however, uniformly negative. In particular contexts, men can be constructed as no different from women, or fathers as better parents than mothers. I shall move on to describe these aspects of gender construction next, starting with how men come to be seen as no different from women.

6.2.5 Men as no different from women

This discourse comprises two rather different aspects. One relates to cases where a man and a woman are said to be 'as bad as each other'. The other reflects a notion of equality in social work culture that involves viewing men as no different from women. There is recognition that child protection procedures, involving as they do some confrontation and intrusiveness, can be equally difficult for both parents.

I can think of men being difficult in cases but I can think of women being difficult in cases (interview with Margaret).

And obviously you are questioning somebody about how a bruise happened or how this injury occurred and obviously people become very, very defensive, but that is equally the same for women as for males (interview with Jane from Docketown).

As mentioned above, the social workers' explanations of violence in the home reflect the diversity of academic discourse on this topic. There are certain cases where domestic violence is understood as to some degree the responsibility of both partners (see chapter 5). This construction seems to be particularly strong where the problems are long-standing and the case has been active for many years. Typically the children are described as 'pulled all ways' between warring parents. This construction of a violent household tends to be linked to the presence of a woman who is seen as aggressive (see chapter 5, p.99)

The other aspect of the discourse of men as no different relates to tensions in the interpretation of concepts of equal opportunities and anti-discrimination. These can be seen in the mixed reactions to my stated research topic, social work with men. There was general interest, rather than hostility, but more than one different interpretation of the purpose of the research. Some people immediately made reference to feminist critiques of masculinity. Of these there were some that assumed 'the problem' to be located with the difficult behaviour of men clients themselves. Others assumed it to be an issue of the organisation failing to confront men's difficult behaviour. Finally, there were some social workers that wondered whether men were being disadvantaged in the social work process. In the excerpts below, Mike reflects this discourse of equal treatment when he questions whether he should have treated a man as a victim of domestic violence. When he says 'it's a good example' he is directly referring to my research topic. Jane showed during her interview and after it (see second extract) that she was resistant to the idea of men as difficult.

Mike was on the phone for 15 minutes when I arrived. He came off the phone exasperated. It was a man who says his wife is mentally ill and attacks him, scratching his face. Mike said 'there's no kids there', to emphasise how inappropriate it is for the man to phone a children and families team. The man refuses to take out an injunction or use the fact that the tenancy is his to get her out. The mental health team has done an assessment and she has not been found to have any mental health problems. Minutes later Mike came back into the room, having popped out briefly, to say 'I suppose I could have put him in touch with the domestic violence unit. It's a good example. If it had been a woman, would we do something different?'

At the end of the interview she asked 'so why are you interested in men anyway?' I am not sure what was behind this, but it implied scepticism. I had explained my rationale at the outset, and the general tone of her interview was that she did not see the problem - she resisted the notion of men as difficult (from fieldnotes, 10 July, following pilot interview with Jane from Docktown).

There are clearly different versions of gender politics available to the social workers. The issue of gender bias in social work practice can be one of unfairness to men because they are not fully involved in procedures which determine children's futures, or unfairness to women because they are held responsible for the bad behaviour of men. Tensions surrounding concepts of gender equality and justice in social work relate to

different emphases in social work knowledge, as well as the range of perspectives on masculinity outlined by Clatterbaugh (1990). I shall return to this issue in an extended discussion in chapter eight.

6.2.6 Men as better than women

We do assume as a department that women are the natural carers, and you can see it, the occasional time that there is some crisis and a man is looking after his children, it gets so much more attention because it is seen as, you know, 'gosh, isn't he wonderful? he is looking after the children' (interview with Lorraine).

Lorraine is critical of what she sees as a tendency in the organisation to praise men for mundane and expected child care work. Despite this view of Lorraine's, I did not in fact find that the work of the Uplands team echoed Swift's (1995) finding from her Canadian research that virtually any child care performed by a father produces a positive view of him. As I explained above in the section on men as no use, the Uplands social workers seem to often note men's neglect of child care duties. Where a man is singled out for positive comment, it tends to be in relation to a woman's failings. Men are constructed as better, or as surprisingly good, where the mother is seen to be deficient in some way. This might mean failing to cope with the tasks of mothering: housework, nurturing, and the servicing of the child's body. The following excerpt is an example of this:

She makes an effort in that her clothes are clean and her personal hygiene is good. The home is also clean and tidy. Neil undertakes all of the cooking and possibly all of the cleaning Helen has some insight. The participants reiterated that Neil is more in tune with the baby. He is less egocentric and immature than Helen (case conference report, Warren family file).

Positive constructions of men are more easily explained in relation to ideologies of mothering than in relation to any particular discourse of masculinity. For a father to be constructed as capable and committed he needs to be connected to a bad mother. However, a bad mother case does not necessarily involve positive constructions of men, although gendered constructions of parent clients are always relational in some respect. Women who are failing as mothers are also seen as victims of oppressive men, weak or

unnatural in refusing to leave such a man 'for the sake of the children', or 'as bad as he is' in cases of mutual hostility.

6.3 Discussion

Munro (1998: 93) writes that the scrutiny of mothers in child protection work is 'surprising since men are considerably more likely than women to be violent and so, one would think, professionals would give them more, not less, attention than women in assessing danger to children'. The ethnographic data described above go some way towards addressing this surprise. The study found that in the occupational culture of child protection social work, men are constructed as a threat, as no use, as irrelevant, as absent, as no different from women, and as better than women. In general, men clients seem to be constructed as a negative influence unless there are bad mothers with whom they can be contrasted. Where they are a negative influence, it tends not to be seen as part of the job to work with them.

Men are often invisible or silent in child protection practice. This phenomenon has been observed in the UK (Stanley, 1997), Australia (Parton *et al*, 1997) and the USA (Edleson, 1998). Hall *et al* (1997b) have analysed the various ways in which voices are silenced in social work narratives. This process of silencing can effect children as well as adult women and men who are in receipt of social work services. It seems to be very often the case, however, that men are effectively silenced in accounts of social work. The discourses of men as a threat, men as irrelevant and men as absent are particularly relevant in explaining this silencing.

In many ways constructions of men are strongly influenced by some particular feminist accounts of masculinity. There is frequent reference to men's power over women and children, and the inequality of domestic labour. It is interesting to note, however, that this feminist influence does not seem to have reduced the scrutiny of women. Abusive men are seen as a danger to women and children and should be removed, but it is the responsibility of *women* to do this, and not doing so constitutes 'failure to protect', so it is women's actions and attitudes that are scrutinised (see the previous chapter). There is a feeling that women clients would be better off without

these particular men (although not necessarily without men at all), and little empathy when they do not wish to be.

It is interesting to compare constructions of violence against women and constructions of sexual abuse. The most striking aspect of the constructions of men and sexual abuse is the homogeneity; the view that 'they are all like that'. There is a marked difference between the way the social workers respond to sex offenders and the diverse ways they respond to other men clients, including those who are constructed as a threat. Sexual abuse is seen to warrant an extraordinary response (D. Scott, 1998). It is not considered possible for children to remain in a household where a man has sexually abused unless the mother rejects him absolutely. Men who are abusers are only engaged on the cynical basis of the need to get them talking to find out their 'grooming' tactics. As Featherstone and Lancaster (1997) point out, these men are seen as exempt from entitlement to the 'universal respect' said to be a core traditional social work ethic).

It needs to be remembered that constructions of men as clients of child care social workers are constructions of socially and economically marginal men. The dangerousness of rough working class men is implicitly contrasted with the respectability of other men (Hearn, 1990; Edwards, 1998), and male social workers themselves are among the respectable men. Collier (1995) has observed that in the last century a respectable middle class family man was constructed; a 'Dad' who was sex-less, safe, rid of the natural force of male sexuality, and could be set against the sexually licentious 'dangerous classes' of the Victorian imagination. It is these men, Collier asserts, who are the Other of respectable familial masculinity. It is worth considering the application of Collier's (1995) argument to child protection work. Social workers are operating in a wider discursive context where the 'problem' of masculinity is increasingly becoming a matter of public debate, and a specific occupational context where there is a particular connection between men and sexual abuse (see chapter three). It could be argued that in the light of these discursive contexts, pejorative discourses of masculinity have some value for the staff in making social worker men seem all right, seem safe.

The discourses of men as a threat, men as no use, men as absent and, to an extent, men as irrelevant relate to the increasingly powerful discourse of the 'problem with men' alluded to (in a social policy context) earlier in the chapter. Collier (1998), amongst others, reminds us that in relation to a range of issues, including crime, parenting,

working with children, child support, sexuality, marriage and divorce, the behaviour of men has been called into question in media, academic and political discourse. The fact that the topic of masculinity seems to be considered 'good copy' in much of the media, and not just in the intellectual press, is an indication of its currency and accessibility. The Uplands social workers' constructions of men as clients should not be seen as simply a straightforward reflection of the material practices of the men they encounter. Nor should they be taken to reveal a tightly bounded occupational culture of social work. Rather, the process of constructing men in child protection work ought to be understood as rooted in a wider discourse of masculinity as problematic. The problematising of masculinity has its roots in feminist activism, academia and women's life experiences (although men have also contributed). It is possible that its influence on social work culture indicates the extent to which front-line practitioner culture is, in origin at least, a women's culture.

The data presented in the chapter need to be read with an awareness of the question of audience. So representations of masculinity in file recording reflect expectations of organisational use and managerial audit (as does supervision talk, to an extent). Informal case talk in the office reflects the expected reactions of peers. Interviews reveal discourse that might be thought acceptable to an academic with a stated interest in 'masculinity'. As shown above, however, there was no one consistent response to my research topic. The picture is one of some diversity, just as the negative representations of men need to be balanced with those which stress similarity with women, or equity, or men's superior domestic performance. Overall the picture of gender construction in this and the previous chapter is a complex one of multiple discourses, albeit one where certain discourses are more powerful than others. There is different discourse for different audiences, and for different kinds of cases. Not all kinds of cases are given the same attention, however. Amongst the diversity of family situations the social workers face, and the diversity of academic and professional perspectives on child abuse, the organisation inevitably chooses to prioritise certain kinds of cases above others, and this process is also inevitably gendered. It is this issue of the organisational prioritising of child protection issues that the next chapter will tackle, providing an extended discussion of one category of child maltreatment as a vivid example of the gendered nature of child protection social work.

Chapter 7

CHILD PROTECTION PRIORITIES

A 'children and families' social work team such as the Uplands provides all forms of support for 'children in need' as well as having responsibility for child protection. The only child welfare that is covered elsewhere in the organisation is the work with disabled children. Child protection work, the focus of this thesis and the part of the social work role seen as most important, has itself a potentially huge scope. The manifestations of child maltreatment range from inappropriate diet to rape. There has to be a paring down of this mass of allegations and cases competing for attention. The choice of child protection priorities is what preoccupies this chapter. The discussion will centre around the gendered nature of this choice and its gendered implications.

Investigating gender in an organisation inevitably requires attention to the process of institutional categorisation. In child protection work the most important one is the categorisation of the nature of actual or likely harm to a child, decided by a multi-disciplinary case conference. One of these categories is 'neglect'. I found attention to the categorisation of neglect impossible to avoid in the Uplands team. It was an issue that was very much on the minds of social workers. The question of what does and does not constitute neglect was the subject of almost daily discussion. River County Social Services had made a decision to prioritise the identification of child neglect, as such cases were seen to have been under-represented in the recent past in the department's workload. This chapter will use the issue of child neglect in the Uplands team as a kind of case study of the construction of gender. Since, as has been asserted throughout the thesis, gender is not the only factor of social organisation that is pertinent to understanding child protection work, some other concepts will be brought in to help explain the current focus on child neglect.

The new focus on child neglect in River County constitutes a rediscovery of the issue in more than one sense. In the decades between the world wars and in the immediate post-war period, child welfare concern was focused on the issue of child neglect (Parker, 1995). The focus then shifted to physical abuse in the 70s, following the growing influence of the work of the Kempes (e.g. Kempe *et al*, 1962) and, more specifically, the inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell. The 1980s saw an increased interest in child

sexual abuse. These last few decades have seen the marginalisation of concern about child neglect. Wolock and Horowitz (1984) have called this 'the neglect of neglect'. River County Social Services decision to prioritise neglect does, then, constitute a rediscovery.

The other sense in which this can be seen as a rediscovery is related to social work's capacity for the social control of socially and economically marginalised people. Arguably, an awareness of this capacity has been mainstream among social work practitioners since the 70s, resulting in an awareness of how class-based assumptions can influence practice. This in turn has led to a reluctance to bring families into the child protection system on grounds of being poor, shabby and dirty. As the discussion below of the ethnographic data shows, this reluctance is being seriously questioned in the Uplands team. The social workers speak of the need to rediscover their own personal values in terms of the physical care of children.

The chapter will be structured as follows. I begin by explaining the circumstances in which child neglect has become a priority issue in the authority. I then outline two influential professional discourses of child neglect, the lack of emotional warmth, and failure to service of the child's body. The section that follows this then describes how the latter of these professional discourses, the importance of physical care of children, is currently dominant in the Uplands team. I then go on to explain the implications of this for questions of gender, and consider some other social and political factors which may help explain the concentration on physical care.

7.1 The recent interest in child neglect in River County

River County Social Services Department has shown a great deal of interest recently in child neglect. This is currently a dominant construction of new cases. Social workers commonly referred to neglect as 'the flavour of the month' or 'the buzzword at the moment'. The interest in neglect arose from the response to several child deaths in the local area, and one recent and notorious death in particular that attracted the full glare of the media. This death was retrospectively constructed as a 'neglect' case, although the direct cause of death was violence from the mother's boyfriend. The reaction in River County social services department to these deaths was to arrange training for staff in the

identification of child neglect. This training was provided by the Bridge Child Care Consultancy, and it seems to have had a profound effect on the social workers.

The construction of child neglect provides an example of how attention to the body can be a helpful way of understanding child protection work. It is a specifically local example. River County Social Services have targeted neglect, with the result that the proportions of children thus categorised on the child protection register increased threefold between March and July of 1997, the months preceding my fieldwork. All data from an ethnographic study can be seen as locally specific, and clearly not straightforwardly generalisable. However, the data on constructions of child neglect highlight many of the general themes outlined in the previous chapters, and a lot of the problems of gender that I argue are inevitable in this work. The rediscovery of neglect in River County is also an interesting phenomenon in its own right, and one which is not happening in isolation, but represents an attempt to respond to national guidance and, according to Parton (1995), illustrates a national trend to treat neglect as a child protection issue. Government statistics (Department of Health, 1998b) show that the proportion of children on child protection registers in England for neglect rose from 29.5% in 1994 to 41% in 1998. Neglect has become the highest category of child protection registration.

7.2 Professional discourse

There is a wealth of literature from medical, psychological and social work disciplines which debates the nature of neglect. Recent summaries of the field can be found in Stevenson (1998) and Swift (1995: 68ff). This chapter does not attempt to review this literature, because the concern of the research is with how social workers construct child neglect in their everyday work rather than with academic child neglect discourse. There are two important professional discourses on child neglect that the social workers make reference to in their case talk, in interviews, and in written records. There is some tension between these discourses. They are connected with the literature of specific organisations, but this literature does not impact on the practice wisdom of social workers in a straightforward way. The social workers take up the selected and condensed

messages from this literature, which are passed on to colleagues through occupational socialisation.

The first is what is taken to be the message of the Bridge Child Care Consultancy. This independent, profit-making organisation has been prominent in raising the profile of child neglect in recent years, with the claim that the neglected child can suffer longer term emotional difficulties than children abused in other ways (Pritchard, 1996). Their emphasis (or at least the social workers' version of it), in defining neglect, is on physical care, or the servicing of the child's body. Their neglected child is dirty and smelly. This seems to ring true for social workers who say they have not previously targeted neglect as a major issue requiring intervention:

'I think research was showing that although in the past some of the worst tragedies have been children where social workers have said oh well the house is stinking but the children are happy, research is saying are they really happy, are they happy in school, and they are different from other children, their clothes are worse and they can't bring friends home.' (interview with Lorraine)

The other important influence on the development of the authority's response to child neglect is the Department of Health's *Child Protection: Messages from Research* document. The statement most often quoted by social workers from this summary of twenty commissioned research studies is the finding that individual incidents of abuse are less connected with poor long-term outcomes for children than living in families characterised as 'low on warmth and high on criticism' (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995: 19). As a social worker put it during an interview:

'Everyone doesn't have to have dirty houses and dirty smelly children to have been neglect, neglect is more looking at are the child's needs being met, particularly the emotional needs, the holistic picture if you like.' (interview with Margaret)

To summarise, the emphasis of the Department of Health discourse on neglect, as understood by the social workers, is on the emotional impact of parenting styles. The child neglect discourse of the Bridge Child Care Consultancy, however, is understood by the social workers to be promoting the importance of servicing the child's body. The Uplands team social workers' constructions of families labelled as neglect cases do in fact

concentrate on children's bodies, and parental body maintenance work for children, and cleaning and feeding in particular. There is also reference to other factors, which are outlined more fully later in the chapter, but the servicing of the child's body is the dominant concern.

The construction of neglect in the social workers' routine practice suggests that judgements are indeed made about the emotional climate of the home, but that if this is found to be positive, and the standards of body maintenance unacceptable, the family are seen as giving cause for 'concern'. The practical construction of neglect is more influenced by the discourse of the servicing of the child's body. The intention of this chapter is not to crudely claim that the Uplands team social workers are only concerned with physical care and not with emotional well-being, but rather to draw attention to their questioning of the welfare of happy, dirty children, and to discuss the implications of this.

7.3 The physical care of children

The dominant concern in the Uplands team has become body maintenance work. To repeat Foucault's definition cited in chapter two, this is 'the permanent and exacting corporal relation between adults and their children' (Foucault, 1986: 279). The next section of the chapter will discuss the social workers' responses to failures in body maintenance in relation to dirt, disorder and diet.

7.3 1 Dirt and disorder

For neglect cases to be categorised as child protection cases rather than warranting a preventative response is a new development in this authority, and one that Parton (1995) argues is a general development throughout the UK. A preoccupation with dirt and disorder, however, does not seem to be new. The phrase 'home conditions' has, for many years, been a standard category for comment on the forms for monitoring children on the child protection register in River County, and the phrase appears in many different contexts in files that are more than ten years old. It is seen as a category of professional knowledge, and is often invoked in social workers' discussions of cases.

