

Title Page

Non-resident fathers becoming full-time carers: A qualitative study of fathers and social workers' reflections on their motivations, and the challenges and opportunities they encountered across the child protection process in England.

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Summary

Research studies in the UK over the past twenty-five years have consistently found a number of challenges and problems in the engagement, and relationship between fathers and social workers in child protection practice. This has resulted in missed opportunities for fathers to be assessed as either a risk or a resource for their children. In considering the latter, this PhD thesis study, through adopting an Appreciative Inquiry lens, contributes to existing knowledge through exploring what factors were present where social workers had successfully considered non-resident fathers as a resource. In particular, situations where the social workers agreed to the father becoming their child's primary carer, when they had concerns about the care the child was receiving from their mother. Seven social workers and thirteen former non-resident fathers were recruited and interviewed. The fathers who participated in the study had their child living with them on a full-time basis. Adopting a narrative approach to the interviews I documented the fathers' journeys, exploring their motivations for agreeing to take on this role and their experiences of their involvement with their child's social workers, whom I also interviewed. The thesis illustrated how given the opportunity, fathers involved in child protection will 'step up' and become a resource for their child when the child's mother is not in a position to do so. The fathers exercised agency and demonstrated a commitment to the assessment and their child. The social workers demonstrated a level of reasoning and discretion in considering the negative aspects of the fathers' lives, where they understand that the fathers were neither good nor bad, but a combination of both, and demonstrated an ability to offer encouragement and challenge in equal measures. Most importantly, despite a few challenges, the fathers and social workers were able to develop, and sustain a relationship, that led to the fathers been successfully utilised as a resource in child protection practice.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Introducing the study

Research studies have consistently found the engagement between fathers and child protection social workers to be challenging and problematic, not only in the UK, but in countries such as Canada, America, Australia, and the Nordic countries. The lack of engagement has developed along two distinct, but not exclusive, avenues. Firstly, where a lack of engagement has led to the failure to see fathers as a risk to their child, and secondly, a failure to consider the father as a resource for their child. It is the latter that is the focus of this study. The failure to father as a resource is significant as it serves to provide an incomplete picture of a family's resources, strengths and challenges (Storhaug 2013), and the social work assessment of the child's care situation is only partial. In addition, the focus of child welfare should be upon what is in the best interests of the child; in this respect, by ignoring fathers who have something to offer, social workers are overlooking potential assets and resources through which to support the child and deal effectively with the case (O'Hagan 1997), and thus contribute to the prevention of further neglect and/or abuse from the present caregivers.

The catalyst for this doctoral study emanated from my previous experience as a child protection social worker, and later as a lecturer, as well as my engagement with previous studies in this area. The focus of this study developed as a consequence of the findings of the three-part study commissioned by the Family Rights Group into the engagement between fathers and social services (Ashley et al 2006; Roskill et al 2008; Roskill et al 2011). The Family Rights Group is a charity that advises parents, grandparents, relatives and friends about their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about their children's welfare. The stimulus for the first of the three studies was the fact that the advice line they provide was receiving an increasing number of calls from non-resident fathers who had, belatedly, found out that social services were involved with their children or had already taken their child into care. The study found, amongst other issues¹ that:

“In child protection services, the limited research which exists suggests that men who wish to care for children have to struggle to be seen as resources by professionals even in situations where mothers cannot look after children safely” (Ashley et al 2006 p.45)

¹ Further findings from this study will be explored in Chapter 3

This study aimed to explore this finding further, but by approaching it from the opposite position, where social workers had considered non-resident fathers as a resource to the point that they agreed to them becoming their child's primary carer. Through applying an Appreciative Inquiry 'lens' to my study (see section 4.4), I aimed to unearth what particular factors were present in this successful outcome to this phenomenon from the perspectives of the two main protagonists, the fathers and the social workers. To this end, I recruited and interviewed thirteen former non-resident fathers who, as a result of social services having concerns about the mother's ability to look after the child safely, had their child living with them on a full-time basis. In addition, I interviewed seven social workers who were involved in these cases. Rather than adopting a retrospective approach, the initial aim of this study was to explore the social workers' and non-resident fathers' motivations and experiences during the initial engagement and assessment. Data would have been produced with social workers through direct observations in team meetings and home visits, along with the use of mobile research methods (Ross et al. 2009; Ferguson 2014), such as, for example, conducting interviews in the car during the journey to and from the home visit. Interviews would also have taken place with the fathers at different stages during, and after, their assessment with the social workers. However, during the first two days in the research setting (a community social work team) it became apparent that current child protection practice would be too challenging to observe, due to the level of commitment and time needed *in situ*, to develop the relationships necessary for using these methods of data collection. Specifically, I found frontline social work practice to be much more intensive than my prior experience, with high levels of staff turnover and absence, and social workers hot desking and spending ever-more time outside of the office. It was then, through consultation with my supervisors, agreed that I would adapt the design and approach of my research.

The original remit of this study was to consider fathers who had taken part in a viability assessment with social services during the pre-proceedings stage. However, it became apparent that only three of the fathers had undergone an assessment of their viability as a carer, but these assessments had been undertaken beyond the pre-proceedings stage, with their children already the subject of a care order and in the care of the local authority. Despite this, I feel it is still important to provide the background, context, and details of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. The stage was introduced in 2008 with the initial intent of improving the engagement of social workers and parents at a critical stage in the child protection process. As suggested by Masson et al. (2013), the pre-proceedings stage can be considered as:

“...a system through which the relationship between the parents and the local authority is formalised (and possibly renewed) for families at the edge of care” (p. 6).

In addition to promoting engagement, if deemed safe for children, this stage is also viewed as a mechanism through which to divert cases away from care proceedings. Parents should be made aware of the concerns of the local authority at the earliest possible opportunity, before a mutually agreed action plan is then devised (Broadhurst et al. 2011). Beginning with what is often referred to as the ‘legal gateway’, the local authority discusses its concerns with legal advisors and establishes whether they meet the required threshold for initiating care proceedings. A “Letter Before Proceedings” is then sent to the birth parents informing them of the local authority’s concerns and inviting them to a formal ‘pre-proceedings’ meeting as well as advising them to seek legal advice. At this meeting, the local authority should ask the parents to identify any potential alternative carers within their extended family, for example, uncles, aunts, or grandparents. The assessment of these potential carers is then completed through an initial viability assessment within a twelve-week period. The purpose of conducting these frontloaded assessments is that, in the event that no birth family members are deemed to be suitable, the case will proceed to court with the majority of the work having already been completed. Moreover, the fact that the local authority care plan will thus be viewed as sufficiently evidence-based means that the care proceedings will conclude quickly (Stanley 2019). Alongside promoting efficiency, the pre-proceedings stage espouses two key principles that underpin social work practice with children, the first of which is as follows:

“A care order should be applied for only when the principle of the diminishment of the need for court proceedings has been tried or considered and been found to be unsuccessful or inapplicable” (Carr and Goosey 2017 p. 281).

The second principle upon which the Children Act 1989 is predicated is that:

“...children are generally best looked after within the family, save where that is not consistent with their welfare, with their parents playing a full part in their lives and with least recourse to legal proceedings” (DoE 2014 p. 4).

Both these principles guide social workers through the required stages in order to ensure that all the possible options for alternative carers from the birth family are exhausted prior to initiating care proceedings. Once these care proceedings have been initiated the local authority then has twenty-six weeks to complete a final care plan for the child, which the court then

either approves or rejects in a final hearing as part of its decision on the long-term future of the child.

As stated previously only three of the fathers in this study were participants in a viability assessment, with these being presented to the court at a final hearing. For the remaining ten fathers, they had, through different means, already had their children living with them when I interviewed them. In these situations, the social workers' intervention appeared to take the form of a forty-five-day core assessment, followed by a monitoring of the child and father for differing periods of time. The journeys experienced by the fathers in becoming their child's primary carer were, therefore, unique, with none taking part through the pre-proceedings stage. This resulted in the need to widen the scope of my research to include fathers involved throughout the child protection procedures. A consistent factor, however, in the thirteen fathers' journey, was that the concerns of social services centred around the mothers' mental health and/or alcohol and substance misuse. These factors are consistent with previous studies that have examined the risk factors that lead to the involvement of social services with mothers (Erickson and Tonigan 2008; O'Donnell et al. 2015; Hammond et al. 2017; Johnson et al. 2022), which, as will be discussed in section 6.3.1, can form part of the negative construction of mothers in child protection practice.

Initially, I only envisaged recruiting previously non-resident fathers who were the biological father for their children. I was, however, pleasantly surprised that this parameter was too narrow. As will be discussed in the next section, defining whom can be considered a child's 'father' is far from simplistic, and this was reflected in this study, with the fathers representing a diverse range. For example, one father, took on the full-time care of a child for whom he was not the biological father, following the death of the child's mother, although he had only been in a six-month relationship with her before her son's birth. Similarly, another father, alongside two children for whom his was the biological father, took on the care of a child for whom he was not. Furthermore, one father was not aware of the existence of his daughter until she was three years of age, who, after a positive DNA test and viability assessment was placed in the full-time care of her father².

Seven social workers were interviewed, their demographic details can be found in Table 2, and details of their recruitment in section 4.7. The aim of their inclusion in the study was to provide their interpretation of the journey of the father becoming their child's primary carer, and how they negotiated the assessment process. In line with the central aim of the study, it

² In all these cases the fathers were subsequently granted parental responsibility through a court order.

was important to ascertain what they felt worked in respect of their relationship and involvement with their fathers and how this may have contributed to the outcome. A crucial aspect of this study is the understanding and acceptance that the involvement between the father and the social worker did not take place in a 'gender vacuum'. Instead, the study considers the influence wider societal constructs of gender and parenting had on the outcome in each of these thirteen cases. It is important to stress at this point that through adopting a social constructionist approach in this study, meant deemphasising the perceived differences in the personalities of men and women. In this study the concept of gender is understood as a set of socially constructed relationships that are produced and reproduced through people's actions, everyday activities, social interaction and displays, that are viewed or accepted by others as masculine or feminine (West and Zimmerman 1987; Coltrane 1996)(see section 2.5)

Through adopting a constructivist/interpretivist approach to my research (see section 4.2) and eschewing any positivist notions, I embraced subjectivity, positionality and reflexivity and the use of 'self' as an asset in the production of knowledge in the study (Etherington 2004; Braun and Clarke 2019). These three interrelated concepts played an intrinsic role in the design and undertaking of this study through the research aims, recruitment, data production to the data analysis and writing, and thereby, considered and responded to the following question from Steier (1991):

“Why do research for which you must deny responsibility for what *you* have 'found'?”
(p.10)

A further motivation for me adopting this position is that not only is it proposed that subjectivity and reflexivity are a crucial aspect of social workers' practice (White 1997), but the principal values of reflexivity, namely honesty, integrity and transparency, are also consistent with the values that underpin the social work profession.

Finally, the interpretivist paradigm holds that reality is subjective, socially constructed, and a composite of multiple perspectives (Guba and Lincoln 2004). Therefore, as well as considering my own subjectivity, there was also a need to interpret the accounts of both the fathers and the social workers through a critical lens, as both presented their own subjective view of the phenomena based on their personal experience and motivations. This issue will be revisited in sections 6.3, and 7.2.

1.1.1 Terminology

As noted in the previous section, a challenge in researching fatherhood and fathering is the issue of defining what constitutes, and who can claim to be a ‘father’. Changes in family patterns have led to the category of father becoming broader and ambiguous (Featherstone 2001; Scourfield 2014), which have resulted in a myriad of terms now in use, such as social father, biological father, father figure, stepfather, and mother’s partner. These terms are often based upon factors such as physical proximity, the amount of time spent with the child, and the role the father provides for their child. For the purpose of this study, I have defined a father to include those that are considered the child’s biological father through being on the child’s birth certificate, or have parental responsibility sanctioned through a court order. I will make specific reference to fathers who do not fall within these categories.

Similarly, there is also contention over the term ‘non-resident father’. In the study by Hamer (2001) of low-income African American fathers, it was found that neither the terms non-custodial or non-resident reflected the reality for the fathers. Hamer (2001) argues that irrespective of the form of fatherhood that one experiences, “a father’s existence precludes his total absence” (p. 12). The basis for this existence is the point at which the child is born, where he becomes a father and an attachment is subsequently formed, whether it is biological or emotional in nature, and regardless of the actual amount of time fathers go on to spend with their children, this attachment endures. The fathers in the study were all situated away from that point of origin and were therefore considered ‘distal’ fathers (p. 12). Hamer (2001) found that none of the eighty-eight fathers in her study used existing terms to describe their status in their child’s lives, and instead all referred to living away from their children. Instead, the term “Live-away fathers” (p. 13) she argues, encapsulates the profusion of father-child relationships that exist.

In the UK, due, in part, to the introduction of the presumption of shared care in the private law arena following separation and divorce, a number of different living arrangements have emerged between non-resident fathers and their children. These arrangements include fathers who provide regular overnight or daytime care, to those who share fifty percent of the care for their children with their ex-partner. This had led to a suggestion to adopt the term ‘own-household-fathers’, (Goldman et al. 2019 p.6) challenging the common misconception that own-household-fathers are all of the ‘non-resident’ type. Although I agree with this suggested change in terminology, for the purpose of this study, however, I have retained the use of the term non-resident father as it is still widely used in literature and commentary in the UK and has a common and accepted interpretation and understanding.

Finally, in this thesis I use the terms social care, social work, social workers, child protection, social services, and the local authority, which are synonymous with sections of caring professions in England and Wales. Social care refers to the wider arena of care services which involves both adults and children services, and often in partnership with health services, with social work being a discipline within social care. For the purpose of this thesis, the term social worker refers to the qualified professional title and role, with child protection being a specialism of social work practice. The terms social services and local authority are often used interchangeably and refer to the wider organisation in which social care and social work reside. The term local authority is often used in relation to the granting of legal orders, as it is the local authority and not the individual social worker that applies for and is granted a court order. I will refer to the term child welfare services, when referring to research studies that have been conducted in North America, and the Nordic countries.

1.2 Research aims and questions

In consideration of the fact, that, at least to the best of my knowledge, the specific aims and approach taken in this study of fathers and child protection practice, has hitherto not been previously adopted, I wanted to conduct an interpretivist exploratory study underpinned by relatively broad research questions. In addition, as previously stated, I adopted an appreciative inquiry approach to this study where I aimed, through exploring positive experiences and examples of good practice, to discover what worked in the engagement between the fathers and social workers in these incidences. Additionally, as previously discussed in this section, the study also aimed to explore the wider issues of fathering and the social construction of gender that influenced the journey of the non-resident fathers becoming their child's primary carer. Finally, it is argued that research question should avoid having an answer built into them (Flick 2014) and should be designed to accommodate unconventional findings, as Aurini et al. (2022) note:

“‘Surprises’ can come in many forms, including inconvenient findings, weaker or stronger findings than you would have otherwise expected, and non-findings”.

(p.50)

As will be discussed in 4.4, this is important in term of my own positionality that these questions generated findings that challenged my personal and professional beliefs and understanding of the research topic, participants, and setting. Therefore, my research

questions were constructed and written to encapsulate these factors, with the data produced and analysed with the guide of the following three research questions:

- *What were the fathers' motivations for becoming the full-time carer for their children, and what were the fathers' experiences of involvement with social services*
- *What were the social workers' experiences of assessing the fathers' capacity to be their child's potential full-time carer, and how did they negotiate this assessment?*
- *How did the non-resident fathers position themselves as fathers and how did this impact upon their ability to become potential full-time carers for their children?*

Sections 2.7 and 3.5 of this thesis provide an understanding of, and rationale for how these research questions were constructed.

Through considering the Ecology of Social work Decision Making Model (Baumann et al. 2014) (see Figure 1) I acknowledge in this study that the engagement between the father and the social worker, the assessment, and the final decision for the father to become the primary carer, did not take place in a vacuum. I appreciate that there were likely to have been organisational and external factors that impacted upon the outcome, which were beyond the control or influence of either the fathers or the social workers, such as organisational timescales, heavy workloads and the wider influence and decisions of other professionals in the child protection and childcare legal system. This latter point is illustrated in section 6.2, where a number of social workers found themselves in opposition to the views of other professionals involved in the children's lives, in respect of their decision to approve the fathers as primary carers. Therefore, although these research aims have focussed upon the fathers and social workers, it is acknowledged that they were not the only factors that led to the successful outcome in these cases.

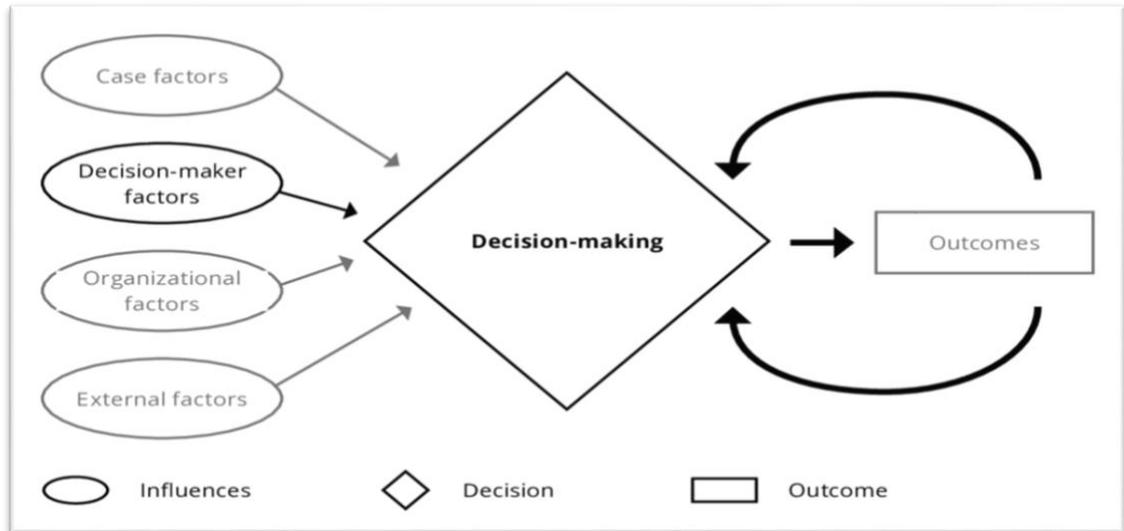


Figure 1 - The ecology of social work decision-making (Baumann et al. 2014)

1.3 Guide to the thesis

The purpose of this section is to provide a guide to the structure and content of the thesis. Commencing with two literature chapters the thesis will then continue onto the four findings chapters which have been presented in an order which best reflects the fathers' journey from being their child's non-resident father to their primary carer. Chapter Six starts the journey through considering when the fathers first became aware of the concerns of social services. Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight then takes the reader through the social workers' perspectives of their involvement with, and assessment of the fathers. Chapter Nine then completes the journey through exploring the fathers' reflections upon their own positioning as fathers, and how becoming their child's primary carer has changed their lives and perspectives on fathering.

1.3.1 Contemporary fathering, masculinity and non-resident fathering

Chapter Two will consider studies on contemporary fathering, with a specific focus of studies that have considered fathers as being more involved with, or taking on a primary caring role with their children as opposed to the more traditional role of financial provider role. The second section of the chapter will then explore studies that have highlighted the specific challenges of becoming, or being a non-resident father, and how these challenges have led to fathers either remaining involved and in contact with their children or making the decision to withdraw from their child's lives. The chapter will also start to consider the influence of the literature on the formation of the research questions for this study.

1.3.2 Fathers and Child Protection Practice

In Chapter Three, I will demonstrate how studies have contributed to a growing body of literature that has highlighted how social workers involved in child protection, have consistently failed to engage and involve the fathers. Through focusing upon the mother as the primary carer for children, and through the actual and perceived violence of men, and the construction of dangerous masculinities. This practice has not led to both the oppression of mothers, and the detriment of children and their father, through social workers not considering the father as resource for his child. It will be identified how the wider societal constructs of gender have influenced the decision making of social workers through mechanisms such as a gendered occupational culture (Scourfield 2003, 2006b), where social work discourse purports a dominant traditional perception of mothers being more able and natural care givers (Buckley 2003b; Featherstone 2009; Storhaug and Oien 2012). The chapter will identify where this doctoral study is distinguishable to previous research studies, and how it will contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Finally, the chapter will conclude through outlining how the research questioned for this study were constructed through considering of the literature from this, and the previous chapter.

1.3.3 Research methodology

In Chapter Four I set out the methodology adopted in this study, and explain how my methodological approach, driven by my theoretical and ethical positioning, allowed me to address the research questions. I discuss the importance of positionality, reflexivity and my role in the research process, which are inherent considerations when conducting an interpretive study that is built upon a social constructionist standpoint (Burr 2003). The chapter then proceeds to detail and provide a rationale for my chosen methods of data production. I outline, how, as well as theoretical and practical considerations, a predominant driver for my choice of methods was my positionality both on a personal and professional level in respect of both the fathers and social workers. I then explore the research setting and the practical and ethical challenges of recruiting the participants on the study through gatekeepers before introducing the participants that were recruited to the study. Several sections of the chapter are then devoted to exploring my reflections upon the challenges and opportunities I experienced whilst using the chosen methods in the field. The chapter will then conclude with an explanation, and exploration. of the analysis of the interview data from both the fathers and the social workers.

1.3.4. The Fathers' motivations for and experiences of becoming their child's primary carer

Chapter Five explores the themes emanating from the interview data of the thirteen fathers that address the first research question introduced in section 1.1.2. As suggested above this chapter reflects upon the start of the father's journey to becoming the child's primary carers by first exploring why, and how, the fathers acted after becoming aware of the concerns and intentions of social services in respect of their children. What were their motivations for acting and once they had, how they experienced the ensuing relationship with their child's social worker and the assessment of them. The chapter explores how time was a crucial factor in the both the fathers' journey, and their relationship with the social worker and assessment of them.

1.3.5 Assessing the fathers: considering the negative factors of the father's lives.

Chapter Six is the first of two findings chapters that address the second research question in respect of how the social workers experienced and negotiated their involvement with, and assessment of the fathers' capacity to be their child's potential full-time carer. In this chapter, considering the data interview for the seven social workers, the negative aspects of the father's past and present behaviour and lives are considered, in particular their past violent behaviour and drug use, and their present emotional presentation and responses. A number of the findings in this chapter will be considered in relation to the professional discretion that the social workers exercised in their assessment of the fathers and how this discretion often led them to be in conflict with other professionals involved in the child's life. This chapter will also consider where the data for the social workers considered the negative behaviour of fathers favourably, in conjunction with their construction of the 'bad' mother.

1.3.6 Assessing the fathers: considering the positive factors of the father's lives.

Chapter Seven, again using the data interview of the social workers, explores where the social workers reflected on their observations of the positive aspects of the fathers' behaviour and lives. The chapter will explore how the social workers observed and understood the love and intimacy between the fathers and their children, the fathers commitment to their child through their willing to change their lives and how the fluidity of their fathering and their family practices and displays appeared to facilitate the transition and accommodation of the child into the existing family structure.

1.3.7 How the fathers positioned themselves as fathers, and experienced the primary caring role for their children

In this final findings chapter, I return to the interview data for the fathers to address the third research question in how the fathers position themselves as fathers and how this impacted

upon their ability to become potential full-time carers for their children. Encapsulating wider issue of gender and parenting in society. This chapter identifies how several fathers struggled with the idea of being their child's primary carer as they adhered to a traditional role of the father as a secondary parent to the mother. Whereas other fathers took on a more pragmatic position as seeing parents as interchangeable in their child's lives, especially at points of crisis and need. The chapter finally explores where the fathers reflected on the challenges, benefits and changes to their lives through them taking on the primary caring role for their children.

1.3.8 Conclusions and recommendations

In Chapter Nine I summarise and conclude the thesis by first reflecting on the three research questions, documenting what has been learnt about each of them throughout the thesis and reiterating the main findings. I then reflect upon the limitations of the study before suggesting how the findings of the study may inform, and improve, social work practice with fathers before providing recommendations for future research in this area.

Chapter Two:

Contemporary fathering, masculinity, and non-resident fathering

2.1 Introduction

In order to identify what is already known about the existing research, and the nature of the key debates in which your field is situated, an exploration of the existing literature is essential (Punch, 2014). A systematic review of the literature allows the development of central research questions for the study, and how the study will contribute to the existing knowledge base (Ridley 2012). The research strategy for this, and the following literature review chapter, was similar in structure and process. Searches were carried out on the following databases: The Web of Science, Social Care Online, SCOPUS, Social Services Abstracts, Community Care Inform Children, Social Policy and Practice. These were accessed through the online libraries for both Cardiff University and Leeds Beckett University. Additional searches were conducted using Google and Google Scholar to identify relevant internet based published reports, as well as book chapters, thesis and articles. A snowballing technique was also adopted where reference lists for all articles were checked for further relevant studies.

The databases were searched using Boolean search terms. A challenge in using the Boolean approach, as identified in section 1.1, was the numerous terms that I had to use to describe fathers and fathering, non-resident father, social services and child protection. The literature search also involved periodically checking the following journals for any new, relevant publications:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Child Abuse Review | Men and Masculinities |
| The British Journal of Social Work | Sociology |
| Children and Youth Services Review | Fathering |
| Families, Relationships and Societies | The Journal of Men's Studies. |
| Qualitative Social Work | Journal of Family Issues |
| Child & Family Social Work | |

This chapter considers two interrelated areas, firstly, an exploration of contemporary literature on fathering in Western societies considering the theoretical underpinnings around gender, parenting and fathering. It was identified in the previous chapter that the construction of women in society posits them as the primary care providers for children, leading to a moral positioning where fathers enjoy the option of not providing direct care to their children (Philip

2014). The purpose of reviewing this literature was therefore to explore that when fathers adopt a more nurturing and direct caring role with their children, how they negotiate this change in respect of the concept of hegemonic masculinity of the traditional role of fathers as breadwinners. The second part of this chapter will consider literature that has considered the specific challenges faced by fathers who do not live with their children on a full-time basis.

2.2 Intimate fathering or ‘putting food on the table?’

In the UK context, the term ‘involved fathering’ first emerged in the 1980s to depict a new breed of fathers who place practical care, nurturing and co-parenting above the traditional breadwinner role (Machin 2015). However, scholars have argued that there is a gap between the culture and conduct of fathers (LaRossa 1997) in which the behaviours of fathers are often out of step with the discourse of involved fathering, thus resulting in a ‘lagged adaptation’ (Miller 2011b). LaRossa (1988; 1997) has consistently argued that although the practice of involved fathering is on the increase, ultimately this change has been somewhat minimal and has “...largely occurred within a single group- the middle classes” (LaRossa 1988 p. 456).

It is vitally important to question whether this gap between culture and conduct stems from a reluctance on the behalf of men to assume the mantle of involved fatherhood, or, alternatively, whether there are other more personal, societal or economic reasons for this observed disjunction (Machin 2015). To address this question in the UK context, a number of qualitative longitudinal studies have explored the experiences of first-time fathers in their transition to fatherhood. Before unpacking these studies in detail, it is instructive to first define what is meant precisely by the term ‘involved father’.

As part of a study examining how fathers combined their employment and family life, Dermott (2003; 2008) interviewed twenty-five predominately white fathers in heterosexual relationships, who were living in the same households as their children. The study purposively recruited high-earning fathers in professional/managerial positions, based on the rationale that this target group had greater choice over how to balance their home life and employment as money was not the primary motivator for organising and conducting their family life.

The interview data presented a number of salient dimensions which the fathers considered to be representative of involved fathering, namely an openness with one’s emotions, expressing affection and building close relationships with one’s children. Dermott (2008), drawing upon the previous work of Jamieson (1999) suggest that these descriptions were strongly associated with the concept of intimacy. Dermott (2003) put forward a pertinent argument regarding

whether the breadwinner role should be framed as a wholly negative position for men to identify with. Questioning whether the role needs to be reconsidered in light of many potential ways of being involved as a father, and also within a broader understanding of the ‘involved’ father. As Dermott (2003) suggests:

“In trying to characterise the demise of one notion of fatherhood and the rise of another in its place, the counterpoising of ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ is often transposed to ‘involved’ versus ‘breadwinner’ thereby implying that involvement is something distinct from the role of economic provisioning” (p.45).

As one can discern above, the term ‘involved’ thus becomes synonymous with the positive attributes of an engaged father and counterposed to the negative connotations associated with the uninvolved and detached father (Dermott 2003). Interestingly, there appears to be an inherent conflict within contemporary discourses in the UK apropos fathers, insofar as normative ideas about good fathers espouse notions of involved fatherhood, while, simultaneously, valorising the economically productive male worker (Miller 2011b).

Resonating with Dermott’s work (2003), three more qualitative longitudinal studies that focus on fathers’ experiences of transitioning to first time fatherhood have explored the disjuncture between the desire to be involved fathers and the reality with respect to their experiences of fatherhood.

One of these studies commenced in 2005, two years after the introduction of statutory paternity leave in the UK and finished in 2009. Miller (2010b, 2011a, 2011b) interviewed seventeen fathers aged between 24 to 39 years of age, all of whom were white and in full-time skilled employment. The researcher interviewed the fathers on four occasions prior to and following the birth of their child, with the final interview taking place around their child’s second birthday. Miller (2011a) observed in their interviews with fathers that when their children were 9-10 months and two years of age that:

“All the men are now practiced in hands-on caring as well as providing in economic ways for their children. The caring practices which have become a ‘new normal’ part of everyday life continue to fill the spaces around their working day and/or evenings” (Miller 2011a pg.374).

Similarly, Machin (2015) longitudinal study in the UK explored the potential societal and professional barriers to fathers fulfilling the involved role. The study sampled fifteen first-

time fathers aged over 18 who were all in full-time employment and lived with both their partner and child. The study utilised questionnaires and semi-structured interviews exploring the experiences of fathers over an eight-month period from seven months' gestation to six-month post-birth. Similar to Dermott (2003), the study revealed that the fathers believed that involved fathering was characterised by presence, practical care and nurturance and affection. Furthermore, the study found that one of the constitutive components of involved fathering was the concept of the father as a co-parent providing equal care and emotional support following the birth of their child.

Machin (2015) wholly accepts that the findings from such a small sample are by no means conclusive. Nonetheless, apropos the disjunction between the expectation and reality of involved fathering, she purports that alongside any potential lack of desire on behalf of the fathers to fulfil the role, other factors may also limit their ability to fulfil this desire. This was especially significant in the initial period following childbirth, such as, amongst other things, the economic necessity to work, limited paternity leave as well as biological and developmental factors around the care of the child.

In a recent qualitative longitudinal study, Neale and Davies (2016) followed thirty-one young fathers from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds in England as they navigated their way through both fatherhood and their Education, Employment and Training (EET) trajectories. A recurrent theme in the fathers' accounts was the value placed upon earning and caring as core attributes of fatherhood, which were espoused irrespective of either the relationship that the men actually had with their child's mother or whether they resided with the child or not. More specifically, it was found that:

“Providing for their children was a ‘given’, but the account reveals the importance attached to ‘being there’ in a loving personal relationship with a child. Indeed, these roles were intertwined: being a provider was inextricably bound up with being ‘close’ to [their] child” (Neale and Davies 2016 pg. 89).

The longitudinal qualitative study from Bailey (2015) of first-time fathers in Ireland, delineates their often negative experiences collectively as a ‘patriarchal deficit’. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty first-time fathers—all of whom were white and in full-time employment in the managerial and professional sectors—both prior to and after the birth of their children, in order to gain insight into their experiences and attitudes. The study specifically considered the experiences of fathers within two environments, namely the maternity hospital and their workplace, in which the researcher

concluded the fathers experienced exclusion and marginalization. Most notably, the study found that despite policies encouraging their involvement, the attitudes of medical staff and hospital regulations ultimately served to curtail the fathers' engagement with the pregnancy and birth. In addition, the fathers expressed losing out on time with their children when they returned to work, and that the demands and expectations of the workplace limited their ability to support their partners with childcare. Bailey (2015) concluded that:

“...despite the workplace and institutional structural barriers, resulting in a ‘patriarchal deficit’ for many fathers, this group of men strive to mitigate the deficit through various strategies and compromises” (p.4).

It can argued that a reframing and renegotiating of fathering identity has taken place in recent decades. Although the emotional connection between fathers and their children is by no means necessarily a recent phenomenon, this is not to say that these shifts are not indicative of a ‘new’ type of fathering; rather, the demise of the breadwinner role as the primary identity marker for fathers has led to the emergence of the need for emotional connection as the central component of fathering identity (Dermott 2003). In addition, what is also ‘new’ in this respect is that it is now more culturally acceptable for men to both feel and express these emotions (Dermott and Miller 2015). Therefore, the desire for first-time fathers to balance the tension between being an involved father and the chief economic provider is a common finding in extant studies on first-time fathering (Henwood and Proctor 2003; Miller 2010b; Bailey 2015; Gatrell et al. 2015).

Whilst it has been suggested, as can be seen that a fathers level of intimacy and involvement with their child is determined and influenced by wider societal pressures, a number of academics have suggested the role adopted by a father with their child is made at a more individual level, which will be explored in the next section.

2.3 Reflexive fathering

Westering (2015) implies that the relationship between child and their father is not developed and negotiated via the practical challenges of everyday life, but rather that it was also chosen via the practices of agency and choice. As Westering put it:

“With regard to the theory of reflexive modernization, the father’s mode of relatedness can be understood as a product of individualization” (Westering 2015 pg. 219).

He further contends that although a father's mode of relatedness does not require a reciprocal response from their children, as the fathers in the study generally articulated fathering in terms of unconditional care and support and as revolving around "doing it *for* my child", their involvement with their children was not purely for the sake of their children alone, but rather appeared to be motivated by the relationship in itself. That is to say, the fathers were doing something "for their selves", with the father and child relationship becoming a constitutive part of their narrative accounts of who they are.

Williams (2008, 2011) conducted semi-structured interviews with forty fathers from four different socioeconomic backgrounds in south Wales, namely professionals, employed, unemployed and students, who were living in a variety of situations, such as being divorced, living in reconstituted families, or being lone parents, and three fathers who declared themselves as being homosexual. The study sought to gain insight into the perceptions and experiences of these fathers through having them explore their lives as fathers. Williams (2008) found that the changes in their fathering practices were the result of decisions they were compelled to make rather than choices that they sought to pursue. Although a number of men in the study retained a degree of attachment to the traditional breadwinner role, the majority understood that fathering now involves working closely with the mother to raise children and playing an active role in their children's lives.

The study also found that the fathers reflected on the fact that they differed from their own fathers, in terms of participating more in daily shared parenting duties, albeit the exact degree of involvement depended on their own family and social circumstances. Although many of the fathers in the study expressed a desire to be different from their own fathers apropos key aspects of their relationships with their children and partners, they also acknowledged that they have to be different if they are to maintain a relationship with their partners. As Williams (2008) notes:

"Changes in domestic arrangements are not without conflict, but the men recognize the problem of a failure to adapt as well as the benefits of adapting" (p. 501).

These points suggest that the traditional role of fathering has become less and less of an option due to changes in the roles within the family, for example, the additional income generated by mothers as well as the fact that being wholly detached from the caring role and domestic tasks is not as acceptable in contemporary society and family life. However, Williams (2008) emphasises that the fathers were reluctant to take on a more involved role. In this respect, he

saw their involvement as stemming more from a compulsory negotiation rather than any genuine desire on their part. This raises the question of whether academic research finds it difficult to accept the idea that fathers might somehow gain pleasure from taking care of their children. Indeed, the majority of the literature examines fathering as a functional as opposed to an emotional activity. However, Dermott (2003) posits that fathers advocate for greater involvement on the grounds that it both provides them with personal satisfaction and in an attempt to act in accordance with an emergent societal norm. Dermott (2003) suggests that there is no suggestion that adhering to this social norm either involves any imposition on fathers nor leads them to behave in ways that are contrary to their wishes. Rather, she argues that such adherence to the new norm of greater involvement is driven by fathers' own perception that they will procure pleasure and a sense of fulfilment from fathering practices. Williams (2008), drawing upon the work of Doucet (2006), raises a very persuasive and perhaps a pertinent issue to provide a motivation for non-resident fathers to care for their child is borderwork.

2.4 Borderwork

Doucet (2004) in her seminal study interviewed 102 Canadian predominantly middle-class fathers, 70 of whom had made the decision to become stay-at-home fathers. The remaining participants were single fathers, having been widowed or through agreeing to take on the care of the children following separation. Drawing upon the earlier writings about borderwork (Thorne 1993; Renold 1997), Doucet (2006a) coined the term to describe the occurrence when a father performs the activities affiliated to the mother, where 'spaces and times where intense gender differences are intensely perceived and experienced' (p. 42) she conceives border crossing as times where gender boundaries and barriers are deactivated and the gender divide can be successfully crossed. Doucet (2006) coined the term to describe instances in which fathers perform activities affiliated with mothers in "spaces and times where intense gender differences are intensely perceived and experienced" (p. 42). She conceives of border crossing as moments in which gender boundaries and barriers are deactivated, and the gender divide can be successfully crossed. Similar to the study of Doucet (2006a) the focus of this study was fathers who have successfully taken on the primary, and for the majority of fathers in this study, the sole care of their children, and so, as will be suggested in section 8.6, also negotiated the crossing of gendered borders. The fathers in both these studies also, it could be argued, challenged the socially constructed concepts of femininity and masculinity through adopting the primary carer role. Therefore, it is important to spend a little time, in the next section, examining these concepts through the literature.

2.5 Caring, Femininity Masculinity and Fathering

The intrinsic nature of care in social life has, for some time, been the focus of concern in the Social Sciences, with Feminist theorists in particular seeking to bring to prominence the problems that care creates for women (Hollway 1984; Gilligan 1993; Skeggs 1997). Care, it is argued, has been socially constructed in both the private and public sphere of society as archetypically feminine (Hanlon 2012), with care work been considered a “woman-specific concept” (Scambor et al. 2014 pg. 17). Lynch and Lyons (2009) suggests that through its association with women, who are also undervalued in society, to be a carer is to be materially and symbolically subordinated. Ironically, it is argued that the continuing existence of human life and society is dependent upon the myriad of acts and behaviours that constitute care (Elliott 2015). As Hanlon (2012) suggests:

“It is also valuable to consider care as an overarching concept because of how central care is to all human relationships “(Hanlon 2012 pg.18)

In the next chapter, I will consider how this thinking has permeated social work discourse through a dominant traditional perception of mothers being more able and natural care givers (Buckley 2003b; Featherstone 2009; Storhaug and Oien 2012). Consequently, parenting is seen as “women’s work” (Holland 2004 p.64) and fathers are predominantly viewed in the traditional role of economic provider, disciplinarian (Featherstone 2006) or secondary parent (Dufour et al. 2008).

Returning to the point of symbolic subordination, it is argued that the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 2000) is seen as a perpetual pattern of practices that allow men’s dominance over woman (Carrigan et al. 1985). It is also considered a hierarchal structure where other types of masculinities are subordinate to the hegemonic form (Butler 1990; Connell 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The concept describes a culturally dominant masculinity upheld by certain groups of men with a socially dominant position (Hearn 2004). Hegemonic masculinity has often been closely related to paid work, associated with over-performance and long hours at work (Langvasbraten and Teigen 2006). In relation to fathering, the notion of a ‘good father’ has traditionally been defined in British political discourse and policy-making as someone who is economically active in the labour market (Collier 2001), prescribing a norm of financial providers or breadwinners (Brandth and Kvande 2016). As Lupton and Barclay (1997) note:

“Men are generally still expected to participate fully in the economic sphere, to act as providers for their families, and are encouraged to construct their self-identity as masculine subjects through their work role” (p.2)

Although the utility of the concept has been questioned, the work of Connell (1995, 2000) continues to have persuasive influence on the study of men and masculinities (Anderson and Magrath 2019). An alternative type of masculinity, and relevant to this study, is caring masculinity and is based on care-giving roles for men (Scambor et al. 2014). Viewed as a gender equality intervention where it attempts to introduce and equate traditional feminists care values, attributes and behaviours into masculinities. (Hanlon 2009, 2012; Elliott 2015). Elliot (2015) argues that caring masculinities, which value positive emotions have important implications for men and women, and can enrich men’s lives in a number of positive ways: emotionally, psychologically, and thus providing a more nourishing and satisfying models of masculinity than hegemonic masculinity (Elliott 2015)

It has been argued that it not necessary for fathers to reject traditional forms of masculinity in favour of a caring masculinity or visa versa. Introduced in the previous section, the study of Doucet (2006b, 2018) found that fathers who had taken on the primary care for their children grappled with these traditional masculine sources of identity such as paid employment, which demonstrated how “...the long-shadow of hegemonic masculinity hangs over them” (Doucet 2004 pg. 279). Despite this Doucet (2004), argues that the fathers neither challenged or reproduced hegemonic masculinity, instead the fathers were in a unique position to create new kinds of masculinities through constantly moving between, and bringing together varied configurations of femininities and masculinities. For Doucet (2006a), “...men are, in fact, radically revisioning caring work, masculine conceptions of care, and ultimately our understandings of masculinities.” (pg.238) Similarly in the narrative study by Heslop (2016) in the UK, exploring how foster fathers negotiated their masculinity through their caring for the children in their care, it was found that the fathers’ narratives presented a complex picture where they constructed multiple masculinities through their experience of caring for the children in their care. Although the fathers reproduce traditional masculinity through performing roles such being a supporting carer to the foster mother, role modelling and disciplinarian. They also demonstrate roles that contrast with the stereotyped masculinity where instead they take on activities often associated with women, such as nurturing, providing close personal care and bonding with their foster children.

The limitations of the previous studies that have examined how fathers have negotiated the transition from employment to a more caring role with their children, is that they were married,

and/or living with their child and partner (Doucet 2006a; Pailhe and Solaz 2008; Miller 2010b, 2011b; Shirani et al. 2012; Strier 2014; Castrillo et al. 2020). In addition, for many of the fathers in these studies, becoming the primary caregiver was a *choice*, which led to them leaving employment to become a ‘stay at home’ father (Doucet 2004; Chesley 2011; Solomon 2014). Moreover, even when the fathers found themselves involuntarily unemployed, their partners were still employed and therefore provided both a source of income and additional care to the father (Strier 2014; Castrillo et al. 2020). The fathers who were single primary carers in Doucet’s (2006) study were from middle class backgrounds, and were either financially secure or had reached a comfortable position in their career progression prior to ceasing employment. As such the studies have failed to include from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds and different living arrangements

In the next section of this chapter, I will consider aspects of fathering that is specific to non-resident fathers, and the challenges that these fathers face in maintaining a relationship with their children.

2.6 Non-resident fathering: negotiation, contact and involvement

In the previous section fathering was considered through critically examining different models and approaches as well as its relationship with the contested concept of masculinity. These studies predominantly concentrate on how fathers negotiate and experience their role whilst living with both their child and the child’s mother. In the present chapter, I explore relevant research studies in an attempt to understand some of the experiences, feelings and challenges associated with fathering that are specific to non-resident fathers generally as well as the non-resident fathers in this study. This literature also provides a platform for understanding both how this has impacted upon non-resident fathers’ physical and emotional proximity to their child and their motivation for taking the further step, when given the opportunity, to become the sole carers for their children.

There is a relative dearth of research that specifically explores and captures the actual lived experiences and feelings of non-resident fathers post-separation and divorce, especially within the UK. Therefore, international research studies from the Netherlands, Canada, The United States and Australia were explored for the purposes of this research, all of which suggest a strong degree of consistency with respect to the experiences of non-resident fathers across Western society.

One positive aspect that emerged out of the exploration of research in this area was that the majority of studies used narrative and life story interviews as methods of data production for exploring the experiences of non-resident fathers. It is important for research in this area to continue to be undertaken in order to develop the current body of knowledge and understanding (Kruk 1994; Zaroni et al. 2014; Clapton and Clifton 2016).

2.6.1 The fathers' journeys to non-residency

The thirteen fathers that participated in this study (see Appendix 4), much like other fathers in wider society, all had different experiences of, and journeys to, being their child's non-resident father. This is reflected in research studies that have found that non-resident fathers' experiences of becoming and living are often ambiguous, complex, and multifaceted (Hamer 2001; Pasley and Minton 2001; Olmstead et al. 2009; Kruk 2010, 2011).

When considering separation and divorce as one route to non-residency, despite emergent political interest in establishing equal post-separation parenting via the implementation of recent gender-neutral legislation and policy, the gendered model of parenting both remains structurally and normatively powerful (Philip 2013) and continues to be adopted by the majority of parents in the wake of separation and divorce (Blackwell and Dawe 2003; Kielty 2006). Indeed, it has been found that fathers are habitually elected as non-resident by default due to both parents' adherence to the assumption that this is what will eventually happen (Bradshaw et al. 1999b; Kielty 2006), with the father often retaining the supporting role. As Philip (2014) suggests:

“...gendered patterns of caring become fault-lines for the reorganization of parental roles and responsibilities following separation or divorce” (p. 421).

While it remains unknown precisely how many fathers are non-resident either as a result of separation or divorce, or because they have never lived with their children, according to data from the Office for National Statistics, in 2013 there were 1.9 million lone parent families with dependent children in the UK, which represented an increase from 1.8 million in 2003 (ONS 2012, 2013). Of this number it is estimated that around 97% of parents who engage in primary care for their children are mothers (DWP 2010; Poole et al. 2013). These figures therefore suggest that a large number of fathers both live apart from and do not have primary

care responsibilities for their children. A further finding from the study by (Poole et al. 2013) is that 71% of the fathers who had non-resident children did not live with other dependent children. Moreover, the study found that 46% of fathers with non-resident dependent children were not living with a child or a partner and therefore lived on their own. This was mirrored to some extent in the recruitment of fathers for this doctoral study, where in fact 92% of the fathers on my study were living on their own as a non-resident father when they took on the care of their children.

2.6.2 Remaining in contact - challenges and opportunities

The issue of establishing ongoing contact between children and their non-resident fathers has long evoked a strong negative moral, social and political response in the UK, which has been fuelled to some extent by commentary regarding the potential detrimental effects upon children of growing up without a father (Hall 2001; Antrobus 2012; Davis 2016). These debates have engendered a plethora of often pejorative terms for such fathers, including, amongst other things, absent, abandoning, disengaged, deadbeat, feckless, or visiting father (Blankenhorn 1995; Hamer 2001; Pasley and Minton 2001; Johnson 2007). Surprisingly, despite such reactions, there has been a relative dearth of research studies conducted in the UK pertaining to the frequency, type, and quality of contact between children and their non-resident fathers. Moreover, the few studies that have been conducted invariably rely upon proxy measures, specifically around non-resident fathers. The consequence of this is that there is a lack of knowledge concerning both the number of men who have different types of relationships with their children and their personal characteristics (Kiernan 2006; Corlyon et al. 2009; Poole et al. 2013).

However, the study by Poole et al. (2013), which formed part of a wider ERSC funded project entitled *Fathers, Work and Families in Twenty-First century Britain: Beyond the Breadwinner Model?*, is an exception in this regard. The authors found that 87% of the non-resident fathers in their study stated that they continue to have contact with their children, with 49% having regular contact on weekends and during school holidays. This is consistent with the findings of Bradshaw et al. (1999b), who found that 47% of the non-resident fathers they surveyed reported seeing their children at least once a month. However, Poole et al. (2013) noted that researchers should exercise caution with respect to potential misreporting, as resident parents often underestimate their level of contact, while conversely, non-resident fathers overestimate their level of contact. Their study also generated some useful findings with regard to the

contact that non-resident fathers experience with their children. With respect to how the non-resident fathers in their study described their relationship with their children, 81% of them claimed to have either a very or quite close relationship with their non-resident children, while 11% stated that they are not close at all. As expected, one could argue that there is a strong association between the level of contact and the closeness of the relationship between the non-resident fathers and their children. Although not conclusive by any means, these findings suggest that non-resident fathers do not necessarily conform to the prevailing notion of absent or “feckless fathers” (Johnson 2007 pg.1), following separation. Indeed, research has estimated that only 10% or (Blackwell and Dawe 2003) or 13% (Poole et al. 2013) of non-resident fathers have no contact at all with their children in the UK.

In the studies in the UK from Wilson et al. (2004) and (Philip 2014) into the experiences of non-resident fathers, both studies reporting a pertinent and consistent moral response from fathers with respect to the idea of discontinuing contact with their children following their separation. In both studies, the fathers consistently laid claim to a moral identity by describing themselves as men who had maintained contact with their children. While accepting that disengagement was potentially a justifiable strategy that many men in their situation might endorse, they simultaneously distanced themselves from such fathers. Philips (2013) argues that moral identity is an intrinsic part of being a father in most contemporary Western societies, and, albeit in different ways, it is at risk due to separation and divorce.

2.6.3 Living and caring as a non-resident father

It has been found that pre-divorce fathering does not necessarily prepare fathers for fathering post-separation due to the gendered model of parenting, which results in the fathers having little direct experience of caring for their child when they resided with them. This in turn, serves to position mothers as the primary, and the fathers as supporting carers. Within this model of parenting, fathers are connected with their children through their relationship with their wives, with the mother mediating the father’s relationship with their children via monitoring, supervising and delegating certain tasks to fathers (Smart and Neale 1999b; Pasley and Minton 2001). In addition, studies have also shown that resident mothers can act as a barrier to fathers’ ability to undertake an authoritarian role following separation, by virtue of the fact that they mediate non-resident fathers’ knowledge of their children (Philip 2014) and via the imposition of rules and routines that have been predetermined and formalised at resident mothers’ homes (Olmstead et al. 2009). In this respect, non-resident fathers need to be proactive in re-negotiating their role as fathers and even negotiating new guidelines for contact and interaction (Roy and Smith 2013).

It has been suggested that authoritative parenting is beneficial to children, specifically the combination of emotional warmth and discipline and the provision of practical support with everyday problems and moral issues. However, it is argued that this is difficult to actualise for non-resident fathers insofar as it requires high levels of availability and engagement, which is simply not possible due to time restrictions of contact arrangements (Amato and Sobolewski 2004; Troilo and Coleman 2012). As suggested by Roy and Smith (2013):

“Living with a child provides a sense of momentum and routine, both of which have to be recreated every week for non-resident fathers” (p. 329).

Consequently, when fathers do have contact as the sole carer for their children on a one-to-one basis they often find it challenging and difficult to establish meaningful ways to relate to them (Dermott 2016; Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaraniemi 2019). As aforementioned, an expedient study for exploring the experiences and practices of non-resident fathers following separation and divorce was conducted in England by Philip (2014). This qualitative study involved narrative interviews with a cross-sectional sample of twenty-three previously resident biological fathers. The interviews aimed to explore the narratives of post-separation fathers who had identified themselves as remaining in contact with their children over time and across households, in order to reveal the processes of negotiation and sustaining both co-parental and father-child relationships. Philip (2014) found that not only does a lack of time impact upon fathers’ ability to adopt their desired role it also impacts upon their domestic space. Specifically, the need for suitable accommodation extended beyond a mere physical place to instead represent a more symbolic meaning of ‘home’, that is, a space where fathering could take place through providing resources for routine activities and emotional closeness (Philip 2014).

It has been found that, due to time restraints and limited space non-resident fathers engage in “recreational parenting” (Amato and Dorius 2010 pg.189), which is characterised by spending time watching movies and sporting events. While the portrayal of non-resident fathers as “Disneyland Dads” (Arditti 1995) has received broad attention within commentary around non-resident fathering, it has been argued that in the absence of factual knowledge about what non-resident fathers actually do, there is a tendency to assume that non-resident fathers adhere to this role of parenting as an extension of “typical gendered parental roles” (Kielty 2006), whereas in fact there is some evidence that non-resident fathers do not merely want to be the “supplier of treats” (Philip 2014, p. 224). Moreover, Jenkins (2006) identified in their study of non-resident fathering in Australia, that there is a lack of research examining both the extent

and salience of leisure in non-residential parenting. Jenkins argues for a more positive construct of leisure as an activity between children and their father to be considered.

2.6.4 The transformative nature of caring as a non-resident father

In contrast to the pejorative depictions of non-resident fathering discussed above, studies have found that non-residency can in fact have a positive and transformative effect on fathering. For example, Philip (2013) found that the concept of transformation was present amongst fathers who cared for their children at weekends or periods of school holidays, due, in part, to the intensification stemming from feeling solely responsible for their children as well as the fact that their time was limited together, which, in turn, made them more attentive and available to their children. Similarly, Kruk (1994) found that fathers who were less attached to their children when they lived with them enjoyed a more positive relationship with them post-separation, purporting that:

“... within the confines of non-custodial fatherhood, to spend time alone with their children in more intense and meaningful ways and thus were presented with the opportunity to develop stronger bonds with their children than they had before the divorce” (p.20).

This point will be returned to in one of the findings chapters in section 8.6.2, where I discuss how being the sole carer for their children induced a transformative effect upon fathers’ abilities and approaches to caring.

2.6.5 The emotional challenges of non-residency

Alongside the practical challenges associated with being the non-resident parent, research has also demonstrated that fathers experience strong negative emotions. Firstly, a number of studies have considered the grief and sense of loss that is experienced by fathers who become non-resident through separation or divorce, and examined how this impacted on both their role and subsequent involvement in their child’s lives. Hallman et al. (2007) observed that the fathers in their study talked about feelings of loss from not seeing their children on a day-to-day basis. These feelings were more pronounced during the period of separation, and although some fathers noted that these feelings diminished over time, they also shared that they continued to experience a sense of loss.

In America, Mercadante et al. (2014) found that immediately after separation, fathers typically experienced either minimal or no input into the care arrangements of their children. This led to precipitant experiences of grief following different losses, including, amongst other things, the loss of a care routine with their children, the loss of their fathering role and, the loss of connection from their children. Troilo and Coleman (2012) showed that although each separated non-resident father in their study experienced the same stressful life events, their subsequent responses spanned along a continuum from completely disengaging from their children to increasing their involvement. They suggested that these responses were dependent upon the salience of the role that each father experienced prior to the separation, with fathers with highly salient nurturing roles ultimately remaining more involved with their children than those that displayed less salient nurturing roles. Studies by (Kruk 1994, 2010, 2011) in Canada and Scotland also found that the majority of fathers appeared to experience a grieving process following their separation, as a result of the loss of both day-to-day contact and the father-child attachment. Kruk (2011, p. 12) observed that:

“This grief, characterized by reactions of shock and denial, bargaining, anger and depression, was reported to be directly connected to fathers’ experience of child absence and loss of parental identity”.

Furthermore, this study found that non-resident fathers who reported being highly attached to their children and who undertook a nurturing role were more likely to lose contact with their children post-divorce due to the grieving process being highly problematic, whereas fathers who had previously been on the periphery of their children’s lives were more likely to remain in contact. The study found that the fathers experienced heightened post-traumatic stress due to greater awareness over the negative impact that their absence from the home was having upon their children, while having no agency to be there for them (Kruk 2011).

2.6.6 The importance of relationality, kinship networks and family practices

One area of the analytical framework adopted in the study by Philip (2013) concerned the concept of relationality. This concept helped to shed light on the fact that fathers needed to preserve their position of father through their continued relationship with their children and mother. This was achieved as a result of their connections with others, but not necessarily in collaboration with others, as the fathers reported being part of a complex network of people and organisations involved in their children’s lives (Philip 2013, p. 413). Alongside this, given that part of the fathers’ identities was enacted through fathering practices in private settings, the study also found that it was important to do this in more public and social settings. One

such setting was their child's school, which a number of fathers reported seeing as a place in which it was both possible and desirable to exercise their parental responsibility and 'display' fathering; accordingly, "school was related to their sense of self, moral identity and social status" (Philip 2014, p. 225).

Roy and Smith (2013) also considered the influence and impact of relationships and connections on children and their non-resident fathers following separation. Adopting a life course perspective, their study undertook retrospective life history interviews with 146 low-income fathers in Chicago, who were demonstrating their commitment to maintaining involvement with their child and were attending community-based fathering programmes. The sample consisted of 29 European-American men, 19 Latino men and 96 African American men. The aim of the study was to explore how non-resident fathers navigate and negotiate their new parental responsibilities through kinship relationships, and how these relationships subsequently shape non-resident fathering.

The study adopted the standpoint that rather than being an individual endeavour, fathering instead rests upon a network of social arrangements and kinship relationships, which are primarily created and subsequently maintained through female relatives from both the maternal and paternal family. Roy and Smith (2013) describe such 'kin work' (p. 321) as a desire to perpetuate their wider family, with its role being to:

“...regenerate families, maintain lifetime continuities, sustain intergenerational responsibilities, and reinforce shared values” (p. 322).

The study found that within families and communities with limited resources the sustaining of kin care for children was crucial, with a number of families often working together to nurture and care for children. The fathers were unclear about the expectations and understanding of their role in their child's life following separation. They sought support and guidance from family who reciprocally assessed the father's conduct and abilities to live up to the responsibility of caring for their children. In this way, this 'kin work' provided the moral ground rules for how fathers should conduct themselves with their children, through "clear messages on responsibility and the sanctions for irresponsibility" (Roy and Smith 2013 p. 328).

Adopting a life course approach aids the identification of the fluidity and changing nature of both non-resident fathering as well as the kinship relationships where:

“...non-resident fathers also shape kin systems, as men opt to recommit and adopt to the challenges that parenting outside of residence and marriage may present” (Roy and Smith 2013 p. 332).

It is difficult to ascertain how transferrable these findings are with regard to comparing low-income fathers from a predominantly African American community in Chicago to my sample of low-income white European fathers in communities in the North of England. Whether such close kinship relationships and networks with the collective desire to or whether families are much defragmented and distant from each other. However, it is interesting to consider how fathers' kinship relationships with their maternal and paternal family could govern their access and opportunities for continued involvement with their children.

The notion of family routines continuing and being undertaken after separation was also considered in a study in the Netherlands by Bakker and Mulder (2015). The study involved undertaking narrative interviews with thirty-five separated parents in order to gain insight into their experiences of their family life following divorce or separation. In the Netherlands, it has been recorded that of single parent families, 74% of children live with their mother and have contact with their non-resident father on a regular basis, with a further 20% of parents having a shared residency arrangement in which the children live with both parents and the care for the children is shared equally. The study was underpinned by the concept that a family is constructed by its members practicing 'family life', in particular the practicing of routines and rituals.

“Whereas family routines are instrumental to family organisation, rituals provide a sense of belonging and emotional exchange among family members” (Bakker and Mulder 2015 p. 367).

The authors stress the importance of rituals representing an identity for a family by virtue of providing continuity in meaning. The study found three distinct post-separation types of family emerging from the data, the first was 'continuing family life' where both parents had found an amicable position in their separation, with no blame being apportioned by either party. Rather, they were morally obligated to their children and sought to minimise the impact of their perceived failure of their relationship upon their children. In this particular situation, family routines were alternatively practiced with each parent separately, with many of the pre-separation rituals being practiced jointly with the parent. The second type of family, which the authors refer to as 'building a new life', was the most common arrangement, and involved the children living full-time with the mother and visiting their non-resident father regularly.

Both parents, although still holding onto some joint obligation towards their children as their parents, were committed to building a new life and family without the involvement of the previous partner. The consequence of this was that as well as routines being practiced separately in both families, rituals were also carried out separately.

2.7 Summary

This chapter has, through exploring relevant literature, considered a number of the theoretical underpinnings, and approaches to understanding contemporary fathering in Western Society. It has considered the findings of studies that have sought to capture the experiences of fathers as they balance employment with a providing care for their children, considering whether, and how they negotiated the traditional breadwinner role with that of a more involved and 'hands on father'. Within this discussion it was suggested that a reconsideration of the breadwinner role is needed, moving away from the present negative construct to consider it in a more positive aspect of fathering, where it is permitted to be considered as a father's demonstration of love and care for this child through financial provision. Through the studies of Williams (2008, 2011) and Westering (2015) it was proposed that fathering, and the relationship between father and their child is not necessarily dependent upon wider societal constructs of fathering, but is the result of fathers constructing their role as a father on a much more individual basis, driven not only by the needs of their own family, but also as a result them seeking and enjoying a closer caring, and nurturing relationship, with their child.

In considering the study of Doucet (2006) and the concept of borderwork, the chapter considers how fathers have responded to leaving employment and taking on the primary caring role for their child. Considering the role of the contested concept of masculinity in this new role, whether fathers still yearn to fulfil the dominant hegemonic masculinity or embrace a more caring masculinity in their day to day lives

The second part of the chapter explored the literature that has considered the challenges and opportunities faced by non-resident fathers. It was identified that the challenges to remaining in contact with their child, and enjoying a positive relationship for a non-resident father can be challenging on an emotional and practical level. It was identified, however that the non-resident role for many fathers can be a positive enjoyed a more positive relationship time was limited together, which, in turn, made them more attentive and available to their children (Kruk 1994; Phillip 2013)

It has been highlighted, that despite, some suggestions of a shift, the care of children still remains predominantly the responsibility of mothers in the UK. An example of this can be seen when parents separate, or when a child is born to non-cohabiting parents, studies have shown that, in the majority of cases, the mother assumes the primary caring role. Although the chapter has shown that fathers do, on the whole demonstrate a desire to remain in contact with their children, often through adversity, they retain the choice as to the level of contact they will continue to have contact with their child, if any. It could be argued that fathers ultimately are under no moral obligation from wider society to care for, or continue to have contact with their child. The only obligation they have towards their child is financial, via enforcement through the Child Support Act 1991 and the Child Maintenance Service . It is argued that mothers are not accorded the same level of fluidity and choice with their parenting in society, and, moreover, there is a danger that this serves to mask the detrimental emotional and financial impact that some fathers' behaviour has upon children and mothers when they no longer to part of their child's lives. It was these issues that led, in part, to the creation of the first part of one of the research questions in this study;

What were the fathers' motivations for becoming the full-time carer for their children, and what were the fathers' experiences of involvement with social services

If fathers are under no wider societal expectation and moral obligation to take on the primary care for their children , I wanted to discover what in particular was different about the fathers in this study. These fathers, it could be argued, challenged the gendered model of parenting (Philip 2013) through their actions. Therefore, it was important to understand what were their motivations were for agreeing to take on this role. These issues were also important in the development of the third research question, which was:

How did the non-resident fathers position themselves as fathers and how did this impact upon their ability to become potential full-time carers for their children?

This research question was also fuelled by the findings of studies that have explored how fathers position themselves, and deal with the pressures to uphold a traditional provider, and also fulfil the 'involved' father role, and what function, the concept of hegemonic masculinities had within this positioning. I wanted to discover, through the fathers' retrospective accounts, how they had positioned themselves as fathers prior to taking on the care of their children, whether this was factor in their motivation, and ability to adjust in

becoming their child' primary carer, and whether there had been any changes in their positioning following this phenomena.

In the summary section of the following literature review chapter (see section 3.5) I will identify where the literature pertaining to the engagement and involvement of fathers in child protection, also guided and formed the research questions in this study.

Chapter three:

Fathers and Child Protection Practice

3.1 Introduction

This second literature review chapter will look at the relevant literature that has considered where social workers, involved in child protection, have consistently failed to engage and involve the fathers, as a consequence of constructing the mother as the primary carer for children, and through the actual and perceived violence of men, and the construction of dangerous masculinities. As this study was situated in UK, the majority of the studies emanated from this country, some studies however, were included from countries where the social services that were similar in their purpose and structure to that in UK; predominantly in Europe and North America. This is expedient in demonstrating common themes relating to the engagement with fathers in child protection across Western Society.