Assessment of 'home conditions' means deciding whether or not this is a tidy house (see Steedman, 1982).

As far as home conditions are concerned, the front room is perfect. At least it's acceptable by my standards. It's OK, I've seen a lot worse (Joan, from fieldnotes, 6 August).

We're investigating neglect. It's mainly to do with the home situation. They're living in squalor. Upstairs there's no carpet, the children are sleeping 4 to a bed... It's getting the mother to accept that there's a problem. Everyone's to blame bar her (Debbie, from fieldnotes, 3 September).

The home conditions are very good aren't they? I don't know if she does any cooking. I never see any food in the kitchen (Claire, from fieldnotes, 29 August).

Mr White asked Mrs Ellis about Mrs Faulkner's home conditions. Mrs Ellis replied that she found conditions to be excellent. (from case conference minutes, Faulkner family – not a neglect case).

The home conditions had appeared dirty and very untidy as usual. However, Mrs. Wheeler had hoovered the living room – again, effort I had not noticed before. (Wheeler family file).

Home conditions are judged against tacit standards. These seem to involve a high level of order and cleanliness, although a small amount of mess or dirt, if caused by children, is considered to be a good thing, giving a house the feel of being homely and 'lived in'.

I did use the loo... It was acceptable in a way. You know I wouldn't use the loo unless... It'd be worrying if a house was so tidy you wouldn't know they had kids.... there's got to be a balance. (Joan, from fieldnotes, 6 August)

Neglect cases invariably involve dirt and mess. Swift's research (1995) into the construction of neglect cases in Canada found that dirt and disorder were constant reference points in case recording, but that they tended not to be the primary factors that precipitated a decision about a family. She found that details of domestic environment were used to justify institutional action. In the Uplands team, however, following their training from the Bridge Child Care Consultancy, it has become acceptable to use dirt and disorder as primary grounds for child protection procedures. The following excerpts

from the data, as well as many of those cited later in the chapter, illustrate the preoccupation with dirt, mess and smell in the identification of neglect.

It was interesting. It was a bit of a chaotic family but the parents are always extremely well dressed and extremely clean, and present very nicely, whereas the children in the house at its worst, when there were untrained cats running around the place, there was so much faeces brought in from the cats, trod on by the cats, children crawling in it. At times as well there were visits where the two older children were absolutely dirty with their own faeces, which was smeared on them, on their legs. Obviously, they would always give an excuse and say well we are just putting them in the bath, we are just going to give them a bath now, but you know it was pretty yucky at one stage. (interview with Lorraine)

We'll do a little scene. Don't eat for a fortnight and don't bath. (Lisa and Debbie discussing the session they intend to run on the topic of neglect for a forthcoming training day, from fieldnotes, 7 August)

The flat was in a very untidy state. It appeared to be totally disorganised and I had difficulty finding a place to sit down. (from case recording, Wheeler family)

The house was in a very untidy, dirty state, there was also a strong odour. (from case recording, Wheeler family)

The kitchen ! Well, they said they cooked in it, but I can't imagine how you could. (Debbie, from fieldnotes, 23 July)

As Swift (1995) also found, neglect is seen to be associated with long-term, or chronic problems; families who are in and out of the caseload over many years.

It's cyclical. They were right back where they were at their worst. Some of the bits like the kitchen were frightening. The environmental health, well, they probably wouldn't even have wanted to go in. (Pete, from fieldnotes, 3 July)

At times social workers have to rely on the accounts of others. Several spoke of other professionals having 'lower tolerance' of dirty houses. It seems that particular censure is reserved for those parents (mothers) who are thought to be exposing their children to messy or dirty environments. This is illustrated in the extreme case formulation of the

referrals of some other professional groups. A police report of their response to a 999 call because of a 'domestic incident' at a client's house had little to say about the alleged violence, but recorded at length their impression that 'the house is uninhabitable to say the least. You cannot see a foot of carpet'.

Both officers were disgusted with the inhuman conditions in which the children were living in. The living room looked more like a rubbish tip with dozens of flies on the ceiling. The house had a very strong putrid smell. There was a small very scabby dog which appeared to be in the process of being eaten by swarms of fleas (police report in Brown family file).

There is a sense in which the participants were apologetic about the focus on dirt. There was an awareness that they might be in danger of imposing class-bound values on clients. They were keen to justify their attention to cleanliness as ensuring healthy children, and as related to a concern that smelly children would be isolated from their peer group.

The poor standard of hygiene in the home and the possible risk this presents to Ian's health (from core group minutes, Smith child).

You start to dig, and teachers are saying things like, 'oh Leanne isn't very popular, because she smells'. Teachers don't think a child being isolated because they smell warrants a call to a social worker..... you hear that Leanne has repeated urinary tract infections, and there's no referral because people don't understand neglect (Pete, from fieldnotes, 3 August).

This focus on isolation seemed to be a recent insight for the team, stemming from the Bridge Child Care Consultancy literature. Whilst seeing neglect as linked with poverty, there was an attempt made to separate out ordinary poor families from neglectful ones:

Actually being able to distinguish between families who are struggling materially, of which there are a lot around, and families who struggle but despite that they will manage. The kids sometimes go to school with half a slice of toast or something for breakfast because there isn't anything else around but people will always have that half a slice of toast, whereas there are other families who even if they might be in terms of income won't actually be materially as well off because they mispend their money. They won't be managing their money as well. They won't be thinking in terms of what the children's needs are, and will give up attempting to meet those

needs at the earlier stage in the struggle. I think it is those families that in terms of neglect we are sort of looking to become more involved with (interview with Mike).

There is a difference between deliberately not feeding children and the kind of neglect which lets children go to school in clothes that nobody else is wearing or doesn't provide money for them to go on school trips I mean which is a kind of neglect but it is not wilful neglect (interview with Lorraine).

The rationale for the comment on disorderly houses is less clear from social workers' talk than the rationale for their interest in dirt. There was one reference (below) to a very young child being at risk of injury. Otherwise it seems to function as a symbol of more generally inadequate parenting.

It was the state of the house. She just felt that it was unsafe for a toddler his age, you know sort of toddling around the living room or whatever and she just felt it was too dangerous, old food lying around, crockery, knives and forks (interview with Mary).

7.3.2 Diet

Adequate feeding is another abiding concern about the servicing of children's bodies. There is concern about children being given enough food and the right kind of food. As Lupton (1996) observes, domestic cooking is still overwhelmingly women's work, with women providing food for men and children. Silverman (1987: 254) has observed that 'thriving', 'well-fed' children testify to the moral worth of their mothers'. The social workers' concerns about diet are illustrated in the passages below.

The other thing that caused her concern was his weight. The health visitor in Coast Town had always said his weight was a bit up and down. That is what she always said to me but on the whole he was okay. And there was always some concern about his diet, was he receiving an adequate diet or not, and she was always giving him crisps and chocolate and stuff like that. There was a question mark basically over whether she was feeding him properly, whether he was getting an adequate diet. The guardian felt that he wasn't and that his pattern of weight gain proved that (interview with Mary).

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Never seen any evidence of food being cooked or prepared, except for empty cartons of 'Indian take away' food. The only time I have seen the children eating has been cereal the day of the hospital appointment (case recording, Wheeler family, list of 'concerns discussed with team manager').

Jade's weight had dropped really significantly and that there didn't seem to be an organic reason for it (interview with Lorraine).

When living with sister, mother was seen to feed child with tomato sauce from a bottle (from case recording, Wheeler family).

Issues around Ian's inconsistent weight gain, poor diet and inconsistent feeding routines (core group minutes, Smith child).

There is an appreciation that judgements about diet are culturally relative, and that the idea that only a 'cooked dinner' is proper food (see Murcott, 1982) should be questioned. Alongside this runs a conviction that some things are measurable.

Joan: If you feed your child pizza, the sort of food they get in school, granny might give them faggots and peas, you know, meat and two veg. She might think you're not feeding them proper food, even though there's not much difference in nutrition.

Mike: What's a lot less subjective is medical things.

Joan: Like development. Absolutely.

Mike: Like the sentile chart
(from fieldnotes, 9 August)

White (1998a) has written of the widespread faith in developmentalism in the child welfare field. It does seem that the field of child development is believed to be an exact science, a belief that is challenged by Burman (1994) and Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1995), amongst others. As evidence of neglect, social workers make reference to 'developmental delay'.

How are you finding Daniel with regard to his speech ? He doesn't to me, he just stares, and he does the same to Julie Morris [health visitor]. You don't find him like that then (Debbie, on phone, from fieldnotes, 3 September).

Jade's name was added to the child protection register on 30.4.96 following concerns about her failure to thrive (case recording, Wheeler family).

7.4 Other factors

There are other aspects of body maintenance cited as identification of child neglect in the Uplands team that are less dominant than cleaning and feeding. There are also some factors occasionally deployed which move away from the focus on physical care. These will be mentioned below, albeit briefly, because they are notably less central to the construction of neglect than the physical care tasks already discussed.

Two other core tasks of body maintenance referred to less frequently than cleaning and feeding were the clothing of children and seeking appropriate medical attention.

If we're looking at neglect, we have to look at every aspect of the child. ... How are they in school? are they appropriately dressed and things? In Winter they don't come in a t-shirt or things like that (Debbie, from fieldnotes, 3 September).

I suppose also, around issues of safety. A hazardous house, failure to take children for medical appointments, to call a doctor when they are ill, that I suppose is around neglect (interview with Margaret).

Failure to supervise children can constitute neglect. One example was a child alleged to have picked up and swallowed a small amount of cannabis resin. The social worker (Lisa) said there was 'definitely an element of neglect' in this case. Leaving children alone in the house or flat also comes into this category. As Swift (1995) also found, whilst neglect is usually chronic, there can be a 'neglect incident' such as abandonment.

She wasn't sort of supervising him enough. She admitted that she had left him in the flat while she nipped out to the chippie or something like that but she always asked one of the girls down the road to keep an eye on him (interview with Mary).

An exception to the emphasis on physical care is the noting of the presence or absence of toys in some cases to back up formulations of neglectful or non-neglectful families.

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There are no toys, no books, there's no evidence of any children there. There's a computer, but nothing else. They've had toys, Social Services have bought them (Debbie, from fieldnotes, 3 September).

Domestic violence is occasionally cited as contributing to an overall picture of neglect, although cases of family violence are also often categorised very differently.

It fits the neglect profile so perfectly. Isolation of children in peer groups, developmental delay, domestic violence. It fits this family like a glove (Pete, from fieldnotes, 3 July).

In almost all the neglect cases I encountered in the Uplands team there were incidents of violence from the father to the mother recorded on the files. It was not, however, in these cases, a major issue for monitoring. The key to this is the process of institutional categorisation. The physical care of children comes to be seen as a greater threat to their well-being than other problem factors when a case is categorised as a neglect case.

A general rule about neglect is understood to be parents putting their needs before those of their children.

I think in my experience those families where I have felt that sort of thing was going on, quite often it is about adults with emotional needs which tend to precedence over the children. I mean adults who will go out and buy a bottle of vodka in preference to paying the electricity bill or buying some food for the kids or whatever. I think that is probably what it is about. Not being able to actually put your needs second to the needs of the children when it is required (Interview with Mike).

As noted earlier, the emotional climate for children is certainly considered relevant, but a positive emotional bond can be outweighed by lack of physical care.

Conditions have again deteriorated and despite intensive efforts by social worker and team manager to raise standards, the house has now become unacceptable for the children to live in. It is fly-ridden, filthy, cluttered and totally unhygienic. The children themselves are not neglected emotionally, not physically in terms of clothing/food/schooling.... However, the situation is now reaching the point where their health must be at risk, living in such dirty surroundings (child protection referral form for Brown family).

Most of the minutes are about whether or not parents are complying with the plan and information on the children's weight and behaviour. Not about quality of relationship with parents (my comments on Wheeler family file, from fieldnotes, July 15).

There has always appeared to be a strong emotional bond between Carol and Ian, and until recent months Carol has on the whole put Ian's needs first.... However, this strong emotional bond has always been somewhat overshadowed by Carol's difficulties coping with practicalities e.g. budgetting, cooking, domestic tasks, as well as coping with her own emotional needs (case recording, Smith child).

I have described in this and the previous sections how a particular version of neglect comes to dominate the construction of this category of maltreatment. In the rest of the chapter I shall discuss the implications of this and attempt to find an explanatory framework which should shed light on broader questions about the construction of gender in child protection work. First I shall discuss the implications of targeting the physical care of children for men and women clients.

7.5 Body maintenance work and the scrutiny of mothering

The result of this preoccupation with body maintenance work is that mothering comes under scrutiny. A connection between neglect and mothering is a familiar one. Swift (1995) argues it is mainstream in the professional literature. The influential work of Polansky *et al* (1981), for example, is notable for its targeting mothers in its concern about child neglect. Turney (forthcoming, 2000) argues that this connection stems from the construction of neglect as an absence of care. When care is so strongly associated with femininity, she observes, it is inevitable that women will be held responsible. Swift captures the gender bias of neglect categorisation thus:

while the category neglect appears on the surface to be gender free, implicating 'parents' as responsible for the care of children, virtually all people actually accused of neglecting their children, both historically and at present, are mothers (Swift, 1995: 107).

The attention to mothering in the Uplands team is not, however, in any straightforward way, a conscious decision on the part social workers to avoid men and

pressurise women. As the data extracts above show, there is a tendency in case talk to slip into only mentioning mothers as culpable. This slippage also needs to be understood, however, in the context of an occupational culture where a feminist critique of men's power over women in families is mainstream social work knowledge. The focus of mothering needs to be understood on many different layers; as the outcome of pragmatic decisions, as the inevitable result of a system based on risk management, and as connected with the social workers' gender and class identities.

Social workers' explanations of neglectful families tend to refer heavily to the negative influences of fathers, or mothers' partners, often in terms of their lack of engagement with the routine tasks of parenting. As observed in the previous chapter, this contrasts with Swift's research (1995). A manager said this to me, in reference to his recent survey of fifteen cases retrospectively identified as neglect cases.

The men in their lives were at best an impediment, and almost always a negative influence. Either there was domestic violence or they ruined the household, through spending the money on drugs or by being in prison. There was not one of the fifteen (cases) where a man was a positive role model (senior manager, from fieldnotes, 8 July).

In practice, intervention is usually focused on women, however. As outlined in chapters five and six, social workers declare there is little choice within the current routines of home visiting, because men absent themselves from the family for much of the time, and perhaps especially when the social worker is due to call. Social workers make pragmatic decisions about who they can realistically work with, deciding that they will not get very far with changing men's entrenched patterns of behaviour.

Parker's (1995) overview of the history of child protection suggests that periods of attention to neglect have historically meant more attention to bad mothering than periods when abuse has been targeted. Gordon's historical work also shows that

when child *abuse* had been emphasized, and individual vice blamed, men were the spotlighted culprits. When neglect was emphasized, and social conditions blamed, women were responsible, because they were in charge of children's care (Gordon, 1988: 73).

Unlike the earlier decades of the century that Parker refers to, the current cultural and legislative climate is generally more supportive of fathers' involvement in child-rearing. This is reflected in the social workers' view that they should ideally be working with both parents. Formal documents, such as minutes of meetings and social workers' reports, typically use gender neutral language, referring to 'the parents' responsibilities. In fact these formal documents have the effect of masking the gendered reality of the work. Discussion of the construction of clienthood by professionals and procedures cannot escape the material reality of the gendered division of labour in client families and elsewhere. Housework, and the physical and emotional care of children are, in practice, women's work. So a concentration on dirt, mess and food is a concentration on mothering.

It can be argued that given the gendered division of parental labour in client families, scrutiny of mothering is inevitable in the current child protection system, whatever the case categorisation. The system is based on the management of risk; the future possibility of harm to children (Parton *et al*, 1997). Any attempt to assess and manage a case defined as 'high risk' will be intrusive and interventionist, and it is women who are bodily present in households, taking responsibility for childcare, so they bear the brunt of this intrusion (Parton and Parton, 1989). Some social workers are uneasy about the intrusive and coercive nature of their work, and its focus on women. As cited in chapter five, one said 'quite often it does feel like you are sort of persecuting women for the inadequacies of society'.

It is clear that the local authority's choice to target the neglect of body maintenance when there is a host of potential new child protection targets; men's violence, or men's abdication of responsibility, for example, is a choice with implications for the gender and class composition of the client group. It means in practice that more poor women will have their housekeeping and child-rearing skills scrutinised. The interesting question to ask is why this particular target? Why physical care, and why dirt, disorder and diet? The next section will discuss these questions.

The gendered implications of a decision to target physical neglect are fairly clear. It is possible that a failure on the part of senior managers (almost all men) to seriously acknowledge men's abuse of women and children contributed to that decision. However, the data suggest that some aspects of feminist discourse on the family are also

mainstream at management level. The words of the senior manager cited above that the men in cases of neglect were 'almost always a negative influence' are an illustration of this. Whilst the practice of child protection work which prioritises physical neglect has gender and class implications, gender as an explanatory framework does not tell us everything we need to know about the preoccupation with dirt, disorder and diet. We also need to go beyond the issue of gender to more thoroughly understand the choice of this particular target.

7.6 Why dirty, hungry children and untidy houses?

The next section of the chapter will offer some other possible reasons for the dominance of one particular professional discourse on neglect. The discussion makes reference to anthropological work on the social meaning of dirt and cleanliness, the influence of physical and emotional responses, traditional notions of respectability, the usefulness of the observable body as evidence, and the rediscovery of child neglect as a response to conflicting but unavoidable pressures in contemporary child protection work

Dirt is culturally very powerful. When a social worker records that 'the smell of cat faeces was overwhelming' we share the horror of that smell. Mary Douglas's work on the social meaning of dirt and cleanliness (1966) might point to some clues as to the preoccupation with dirt. Rather than describing dirt within the medical framework of hygiene, she sees it as 'matter out of place'. An interest in dirt and pollution arises in response to the ambiguity caused by the challenging of social boundaries. Child abuse is certainly an example of the challenging of internal societal boundaries. There are multiple ambiguities and insecurities inherent in the child protection role. Risk to children is not provable, but social workers are under a great deal of pressure to get it right. The shift in emphasis towards neglect arose from a child death where the social worker was found to be at fault; every social worker's worst nightmare. Perhaps the interest in dirt is explained by this context. Certainly in the face of this kind of uncertainty and insecurity, dirty, hungry, ill-clad children are bodies of evidence. They are concrete proof of parental failure to clean, feed and clothe.

To understand the interest in dirt, we need to consider its capacity to provoke physical and emotional responses as well as cognitive ones. The importance of embodied cultural

responses has been convincingly made by Bourdieu (1986). Peile (1998) has recently argued a case for applying bodily and emotive knowledge to social work practice. 'Carnal knowledge' is the term used (albeit in a very different context) by Mellor and Shilling (1997) to describe the link between the physical body and the mind. The reaction of social workers to some households is certainly an emotional and physical one.

I mean there were times when I felt that if somebody had gone in there who didn't have a strong stomach as maybe I had, you know they would have probably removed those children just because the stink, the smell in the house (Interview with Lorraine).

If you saw the state of this property. The state of the toilets downstairs. I took a housing official with me. He almost threw up. It's the only house I visit I just can't wait to get out of (Debbie, from fieldnotes, 3 September).

This is, of course, a culturally specific physical reaction to particular smells. A paper by De Montigny (1995) discusses at some length the one line in a social work case file 'the apartment smelled of urine'. He first describes his own embodied response to the apartment (he was the social worker), as well as the complex power relations behind this reaction and the its translation into a mundane 'fact' in a social work file.

The construction of neglect should perhaps be understood in the context of traditional preoccupations in working class communities, namely the importance of the tidy house, well-dressed children and proper food as markers of respectability (Steedman, 1982). The backgrounds and regional origins of the social workers vary, but the Uplands community values are seen very strongly in the recorded reactions of other professional groups more homogenous in their local origins, such as police officers and health visitors. In some sense 'home conditions' are familiar territory in a climate of uncertainty, Skeggs's work (1997) captures the crucial significance of respectability in the construction of gender and class identities. She states her case neatly in the following passage:

Respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class. It informs how we speak, who we speak to, how we classify others, what we study and how we know who we are (or are not). Respectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it. Respectability would not be of concern here, if the working classes (Black and White) had not consistently been classified as dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect (Skeggs, 1997:1)

The Bridge Child Care Consultancy message on neglect that the social workers remember most vividly is the danger of believing families are dirty, but happy. Several of the research participants spoke of the need to question their existing professional values on parenting, described as 'minimum standards' and reclaim their own higher personal standards of what would be acceptable for children of their own. I return to discuss this issue at greater length in the next chapter. It seems that the social workers are both interested in the issue of child neglect, experiencing a sense of novelty, and also feel uneasy about it. One said that it raised 'huge dilemmas'. Perhaps because of the newness of neglect as a priority issue, and because of the particularly overt links to poverty, there is more of a sense that social workers are struggling to get it right than with other types of cases.

I mean I am never convinced that if I lived in one of the dump houses in say Hilltown or Valleytown that I would be any better than anybody else. You know I am sure that enough ties to a person's address at times and I am sure that if I was left on my own with a couple of small children, a very limited income, no car, no expectations you know I don't think I would do a very good job (interview with Lorraine).

Neglect is a difficult one anyway. With neglect it's over a period of time. With physical or sexual abuse you've got it there. We've all got different views on what neglect is. I find it the most difficult of the categories. What might be acceptable to me in the home, a health visitor might think 'oh my God'. Where I might think 'well, I've seen worse'. We've not got a clear definition of neglect (Interview with Claire).

I heard Debbie and Lisa talking yesterday about some case that they are involved with at the moment where the house is they say a total tip, everything is absolutely filthy, they have virtually no bedding etc, etc. But the children look bright and happy, you know, and is that what we are aiming for? (interview with Lorraine).

As already stated, the version of neglect being taken up in River County is what staff perceive to be the message of the Bridge Child Care Consultancy. The effectiveness of this discourse warrants some preliminary discussion. Bridge are successful in getting across their message through the use of powerful emotive rhetoric. For example, one of their publications (Pritchard, 1996) compares a passage from *Oliver Twist* with one from

the 'Paul' report (Bridge Child Care Consultancy, 1995) and asks the reader to consider how far society has progressed. The training delivery is very effective in striking a chord with social workers' experiences, and making the message stick through fear: the fear that the same could happen here.

We've had this training day. It was excellent. You could just picture cases in your mind (from fieldnotes, Debbie, 3 September).

Pete said that the description of the Paul case made him 'go cold' because of the Brown family (my comment, from fieldnotes, 5 August).

Despite the emotional content of the child protection role, much of the daily work is fairly routine. A new professional mission packaged in an exciting way, and combined with the crucial element of fear, can be highly effective.

He's the best speaker I've ever heard. When you compare it with some of the boring training I've been on (from fieldnotes, Lorraine, 21 August).

Bridge are not alone in this kind of approach. Child protection is a highly contested field, and the competing philosophies have to battle to persuade social workers. There are financial vested interests where profit-making organisations increase custom through the success of charismatic presentations. This is not to suggest that Bridge are different from other organisations in respect of the above comments. It is to argue that the rhetorical construction of child abuse discourse needs to be questioned by social workers and social services managers. The Bridge version of child abuse and neglect is controversial, after all. An NSPCC spokesperson recently commented that the new dangerous families checklist written by Bridge was 'a throwback to practice before the current trend, supported by the Government, of a less confrontational approach to families in need' (Brindle, 1998:11). It is worth restating that the dominant version of neglect in River County is only what they *perceive to be* the Bridge message on neglect. A good example of where errors are made was one of the Uplands social workers mentioning the death of Sukina Hammond as an example of a neglect case. He rightly associated this case with Bridge – they wrote the report (Bridge Child Care Consultancy, 1991) – but there is no

suggestion in the Sukina Hammond inquiry report that this is a neglect case. It is clearly identified as having been a problem of a violent man.

So why the attention to the exterior of the child's body at a time when the official message (from the Department of Health) is that a rounded view of a child's welfare is needed; one that includes consideration of emotional attachments? It is of course easier to monitor the observable body. You can see and smell dirt, check a child's weight. It is certainly easier to monitor than other parental deficiencies; men's violence, for example, and easier to measure than emotional well-being. As Howe (1992), amongst others, has asserted, monitoring, and the gathering of evidence have become the chief tasks of child protection social workers. Howe (1996) has also characterised contemporary social work as concerned with surface, rather than depth. In the Uplands team it seems that social workers want to get beyond the surface of observable family situations to find out nasty secrets rather more than to locate causes of problems that can lead to helping strategies. There are frequent references to 'digging', or even 'ferreting' for what is hidden. In gathering evidence, bodily signs are crucial. Evidence of 'development' is written on the child's body (White, 1997a). It is perhaps difficult for social workers to shift to the holistic view of child welfare recommended by the Department of Health when there are compelling practical and cultural reasons for scrutiny of the child's body.

The switch to a protectionist approach with neglect could be seen as a surprising development, when the thrust of government guidance is towards reducing the time spent on investigations and increasing support to families (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). Obviously the implication of the rediscovery of neglect as a child protection issue is that more children will be brought into the child protection net rather than more kept out. The rediscovery of neglect in River County is a response to two very different pressures. It represents increased scrutiny of families, or at least scrutiny of different problems, in response to local furore at child deaths. It is also an attempt to follow the government guidance that it is unwise to focus on specific incidents of abuse rather than children's overall welfare. Although a preoccupation with physical neglect does represent a move away from specific incidents of abuse, the result is a very partial view of children's welfare, albeit one that is easier to establish than the more holistic picture. The authority's predicament illustrates very neatly the difficulty of responding to the Department of Health's *Messages from Research* in a climate of preoccupation with risk.

Parton (1997) has pointed out the tension between attempts to move away from child protection and the continuing influence of inquiries into child deaths. He cites the Bridge report on the death of 'Paul' (Bridge Child Care Consultancy, 1995) as an example of forces pulling back towards protectionism. The local inquiries in River County, albeit not public ones, have had the effect of putting pressure on the authority to step up investigation rather than reduce it.

Observing the Uplands team at work suggests, in keeping with the findings of Parton *et al* (1997) and Kähkönen (1999), that the attention of the child protection system is on standards of parenting, which usually means mothering. But the bodies of children can be the focus for judgements on parenting. They are easy evidence in a system which is based on the gathering of evidence and the management of risk. They are tangible and concrete in a climate of risk, insecurity and uncertainty. And they are visible signs of the quality of mothering.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an analysis of ethnographic data on the construction of child neglect in the Uplands team, as a particularly vivid and topical example of the gendering of child protection work. The dominant construction of child neglect was seen to be the failure to provide adequate physical care for children and their environment; in particular an emphasis on dirty, hungry children and untidy houses.

The chapter went on to discuss the implications of this dominant construction for the gender and class profile of the primary clients. The rediscovery of neglect was seen to increase the scrutiny of women living in poverty. Various perspectives were then brought to bear to explain the emphasis on body maintenance work. These were as follows: anthropological work on the social meaning of dirt and cleanliness, the importance of physical and emotional responses, traditional notions of respectability, the rhetorical power of vested interest groups, and the usefulness of the observable body as evidence. Also, the rediscovery of child neglect in this authority is a response to the dual pressures of public reaction to a child death and government guidance on reducing investigations of alleged abuse incidents, both inescapable pressures in contemporary child protection work. The gendered effect of a concentration on body maintenance is particularly stark,

but this concentration has to be explained in the context of the political and social context of child protection in the late 1990s; a context which makes the scrutiny of mothering an inevitability.

In this chapter I aimed to provide a sustained example of gender construction. The initial reason for the inclusion of this particular example was the impossibility of avoiding the issue of child neglect in River County, such was its topicality and novelty. Over and above this local dimension, however, as an example of gender construction, child neglect cases are illuminating for several reasons. They illustrate how choices about child protection priorities at a management level are gendered. They illustrate how the outcomes of some ostensibly non-gendered practice can in fact be highly gendered. They also emphasise that gender relations can never be considered in isolation from other explanatory factors. In particular, the more general social, political and historical location of child protection policy and practice has to be brought into the analysis. The next chapter moves away from the specific frame of this one, and back to a more general level of analysis. It will focus on social work knowledge and values in practice, and their gendered implications.

Chapter 8

GENDER, KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES

The aim of the research has been to unpack and examine the occupational culture of child protection work. Chapter four set out the context of the construction of clienthood. Chapters five and six gave overviews of the discourses of masculinity and femininity in the social workers' case talk, recording and report writing. Chapter seven then focused on the gendered construction of child protection priorities. This final empirical chapter goes on to address how social workers draw on professional knowledge, ethics and values, and the implications of how they do this for work with men and women. Reference has already been made to social work knowledge, ethics and values in each of the previous chapters. This chapter will tackle the topic in a more sustained fashion, having as its central question: on the basis of what knowledge, ethics and values do social workers construct gender?

The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) sees the 'competences' necessary for good social work practice as comprising the separate elements of skills, knowledge and values (CCETSW, 1991). In this chapter I do not make much of the distinction between 'ethics' and 'values'. Dictionary definitions link both professional 'ethics' and 'values' to 'moral standards' that are considered correct in a social group. It could be argued that ethics come into play in relation to specific practice dilemmas, whereas values are over-arching working principles. I tend, however, to collapse the two terms together, using either the phrase 'ethics and values' or just 'values'. My interest at this point is not so much in social work theorising in the academy, although I do make reference to relevant debates in academic literature. Rather, I aim to explore how social workers draw on knowledge and values in their *practice*. Relating knowledge and values to practice is unavoidable, since knowledge in the social work office is not disembodied. Individual social workers have to process the dilemmas and discussions in child protection work, and these ultimately relate to individual children, and adult carers - women and men.

The chapter divides into two main sections. Firstly there is a general discussion of the relationship between theory and practice in social work, with some comment on this relationship in the Uplands team and its gendered implications. I explore the sources of

knowledge and values in the social work office, making problematic the distinction between lay and professional knowledge. Secondly there is an exploration of some of the tensions that can be observed in the case talk and case recording of the Uplands team - tensions that could be seen as inherent in social work knowledge and values - tensions between a focus on individuals and a focus on their social context. The topic here is not so much knowledge about gender as knowledge about social work and knowledge about personal and social problems, with the implications for the question of gender drawn out. To begin the chapter in earnest I start with a discussion of how theory and practice relate to each other in social work.

8.1 The relationship between theory and practice in social work

The supposed gap between theory and practice is a recurrent theme in social work (see, for example, Sheldon, 1978; Munro, 1998). Many social work students will say that theory seems very distant from their experience of practical decision-making in the workplace. Academics, and research students, often complain that mainstream social work practice is not theoretically informed, when it really ought to be. As Sibeon (1990) has observed, the call for social work to have a basis in theory goes back to the work of the Charity Organisation Society (Loch, 1906). There has been lively debate about whether or not social science theory is essential to social work practice. Curnock and Hardiker (1979) have argued that it is, whereas Davies (1988) has claimed that 'practice know-how', a grasp of welfare rights, relevant legislation, and knowledge of local communities are considerably more important to the social work practitioner. It should not be taken for granted that there is a theory-practice gulf. The existence of such a gulf is contested. There are several arguments that have developed, both within social work and without, that have challenged the view that theory and practice are distinct domains. I shall go on to mention a few of these in the next section, which will give an overview of developing ideas about the nature of professional knowledge.

8.1.2 The nature of professional knowledge

To introduce some of the ideas about the nature of professional knowledge that are particularly relevant to social work, I shall briefly cover a few issues. These are the status of expert knowledge, professional knowledge as constructed in the routines of the workplace, the relationship between social science and everyday thinking, professionals' practice reasoning, the concept of 'indeterminacy', and knowledge as 'gendered'.

The status of expert knowledge itself has been questioned. The status of scientific knowledge as forged only in controlled experimentation has been challenged by the recent sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g. Collins and Pinch, 1993). An example of the deconstruction of the kind of science that childcare social work draws on is Burman's (1994) work on developmentalism. One of her key themes is how science can be gendered. She argues that it is the adequacy of mothering that developmental psychology is called upon to regulate. As mentioned in chapter two, detailed study of the learned professions at work, including research into occupational socialisation, has commented on how knowledge in practice is constructed through the rituals of the workplace. Such research suggests that a characterisation of professional work as reliant on routine or rhetoric is perhaps more appropriate than concentrating on its 'scientific' rigour and objective distance (see, for example, Atkinson, 1995).

Social work knowledge has traditionally been defined as the social scientific basis for social work, as distinct from practice wisdom, seen as an area of practitioners' thinking rooted in 'common sense' and without academic backing. Sheppard (1995) explodes the traditional distinction between social science and practice wisdom in social work. He argues that the thought processes we use in conducting our everyday lives are the same, in principle, as the methods that characterise social science. It is also important to remember that ideas from social science can filter through to popular culture. An example would be psychoanalytic concepts, that 'have permeated the culture and its everyday language to such an extent that parts of psychoanalytic theory have almost achieved the status of an indigenous psychology' (Scott, 1989: 49). Giddens (1993) has used the term 'double hermeneutic' of knowledge to capture the way in which knowledge spirals in and out of expert systems. Theorists such as Giddens (1990, 1991) and Beck (1992) have claimed that the questioning of expert knowledge is one of the features of

what they call reflexive modernisation. The separation of lay and expert knowledge has been the subject of much debate (e.g Wynne, 1996; Irwin and Wynne, 1996). I should like to sidestep this debate, however, since my interest is in the *discursive interaction* of lay and expert knowledge in social work practice. My concern is with gender relations, so any consideration of knowledge, ethics and values has to put these in a context of power relations.

Schön's influential work (1991) on professionals' practice reasoning uses the concept of 'knowledge in action' to explain 'the artful ways in which some practitioners deal competently with the indeterminacies and value conflicts of practice' (p19). Schön writes of the 'indeterminacies' of practice, drawing on a distinction between indeterminacy and technicity in professional knowledge that was originally made by Jamous and Peloille (1970). Atkinson and Delamont (1990: 95) define indeterminacy as 'the "hidden curriculum" of the job performance: the tacit, implicit, unexamined ways of being a member of any occupational group' and technicity as 'the explicit, rule-governed, codified part of a job'. Macdonald (1995), in discussing indeterminacy in various professions, has claimed that social work is not characterised by indeterminacy so much as uncertainty. He distinguishes the making of a judgement after seeing a client by a doctor or a lawyer from the multiplicity of models faced by a social worker prior to an encounter with a client. Within the social work discipline, some would happily agree with Macdonald. Parton (1998) has recently entitled an article 'the need to rediscover uncertainty and ambiguity' and elsewhere (Parton, 1999) claimed uncertainty as the primary positive distinctive feature of social work as a discipline, linking this to the current socio-political configuration which has been termed 'post-' or 'high' modernity.

The notion of indeterminacy has been criticised by Atkinson and Delamont (1990) as a new justification for male domination of professions. They link the idea of indeterminacy with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of 'habitus' as something that cannot be taught. They argue it could be taken to mean knowledge that only men understand; an 'aura' of professional style that is inborn and natural. This brings these introductory comments round to the theme of 'gendered' knowledge. As second wave feminism has developed questions have been asked about knowledge as gendered, such as 'are women's ways of knowing different from those of men?' and 'can there be a feminist epistemology?' (see Abbott and Wallace's overview, 1997: 83ff.). Various questions arise

about gendered knowledge in the social work office, in the context of a majority of women front-line staff and men as managers across the social work profession (Hallett, 1989). The preoccupation with risk in child protection has led to attempts at rendering the process more scientific (Parton, 1998). Such an approach to epistemology has been criticised as masculinist. Froggett (1998) has argued that the increasing managerialism in social work in the 1990s has involved the substitution of instrumental knowledge for interpretive, reflexive knowledge, and that this means 'reinstating the law of the father'. Further questions are raised by Macdonald (1995), in discussing knowledge and indeterminacy in the caring professions. He asks whether a caring attitude and interpersonal skills are thought to be indeterminate (and feminine) qualities, and whether objectivity is possible in caring work with its emotional content. These are important issues, which form the context to a consideration of the sources of knowledge about gender in the Uplands team.

8.1.2 Lay and professional knowledge in the Uplands team

This next section begins to explore the sources of knowledge in the social work team, through a discussion of the distinction between 'lay' and 'professional' knowledge in practice. The aim is to make problematic this distinction, arguing that lay and professional knowledge overlap and are both highly gendered. Lay notions are particularly important in social work practice, because the knowledge base is more diverse than that in, for example, law and medicine, and many practitioners (unlike doctors or lawyers) would openly claim that much of what they do is based on common sense. Pithouse and Atkinson's (1988) analysis of case talk shows social workers using little explicit theorising, but employing the narrative force of a moral tale. The Uplands team social workers' notions of what constitutes professional knowledge inevitably encompass the interpretations of personal and social problems that derive from the social sciences, and also everyday 'lay' ideas about family life and child abuse (see also Pithouse, 1987).