When considering the inclusion of literature in respect of timescales, it became apparent in the literature search that there was a natural commencement to studies examining the issue of gender in child protection practice in the UK in late 1980s and early 1990s, through the initial work of Parton and Parton (1988), Milner (1993), and O'Hagan and Dillenburger (1995). Therefore, I have presented what I consider to be pertinent research studies and commentary, where possible, in a chronological order in order to demonstrate both the persistence of these issues and the development of the knowledge base in this area. Presenting the literature in this manner also allows the reader different research participants recruited, and research methods adopted in studies over the past thirty years

Although the exclusion of fathers from child protection social work practice has been identified as a problem within international studies, it will be identified in this chapter that few scholars have explicitly recruited fathers as participants in their own right and explored their experiences of this process (Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer 2003; Storhaug and Sobo-Allen 2018). Instead, the majority of studies have recruited professionals and looked at their perspectives and experiences of working with fathers, or utilised information about fathers through interviewing the mothers of their children (Ashley et al. 2006; Shapiro and Krysik 2010). Similarly, these studies are often conducted solely with mothers, or, alternatively, consider parents together rather than distinguishing between them (Zanoni et al. 2014). This has resulted in a continuing dearth of knowledge concerning fathers' role in child protection families worldwide (Bellamy 2009; Coady et al. 2012; Zanoni et al. 2013; Perez-Vaisvidovsky

et al. 2020). This also resulted in the need to widen my inclusion/exclusion criteria to include studies that looked at the engagement of social services with both parents.

The chapter will identify where this doctoral study is distinguishable to existing research studies and how it will contribute to the existing body of knowledge (Ridley 2012). The chapter will conclude through an explanation as to how the research questions developed from these two literature review chapters.

3.2 The years 1988-2000

Two dominant themes emerged through the first wave of studies, and have remained a constant in the literature since this time. The first concerned the existence of a clear gender bias towards mothers and mothering, and the second involved consideration of the risks that fathers pose to mothers and their children. With the latter, the literature has found that a paradox exists with regard to the risks that men pose through violence: on the one hand, social workers are required to assess the level of risk, whilst, on the other hand, this violence, whether actual or perceived, also acted as a barrier to this engagement and assessment.

The early study by Milner (1993) involved the author reflecting upon her recent experience of child protection investigation referrals, found that mothers were the social workers' primary focus of scrutiny, while fathers were pushed into the background. In the same study, Milner (1993) suggested that, although considered difficult and onerous, one of the tasks of social workers is to identify and challenge "dangerous" fathers. The study found, however, that social workers instead chose to adopt strategies to divert the attention towards the mother. It was also suggested that these procedures afforded little encouragement or support with this task because of gender bias:

"The procedures at no stage encourage or help the social worker to address the issue of male violence" (Milner 1993 p.59).

It was also during the early 1990's in England and Wales, through policy and practice guidance emanating from the Children Act 1989, that attempts were made to address this bias and achieve gender neutrality through the introduction of the term *parent* within childcare legislation and policy. This was designed to draw the attention of social workers towards parents as opposed to mothers alone (Thompson 2006). In practice, however, scholars have argued that this has been largely ineffective, insofar as it has done little or nothing to shift the focus away from the mother and, in fact, even may serve to obscure the gendered division of

childcare (Milner 1993; Whitfield and Harwood 1999; Scourfield 2001c; Brown et al. 2009). As Milner (1993) firmly asserted:

“... the term parenting although an attempt at gender neutrality, is nothing but an empty gesture. It is impossible to assess “good enough parenting” only “good enough mothering” (Milner 1993 pg.52).

Similarly, Parton and Parton (1988) argued that the new concept of parental responsibility introduced in the Children Act 1989 actually means “maternal responsibility” (p. 45). Further, O’Hagan and Dillenburg (1995) suggested that a consequence of women been constructed as the main carer for children, is that when concerns emerge about the care or control of the children, it is the mother, and not the father that is held accountable.

The study by Thoburn et al. (1995) considered social workers and parents’ experiences of the principles of partnership and participation during case conferences. Adopting a mixed-methods approach comprising interviews, questionnaires, and a case file examination of 220 cases that reached child protection conferences in seven local authorities, resulted in the interviewing of 94 parents in total, 73 of whom were resident and 21 non-resident (it was not stated how many of these were fathers). Two important themes emerged: firstly, a number of fathers in the study were difficult to engage with because they would avoid contact with social workers; and secondly, ironically it was noted, that when fathers did attend the initial conference, they were more likely to become engaged. The difference in this study was the slight shift in focus from viewing perpetrators of violence purely as a risk, and therefore as needing to be kept away from the mother and child, to involving them in the child protection process. Ultimately, what this was calling for then was a refocusing of practice:

“From the interviews it appeared that this more open style of practice has a greater chance of engaging fathers in the social work and protection process” (Thoburn et al. 1995 p.168)

While the O’Hagan (1997) paper *The Problem of Engaging Men in Protection Work* is not an empirical study, it is nevertheless a seminal piece of work which has been extensively and broadly cited. Its strength stems from the level of critical exploration not only into how social workers avoid fathers but also why they do so. O’Hagan (1997) critically reflected upon his own experience as a social worker, previous literature, and the findings of the inquiries into the child deaths in the 1970s and 1980s, and he posited that fathers are marginalised or ignored by social workers throughout all the stages of child protection procedures irrespective of the

gender of individual social workers, a finding which was also highlighted in later research (Scourfield 2001a, 2003, 2006a, 2006b). Therefore, despite the fact that the majority of frontline social workers were female, male colleagues were found to be just as likely to avoid fathers (O'Hagan 1997). This avoidance was found to occur consciously or unconsciously, ranging from organising meetings when fathers were less likely to be present or available, to avoiding interaction when they were in the same room. One possible explanation for this, which has received support from other studies, is that social workers avoid contact with fathers either out of fear of anticipated violence or intimidation that is fuelled by their own actual personal experiences, or through an acute awareness of potential violence experienced by colleagues or other professionals (Milner 1993; O'Hagan 1997). Another important factor raised by O'Hagan (1997) is that by ignoring fathers who have something to offer, social workers are overlooking potential assets and resources through which to support the child and deal effectively with the case (this issue will be discussed further in section 3.4).

The UK study by Farmer and Owen (1998) involved interviewing parents, older children, and key social workers from seventy-three cases registered at the initial case conference as well as once again twenty months later. The findings were consistent with previous studies in which:

“...even when abuse by men does lead to professional concern, there is a tendency for professional practice to revert to regulating women unless strenuous efforts are made to retain the focus on men” (pg. 559).

Similarly, a small-scale study by Whitfield and Harwood (1999) examined the principle of partnership with thirteen parents in child protection procedures, particularly parents' experiences of partnership following the referral, the investigation stage and child protection conference. Thirteen parents, seven mothers and six fathers, completed a questionnaire, of whom four were lone mothers and one was a lone father. This is a small sample, especially for a study employing questionnaires rather than in-depth interviews. However, the findings do support the suggestion that mothers both received more information about the child protection process and were included more in the stages than the fathers. The authors concluded that:

“Practice which does not include men in families holds women responsible for the safety and wellbeing of children, ignores issues of power and devalues the contribution men make in raising children” (Whitfield and Harwood 1999 pg.50).

The findings from the ethnographic PhD study in the UK in 1999 by Scourfield (2001a, 2002, 2003, 2006a, 2006b) lend further support to these earlier findings. This study involved the researcher being based in a social work team for a three-month period, where he observed talk, direct practice, conducted in-depth interviews with each team member, and analysed cases where children were on the child protection register. The study unearthed specific constructions of fathers existing within child protection practice:

“men as a threat, men as no use, men as irrelevant, men as absent, men as no different to women and men as better than women” (Scourfield 2001a p.76).

The study also found that mothers were the focus of inquiry by social workers and this level of scrutiny was both oppressive and unjust. This occurred both through and within the gendered occupational culture of child protection, which Scourfield (2006a) defines as:

“...the ways of thinking and talking about clients that are (and are not) acceptable in the culture of the team and also the approaches to assessing people and intervening that become taken for granted” (p. 443).

The same study found that fathers either did not participate in the care of the child or were frequently away from home, spending all the family’s money. This absence from the home was often deemed as a tactic through which to avoid engaging with social workers. Finally, deeming fathers as irrelevant referred to the legal status of a father, that is, when they did not have parental responsibility for the child and the mother did not want them to be involved, then social workers would then choose not to engage with the father (Scourfield 2001a, 2003). Similar to the experiences of O’Hagan (1997) the study also found that the gender of individual social workers had no impact on the lack of engagement with fathers.

Both the interest in the 1990s and the continued impetuosity to consider both the position and oppression of mothers as a parent in child protection practice were fuelled, in part, by the emergent influence of feminist writers in social work.³ Featherstone (1999) argued that mothers should be seen as subjects in their own right, rather than merely in terms of their impact upon their children. Despite the pervasiveness of the feminist consciousness within social work practice, decisions regarding the care of children still centred on the view that

³ For example, see Daniel (2000, 2005) Taylor & Daniel (1999, 2000), Featherstone (1997, 2003, 2006) Featherstone and Trinder (1997) and D’Cruz (2002)

women were ultimately responsible for children, while men were simply not expected to be responsible. In terms of my study, although mothers were neither its focus of, nor participants in the study, the issues highlighted above emerged out of the analysis of interviews with both fathers and social workers, and will be explored in section 6.3 of the third findings chapter.

However, the influence of feminist perspectives in social work has not always been viewed as a positive, especially with respect to the discourse of men as a threat within social work practice.. It is argued that the intensity of the belief in this particular discourse is the result of the influence of feminist perspectives and explanations of men's violence that have not only permeated social work practice (O'Hagan 1997; Scourfield 2001a) but also attained hegemonic status within the profession (Featherstone and Trinder 1997). As Featherstone et al. (2007) suggest:

“The growth in attention by feminists to men's violent and abusive behaviour did little to support more positive or expansive constructions of men” (p. 32)

Featherstone (2003) argues that such suspicions are often based upon potential rather than actual behaviour. While it is readily acknowledged that these constructs of dangerous fathers and the risk they pose to children and mothers reflect a concrete reality, and, as such, should by no means be minimised (Scourfield 2001a, 2006b), Featherstone (2003) argues that:

“In terms of men who are physically violent the notion of a universal threat that appears to feed social work discourses also needs deconstructing” (p.250).

3.3 The years 2001 – 2010

The study from Ferguson and Hogan (2004) in Ireland is important to explore here, not only because of its findings but also because it interviewed fathers, including a number of non-resident fathers, who had worked with social workers. The qualitative study interviewed twenty-four fathers, twelve mothers, twelve children and twenty professionals. Like a number of previous studies, it was found that both fathers and social workers reported on the exclusion of fathers' involvement, and that:

“The dynamics of such exclusion took many forms, the most common and powerful of which was a view of men as dangerous, non-nurturing beings...Some men were excluded from being worked with and seen as possibly caring fathers simply on the

basis of their appearance and perceived lifestyles, such as men who had tattoos, bulked up physiques, skinheads and who did hard physical violence prone work such as a ‘bouncer’ or ‘security’” (Ferguson and Hogan 2004 p.8).

It has been argued that perpetuating such powerful embodied images of dangerous men discourages any kind of meaningful engagement from social workers with such men (Scourfield 2001a; Featherstone 2003; Ferguson and Hogan 2004). The study also found that not only did the occupational culture (Scourfield 2001a, 2002, 2003) impact on social workers’ engagement with fathers but also the workers’ own personal biographies, including how they were parented, had a considerable impact on their attitudes and subsequent practice (Ferguson and Hogan 2004).

As previously discussed in section 1.1. the focus of this study developed as a consequence of the findings of the three-part study commissioned by the Family Rights Group into the engagement between fathers and social services (Ashley et al. 2006; Roskill et al. 2008; Roskill et al. 2011)⁴ The three studies included a multitude of methods of data collection including, but not exhaustive; focus groups and individual interviews with fathers, mothers, grandparents, and social workers, case file audits, a survey questionnaire of higher education, an analysis of calls received by the Family Rights Helpline , and an analysis of local and actional policies relating to issues of domestic violence. It is not possible within the scope and limitations of this chapter to explore all the findings of these three studies. Some of the findings will however be presented in the chapter and throughout this thesis.

Ashley et al. (2006) found that when non-resident fathers called social services expressing concerns about the welfare of their children, social services failed to respond or take the matter seriously. Indeed, some of the non-resident fathers in their study recalled feeling a level of scepticism from social workers regarding their concerns, giving the impression that their motivation was fuelled by a need to undermine their ex-partner. Roskill et al. (2008) found that when a core assessment was undertaken by a social worker, only half of the fathers in their sample were invited to participate. The study highlighted that when the fathers were invited to participate, three-quarters of them took up the opportunity to attend assessment meetings. Roskill et al. (2008) through conducting an audit of child protection cases, found that the files often lacked basic information about the father, including their contact details and legal status, while 20% of the files did not even name the birth father. Similarly, Brown

⁴ The final of the three studies from Roskill et al (2011) concentrated upon child protection social work involvement with domestically abusive fathers

et al. (2009) found, through their review of 116 randomly selected child protection files in Canada, that contact of any kind with fathers was not widely recorded in the files. The study by Brown et al. (2009) attempted to understand how ‘ghost’ fathers⁵ were manufactured through examining the day to practices of child protection workers. Again, the findings were consistent with studies in the UK, where deeply held gender biases that permeate child welfare systems meant that, “...fathers are seen as deviant, dangerous, irresponsible and irrelevant, and even further, how their absence in child welfare is inextricably linked to blaming mothers” (p.25).

3.4 The years 2011 to 2021.

In the period between 2011 and 2020 there appeared to have been a heightened interest from academics and practitioners to understand and further explore the issues around the involvement of fathers in child protection practice, leading to an increase in research studies that were conducted in a number of Western Societies during this time. For example in Canada, as part of a wider study that included a study by Brown et al. (2009) and also Strega et al. (2008). Dominelli et al. (2011) conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with eleven fathers whose children were ‘looked after’ in the child welfare system in order to gain an insight into their experiences of involvement with the social workers and in their child’s lives. Amongst the fathers’ accounts it was found that they felt that social workers did not completely trust them, as fathers, to care for children. The study, consistent with the previous study from Ashley et al. (2006) found that this lead to fathers not being heard when they raised concerns about the care the mother is providing to the child. Dominelli et al. (2011) suggest that “fathers tend to be excluded and [function as] ‘invisible’ participants in the child welfare system” (p.351). Similarly, and also in Canada, Coady et al. (2012)⁶ conducted a study with 18 fathers who had had recent involvement with child welfare services. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted in order to capture equally the positive and negative aspects of the fathers’ involvement with child welfare services. Amongst other findings, the study found a contrast between fathers finding their social workers as “understanding and supportive” (p.282) to others as “uncaring, unhelpful and unprofessional workers” (p.282). These studies reflected a shift in the approach and focus to exploring fathers involvement with child protection practice, in that, rather than considering the stages and process of child protection and the barriers present, the purpose of interviewing the fathers was to capture the fathers’ retrospect experiences of their involvement with social workers, exploring both the negative

⁵ Brown et al (2009) use to this term to the notion that fathers exist in the lives of women and children in child welfare, yet are rarely seen or engaged with by professionals, even when present.

⁶ This research was also published in the article from Cameron et al (2012)

and positive aspects of this involvement as opposed to just the negatives and the barriers. The approaches taken in these two Canadian studies were of particular interest in the development of the research design for this study which will be explored later.

Nordic countries have, through the introduction of legislation and family policies, tried to implement the ‘adult worker model’ (Eydal and Rostgaard 2015 p.3), where men and women are considered equally employable and capable of participating in the labour market. This has subsequently led to equally shared parenthood, with men becoming more integrated into the shared tasks related to the family and household to the point that these societies are now commonly viewed as forerunners in promoting caring fatherhood (Nordenmark 2015). However, it has been argued that this approach is not mirrored in the practices of child welfare services. As well as a problem being found in the engagement with fathers in Nordic child welfare services, there has also been a neglect of this area on the behalf of the research community itself (Mykkänen et al. 2017). Drawing and building upon the research studies conducted in the UK, a plethora of research specifically exploring the engagement of fathers in child welfare services subsequently emerged in Nordic societies.⁷

Reflecting on international research, a study by Storhaug (2013), which involved focus group interviews with fourteen child welfare social workers in Norway, found that the social workers rarely reflected upon or talked about involving fathers in their assessment of families, while a large number of the social workers also did not see it as their role to involve fathers who were not showing an interest in the case. Similarly, it has been suggested that social workers do not completely trust fathers, and, as such, see mothers as the safer option for caring for children (Storhaug and Oien 2012). In a small- scale Norwegian study by Storhaug and Oien (2012), which involved interviewing fifteen fathers who had recently been involved with child welfare services, it was found that not only did the fathers criticise the welfare services for holding the above views but that generally they themselves also held the same attitudes. According to Storhaug and Oien (2012):

“This might strengthen the fathers feeling that they constantly have to prove to child welfare services that they can take care of the children in a good way. This may be something that they also must prove to themselves, as these attitudes appear to be deeply embedded” (p.302).

⁷ For further reading see studies of Kullberg (2005), Storhaug and Oien (2012), Storhaug (2013), Skramstad and Skivenes (2017), Mykkänen et al (2017), Nygren et al. (2018, 2020) Storhaug and Sobo-Allen (2018).

In Northern Ireland, Ewart-Boyle et al. (2013) interviewed twenty-two social workers as well as carrying out an audit of case files, and found that the social workers in their study generally held very traditional views of parenting roles, in that they were of the belief that it is a mother's responsibility and role to provide care for their children. This concurs with other commentary which suggests that social workers in the UK struggle with recognising the value and importance of fathers in the lives of their children (Featherstone and Peckover 2007a).

In the study by Zanoni et al. (2014) in Australia, the focus of the study through conducting life story interviews with 35 fathers who had involvement with a parenting program, in order to investigate whether or not there was support for the negative support stereotypes of fathers as uncommitted and uninvolved, and unable to change their behaviour for the sake of their children. The findings indicated that, in contrast to these negative stereotypes, the fathers were typically committed and involved parents who were no longer abusing substances. The findings from this study will be further considered in the findings chapters of this thesis.

An extensive study was carried out in the UK by Brandon et al. (2017)⁸ where a Qualitative Longitudinal methodology was adopted to reveal the experiences and patterns as fathers travel through the formal child protection. The study, over a twelve month period involved in-depth interviews with 35 men and six mothers. The findings emanating from this study are pertinent to the understanding of how fathers experience their involvement with the child protection procedures and their relationship with their child's social worker and feature heavily in the findings chapter in this thesis. The study explored how the fathers' emotions are often misunderstood by social workers, an issue that was later found in the study in New Zealand by Quick and Scott (2019) who through interviewing 13 parents (four fathers) considered the emotional regime that exists within child protection services, often resulting in a miscommunication of emotional responses between parents and social workers.⁹ The study from Brandon et al. (2017) in considering the relationship between the fathers and social workers found that time played a huge factor, in terms of the point at which the fathers were engaged with, the timing of the assessments and also the periods of time between contacts from the social worker.

The importance of this study, as previously identified in the studies by Brown et al. (2009); Zanoni et al. (2014) is that it continued the change in focus of not only defining the barriers to the involvement of fathers, but through capturing the fathers experiences and perspectives,

⁸ This findings for this study were published through a number of articles, see Philip et al (2018,2020) Brandon et al (2019)

⁹ This issue will be further discussed in section 7.2

was to find in some ways a resolution to this often impasse between fathers and social workers. I will return to this point in the summary section. As Brandon et al. (2017) note:

“Understanding the men and their perspectives in this way can guide future practice and tackle some of the barriers to men’s engagement and involvement.” (p.7)

Drawing this literature review to a conclusion, since this study the interests in exploring the engagement of fathers by social workers has continued in Western Societies with further studies from Brewsaugh et al. (2018) in the USA, Amato (2018) in Canada, and finally the studies of Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al. (2020) and Halpern et al. (2021)¹⁰ from Israel. The findings from these studies are generally consistent with previous studies explored in this chapter and further add to the developing knowledge base. Having explored the pertinent literature from the past thirty three years I will look at how my study is situated in relation to, and how the research questions emerged from the exist literature.

3.5 Summary

This chapter has explored the pertinent research studies and commentary over the past 30 years that have considered the challenges of engaging and involving fathers in child protection practice. During this this time it has been consistently found that a number of barriers exist between fathers and social workers across child protection procedures, both as a consequence of the gendered organisational culture of social work (Scourfield 2001; 2003; 2006), and because of how men and fathers are constructed and viewed (O’Hagan 1997; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Brown et al. 2009; Zaroni et al. 2014). As previously discussed, the majority of studies, have captured the views and experiences of professionals and mothers involved in child protection, with fathers often coupled in studies with mothers, in small numbers as ‘parents’. It is only since the study of Ashley et al. (2006) that fathers themselves have become and more involved in, and the focus of, studies in their own right.

It was the themes emanating form the literature that informed two of the research questions in this study. The first question is;

What were the fathers’ motivations for becoming the full-time carer for their children, and what were the fathers’ experiences of involvement with social services

¹⁰ This follows on previous work of Peled (2000) and Perel & Peled (2008) looking at the challenges of working with violent men in social services

As discussed in section 2.7, I wanted to explore what the motivations were of these fathers in respect of the expectations and obligations in respect of wider societal expectations of fathers as carers for their children to agree to become to their child's primary carer. In addition, it was important to explore the motivations of the fathers, in respect of the negative constructs of fathers from families involved in child protection, that have emerged in a number of studies in this chapter. The studies have found fathers to be absent (Scourfield 2001a) or stereotypes of fathers as uncommitted and uninvolved, and unable to change their behaviour (Zanoni et al. 2014)

The second part of this question, again aimed to challenge and explore previous studies findings that have found challenges and barriers to fathers involvement with social workers, in particular, exploring any positive experiences that may have supported the successful engagements and assessment of the fathers. The second research question aimed to consider the social workers experiences of the assessment of the fathers.

What were the social workers' experience of assessing the fathers' capacity to be their child's potential full-time carer, and how did they negotiate this assessment?

This research question again aimed to explore and challenge previous research findings that have identified barriers and difficulties in the involvement between fathers and social workers. Where social workers do not completely trust fathers to care for children (Storhaug and Oien 2012) or consider them irresponsible or irrelevant (Scourfield 2003; Brown et al. 2009) Similarly to the previous research question, it also aimed to explore any positive aspects of the assessment and how the social workers negotiated the assessment.

Although previous studies have reported and recorded the barriers to engagement with fathers, with a few studies identifying how the exclusion of fathers leads to them to not been seen as a resource, no studies, so far, have examined situations where these barriers have been overcome to the point that the fathers have become the primary carer for their child. In addition only a small number of studies has made fathers the key focus and participant of the study, It was important for part of this study to capture the experiences of the fathers parenting since they had had their children in their care, as the lived experience of fatherhood remains relatively scarce (Shirani 2011)

The majority of studies that have included fathers have asked their views and experiences within ongoing child protection procedures. My study aimed to go beyond any current involvement in child protection procedures, and instead retrospectively interviewed fathers

and social workers who have been through the assessment of them to understand how they had reached that point. The study that perhaps is the closest to focus to this study from Dominelli (2011) where the study interviewed fathers whose children were already in the care system, exploring their experiences and their understanding of their role with their children. This doctoral study adopted a similar approach to, and built on the impetus of the studies of Dominelli et al. (2011), Zanoni et al. (2014) in order to capture the experiences of the fathers and social workers in order to guide future practice.

This thesis will progress from considering the literature relevant to this study, to explore in the next chapter, the methodological approach that was adopted in this doctoral study.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to delineate the methodological approach adopted in the study that would best address the following research questions in this study:

- *What were the fathers motivations for becoming the full-time carer for their children, and what were the fathers experiences of involvement with social services?*
- *What were the social workers' experience of assessing the fathers' capacity to be their child's potential full-time carer, and how they negotiated this assessment?*
- *How did the non-resident fathers position themselves as fathers and how this impacted upon their motivations and ability to become potential full-time carers for their children?*

The chapter will identify how the methodology, and choice of methods of data production, were influenced by my ontological and epistemological position, my positionality and the need to 'fight familiarity' (Delamont and Atkinson 1995) and also the challenges of interviewing men. In adapting a reflexive approach to the research process, it will be identified that the research design was adapted in response to challenges and changes in the research field. In adopting a reflexive approach Maxwell (2013) notes:

“The activities of collecting and analysing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refining the research questions, and identifying and addressing validity threats are usually all going on more or less simultaneously, each influencing all of the others” (Maxwell 2013 pg. 2).

The chapter will explore the ethical considerations of this study before considering the challenges that were experienced in recruiting the fathers for this study, through the social services acting as gatekeepers. The demographic details of both sets of participants will then be provided, followed by a reflective account of the practicalities of utilising the methods of data production with both the fathers and social workers. The chapter will conclude with a detailed account of the analysis of the data through a Reflexive Thematic approach.

4.2 Qualitative Research

For this research study I have chosen Qualitative Research methodology as my process of inquiry. The rationale for this is based upon understanding my ontological and epistemological positions, which have led me to adopt Social Constructionism and Interpretivism in this study.

The latter reflects a belief that there is no one reality or truth, rather truth is grounded in the multiple and contextually determined realities of individual's perception, dialogues, and shared understandings, where language, knowledge and action are inextricably linked (Grant and Humphries 2006). Burr (1995) suggests that social reality is a social construct created by interaction, communication and language, where reality is seen as experiential, through transmission from generation to generation through traditions and socialisation (Gergen 2015). Guba and Lincoln (2004) propose that with social constructionism the conventional distinction between ontology and epistemology disappear, where they note:

“The investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the “findings” are literally created as the investigation proceeds.” (p.27)

This understanding of the social world, and how knowledge is generated, stems my personal life but mainly through my professional role as a social worker, where you were asked to constantly interpret people's lives, actions and language in order to uncover, and present, a version of the truth that could be used to inform a recommendations or decision. This understanding was also crucial in this study where I asked fathers to reflect upon their experiences and understanding of becoming their child's primary carer, where multiple truths and interpretations emerged, and where my own positionality as man, father and social worker played a crucial role in the research process.

Through qualitative research being interpretivist in nature (Snape and Spencer 2003) and having a commitment to a constructivist epistemology (Shaw and Holland 2014). It was a natural progression for me to adopt this methodology. It is found that there have been many attempts to define qualitative research in the social sciences with a consensus yet to be reached (Mason 2002;2017). Perhaps the most useful definition, and pertinent to this study, is offered by Denzin and Lincoln (2000)

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set on interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices turn the world into a series of representations including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves and interpretivist, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to them” (p.3)

In sections 4.5 and 4.12 of this chapter I will outline how I utilised Qualitative Research methodology through my methods of data production and data analysis.

4.3 Social Work Research and Appreciative Inquiry

One could argue that the purpose of conducting research within the social sciences is to develop a deeper understanding of societal issues, in order to engender positive changes in policy and facilitate engagement with different groups in society. Within both the field of social sciences and within several Social Science departments in UK Universities sits the professional and academic/research discipline of social work. There is some debate as to precisely where social work research fits within the wider field of the social sciences, and whether it can and should be considered distinctive and original (Smith 2016), and thereby viewed as a separate discipline (Hardwick and Worsley 2011; McLaughlin 2012). Shaw (2007) argues that social work research, and subsequently the social work profession, would suffer if this distinctiveness was overemphasised, as it would shut the door on active dialogue with the broader social science community. Instead, he suggests that, as in practice where we have combined services, we should similarly aim for “disciplinary joined up research” (p. 663). I wholly support this view, and, indeed, although this thesis concentrates on social work practice, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, I have accessed and embraced research studies and theory relating to wider sociological contexts, including, amongst other things, gender, poverty, and the concept of the family. Putting aside arguments about its distinctiveness, what is consistent within social work research, and something I tried to achieve through this study, is its orientation towards developing knowledge that supports, challenges, and improves existing practice (D’Cruz and Jones 2014; Webber and Carr 2015; Smith 2016).

As previously stated, an aim of this study is to improve existing practice through developing an understanding of what worked well in the engagement between fathers and social workers in these cases. It is for this reason that I was drawn to Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to inform my methodology. AI has its foundations in and is strongly influenced by the ontology of social constructionism (Coghlan et al. 2003; Grant and Humphries 2006), which is predicated on an understanding of organisations as being socially constructed and generative of the contexts in which people act and react (Richer et al. 2009). With respect to the present study, the organisation is the local authority, with the context being generated through the child protection procedures and their accompanying timescales, all of which are socially constructed. As the term suggests, in adopting AI, the researcher is directed towards appreciating what it is about the social world that is positive and then exploring it (Reed et al.

2001), actively celebrating successes, achievements and what is already working (Carter 2006). On a pragmatic level:

“AI builds on learning and on what works in an organisation at its best to effect changes for the future” (Richer et al 2009 p. 948).

As a result of this specific positioning, the approach has tended to be utilised by researchers in health, social care and criminal justice, with the aim of exploring positive experiences and best practices of various kinds (Robinson et al. 2012). Criticisms of AI pertain to the fact that it is ambiguous and potentially flawed as a consequence of its flexibility and lack of clear instructions over how it should be undertaken (Carter 2006). Although I wish to stress that I did not fully design my research around the AI framework, as other factors were considered in my research design, it nevertheless served as a starting point, and I subsequently applied an ‘appreciative’ lens to all aspects of the research process.

4.4 The importance Reflexivity and Positionality

It was identified in section 1.1 how reflexivity and my positionality formed a significant and intrinsic part of this study. It is suggested that the multiple positionalities of the researchers is intrinsic to ethical research practice, through understanding where they may influence and shape research encounters, processes and outcomes (Hopkins 2007). Therefore, it is important before considering the methods of data production in detail, to provide an outline of my multiple positionalities in respect of the participants in this study, and also how I engaged reflexivity in this study in respect of the both the fathers and the social workers, which subsequently influenced the method of data production. The issues relating to my positionality will then be revisited in my reflections on the data production in section 4.11.

A debate exists as to the need to continue to strive for researcher objectivity within the qualitative research process (Robertson 2006; Mason 2017). For when researching a social phenomenon, as in this study, qualitative research places the researcher front and centre, resulting in an inability of the researcher to prevent their biases, prejudices and values from informing their research practice, and thus achieve research objectivity. (Snape and Spencer 2003; Evans and Hardy 2010; Franklin 2012). It is proposed that rather than viewing subjectivity as the nemesis of qualitative research, it should be regarded as an opportunity and resource throughout the research process (Taylor and White 2000; Robertson 2006; Gough and Madill 2012; Aurini et al. 2022). Alternatively, it is suggested that a position of ‘empathic neutrality’ (Snape and Spencer 2003 p.45) should be sought in which the researcher wholly acknowledges that their research cannot be value free, and instead aims to be transparent over

their values and assumptions to the point of “enabling those who consult research to understand where the researcher is ‘coming from’” (Evans and Hardy 2010, p. 79). The adoption of reflexivity can assist the researcher in this process. There are debates over precisely what constitutes reflexivity, which stems, in part, from the heterogeneity of definitions and applications of the term (Taylor and White 2000). The exploration of reflexivity in the field of feminist psychology by Wilkinson (1988) does however offer a useful framework in understanding reflexivity, where three interrelated aspects of reflexivity are proposed; personal, functional and disciplinary. It was the first two aspects of this framework that I utilised in this study.