As earlier chapters of the thesis suggested, constructions of men and women clients could be seen to draw on notions of gender that are both professional and 'ordinary'. Inevitably, social workers' imaginings are the imaginings of their culture; the occupational

culture of the social work office, the wider culture of their geographical area and UK-wide cultural influences. Such lay knowledge is in many respects no less systematic than professional or expert knowledge. Geertz's essay on common sense as a cultural system argues that common sense is 'a loosely connected body of belief and judgement, rather than just what anybody properly put together cannot help but think' (Geertz, 1993: 10). Whilst seeing the manifestations of common sense as varying according to cultural and historical location, he also identifies distinctive characteristics across cultures: 'naturalness', 'practicalness', 'thinness', 'immethodicalness' and 'accessibleness'.

Some practice reasoning in child protection work references findings from research that are well known to social workers and, indeed, are so well known to lay people that they move into the realm of 'common sense'. Some examples might be that witnessing violence against their mother has damaging emotional consequences for children, or that children with stable fostering or adoptive placements fare better than those who move around constantly. The very influential discipline of developmentalism also has the status of being so widely accepted as to have become common sense about child-rearing; what children should be able to do at certain ages, and so on (White, 1998a). There are then the more contested issues, such as the very grey areas of whether a complex situation can be labelled abusive, and theories of causation. There are trends of following particular explanations in particular settings according to occupational culture (see chapters four to seven), whereas amongst the general public opinion would be divided. There are also examples of reasoning that quite clearly draws on lay understanding above all else. Below is an extract of such reasoning. Joan and Debbie are discussing one of Joan's cases.

Joan tells Debbie 'I've got this girl, she's 16, she's just moved to Middletown'. She says the girl's brother was schizophrenic, and she had to move out of the family home. Debbie asks 'where in Middletown?' and Joan replies 'The Meadows, a nice little council house. The baby is fine, well fed, appropriately dressed. She wants to go to college.' Joan says she has just received a note from the police saying that 'last night she was out in a garage with lots of other youths, passing the baby around. She says the baby wouldn't sleep so she went out in the car. Obviously that's inappropriate, and can't carry on, but she's only 16'. She goes on to say 'she's really bright, excellent at English and French. It's such a refreshing change when someone wants to'. She was cut off at this point by someone else arriving. She seemed to be about to say 'get an education' or perhaps 'better themselves' (from fieldnotes, 11 September).

Here, Joan draws on notions of respectability and unrespectability (see Skeggs, 1997). The desire for an education is a marker of respectability, and an unusual one amongst a generally very uneducated client group. Hanging around a garage with lots of 'youths', which we can, perhaps, take to mean young men, is a marker of unrespectability, with its overtones of slovenly mothering and possibly flirtatiousness or even, more distantly, promiscuity. The Meadows is a respectable estate, as opposed to the large and impoverished ones where most of the Uplands clients live. Moving there, to a 'nice little' council house again sets the client apart from the rest. Joan's comment that passing the baby around is 'obviously inappropriate' suggests she may be predicting what Debbie will think of the situation; this is shared tacit knowledge. Passing a baby around to a lot of youths in a garage at night is something that you just do not do. Judgmental approaches to teenage mothers can, of course, also be found in professional literature on child welfare (e.g. Uno *et al*, 1998; Elo *et al*, 1999). I would speculate, however, that Joan does not draw on formal professional sources in this case talk. She is much more likely to be drawing on her life experience and local community values, as well as the culture of child care social work, handed down through generations of practitioners. As Tice's work (1998) has shown, occupational discourse in social work has historically constructed 'wayward girls' as objects of concern.

There are times when lay and professional notions are seen to clash, or at least pull in different directions. Some interesting comments were made about what one social worker called the tension between 'personal and professional values' in relation to child neglect and the state of clients' houses. The term 'home conditions' discussed in chapter seven is a good example of the overlap of lay and professional reasoning. It encompasses traditional lay judgements about the unrespectable poor, but similar judgements can also be found in child welfare literature (see Polansky *et al* 1981) and in the history of British social work (Bosanquet, 1902). Pete describes his dilemmas below.

My values are that my son should have lots of educational toys, to play with, to pretend with, to learn through. Whether he has guns or not, I've got no feeling about that. He should have a clean, tidy environment, clean bed linen, clean clothes. When they're dirty they should be washed. When they're torn or damaged they should be replaced. If his pillow is lumpy he should have a new one. There should be lots of posters on the wall, his works of art should be kept and valued, because they're unique. These are my personal values. My professional values are about what I know professionally to be in the

best interests of children and it's about minimum standards below which we act to protect the children and above which we intervene and help. It's about good enough parenting, social learning theory and attachment theory, and neglect Our carpet gets hoovered usually twice a day and shampooed around once a month. Social work values clients' uniqueness, that they have their own values. We wouldn't become involved unless there is a significant risk. A dirty carpet is not necessarily a cause for concern on its own (Pete, from fieldnotes, 5 August).

Mike echoes Pete's appraisal of cleanliness standards amongst social workers:

Our values would see a house as acceptable when someone else wouldn't until it gets unhygienic, you know, half a dozen bin bags full of food (Mike, from fieldnotes, 6 August).

Clearly the issue of cleanliness has come into question recently, as a result of the training on neglect. As chapter seven explained, there are indications that the social workers are beginning to wonder whether their traditional standards (that they perceive to be at a 'minimum' level) are perhaps too low, and whether in fact it is the lay understanding of 'I wouldn't want *my* children to live in those conditions' that should be applied instead. Here, social workers are consciously displacing professional practice for populism and debunking theory.

As well as the excerpts cited above that show the use of lay reasoning, and the clash perceived between 'personal' and 'professional' values, there are also examples in chapters four to seven of a range of different relationships between professional and lay knowledge. The dominant mode of practice theorising combines both sources of knowledge. The favoured ideas about family life are arguably those from the broad field of child welfare which chime with practitioners' own values and have practical relevance to social workers' statutory responsibilities. As Swift expresses it,

the practices of child welfare workers reflect the knowledge, values, and beliefs of the larger society. In other words, child welfare workers import and apply their experiences as members of society to their everyday reasoning and decision processes (Swift, 1995: 13).

So, as seen in the previous chapter, the importance of the physical neglect of children is a message being pushed by a powerful professional body and is highlighted in some of the

child welfare literature. It also fits with traditional judgement on unrespectable working class families (meaning mothers) and its easily observable nature makes it an ideal source of evidence. Similarly, the diverse versions of domestic violence (see chapters five and six) reflect not only debate within academic and professional spheres, but also the range of popular discourse. The dominant practice of expecting women to put pressure on men to leave the family reflects what social workers over many years have testified to colleagues is actually feasible. Occupational discourse in social work can be seen, then, to comprise both 'official' knowledge and lay wisdom. There has been some reflection on which aspects of formal theory achieve powerful status in the team. The next section will go on to consider this in more detail.

8.1.3 The use of theory in the Uplands team

Payne (1991) writes of the 'social construction of social work theory', and clearly the theoretical premise of this thesis requires an acknowledgement that theory in social work is socially constructed. One important respect in which theory is constructed in the Uplands team is the privileging of certain theoretical perspectives as more central to the task of child protection than others. Social workers, in my experience, tend to say they do not think very highly of theory, valuing 'learning on the job' (or 'practice wisdom') more highly. Parton (1999, WWW page) argues that 'practice informs the development of theory as much, if not more than, vice versa'. This can be regarded as a positive aspect of the profession. There is, however, within each area of social work, recognition of the value of certain types of 'specialist' knowledge. Two 'specialist' areas that were referred to during my period of fieldwork in the Uplands team were work with sex offenders and direct work with children (see chapters six and four). Informal sources, such as my own practice experience and that of friends, would suggest these are indeed privileged areas of knowledge in the culture of child protection work. There are several possible reasons for this.

Children, as chapter four explained, are reified as the object of concern. Perhaps, despite Howe's (1992) argument that contemporary child protection practice is concerned with monitoring clients rather than helping them change, it is still therapeutic work as opposed to practical support that is regarded by practitioners as 'real' social work

(see Pithouse, 1987). Direct work with children, often those who have been abused or who are seen to suffer 'separation anxiety', is overwhelmingly conducted within a psychodynamic framework. The interest in this specialism might suggest the continuing importance of psychodynamic theories to much mainstream social work practice (Payne, 1991). There is a prevalent belief that sex offenders can be known about; they can be understood within a template of behaviour (see chapter six). The accepted approach to sex offenders is seen as a 'tough' one. This fits with social workers' self-perception as tough on child abuse. It distances them from images of social work as liberal and non-confrontational. It is also possible that ideas about sex offenders and about therapeutic work with children are valued because much of the rest of child protection knowledge is seen as mundane, obvious, common sense, whereas these aspects of the job are seen to go beyond everyday knowledge. They are perceived as 'specialisms', whereas other tasks such as, for example, giving advice about housing or engaging a woman in purposeful conversation about the violent man she lives with, are considered routine.

The privileging of knowledge about sex offenders and about therapeutic work with children is highly gendered. Any substantial interest in intensive work with women is noticeably absent, and there are contradictory messages about men. There is little explicit attention drawn to the fact that the sex offenders who come to the attention of child protection workers are almost always men, no doubt because this fact is taken for granted. Dominelli (1991) sees practice that is not explicit about the connection between sexual abuse and masculinity as in some ways collusive with the abuse. It could be argued, however, that an approach to understanding sex offenders which emphasises the abuse as deliberate and planned (this is the only approach in the Uplands team) could be seen as going some way to challenging a masculinity predicated on abuse of power.

The construction of sexual abusers of children as well-planned serial offenders with little empathy does have the effect of separating off this group of men, to an extent (see chapter six). They are the ones who abuse power, whose behaviour needs to be understood in collective terms. The other men clients are diverse and require a variety of different explanations and interventions. The men of the social services department represent respectable masculinity. It is the group of aberrant men, the sex offenders, whose interests are in opposition to those of children. Mainstream masculinity is good for children, a necessary influence even. This construction of some types of masculine

behaviour against a social template and others as heterogeneous comes close to the crux of this chapter's argument, that there are tensions around gender in social work knowledge in terms of the relationship between the individual and the social. The discussion that follows will elaborate on this theme.

8.2 Inherent tensions in social work knowledge and values

Sibeon (1990) argues that the theoretical ideas behind social work can be organised into three sub-sections: theories of what social work is, theories of how to do social work, and theories of the client world. The discussion below will refer to two of these areas, theories of how to do social work and theories of the client world. I will argue that tensions exist in both levels of theory over the relationship between the individual and the social; tensions which are central to understanding the gendering of child protection work. I refer to 'the social' not as the domain of professional intervention between the public and the private that Donzelot (1980) describes (see chapter two), but rather to mean a focus on society and collectivity; a sociological perspective.

The tensions between the individual and the social take several forms. There is the tension between the disciplines of psychology and sociology, both of which inform social work theory and practice. Then within sociology there is the tension between structure and agency, and the discipline of psychology encompasses a range of perspectives from an emphasis on individual neurology through to a focus on socially produced cognition. These tensions are in some ways related to that which Sibeon (1990) calls the distinction between generalising (nomothetic) knowledge and particularising (idiographic) knowledge and between what Berger and Luckmann (1967) term the intersubjective and the intrasubjective meaning of events. There is also tension between the dual promises of impartiality and an individualised service, which Murray *et al* (1983) see as the Janus character of professions:

On the one hand, it is publicly asserted that they offer an impartial, objective and freely available way of resolving problems of social or natural order. On the other, a private promise is given of a service that is personal, individualised and oriented to the resolution of private problems to the satisfaction of particular rather than general interests' (Murray *et al*, 1983: 219, cited in Atkinson and Delamont, 1990: 97).

There is also the tension between working with the individual or working on a collective level: casework v. community work. This tension is seen in the debates between those who believe social work has to focus on individual and family difficulties and those who believe community action and radical political change should be the priority (Rojek *et al*, 1988, summarise these debates). Philp (1979) attempts to circumvent this debate by arguing that the underlying discourse of social work requires the production of knowledge of people as subjects.

Social work has an ambivalent relation to any form of determinism, for determinism suggests forces beyond individual control. At the same time it utilises determinist theory to explain why an individual has become, for example, anti-social. It solves the problem by ultimately denying an absolute nature to determinism and by showing that, with compassion and an understanding of the individual's essential humanity, these forces can be transcended, thus realising the individual's inherently social self (Philp, 1979: 92-93).

Many commentators have argued that social work has to have a dual focus on the individual and the social (Howe, 1996, is a recent example); that social work necessarily involves engaging with individuals, but that what distinguishes the profession from others is its location of individuals in their social context. One version of this is the ecological model (see, for example, Barber, 1991), which assumes intervention on several levels, from the microsystem (the client's immediate, phenomenological environment) up to the macrosystem (the norms and rituals of a culture or sub-culture). Despite the fact that there have been some interesting attempts to integrate the individual and the social in social work theory, this chapter aims to explore the tensions at the level of practice reasoning. And tensions there undoubtedly are. Jordan (1991) argues that there are unavoidable tensions between an appreciation of structural inequalities and an emphasis on the individual's right to dignity, privacy, confidentiality, choice and protection.

All of which is relevant to gender because gender is a social category. However far deconstruction of the terms 'sex' and 'gender' takes us, and whichever we decide comes first (see Delphy, 1993) we are dealing with social identities and social inequality. If you accept there is inequality and imbalance in child protection work with men and women, and aim to change that situation, you cannot do so unless you have a social analysis.

Neither, if that is your aim, can you offer a service that is 'gender sensitive', that is, geared towards the 'different needs' of men and women.

In terms of gender issues, manifestations of the individual-social distinction include equal treatment versus anti-oppression, and structural theories of male power versus an emphasis on individual gendered identities. In the culture of social work the two oppositional pairs are linked, as will be explained below. The discussion that follows will be structured around two of the three types of social work theories identified by Sibeon (1990): theories of how to do social work, and theories of the client world.

8.2.1 Theories of how to do social work

One of the most interesting tensions around gender is caused by the enduring legacy of what can be termed traditional social work ethics. Concepts such as respect for clients, valuing individuals, partnership, confidentiality and equal treatment are important elements of the ethical basis social workers draw on, and they cause some confusion and conflict in child protection, with important implications for work with men and women clients.

Biestek's (1961) classic formulation of social work values includes the concepts of unconditional acceptance of the client as a person, a non-judgemental approach, and clients' self-determination. As Hugman and Smith (1995) point out, by the time the basis of the Diploma in Social Work was set out thirty years later (CCETSW, 1991) the emphasis had changed. The CCETSW document reflects the influence of radical critiques, including feminism. It also reflects an increasing recognition both of the need for an authority role in certain contexts and also of the limits of what social workers can achieve. So unconditional acceptance becomes respect for clients' dignity and strengths, self-determination becomes the promotion of choice. Non-judgementalism becomes non-discrimination and anti-oppression. The theme of commitment to the value of individuals is a consistent theme in Biestek and CCETSW's paper 30, and the code of ethics of the British Association of Social Workers states:

The social worker's basic values must relate to individuals, whether working with individuals, groups or communities, since it is the welfare of the

individuals in a group or community which is the social worker's basic concern even if indirectly (BASW, 1996).

Studying the work of the Uplands team shows that all these different emphases are present in the social workers' knowledge-in-action. The acceptance of clients as they are is reflected in the optimistic refusal of some to talk about clients as 'difficult'.

I do not have difficult clients really. I have clients who may be in crisis when I go to see them, and therefore they may be quite angry and looking for help, but I don't generally see clients as being difficult clients. I see them more as clients with difficulties, which then means that I become a sort of an enabler, a facilitator and that sort of thing. So it is not very often that I do have, although I remember, you know they spring to mind as being difficult clients, it is almost as if that has become part of the job and you expect people to be difficult at different times (interview with Pete).

Although an optimistic acceptance of clients is an important stream of professional rhetoric, there are notable exceptions. As Featherstone and Lancaster (1997) have claimed, sex offenders are in many respects exempt from the traditional social work ethic (with roots in Kantian ideas) of 'respect for persons'. This exemption seems to be made on the basis that it is the child that is the client. This ethical stance, expressed in the phraseology of the Children Act 1989 that 'the welfare of the child is paramount' has become something of a mantra in child protection work. The child is the client, so deserves respect, whereas disregard of parents' wishes is justified on the grounds that they are not the key client. Sex offenders do not receive individualised service, because their behaviour is understood according to a fairly rigid template (see chapter six). Social workers do not expect to spend time working with sex offenders. The only acceptable strategy, if it is decided that abuse has taken place, is to get the man out of the home. In practice, the social workers testify, this is done either through imprisonment or by pressure being applied through the threat of legal action if he does not leave. In many cases this involves the woman having to 'choose' him or the children.

Philp's work (1979) is relevant here. He argues that social work cannot speak for those whose objective status overwhelms their subjectivity. Social work cannot operate when an individual's act has removed him from the right to be perceived as human. The examples he gives are the psychotic or the mass murderer. In the current climate of particular horror being reserved for those who sexually abuse children (Stainton Rogers

and Stainton Rogers, 1992), this category of people (mostly men) can be added to Philp's examples.

This brings us to the key dilemma about gender in the knowledge and value base of social work. How can social workers incorporate an understanding of social inequality alongside an individualised service that treats each client as unique? Most interpretations of inequality point to the profound effects of this inequality on social identities. If social workers accept there are social trends in men's and women's behaviour resulting from the different opportunities given to each sex, and that informs their practice, how do they also then treat each client as an individual? Margaret, in the following excerpt, resists the idea that you can talk about men and women in collective terms.

Jonathan: Are there any common differences between the men clients that you work with and the women clients you work with? You know, could you describe, for example, what the women clients are kind of typically like?

Margaret: Oh gosh, I don't think I can generalise to that extent. No, I don't think I could describe what women are typically like. I mean I think, we endeavour to, not to discriminate between men and women (interview with Margaret).