Personal aspects of reflexivity concern the impact of the researcher’s own identity and life experience upon the research process, and the consideration that the topic of the research is likely to be the result of personal interests and values (Wilkinson 1988). Functional reflexivity contributes through considering with how the choices of methods of data production, interpretation, analysis etc. are influenced by our own values and life experiences, and further, what role do these choice play in producing our findings and, hence constructing our knowledge. (Wilkinson 1988) suggests that:

“Reflexive analysis here entails continuous, critical examination of the practice/process of research to reveal its assumptions, value and biases.” (p.495)

Personal reflexivity in this research study allowed me to understand my positionality in respect of the fathers and social workers, and commenced at the beginning through critical self - reflection on two levels. Firstly, where “the mind observes and examines its own experiences and emotions, intelligent self-awareness and introspection”(Sherry 2013 p.283). Then, in order to understand how my personal, social and professional background and behaviour would impact upon the research process, I listed as many assumptions and preconceived notions I had about the topics under consideration (Finlay and Gough 2003; O’Leary 2014). This self-reflection continued throughout the research process through the compilation of a research diary as a means of documenting ongoing reflections, alongside engaging in critical and reflective discussions in supervision (Hart 2005; Phillips and Pugh 2010). The primary challenge in respect of my positionality concerned to contested related concepts of familiarity and the insider/outsider dichotomy, as a result of my relative proximity to both the fathers and the social workers participating in the study.

It is suggested that building rapport and gaining access can be better achieved through a researcher sharing a level of intimacy (Taylor 2011) or a common identity with participants

(Morriss 2015; Wiederhold 2015). Mannay (2010) warns, however, that as a consequence of interpretative research aiming to explore the indivisibly of everyday life there is a risk that findings can be obscured when the researcher is working in familiar territory, as a result of the “...enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding” (p.94). The challenge, therefore, in interpretative research is to be adequately ‘outside’ of the phenomena under study to be sufficiently objective, whilst at the same time ‘inside’ enough to understand and appreciate what is being studied (Deutsch 1981) Although the adequacy of this outside/inside binary to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of perspectives and identities has been questioned (Song and Parker 1995; Mannay 2010). It has also been argued that the consideration given to an insider or outsider in qualitative research should neither be dismissed nor eradicated, as paying no attention to questions of proximity surmises that knowledge emanates from nowhere thus “allowing researchers to become an abstract concept rather than a site of accountability” (Mannay 2010 p.92). Instead it argued that researchers should embrace the concept that in our research sites we almost always simultaneously hold the positions of insider and outsider (Wiederhold 2015). Then when conducting fieldwork ‘at home’ a deeper consideration of the influence of mutual familiarity between the participant must be considered, in order to develop a deeper clarity of the specific parameters of the terms. (Wiederhold 2015).

Considering my positionality in respect of the involvement of the fathers in this study, I note, like the majority of the fathers, that I’m a white British man and father who was born and raised in a mining community. I experienced both the positives of living in close mining community, and struggles associated with a low socioeconomic background as a result of my father’s redundancy following the closure of the collieries. My family still lives in the same house, which I visit regularly, so I am acutely aware of the problems that these former mining villages face, and continue to have a strong affiliation and sense of social and political identity to my background. However, the fact that I left this community to go to university and never returned to live there means that my experiences as an adult male and also as a father have been very different to my upbringing, due to my employment status, income and economic situation. Finally, I experienced being the child of a non-resident father when my parents separated when I was four years of age, with me being unable to reconcile, and develop a relationship with my father before his death when I was 26. I was therefore aware, as Wilkinson (1988) suggests above, that my chosen topic of the research was the result of personal, as well as professional interests, and subsequently the need for personal reflexivity. I was very aware throughout the research process, that I was not using this study as a personal crusade and cathartic tool to find my own answers, and instead was cognisant of the impact of my personal judgements and values throughout the data production and analysis.

It is difficult to decipher whether my biography made me an ‘insider’ or a ‘researcher at home’¹¹ in respect of the fathers (Wiederhold 2015 p.94). It was clear, however, from my interviews with the fathers, and in line with the notion of being ‘researcher near’ (Mannay 2010 p. 93), is that I benefited from not having to negotiate some of the potential barriers associated with language and cultural references to places and events.

I was also aware of my positionality in respect of the social workers that participated in the study, having been involved in social care and social work since the age of 18. Through working initially in care and nursing homes, and then in children’s homes, challenging behaviour units, with people with learning disabilities and supporting people with mental health problems in the community. After qualifying as a social worker when I was 26, I worked in the areas of child protection and child disabilities before moving into higher education and becoming a lecturer in social work. Therefore, it can be seen that my whole adult life, to date, has involved working with, or as a social worker. I was aware when I decided to involve social workers as participants in this study that I would have to consider my positionality and understand the mutual familiarity between myself and the social workers. This issue will be further addressed in sections 4.5.3 and 4.11.3.

4.5 Methods of Data Production

This section, building upon points raised in the previous section, will provide the reader with details of, and rationale for the methods of data production I adopted with both the fathers and the social workers.

4.5.1 Narrative interviews of the fathers

The face to face interviews with the fathers were conducted through the adoption of a narrative approach to interviews (and so the broader concept of narrative inquiry). This approach of ‘borrowing’ aspects of narrative inquiry is becoming more and more common, with researchers adopting the narrative interview as a resource through which to get at the substantive content that they are interested in, or to support reflexive approaches that explore the context of the interviewer and the audience in the production of the data in the narrative

¹¹ The classification of ‘researcher-at-home’ describes those individuals who do have a stable, place-based sense of ‘home’ – where they are recognised as an individual or by their affiliation to a family name and where that recognition situates them within a history in the community of interest (Wiederhold 2015).

interview (Elliot 2005; Reissman and Quinney 2005; Reissman 2008, 2012; Shaw and Holland 2014a). In truth, the term ‘narrative’ carries many meanings with no simple or clear definition (Reissman and Quinney 2005) with virtually every profession and discipline now possessing a form of narrative work, from history to social work, with each creating their own distinct approach. (Reissman 2012)

An important issue in adopting this approach, is that structured interviews, where a standard question-answer mode is adopted, have been criticised because participants may be reluctant to share sensitive or painful experiences, which Holloway and Jefferson (2000) refer to as the ‘defended subject’ (p.34). Whereas narrative type interviews allow the exploration of delicate or sensitive issues with research participants which was crucial in this study where I was asking fathers to reflect on their journey of being non-resident fathers, and not seeing their children on a day-to day basis, through to having them being in their care on a full-time basis. In section 4.8 I will explore the challenges of recruiting men as participants in research studies. It has been found that similar challenges in interviewing men (Richardson 2013; Tarrant 2014), especially as result of the presence and role of masculinity, with Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001b) suggesting that:

“An interview is both an opportunity for signifying masculinity and a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001b pg.91).

I was aware that interviewing does not take place in a ‘gender vacuum’ (Herod 1993 pg.306), and even in situations where the interview participants are of the same sex, gender relations continue to shape the social interaction between researcher and interviewee. As (Herod 1993) suggests:

“By writing ourselves into the research process we can critically reflect upon how our participation may have structured a particular interview” (p. 314).

Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001a) further propose two distinct processes within interviews, that can pose a threat to both male and female participants. Firstly, the ‘baseline threat’, emanating from the very nature of the interview, finds that the interviewer, who is nearly always a stranger, sets the agenda, asks the questions, and controls both the pace and flow of the discussion through probing for information. They argue that this threat exists irrespective of how approachable and friendly the interviewer is, as participating in an interview involves resigning control and, as such, constitutes a risk of undermining one’s public persona. This

threat, so it is argued, is heightened in men because male privilege is predicated on signifying a masculine self, and, hence, men may perceive this as a greater threat even if the topics in themselves are not intrusive or sensitive. The second threat, referred to as the ‘surplus threat,’ concerns the topics and lines of questioning in the interviews, namely the fact that questions that demand answers, if only implicitly, put one’s autonomy, rationality, or control in doubt and thus can be experienced as threatening. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) further suggest that the reactions of men to these potential baseline or surplus threats are not necessarily conscious, and the threat is further heightened in men when the interviewer is interested in exploring gender as it “...increases the salience of the participant’s identity as a man” (p. 91). Similarly, Oliffe and Mroz (2005) found in their study that men do not readily express themselves, and find it easier to discuss aspects of their lives that are less personal and emotional, with the result that the interview can be “...over before it has started, or at best yield superficial data” (p. 258).

Despite these findings Oliffe and Mroz (2005) suggest that we should avoid generalisations about men’s willingness to talk, as they can be self-fulfilling prophecies that act as a catalyst to inhibit and discourage the interviewer. Additionally, they argue that we should neither subscribe to, nor fear, breaking down these prevailing ideals of what men are willing and not willing to talk about. They suggest that it is imperative for researchers to convey an expectation that men will talk, because:

“Any subtle innuendo or indication that the interviewer is not genuinely enthusiastic and expecting valuable information to be shared has the potential to disenfranchise the participant and jeopardize the interview” (p. 258).

I considered these points in my choice of methods of data production, as I could not avoid referring to issues of gender with the fathers, nor personal or emotional issues as my study required the fathers to share their experiences and feelings about being a father and their motivations for taking on the care of their children. A further consideration relates to my previous role as a child protection social worker and my role in this study as a researcher. Greer (1964) suggested that the adoption of a role with research participants can present a problem and, as such, that researchers must consider and anticipate, prior to undertaking the research, what their role will be and how this will potentially impact upon the research process. In my previous role I have interviewed fathers similar to those in my study, and often in very similar circumstances. These interviews would have been inquisitorial and challenging, reflecting the inherit power imbalance between social workers and the parents. Indeed, the whole of my professional career in social work has involved interviewing people as part of an

assessment, whether this was in child protection, children with disabilities, older people or people with learning disabilities. The purpose of conducting these interviews was to gather information in order to make a decision, in respect, for example of the allocation of funding or resources, a discharge from hospital, or consideration of whether a child is at risk of significant harm. Adopting a narrative approach to interviews would allow me to move away from my previous experience of interviewing as a social worker, and assist me in embracing and fulfilling my role as a researcher. The method would assist “fight familiarity” (Morris 2015 p.527) and make a familiar setting strange and interesting again (Mannay 2010, 2016) I was also aware that the fathers would likely have experienced inquisitorial and challenging, interview style through their involvement and assessment with the social workers in their journey to becoming their child’s primary carer. A narrative approach to interviews is less confrontational in practice and leads to higher levels of participation. It also allows room for digression, thereby momentarily shifting the power away from the interviewer, and towards the participant (Reissman 2012) . All of these are factors crucial, as it was important that the interviews did not mirror previous interview styles experienced by the fathers in the study.

The study was interested in retrospective accounts, and therefore the method was designed to explore participants' recollections of the past. The timespan of their recollections ranged from several months to two years. The plan was to interview the fathers twice, where a richer discussion could be utilised in the second interview building upon themes from the first interviews. Alongside these interviews I planned to produce timelines with the fathers which will introduced in the following section.

4.5.2 Using timelines to assist data production

It has been found that focusing on a visual level allows participants to go beyond mere verbal communication (Hanna and Lau-Clayton 2012), and through acting as a stimulus for memory recall (Bagnoli 2009; Sheridan et al. 2011; Jackson 2012) encourages the “construction of rich temporal narratives” (Sheridan et al. 2011 p.552), allowing participants to draw and visually explore their life experiences and events, providing an opportunity for participants to reflect upon the significance and meaning of individual events as well as the relationships between these different events (Berends 2011). An air of caution needs to be exercised when using timelines for two reasons: firstly, because the stories that are produced are only ever partial; and secondly, although visualising the interview is beneficial and an expedient tool for untangling the story, the timeline cannot be assumed to represent linearity or a chronological timeline (Adriansen 2012)

However, despite these reservations, the use of timelines in this study allowed the fathers to focus upon specific events or turning points in their lives that they felt were pertinent to them. For example, when their child was born, significant relationships, separations, and periods of living with the child, in addition to their present situation of taking on the full-time care of the child. In addition, as a diagrammatic stimuli, it is argued that timelines assist communication between researchers and interviewers (Crilly et al. 2006), by helping to overcome silences and aid discussions around difficult and sensitive aspects of peoples of lives that may be difficult to articulate in words (Rhodes and Fitzgerald 2006; Bagnoli 2009; Hanna and Lau-Clayton 2012) As Clark and Moriss (2015) suggest:

“...in the case of elicitation techniques, the visual can provide an apparently ‘neutral’ – or at least somewhat displaced – element around which to formulate and advance discussion, acting as a kind of ‘third object’ around which participants and researchers can focus” (p. 8).

Similarly, to narrative interviews studies that have utilised timelines have found that their use in data production allowed research participants a degree of control over the pace of the interview, and manner of disclosure of difficult issues. (Wilson et al. 2007; Jackson 2010; Sheridan et al. 2011; 2012). As previously discussed these factors were crucial in respect of my positionality and the need to fight familiarity, where my methods of data production needed to be as far away as possible from the method of interviewing utilised in child protection social work practice.

It has been argued that researchers must be aware that asking participants to engage in drawing or constructing diagrams may be a source of embarrassment and unease, in addition to researchers being cognisant to the fact that participants have their own lives and commitments and recognise that data collection should not represent an additional burden (Mannay 2016). In addition, it has been found that when there are issue with literary skills being a barrier to the participation, in terms of reading and writing, working together with the researcher in producing the timelines can be a preference and beneficial. (Mannay et al. 2017) In accordance with these caveats, I ensured that the task of constructing the timeline was done *in situ* with the fathers, as opposed to asking them to construct it in between interviews, and also in the fathers’ home in order, when possible, to ensure privacy and confidentiality. In the last two section I have provided details, and the rationale, for the methods I chose for data production with the fathers in this study. In the next section I will provide the details and rationale for the methods of data production with the social workers.

4.5.3 Semi structured interviews with the social workers

As previously identified, when researching familiar settings, it is important to fight familiarity (Morriss 2015). This was particularly pertinent in data production with the social workers in the study. Through my previous experience as child protection social worker, and my present role as a social work lecturer, I was aware of the risk that the interview could degenerate into a “chat” between two child protection social workers who had shared experiences and a common lexicon. It was my intention to still gather rich data that included the social workers individual experiences and feelings, and so select a suitable qualitative method of data production. Therefore, rather than a narrative approach to interviews, I chose to use semi-structured interviews with a list of interview questions (see Figure 4). The questions were designed to allow the social workers to reflect on their experiences, motivations, and feelings, consider the different roles that people played, and to consider what were the crucial factors/components that led to the children living with their fathers on a full-time basis. The interviews the social workers were planned to take place in social services buildings in a private office space.

Figure 4 – The questions for the social worker interviews

1. Can you please explore the circumstances that led up to the child/children being placed in the care of their non-resident father?
2. What do you consider to be the main factors that led to this intervention/outcome?
3. What attributes and behaviours did the non-resident father demonstrate that aided your engagement with him and the outcome?
4. What was your motivation for engaging with and seeking this outcome?
5. Was this outcome you were seeking to achieve based upon initial involvement with the father?

4.6 Ethical considerations

Kara (2018) argues that a research study cannot be rendered ethical by merely completing a one-off administrative task, instead good ethical research practice is achieved through researchers working in an ethical way throughout the research process. I suggested in section 4.4 that positionality in this study was an integral factor of ethical research practice, and was considered throughout this research process. In this section, and also in sections 4.8 I will identify where ethical practice was conducted at different stages of the research process, as was outlining other ethical considerations in this study.

One administrative task that needed to be completed, however, was to gain institutional ethical approval for the study from Cardiff University School Research Ethics Committee (SREC). This required setting out the processes I would use to address questions relating to informed consent; data management; harm to participants; harm to researcher; and anonymity and confidentiality (see Appendix 1 for the application that was submitted, and Appendix 2 for the approval letter from SREC).

One of first ethical priorities was to ensure that both the father and social workers knew exactly what they would be agreeing to when agreeing to take part in the study. I therefore created a detailed information sheet. (see Appendix 3 and 4). An important ethical consideration in this study was to make the fathers aware of the potentials benefits and disadvantages of taking part in the study. The fathers were made aware of my professional background, and as previously discussed, a number of the cases still had the involvement of social services. I therefore reassured them that the information they shared with me would be confidential, and would not be shared with social services unless it raised safeguarding issues. In terms of consent, I ensured all participants completed and signed an opt-in consent, once they had read an information sheet that explained what participating would involve (see Appendix 3 and 4).

An ethical consideration that will be explored further in section 4.8.2, when recruiting participants through gatekeepers concerns the issue of duress. This was particularly important because I was dependent on social workers to recruit the fathers. In order to attempt to negate any duress, once the social worker had passed the details of the father to me, I spoke to the father to arrange a time and location for the interview. During this conversation the fathers were able to ask questions. Additionally, there was an inevitable time delay between them agreeing to participate and the interviews taking place, this gave the fathers the time and opportunity to reflect on participation, and contact again for further information before the interview. Prior to the commencement of the first interview with the fathers I went through the information sheet with them again, and it was at this point that they signed the consent form in my presence¹². I adopted a similar process with the social workers.

It is suggested that consent is an on-going process that does not start and end with the signing of a consent form but must be continually negotiated and reconstituted throughout the research process (Atkinson et al., 2003). Therefore, for those fathers that agreed to a second interview,

¹² A similar process was adopted prior to the interview with the social workers.

I ensured I again gained their verbal consent for their continuing participation in the study. With both the fathers' and social workers' permission, I audio-recorded the interviews. The commencement of recording was always preceded by an initial "check-in" in which we reviewed confidentiality, consent and withdrawal from the project, as well as encouragement to take breaks, ask questions, make themselves comfortable in the space, and stop or pause the recorder at any time. Great care taken to protect the anonymity of the participants, with each participants assigned a pseudonym at the transcription stage, and therefore any quotes in this thesis cannot be attributed to individual participants.

4.7 The research setting

This section serves as an introduction to the research setting, which was two Local Authorities and one Third Sector Organisation in the North of England. The rationale for selecting this site was based upon the aims of the doctoral research study, and my proximity to, and the convenience of approaching and conducting the fieldwork in these organisations. Both Local Authorities were situated in previous coal mining areas, which have struggled to recover from the closure of the collieries in the late 1980s, despite going through different phases of regeneration. Both areas consist predominantly of a white British working population, although there are concentrations of people from different ethnic minorities that have settled in the areas as a result of immigration, or have moved into the area from the neighbouring authorities that were previously based upon the textile and clothing industry.

4.8 Recruiting the participants

In the following section, I elucidate the rationale for my sampling techniques as well as the challenges I encountered in recruiting both the fathers and social workers for my study via a number of Local Authorities and Third-sector Organisations.

4.8.1 Purposive Criterion-based sampling

It has been suggested that rather than treating it as an afterthought, or as something to only consider when data production is imminent, a sampling strategy should form an integral part of the research design, coordinating with other components of the study, including the research aims of the study (Punch 2006; 2014), and that a clear rationale should be provided for your choice (Mason 2002). For this study I chose a form of purposive sampling, as a non-probability sampling method, participants were selected through the researcher devising and using a specified criterion (Oliver 2006). It is argued that purposive sampling is more or less synonymous with qualitative research (Shaw and Holland 2014b; Aurini et al. 2022), and that

all types of sampling in qualitative research can be encompassed under the broad term of purposive sampling (Patton 1990, 2002). When conducting a qualitative study, a relatively small and purposively selected sample suffices, due to the fact that the objective of qualitative inquiry is to increase the depth as opposed to the breadth of understanding (Palinkas et al. 2015; Campbell et al. 2020). As opposed to randomly sampling individuals, in purposive sampling participants are “handpicked” (Descombe 2017 p.41) for the research, based on the assumption that they possess privileged knowledge and experience about the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al. 2015; Descombe 2017).

There are numerous types of purposive sampling designs, such as, snowball, theoretical, typical case, extreme, deviant case, and so on. I chose a purposive criterion sampling strategy for my study. This strategy was suitable for this study because it sought individuals who met a predetermined criterion of importance, such as, for example, a particular life experience or circumstance that is known to have salience to the subject under study (Ritchie et al. 2003; Gray 2018; Aurini et al. 2022). Both the non-resident fathers and their children’s social workers were involved and present (albeit at different levels for the social workers) at the point in time in which the fathers became the primary carer for their children.

A further rationale for adopting this sampling strategy was the fact that I was seeking to study non-resident fathers, who could be considered as a hidden population. I avoid using the common term “hard to reach” as this can stigmatise the population under study, suggesting that they are solely responsible for not being easily accessible as research subjects (Munro et al. 2005). I consider them to be hidden in a number of ways; firstly, as will be discussed further in the next section, the only way to access these fathers was through a gatekeeper; and secondly, as will be explored in section 8.3, the non-resident fathers consider themselves, and are deemed by society, to be secondary parents behind the mother; and finally, parents experiencing the social stigma associated with having a child involved with social services, will not necessarily wish to want to share their experiences. Therefore, although I do not agree with the designation “hard to reach”, the fathers in this study were nevertheless perhaps reluctant to come forward. It has been found that recruiting men to participate in research is challenging (Olliffe and Mroz 2005), particularly men from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Mackereth and Milner 2009; Zanoni et al. 2013). Based on my prior experience as a social worker in child protection, I was cognisant of the fact that the fathers I was seeking to recruit for my study would be in a similar position.

Recent studies exploring men’s health found that men were willing to participate in research studies without reading the information sheet, and therefore have little understanding of, or

concern over what their participation would involve (Witty 2013; Gelling 2014). Similarly, Oliffe and Mroz (2005) propose that a practice of not reading instructions is a masculine trait, with men preferring instead to “navigate unexplored territory in spontaneous, adventurous ways” (p.258). However, it has been found that even when participants actually read the information sheet and sign the consent form, it does not necessarily mean they fully understand and so informed as to what they are consenting to (Mannay 2014b)

As well as men not understanding exactly what an academic study entails, or how their data will be used. A further issue is men’s willingness to engage with the data production once they had agreed to participated in the research study. For example, in Mckee and O'Brien (1983) seminal study into the experiences of first-time fathers, they found that the interviews with the fathers were consistently shorter and less conversational than those of the mothers. To make sense of this, the authors referred to the concept of the “legitimacy of topic” (p. 151) to account for the fact that men are unaccustomed to talking about subjects such as pregnancy and children, especially to non-family members, due to wider societal prescriptions of masculinity that create boundaries and preoccupations. For example, their study found that men were more comfortable talking about issues such as work or leisure which actually inhibit a connection with pregnancy and birth. Moreover, the study found that fathers mentioned earlier in the interviews that they were unable to rehearse or anticipate what the interviewer might want to know or what they might want them to tell. Mckee and O'Brien (1983) argued that:

“Methodologically this is an acute problem, for it a case of a researcher labelling a research phenomenon and expecting her respondents both to recognise the label and to be able to talk about it out loud” (p. 151).

This proved to be an issue in my own research, as initially the social workers forwarded the information to the fathers. It was only during my first meeting with the fathers that I went through the information sheet again and thus was able to ensure that they fully understood the nature of their participation prior to signing the consent form. To address this issue, at least to some extent, prior to the first interview with the fathers I would explore and clarify with them, either in person or on the telephone, the phenomenon of fathers taking on the care of their children after separation in a broader societal context where fathers, especially as single carers, doing so is uncommon. I would also specify that the research was interested in collecting their “story” about why they chose to do this. What is interesting about the point raised by Mckee and Brien (1983) is that the fathers in my study, it could be argued, either never possessed

such boundaries and preoccupations in the first place or these had been broken down by virtue of taking on the care of their children.

Researchers have argued that it is impossible to determine if participants are representative of the populations when purposively sampling hidden populations (Sydor 2013). This was applicable to this study where I was dependent upon the gatekeepers for the sample of fathers. A further disadvantage of my sampling approach is that it potentially involved bias (Emmel 2013). Specifically, although purposive sampling involves making deliberate subjective choices, it is argued that the process of purposive sampling should avoid bias, be clearly objective, and must stand up to independent scrutiny (Ritchie et al. 2003; Harding 2019). However, this proved to not be entirely possible due to the fact that I used social workers as the final level of gatekeeper, which meant that I was not able to influence who they chose to approach or not approach, and, as such, cannot be absolutely certain whether they exercised bias, by, for example, favouring certain fathers with whom they had experience and who would evaluate their practice in a favourable light. As discussed in the next section, working with gatekeepers involves mutual trust between the researcher and the gatekeeper. As a caveat, when examining the findings of this study I am inclined to suggest that the social workers did not display clear bias with respect to whom they did or did not approach, as both the fathers and social workers reflected on the challenges and difficulties of working with each other.

4.8.2 Accessing and recruiting the fathers through gatekeepers

Sixsmith et al. (2002) purport that the details of access and recruitment of research participants through gatekeepers are often presented in research studies and published accounts as either a *fait accompli* or in a sanitised manner. However, in my research design, I was cognisant from the very inception of my study that recruiting fathers via gatekeepers would represent one of the biggest challenges, and that I would likely have to change and adapt to these challenges. As discussed in section 4.1, the original research design involved placing myself as an observer in a child protection service office, which meant that the non-resident fathers would be recruited through my direct relationships with individual social workers. When this approach proved not to be feasible as outlined in section 1.1, I subsequently decided to recruit fathers and social workers through local authorities acting as gatekeepers. The local authorities were chosen based upon the convenience of their geographical location in the North of England, rather than on any other factor such as being rural, or city based. I approached ten local authorities in total, only three of which agreed to collaborate with me on this study, with the recruitment process proving to be time-consuming and multi-layered. Once contact was made to meet with senior-management and talk about my research, they then had to gain the

approval of the Director of Social Services before sending out the information sheet and consent forms to team managers, who would then pass these onto individual social workers for them to approach fathers who met the sampling criteria. Only once the fathers agreed to participate could I reach out to the fathers. I found the recruitment of non-resident fathers so challenging through local authorities that, after discussion with my supervisors, I decided to approach a third-party organisation that worked with fathers, which helped me to successfully recruit three fathers.

I was acutely aware that involvement in research projects can impose considerable additional work on social services staff who are already under pressure as a result of difficulties with staff retention and shortages (Munro et al. 2005). However, I found the social work staff to be cooperative and committed when they actually became involved in the research.

Another issue I was aware of, and considered as part of the process of approaching the gatekeepers, was that they needed to ensure that their interests were safeguarded, before they could grant permission to access the participants (Laine 2000). As Masson (2004) suggests:

“Researchers should expect gatekeepers to test their motives for wanting access, and to act as a barrier for poorly thought out or potentially damaging research” (Masson 2004 p.46).

As well as research potentially being damaging for the participants, there is also the possibility that the findings of a study can be detrimental to the local authority, namely in terms of reporting problematic practice (Munro et al. 2005; Emmel et al. 2007). I was incredibly conscious of local authorities being apprehensive about engaging in this study, because I was wanting to explore an area of practice in which, as discussed in the previous chapter, research findings, case law judgements and the findings of serious case reviews have found social workers to be lacking in their engagement with fathers as either a risk or a resource. Therefore, when both communicating with senior managers and composing the information sheet (see Appendix 2.2), it was important that I conveyed the underpinnings of the appreciative inquiry approach, and made it clear that I was focusing on the positives of their practice and what has worked.

One additional issue I considered when using gatekeepers to recruit the fathers for my study pertained to the ethical issue of consent and duress, as it has been argued that gatekeepers inherently have power over participants and, as such, can exert influence over them and impede participants' recruitment and continuing engagement in the research process (Miller

and Bell 2002). Emmel et al. (2007) argue that we should look beyond the notion of power when examining the relationship between participants and gatekeepers, and instead consider the trust and distrust between the two parties. This proved to be an issue with several of the fathers who were still involved with social services throughout my data production, as they were monitoring the ongoing care been given to their children. For these fathers, this raised two issues; firstly, whether their involvement would reflect upon how they were perceived; and secondly, whether I would report back to social services about them. I attempted to assuage these fears by keeping the involvement of the social workers to a minimum. Once they had approached the fathers and gained verbal agreement for me to contact them, their involvement ceased. From then onwards, I either spoke or met with the fathers prior to the initial interview and made it clear that unless they disclosed something that I deemed to present a risk to their children, the information they provided would be strictly confidential and, therefore, would not influence how they were perceived in the ongoing involvement of social services.

4.9 Introducing the participants- the fathers

There was a total of thirteen fathers that were recruited and participated in this study, which are detailed in Table 1 below. For further details of the fathers, their children and their journey to becoming their child’s primary carer, please refer to Appendix 9. The fathers ranged from 28-56 years in age, with an average age of 36, and median of 34 years of age. When I interviewed the fathers they all had had their children living with them for differing periods of time, ranging from 3 months to 3 years. They all had parental responsibility for their children through their name being on their child’s birth certificate, or in the case of Lucas, Robert and Mike they were granted parental responsibility for their child through a court order. In respect of the children, there was an equal distribution of sons and daughters across the fathers, with the children’s ages ranging from six months to 14 years, with the average age of the child being six and a half years old, and the median age was six.

Table 1 – Demographic information of the fathers

| PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYM | NATIONALITY | AGE | EMPLOYMENT | FAMILY UNIT/ NO. OF CHILDREN | HOUSING |
|-----------------------|---------------|-----|---------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| Alan | White British | 54 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 3 | Council - rented |
| Abdel | Algerian | 34 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 1 | Council - rented |
| David | White British | 28 | Self-employed | Single parent/ 1 | Homeowner |
| Graham | White British | 28 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 2 | Council - rented |
| Lawrence | White British | 35 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 2 | Council - rented |
| Liam | White British | 32 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 2 | Council - rented |
| Lucas | White British | 35 | Employed | Married/ 3 | Private - rented |
| Nigel | White British | 48 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 2 | Council - rented |

| | | | | | |
|--------|---------------|----|------------|------------------|------------------|
| Norman | White British | 42 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 1 | Council - rented |
| Mike | White British | 30 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 1 | Council - rented |
| Robert | White British | 29 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 3 | Council - rented |
| Tony | White British | 26 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 1 | Council - rented |
| Victor | White Irish | 56 | Unemployed | Single parent/ 1 | Council - rented |

4.10 Introducing the Participants- the social workers

The social workers were chosen purposively because of their direct involvement with placing the children with their fathers, in terms of their assessment of the father and / or ongoing involvement with them. This meant that other characteristics such as gender, race or class were not deemed to be important at the recruitment stage.

Seven social workers were interviewed in total and, as will be discussed in section in 4.6.2, they were employed in two Local Authorities in the North of England and were recruited as a consequence of them identifying and approaching fathers whom they had been involved with, by virtue of being the social workers for the child's father. They were all the allocated social workers for the children when the concerns had reached such a level with the care that were receiving from the mother, that they had, or were on the brink of initiating care proceedings in respect of the child. They subsequently remained involved for differing periods of time following the child residing with their father on a full time basis. As can be seen in Table 2 below, the majority of social workers were female, this is consistent with recent annual census data from Local Authorities in England ,which identified that 87% of social workers in 2021 were female (GOV.UK 2022).

Table 2 – Information on the Social Workers

| PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYM | GENDER | AGE | POSITION | RELEVANCE |
|-----------------------|--------|-----|-----------------|--|
| Clare | Female | 36 | SW | Assessments of Liam and Abdel |
| Colin | Male | 46 | SW Team Manager | Involvement with Lawrence's children |
| Diane | Female | 48 | SW | Involvement with David's children |
| Hannah | Female | 32 | Principal SW | Assessments of Victor and Norman |
| Katy | Female | 52 | SW | Involvement with Nigel's children |
| Kerry | Female | 48 | SW Team Manager | Assessment of Robert |
| Mary | Female | 34 | SW | Involvement with Alan's children and assessment of Lucas |

4.11 Reflections on the data production

In this section I intend to reflect upon the process of data production with both the fathers and the social workers. Considering my initial intentions and plan to conduct the data production through narrative interviews and timelines with the fathers and semi structured interviews with the fathers, I critically reflect on the reality of the using these methods in the research field.

4.11.1 The narrative interviews with the fathers

Table 3 below details the number and duration of the interviews that were conducted with the thirteen fathers in the study. It can be noted that unfortunately, with only three fathers was I able to secure a second interview.