She equates generalising about clients on the basis of their sex with discrimination, although at other times she is happy to talk about the effects of social structural inequality on clients' lives. The dilemma of negotiating both individualisation and a focus on collectivity and social forces in social work has led to much debate. On one side is the argument that social work too often explains situations that at root are social problems (e.g. violence against women) with individualised therapeutic discourse (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). In opposition to this argument, some authors have claimed that a rigid interpretation of social structural oppression can de-humanise social work and result in formulaic interventions (Featherstone and Trinder, 1997).

Inevitably, the complexity of the picture of social work practice in the Uplands team means it does not neatly justify either critique. As stated above, constructions of sexual abuse are formulaic, whereas knowledge about other kinds of abusive behaviour by men is more diffuse. The discourse of men as a threat is a powerful one, but some men are constructed as caring and capable in contrast to their women partners. A client such as 'Dave', can be firmly categorised as a threat whilst in prison, but then viewed as a

basically decent individual when finally met face to face (see quotation from Mary in chapter six, p.126)

The tension between knowledge of social forces and knowledge of the individual echoes, in some respects, the debate about the gender order between those who emphasise structural power and post-structuralists and others who emphasise fluidity and diversity. These are the different emphases of, for example, Walby (1989) and Butler (1990) or, in the social work literature, Mullender (1996) and Featherstone and Trinder (1997). All these authors write from within the broad school of feminism. Practice wisdom about gender in social work teams includes notions that are pro-feminist, pre-feminist, non-feminist and anti-feminist. The analogy with academic debates is a fair one, however. As argued earlier in the chapter, it may not be possible to maintain firm boundaries between conceptions of what constitutes theory and what practice. Also it is arguable that anti-discriminatory discourse within social work practice is now so mainstream that we can talk about feminism as a major influence.

Mention of anti-discrimination brings the discussion round to another key gender tension about how to do social work; the tension between equal treatment and anti-oppression. There is a general acknowledgement in the Uplands team, informed by feminism, that the lives of the women they work with are very often made much more difficult by the oppressive behaviour of the men they live with. There is also, though, a strong assumption that practising in a gender aware and anti-sexist fashion requires an 'equal treatment' approach. This is an essentially liberal strategy of non-discrimination; men and women should not be treated differently. The following extract from an interview with Pete illustrates the tensions between equal treatment and an approach tailored according to the gender differences that clients present. This social worker has been asked if he sees any differences in the way he works with women and with men.

I'd like to think not. And I think it would only be, you know by being directly observed that we would know if there was, but I would like to think not. I don't believe that I have a different approach in that I try and approach every one as - God this sounds crass! - but as an individual. I try, whether they are a child or adult male or female, I try and approach them as an individual and relate to them you know in the best way that I can. I mean, I am aware of anti-discriminatory practice, obviously because of my practice teaching, but I try and be conscious of the way that I relate to people is not in a discriminatory way. I know inevitably that I do and sometimes I am

conscious of that and can address it and sometimes I am not conscious of it. But I don't think I could say that I was totally non-discriminatory because I just think, well the sheer fact that I am fallible, that is inevitably going to creep in. But I try and make sure that, as best I can that in my dealings with people that I am dealing in a, you know on an individual level rather than dealing with things on a gender basis. But, sometimes you have to, in that dealing with or engaging some clients you are not going to engage the father by talking at great length about the child care, about the nitty-gritty of babies. If they have just had a baby into that family I mean, I am saying in some cases because that is not what that father considers his role or that family considers that father's role to be. And he will want to talk about and discuss other things and that is the 'I want to provide' bit. So he might want to discuss with me bits about help with providing certain bits of equipment or problems with the money, whereas the mother might want to talk about difficulties in coping with the physical demands of caring for a baby. But what I try and do where possible is address people where they are coming from. But if they were a couple I would address my answers to both regardless of who fired a question. But if they are on an individual level then I will address the sort of problems that they are raising (interview with Pete).

His response reveals several distinct professional discourses. He refers to the need to deal with people as individuals, drawing on a traditional social work ethic. It is interesting to note that he is embarrassed to voice this. It is possible he sees this tradition as associated with the pejorative sandal-wearing 'woolly liberal' popular image of social workers. There is perhaps, in the culture of child protection, a fear of being seen to be 'soft on parents' (see White, 1997a, on scepticism about parental accounts). He may even be apologising to another man for an approach that might be seen as feminised. His acknowledgement of fallibility feeds into a discourse of reflexivity that is increasingly influential, particularly where it overlaps with anti-discriminatory discourse, in terms of the need to be aware of your own inevitable discriminatory views. He talks of the importance of equal treatment 'rather than dealing with things on a gender basis', but then goes on to argue that it can be necessary in some situations to tailor your approach according to client's gendered behaviour. This approach, to 'address people where they are coming from' or work at the client's own pace, is also a familiar element in social work discourse.

A distinction has been made in the social work literature between anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, the former being a strategy to avoid treating any group unfairly, and the latter a more proactive approach which acknowledges structural power differentials and oppressive forces (Phillipson, 1992). Pete, in the extract above, refers to

anti-discrimination in his stated desire to deal with people as individuals with equal rights to a service, and he refers to anti-oppressive practice in recognising the reality that men often want a limited role in child-rearing. He does not advocate challenging men, as do some commentators on social work (e.g. Stanley, 1997), but rather believes you should begin by responding to the man as he is.

So much of the anti-oppression discourse in social work has taken for granted that it is the clients of social workers that will be the oppressed people in the power relationship; oppressed by the state, including the social services, and oppressed by a racist, sexist, homophobic society. One of the reasons that child protection social workers spend little time actually working with abusive men may be that this anti-oppression discourse, that has recently become mainstream in social work culture, cannot understand these clients. It cannot understand clients as the oppressors, the abusers of power. In fact, such men are often excluded from social work services. Women are expected to remove them from the house (Mullender, 1997), and there is thereafter no notion that they should be engaged in any way. The idea, advanced by some, of challenging abusive men is perhaps alien to mainstream social work knowledge. It does not fit with the traditional notion, as found in Biestek (1961), of unconditional acceptance of the client. Neither does it fit with more recent ideas about anti-oppressive practice.

The excerpt below from Debbie expresses the limits of mainstream social work discourse in responding to gender inequality, and more broadly the inherent difficulty in child protection practice of attempting to work co-operatively with people whose behaviour you find problematic.

There's a clash of values when you're supposed to work in partnership but he may have no idea that it's his role to give her any support (interview with Debbie).

8.2.2 Theories of the client world

There are of course very many different theories used by social workers in practice to explain the child abuse and neglect they work with. Many have been mentioned already in previous chapters. The brief discussion below will again highlight the tensions between

the individual and the social, and draw out the implications for the construction of gender.

The trend towards a liberal non-discriminatory ethic resists knowledge about social characteristics. There is a view that to incorporate into practice a version of the gender order which acknowledges oppression of women by men would be to stereotype, label, and therefore discriminate. The excerpts below illustrate this reluctance to talk about social trends, or to talk about one sex in negative terms.

No I don't think I could describe what women are typically like. I think we endeavour to, not to discriminate between men and women. I say we endeavour to, that is not to say that we probably don't end up doing so (interview with Margaret).

I don't think I have specifically difficult male clients. I mean I have been into difficult situations where I mean it could have been dodgy with either mum or dad but they turned out okay in the end. And obviously you are questioning somebody about how a bruise happened or how this injury occurred and obviously people become very, very defensive, but that is equally the same for women as for males (interview with Sarah, Docktown)

There is, however, a great deal of social categorisation in routine child protection work. Some of this is tacit categorisation of clients (Howitt, 1992), some is categorisation for bureaucratic purposes, and some is a more consciously theoretical explanation of client problems that draws on sociological ideas. More individually-based psychological explanations are also frequently employed. As mentioned earlier, psychodynamic ideas continue to be referenced in mainstream social work practice, and developmental psychology is unquestioned as a foundation for decisions about children (White, 1998a). Psychological and sociological explanations are also often combined. The excerpt below from one of my pilot interviews in 'Docktown' is an example of this.

I must say that I am sure that there are different reasons why there is physical abuse in families. I mean a lot of it can be behaviour, it was what was the norm in the childhood that they had. And there are lots of views about, you know, you hit a child and you tell a child that it is all right to hit. There are lots of kinds of theories that we could look at about why. There is also I believe a lot of pressures on people today, coping alone. You haven't got the social networks of family networks that you had before. Where you had a gran around the corner or auntie you haven't got that. People are a lot more isolated. I think there is demand to have a television, it has to be a

colour television, so there is the demand on the financial implications. I think that they all put pressures on how families cope with every day living, you know, and with fractious children that could be around at the wrong time when things are going wrong for you and you lash out, so there are those kinds of reasons (interview with Lynne, Docketown).

She makes mention of social learning theory from the psychological realm ('it was what was the norm in the childhood') and also the more sociological comment on the state of social networks and the pressures of poverty. Another social worker, in the excerpt below, references both ideas about the origins of domestic violence in men's social power and also, switching the focus to the woman as cause, more psychological ideas about learning to have a low self-esteem.

In my previous job, not so much here, alcohol and domestic violence were rife. If we look at the mother, look at the parents, what I see is the man having control, power, being in charge, perhaps drinking quite a lot of the income. The mother has low self-esteem, a poor self-image. She's grown up with a father who's violent (interview with Claire).

Despite this combining of individual and social theories, the data tend to support Philp's argument (1979) that social work requires the production of knowledge of people as subjects (also see Stenson, 1993). Philp writes that

Essentially, any theory which suggests forces permanently beyond the individual's control is either ignored by, or subverted to, social work's regime of truth (Philp, 1979: 93).

There is a sense in which, in the final analysis, social workers cannot see a situation as socially determined. The extract from fieldnotes reproduced below, and also cited in chapter five, quite clearly illustrates this belief in relation to alleged child neglect in a situation of poor housing.

Debbie to Margaret, discussing a new case being investigated for suspected neglect:

'It's about protecting the children, a safer environment. There aren't any locked doors, they aren't deprived of affection.' It turns out there is a man after all. Until today I assumed it was a single mother. 'The woman says she has housing problems'. Debbie says 'that's no excuse..... we'll just have to keep on chipping away at it' (from fieldnotes, 23 September)

This insistence on clients' agency has implications for work with men and women. It perhaps explains the expectation that women should be able to release themselves from oppressive situations, by leaving, or by removing the source of the oppression. It also suggests a belief that abusive men should be able to change, unless (again echoing Philp, 1979) their objective status overwhelms their subjectivity. Into this category of those beyond redemption fall 'proven' abusers, such as perpetrators of sexual abuse and people whose physical or psychological abuse of women or children is seen as 'serious'. It is important to combine Philp's argument with the assertion in chapter four that redeemable clients are expected to change solely in response to the threat of losing the care of their children. Although social workers make frequent reference to social and psychological causes of client problems, there is a belief that if they are told what needs to change in order to keep their children, they will be able to do this.

8.3 Discussion

The tension between individualisation and social context warrants further discussion at this point, particularly in as much as it reflects on the construction of gender in the child care social work office. The discussion above has related throughout to the material in the previous four chapters. One obvious point of connection between the tensions in social work knowledge and values described above and the multiple discourses of masculinity and femininity described in chapters five and six is fluidity. The fluidity of gender construction, and the presence of multiple discourses are both central to my theoretical base in this thesis, and I would reject Philp's (1979) structuralist assumption that it should be possible to identify a unitary discourse for the social work profession. I do agree with Philp, however, that the production of knowledge about subjects; subjects who can act and not get stuck (Stenson, 1993) does have a great deal of discursive power in the culture of social work. Gordon's (1988) study of gender and violence in historical case records also found that

despite the environmental analysis, child protectors continued to feature moralistic appeals to will power, as if individual determination could hold off the centrifugal forces of modern urban life (Gordon, 1988: 74).

In fact the application of Philp's theories to the Uplands team shows that women are expected to have will power and, men, when seen as abusers, are beyond subjectivity and therefore beyond clienthood. The emphasis on the subject who can act, despite a lifetime of identity formation and overwhelming circumstantial pressure is problematic for feminist social work. Inevitably, it means a down-grading of social information that might explain a 'case' and makes interventions on a governmental or a community level seem irrelevant. As Swift observes,

the contextual information that might help to explain problems in child care is stripped away from the mother, and she is looked at as an 'individual' a process that warrants the efforts of the state to focus its change efforts on her - in fact, which makes any other effort appear off the point. Poverty, class and race relations, gender issues, and fathers all vanish. Mothers are produced and reproduced as the 'causal variable' (Swift, 1995: 125).

Arguably, the emphasis on the 'will-power' of the subject does not take account of how gender works. It does not consider the effects of long-term oppression on the formation of social identities, the difficulty of thinking you ought to do one thing, but finding yourself doing another – the very thing you believe you should not be doing. It does not take account of limitations on opportunities for action, for example, the immense difficulty for a woman in acting to force a man to leave her house when he has threatened her life and she fears homelessness and the stigma of single parenthood. This form of subjectification of clients does not allow for a social understanding of gender relations, but brings everything back to individual responsibility. Croghan and Miell express it thus:

Social work, with its foundation in humanist principles of self-actualization and personal autonomy, has tended to treat individual experience as both ahistorical and asocial, and has thus emphasized individual (and particularly female) responsibility for child welfare (Croghan and Miell, 1998: 446).

The tensions between the individual and the social experienced by social workers in trying to explain their clients' circumstances mirror my own struggles to conceptualise the social workers' constructions of gender. The question they have to face as to whether clients are trapped in an oppressive social context neatly matches one of the most

important theoretical dilemmas of my research, namely are the social workers trapped in occupational discourse or can there be alternative, oppositional constructions of men and women clients? There is symmetry here, and not surprisingly, since this is the oldest problem of social inquiry, the activity the social workers and I are engaged in. This is the dualism of sociology-psychology, structure-agency, work with individuals or work with collectivities. Because this is the oldest problem, it will not go away just yet. The next two chapters will continue to grapple with it.

Before concluding, I should return to the issue of 'gendered knowledge'. Knowledge about gender preoccupies me in this thesis, and this chapter is no exception. I do not see much relevance, however, in the idea of knowledge as connected to biological sex – the way in which the term 'gendered knowledge' is sometimes used – the idea that men and women think differently. In the case of this research, the question as to whether men or women social workers construct their clients as gendered in different ways is an important one to address. It has already been asserted that this is not my position. As I made clear in chapter three, I did not find in the Uplands team that there were substantial differences between men's and women's constructions of clients. I also find the idea that there could be a knowledge-body link to be a flawed one which implies biological determinism.

I do not accept wholesale the rejection of the categories 'woman' and 'man' in post-modernist feminism and queer theory. I agree with Oakley (1998) that such theorising tends to be distanced from

the situation of women out there in a world that definitely does exist, and that remains obdurately structured by a dualistic, power-driven gender system (Oakley, 1998: 143).

I do find, however, that post-modernist feminism such as Butler's (1990, 1993) has successfully exploded the connection between knowledge and the body. I believe such theorists have ensured the notion that certain types of thinking are associated with possession of female or male body parts is no longer tenable. Because of this, I do not consider such a version of 'gendered knowledge' to be a helpful framework for this thesis. I have tried to explain though through this chapter in which ways I do see knowledge about clients and social work values to be gendered. I explained in chapter

two that I use the term 'gendered' in relation to child protection practice and office culture to refer to the different implications of that practice and that culture for men and women clients.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored some aspects of the 'knowledge-in-action' of practitioners in a child protection team. The premise of the research has been that whilst social work is circumscribed by discourse, there is not one fundamental discourse but rather multiple discourses, some of which oppose others. The discussion earlier in the chapter concluded that the origin of these discourses is the interaction between everyday and professional knowledge and values. Multiple discourses can pull in very different directions. For example, discourse on the family that is conservative about gender relations, and discourse that is challenging and radical, can simultaneously influence the culture of the social work office. An important discursive tension discussed in this chapter is that between individualisation and a focus on social context. The discussion focused on the social workers' ways of dealing with the dilemma of how to provide an individualised service whilst considering the impact of social inequality. Overlapping discourses of the individual and the social can be found throughout practitioners' case talk. Whilst not all the discussion above has been about gender, the particular implications of these tensions in social work knowledge, ethics and values for working with men and woman were highlighted.

Particular aspects of the use of social work knowledge and values were highlighted. Social workers find a tension between the discourses of anti-discrimination and anti-oppression, and they are torn between a reluctance to categorise their clients as a 'type of person' and a need to understand them in terms of what is known about social trends. This tension goes to the heart of the problem of understanding gender relations, since gender is an inherently social concept. There is a tendency to use rigid social categorisation for some problem behaviour (sex offending) in contrast to the perception that other types of behaviour, whilst constructed as abusive are nonetheless thought to be heterogeneous. Challenging abusers (more often men, in terms of the daily work of child protection teams) is not seen as part of the job of child care social workers. The

roots of this limitation of the social work role in the occupational knowledge and value base were discussed. The intention has not been to preach any particular line about social work knowledge or values, or to criticise practitioners, but rather to point to some of the difficulties of attempting to apply social work knowledge, ethics and values to the practical task of child protection work.

Chapter 9

THEORISING GENDERED SOCIAL CONTROL

This last substantive chapter aims to summarise the research findings and discuss their theoretical implications. The findings will be first summarised, and then the chapter will proceed with discussion of the current state of child protection work and possibilities for theorising gendered social control. The final chapter that follows this one is a shorter conclusion that will discuss what the research might mean to practitioners.

The discussion of the ethnographic data began by looking at divisions of the potential clientele other than on a gender basis. The vast majority of all active child protection cases are poor working class clients. They are often stigmatised even within very poor communities, and their socio-economic status is understood by the social workers within a variety of discourses, including those of the underclass and the unrespectable working class. There was seen to be rhetorical power in the assertion of the primacy of the child's welfare and the child's needs, although it was professionals who ultimately decided what these needs were. A key parenting philosophy emphasises parents putting their children's needs before their own. Social workers will proudly say that it is the child that is their client, rather than the parent or parents, although a great deal of the routine talk about clients actually refers to adults, since it is adults the social workers spend most of their time with. Children are constructed as essentially vulnerable, with the child's body in particular being a current target of concern. The child's body reflects judgements about parents.