Table 3: - The interviews with the fathers

| PATICIPANT PSEUDONYM | NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS | INTERVIEW WORD COUNT | RECORDED INTERVIEW TIME | TIMELINE COMPLETED |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Nigel | 2 | 14,506 | 1:29:27 | No |
| Lucas | 1 | 7,354 | 46:27 | No |
| Alan | 1 | 3,977 | 26:40 | No |
| David | 1 | 10,785 | 1:06:11 | Yes |
| Lawrence | 2 | 11,121 | 1:10:46 | No |
| Victor | 1 | 4,355 | 27:14 | No |
| Robert | 1 | 9,918 | 54:58 | No |
| Graham | 1 | 8,345 | 48:48 | No |
| Abdel | 1 | 3,600 | 23:30 | No |
| Tony | 2 | 11,525 | 1:08:35 | No |
| Norman | 1 | 6,084 | 42:44 | No |
| Mike | 1 | 8,779 | 51:30 | Yes |
| Liam | 1 | 4,297 | 30: 44 | No |

Adopting a narrative approach engendered a more open and participant led interaction, where, through the fathers leading the interviews, they were able to tell their story of the event of having their children placed in their care, in the context of being the non-resident father and their non-standard paternal biographies (Lewis and Lamb 2007a). The fathers were able present their story temporally and reflect back on their life through memories, which, according to Reissman (2008), prior to the narration can be chaotic, fragmented and scarcely visible. Although each non-resident father’s experience and understanding of fathering was different, there were also commonalities. It was important to explore these stories in order to develop an understanding of the fathers’ “lived life” and how they have reacted to it (Adriansen 2012) as well as it how it affected their motivation to engage with social services. I became aware of this during the data production where several fathers appeared to present a

“sanitised version” of their lives. This was particularly the case with those fathers who were still subject to monitoring by social workers regarding the care they were providing to their children. I became cognisant of this when interviewing the social workers who brought up certain events in the lives of the fathers, that the fathers themselves had failed to mention in their stories. One example of this is that Nigel failed to disclose in his interview with me that he had spent time in prison during his child’s life, and also that he was on a current Methadone programme, which I only discovered through the interview with his child’s social worker Katy. This point relates to the issue I raised in section 1.1 where I suggest that there is a need to interpret the accounts of both the fathers and the social workers through a critical lens.

It is argued, however, that researchers must exercise caution towards the narrative accounts that people present, as the veracity of their account can be compromised by both the story-teller’s memory and motivations to create a story for a particular audience that is influenced by power relations (Holloway and Jefferson 2000; Reissman 2008). As Reissman (2008) suggests:

“There is, of course, a complicated relationship between narrative, time and memories for we revise and edit the remembered past to square with our identities in the present” (p. 8).

Holloway and Jefferson (2000) argue that the assumption that transparency can be said to exist when participants are “telling it like it is” has been adopted wrongly by many in the field of qualitative research. They argue that this assumption accepts two premises: firstly, that participants have a clear understanding of who they are and how they function; and secondly that they are amenable and articulate in telling this to a total stranger (the researcher), with the truth being potentially compromised through the story-teller’s memory and motivation. This raises the issue of the veracity of the stories that people present, not to mention the broader issue of what constitutes the truth. As Webster and Mertova (2007) note:

“Narrative Research does not claim to represent the exact “truth”, but rather aims for “verisimilitude” – that the results have the appearance of truth or reality” (p.4)

It is suggested that although interruptions from the interviewers in narrative interviews should be kept to a minimum (Morris 2015), interviewers are also seen as active participants in narrative interviews, who when needed “subtly prod the interviewee to say “more” about a topic or pausing at key points in the expectation that “more” could be said” (Maxwell 2013 pg.368). However, I found after conducting my first interview that with some of fathers, I

would need to take a different approach and introduce more direct questions and prompts to gain an understanding of the points that were raised, which at times aligned the data production with the format of semi-structured qualitative interviews. However, as identified in the introductory section of this chapter, a reflexive approach was adopted in this study, where the research adapts and changes in response to challenges in the field (Maxwell 2013) This was also the situation with the use of timelines which will be discussed in section 4.7.2.

4.11.2 The use of timelines with the fathers

However, the practicalities of completing the timelines with the fathers in their homes proved very difficult due to the lack of a surface to complete the timelines, and the disruption from the children who were often in the room, or within the house. A change of venue was considered, but was not an option as the fathers only wished to conduct the interviews in their homes, and only made themselves available for an interview when the children were at home. As a result, I was only able to complete two timelines with David and Mike, which can be viewed below in Figure 1 and Figure 2. However, I found the use of timelines in the interviews very beneficial as a means of discussing emotive and difficult issues. as cited above. This was particularly pertinent within the interview with Mike, where he was reflecting back on the death of his partner through complications relating to her drug use. Where, he was also under the influence of illegal drugs, and in the same room as her when she died.

On reflection, I should have pre-empted some of the difficulties I would have in completing the timelines with the fathers, and more experience and practice in using visual methods would have been beneficial, as it would have given me the confidence and experience to switch to other visual methods such as photo elicitation.

4.11.3 The semi-structured interviews with the social workers

As illustrated in Table 4, interviews ranged from 40-50 minutes in duration. I found that after listening to, and transcribing the interviews soon after they had been conducted, that they contained sufficient detail that a second interview would not be necessary to reveal any further themes or produce any richer data.

As identified in section 4.4.3 semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method of data production. It was during the transcription and initial analysis of the first two social worker interviews, however, that I realised I had underestimated the influence that familiarity would have in the interviews, with the data containing numerous references to common acronyms

and allusions to shared understanding, not to mention several instances where I actually completed the thoughts and sentences of the social workers. All of this ultimately affected the quality of the data, insofar as things were not shared because there was a dynamic of “you know what I mean”. This same issue was experienced in a study into the identity of mental health social workers by (Morriss 2015) who found that due to previously holding the same position as her participants, she struggled with the analysis of the interview data due to familiarity and she described experiencing “insider myopia” (p.526). In response to this identified issue, I reflected upon my role and position in these two previous interviews, and, in the following five interviews, I took a more passive and novice stance, contributing less to the discussion and asking for more clarity on professional acronyms and jargon.

Table 4 - The interviews with the social workers

| PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYM | NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS | INTERVIEW WORD COUNT | RECORDED INTERVIEW TIME |
|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--|
| Clare | 2 | 9,252 8,153 | 51:02 (for Abdel) 49:40 (for Liam) |
| Colin | 1 | 7,166 | 55:04 |
| Diane | 1 | 7,257 | 40:35 |
| Hannah | 2 | 8,500 8,736 | 43:46 (for Victor) 45:58 (for Norman) |
| Katy | 1 | 7,532 | 41:48 |
| Kerry | 1 | 11,061 | 56:30 |
| Mary | 2 | 8,461 7,958 | 49:28 (for Lucas) 46:38 (for Alan) |

4.12 Data Analysis - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

There exists a plethora of approaches that can be espoused to analyse qualitative data, for those researchers focusing upon the use of language may chose conversational analysis (Greco 2006) or discourse analysis (Tonkiss 2004), whereas those interested in theory building can adopt approaches such as grounded theory (Urquhart 2013; Charmaz 2017). Thematic Analysis (TA), however, focusing upon identifying, describing analysing both implicit and explicit ideas (themes) within a set of data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Guest et al. 2012). In its purest sense, I embrace Leininger (1985) suggestions that TA involves “...bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone” (p. 60). Often presented as a singular and homogenous approach, in reality there are numerous and differing typologies of TA (Byrne 2021).¹³ The specific approach I chose in this study was Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019,

¹³ It is argued this has led to a lack of clarity about what constitutes thematic analysis and its implementation, which can often lead to poorly constructed and executed analysis see: Trainor and Bundon (2021), Terry et al (2017) Harding (2019)

2021, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2006) first introduced their model of TA through an inaugural publication in a psychology journal in 2006. In recent years they rebranded and relabelled this original model to RTA, with the intention of reemphasising and reinforcing that the notion that its application requires a reflexive practitioner (Trainor and Bundon 2021). Accordingly, Braun and Clarke (2021) in order to demarcate what is distinct and different about their approach, suggest that "...it emphasises the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as an analytic resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation"¹⁴ (Braun and Clarke 2021 p.330).

D'Souza et al. (2020) through adopting this approach in their study of men's gendered experiences of rehabilitation and recovery following traumatic brain injury, found that the flexibility offers the researcher the ability to develop a unique, detailed and nuanced analysis, where:

"Unlike other qualitative methods, Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis is not bound by methodological commitments, meaning that analysts are granted freedom to draw on the theoretical framework of their choosing to make sense of their data." (p. 6)

In analysing both sets of interview data I followed the six phase process proposed by (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2021, 2022)

- Phase one – Familiarisation with the data
- Phase two – generating initial codes
- Phase three – generating themes
- Phase four - reviewing potential themes
- Phase five - defining and naming themes
- Phase six- producing the report

According to (Braun and Clarke 2013, 2020), the phases are to be viewed as a set of guidelines, rather than rules, and should be applied in a flexible manner to fit the data and the research questions. In addition, whilst the phases are presented in a logical sequential order, I was cognisant of the fact that the analysis is not a linear process of moving forward through

¹⁴It is suggested that this reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation has allowed a level of flexibility that makes it so appealing, and the most commonly used approach in the analysis in qualitative research and the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a free flowing textual data set. See Guest et al (2012), Trainor and Bundon (2021) .

the phases, rather, the analysis is recursive and iterative, which required me to move back and forth through the phases as required (Braun and Clarke 2020), which led to new interpretations of the data and patterns of meaning. The interview data from both the fathers and the social worker was subjected to the same process of analysis, and I will now, in the next section explore how I adopted these six phases in my data analysis.

4.12.1 Analysis of the interview data

Prior to the transcription of each interview, I began to familiarise myself with the data through “active listening” (Byrne 2021 p.13) where I listened to each interview without taking notes. This allowed me to consider the raw data in its purest sense, before it was transformed into words, codes, themes and findings. It is proposed that analysis starts during transcription, thus making it an integral phase of data analysis within interpretive qualitative methodology (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999; Bird 2005) As Bird (2005) contends:

“When representing an oral voice in written form, the transcriber becomes the channel for that voice. Because the transcriber is *not* that voice, any act of transcription becomes an interpretive act.” (p.228)

It is suggested that transcription allows researchers an opportunity to immerse themselves in the data (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Indeed, through my experience of the transcribing of the interview data being such an onerous task, with each interview taking several hours to complete, I would offer that immersion is almost unavoidable.

These anonymised transcripts were then uploaded into QSR NVivo V.12. As a person of a certain era, and with someone with dyslexia, I also printed off each interview transcript, for although reparative and time consuming, I found using a combination of manual analysis¹⁵ and NVivo, both an enjoyable, and productive visual and tactile experience. The NVivo software was invaluable, however, as both as a repository and as a means of coding in an organised way. To further familiarise myself with the data, I read each interview transcript twice and began to explore potential meanings and patterns whilst making reflective notes. It was at this stage that I also utilised the research diary that I had compiled during the interviews with the fathers and social workers.

Research diaries are seen as crucial aspect of qualitative research as they capture feelings, observations, annoyances, and reflections of the researcher and thus become data in their own

¹⁵ Print out of the interviews, use highlighter pens, post it notes etc

right and part of the overall findings (Flick 2009; Maxwell 2013; Blaikie and Priest 2018). In this study, one challenge that emerged in my analysis of the interview data from the social workers in respect of my positionality as a previous social worker, was how they considered and rationalised cases of domestic abuse in the fathers' biographies. For example, when social workers' accounts separated the violent man from the caring father, and apportioned blame to mothers who had encountered this violence, I felt uncomfortable with their decision making process. Using my research diary to reflect on my feelings around these issues was an invaluable aspect of the data analysis process.

Referring to the previous point about the voice of the participant, Bird (2005) further stresses the importance of ensuring that the voice of the research participant can be heard in the way that they wished, where their voice is much more than words, and should include the social context and embedded and intended meaning. This was achieved through repeated consultation with my research diary, which allowed me to revisit the details, context and reflections of each interview that I had recorded immediately after each interview.

Phase two began with generating codes, which as well as the building blocks of analysis and the foundation of theme development, are labels of a segment of raw data that is potentially relevant to research questions (Braun and Clarke 2014; Trainor and Bundon 2021). In line with a constructivist approach, I predominantly used an inductive or data driven approach where the data was "open coded" with the codes produced reflecting the content of the data, rather than fitting a pre-existing coding frame. However, it is argued that it is not possible to conduct a purely inductive analysis, "...because you cannot enter a theoretical vacuum when doing thematic analysis" (Braun and Clarke 2021 p.331). Therefore, I was required to undertake a level of deductive analysis in order to ensure the open-coding and the participant meanings were relevant to the research questions (Fereday and Muir-Chochrane 2006; Byrne 2021). Once all the relevant data times were coded, Phase three commenced with a review and analysis of the coded data through an iterative process. In NVivo, I expanded, collapsed and moved codes in and out categories, in order to interpret and determine whether, and how the relationships between the codes informed the narrative of each theme. It was at this stage that a hierarchy of subthemes and themes were established. Examples of this coding and theme development can be found at Appendix 7 and. These examples illustrate how NVivo was helpful in assigning multiple codes to one passage, with the added value of being able to link a coded passage back to the part of the text in which it originated. It can be seen that each theme contained different numbers of codes and data items. However, I was aware that the salience of a theme is not dependent upon the number of data items of codes contained within

a particular theme, but that the codes and data communicate something meaningful that helps in answering the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2014; Terry et al. 2017).

I found that Phase four and Phase five amalgamated into one process, where, through conducting a recursive review of the initially identified themes, I confirmed, and where necessary renamed the themes, grouping them together to represent a lucid narrative of the dataset and an identification with the research question. It was at this phase that I needed to be willing to assign codes and themes to the cutting room floor, as too many themes may result in the analysis becoming cumbersome and incoherent (D'Souza et al. 2020; Byrne 2021), whilst at the same time an insufficient number of themes can result in the analysis failing to explore or reflect the full breadth and of the data (Braun and Clarke 2021, 2022)¹⁶. It was also during this phase that I began to identify abstracts which would "...provide a vivid and compelling account of the arguments being made by a respective theme" (Byrne 2021 p.12). copying and pasting them into a Microsoft word document, where they could begin to create a narrative to aid the writing of the findings chapters.

Braun and Clarke (2012) profess that the write up of qualitative research in Phase six, is interwoven with the entire process of the analysis, where as well as codes and themes changing and evolving, so too does the writeup. Throughout the writing of the findings chapters, I found myself repeatedly returning to the codes, themes, and indeed the original interview data, in order to undertake further analysis and gain clarity on pre-existing themes. This again is demonstrated in Figure 5 and 6 where the dates in the second to last column on the right represent when the codes/themes were created and/or adapted.

4.13 Summary

This chapter has presented a reflexive insight into the methodological approach taken in this research study. I presented a rationale for the adoption a qualitative research approach that informed the data production and analysis, and attempted to address the research questions posed at the beginning of the chapter. In addition, a detailed account was provided of how my positionality influenced my choice of methods of data production with both the fathers and social workers. Particular attention was also paid the challenges of interviewing men and therefore the need to adopt of a narrative approach to interviewing.

It is hoped that the transparency and authenticity of this research has been strengthened by not only me describing the ethical procedures and research process in detail, but also how my

¹⁶ I have found this task a challenge both at the analysis stage of this study, and the writing up of the findings in this thesis.

choice of data production and analysis was informed through the exploration my own positionality in respect of the participants in the study and the research setting. The chapter has also highlighted the complexity and fluidity of qualitative research and the challenges of data production in the field.

The thesis will now progress to explore the four findings chapters, the first, Chapter five, will consider the fathers' motivations for and experiences of becoming their child's primary carer.

Chapter Five:

The Fathers' motivations for and experiences of becoming their child's primary carer

5.1 Introduction

As stated in section 1.2, the four findings chapters are presented in the order which best tells the fathers' journeys from being the non-resident father to becoming their child's primary carer, and with the exception of only one father, their sole carer. The first findings chapter focuses on the central research question of the study, which was what were the fathers experiences of involvement with social services and what were their motivations for becoming the full-time carers for their children. It is important to note, before I present the findings in these four chapters, that a great deal of data was generated from the interview of the fathers and the social workers, which led to a number of challenges, and complexity, in choosing which themes to use, and how to present the findings.

I have separated this research aim into two sections because, as explored in section 6.3, not all the fathers agreed with either the involvement of social services in the first instance, or the assessment of their ability to care for their child. They were aware, however, that they needed to participate in an assessment in order to secure the care of their child. Ultimately, they were motivated by their wish to either retain their child or have the child placed in their care, with the assessment being regarded as a means to an end to achieve this aim. This raises the issue of the disputed phenomenon of "disguised compliance" (Turney 2012 p.154), which refers to the fact that social workers must be aware that service users may feign the appearance of cooperation, while, simultaneously, actively deceiving and duping professionals. Some have argued that this term is unhelpful and oppressive, insofar as it frames all parents who do not engage as being untrustworthy (Leigh et al. 2020), whereas it has been found that parents often have perfectly good reasons for not responding well to social workers when faced with such authority figures, and parents often feel blackmailed into cooperating with an assessment and/or plan that they do not agree with (Featherstone et al. 2014 ; Leigh et al. 2020). I would suggest that this was indeed the case for at least three of the fathers in this study as, despite the fact that there were often no concerns about their care, their children nevertheless continued to be on full care orders whilst in their care, which meant that they were subject to the full scrutiny of the courts.

The assessments of the fathers also varied in terms of both depth and time depending on where the child was residing and whether the child was in care proceedings; for example, two of the fathers who had little or no contact with their children were required to be observed during contact sessions over a number of months, while two of the fathers with young babies needed to be observed by social workers and attend parenting classes with their children. Conversely, for those fathers whose children already lived with them, the assessment appeared to be a forty-day core assessment under S.17 of the Children Act 1989.

The fathers' motivations for taking part in an assessment of them were situation-dependent; for example, five fathers already had their children living with them without the knowledge of social services. The chapter first examines the various motivations of the fathers for agreeing to be assessed to take on the care of their children. These motivations included preventing their children from going into care because of negative media reporting of care placements, societal stigma associated with the care system, and their own lived experience of care. These motivations also pertained to the fathers' concerns over their children's futures as well as a personal need for redemption from previous misdemeanours in their own lives. The chapter then proceeds to explore the fathers' experiences of the assessment process, documenting when the fathers first became aware of the concerns of the local authority, their engagement with their child's social worker, and the subsequent relationship that developed during the assessment process. The chapter also considers both time and timing, which featured heavily in the fathers' accounts of the problems they encountered, namely with respect to their understanding of the timescales¹⁷ within the child protection system, and the different speeds at which social workers operate during an assessment.

5.2 The motivations of the fathers

The benefit of adopting a qualitative approach in this study was that it enabled the fathers to tell their story, which, in so doing, allowed me to gain an understanding of the fathers' internalised narrative rendering of their life over time, involving the reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future (McAdams et al. 2001). In the following sections, I demonstrate how the fathers considered all three dimensions of time while discussing their motivations.

¹⁷ It must be noted that these timescales are not naturally occurring but are imposed by the child protection system including the local authority procedures and court processes.

For a number of the fathers the decision to become the primary carer for their children was to avoid them either being removed or remaining in the care of the local authority. This, in turn, was fuelled by a number of considerations which will be discussed below.

5.2.1 Negative perceptions of the care system

For one father, Lawrence, the underlying rationale for not wanting his sons to go into local authority care was his negative perceptions of the care system. I asked Lawrence to consider how he would have felt if his sons had been removed into care.

Lawrence: I would have felt down. I would have been sick; I'd have been crying. I would have been sad.

Lee: Why is that do you think?

Lawrence: Because I don't think any children should end up in care, you always see on the news, don't you, care isn't good for children? Even on TV soaps it says care isn't good for children. I have talked to people, you see it in the paper, all the stories about care aren't good. Nine times out of ten, the children end up having no life, on drugs, in prison, being abused. So, it isn't a good place for children to go, care.

What is significant about Lawrence's account is his emotional response to the thought of his sons going into care. In section 6.5, I discuss in greater detail the emotional responses of fathers and how there was often a disconnect between social workers' awareness, understanding and responses to the emotional position of fathers. It can be seen that the negative perception that Lawrence holds derives from popular media, such as television and newspapers, which have been found to reflect societal attitudes towards children in care (West 1999; Ferguson 2007; Riggs et al. 2009; Cockett 2017). While Lawrence's aversion towards the care system appeared to emanate from external sources, for two of the fathers in the study, Liam and Robert, their negative perceptions of the care system appeared to be based on their own lived experiences. In their respective interviews, both fathers talked openly about their experiences of being in the care system as children. Liam recounted the event that led to him going into care at the age of eleven, whereas Robert recalled that he was nine years of age when this happened, with his twin brother remaining in the care of his parents. In the following extract I invited Robert to talk about his children.

Lee: So how many have you got living with you now?

Robert: Three, they are doing well in school. They are loving school. It's just finding stuff to do now. I'm looking to find a boxing place for us all to go, because I know that it deals with

a lot of discipline, so that's a massive thing that I'm wanting them to do. I want them to grow up to be respectful young gentlemen. I don't want them to live the life that I had. This is why I took them on because I don't want them to get put into care and then get separated. That's the last thing that I want.

Robert was able to reflect upon the fact that, through his actions, not only had he managed to achieve his goal of not having his children go into care like he did, but it has made a positive difference to their lives, both in the present and the future. Robert was determined to change the trajectory of his sons' life, which was further demonstrated when I asked him about the current state of the care proceedings. Robert viewed the circumstances with his sons by drawing upon memories of his own childhood experiences when he was separated from his twin brother.

Robert: *They're wanting to put my son on a care order, and I said, "Why? He's my biological son, he shouldn't need to be on a care order. The last thing I said to you is that you are going to put my son in a position that I was in when I was his age. You're putting him in a care home, which is something that I don't want, and something that I went through as a kid. You're obviously not doing your job properly if you think it's right putting my son on a care order." Then I said to her, "To be honest with you, I think you have played it quite cleverly, because if anything bad happens, you're going to take them all. But then again, you have more chance of separating all three, so what's the point?" They are like the Krays,¹⁸ this is what they are like, the partnership in these kids. You cannot separate them. If you separate these kids, they will find each other.*

Returning to the earlier discussion about disguised compliance (Turney 2012; Leigh et al. 2020), Liam reflected negatively upon the inherent power that social services held over himself and his children by virtue of having a care order in place for his three children, and expressed fears that if concerns were raised about his care, then they could remove the children without presenting further evidence to the court. His negativity and reticence are understandable in this regard, as this care order did not relate to his care of his children, but remained in place when the children came to live with him. He was aware that he was powerless, and expressed his frustration through referring to how his children will rally and

¹⁸ The Krays were twin brothers who were notorious gangsters in East London during the 1950s and 1960s, who, despite often well-documented fights with each other, were reported as being passionately loyal to, and protective of each other throughout their lives.

fight back against any such intervention because their bond and loyalty to each other is more powerful.

Similar to Robert, in the next extract Liam reflected on his own experience of being separated from his brother, and the enduring kinship that he believes exists between his own children, in addition to other negative experiences of being in the care system.

Liam: Yes. Not like I'm bothered because I've got nothing to hide but I didn't want them to go into the care system even if it was for a month, you know. Because I've been through care system myself and it... At eleven, I went into care, and you're just left to your own devices. I'd never been fostered out till late on in life, but you're left to your own devices, yeah, just left and it's not good because you're mixing with the wrong crowd and stuff like that and before you know it, you're in trouble, but not just that, because they've got nobody else, and I was gutted when I went into the care system and it's my job. They're my kids. I have to step up. If their mam can't do it, it's my job to step up to the plate and look after them.

Liam talked negatively about his care experience by using phrases like, “*I was gutted when I went into the care system*”. He switched his narrative in the same sentence to reflect upon how he felt at the point when he was taken into care, highlighting his negative experiences of the care system where he was left to his own devices and mixed with the wrong crowd. Liam also expressed the sense of personal responsibility that he felt towards his children, alongside his need to step in to protect his son and prevent him from going into care.

What is interesting is that both Robert and Liam did not only refer to their negative experiences with the care system, but rather also reflected upon the issues that led them to be removed into care, the abuse/neglect they experienced in their own families, and the sense of loss they felt as a result. Consequently, one could argue that the motivation for these two fathers taking on the care of their children did not simply derive from negative perceptions or stigma associated with the care system that was raised by other fathers. Rather, there was an additional form of motivation for them, which was that they did not want their children to feel the sense of loss, loneliness, and abandonment that they both experienced in the care system. The concept of loss is discussed further in the next section, where I describe how a number of fathers expressed that they would feel a sense of loss in the future if their children had not come into their care.

5.2.2 Present and perceived loss

As identified in section 5.3.1, child protection social work, by its very nature, places children at the centre of its focus, with the child's future being of particular importance (Smeeton 2012). In her study of the experiences of mothers who were subject to recurrent care proceedings, Morriss (2018b) argues that professionals involved in the day-to-day decision-making for children are engaged in "future work" (p. 283), which involves them continuously pre-empting and predicting a number of possible imagined futures for children.

"Indeed, thinking futures and making futures can be seen as the *raison d'être* of child protection practices: these practitioners are "specialists of the future"" (Morriss 2018b p. 824).

This focus on children's future raises some important issues for the fathers in this study, as professionals' talk becomes centred on the child's future. This was highlighted in the interview with Abdel, who was contacted by social services once his daughter, Sara, was in foster care with the plan for adoption alongside the assessment of Abdul as a possible carer. This is referred to as either parallel or concurrent planning (Brammer 2015), which according to the statutory guidance is used:

"...in cases where the local authority is still attempting rehabilitation with the birth family but expects that adoption will become the plan should rehabilitation with the birth family be not successful" (DOH 2014 p. 23).

Once in care proceedings, the focus moves primarily to the future or, to be more accurate, the child's future. At this stage, the father becomes, as demonstrated through the process of concurrent planning, one of several possible options for the child's future permanent care. For Abdel, because Sara was only three years old, adoption was a viable option. Abdel had been made aware of the care plan, and his own solicitor had also informed him of his predicament.

Abdel: *They were looking for adoption.*

Lee: *As a baby, as a baby, yes.*

Abdel: *Yes. Because I was looking at giving her to my mum back home, but they said they don't want that. Even the solicitor told me not a chance to... So, that meant only me or the adoption.*

Lee: *Yes*

Abdel: *The best solution we got.*

His awareness of the situation was further confirmed by his daughter's social worker, Clare.

Clare: *He knew that adoption was front and centre because it's always mentioned in the Looked After review process right from the word go, you sort of, "Are you doing the adoption? Have you got the adoption medical reports?"*

In section 5.3.2, it was proposed that people have a distinct perception of the passing of time, which is often referred to as the temporal perspective (Zimbardo and Boyd 1999). It is also suggested that people have a personal time orientation (Begić and Mercer 2017), which concerns whether they are either orientated primarily towards their past, their present experiences, or more concerned with the future. This temporal lens through which a person experiences the world has been found to have a significant impact upon the motivations and behaviour of individuals (Simons et al. 2004). When applying this concept along with that of Morriss (2018) to the fathers in this study, one can say that although it was not possible to ascertain each individual father's temporal orientation, I suggest that through their involvement with social workers, whether they wished to or not, they were forced to consider a possible future without their children, and this subsequently impacted upon their motivation to be assessed. This can be discerned in the interviews of Lawrence and Abdel, who perceived a loss on both an emotional level and a material level if their children were taken into care, or in the case of Abdel, placed for adoption. In the following excerpt, Lawrence reflected on the challenges of caring for his two sons on his own.

Lawrence: *There has been stages where I've thought I just can't cope.*

Lee: *Yeah. So, what has kept you going?*

Lawrence: *I've always thought that I don't want my children to end up in care, because if they do go in care, then I won't see them all the time, and I have always seen my children all the time. Even in the past, I've had a full-time job and I've still seen them Friday to Sunday.*

Lee: *Yeah.*

Lawrence: *And I've always had them, so I didn't like the thought of somebody else having a say about my own children over me. They are taking over a dad's job because I'm their dad, and I didn't want anybody else to take over that job of being their full-time carer.*

Lawrence's statement that *I have always seen my children all the time* relates to the bonds formed over time and the power of kinship, as he was one of the twelve fathers that had a relationship with their children prior to assuming the role of primary carer, and one of the ten fathers that lived with their children prior to becoming non-resident. It is unclear from his account whether he was referring to a time in the past when he was resident or non-resident,

but he, nevertheless, clearly understood the consequences and impact of his children going into care concerning the amount of time he would have spent with his children. It could be suggested that this was because he had already experienced this through becoming a non-resident father, which provided him with direct lived experience of loss. Previous studies that have considered fathers' experiences of becoming non-resident found that they experienced a strong symbolic and social sense of loss, such as not being able to see their children on a daily basis (Hallman et al. 2007; Mercadante et al. 2014). The statement *They are taking over a dad's job, because I'm their dad* could be interpreted as Lawrence anticipating or reflecting on a loss of role and identity, which is consistent with studies of non-resident fathers and related to the reduction in parental time (Simpson et al. 2003; Olmstead et al. 2009; Troilo and Coleman 2012).

Lawrence also referred to *somebody else having a say about my own children over me*. This could be interpreted as him feeling a loss of direction over his children's lives, which is once again in line with the notion that non-resident fathers experience a loss of control and authority with decisions relating to their children and family (Umberson and Williams 1993; Simpson et al. 2003; Kielty 2006). One alternative interpretation of Lawrence's statement that he did not want somebody else taking *over that job of being their full-time carer*, is that Lawrence was imagining a possible self, and the stigmatisation of someone else looking after his sons. Scholte et al. (1999) comprehensive study of perceived stigma amongst users of childcare services found that a sense of stigma was prominent with users of residential and foster care services.

“...the perception seems to be that it is marginally all right to accept help in raising one's children – though needing help at all may be an indication of failure – but it is not all right to fail in the child rearing task to such a degree that one's children are taken away and raised by someone else” (Scholte et al. 1999 p.388).

Scholte et al. (1999) purport that the degree of stigma closely relates to the perception of failure associated with increasing levels of support or, in the case of the removal of a child into care, the interference that a parent experiences from social services. On a number of occasions in Lawrence's interview he referred to needing support to care for one of his sons who was exhibiting challenging behaviour.

Lawrence: *Yeah. It has been hard for me, I don't have anybody who will come and have the children for me, because Edward is hard work. I have applied for short breaks through the*

social services, so I'm hoping I can have a few hours a week where somebody comes and takes him out for me, on a Saturday or a Sunday

Therefore, it could be suggested that Lawrence justifies and defends the need for support from social services on the grounds of both his son's difficult behaviour and the lack of support. Having someone to look after his children for a *few hours a week* did not trigger a perception of failure as a father and the ensuing stigma.

In the next extract, Abdel discussed how he anticipated experiencing feelings of loss if his daughter were to be placed up for adoption.

Lee: Yes. At what point did you think, yes, I'm going to do it. At what point did it, sort of... the idea come to you, or you say you're going to do it. Can you remember what?

Abdel: I can't honestly, I see her as my daughter like she's going to go then...you know I was thinking if she goes...I would be very sad... the more, you know I'm thinking that's it I'm going to lose her forever.

What is notable about these accounts from fathers is their emotional depth. Studies have found that emotional reactions are often either not recognised or are misinterpreted by social workers. Baum and Negbi (2013) suggest that because of the lack of both time that social workers spend with fathers and the skills required to work with them in practice, when fathers do openly show their pain, social workers underestimate or dismiss the feelings they are experiencing. Similarly, Hojer (2011b), in her study of parents, found that despite the majority of fathers experiencing profound feelings of loss, grief and guilt, they were not always recognised by their social workers. Moreover, the study found that when parents did exhibit an emotional reaction, such as, for example, having an emotional outburst and using emotionally loaded language, they were often framed as undesirable or inadequate reactions to the situation, and, as such, worked against parents as it was interpreted as additional evidence of “bad parenting” during the assessment process” (Hojer 2011b p.121). Smithers (2012), in his small-scale study of fathers who had either had children placed on a child protection plan or removed into care, also observed that social workers had stereotypical or limited expectations of fathers displaying emotional depth.

“If the emotional depth and complexity of the men is met with a blind eye and a deaf ear then it is little wonder that that the one of frustration, which can be interpreted as aggression, thus fitting a stereotypical view of a problematic male client...”
(Smithers 2012 pg. 22).

It will be highlighted in sections 6.5 and 7.2 that interpretation of the data emanating from the social work interviews data challenges these previous findings. In the study a number of the social workers appeared to both understand and appreciate the emotional responses to the involvement of social services, and in some instances were able to challenge these responses. Similarly, section 7.2 will explore where several social workers commented on the fathers' emotional investment in, and response to, their children that they observed during the assessment.

As well as fathers anticipating feelings of loss in a future without their children, a number of the fathers also referred to a future where they would feel stigmatised, and guilt should their children once again be taken into care. This theme will be explored in the next section.

5.2.3 Protecting both your own and your child's future self

This section considers where several fathers referred to an imagined future where a lack of engagement in, or success in the assessment would likely have resulted in a negative impact upon themselves and their child. The concept of the future in academia is both contested and complex (Urry 2016). One particularly useful approach for considering the future comes from Adam (2004, 2005), who argues that the future is prepared in the present through the actions of an individual and their perceived effects on the future, which serves to transform the future into the present. In addition, a factual understanding of the future is not possible; all we can know is that the future will appear "knowable" (Shirani and Henwood 2011) as we reflect upon and use our previous lived experiences and those of others. In this first extract from Lucas, I asked him whether he ever thought about not agreeing to be assessed by social services in order to take care of his daughter Meadow.

Lucas: *I could have, yeah, but then if I've done the DNA test and then knew, it would have never gone away, would it?*

Lee: *In what way, what do you mean?*

Lucas: *Well, obviously, when she got older, and if she knew I was her dad, I would just get a load of grief, wouldn't I?*

Lucas placed himself in an imagined future where if he did not agree to the assessment despite knowing Meadow was his daughter, then he would perhaps experience guilt that would have *never gone away*, coupled with a fear of retribution from his daughter finding out this fact later in her life. Similarly, Norman had not seen his son for three years prior to social services

contacting him about their concerns about his care, and I asked him whether he had any hesitation about agreeing to be assessed.

Norman: *No, that never entered my mind. I always said if it comes to it, I'll take him and look after him.*

Lee: *Why was that? Why did you think?*

Norman: *Because he's my family, my son. You don't have no issues or qualms about it, you just do it and get on with it. I'd rather him live with me than go in care. Fair enough if I did it wrong and it went pear-shaped, I've tried, but I'd rather try than not try. Not just that, you don't know if he's going to resent you later on when he finds out he could have gone to you, but you didn't want him. That's going to mess him up more.*

Lee: *Yes when he's older?*

Norman: *Yes, I'd rather just try and get on with it than not try at all.*

Norman referred to a sense of kinship with his son, Tom, because *he's my family* and as having an obligation to at least act, even if it resulted in failure. Alongside the desire to avoid future resentment from Tom, he was also motivated by an awareness of the impact that this would also have on Tom in the future, which was expressed via the phrase *that's going to mess him up more*. Similarly, Graham referred to the same theme in his interview.

Graham: *Yes. If I went out and I slept with a bird and now she was pregnant, and it were a one night stand like, I would do the same thing because I would hate the thought of having a child that were growing up and I didn't know them and I didn't have something to do with them and I want Jack to know that I'm fighting for him and to know when he is older that I fought for him, do you know what I mean?*

What is interesting about these three fathers is that they did not appear to have been concerned about any wider condemnation from an external audience apropos their lack of action, but rather were purely concerned about potential judgment from their children. These themes from Norman and Graham's accounts resonate with those found in the study of Clifton (2012) who, via the use of narrative interviews, explored the experiences and feelings of twenty resident and non-resident fathers, whose children had been adopted. The study examined and developed the concept of "The Fight" (Clifton 2012, p. 47), based on the fact that a number of the fathers foregrounded the importance of being depicted as fighting for, or having fought for their child to prevent their adoption.

“...a number of participants imagined that their child, assuming that they met again, would need to be convinced that their birth father had fought to keep them” (Clifton 2012 p. 47).

When considering the interview data of both Abdel and his daughters’ social worker, it was evident that Abdel’s mother was supporting him during his assessment by social services as well as initially being assessed herself. Abdel referred to his mother in several contexts throughout his narrative. In the following extract, we discussed the fact that in the wake of his unsuccessful first assessment he subsequently needed to undertake more work with his support worker as part of the assessment.

Abdel: There’s so much more. They must make sure they do so much more, the work, especially with the other half as well. My mum she was to come here, she told me I’m scared for them. I don’t have no option, you know.

Here, Abdel is displaying his awareness of his mother’s feelings, namely the fears she had regarding the children going into care, which left him with ‘no option’. Similarly, in the next passage Abdel once again refers to the indirect pressure from his mother to continue with the assessment despite the challenges.

Abdel: Yes. So, I know it’s hard... I know it’s hard, even my mum she told me it’s hard, with her a single mum...but the reasons why I’m doing it you see my daughter she’s not going to go, so when I get used to her... I feel sorry for her...she’s, my daughter.

Studies have found that this need to avoid moral condemnation not only stems from oneself or a possible future meeting with one’s child, but rather also the expectations of fathers’ family and wider network (Clifton 2012; Baum and Negbi 2013). Baum and Negbi (2013) found in their study that:

“Their [fathers’] pain was exacerbated by accusations from their other children, relatives and friends that they had allowed the removal to occur, by their sense that no one recognised their grief, and by their self-accusations” (Baum and Negbi 2013 pg.1684).

These issues relate to the studies discussed previously in section 2.3.5 in relation to importance of relationality and kinship networks for fathers. In addition, Roy and Smith (2013) found in their study of non-resident fathers that they were often unclear about the expectations and

understanding of their role in their child's lives following separation, and, as such, sought support and guidance from their wider family who reciprocally assessed their conduct and abilities to live up to the responsibility of caring for their children. In this way, this 'kin work' provided the moral ground rules for how fathers should conduct themselves with their children, by outlining "clear messages on responsibility and the sanctions for irresponsibility" (Roy and Smith 2013 pg. 328).

In addition to perceived future loss and condemnation being a motivator for taking on the care of their child, the next section will explore how two fathers reflected upon how their previous misdemeanours and indiscretions motivated them to respond.

5.2.4 Redemption or 'hero of his own life?'

This section focuses on the accounts of two fathers in my study, Lucas and Victor. One of the motivating factors for them in agreeing to be assessed by social services is associated with the need to seek redemption, which can be defined as "...an internal process of self-reclamation and restoration of the moral worthiness of the self" (Fox et al. 2008 pg. 154). In his interview, Lucas reflected on the precise point at which he was contacted by Meadow's social worker.

Lucas: Then she told me the situation and that and said that she was going to go into care, so I had to have a DNA test. So, they did the DNA test, and obviously she was mine. I didn't want her to go into care, because obviously it wasn't Meadow's fault for what I had done... what kind of person would that have made me, for one stupid mistake that I wish never happened?

Lucas not only appeared to be seeking redemption for his infidelity, but apropos the notion of nonmaleficence,¹⁹ it was evident that Lawrence was also aware of the likelihood of him doing even further harm through his actions, or lack of action. Consequently, he wished to avoid this and viewed his daughter going into care as her taking on the burden of the punishment for his *mistake*.

Similarly, when I interviewed Victor, he was still being assessed by social services while Sean was actually in his sole care. The assessment was due to conclude within three weeks of our interview at a final court hearing that would determine whether the judge agreed with the care

¹⁹ The principle of nonmaleficence holds that there is an obligation not to inflict harm on others.

plan of the local authority. I asked Victor whether he agreed with the condition of his assessment to be abstinent from alcohol.

Victor: No, but they feel it's needed. So, I've got to go along with it because I was a bad person. I got into a lot of violence when I was older than you are probably. So, with somebody like me then they wouldn't even consider me I had been drinking because they were too afraid of what might happen.

Lee: Yes.

Victor: So, I was deteriorating from alcohol. I took some seizures from alcohol withdrawal and that. So, I probably would have ended up dead if –

Lee: Right.

Victor: So, I think sometimes God sent him to save me.

Lee: Yes?

Victor: Yes, we go and rescue each other, yes?

Victor did not agree with this condition of his assessment. He also did not take full responsibility for his violence, suggesting instead that it was something *he got into* and was the result of his alcohol problem. However, he did appear to accept that his previous behaviour, from the perspective of an external audience, could be viewed as him being a *bad person*. He also accepted that he posed a risk, due to the fact that alcohol exacerbated the propensity to be this person again. Victor suggested that he had been given a second chance in life and an opportunity to redeem himself by rescuing his son, with his son saving him in return, namely from potentially drinking himself to death. I asked Victor how he felt about the decision of social services to place both him and his son in foster placement for four months in order to observe and develop his parenting skills.

Victor: Together, yes. So, he didn't go into care, and he can't go into care unless I fuck up, like I have before. I'm not going to fuck up because there's no way I'm going to let him go into care. So, it's me and him from now on.

Victor intimated both his desire to redeem himself by rescuing his son from going into care and his awareness of his vulnerability to failing. This is consistent with the findings of Fox et al. (2008) study into fathers and domestic violence, where redemption was found to coexist with a mistrust of self. This is also in accordance with the redemption approach, which is predicated on a compassionate understanding of human fallibility (Ladlow and Neale 2016). Victor knew what he needed and wanted to do, but also appreciated that he had the propensity to mess things up. He also referred to a sense of solidarity with his son, a theme which is

explored further in section 8.5. Moreover, Victor appeared determined to complete the assessment.

Victor: I kept battling, fighting, like staying off the drink. They told me I had to pack in smoking cannabis. So, I done that. It come to where the baby was in danger and they had to take him off her, I am going to do it, because like the most important thing in the world is I've got him.

Victor, once again, exhibited a sense of fallibility when he referred to battling and fighting, rather than having already won his battle against alcohol and cannabis abuse. Another possible interpretation for Victor's motivation is the value that he placed on fatherhood. In the above extract, he referred to having Sean in his care as the *most important thing in the world*. In the extract below, Sean's social worker, Hannah, discussed a conversation she had with Victor whilst he was in the foster placement with Sean.

Hannah: For him, he started to realise actually, and he said this to me, "I thought I knew what a dad was until I came here and now, I know what a dad is."

In section 2.3.3 I highlighted where studies have examined the transformative nature of caring as a non-resident father, and in Section 8.6.2 I explored both the benefits and transformative nature of care for a number of fathers in this study. One way of interpreting this account is that taking on a valuable and valued role enabled Victor to see himself in a way that was in direct contrast to his previous life. In their study of young mothers living in a deprived area in the UK, Anwar and Stanistreet (2014) found that the mothers rejected the negative societal depictions of teenage pregnancy, and instead viewed motherhood as a positive experience, and as "...one which afforded them a valued social role within their local communities" (p. 273). Therefore, one could tentatively argue that if motherhood can provide women with a "place" in their communities, then this should also be the case for fathers like Victor. Alternatively, Mykkänen et al. (2017) showed in the narrative study of fathers involved with child welfare services in Finland that a hero narrative predominated amongst the men. This narrative depicted the fathers' increased agency as a result of having gone through and overcome major challenges and difficulties in their life, such as, amongst other things, alcohol and substance abuse, which, in turn, ended with them experiencing feelings of joy, gratitude, and trust. This narrative involves a "recognition of empowerment after survival" (p. 5) and frames the father as the "hero of his own life" (p. 5). It could be argued that Victor's narrative also fits within this narrative.

In these sections of this findings chapter the primary motivations of the fathers in this study to take on the care of their child has been explored. The chapter will now move on to consider how the fathers reported their involvement and relationship with their child's social worker.

5.3 The experiences of the fathers

In section 1.1 it was identified that none of the thirteen fathers were assessed or involved in the pre-proceeding stage of child protection. Two of the fathers, Graham, and Nigel, had their children placed with them directly through the actions of social services during a moment of crisis. For seven of the fathers, Norman, Tony, Robert, Lucas, Victor, Mike and Abdel, their children were placed in their care from foster care after a formal twenty-six-week assessment, which involved a planned phase of contact. For the remaining four fathers, Alan, Liam, Lawrence, and David, they either collected their children from their mother, or retained them in their care during contact, having been alerted by the child's mother about the intention of social services to remove them into care. It was at this stage that a viability assessment commenced. For Graham and Nigel, there was no requirement for the pre-proceedings stage as both fathers had been involved with social services, and in response to the flagged concerns, had reacted quickly to changes in their child's circumstances. It is not possible from the interviews to ascertain the reasons why pre-proceedings were not initiated in the remaining eleven cases.²⁰ However, I feel that it is important to provide this context, insofar as it informs our understanding of the fathers' transition to becoming their child's primary carer, in addition to how this influenced their relationship with the social worker, which is discussed further in the following section.

5.3.1 The importance of a good working relationship

Although many may not agree, social work is a compassionate profession in which relationships are, or at least always should be, at the core of social work practice (Hood 2018). Within child protection social work that is grounded in a "child-focused orientation" (Stafford et al. 2012 p.15), where children's wellbeing is central to social work interventions (Beckett 2007; Race and O'Keefe 2011), the development of a positive relationship with parents is fundamental to achieving the best outcomes for children (Buckley 2003a; Turney 2012; Munro 2020). However, as a consequence of the authoritarian nature of child protection, it is suggested that applying a relationship-based approach to working with involuntary service users raises a number of difficult ethical challenges (Trotter 2006; Turney 2012).

²⁰ It was neither possible to find any studies that looked into the number of cases that did not reach the pre-proceedings stage nor the reasons for this.

The Children Act 1989 was founded on the underlying principles of participation by and partnership with parents in the protection of their children, which, one could argue, can only be achieved through the development of a mutual relationship. The building and strengthening of relationships with service users in social work has, however, been the subject of considerable scrutiny and criticism in recent years, especially within child protection. Specifically, it has been found that relationship-based work has become peripheral to an increase in proceduralisation and timescales (Lonne et al. 2008), the prominence of decision-making (Munro 2020), and the pressure to get these decisions right (Platt 2006). This, in turn, has led to a focus on completing ‘off the shelf assessments’ (Holt 2016 p.91) that reduce complex decisions to limited and manageable decision-making strategies (Broadhurst et al. 2010; Platt and Turney 2014). This, amongst a host of other issues, has led to a refocusing of relationships within social work, both at a practice and academic level, and the concomitant emergence of several models of relationship-based social work. As Heslop and Meredith (2019) suggest:

“Relationship-based social work has emerged in response to the apparent trend for the bureaucratisation of practice” (p. 132).

It is outside the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed exploration of relationship-based social work; rather, its introduction in this chapter is merely a means of setting the context. When considering the fathers’ accounts of their problematic relationships with their child’s social worker, a number of external factors are likely to have played a role, which are addressed below both at the academic and practice level.

With regard to developing relationships with fathers, it is suggested that the fact that men have not traditionally been users of child care services means that they are likely to be reluctant to engage with professionals, which makes the interaction between them and social workers fundamental (Scourfield et al. 2016). In addition, Ferguson (2011) contends that social workers should engage with fathers in the same way as they do with mothers, counteracting the negative assumptions that men lack the capacity to talk about their feelings and intimate subjects. This is an important point that will be revisited in section 6.3 in relation to emotional regimes.

The only father to talk in a wholly positive manner about his relationship with his child’s social worker was Nigel. The fundamental difference between Nigel and the other fathers was that he was the only one out of the thirteen fathers who appeared to be fully involved in the

child protection process with the local authority from the outset of them having concerns over his children.²¹ It was identified in Nigel's interview, and subsequently confirmed by his social worker, Katy, that they were in regular communication with each other, with Nigel updating Katy on his concerns for his children. Moreover, the initial assessment of Nigel as the primary carer for his three children was conducted through this ongoing relationship, rather than being the result of a defined, time-bound assessment. At the child protection case conference, where Nigel was present, his ex-partner left the meeting after stating *if you can do a better job then you fucking do it and that was it* (according to Nigel and confirmed by Katy). The decision by the local authority to support Nigel as the primary carer was influenced by his positive ongoing relationship with the social worker. This is consistent with the Brandon et al. (2017, 2019) work, which showed that:

“The timing of when and how social workers decide to seek a man's perspective, or include him in an assessment can have not just practical, but also relational consequences for the direction of the case (and so, the child) and the working relationship between social workers and men” (Brandon et al. 2017, p. 89).

In the following excerpt, Nigel described what happened immediately following this incident at the child protection case conference.

Nigel: Yes, brilliant, she [Katy] was, really good, really helpful. She was like, “Right, what do we do, you've just got your two kids, what are we going to do about it?” it was one of those, what do you do about it. But she rallied round because the little lad was still wearing nappies, I didn't have any clothes, didn't have any ... I was living on my own, but everybody rallied round, and Katy just took it from there.

One could posit that Katy supported Nigel through a very pragmatic approach, by not dwelling upon the past or the current position, but rather looking for solutions. The interview data also suggests that this was done in close partnership with Nigel, by virtue of his repeated use of the word *we*. Nigel provided a further example of the support he received.

Nigel: If it hadn't been for Katy helping me out, I wouldn't have gone under because the social worker wouldn't have let us go under but there were times when, I think, that's when I was

²¹ In academic literature, there are arguments that fathers should be engaged and included throughout the involvement of local authorities with their children, whether they are resident or non-resident. For examples, please see Ferguson (2011) Ewart-Boyle et al. (2013), and Nygren et al. (2018).

stressed but no, I was glad, I was happy that I had my two kids, but also social services were fully involved by that time

Despite struggling with the care of five children, Nigel referred to the level of commitment displayed by Katy, suggesting that he could not have succeeded without her support. The most pertinent element of this situation is that both the longevity and strength of the relationship appeared to engender a level of reciprocal trust and respect to develop between Nigel and Katy. Nigel's experience is in contradistinction to previous studies which have consistently found that social workers distrust what non-resident fathers report to them about their children (Ashley et al. 2006; Dominelli et al. 2011; Storhaug and Oien 2012), which was the case with the majority of other fathers in this study. In my interview with Katy, I asked her whether she felt whether Nigel's reporting of being concerned for his children was negatively motivated.

Katy: I don't think there has ever been any kind of any vindictiveness around it, he just cares for his children. I think he's just kind of recognised that actually if he didn't step up and be a father to these kids that they would finish up in foster care.

Katy suggested that she trusted Nigel and his commitment to his children, and that the catalyst for his final decision to take on the care of his children was when their mother ceased to cooperate with social services. The importance of timing with respect to both when the father is contacted and becomes involved in the assessment is returned to in section 5.3.4.

What is important about Katy's approach to Nigel is that she considered him as both a person and carer in his own right and as being separate from the concerns that she had over the children's mother. This is in line with Critchley (2021) study of pre-birth child protection, which found that social workers see fathers as 'ends in themselves', rather than as obstacles in the way of the working relationship with the mother, and that this positioning of fathers underwrote all meaningful involvement of men in child protection assessment.

Alongside Nigel, two other fathers reported having a reasonably positive relationship with their child's social worker, albeit after a difficult start, while the remaining fathers expressed negative experiences. This is in accordance with Brandon et al. (2019), where a small number of the fathers described having "ups and downs in their relationships" with social workers (p. 457), whereas the majority of fathers failed to develop a constructive relationship with their social workers. Below, I explore some of these negative relationships through recourse to the interview data of Robert and Tony.

Robert: *It feels like they're just going to be on my case. But I am doing everything I possibly can. Yeah, it's not always done on time, yeah, I've got to be pushed a little bit, but don't stand there and contradict me when you don't even do half of the stuff that you're meant to do. I'm not an idiot, so don't treat me like one.*

Robert's experience of feeling negatively judged by social workers is consistent with the findings of both Icard et al. (2014) and Campbell et al. (2015), who found that fathers experienced being negatively judged by social workers. Robert's account also suggests that he felt that there were double standards in his relationship with his social worker, where despite the pressure for him to complete tasks on time, the social worker did not *do half of the stuff* they were meant to. This indicates that Robert considered himself to be on an equal footing with the social worker within their relationship, and therefore expected mutual respect and reciprocity in return. This is consistent with previous studies, where the power differential present within child protection can often lead to parents feeling ill-informed and powerless (Dumbrill 2006; Featherstone et al. 2011; Hood 2018). Similarly, studies have found that a father's perceptions of social workers were influenced by the presence or absence of simple, straight-forward behaviours that conveyed either respect or disrespect (Storhaug and Oien 2012; Storhaug 2013). Things as simple as being treated with respect, seeing their side of things, returning phone calls, keeping them informed about their children or their court proceedings, and explaining intervention plans were very important to men (Philip et al. 2018b). What fathers could not tolerate were workers who seemed cold, uncaring and judgemental, and who were not straightforward and honest in their dealings with them (Coady et al. 2012). This possible lack of honesty was found in the following extract from Tony's interview where he was reflecting on the initial stages of his assessment.

Tony: *You know, I'll do everything they say, I don't mind doing that, I just want them to be honest at the beginning, and I would like to know timescales so that I can plan ahead without living day by day and wondering what is going to happen.*

Like Robert, Tony was under the impression that he was in a reciprocal relationship with his son's social worker, where in return for his ongoing commitment to the assessment, he would receive honesty and transparency. There is, however, no data in the interview of the two social workers to suggest that they were not honest and transparent and the commencement of their involvement, suggesting that these could be Robert and Tony's interpretation and perception of their communication with the social workers.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, greater scrutiny from wider society and the media has led to a defensive climate within child protection (Lonne et al. 2008; Featherstone et al. 2014; Munro 2020). Secondly, as discussed in section 5.2.1, once involved in care proceedings social workers succumb to the scrutiny of the courts. Holland (2011) found that it is at this stage that social workers strive to retain control of the assessment process, in order to ensure the assessment is thorough and robust, as they are professionally answerable to the courts for the outcome. Holland (2011) also suggests that although a level of openness needs to be developed between social workers and parents in order to unearth the level of information needed for an in-depth assessment, a balance needs to be struck, as social workers need to remain professional, and “cannot afford to get too close” (p. 124). Social workers may well be required to produce a report in which they make a recommendation, which in Holland’s (2011) study could have resulted in a father not being deemed suitable to care for their children.

What is also present in the accounts presented in this section is a direct or indirect reference to deadlines and timescales, which caused a level of anxiety for the fathers. In the next section, the importance of time is explored further.

5.3.2 Different concepts of time

Time, as a concept, is regarded as being difficult to measure and understand by virtue of being invisible to the senses as well as because there is no single time, but rather many times (Urry 2016). In addition to time being of a central concern across academic disciplines (Mannay 2021), for professional disciplines such as child protection social work, time and temporality also hold central significance (White 1998; Holland 2011; Welbourne 2014). Social workers, through their assessment, analysis, and decision-making process manoeuvre through different temporal perspectives. For example, the threshold that needs to be satisfied to trigger care proceedings is: “...that the child concerned is suffering actual, or is likely to suffer, significant harm” (CA 1989). Even though social workers may be in the present when considering actual significant harm, they are also required to consider the past to determine how long a child has been subjected to emotional abuse or neglect. Then, dusting off their crystal ball, the social worker is then required to look at the past, and the present, in order to predict the risk of significant harm to the child in the future²². As White (1998) notes: “...anticipation of the future and scrutiny of the past are essentially temporal activities” (p.56).

²² Scholars have questioned the ability of traditional assessments to predict the future on the grounds of the complexity and fluidity of the families they work with. For examples, see Ryburn (1991), Beckett (2007), Munro (2020), Wilkins and Forrester (2020), and Meindl and Wilkins (2021).

Notions of temporality and measured time form the fabric of social work intervention and are reflected in the organisational talk through temporal references such as short-term, long-term, and urgent. In addition, social work activities are governed by organisational time, such as workloads, deadlines and the finite hours in social workers' working day, not to mention work time cycles such as maternity, sickness or annual leave (Holland 2011). Finally, time in social work practice is influenced by events taking place in other spatial and temporal locations, including, amongst other things, the fluid lives of service users, other child care professionals, and the wider legal arena, such as the family courts.

In relation to the concept of time and social work assessments, Holland (2011) found that there is an enduring conflict between social workers and parents over what issues are considered a priority at any given time. This can be seen in the following extract from Mike's interview, where he reflected on his attempts to contact his social worker.

Mike: So, I don't know if they can put a supervision order with a special guardianship again, extend it, and I've not heard, since June, I've not heard from him, on the 26th of August, the supervision order runs out. So, I've not heard from him. I did try ringing him a few times, obviously, it's pointless, they say email or, he texts quite a lot actually, that seems to be his preferred method.

Mike expressed his anxiety over the pending deadline for the elapsing of the supervision order. Mike also saw this as a priority in his life and was frustrated that the social workers did not appear to share his sense of urgency. This is further highlighted in another passage from Mike's interview.

Mike: Yes, obviously, everyone you speak to will say how impossible it is for contact, to contact people, you've got to be really sort of, and this was a traumatic time, so you're ringing people that don't answer, you don't think, "I'll email them and put the manager in the email." Or stuff like that. You talk to the managers and they're worse than the social workers.

Mike referred to experiencing a *traumatic time* during the assessment and as needing support immediately in the form of a telephone call, but that he received either a slow, or no response, from social services. This again could be interpreted as a different understanding of priorities

and urgency. What it also highlights is a problem in the communication between fathers and social workers, which is consistent with Brandon et al. (2019) study, which also highlighted:

“Barriers to forming working relationships included men and social workers mirroring a sceptical view of each other, with each describing the other as hard to reach and evasive” (p. 457).

A further theme that was present in a number of the fathers’ accounts apropos the challenges they faced in their relationships with their social worker pertained to their difficulty in understanding the different speeds of, and time between, communication and actions by social services. In the following excerpt, Robert reflects on his assessment by social services.

Robert: *So how do they expect me to change my ways? I’m shouting out for help, and no one’s listening. It feels like there’s not much happens at times or little help at times. Why do I have to do the chasing? Why don’t you? You’re quick enough to get on my back when I’ve done wrong, aren’t you?*

Once again, Robert returned to a point he made previously with regard to his expectation of a reciprocal relationship with the social workers. He also expressed his frustration over the differing speed of involvement from social workers, which he firstly referred to in terms of *not much that happens*, to then the social worker being *quick enough* to chase him. This issue is also illustrated in the following extract from Lucas.

Lucas: *Not knowing was the worst, because you’d put all the effort in, and then you didn’t know until 26 weeks later, with all the assessments and all that. It’s six months, isn’t it? The first court date was January the 12th, that was when they did the [DNA], and then the 27th of May was when I got her.*

Lucas expressed his frustration not only with the length of time taken between the first court hearing and having his daughter placed with him but also towards the differing intensity of, and space between, periods of involvement with social services, where he *put all the effort in* but would not know the outcome for six months. These themes are consistent with the findings of Brandon et al. (2017), who argue that the child protection system creates a perception of social work as both “rushed and slow” (p. 88), with the fathers in their study describing short or sudden periods of action by social workers followed by, what they deemed to be, long periods of delay or inactivity. This, in turn, led the fathers “...to question the credibility or capacity of social workers...” (p. 88).

It is generally assumed that the passage of time is unavoidable and therefore invariant (Spassova and Y.Lee 2013). However, perceptions of time and the passing of time are different, subjective and personal (Begić and Mercer 2017). Our individual temporal perspective (Zimbardo and Boyd 1999) means that a future event or behaviour may be perceived by some to be distant from the present, while to others it will be perceived as being relatively near. Taking both this into consideration and other themes explored in this section, perhaps there is a need for social workers, from the initial contact with fathers onwards, to manage fathers' expectations of the parameters of their relationship as well as their contact during the assessment and the deadlines during the court process. However, given the aforesaid individual differences in perceptions of time, and coupled with restrictions on time in social work practice and organisations generally, perhaps such clashes will be very difficult to negotiate and overcome within the current limitations of the childcare sector.

In addition to the social workers actually undertaking the assessment, in the next section I explore how both time and timing were important factors with respect to how the fathers became aware of the concerns by the local authority, and/or the plan to remove their children into care.

5.3.3 The timing of the engagement with the father

As discussed in section 5.2.1, it was identified that despite policy and practice guidance advocating for the contact and engagement of both parents prior to initiating care proceedings, this was not the case for any of the fathers in this study. In this study, apart from Nigel, the social workers failed to contact the fathers directly about the concerns they had about their child, with concerns being expressed to the child's mother or extended family at the point where the children were at the brink of being removed into care. This is consistent with previous studies, where social workers failed to contact the fathers, or delayed contacting fathers until they were at the point of being the "last resort", (Brandon et al. 2019 p.455) to prevent the child entering care (Strega et al. 2009; Dominelli et al. 2011; Coady et al. 2012; Brandon et al. 2017; Philip et al. 2020) or the child had actually already been placed into local authority child care (Ashley et al. 2006; Roskill et al. 2008). Drawing on the interviews of Liam, Alan, Norman, and Abdel, below, I explore when, and how, they first became aware of the concerns and proposed actions of social services. In the following excerpt, I had asked Liam to reflect on the initial contact from social services.

Liam: *No. I never knew about things that were going on, you know, because they've been working with the kids for a while before that. But nobody thought to ring me and that was my issue. I'm the father so I have a right to know what's going on.*

Lee: *Were you ever in any contact with them all the time or –?*

Liam: *Yes. Every weekend I was having them.*

Lee: *At what point...? So, it was Rachel [mother], not the social workers that contacted you?*

Liam: *Well basically, she said look you're going to have to get them or they're going to end up taking them. I said, oh don't be silly because obviously I didn't think it was as bad as that but obviously, it was to do with her, so she knows how bad it is. She went on telling me, if you don't come for them, they're going to take them, and I thought I can't call her bluff because if they [social services] take them sometimes it's a lot harder to get them, whereas if I just go up there and get them, I don't have a fight on my hands, you know.*

In this excerpt, Liam refers to not being contacted by social services about the concerns they had about his children, despite him having contact with them every week. It is not possible to confirm this from the social worker's account, as this case was under another a local authority and was transferred when the children went to live with their father.

Liam shared his sense of disempowerment by being put in this position and referred to a switch of power had his children been taken into care, stating that it would have been *a lot harder to get them* and that the relationship with social services would have become adversarial and led to him having a *fight* on his hands. In section 5.4.1, I explore Liam's disclosure of his own experiences as a child living in the care system, which could lead one to interpret that he was drawing on his own lived experience and sense of powerless in his perceptions of care proceedings. Liam also reflected on his role in his children ultimately ending up living with him.

Liam: *The thing is you always sit there and think, could I have done things differently? But if you don't know what's going on you can't act can you and that's my issue. I was going to put in a complaint, but I thought, nothing's going to happen, but I just think it's a bit of a farce when... They had my number so they can't say, oh, we didn't have his number or anything. They had my number so they could have easily said, look we've got concerns regarding your children, you know. Maybe... Well, I would probably have stepped in and said, look if you can't do it just let me take them now. So maybe things might have happened quicker. I don't know.*

What is interesting about Liam's interview is that at no point did he acknowledge being aware of the severity of the neglect that his children were enduring, despite his claim that he saw them every weekend. One explanation for this is that he was in denial regarding how much he knew and did nothing to protect his children, instead transferring the blame onto social services. Another possible explanation is that he simply was not aware of their concerns. This was explored in Chapter 3, where it was discussed how non-resident fathers' limited contact with and role in their children's lives can lead them to lose, or interrupt, their everyday knowledge, and experiences of their children's lives (Troilo and Coleman 2012; Roy and Smith 2013; Philip 2014). Like Liam, Alan was another father who took on the care of his children following contact with the mother, when it was alleged that the local authority was on the brink of removing them into care. I asked Alan why he agreed to go and collect his children from their mother following her alerting him to the intentions of the local authority.