There are aspects of the work that could be seen as gendered in effect rather than intent. An example would be where a woman becomes the principal point of contact in a family not because the social worker has targeted her in particular, but because she bears the brunt of day-to-day responsibility for the child care. There are also aspects of child protection work that show deliberate choices being made that, whilst again not consciously targeting women, have the effect of screening out men and increasing scrutiny of women. The extended example given in chapter seven is that of the construction of child protection priorities. Where a wide range of types of child abuse could be targeted, including those which may be more likely to involve men as perpetrators, River County Social Services chose to target the physical neglect of

children. The concern with dirty children and houses that resulted led inevitably to attention falling on women as the primary carers. There are, also, explicitly gendered constructions of adult clients. Two of the chapters were given over to discussing these constructions of women and of men.

There is more than one gendered discourse on women clients. The picture is complex. Most are thought to be oppressed in the extreme, often by men partners who are lazy, domineering and possibly violent. This experience of oppression is thought to affect their parenting, although where women transgress by not putting their children's needs before their own they are seen to have made a deliberate choice to do so, regardless of the influence of their social context. On the one hand the social workers come to expect little change in cases, but where a woman is given an ultimatum about her children's future, it is expected that this will galvanise change, that she will act immediately to keep her children. It is seen to be women's fundamental responsibility to protect children, so that 'allowing' a violent man to stay in a household constitutes 'failure to protect'. There is empathy with women clients, but only up to a point. When a woman fails to act in response to an ultimatum, the empathy ends. The defining discourses identified in chapter five were women as oppressed, women as responsible for protection, and women as making choices.

There is, also, a variety of discourses of masculinity in the social work office. There are constructions that are broadly negative and those that are broadly positive, although negativity predominates. These can all be seen as responses to the 'problem of men' that has emerged in academic, popular and now political discourse, and also as responses to discourses of anti-discrimination and anti-oppression in social work. The negative constructions identified were men as a threat, men as no use, men as irrelevant and men as absent. The first of these is particularly powerful in relation to child protection cases, and draws on popular and professional ideas about violence and sexual abuse. There was also the discourse of men as no different from women, coming both from an ethic of non-discrimination and also from the perspective that both parents are 'as bad as each other'. Finally, in a small number of cases, men are constructed as better than women, where the woman had been identified as failing in her expected role.

The preceding empirical chapter focused on gender tensions in the knowledge and values employed in routine social work practice. Knowledge and values in the team were

found to be rooted in the discursive interaction of lay and professional knowledge, both of which are gendered. The choice of theoretical perspectives from among the mass of social scientific ideas that compete for social workers' attention was also described, and again found to be a gendered choice. Overlapping discourses of the individual and the social were identified in case talk, with implications for working with men and women. There is tension between anti-discrimination and anti-oppression, that is, between an ethic of equal treatment and an attempt to incorporate into practice an understanding of social inequalities and social trends. So, for example, there is a tendency to rigid social categorisation of sex offenders, who are seen to fit a clear template of behaviour, whilst other people alleged to have abused children in some way are seen as heterogeneous. There exists simultaneously a reluctance to categorise clients, on the basis that all should be seen as individuals, and a perceived need to understand people in their social context. There will be relatively little discussion of the implications of chapter eight in what follows. Its analysis will be taken up in the next chapter on the implications for social work practice.

In the light of the analysis presented in chapters four to nine the aim of the next section is to make some general evaluative comment about the current state of child protection work in the UK. Whilst it was made clear in the introduction that the primary aim of the research was understanding rather than evaluation, I do not believe it is possible to discuss the theoretical implications of the research findings without straying into the territory of evaluative comment. The premise of the research was, after all, that the gender bias of child protection practice is unjust. Firstly, then, I will attempt to locate child protection work within a continuum of gendered social control, before going on to draw out explanatory themes. Crudely, the first section of the chapter aims to weigh up *what* I have found out, and the second section aims to ask *why* child protection work is the way it is.

9.1 The current state of child protection work

Child protection procedures and interventions must not only be seen as constraining, but viewed also in a positive light as enabling, creating new opportunities for protection from violences that were traditionally repressed and for reflexively organised life-planning (Ferguson, 1997: 230).

My warning to people now is that if you need help the last people you should go to is to social services. We warn anybody we can. They are not there to help (one of the women labelled 'bad mothers' who were interviewed by Croghan and Miell, 1998: 454).

The judgements expressed in these two extracts illustrate the range of possible conclusions in the evaluation of child protection. The former extract comes from an academic commentator and the latter from a former client. It is not intended to set the opinions of clients against those of researchers, but only to show the scope for opposing views. In fact, a similar range of opinion can probably be found between academics and between clients. The conclusion a researcher reaches about the extent of coercion in family welfare services is principally determined by his or her position in relation to the respective rights of parents, children and the state (Fox Harding, 1997). Dingwall *et al* (1995) conclude that the organisational orientation remains one of optimism about parenting whereas White (1997a) found the accomplishment of the social work role to require a display of scepticism about parental accounts. These almost opposite findings can perhaps be explained less by differences in research methodology or regional and temporal variations in workplace culture than by the different stances of the researchers on what constitutes optimism or scepticism in relation to standards of parenting (Corby, 1987). These stances will depend on the researchers' baseline for good enough parenting, and also on whether they incline to a parents' rights, children's rights or other perspective.

Since any attempt at reflexivity required me to declare my perspective at the outset, I noted in the introduction that, according to the family welfare paradigms outlined by Fox Harding (1997), I would have to acknowledge mine as a parents' rights perspective. The thesis set out to shed light on the problem of gender bias in child protection work. In making that statement, I am asserting that there is bias and that this is a problem. I have, to an extent, taken as read (based on existing research and commentary) that child protection social workers spend more time working with women. The concern about gender bias assumes that women, who are the object of services, are having a rough deal, rather than men, who are not the object of social work intervention. This in turn is based on the assumption that being in contact with child protection services is a negative experience, at least for adults. This next section aims to further explore this assumption in the light of the ethnographic data. It also aims to reach some conclusions about the

influence of feminism on child care social work, since the persistence of gender bias is all the more interesting in the light of the dominance of anti-discriminatory discourse in social work training in recent years.

Clearly there are methodological limits to what can be claimed about the current state of child protection work. I did not research the views of either parent of child clients on their involvement with social services, and theirs are surely the most important opinions on whether that involvement has been a good or bad experience. I have also only studied one team of social workers, but I can comment on what the culture of the Uplands team reveals about the current preoccupations of child protection practice. Waddington (1999), writing on police canteen culture, criticises researchers' claims that what the police say about their work amongst peers reveals how they perform their duties in public. I believe my research in the Uplands team avoids this pitfall. Firstly, as Pithouse and Atkinson (1988) assert, social workers' accounts of practice *are* work, since good work is only known through good accounts. Secondly, the analysis of documents shows something of frontline practice. Whilst case records are, of course, particular retrospective versions of worker-client interaction, documents such as case conference reports constitute actual social work intervention. Reports are a written summary of a social worker's judgement of a case that strongly influences the conference decision. So whilst there are limitations to what can be claimed from my data, I maintain there is a basis for some initial comment on what can be learned about the current state of the child protection system.

All state welfare work can be understood as social control in some way or another. As Abbott and Sapsford (1990:120) boldly state, 'it is now widely accepted that social workers are "soft policemen"'. Marxists would emphasise the pacifying of the working class to diffuse opposition to capitalism (Leonard, 1978). The work of Foucault (1977) and Donzelot (1980) has shown that helping professions have a crucial role in disciplining populations (see chapter two). It is not surprising that this chapter is entitled 'theorising gendered social control'. It is the premise of the thesis that gender relations, whilst not the only social relations relevant to the topic (class, in particular, is crucial), do inevitably impact on every aspect of the job of child protection. So of course child protection is about social control and of course it is gendered. The question remains,

where should contemporary child protection practice be placed on a continuum of gendered social control.

My concluding evaluation of the child protection system is that social control of parents and children is fairly overt and that some gendered practices will result in negative experiences for both men and women clients. Whilst I tend to side with the child protection pessimists, I should of course like to avoid the unrelenting negativity described by Pithouse and Williamson.

the unrelieved gloom that sometimes characterises academic accounts of practice, particularly social work, whereby oppression, neglect, and incompetence are unerringly found by those whose intellectual fascination with welfare is to ensure they find little that is positive or liberating about it (Pithouse and Williamson, 1997: xiii).

The picture of social control of clients in the Uplands team is, of course, a complex one and a one-dimensional summary would be unfair and inaccurate. For example, some clients' fear of social workers revealed vividly in data extracts in chapter four needs to be balanced against some indications of warm relations and the fact that many parents (especially mothers) come to social services to ask for help. But when this complex picture is weighed up, there are features that stand out to create an impression of overt social control that is heavily gendered.

There is something of a consensus in the research on child and family social work that the emphasis has shifted from child welfare to child protection, with a great deal of time being absorbed by investigation of alleged abuse (see, for example, Lindsay, 1994; Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). It has been observed several times during the course of the thesis that in such a climate women will feel the heat of the investigation because they are far more likely to be the primary carers of children (Parton and Parton, 1989).

A narrow interpretation of the welfare of the child only serves to intensify this process. Social workers tend to be very clear that their responsibilities are to children *rather than* adults. It is a clear and open organisational ethic that helping parents for its own sake is not part of the job, and in child protection cases children's interests are quite often thought to clash with those of parents. Certainly there is a belief that parents should be supported for the sake of improving children's quality of life, but we know

from existing research that support services are often lacking (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). Women do most of the caring, so are more likely to be the parents needing and asking for some kind of support service. They are also more likely to be victims of abuse from violent male partners and, arguably, less likely to cause serious harm to children (see chapter two's summary of this debate). But if support services are few, and primarily for children, or at least for the sake of children, then women will inevitably experience investigation more than help, and experience this more than men.

Whilst this research has not had representations of children as its focus, chapter four took an initial look at this issue, as essential context for the examination of the construction of adult clients. This showed that the rhetorical power of 'the child's needs' and 'the welfare of the child' does not necessarily lead to child-centred practice. There was a stark example given of how it is held to be relatively unproblematic that children's welfare should be determined by professionals. I did not encounter any instances of children going home to parents against their will, but there were examples of children being taken away from home against their stated wishes. Where a family home is considered by social workers to be unsafe, children's opposing views will not affect the action taken.

As chapters five and six showed, some aspects of feminism have influenced the culture of the social work office, but not always in ways that have improved women's experiences of social work. The social workers believe domestic violence to be a harrowing experience for women and children, and *part* of the repertoire of explanations within the team is the argument that this violence is rooted in men's determination to control women. However, the stock response to violent situations is to hold women responsible for getting men out of the house. This is one example of a general trend of giving clients ultimatums about making changes that are arguably not within their control. It is generally the case that whilst poor environments and oppressive personal circumstances are thought to explain problems with parenting, they are ultimately thought to be 'no excuse' for continued parental failure, especially when professionals have been very explicit in pointing out where exactly changes need to be made. To an extent, telling adult clients clearly where they are going wrong has become the dominant social work intervention. In response, it is thought that anyone with the potential to look after their children (and any natural mother) will simply act, and do what they are told,

regardless of any factors working against change. Social control is, therefore, quite overt. There are relatively few helping interventions to soften the control. Pointing out responsibility, or, less euphemistically, allocating blame, is thought to be enough of a help in itself. Swift (1995: 87) expresses this starkly: 'the only helping tool society has provided itself is to find parents guilty'.

Rose (1987) sees society as regulating parental conduct not through obedience to the threat of sanction, but through the activation of guilt and anxiety. Rather than power operating on the family, it suffuses the family. This is Donzelot's (1980) notion of government *through* the family, rather than government *of* the family. Whilst this is no doubt a fair judgement on the regulation of parenting across social classes, and I am generally happy to accept this Foucauldian understanding of power, I would argue that the practice of child protection needs to be viewed rather differently. Power is not simply uni-directional in the child protection process, but clients do not tend to have much of it in relation to crucial decisions about children (rightly, some would argue). The control of parents in this arena is overt and relies on the existence of threats, which are often quite explicit. Since the child protection system affects poor working class families more than any others, the nature of the regulation of parenting can be seen to be class-specific. Certainly parenting is regulated through anxiety about children (see Scott *et al*, 1998), but the parenting of those under scrutiny of the child protection system is regulated by threat of sanction.

The choice of child protection priorities is amongst the most obviously gendered dimensions of the preceding data analysis. In response to the panic at a child's death, the decision was taken to prioritise a particular form of child maltreatment that would inevitably result in women being further scrutinised. In theory, an alternative decision was open to the department, particularly since the most talked about child death was caused by a man's violence, a decision that would have shifted social control towards men.

For much of the thesis, discussion of the data has concentrated on the effects of gendered constructions on women, since they are more often primary carers and therefore more obviously affected by what social workers do. But where men have some kind of stake in the upbringing of children, they too are obviously affected by social workers' gendered practice. As Edwards (1998) has pointed out, professionals' failure to

involve men in child care interventions has the effect both of absolving them from responsibility and of excluding them from discussion of the welfare of their children. It is impossible not to stray into realism when discussing constructions of clients. Just as we cannot ignore the overwhelming research evidence on women's responsibility for the work of caring, we cannot ignore the likelihood of behaviour by men that will cause harm to others. So it is not appropriate to start discussing constructions of men in terms of some concept of justice unless the material reality of client men's behaviour is brought into the equation. It is possible, though, to draw out the implications of the Uplands team data for the social control of men. The discourses of masculinity outlined in chapter six spanned a range of positive and negative constructions of men, but the dominant discourse in a child protection context was men as a threat. There were three other pejorative discourses identified, and the two that were more positive about men featured relatively rarely in case talk and case recording. Certainly men are socially controlled. It maybe women that are more often expected to act, and women that spend more time under direct pressure from professionals in face-to-face encounters. It is men, however, who are more often denied contact with the rest of the family, and it is men who are less likely to be trusted with the care of children if they are not known to the social services department.

Having made a judgement about the extent of social control within social work practice and the extent to which it is gendered, the rest of the chapter will be dedicated to discussing possible explanations for gendered social control in child protection work.

9.2 Understanding gender in occupational culture

There will be four sub-sections to this discussion. It will start by re-considering how useful the concepts of social structure and discourse might be for understanding occupational culture in child protection. Following this, there will be consideration of the influence of social workers' gender identities and the gendered organisation of social services. Discussion will then move on to the preoccupation with the body in late modernity, and the intersection of current discourse on gender, class and crime. The first two sections will deal with the two ends of the continuum of feminist work on gender

relations. Firstly I will tackle the structuralist idea of patriarchy, and secondly the notion of gendered identities favoured by post-structuralist and post-modernist writers.

9.2.1 Structure and discourse

One of the most interesting theoretical questions that remains is how we explain the persistence of gender bias in child protection social work in the context of the increasing dominance of anti-oppressive rhetoric in the formal knowledge base of the profession. This section will tackle the question by looking again at the nature of occupational discourse, and by considering notions of social structure. It will discuss the usefulness of the concept of patriarchy for understanding child protection, and the extent to which occupational discourse prescribes social work practice.

In feminist thought, the term most often used to indicate structures of masculine domination is patriarchy (see also chapter two). As Pollert (1996) observes, it is interesting that whilst in sociological writings structures and causes seem to have been taken over by fragments and contingencies, the grand narrative of patriarchy has survived. That is not to say that the concept is without its critics. There are etymological, definitional and theoretical problems with the concept of 'patriarchy' (Waters, 1989) and post-structuralist and post-modernist challenges are now well established in feminist theory. However, the concept continues to be very widely used, even within sophisticated accounts of the gender order such as Connell's (1987, 1995), so it deserves some attention at this point. Potentially an emphasis on the continuing social structural oppression of women could be useful in explaining the fact that gender bias persists in child protection work despite the increasing influence of feminism in the social work profession.

If a sociologist employs the idea of patriarchy they are claiming relevance for the generalisation of men's dominance of women. Whilst many who employ the concept of patriarchy acknowledge the historical specificity of forms of male domination, and the effect of other power relations such as class and race, it is more of a challenge to apply this generalisation to situations where women exert power over other women. Undeniably, women social workers exert power over women clients. As well as individual women social workers having authority over individual women clients, it can be argued

that child protection involves, to some extent, a group of professional women with power over a group of poor working class women. As Abbott and Wallace put it,

Whilst sociologists have commonly drawn attention to the power exercised by social workers And criticized them for being agents of social control, they have ignored two key interrelated factors: first, that clients of social workers tend to be predominantly female, and, second, that they are mainly working-class most social workers are female and they exercise control over women – much of the time working within patriarchal ideologies (Abbott and Wallace, 1990: 6-7).

Although the higher management of social work is male (see next sub-section), the front-line culture can be seen as a women's culture. It is front-line social work culture, rather than policies from central or local government, that is most crucial to the construction of clients. As Lipsky's work (1980, see also Hill, 1982) has shown, the decisions of street level bureaucrats, and the routines they develop to cope with the uncertainties and pressures of their job effectively *become* the policies they carry out. Tacit knowledge about client families in the social work office has developed from a front-line staff base that is still largely dominated by women. This causes problems for a simple version of patriarchy as 'men controlling women'. It is possible to incorporate the dimension of women working with women into a more nuanced version of patriarchy if we take account of the gendered division of labour in social services departments (see next sub-section). There is also a possible argument that women social workers are controlling women clients *in the service of* patriarchy; inducting other women into the role of second-class citizen (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1983, cited in Lawrence, 1992). The reservations expressed by Mary and Lorraine (see chapters five and seven) suggest a reluctance to carry out some aspects of the expected role. There is also, however, a certain relish in 'saving' children from bad parents (see, for example, the tangible excitement described in chapter four), and, in general, the women in the Uplands team tend to be accepting of occupational discourse on family life.

Some commentators have used the term 'mother blaming' to describe the gendered nature of child protection intervention (Hooper, 1987; Davies and Krane, 1996). Whilst this phenomenon can be found (see chapters five and seven in particular), the Uplands team data also suggest there is a fair amount of father blaming. Men clients tend to be viewed negatively, and much of the scrutiny of women comes about because of initial

suspicion of men. This again does not lend itself to an explanation based on a simple and rigidly structuralist version of patriarchy. What we see in the Uplands team is the combined forces of gendered discourses, some of which are patriarchal but some of which are feminist. Discursive power operates in such a hybrid, situated manner in the social work office as to make a rigid notion of systemic male-dominated power structures indefensible. The concept of patriarchy is not a particularly helpful one in explaining either the power of women social workers over women clients or the negative construction of men clients. It does, however, convey the privilege of most men and the oppression of most women, social facts that remain central to this topic. As stated many times, I accept that the actual bodily practices of clients will in part determine the gendered constructions of professionals. That social workers consistently describe men as having power over women in the families they engage with must bear some relation to material reality. Patriarchy does, therefore, form *part* of the framework for understanding the domain of child protection, as long as the provisos above are taken into consideration.