Alan: *They would have been in care.*

Lee: *Did you realise that at the time?*

Alan: *Well, I knew they would have been, because, like I say, she got to the stage where she couldn't cope any more, they [social workers] weren't helping her. They [social services] would have ended up taking them. I couldn't let that happen. But before that, she had seen that herself, for she said, look have the kids.*

Alan reflected on his realisation through contact with his ex-partner that the local authority was on the brink of removing his three children into care and he *couldn't let that happen*. This position was confirmed in the following extract from Mary.

Mary: *We were definitely in pre-proceedings. I mean, mum, I think, at that point would have willingly given the kids up, because that's what she was saying she wanted to do. So interim, we would have probably had a Section 20, then would have likely gone into proceedings, which, in some ways, Alan wouldn't have fared very well with, I don't think. Well, he wouldn't. Whichever way I look at that, I don't think that would have been a great outcome for him or for the kids.*

What is interesting about this position is that via Alan exercising his agency as a father and taking the children into his care, he not only avoided the children going into care, which would have been on a voluntary basis with the mother agreeing to Section 20 of the Children Act 1998 but also appeared to avoid a viability assessment that may not have been favourable for the father or his children. This raises an important point that I will return to in section 7.2.,

where it is suggested that social workers are accorded some discretionary space when they are not under the scrutiny of the courts.

In the next extract Norman reflected upon the precise point that he became aware of the involvement of the local authority with his son, whom he had had no contact with for three years.

Lee: What happened about removal? When did you become aware?

Norman: Become aware last year, it was about April, May. His nanna, Ann's mam, come to tell me to give me this phone number to call, social services, and I phoned them, and they came out to see me and explained to me what was going on and that. We were going to go court and we all had to have an assessment and that. He come to live with me in October, November last year. Not last year, the year before.

It appears from Norman's account that he became aware of the concerns of social services about his son, Tom, through his mother-in-law, which was at the point of Tom being removed into care. The social worker, Hannah, in her interview, neither alluded to why this was the case nor why Norman was not contacted sooner about their concerns over Tom's care. Regardless of both this and the fact that they were not able to avoid Tom spending a few months in the care system, it ended up being a positive outcome for Norman and Tom as the assessment was completed within the six-month timescale.

Consistent with previous studies, this section has highlighted that, according to a number of fathers' interpretation of events, that the timing of the communication between themselves and their child's social worker, regarding the concerns they had about their child, and often their plan to remove them into care, was problematic. This was despite the father often being in close proximity to their child and having regular contact. Despite these challenges, the fathers continued to demonstrate their motivation and commitment to becoming their child's primary carer.

5.4 Summary

This first findings chapter, through primarily considering the interview data from the thirteen fathers, addressed one of three research questions in this study, what were the fathers' motivations for becoming the full-time carers for their children, and what were the fathers' experiences of involvement with social services?

For the majority of the fathers, the motivation for them intervening, and/or agreeing to take over the primary care, was driven by a determination for their child not to enter the care system, or if the child was already in care, for them not to be retained in care or not to be adopted. This in turn was fuelled by different reasons, which included a media fuelled negative view of the care system, and for two fathers, and a lived experience of the care system. For other fathers this involved them placing themselves in an imagined future, where they envisaged experiencing a loss of role and contact with their children, as well as future guilt and disapproval from their children in the future if they had not fought to avoid their children going into care. Whilst for two fathers the opportunity to become their child's primary carer was to redeem for previous mistakes and misdemeanours.

It was identified that the majority of the fathers were the last resort for their child, and needed to step in in order to avoid their child being taken into care. This it, could be argued was a positive aspect, as the fathers (and the child's mother) exercised agency against the inherent authority of social services and did step in, and took over the care of their child. It is not possible to ascertain whether the fathers would have acted in the same manner, or have had the same motivation for becoming the primary carer for their child should the circumstances have been different

In their journey to becoming their child's primary carer the fathers experienced differing relationships with their child's social worker. A number of these were challenging through miscommunication and misunderstandings and frustration over timescales and differencing expectations over the relationship. Despite these challenges, the fathers, it could be suggested demonstrated commitment and resilience in maintaining a working relationship with the social worker. The thesis will return to themes emanating from the interview data of the fathers in Chapter eight when I explore how the fathers positioned themselves in terms of their role as a father in their children's lives and how they reflected upon this role after having become their child's primary carer. Over the next two chapters, through examining the themes emanating from the interview data from the social workers. I will address the research question What were the social workers' experience of assessing the fathers' capacity to be their child's potential full-time carer, and how they negotiated this assessment?

Chapter Six: Assessing the fathers:

considering the negative factors of the father's lives.

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the fathers' motivations for, and experiences of becoming the primary carer for their children. The next two chapters, through data from interviews with the social workers, will address another research question, namely what were the social workers' experience of assessing the fathers' capacity to be their child's potential full-time carer, and how they negotiated this assessment? I decided to split the themes that emerged from the social work data into two separate, but nevertheless interrelated chapters. This provided an insight into both the number of factors that the social workers considered, and also the complexity of their reasoning in reaching the decision as to whether the fathers were able to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children. Chapter seven will explore the positive aspects of the fathers' lives that were observed and considered by the social workers, and this chapter will focus on the negative aspects? The interview data from the nine social workers suggests that in their assessment of the fathers, they paid particular attention to their personality, character, their previous and current behaviour and lifestyle, and their immediate and wider family structure.

The chapter will begin through exploring the subjective nature of assessments and how the professional discretion of social workers was important in their assessment of the negative aspects of these fathers lives. The second half of the chapter will then consider where domestic violence featured in a father's assessment, and how often the social worker's negative construction of the "bad mother" was intertwined with the social worker's rationalisation of the father's domestic violence, which in most cases was towards the child's mother. This is proceeded by an exploration of how the social workers considered, and often justified, the domestic violence of the fathers during their assessment. The chapter concludes with consideration of how the social workers dealt with the frustrations and what they considered to be negative behaviour of the fathers during the assessment.

6.2 “Writing fathers in” – Subjectivity and discretionary practice

Referring again to the Baumann et al. (2014) Decision-Making Ecology model (see Figure 1), it is suggested that the decision maker (in this case the social worker) is one of several factors that influence the overall decision-making process in child protection. Taking the analysis a level deeper, the factors involved in the decision making by social workers involve, among others, subjectivity and discretion. As suggested by Storhaug and Sobo-Allen (2018):

“Subjective assessments are a central part of decision-making and even if we develop clear procedures, child welfare workers private beliefs and understanding of fatherhood will continue have a major impact upon practice” (p. 12).

Munro (2011) suggests that discretion is a key feature of a child centred system where social workers employ discretion in the best interest of the individual child. It is also argued that discretion is not only unavoidable but should be a core characteristic of professional work (Miller 2010a; Freidson 2011). When exercising such discretion, however, it is important that social workers adopt a pragmatic institutional and rational approach (Keddell 2011; Segatto et al. 2020) to their decision-making, in conjunction with a flexible and individual approach. An essential component of social workers exercising discretion is to reflect upon and utilise their own personal experiences and values in their assessments (Thompson and Thompson 2018), which, in the case of social workers working with fathers, would involve managers and frontline workers being provided with opportunities, through supervision, to reflect upon their own experiences of fatherhood (Swann 2011, 2015).

I suggest that the majority of the social workers in this study exercised professional discretion, even those social workers who were involved in the scrutiny of care proceedings appeared to have been afforded discretionary space (Murphy 2021) and employed discretion in their professional judgement (Evans 2013). I propose that discretion was exercised namely through adopting the concept of “good enough” parenting.

It is noted that a dichotomy exists within child protection practice where fathers are deemed to be either “good” or “bad” (Dominelli et al. 2011; Skramstad and Skivenes 2017; Philip et al. 2018b). Dominelli et al. (2011) found that fathers commenced their involvement with social workers from the default and deficit position of being a “bad father”, which resulted in them having to fight to overcome this label and convince social workers that they were “good dads” who could be trusted to care for their children. The data from the interviews with social workers suggests that they did not view the fathers through this good dad/bad dad dichotomy,

but rather adopted the concept of “good enough” parenting. To demonstrate this point, I draw upon the interviews with Mary, Katy, Kerry, and Clare. In the following extract Mary was reflecting upon her decision to approve Lucas as a full time carer for his daughter.

Mary: Yeah, and there probably is enough with Lucas to do that. Well, not to write him out, because for me, the big bits that would have stopped him being able to do it would have had to have been him being unsafe. But, you know, we could have made a bigger deal of his offending, a bigger deal of him not being there. Well, it's not a big deal, because they were all still a big deal in the assessment. But I guess is that the overriding bit of the assessment? And I guess, for me, it wasn't really. And particularly the relationship with Meadow, which just wasn't there. That could have been something, and again, something which I'm still not sure if it is the right thing, really. We don't know if we have just ridden our luck just one last time. And the early signs don't say that.

In this extract it can be seen how Mary balanced the positive and negative aspects of both Lucas' past and present behaviour in deciding whether he would be a safe and stable carer. Mary also demonstrates the tenuous and unpredictable nature of assessments and decision making, when she reflects at the end of the abstract as to whether she have made the right decision to approve Lucas as a suitable carer. What is also interesting about this extract is how Mary intimates the level of discretion she appears to have, where she could have *made a bigger deal* of the negative aspects of Lucas' behaviour. The issue this raises is who, if anyone, would check and question this decision and the strength of the evidence that it is based upon. Fellow professionals reading Mary's assessment have not met Lucas and didn't undertake the assessment, and are therefore reliant upon the honesty and professionalism of Mary as the social worker. A further example of discretion can be found in the following extract, where, Katy, the social worker for Nigel's children, discussed her rationale for approving Nigel as his children's primary carer.

Katy: It would have been easier to have said, 'No.' He was living in that grotty house down there and he was on his methadone programme as well.

Lee: Oh right, okay. I didn't know that, right.

Katy: That was managed, yes. It's reduced now.

Lee: So, what changed your mind?

Katy: I think it was a combination of him being willing and wanting to do it,

Katy suggested that in hindsight it would have been easier to deem Nigel unsuitable to look after his children. However, she balanced out these negative factors of Nigel's life with his

willingness and commitment to take on the care of his children. Similarly, in the next interview extract, I asked Kerry, the social worker for Robert's three children, whether placing Robert's children in his care was the outcome she envisaged at the commencement of his assessment.

Kerry: I could see the potential there for him to be able to look after these children and raise them long term. Yes, he needed that support. He was very nervous, he was very anxious, he smokes cannabis, he wasn't working, we've had some concerns. And you could see certainly a window, but on paper, it looked crap. And so, we had to have a professionals' meeting because they were like, "Kerry, you've lost your mind. This is not okay."

Much like in Katy's account, Kerry considered the negative factors of Robert's life, such as, for example, his use of cannabis, which as she acknowledged *on paper, it looked crap*, and recalled how other professionals questioned her reasoning and decision. I asked Kerry who these professionals were.

Lee: Was it the health visitors?

Kerry: No, kinship team. They were like, "You want us to assess this. No, this is not okay. He's smoking cannabis. He lives in a one-bedroom flat. Too much has gone on in his life, and he just sounds really chaotic."

Lee: So, what was it about in the end to persuade you then?

Kerry: I don't know, just what he was saying, and that he hadn't been given a fair opportunity.

Despite the reticence from other social work colleagues, Kerry recalled how she stood by her decision, and her view that Robert had not been given the opportunity to prove himself. The following extract from Hannah also demonstrates where, as a social worker, her decision was questioned by other professionals involved with the father's child.

Hannah: The neonatal accidents clinic, they had lots of anxieties, they were like how can he? It got to the point where the community paediatrician, I think she called our service delivery manager to say, "What the hell are you doing?", basically

Despite these reservations both social workers were able to see the potential of both fathers to look after their children on a long-term basis. This is in accordance with the reasoning of Mary, the social worker for Alan's three children, who discussed her assessment of Alan as follows.

Mary: *Well, he is predictable. I would say, probably, he's a bit stauncher. He is his age in some respects, and I think a lot of what we are seeing, and what we are trying to change around the edges, are possibly about making him more palatable for everybody.*

Lee: *Yeah.*

Mary: *That's wrong, isn't it, really? Because actually, it has got to be what it looks like for the kids, when I am picky, I think.*

It is unclear when Mary referred to the need to make Alan more *palatable for everybody*, whether she was referring to his behaviour or his appearance; indeed, she made reference to his age, which was sixty-seven years old at that point, which perhaps provided a possible reason for his perceived predictability and framing of him as being too old to care for young children. In the above account, Mary is suggesting that in some ways her job was to change his appearance and behaviour, not intrinsically for his children, but rather for an external audience. Regardless, Mary appeared to find it difficult to determine whether this posed any problem to his children.

Mary: *Yeah. I think it is also a bit better than that as well. I think that is really begrudging praise from me, I think what he does is good enough. There are some bits that he does really well with them, and he is warm and funny with them, and they have all got their own little nicknames, and they all want to be with him. There is lots of good stuff.*

Mary referred to positive aspects of Alan's care for his children, namely that he was warm and funny and that all his children *all want to be with him*. Mary also introduced the term *good enough* in her assessment of Alan, which will be explored further below. It is difficult to ascertain from the social work data in the study whether the concept of good enough is interpreted in a gendered way for these fathers involved in child protection, in that whether it is equally applied to both parents, or if the benchmark is lower for fathers. It was suggested however, in Chapter 2 that fathers do not face the same moral pressure to care for their children and are seen as less likely to face judgement if they decide to walk away from their child. In addition, it will be suggested in section 7.4 that there is less of an expectation for a non-resident father to respond to situation of crisis in respect of their children. Similarly, it is argued that when fathers perform even minor child care tasks, they receive a "hero" like status (Lynch and Lyons 2009), whereas mothers are not accorded the same accolades as it is simply seen as being their role (Taylor and Daniel 2000; Strega et al. 2009). Therefore, there is nothing to suggest that the same imbalance is not applicable in the consideration of good enough parenting with mothers and fathers.

The concept of “good enough” parenting emanated from the early work of Donald Winnicott (1957, 1964), who observed that assessing good or bad parenting was not straightforward because perfectionism in parenting was unattainable, which meant that it should not constitute the basis for judging a parent. Rather, he suggested that “good enough” parenting was sufficient for raising a child successfully. The concept was later introduced into child protection practice through the writing of Adcock and White (1985), who proposed that:

“Very few parents meet the needs of their children all the time but the majority of parents in our society would appear to provide “good enough” parenting for their children in that they do not seriously prevent or hinder their children’s development” (p. 13).

Although “good enough” parenting has been used in child protection for several decades, appearing in court decisions and literature, its actual meaning remains unclear (Choate and Engstrom 2014), as evidenced by the fact that there is no evidence that the concept is understood in the same way by professionals involved in multi-disciplinary child protection (Daniel 2000). Consequently, the challenge for social workers in their decision-making is to define, in precise terms, what constitutes good enough parenting in the absence of any definitional consensus, and often based upon unreliable or incomplete evidence (Taylor et al. 2008; Munro 2020). Amidst such ambiguity, the decision as to what is good enough is often determined by subjective personal and professional intuition and experience (Daniel 2000; Munro 2002; Buckley 2003a).

Referring back to the extracts from Mary’s interview, it is notable that she uses the phrases *When I am picky, I think* and *that is really begrudging praise from me, I think*. One could interpret that these reflected her subjective personal views about Alan as a father; indeed, Mary displayed an awareness of the fact that these feelings were personal, and expressed a sense of guilt for having these feelings and wanted me to accept that this was the case. The subjective nature of the concept of “good enough” parenting is further illustrated in the following extract from Clare, who was the social worker for Liam’s children.

Clare: It is a difficult one, because I suppose we have got legal thresholds to work to. There is ‘good enough’ care, but what is good enough? And then what is more than good enough? And I suppose Liam is providing good enough care that is more than good enough. But I don’t really know, because I don’t feel I can comment on his interactions, I can only comment on what I have seen. But perhaps if you were looking at better than good enough, then you may be seeing some things that Liam is not doing.

Although the concept of “good enough” parenting is not technically a legal threshold, Clare does refer to the threshold level of the concept, which she herself suggested is difficult to define, by asking *what is good enough?* And *what is more than good enough?* Clare reflected on her understanding of the breadth of the margin on either side of this threshold, by virtue of suggesting that *if you were looking at better than good enough* then this would identify *some things that Lucas is not doing*. This is in a similar vein to the point made by Mary in her interview, where she referred to *having probably enough with Lucas to write him out*, where again if she decided to increase the threshold, she would have had sufficient evidence to make the decision that Lucas was not a suitable primary carer for his daughter.

6.3 Fathers, domestic abuse, and the construction of the bad mother

Seven of the fathers; Robert, Graham, Mike, Tony, Victor, David, and Lawrence made direct references in their interviews to domestic abuse against their previous partners. Three of the fathers; Tony, Graham, and Mike were recruited through a voluntary organisation, where they attended a domestic violence perpetrators programme as part of the assessment by social services or the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Services (CAFCASS). Unfortunately, I was not able to get access to the social workers involved with these fathers, so I cannot draw upon their perspectives to either validate or challenge the fathers’ accounts. However, I was able to interview Victor, Robert, David, and Lawrence’s children’s social workers, who also referred to incidents of domestic abuse.

Hannah was the social worker for Victor’s son, Sean. Victor’s life had involved drug use, excess alcohol consumption and violence towards other men as well as domestic abuse against female partners. Victor served a prison sentence for assaulting Carol, Sean’s mother, when she was pregnant. At the beginning of Hannah’s interview, I asked her to recall the circumstances leading up to Sean being placed in the care of his father.

Hannah: *So, Victor’s son was within the care of his mother, Carol. For years ever since he was born, she’s had five other children removed.*

Lee: *Right, okay.*

Hannah: *So, well actually Sean was her fifth, sorry. So, she had four prior to him. So, she had to have a pre-birth assessment. Same situation as before why they were removed which was because of concerns of domestic violence and drug use*

Lee: *With Victor, or previous partners?*

Hannah: *With Victor as well. That’s why the pre-birth was being done because domestic violence was with Victor –*

Lee: *Yes.*

Hannah: - *while she was pregnant.*

Lee: *Yes.*

Hannah: *She would have had to have had one done anyway, but he was included in that.*

Lee: *Yes.*

Hannah: *Previous partners were domestically violent with her as well though.*

Lee: *Right, okay.*

Hannah: *So, every partner she has been with she has been involved in domestic violence. Well, she's been the victim of domestic violence. However, Carol, as we've known time going by, is very feisty. I don't like using the word manipulative, but she can be.*

Hannah informed me at the outset that Sean was Carol's, fifth child, with all her previous had been removed into care. Considering Hannah's interview, my interpretation of our conversations was that Hannah was eager to share her negative construct of Carol as a mother. Hannah's account of Carol was suggestive of a lack of empathy. On two separate occasions, Hannah suggested that the domestic violence *was with* Carol, rather than against her. One possible reason for Hannah taking this position is that she was expressing her disapproval of Carol as a mother who had been subject to recurrent care proceedings. This positioning is not unusual, insofar as previous research has found that these particular groups of mothers suffer social penalties, such as shame and stigmatisation (Morris 2018a), and are considered to be "maternal outcasts" (Broadhurst and Mason 2013 p.1).

Whilst the existence of mothers in recurrent care proceedings has been recognised in social work practice, they have remained a "hidden population" in most academic studies (Broadhurst and Mason 2013 p.2243). However, contemporary studies have begun to both address these gaps in the knowledge base and engender a greater awareness of these mothers²³ to the point that:

"Repeat cases are now firmly established as *routine* rather than *exceptional* within the family justice system in England" (Broadhurst et al. 2017 p.6).

Research has found that one in four women who appear in care proceedings will reappear in subsequent care proceedings within a seven-year period (Broadhurst et al. 2017).²⁴ Subsequent

²³ Interestingly, it is also only very recently that research has begun to focus upon fathers involved in repeat care proceedings (see Bedston et al. 2019; Philip et al. 2020).

²⁴ Researchers have also highlighted that a number of mothers involved in recurrent care proceedings also have experience of the care system (See Broadhurst et al 2017; Roberts 2016; Roberts et al. 2017).

studies have found that for mothers with limited life chances, support and propensity for change, the loss and vulnerability they experienced following the removal of their child was amplified, as they were left with nothing in their lives (Broadhurst and Mason 2020). Similarly, Morriss (2018a) found that mothers become “haunted figures” (p. 5) after the removal of a child, as it can often lead to a loss of accommodation and ostracization by friends and family.

Returning to the extract from Hannah, she stated that concerns over domestic abuse and drug use resulted in the *same situation as before why they were removed*. However, studies have found that once care proceedings end, the mother is effectively abandoned, with the involvement with social services, whose sole focus is the child, also coming to an end (Morriss 2018a). Coupled with this issue is the implicit expectation within the family justice system of “natural recovery” (Broadhurst et al. 2015 p.2256), where recovery is expected to occur through self-change and through the passing of time away from the point of conflict. The effectiveness of such an approach has been challenged (Roberts et al. 2018), instead a greater awareness and cohesive professional support, it argued is needed for mothers for during and following the conclusion of care proceedings (Hoyland 2021). Therefore, it could be argued that Hannah, in her construction of Carol as a mother, does not take into account the external and structural factors that could have led Carol to be subject to recurrent care proceedings. Rather, Hannah appears to suggest that Carol is fully responsible for being in the same situation and has a choice over the direction and course of her life. This point will be explored further in the next sections.

6.3.1 Mothers and Domestic abuse – blame and choice?

Previous research that has considered the relationship between mothers, domestic abuse and social work has found that mothers’ accounts of violence are often not believed (Holland 2011), or, alternatively, they are viewed by social workers as accepting of, or as even enjoying, the violence (Maynard 1985). Additionally, mothers, as opposed to the perpetrators themselves, are seen to either be at blame for inciting the violence through their own behaviour (Mullender 1997; Dobash and Dobash 1998) or being mutually responsible for the violence (Douglas and Walsh 2010; Keeling and Wormer 2012). These approaches can lead, although inadvertently, to a level of collusion between professionals and perpetrators (Hester and Scott 2000; Radford and Hester 2006).

Returning to the previous extract from Hannah, she firstly appears to minimise Victor’s assault on Carol whilst she was pregnant, stating that Carol would have been subjected to a pre-birth

assessment regardless, thus inferring that Victor's violence was only a secondary factor to be included in the assessment. Hannah then stated that *previous partners were domestically violent with her*, and that Carol had *been involved in domestic violence* serves to preclude the fact that Carol was the victim of the violence. It is only at the end of the passage that Hannah appears to concede; *Well, she's been the victim of domestic violence*, only to then in the very next sentence rescind or dilute this view by referring to Carol as *feisty* and *manipulative*, which, once again, suggests that she was in some way deserving of the violence she received from previous partners.

The data from the interview with Hannah could be interpreted that she believed that Carol had a choice in stopping, or walking away from the violence. This is consistent with studies that have found that social workers believe that such mothers have the choice to change their lives and thus protect their children from domestic abuse (Scourfield 2001b, 2003, 2006b), and, as such, are held solely responsible, and castigated, for failing to do so (Featherstone and Peckover 2007b; Ferguson et al. 2020). This theme of mothers having choice was also present in the interview with Colin, the social worker for Lawrence's two sons.

Lee: *So, is this the outcome that you were hoping for?*

Colin: *Yeah. For those two boys – definitely. Zoe's not been able to prioritise those boys' emotional needs through the relationships she has and the domestic violence through her choice of partner and continuing the relationship with them. Also, her lifestyle. She drinks and uses drugs, and those boys don't get the level of emotional warmth that they do in dad's care. They don't get the level of stability. They don't get that same sense of security and safety that they do with dad. They're not having to be worried about what's going to happen.*

Colin directly used the word *choice* in reference to his belief that Zoe both chose violent partners and continued to be in relationships with them. Scourfield (2003) found that the social workers in his study found it almost impossible to empathise with mothers who chose to remain in a relationship, and in a situation that they, themselves, would not tolerate. His study also found that social workers lacked empathy for, and became exasperated by, mothers who could not "...act when a particular action would make all the difference to their future with their children" (p. 79). This suggests that some child protection social workers lack knowledge of, or wholly misunderstand, the dynamics of domestic abuse (Douglas and Walsh 2010; McGhee and Waterhouse 2017).

Returning to the extract, Colin referred to Zoe as not being able to prioritise the emotional wellbeing of her children, and instead (as well as choosing violent partners) chose to use drink

and drugs. In so doing, Colin individualised Zoe's behaviour to the exclusion of any external factors for her drinking and drug use, and suggested that Zoe put her own needs before those of her child. This notion of parents prioritising their own needs over their children has been found to pervade child protection practice, especially with respect to mothers (Ladd-Taylor 2004; Ferguson et al. 2020).

In section 3.3 it was suggested that the presence of a gendered discourse within child protection practice, has positioned mothers as the main carer for the child, and therefore the main focus of scrutiny²⁵ (Featherstone 1999, 2006; Stanley and Humphreys 2017). Resultant in the social work assessments of mothers and 'mothering' been grounded in gendered expectations of women (Urek 2005; Osborn 2014). As Parton and Parton (1988) suggest:

“ An underlying assumption is that motherhood is the natural destiny of women in that a mother is responsible for the success and failures of her children” (Parton and Parton 1988 pg.43).

It is also argued that it creates a standard of mothering that can be unsustainable and, ultimately, oppressive (Stewart 2021). As Scourfield (2001b) contends, “More is expected of women. But when they do fall, they fall from a greater height” (p. 85). I would suggest, through recourse to economic terms, that mothers involved in child protection are an essential commodity, but only in terms of the care they provide to the child, while any attention and support that is directed towards them only occurs when their behaviour, either directly or through omission, is having a detrimental impact on their child.

A further criticism of the child protection system is that it has also adopted a deficit model of men, which frames them primarily in terms of being either potential or actual perpetrators of violence (Rivett 2010; Featherstone et al. 2014; Ferguson et al. 2020). Heward-Belle et al. (2019) found that childcare professionals' descriptions of men were confined primarily to judgments about the risks and dangers they posed to their children and partners. Similarly, Philip et al. (2018b) suggest that child protection professionals adopt both a gendered and binary approach towards fathers, which positions them as either a risk or a resource. When allegations and counter allegations are made by parents, professionals assume the father to be the perpetrator.²⁶ Studies have also found that fathers have to overcome obstacles and

²⁵ Coupled with this is the fact that social work practice is child centred, which by definition means that the interests of all other parties are secondary (see Whittaker and Harvard 2016; Race and O'Keefe 1027; McGhee and Waterhouse 2017).

²⁶ This is an understandable position given that research suggests that men are predominantly the perpetrators of domestic abuse. For example, see Heward-Belle (2015), Brandon et al. (2017) and Myhil (2017).

demonstrate commitment in ways that mothers do not (Zanoni et al. 2014). Additionally, fathers are assumed to be either incapable or unwilling to give up drugs and alcohol (Storhaug and Oien 2012; Campbell et al. 2015), while fathers with a criminal history are found to be particularly prone to harsher treatment (Cameron et al. 2012; Coady et al. 2012). However, Hannah adopted a much more positive and understanding approach towards Victor. In my interview with Hannah, we discussed Victor's imprisonment for the violence he committed against Carol.

Lee: So, did he serve a lot of time in prison?

Hannah: Six months.

Lee: None before that do you know of?

Hannah: I think so, but I can't remember. To be honest his record is as long as your arm. So, that's why when you look at his record alone and me and social workers when they have done, he's had limited offer of contact even, because of his offences as long as his arm.

Lee: Yes.

Hannah: My ideas were that we can change that and actually we haven't done anything to change that.

Hannah accepted that Victor had a criminal history *as long as your arm* and that this had been the reason why social workers had previously limited his contact with Sean. However, Hannah proposed that this was a consequence of Victor not receiving support to change his criminal behaviour. We also discussed Victor's alcohol abuse.

Lee: Have you seen him drunk?

Hannah: Yes, and he intimidates you like no tomorrow. He really does, and you become fearful of him. You really, really do.

Lee: I can imagine that, yes.

Hannah: The Victor that came out, and I believe that that Victor is in there, it's just we've had to tease that out. He is a wonderful person and there's no question of that.

Hannah minimised Victor's violence and its subsequent impact on Carol, while, simultaneously, acknowledging that she was *really, really* fearful of him. This fear was only likely to have been experienced through short home visits, in comparison to living with him. Although Hannah was neither the partner nor victim of Victor's violence, when considering both this extract and Hannah's interview as a whole, parallels can be drawn between her approach and the findings from Thomas and Adams (2000), who interviewed women about their experiences of abusive relationships, and found that several women depicted their

partners as being a dual person or as having a double identity, that is, as being both a beast and a prince. Drawing upon the genres of fairy tales and romantic novels and film, Thomas and Adams (2000) suggest that:

“...the beast in the man is represented as a temporary affliction, whereas the essence of the man is depicted as princely” (p. 564).

As previously highlighted, Hannah referred several times to Victor’s propensity for intimidation and violence throughout his life. However, she also noted that he was a *wonderful person*, an identity which just needed to be teased out through the involvement of social services, which interestingly places Hannah in the position of saviour. Similarly, in the next extract Hannah further shared her positivity for Victor’s behaviour.

Hannah: That’s the really odd thing, he’s actually very respectful. When I come down if there wasn’t a free seat he would stand up, and he was immediately making me a cup of tea or a cup of coffee. You know, he would get the coffee in that I liked just because I liked those, or at Christmas he bought all the professionals a box of chocolates each and if you were walking through a door he would open the door for you,

Hannah emphasised these small, and potentially superficial, acts of kindness and politeness that she had observed. One possible reason for this is that Hannah contrasted his behaviour with more typical fathers she had encountered, who did not possess his social skills. Alternatively, these small acts take on greater significance because of Hannah’s investment in the beast/prince duality where she positioned herself as being able to draw out the princely essence (Thomas and Adams 2000). In sections 1.1 and 7.2 it is noted that there is a need to interpret the accounts of the social workers through a critical lens, as they are aware of the need to justify, to themselves and to an external audience, the sometimes wavering decisions they made in respect of placing with fathers such as Victor.

A further possible explanation for Hannah’s approach to, and consideration of Victor’s behaviour could be as a result of the relationship she had developed with him. It is argued that “professional closeness” (Kendrick and Smith 2002 p.46) can be beneficial in enabling practitioners to share their concerns in a respectful and open manner. Due to the intrinsic power imbalance in child protection practice, as well as paying close attention to the negative relationships that they have with service users, equal attention should be paid to the positive, amicable, and authentic relationships that are formed (Hood 2018). It has been found that positive feelings can either lead to the avoidance of challenging the service user through a fear

of losing the “good” relationship (Hood 2015) or distorting or eschewing the application of care and control that is intrinsic in the statutory social work role (Howe 2014). Similarly, Hood (2018) professes that a superficially positive relationship may inhibit effective intervention and lead to collusion with parents resulting in the consistent minimisation of concerns and downplaying of risks. In the next extract Hannah further reflected upon her relationship with Victor.

Hannah: *He worked so hard with me, and we really did get there.*

Lee: *Yes.*

Hannah: *Victor sadly has never got on with a social worker before and that isn't blowing my own trumpet. I don't know what I did, but I don't know whether it was because, but he says it's because I finally listened and that's all he wanted.*

This extract raises some interesting points, as it has been found that in order to avoid possible collusion, practitioners need to be aware of when service users compare them with previous social workers, where they are idealised as a better worker (Turney 2010), or have an unrealistic belief that the present relationship will reap benefits where others have failed (Brandon 2009).

These previous sections have explored instances in which the fathers were, despite their own negative behaviour, viewed in a more positive light in comparison to negative construction of the mothers. In the next section, I consider how the social workers reported incidents of domestic abuse between the fathers and their child's mother during their assessments.