It is important to address the question of whether the interests of patriarchy are being served by child protection practice. It is certainly true that women are scrutinised and men slip away. Even the feminist discourse feeds into this process. But, as Ferguson (1997) emphasises, some children are protected from violent men and patriarchal families. It is children after all who will usually be the most vulnerable family members (Wise, 1990). It might be argued that in a world of gender transformations (Walby, 1997), where women are stronger and more protected in UK society in many ways, increasing the emphasis on child protection at the expense of child welfare is one of a dwindling number of state functions that allow for increased scrutiny of (poor) women. Swift observes that child protection can be seen to serve purposes other than securing children's safety.

the rescue and saving of children is the apparent reason for allowing scrutiny of family life, but other social purposes are more effectively met through this process - controlling social costs and reorientating the behaviour of particular people in ways that benefit groups other than themselves (Swift, 1995: 11).

Most Feminists will not seriously challenge child protection practice if children are being saved from bad men. Howe *et al* (1992) have observed that birth mothers in the adoption process have not yet become a *cause célèbre* for feminism, and this could equally be said about mothers of questionable parenting skills who come under the scrutiny of the child protection system. These women (and men) are the poorest of the poor and have no political voice. Their place in the residuum of the underclass renders them subject to both old and new gendered discursive controls. I will return to the intersection of class and gender discourses at the end of the chapter.

It has been observed that the construction of gendered others in the social work office is a result of the combined forces of gendered discourses, some of which are patriarchal but some of which are feminist. The question remains as to what extent gender discourse constrains the social work 'gaze'. Are social workers free to choose how to construct clients? The only conclusion I can reach is to reject a simplistic structuralism, but maintain a focus on the constraining nature of discourse.

Chapter two mentioned Ferguson's (1997) application of theories of reflexive modernisation to child protection work. He is markedly optimistic about the current state of child protection. Most importantly, he sees the subjects of social regulation as increasingly critical and reflexive with reference to these systems. This contention was implicitly addressed earlier in the chapter where I made a summary evaluation of gendered social control in the Uplands team, in effect rejecting Ferguson's optimism. My chapter two also mentioned that the ideas of reflexive modernisation can be applied to social workers' use of knowledge, in that these theories imply social workers themselves ought to be able to challenge and question the expert systems they draw on. My position is contrary to this. I believe social workers' constructions of clients are limited by occupational discourses. My position is consistent with the reading of Foucault outlined in chapter two. There are multiple gendered discourses in the culture of the social work office that constitute the knowledge available to the social workers, but I would not argue that there is no scope for resistance to this culture. The understanding of power outlined in chapter two encompasses the shifting of relations between actors, institutions and discourses.

It may be helpful to elucidate an example. The prioritising of physical neglect of children can be explained in terms of ease of evidence (see chapter seven) but also by

dominant professional and lay discourses on child maltreatment. Maybe the choice of men's violence, or men's neglect of children as an alternative target for intervention was not genuinely open to the River County managers because of the power of discourse. If child neglect is constructed as an absence of care, and care is associated with femininity, then responsibility for neglect will obviously be ascribed to women. There is, however, also feminist discourse which challenges this ascription of responsibility (see, for example, Swift, 1995; Turney, forthcoming, 2000) and also an alternative mainstream professional discourse which understands neglect in terms of emotional care. It is open to the social workers to resist the dominant occupational discourse. Mary and Lorraine show signs of doubt, if not active resistance, in research interviews. Foucault (1984) sees this process as involving the appropriation of elements of the dominant discourse.

Chapter ten will return to the question of resistance, by discussing what can be done if social workers are to resist gendered discourse which contributes to the maintenance of an unjust gender order. This section has attempted to revisit the usefulness of theoretical perspectives of social structure and discourse in the light of the Uplands team data. In particular there was a focus on the social structural concept of patriarchy. I shall go on to look at the question of the social workers' own gendered identities, setting this discussion in the context of the gendered institutions of social services departments.

9.2.2 Gendered identities in a gendered organisation

The previous chapter dealt with the issue of gendered knowledge and knowledge about gender in the social work office. In the context of constructions of masculinity, chapter six referred to the issue of men working in child care social work, since this has been raised as a problematic issue in social policy discourse. Chapter five also touched on the issue of women social workers' empathy with women clients. I return at this point to the issue of gendered identities as a potential explanatory framework, together with the issue of social services departments as gendered organisations.

It was explained early in the thesis that there would be little discussion of data on how social workers understood themselves as gendered individuals, because there was found to be far more common ground between women and men social workers' constructions of clients as gendered than there were differences. Nonetheless, at this point it is

pertinent to ask whether the social workers' gender identities explain why women are worked with more than men. Do they shed any light on why social workers are positive about the idea of men's involvement in families (and about actual men when they strike up a good relationship with them) but generally negative about actual men clients? Do social workers' gender identities explain how they so often conclude that even where a man is thought to be abusive, it is women who are ultimately culpable if children are not safe? It is not the intention to discuss data on the particular individuals in the Uplands team, but rather to present some theoretical insights about the position of men and women in child protection work, reflecting on both gendered subjectivity and the experience of working in a gendered organisation.

Atkinson and Delamont (1990: 91) contend that any theory of professional work that fails to explain gender divisions within the occupation cannot be an adequate account of the topic. There are certainly marked gender divisions in River County Social Services, although I would argue that these do not particularly help us understand the gendered construction of clients. The relative power of men and women within social service organisations has fluctuated over time (Carter Hood *et al*, 1998) and remains debatable. The Uplands team has three men and seven women. One of the men is a senior social work practitioner and one of the women the team manager, but the three layers of management above her in the organisation are all represented by men. Women are generally under-represented in the higher management of UK social services and men over-represented (Christie, 1998a), and River County is no exception.

Hearn (1982) defines professionalisation as a patriarchal process, with 'semi-professions' such as social work being domains of work where men have achieved only partial domination and full professionalisation indicating complete male control. He sees professionalisation as attempts by men to take over control of spheres of emotion that have hitherto been private. It is also worth noting that bureaucratic structures themselves are 'sites for the shaping of gender identities and relations' (Morgan, 1996b: 58). As Morgan also notes, feminist critiques of organisations tend to see them as dominated by masculinist notions of rationality. Otway, writing about social services departments, claims there has been a 'masculinisation of the managerial role and hierarchy' and that in work with children and families 'women's experience and values are being replaced by those of men and business' (Otway, 1996: 153). I do not agree with Otway's second

point. Women seem to be disadvantaged in career terms in the River County department, and it can be argued that the bureaucracy is increasingly masculinist, but as I stated in the previous section, I believe front-line social work should be understood as predominantly a women's culture. Whilst it can be seen as a women's culture, the ways in which men and women social workers in the Uplands team construct their clients as gendered are markedly similar. I would maintain it is the discursively constructed tacit knowledge of the social workers that is the key to understanding the way they understand and work with men and women clients.

If social work practice is scrutinising women even when anti-discrimination has a very high profile within their profession, social workers are in some ways doing what they know they should not do. Some suggested in interviews that they are in fact doing what they believe is *wrong* by not challenging the men who are the root cause of a lot of problems. It may be that the explanation for this can be found in the complex histories of the social workers own subjectivities. Some of the data do touch on interesting aspects of the social workers' selves, and I am sure they would have had some fascinating insights into their own motivations in relation to their personal histories if I had targeted this in my fieldwork. However, an emphasis on individual identities would distract from the commonality of the constructions of clients across the team and across the sexes. I have to conclude that organisational discourse is strong enough to override gendered identities. It is not possible to set up binary divisions between male and female social workers' identities since, as previously asserted, recent feminist writings have successfully argued contingency and fluidity in the construction of personal identities. However, a focus on complex subjectivities misses the point that there are some common constructions of clients in particular contexts, which are based, as explained in the previous chapter, on the discursive interaction of lay and professional knowledge. It seems that whether we see gender identities as fixed, or as diverse, complex and not tied to 'sex', we cannot escape the conclusion from the data that the social workers' identities are overridden by a powerful occupational culture of the construction of 'others' (see also Pithouse, 1984 – the chapter on 'women and the area office').

The removal of the subject that is necessitated by a post-structuralist perspective is appropriate for understanding occupational culture. To refer back to the discussion on social constructionism in chapter two, it may seem odd to be asserting the power of the

discourse of an occupation, whilst claiming distance myself, as a social worker by training and recent experience. This was, however, not experience of paid employment in a child care team, which is a significant factor in the light of variation in discourses of masculinity and femininity across different settings – see below. Also, I repeat my view that it is indeed difficult if not impossible to truly distance yourself unless you are reflecting from a position of total (me) or partial (White, 1997a) detachment from that occupational culture, achieved, perhaps, through academic affiliation. Those who express unease in the Uplands team, such as Mary, still practise within the accepted discourses while employed. Perhaps these people are most likely to take their chance to leave the job, as indeed Mary did within a year of my fieldwork.

So far the discussion has led to a position whereby concepts such as patriarchy, organisational inequalities and gender identities, whilst all offering some useful insights, cannot stand alone in explaining how the Uplands team works. To summarise, a crude version of patriarchy was found to be too structural a concept to allow for the existence of multiple and contradictory gendered discourses, and was not found particularly relevant to other power dimensions such as women controlling women. Moreover, an emphasis on inequalities between men and women across the social services department masks the central importance of front-line practice culture in the construction of clients, a culture that is strongly influenced by women, who substantially outnumber men. In addition, the idea of gendered identities is not structural enough to account for the greater power of occupational discourses. The concept that has endured is that of occupational culture as discourse. The term ‘occupational culture’ suggests social work as a whole. Bearing in mind the diversity in gender construction across the social work profession (see chapter six, pp.124-5), it is in fact more accurate to talk of organisational culture; the culture of social services child care teams. Whilst the discussion above perhaps helps to clarify some issues, this concept of organisational culture as discourse is not explicitly about gender, so the next two sections will move on to explore some analytical perspectives which might further illuminate the specific gender constructions in the Uplands team.

9.2.3 The preoccupation with the body in late modernity

The word 'body' has appeared in several places so far in the thesis. There has, as Davis (1997) has put it, been a 'body craze' in academia in recent years. Setting aside the fashionable status of the body in sociological writings, I believe that there is real significance in some of the data on the body in preceding chapters. I would further claim that an analytic focus on the body in child protection work is one that has potential for explaining gendered discourses, and is certainly a perspective that warrants further attention.

The recent sociology of the body emphasises the effect of social processes on individuals, in contrast with the abstractions of class and structure favoured by traditional sociology (Turner, 1996). Such an emphasis is important if the working of child protection is to be understood both as socially constructed within an occupational culture and as affecting individual clients and social workers. The argument here is that a fruitful approach to understanding the current state of child protection is to focus on the representation and regulation of the body. This perspective perhaps allows more attention to the inevitably gendered nature of the child protection system than other theoretical frameworks allow. It allows attention to the imagined bodies the social workers construct, the actual bodies that the system regulates and the effects of the system on these bodies - *who* experiences child protection and *how*. The process of constructing and regulating the bodies of clients needs to be considered if we are to better understand the concentration on investigation and risk in child protection work.

Whilst I tend to agree with the post-modernist view that gender identities need to be seen as inherently fluid, social regulation is not so fluid. What is needed is a conception of social structure that can explain social regulation and also allows for the regulation of men as well as women and allows for the presence of multiple discourses. The particular perspective on the body that seems to work in relation to child protection is that of disciplinary power over bodies (Foucault, 1977). Foucault's work demonstrates that discourse is not abstract, impacting on minds only, but has a material relation to the bodies that are the objects of discourse. As Connell (1998:6) expresses it, 'domination is not a matter of disembodied discourses'. Dyer (1988:14) has written that 'to represent people is to represent bodies'. It can be seen from chapters four to seven that embodied

images are central to the occupational construction of clients as gendered. As Collier (1998) and Daly (1997) have argued, the criminal body is constructed as sexed through popular and academic discourse. Shilling (1993) has claimed that there is a preoccupation with the body in late modernity. This preoccupation cannot be gender-neutral. Bodies are inevitably imagined as sexed and gendered, and bodily practices such as violence, sexuality and intimate care for the bodies of others are all strongly linked to societal constructions of gender (Davis, 1997)

The requirement of the child protection system for parental change includes the regulation of women's bodies. Intake of alcohol and drugs is scrutinised. Women are often coerced over choice of sexual partner, when he is considered a threat to children's safety. And above all women are expected to be constantly available for children. Women's responsibility for servicing the body hangs over all cases, but is particularly acute in 'neglect' cases, which are fundamentally about failure to reach acceptable standards of body maintenance. Social workers seem to find maternal abuse particularly horrifying. The replacement of the mother as protective body with mother as abusive body in the social work imagination can lead to a powerful reaction and some of the most intrusive intervention in the child protection repertoire. Women's responsibility for protecting children against the abusing bodies of men is a recurring theme in the ethnographic data. This construction of families with abusive men present is not seriously questioned by the social workers. Women are held responsible for protecting their children from men's bodily excesses.

There are several different discourses of masculinity in the social work office. Dominant amongst these is the imagining of men as threatening bodies. Their violence is seen as a direct threat to the bodies of social workers (especially women) and there are several instances in the data where nasty secrets of men's sexual violence are thought to lurk in families. Discourses of client masculinities are inevitably those of socially and economically marginal men, influenced by visual images of the underclass. We can only speculate on these visual images: perhaps idle and drunken (or drugged) men, or dirty, hairy and scruffy men (although another underclass image is of cheap and 'tasteless' glamour). There are images of underclass bodies (both men's and women's) and also the social workers' embodied cultural responses (or 'tastes') which are often class-bound (Bourdieu, 1986). As chapter six showed, there are several child protection discourses of

masculinity, which conflict and complement. They reflect images of embodiment and both 'known' and imagined bodily practices.

Constructions of children are not sexed/gendered in the same way, but rely on a discourse of the child as vulnerable body. I shall not rehearse again here points that have already been made in chapter four. Most stark in relation to children is the 'new' interest in the dirty, ill-fed child's body described in chapter seven. This could be seen as tentative support for the idea that there is a preoccupation with the body in late modernity. The culture of investigation in contemporary child protection work could be seen as a preoccupation with the child's vulnerable body and the abusive bodies of adults; men in particular, but also women in 'failing to protect'. Whilst the child's body is not sexed/gendered in the way that adult care-givers are, that body is ultimately constructed as in need of protection from women. It is women who can keep the vulnerable child's body sustained and safe from harm. When they fail in the tasks of body maintenance and body protection they become unnatural; non-mothers.

It is not only clients whose bodies are regulated. The stress created by an investigative culture that is premised on rooting out failing parents takes its toll on the bodies of the social workers. McMahon's study (1998) describes negative physical reactions that include nausea, sickness, depression, nightmares and ulcers. One man in the social work team he observed periodically vomited into a rubbish bin in his office. McMahon (1998:89) writes that 'their bodies were wearing out because of the way they had to do their work'.

The preoccupation with the body in child protection work is an area that needs much more work in terms of specific research and theorising. This ethnography has raised it as an issue rather than examining it in detail. To further consider current trends in child protection, the next section will consider the intersection of popular discourse on gender, class and crime.

9.2.4 Gender, class and crime

The focus of this last section will be what occupational discourses tell us about the wider picture of gender and class discourse and the intersection with discourse on crime. The occupational discourses of masculinity and femininity described in chapters five and six

resonate with wider discourses, which are either implicitly or explicitly class-laden. I label these 'the problem with men' and 'mothers as the root of family problems'. As I argued in chapter six, the Uplands social workers' constructions of clients should not be seen as simply a straightforward reflection of the material practices of the men and women they encounter. Nor should they be taken to reveal a tightly bounded occupational culture of social work. Rather, the process of constructing clients in child protection work ought to be understood as rooted in a wider discourses of masculinity and femininity.

Feminism's challenge to the behaviour of men has recently become rooted in the popular imagination in the UK. It can no longer be claimed, as the early new men's studies were keen to stress, that no one is making masculinity explicit. In the UK broadsheet newspapers, men, and the 'crisis' of masculinity in particular, are thought to be good copy and get considerable coverage. Chapter six showed that the 'problem with men' is now being considered in New Labour social policy. The discourses of men as a threat, men as no use, men as absent and, to an extent, men as irrelevant relate to the increasingly powerful discourse of the 'problem with men'. Collier (1998) and Hearn (1998) have observed that it is not all men whose behaviour has come under scrutiny recently. In particular, the masculinity-crime connection has been made in relation to poor working class men. Journalist Nick Cohen thus describes a conference on men and crime he attended in 1993:

Middle-class feminists who thought of themselves as paragons of left-wing rectitude displayed a hatred of working-class men that seemed indistinguishable from coffee-morning Conservatives' loathing of single mothers (Cohen, 1999:2).

Whilst this statement relies on journalistic hyperbole, he conveys accurately enough the class dimension of the 'problem with men' discourse. The poor working class men who are clients of the Uplands team are constructed through several different discourses, some of which can be seen to contradict others. These multiple discourses cannot be summed, or reduced to one unifying theme. However I would maintain that constructions of men as a threat, as absent, as irrelevant and as no use all need to be understood with reference to this wider discourse of problematic working class masculinity. As mentioned in chapter six, the discourses of men as no different and as better than women have different origins. The former is both rooted in the

individualising ethos of traditional social work and a general pessimism which believes 'they (adult clients) are all as bad as each other'. Men as better than women is explained by the powerful connection between femininity and child-rearing.

The 'problem of men' discourse comes from the political left, feminism, but could be seen to overlap with aspects of new right discourse on the underclass family, referred to in earlier chapters. The 'feckless father' is also present, for example, in Campbell's *Goliath* (1993). The Uplands social workers would strenuously resist the idea that their approach to either men or women echoes that of the political Right. Whilst I agree it does not in any straightforward sense, there are connections to be made. The 'single mother' panic on the Right, initiated by John Redwood's speech in Cardiff in 1993 (Bates, 1993), places responsibility for family problems, and the social problems that 'inevitably' result, firmly with women. For example, a strong connection has been made with the crisis surrounding the 'explosion' in youth crime. As Young (1996: 17) expresses it, this has been a discourse of 'the maternal relation as potentially criminogenetic'. What we see in the Uplands team is not so much a reflection of this discourse of the Right as of a wider discourse of women as ultimately responsible for things that go wrong in families, including the bad behaviour of men.

The New Right 'single mother' discourse is saturated with assumptions about class. The problem women being addressed are, again, from the poor working class. It is perhaps inevitable that, given the high profile of this discourse and its partial incorporation into New Labour policy, a disquiet about the mothering of 'underclass' women will surface in the culture of a social work team. After all, this is no new discourse. It draws on concerns about the morals of the unrespectable poor that go back to the origins of the social work profession. As I am considering class politics, it is worth noting at this point that dual systems theories, which combine critiques of patriarchy and capitalism in a materialist account of class and gender oppression, are as inappropriate as other structuralist theories in accounting for multiple gendered discourses in tension with each other.

To maintain the theme of class and gender discourse and its connection with discourse on crime, Alison Young's work (1996) on the 'crisis in the crimino-legal complex' can potentially be applied to contemporary child protection. Whilst she is writing in relation to criminal law, and most of the child protection process comes under

family law, there are many overlaps between popular discourse on child abuse and more general crime discourse. Young sees the name 'victim' as signifying 'our' community and simultaneously expelling the criminal as outlaw: 'the symbolically sacrificed outlaw is thus the victim of our desire for community (through shared victimisation)' (p9). The idea of shared victimisation mimics the recognition of the yearned for pre-modern community, and 'recognition is not based upon shared friendship, but upon the awareness of risk and danger' (p10).

There is potential for exploring these ideas in relation to child protection. There has been an explosion in referrals of alleged abuse, and considerable resources are spent on investigating these allegations and monitoring children 'at risk'. This investigation is more often of alleged abuse by men, but in fact it is women who bear the brunt of it. The child victim and the adult perpetrator, according to Young's theories, help us maintain a sense of community in times when this is seen to be under threat. We could all be seen as either real or potential victims of child abuse, on the basis that everyone has a childhood, so the idea of shared victimisation can apply to these private and domestic crimes as well as to public crimes by strangers. Perhaps in times of increased awareness of men's abusive behaviour we are all also potential victims of violent men.

Young writes of the importance of boundaries, the making and breaching of borders. This connects with Mary Douglas's ideas (1966) about pollution concern arising when there is fear that boundaries will be breached (see chapter seven). To Young, 'crime is elsewhere and criminality is Other' (p58). Child abuse is also Other and elsewhere (usually in unrespectable and very poor homes, and usually on certain estates – chapter four) but is also potentially in Social Services Departments in the form of sexually abusive male care staff (see chapters three and six).

Young suggests that Woman might be 'constituted as a surrogate for the originary outlaw of the community' (p9). It is men who are very clearly the 'outlaws' of child abuse. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) have termed the association of masculinity and child sexual abuse 'whole gender blaming'. But men are very often not held to account. Both when they are and when they are not, it is quite possible that women will be thought to have failed in comparison with an idealised model of motherhood. So in a sense perhaps women will always be the 'originary outlaw' of child abuse whilst child-rearing is so associated with societal constructions of femininity.

Young's work is one example of how gendered social control can be theorised in such a way as to account for social structure without the restrictive limitations associated with simplistic versions of patriarchy. Her ideas lead to the question as to whether the child protection system is really as much about protecting children as it is about regulating masculinity and femininity; maintaining the respectable father and the protective mother. To ask that question is not to claim that the control of masculinity and femininity is some kind of hidden *aim* of the child protection system. This would look rather like a conspiracy theory. But the result of its practice, governed as it is by organisational cultures (themselves products of wider popular, academic and legal discourse) is that mothering is scrutinised while men disappear from view.

9.3 Conclusion

I have attempted in this chapter both to make a judgement about the extent of gendered social control in the work of the Uplands team and also to draw out some theoretical perspectives which might help explain what I found in the social work office. Bearing in mind the limits of the chosen research methods, I concluded that social control is fairly overt and heavily gendered. I examined theoretical perspectives of patriarchy, of inequality in the workplace, and of gender identities. Each of these captures something of the nature of gendered social control in the Uplands team, but also has shortcomings in explaining the research findings. Structuralism cannot account for some of the dimensions of power, such as the negative constructions of men. Simplistic versions of patriarchy cannot explain the central relationship of women social workers controlling women clients. An emphasis on gender identities misses the commonality of construction of Others. Crucially, any explanation needs to appreciate the strength of organisational discourse in overcoming complex identities. I went on to offer some more fruitful theoretical perspectives, which maintain a focus on power and social constraints whilst avoiding the rigidity of crude structuralism. These were the preoccupation with the body in late modernity and the intersection of wider discourses of gender, class and crime. It has been asserted throughout the thesis that the construction of clients will be constrained by the material reality social workers encounter. The final chapter, which

follows this, will return to materiality, by focusing on implications of the research for practitioners.

Chapter 10

CONCLUSION

Whilst discourses of masculinity and femininity in the social work office should not be crudely understood as reflecting directly what men clients are 'really like', neither are they creative inventions formed in a social vacuum. They reflect wider societal discourses and are also limited by the actual bodily practices of clients. No study of the culture of child protection can forget that there is a material world beyond the social work rhetoric; there are actual embodied children out there and real men and real women (White, 1998b). I am quite willing to accept that there are some relevant social facts here: for example, that more men *do* pose a physical threat to partners and children than women, and women *do* look after children more than men.

A recognition of materiality makes it imperative that I should address the potential implications of the research findings for practitioners who have to make important decisions about families on a daily basis. I do not believe there should not be any overly prescriptive conclusion to a study of this kind. The intention was not to crudely pass judgement on whether constructions of gender are right or wrong. But that is not to claim that there is nothing to conclude that can speak to practitioners.

The job of a child care social worker, increasingly dominated as it is by child protection, is one where the continual task of balancing the rights of different parties takes a heavy toll in terms of stress (Balloch *et al*, 1998). McMahon (1998), whose research vividly describes the experience of this stress in a specific setting, conveys the double bind of child protection work with his book title *Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't*. Social workers are criticised if they intervene in families to protect children, and criticised if they leave a situation alone. It would not be defensible for me to add to this pressure with a heavily prescriptive list of yet more changes they should make in their daily practice. Neither would it be defensible to deconstruct their workplace culture and leave it at that, without addressing the question of what this might mean for their practice.

In speaking to practitioners I must consider what they might find useful. It may be that many practitioners would appreciate 'practice tips' of the kind that I am unable to provide, not having set out to in any way study 'good practice' with men and women

clients. I also believe that caution is needed about prescriptive recommendations for practice. Sue White argues that such judgements are not necessarily helpful:

I have no intention of exercising normative judgement on the activity of social workers, nor of providing a set of prescriptions for 'better practice'. Social work is shot through with the traces of previous such attempts.... In my opinion, piecemeal change can take place in this way, but there is scant evidence that it leads to wholesale and cost-free positive change - a newer and purer order. Rather, policy shifts often bring in their wake another set of theory-driven prescriptions which practitioners either embrace or spend their time fighting off (White, 1997c:17).

I do not think that prescriptive recommendations are never appropriate, but do not believe it is the role of a study of this kind to make such recommendations. Rather it can prepare the ground for others to put together a 'practice guide' or for practitioners to reach their own conclusions. It is arguably necessary for any changes in practice to be based on the kind of detailed observation of social *work* that this thesis has entailed. Sibeon makes this point:

it can be argued that..... prescriptive statements are better grounded if based upon empirical awareness of which forms of knowledge are 'actually' employed by social workers in their everyday practice (Sibeon, 1990: 32-33).

White (1998b) recommends dialogue between research and practice based on attention to *how work gets done*, rather than to how it *should* be done. Gendered tacit knowledge is unavoidable in any organisation. What perhaps can be avoided is an unquestioning acceptance of workplace culture. If injustice in social work provision is to be addressed, gendered constructions of clients have to be made explicit and their implications understood. Social workers need to be reflective about their own practice and the gendered discourse of their office culture.

epistemic reflexivity may only be achieved by social workers becoming aware of the dominant professional constructions influencing their practice. For example, within contemporary child care services these pivot around notions of parental dangerousness and fragile childhoods (White, 1997d: 748).

Bloor's understanding (1997) of the relevance of qualitative research to social problems is that it can speak more to practitioners than to policy makers. He argues that practitioners will recognise themselves in the detailed description of a research setting. In considering the nature of policy, he notes the argument that 'policy is a situated discourse, a set of tacit assumptions and implicit meanings found within particular offices and occupational groupings' (Bloor, 1997: 234).

The thesis has raised some important theoretical issues that I believe are relevant for those engaged in social work practice. Many practitioners would no doubt resist the offer of more theory. The first quotation from Sue White above reminds us that social workers are, if anything, overloaded with theory. But chapter eight's discussion of the use of knowledge in practice indicated that some attention to theory for practice might be helpful because of the difficulties in applying knowledge about gender relations to social work practice.

The analytic practice of social constructionism itself has parallels with social work practice and has much to offer to practitioners, as Payne (1999) and Witkin (1999) have argued, but I will not dwell on that connection here. I will, however, make some links between some of the theoretical frameworks reviewed in the thesis and opportunities for social work practice. The theoretical debates mentioned in the previous chapter reflect the difficulty of understanding the gender order. How might social workers attempt this in practice? How are they to respect individual persons whilst taking social power into account? It needs to be acknowledged that juggling the individual and the social in professional practice is a very complex matter, and most definitely not reducible to a list of anti-discriminatory practice tips, as most practitioners are well aware. My theoretical perspective allows for the existence of multiple discourses, so social workers are not stuck within any given gender discourse. Foucault's conception of discursive power allows for resistance. To repeat a citation from chapter two,

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault, 1984: 100).

Training can initiate support for alternative discourses, and can encourage the reflection on professional constructions referred to above. There has been a great deal of

attention in recent years to training social workers in anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice and their influence can be seen in the culture of the Uplands team. It is possible that the approach to these perspectives has been rather too punitive, and has not encouraged social workers to be genuinely open about their constructions of clients. It is also possible that it has left certain occupational assumptions unquestioned, such as what exactly is meant in practice by the mantra of the primacy of the child's welfare. Perhaps anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approaches need to be more sophisticated in recognising that there are multiple interpretations of just about everything, including what is best for children, and what it means to be a man or a woman. And, crucially, any approach to gender, whether it is termed anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive or whatever, needs to encompass both individual and structural dimensions.

Rojek *et al* (1988) sought to recommend a discourse approach to social workers in *Social Work and Received Ideas* as a way of social workers dealing with the complex relationship between the individual and the social. The fact that a prominent professor of social work admitted in a review of the book that she found it difficult to read (Cheetham, 1989) suggests they may not have been entirely successful in reaching academics with this message, let alone practitioners. This reminds us of how unrealistic it is to recommend yet more complex theory to practitioners with heavy workloads and many competing demands on them. Yet Rojek *et al's* idea about the relevance of post-structuralism to social work was a good one. Post-structuralism accepts the existence of power relations, but insists that these are fluid, complex and multi-directional. It allows for social structures to profoundly influence people's behaviour and identities, but also insists that this process operates through the interplay of multiple (and sometimes contradictory) discourses. So each individual has to be understood as *socially* constructed, but that social construction is contingent on *individual* social situations.

Post-structuralism has been criticised from two very different directions. On the one hand, the case has been made by several authors that the emphasis on fragmentation goes too far and fails to account for continuing inequalities between social groups (e.g. Walby, 1992). And from a very different direction, there has been the criticism that post-structuralism fails to account for subjectivity (e.g. Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Connell's (1987, 1995) is a sophisticated account of gender that takes account of these

criticisms. He insists on the post-structuralist plurality of the term 'masculinities' and writes of 'discursive practices'. He also maintains a nuanced usage of the term 'patriarchy' and sees gendered discursive practices configuring into a hierarchy which takes account of other dimensions of power such as class, 'race' and sexuality. So, for example, compulsory heterosexuality forms part of 'hegemonic masculinity' and gay men represent 'subordinated masculinity'. There are multiple discourses, but some are more powerful than others. He also incorporates an understanding of subjectivity by adding the dimension of existential psychoanalysis. Whilst I am not suggesting all social workers should rush out and buy Connell's *Gender and Power*, his is an example of the kind of sophisticated account of gender relations that social workers need in dealing with the complexities of individual clients in a social context.

The discourses of masculinity and femininity in the Uplands team represent a range of ways of conceptualising gender, from the rigid one-dimensional model of understanding sexually abusive men through to the diversity of psychological and sociological explanations for domestic violence. An attempt to think through the implications of these various different models for other areas of the work may prove fruitful. So, for example, the social workers' theories of sex offending emphasise the need for constant awareness of the possibility that men will minimise the severity of behaviour and the intent behind it. This may be a useful insight into other types of behaviour, such as physical violence or avoidance of domestic work. Equally, the belief in the importance of an individualised approach (see 'men as no different') may be challenging to the blanket assumptions made about men who sexually abuse. What is perhaps needed is gender theorising that can encompass both the material reality of the relative power of most men over most women and also the nuances of gender relations and gender identities, and the complications of multiple and sometimes contradictory discursive practices. Social workers could apply the ethos and analysis of individualisation to structural assumptions and apply a structural understanding to individualised conceptions of problems.

O'Hagan (1997) stresses the need for widening social workers' theoretical base to more fully incorporate feminist perspectives. Equally, there have recently been calls for the broadening out of the theoretical base of feminist social work (Graham, 1992; Featherstone and Lancaster, 1997; Featherstone and Trinder, 1997). These authors stress the need for acceptance of diversity, fluidity and the multi-dimensional nature of power

relations. Neither a liberal theory of anti-discrimination as equal treatment, nor anti-oppressive theory based on a monolithic notion of men's oppression of women, can capture the subtleties of gender identities and power at the micro level. Equally, a post-modernist deconstruction of the intersection of gender and power can leave us totally cut off from any notion that most men are, if not actively involved, at least complicit (Connell, 1995) in the oppression of women. The complexity of the social work role and the complexity of gender relations suggest the need for a sophisticated conceptual framework for understanding men and women as clients in child protection work.

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Appendix 1: access letter

To Director of Social Services, River County SSD

Dear Mr.....

I am currently employed as a tutorial fellow in social work at University of Wales, Cardiff. This involves teaching on the Dip.S.W. course and working on a Ph.D. Until October of this year I was a practising social worker, with experience in drugs and alcohol, HIV and probation work.

I write to you on the advice of Ian Butler. I am interested in carrying out some research in a local Social Services Department, and Ian recommended I approach you as someone with a commitment to research who has always been very helpful with research access.

I should like to research social workers' work with men in children and families teams. Several research studies have referred to the difficulties that social workers have in engaging men in social work support for families and in the child protection process. I should like to study these difficulties in detail and look at policies and practice that might improve the situation. I should be very interested to carry out this research in River County.

Because my recent work background is in social work I appreciate the need for a sensitive approach to people who use the services of a children and families team. I also understand the importance of confidentiality and would respect any relevant agency policy. In writing up my research I would of course preserve anonymity of individuals and of the department.

The outcomes of the research would include a Ph.D. thesis, conference papers and articles for both academic and practitioner publications. If I were to have the opportunity to carry out the research in River County, I would also be very willing to distribute a summary of the research findings and discuss them with staff individually and in the form of presentations to teams, with an emphasis on practical measures that can involve men more fully as recipients of social work. Ideally I should like to start the research straight away .

I shall follow up this letter with a phone call within the next ten days. I should be grateful if you would consider my request in the meantime. If you would like to discuss my ideas further, I should be very happy to come and meet you. I can be contacted at the above address and telephone number, as can Ian Butler, as well as Dr. Amanda Coffey my Ph.D. supervisor, who can both vouch for me.

Yours sincerely

Mr. Jonathan Scourfield
Tutorial fellow

Appendix 2: summary of research idea for staff

Social work with men. A research project

Jonathan Scourfield. University of Wales, Cardiff.

Several research studies have referred to the difficulties that social workers have in engaging men in social work support for families and in the child protection process. This is particularly cause for concern when men who are responsible for some kind of abuse of women or children are not worked with. I should like to study these difficulties in detail and look at policies and practice that might improve the situation.

The research process

I should like to carry out the research in a children and families team. I would hope the process could include as many of the following elements as possible:

1. Interviews with each member of staff. It may be necessary to talk to some people more than once.
2. Reading of some files, including case recording and formal reports.
3. Observation of routine work in the office, including, if possible, some supervisions and team meetings.
4. Where possible, with consent, some observation of social workers' direct contact with clients. This might include office interviews, home visits, case conferences and core group meetings.
5. Where possible, with their consent, some interviews with male clients.

I have a social work background myself, so would preserve confidentiality in line with agency policy. The office would not be named in the writing-up of the research and obviously all individuals would remain anonymous.

Outcomes

- A Ph.D. thesis;
- Conference papers and articles for both academic and practitioner audiences;
- A summary of the research findings for staff;
- Presentations of the research findings to staff, with an emphasis on practical measures that can involve men more fully as recipients of social work.

Timescale

Ideally I should like to start around Easter 1997 and spend 1-2 days each week carrying out the research. I would hope to complete the collection of research data by the end of September 1997.

Appendix 3: interview questions

Explanation of purpose of interview – not an inspection, but I want to find out what goes on and why - what social workers honestly think about working with men and women clients. Explain my background (social work, but not in a child care team).

I'll start with some questions about you, then some general questions about the job, before getting on to the issues I'm particularly interested in.

- How long have you worked in this office ?
- Can you tell me a little about your social work career so far ?
- What do you think of your current job?
- What is a typical day in your job made up of ? What do you spend most of your time doing ? Things like who you work with, what problems you deal with, time spent in the office or elsewhere.
- Can you briefly describe your current 'caseload' (assuming the term has come up already)
- Are there any differences between your women clients and men clients ?
- How would you describe your women clients ?
- (can you give me an example ?)
- How would you describe your men clients ?
- (can you give me an example ?)
- I'd be very interested to hear more about how you experience this job, and its highs and lows. I'd like to hear about clients you enjoyed working with and those you have found difficult. Could you tell me first about a case you enjoyed or found rewarding ?
- I'm well aware of what a demanding job this is and how difficult some situations can be to resolve. I'd like to know a bit about clients that were hard to work with. Could you tell me about a woman client that you found hard to work with.
- Could you tell me about a male client that you found hard to work with.
- (How do people change?)
- (Why do these problems occur in families?)
- (Are your clients typical of the population?)