6.3.2 Different interpretations of domestic abuse

Aforementioned studies have found that social workers lack an understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse. This may, however, be the result of the complexity involved. Baynes and Holland (2012) suggest that through an increased understanding of the nature of domestic abuse and other forms of intra-familial violence, it has become increasingly clear that there are no straightforward answers on how to engage men with a history of violence in the child protection process. As it is, of course not entirely straightforward to simply insist that all fathers must be worked with, as in child protection cases there is a very high incidence of domestic abuse, usually male to female abuse (Holland 2011). It is argued that because of the complexity of domestic abuse, a wider and more progressive response is needed from local authority policy and practice that reflects the different factors and causes of violence in intimate relationships (Rivett and Kelly 2006; Rivett 2010; Philip et al. 2018b). In the

following section, through recourse to the interview data of Colin and Kerry, I explore how social workers adopted different interpretations of fathers' domestic abuse. In this first extract, Kerry, the social worker for Robert's three children, shared her thoughts about the domestic abuse committed by Robert against his children's mother.

Kerry: There've been DV [domestic violence] situations between mum and dad for years, but even though that underlines and affects the children, he's actually still a good dad with the children, the children love their dad and don't see that aggression and violence when they're with him, but the mum and dad clearly clashed and couldn't live together or be in a relationship because it just got too much.

In this extract, Kerry separated the violent man from the loving father, which resonates with the earlier reference to the work of Thomas and Adams (2000). In their study, the mothers described their abusive partners as having a double identity, as being both a beast and a prince. Here, it could be interpreted that the social worker adopted a similar position in her observations of the father. Kerry also considered the violence to be relational and situationally dependent, insofar as the violence occurred when the couple were together. Although Kerry accepted that the domestic abuse affected the children, she felt that this did not affect their positive relationship with Robert, since he was a non-resident father. Consequently, when they did have contact with him, they neither witnessed any further violence against their mother nor where they deemed to be at risk directly from his violence.

A number of writers do not accept the split image of men as abusive in some respects and loving fathers in others (Eriksson and Hester 2001; Rakil 2006). Eriksson and Hester (2001) argue that because agencies value the involvement of fathers, they ignore the risks that these men pose to women and children. Specifically, they say that the category of father serves to obscure the violence committed by these men. In contradistinction to this argument, other scholars purport that fathers who are violent will, inevitably, continue be part of their child's lives, to live with them, or have contact with, their children irrespective of the severity of the violence they commit (Alderson et al. 2013; Heward-Belle et al. 2019). Therefore, the implications for social work, as explored in Chapter 3, is that fathers cannot be ignored or excluded from any social work assessment of their children, whether they are resident or non-resident. Similarly, overly emphasising the potential and actual violence of men, it is argued, inhibits the ability of professionals to look for, and recognise, characteristics and an identity beyond this, and consider how these men could be positively involved in their child's lives (Featherstone et al. 2007; Rivett 2010; Ferguson et al. 2020).

In the following extract from Colin, the social worker for Lawrence's two sons, he recalled a visit to see the family.

Colin: *There you had a man who clearly – all he wanted was a family life. I'd done a home visit and he was at there, sat with the baby and he said, "Yeah, this is what I've wanted. This is...yeah." And he was a loving father, talking about he'd achieved what he wanted, and this is what he was going to be like. Within two weeks there had been a massive DV [domestic violence]. He'd been on a three-day bender, probably lack of trust in a relationship and him and his own mental health issues, but clearly, he couldn't just – something – although he clearly loves his little daughter and he is a good father but there have been a lot of DV [domestic violence]. I just think, you know, his emotional health is...So, what happened is – and as soon as the police say, you can't go around there, the first thing he is saying is, "But I need to see my daughter. But I want to see my daughter."*

As with the previous extract from Kerry, Colin distinguished between Lawrence as the perpetrator of violence towards his partner and Lawrence as the loving father. The issue of Lawrence going on a sustained period of drinking three weeks after the birth of his daughter, which resulted in a massive incident of domestic violence, also appeared to be downplayed by Colin as a minor issue with respect to both the family and his role as a father. One possible explanation for Colin's position is the normalisation of domestic abuse and the functionalist approach to domestic abuse (Holland 2011). Mannay (2014a) found in her study exploring the experiences of mothers and their daughters living on a marginalised housing estate in south Wales, that for those who experienced domestic abuse, the normalisation and naturalisation of male violence was central in their accounts. Similarly, Holland (2011) found that violence was accepted by social workers as being caused by drugs or alcohol, or by the "man's frustration at his family situation" (Holland 2011 p.132). Applying these findings to the above extract, Colin stated that *there have been a lot of DV* [domestic violence], but then appeared to cite mitigating factors for Colin's drinking and violence, namely that it was Colin's way of dealing with his own mental health and issues with relationships.

McCarthy et al. (2014) have questioned to what extent troubles, such as violence, are considered as a normal aspect of family life and "at what point do family troubles become defined as "harmful", "oppressive", "abusive" or "neglectful" of the needs of the less powerful" (p. 14). It is only within the last two decades that domestic abuse has been formally recognised as a child protection concern. Indeed, it was not until the Children and Adoption Act 2002 that domestic abuse came to be considered by social workers as grounds for significant harm to the child through the "impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill

treatment of another”. Today, domestic abuse is considered part of the “toxic trio” (Brandon, 2009) or “toxic triad” (Fuller-Thomson et al. 2019), which describe the dominant risks of child abuse and neglect deriving from a combination of domestic abuse, parental mental health issues and/or learning disabilities, and parental alcohol and/or drug misuse. Although questions remain over whether the evidence base accurately describes the extent to which these factors are present in most child protection cases, or actually present at the same time (Skinner et al. 2021), domestic abuse has been found to be consistent and ever-present in the majority of child protection cases (Ferguson et al. 2020). Therefore, although one could make the argument that there has been a case of “troubling the normal” (McCarthy et al. 2014 p.11) insofar as domestic abuse has now been recognised in legislation and practice guidance as a direct risk to the welfare of children, it could also be suggested that social workers, as a consequence of their day-to-day contact with domestic abuse within families, have also, to some extent, accepted it as a normal aspect of family life.

6.4 Understanding and dealing with emotions

In section 5.4.3, I reported findings that suggest that social workers either fail to understand, underestimate or dismiss the emotions of fathers (Hojer 2011a; Smithers 2012; Baum and Negbi 2013) or are ill-equipped to work with fathers (Brown et al. 2009). Alternatively, Quick and Scott (2019) posit that child protection social workers create an emotional regime in which they can dictate and manage what they perceive as acceptable emotional responses. However, my interviews with Clare, Hannah and Kerry suggest that not only did they understand the reasons behind fathers’ anger and did not dismiss these emotions, but they also seemed to be capable of challenging the fathers about their anger in order to sustain their relationship and continue with the assessment. In this first extract from Clare, the social worker for Liam’s children, we were discussing the circumstances that led to her assessment of Liam as his child’s primary carer.

Clare: A Child Protection Plan, yeah, which had been up and running. And at that point, I think Liam was very frustrated, so I’ve got the social worker telling me that Liam is quite an angry person, that sometimes he’ll shout at meetings, but I didn’t find that at all. I feel that his frustrations were due to the fact that his children were on a Child Protection Plan, they were in his care, they weren’t at risk of significant harm in his care, so why would you fudge a placement of children with this guy if they were at significant risk of harm? So, he was a bit confused, and he just wanted the Child Protection Plan to end.

Clare suggested that there had been a lack of understanding of Liam's motivation for becoming angry; moreover, she appeared to accept that there was justification for his emotional response, as the previous social worker had not been clear about the justification for his children remaining the subject of a child protection plan. Similarly, in the following extract from Hannah, I asked her what motivated her to assess Victor.

Hannah: I wanted him to have a chance. I felt he had never had the chance. To be honest I agree with him, I don't think he was ever listened to. I think because his passion comes across as anger, and he was labelled as an angry man, but actually when you break that down and you look back on that, if you were sat at home and your child was left alone in a pram whilst the mother was taking heroin, would you not go down when social services are involved and scream and shout and say, 'What the hell is going on? To feel powerless made him angry.

Hannah felt Victor's anger was the result of him feeling *powerless* because he had not been listened to by social services when he expressed concerns about his child's welfare. While there is no way to verify whether Victor's account is true, it is consistent with previous studies which found that social workers often distrust what fathers report to them about their children (Ashley et al. 2006; Dominelli et al. 2011; Storhaug 2013; Storhaug and Sobo-Allen 2018).

The data from Hannah's interview also suggests that she was able to challenge Victor about his anger. Hannah reflected on information that Victor had passed onto her where it was alleged that Carol had submitted another person's urine sample as part of her routine check by social services, in order to prove she was abstaining from using heroin.

Hannah: I kept saying to him, 'Look, I can't understand you if you shout at me. You know, I'm here to support you. You've got to realise we are evidenced based practice. Without getting any evidence I have nothing, and the day he told me about false sample we got her in for a test and that's when we got the sample checked.

Lee: Okay, so he knew, yes.

Hannah: Yeah, I said, "Look, now we can do something". All the other tittle tattle tales from the street, I can't do anything with that, and you need to understand it's not me ignoring you, it's me being powerless.

Hannah used the term *powerless* for a second time to align herself with Victor with respect to Carol's actions and deceit around her drug use. In the previous excerpt, the term was used in the context of Victor feeling powerless, but in this case, she used it to convey her own powerlessness at not having the appropriate evidence to determine the harm that Carol's

behaviour was having upon Victor's son. Similarly, in the following extract from Kerry, I asked her about her relationship with Robert.

Kerry: And it has been a lot of handholding, it has been Robert phoning me up a lot. Sometimes, he's had a go, and I've had to tell him, "Hey, don't shout at me. You need to take responsibility. You need to sit down and just calm yourself down, and we'll talk about this when you're calm."

Kerry offered Robert a great deal of support, but also challenged his anger. In considering the data from both social workers, a positive aspect of their practice was their ability to challenge the fathers about their anger, while, simultaneously, continuing to offer support and understanding. Brandon et al. (2017) suggest in order to build a relationship between social workers and fathers, it is crucial to adopt a:

“... ‘both-and’ approach, where effective engagement involves both authoritative and empathic interaction, to hold men accountable, and to directly value their parenting in its own terms” (p. 147).

6.5 Summary

In this third findings chapter I again utilised the social work interviews to highlight where the data has shown where the social workers considered the negative aspects of the fathers lives during their assessments of them. It can be seen when considering the fathers' profiles (see Appendix 9), and the accounts of the social workers, that a number of negative behaviours feature in all of the lives of the fathers to varying degrees, ranging from time spent in prison, to a history of violence, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse and gambling addiction.

Research studies have found the negative behaviours of fathers can preclude a social worker's engagement with, and assessment of them (O'Hagan 1997; Scourfield 2003; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Nygren et al. 2018). Similarly, other studies have underscored fathers' experiences of being negatively perceived by social workers in child protection (Strega et al. 2009; Dominelli et al. 2011; Cameron et al. 2012; Coady et al. 2012; Storhaug and Oien 2012; Zanoni et al. 2014; Campbell et al. 2015; Philip et al. 2018a; Brandon et al. 2019). In this study I was asking social workers to reflect back on where they had already successfully engaged with, and assessed the father. It is important to note, however, that in a number of situations the social workers had no choice but to assess the fathers, through them already having their child living with them, and as noted previously, a negative assessment of the

father in this situation would have involved the social workers needing to prove that the children were at risk of actual, or likely, significant harm if they remained in their fathers care, Therefore, it is difficult to prove whether, in different circumstances, the negative aspect of these fathers lives would have precluded their engagement and assessment by social workers as found in previous studies. However, it is clear from the accounts of a number of social workers that they faced challenges in assessing the fathers who had their children already residing with them. For all the social workers in the study, the decision to approve the fathers as primary carers for their children was challenging, where they were required to weigh up the pro and cons of how the fathers were presenting themselves and decide if this was ‘good enough.’ A positive of their approach appears to be that they adopted a strengths based approach to their assessment, avoiding the binary thinking and instead recognised that the fathers were neither not all good, or all bad, but a combination of both negative and positive factors (Brandon et al. 2017). Through using this professional judgement and discretion they often found themselves in conflict with other professionals involved in the child’s lives, but stood by their convictions and decision

However, it was found, for two social workers in the study, in reaching this decision, it appears that the negative behaviour of fathers was considered in relation to a negative construction of mothers. This is consistent with previous studies in which fathers were often only viewed by social workers as committed and capable of taking care of their children either when the mothers were unable to do so (Storhaug and Oien 2012; Storhaug 2013) or they had been constructed as a “bad mother” (Scourfield 2003 p.103). Unusually for the social work profession, the accounts of the two social workers appear to highlight a lack of empathy for these mothers who were the victims of domestic abuse, or were suffering from mental health problems and/or drug and alcohol misuse. In addition, there appeared to be unwillingness to look beyond the presenting issue to consider the underlying reasons for why these mothers had had previous children removed or were using misusing alcohol or drugs. The chapter, therefore, it could be argued, highlights a complex paradox in child protection, where, on the one hand, men have been constructed negatively in child protection, while, on the other hand, are often less demonised than so-called “bad mothers’ and seen as a more viable option.

Chapter Seven: Assessing the fathers:

considering the positive factors of the father's lives.

7.1. Introduction

As with the previous chapter, this chapter also focuses on the research question in respect of the social workers' experiences of assessing the fathers' capacity to be their child's potential full-time carer, and how did they negotiated the assessment. Whereas the themes in the previous chapter centred around the social workers' observations and considerations of the negative aspects of the fathers' lives and behaviour, this chapter explores where they encountered positive factors in the fathers' behaviours, lives, and wider families.

Although the chapter predominantly utilises data from the interviews with social workers, I also include data from the fathers' interviews. Three main themes are explored. Firstly, I consider instances in which the social workers referred to fathers' love for their children, which was observed through the level and type of care they provided to their children. Secondly, a number of social workers observed the fathers' motivation and commitment to their children through a willingness to change their behaviour and circumstances, in order to take on the full-time care of their child. Thirdly, I explore how the social workers encountered, and made sense of, the fluid and unstructured nature of the fathers' lives and wider families. More specifically, I explore how it could be interpreted that the social workers understood these families not as a structure, but rather as a myriad of family practices and displays of family, and how this was subsequently considered by them to be a positive factor in the assessment.

7.2 Demonstrating love and intimacy

In the emergent body of literature and research into contemporary fathering explored in Chapter two, one strand of work seeks to develop an understanding of the relationship between intimacy, love, and the fathering role. In the seminal work of Dermott (2003, 2008), it is suggested that "intimate" fathers focus on the quality of their emotional relationship with their children, emphasising positive displays of affection which in turn helps them to develop a close and enduring bond with their children. In section 8.4 of this thesis, it is argued that this intimate fathering occurs against the backdrop of increased fluidity in love and relationships and, hence, less reliance on the durability of intimate relationships (Williams 2002; Macht

2020), in comparison to which the parent-child relationship is considered to be more durable (Jamieson 1999; Bauman 2003). This is crucially important given that most fathers, by virtue of being non-resident, have experienced difficult and disruptive relationships with their child's mother, and often with previous partners, which means that the father's relationship with their child has become the most enduring and consistent one in their lives.

Of the nine social workers interviewed, seven directly used the term "love" as a means of describing what they had observed in their assessment of the fathers, despite the term never being used by me at any stage. It is important, however, as identified in sections 1.1 and 6.4, to interpret the accounts of the social workers through a critical lens. It will be suggested, throughout this section, that the social workers interpreted the interaction they observed between the fathers and children as acts of love, and indeed these may well have been physical manifestations of love. The social workers may have looked for signs of love in order to justify the sometimes wavering decisions they made in respect of placing the children with their fathers in this study.

None of the fathers used the term love or its derivatives directly in their narrative accounts. As previously discussed in section 4.7.1, there are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. Firstly, men either tend to express emotions that differ from how they actually feel, or are reluctant to share, or have trouble expressing, their emotions verbally (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001b; Seidler 2006). Secondly, it has also been suggested that fathers tend to experience tension in expressing their feelings of love, because they deem it to be a highly feminised emotion (Rochlen et al. 2008).

Macht (2017) suggested that when asked directly about their feelings of love, the majority of fathers in her study considered it to be a verb, in that it was something that they did and demonstrated as opposed to talked about. This is a crucial point to keep in mind when considering the following interview extracts from Kerry, Colin, Kate, and Mary, as it could be interpreted that love was observed and understood by the social workers through positive actions and behaviours, rather than on account of what the fathers said. I asked Kerry what she felt Robert's motivation was for agreeing to be assessed to take on the care of his three children.

Kerry: His love for the children, I think he clearly loves the children. He's a good parent when you see him with them, and what he's done for them from where they came from.

Henry was hitting and kicking Robert daily, Henry was a runner, you open that car door, and you grab Henry, and Henry ran, and you were chasing him down that street, he's saying he's

running home to his mum, and Robert had to deal with that on a daily basis in a one-bedroom flat. It was small. And the room, his living room was maybe just a tiny bit bigger than this, and that's how he had to live. He had, and they lived like that, and Henry was angry, Mia was crying, and Bob was watching them all, thinking, "What the hell's going on."

Kerry equated Robert being a *good parent* with him loving his children, which was observed not only through the progress he had made in caring for his children since they were removed from their mother's care, but also in his ability to manage Henry's challenging behaviour in difficult living conditions. In addition to direct action, such as Robert chasing after his son when he ran away, love and being a good parent appeared to be also understood by the social worker through their observations of Robert's personal qualities such as patience and tolerance, where despite being attacked by Henry on a daily basis, he continued to care for him. This was also evident in Colin's interview when I asked him what he thought motivated Lawrence to be assessed to take on the care of his two sons.

Colin: I think love for his boys because there's no doubting that he's always loved them. No doubt about it. I've never heard him say an unkind or a really critical word to either of them in that sense. When I've visited the home, he's always talked positively about them. It's not so easy for him with Christian because of his violent behaviour, but just how he understands Cristian's verbal, non-verbal communication, how he sort of pre-empts what Christian may want; and how physically he approaches him. The hopes he's got for doing future things with him and sharing things with him. No, you can tell clearly.

Colin suggested that Lawrence had an unequivocal love for his sons, and that this had never wavered despite dealing with regular physical assaults. Lawrence's tolerance and patience appeared to not only be demonstrated externally through his management of Christian's behaviour, but also internally insofar as he was able to both understand and accept the aggressive behaviour and separate this from his feelings of love for his son and the positive future they would share.

Although these two extracts represent social workers' observations of the fathers as opposed to the fathers' own accounts, parallels can nevertheless be drawn between these findings and those of Macht (2017), where several fathers talked about loving their children despite being challenged by their children in what the fathers described as difficult moments. Through her concept of "emotional bordering", Macht (2017, 2020) builds upon the earlier work of "gender borders" (Thorne 1993) to include male emotional expressions and responses. Macht (2010) suggests that fathers reproduce on an emotional level to create relational boundaries, with the

express aim of either maintaining emotional closeness or emotional distance in their intimate relationships. In reproducing these levels, fathers demonstrate an emotional ability to shift between stoicism (defined as strength and emotional control) and intimacy (defined as caring and openness to dialogue) (Macht 2018 pp. 23). Returning to the accounts of Kerry and Colin, it could be interpreted that both Robert and Lawrence were able to shift between these two positions to maintain their relationships with their children. The children, for different reasons, posed serious challenges to their fathers. Indeed, I observed first-hand in one of my interviews with Lawrence how challenging Christian's autistic behaviour could be, and by observing the damage to the family home. It could be said, from Colin's account, that Robert was able to shift between a stoic approach and maintain an emotional distance during the violent episodes, before then demonstrating emotional closeness and intimacy via understanding and reading his son's body language and how best to approach him.

Whereas these social workers appeared to observe the fathers' love in terms of their ability to shift between different emotional positions, the following extracts from Katy, Mary and Hannah testify to a different form of intimacy via which the fathers demonstrated their love for their children. I asked Katy what she understood to be Nigel's motivation for agreeing to be assessed.

Katy: I think he does love the kids and, you know, there is evidence of a good bond between him and the kids. You know, little things like when he used to go and pick them up to bring them to school before he got his benefits in place to kind of help him out financially, I wasn't allowed, the children wouldn't let me help them into the car and put the buggy in the car, Daddy had to do it. When he sits with them, they will put their arm around him. They will come and sit on his knee, and they are very kind of touchy feely and close with him.

Katy equated Nigel's love for his children with the bond that they had, which she observed through their interactions and the fact that Nigel's children trusted him with their care and initiated affection and received affection in return. As aforementioned, Dermott (2003) found that many fathers promote positive displays of affection, which, in turn, helps them to develop a close and enduring bond with their children. Similarly, (Macht 2020) found that:

“The *boundaries of love* are constantly negotiated through intimate communication, particularly for social actors in long-term commitments” (p. 18).

As well as love being interpreted by the social workers as occurring between the father and their child through physical actions and communication, the following two extracts suggest

that love was also interpreted by the social workers as occurring through non-verbal communication and the responses of the fathers. The first involved Lawrence meeting his three-year-old for the first time at a contact centre.

Lee: What do you think his motivation was for agreeing to be assessed to take on the care of Meadow?

Mary: I think he started to love his daughter. When we started contact, he did literally look like a dad seeing a new-born, and when she was playing in the corner, you could see him sat there, just fascinated with her. And the first few times he did meet her, I would say he fell in love with her. He probably did look like a new dad meeting his child for the first time. He was just so happy, just sat there and watching her play.

Similarly, Hannah below recalled a meeting between Victor and his 12-month-old son, whom he had not seen since he was born.

Hannah: ...I had at this stage managed to observe two contacts that she allowed me to actually take place, and they were really positive. He was really warm with him, how he looked at him, that love, evidently there.

What is interesting about these two extracts is that the social workers described how they observed love between the father and his child as not necessarily emanating from a physical act, but rather as emerging through the emotions generated by the father and subsequently observed by the social workers. In other words, this was not based on something the fathers said, but rather how the social workers observed the way the fathers looked at their children. Although this is obviously subjective and open to interpretation, it was nevertheless present in both social workers' accounts. As (Rusu 2018) suggests:

“As a private intersubjective phenomenon belonging to the emotional realm, often secret and clandestine, love poses methodological challenges that make it difficult to observe, let alone measure” (Rusu 2018 pg.25).

This section has explored instances in the social workers' interviews where they interpreted fathers loving their children, which they observed in several different ways. In the next section I explore data from the interviews with social workers in which they talked about observing the fathers showing a level of commitment to their children and a willingness to change their behaviour and life to accommodate being full-time carers of their children.

7.3. A willingness to change

This section relates, to some extent, to themes explored in the previous chapter, where the social workers again considered a number of negative aspects of the fathers, but then observed, what they interpreted as a willingness and ability change this behaviour. The following extract comes from the interview with Katy, who was the social worker for Nigel's two children. Katy reflected on aspects of her reasoning for persevering with Nigel as the permanent carer for his children. Katy reflected upon the issues in the extract on a number of occasions during her interview, and appeared to be very contemplative on her decision to agree for Nigel to retain the full time of his children.²⁷

Katy: You know, it kind of sounds bad on paper, doesn't it, that, "Oh my god, you know, he's on a methadone programme. Oh my god, he's living in this diabolical house," you know, but I think it was because of his demonstrating his ability to move forward and change. He was doing what he should be doing.

In the above passage, Katy appeared to rationalise and justify her decision through posing a rhetorical question to an external audience, "*You know, it kind of sounds bad on paper, doesn't it?*," thus posing the question of what 'others' might think about her decision to place a child with a person "*on a methadone programme*" in a "*diabolical house*". Katy then proceeded to answer her own question through citing evidence of Nigel's commitment to *move forward and change* and *doing what he should be doing*, which suggested that he fulfilled her own personal expectations, and or the professional requirements of social services, and, as such, justified the risk she had taken in considering him as a suitable placement. This again supports the points previously made in section 6.2 in respect of how social workers exercise discretion in their decision making. I further discussed the changes in Nigel's behaviour with Katy in the next extract.

Lee: So, have you seen a change in Nigel from when you were first involved?

Katy: I think it has given him something to focus on, certainly in terms of his drug use and stuff. He will kind of say, 'I'll never go back to doing that because I won't jeopardise these children.'

Lee: So, he is completely clean now?

²⁷ See section 6.2 . I have used a similar quote from Katy to illustrate the level of discretion that she used in her decision.

Katy: *He's completely clean of street drugs, I think he is down to a very tiny amount of methadone now. You know, he said if he didn't have the children, he could just detox for a couple of days on his own and he would be fine, but because he has got the kids, he knows he can't do that. So, he knows that he has got to be there for the kids.*

Katy talked about Nigel's willingness to address his drug problems, and how she believed the catalyst for this was his desire to remain in a position to care for his children. Additionally, Katy suggested that Nigel was acutely aware of the implications for both him and his children if he did relapse.

Given that no other studies have hitherto specifically explored the *retrospective* experiences and motivations of social workers and non-resident fathers with respect to having children placed in their care, I have drawn upon studies that have considered the engagement between fathers and social workers in less specific circumstances. In accordance with the findings of the present study, Cameron et al. (2012) found, in their life story study with 18 fathers in Canada, that over one-third of the fathers disclosed how their concerns for their children provided them with the motivation to make difficult, yet necessary changes, to how they were living in order for social services to allow them to be involved in their children's lives. More specifically, a number of studies have identified a strong commitment from fathers to seek treatment and support to stop their abuse of drugs and alcohol (Storhaug and Oien 2012; Zanoni et al. 2014). Zanoni et al. (2014), in their Australian study, observed that:

"In contrast to the stereotype that fathers in child welfare have little commitment to their children, most of the fathers in this study were committed enough to give up alcohol and drugs for their children and attend an intensive and long-term program to become better parents and prove they could be trusted with their children" (p. 19).

The above theme considered the basis for Katy's observation that Nigel was willing to address his drug use. The next section explores instances in which Mary and Katy talked in their interviews about the fathers' commitment to both the assessment process and their child.

7.4 A commitment to both the assessment and their child

In this first extract, Mary recalled the first part of Lucas' assessment, which was when he first met his daughter. As discussed previously in section 7.2, Mary observed that in the *first few times he did meet her, I would say he [Lucas] fell in love with her*. However, the feeling was not necessarily mutual.

Mary: *Meadow hated him to start with.*

Lee: *Right.*

Mary: *We did a little story book for her, and she wouldn't look at him, even. There's a bit of me that thinks that might be her caution around men, but yeah, it was just awful. But he came and just sucked it up, and just sat there to be scowled at him for an hour, and then went, and it didn't really deter him at all. Because a bit of me thought he's going to say it's too big to get past, and he never did. But it was awful, she wouldn't even go into a room with him for the first two visits, so she was just sat on her great aunt's knee in reception.*

Towards the end of my interview with Mary, I asked her whether this was the outcome she wanted to achieve for Meadow.

Mary: *But yeah, it is a really good outcome. It's definitely a surprise, because I did wonder, will he hack it, will he stick through the court stuff, will he come to the meetings, will he come to the CLA reviews? And he did all of that.*

Although Mary viewed the outcome of the assessment as a positive one, and underscored Lucas' commitment to both the assessment and court process, there were some indications in her account that Mary had doubts over his commitment. What is also interesting about this social worker's position, and in line with Holland (2000), is that their commitment and motivation appeared to have been judged on account of the father's willingness to cooperate with the social work agency and its procedures as well as different assessment methods, which in this case was an observed assessment session at a family centre. However, I was not able to clarify during the interview with Mary if there were any underlying factors for these doubts, nor was it possible to ascertain from the data what interactions specifically between Lucas and Mary, both verbal and non-verbal during the assessment, ultimately underpinned Mary's position. However, throughout Lucas' interview, he articulated his frustration with how long the process took, from when the DNA test confirmed his paternity of Meadow to when she was subsequently placed in his care, alongside frustration with the timings of the assessment which was explored earlier in section 5.3.2.

Another possible interpretation of Mary's position stems from the study of Dominelli et al. (2011), who identified the presence of the "misrepresented dad" in social work practice with fathers, that is, when a father struggles to be seen as a good dad because of the lack of trust and scepticism social workers have about him being able to care for his children, not to mention social workers' difficulties in appreciating the importance of fatherhood. While it is

not possible to fully determine the source of this reticence without talking to Mary further about this, Mary did acknowledge that Lucas demonstrated his commitment through attending the myriad of meetings. Whereas Mary equated Lucas' commitment with his willingness to attend meetings, in the following extract Katy justified Nigel's commitment to his children by referring to his resilience and ability to deal with crisis situations.

Lee: I mean what are your feelings about this. Is it something that has surprised you, what he has done?

Katy: I don't think it has surprised me because, you know, I think I have worked with single parent dads before in the past. I think it has been really good what he has done because he didn't have to, did he? He could have kind of stepped back and said, "Look, I can't cope, I'm living in this grotty house. I've got this landlord that's a rogue. I'm not in a position right now because of my housing situation where I can look after my kids," but he never did. Whenever I rang him during the week and said, "Look, Jane's not coping; can you take the kids tonight?" "Of course, I can." There was no hesitation about it, "Yes, of course I can." You know, "I'll drop them off." He might have had no nappies, he might have no clothes, he might have had none, but he would never have said

In the above extract, Katy talked about her experience of working with single fathers as well as touching upon the difference in moral standing of parenting that was discussed in Chapter 2, when claiming that *he didn't have to, did he?* Accordingly, fathers in society are seen as less likely to face judgement if they decide to walk away from their child. Although Katy is positive about Nigel's commitment, it could be interpreted that her benchmark for him was lower than it would be for a mother. This connects with a previous point that was made in section 6.2 in respect of the concept of "good enough" parenting and the question of whether the concept is equally applied to both parents.

7.5 Openness and Consistency

Additional positive attributes identified in the social workers' observations of the fathers pertained to them demonstrating both openness and consistency in their approach to both them and their care of their children. In the following extract from the interview with Mary, the social worker for Alan's children, I asked her about his attributes and behaviours. As previously discussed in section 6.4, when considering Mary's data, she appeared to balance out the negative aspects of Alan's behaviour with the positive care and impact he had upon his children.

Lee: *What do you think he's shown that has helped or not helped?*

Mary: *I think what he has been really clear about is he is very black and white. Sometimes that makes everybody feel comfortable, but it's quite concrete, and I guess that is really different from a lot of mums. That probably is a bit of a dad thing, actually, that he's quite clear, and if there is stuff, we're not happy with, that doesn't make him any more likely to try and hide it, whereas I think lots of families, possibly mums, are a bit more aware of the judgment they might get for that. I don't know if that is a dad thing, I'm just thinking out loud, really.*

Social workers are expected, by virtue of dealing with so much uncertainty and complexity and the adversarial nature of child protection, to retain a level of “respectful uncertainty” and “healthy scepticism” (Ruch 2007; Morrison 2010) over what parents tell them. I would argue that Mary was adopting such a position when she referred to Alan as being honest and transparent in what he tells her and other people, particularly with respect to the fact that he did not attempt to hide the perceived negatives aspects of his behaviour or care from the social workers. Mary suggested that this did not occur with other families and was not the case with women necessarily, thus framing mothers as somehow less honest and not as *black and white*. However, one could argue that this derives from the fact that mothers, by virtue of being both seen as, and being the predominant carers of children, are more aware of the scrutiny and judgements of social workers and other professionals. From this perspective, we can say that women are in some ways more aware of the need to be less transparent. In the next extract, Mary proceeded to reflect upon the positive impact of Alan's predictable nature upon his children since they had been in his care.

Mary: *No, it's where it is, and that's what we see, and that's probably where we'll be for the next however many years.*

Lee: *You can work with that?*

Mary: *Yeah, you know where you stand, and I know that if I go planned or unannounced, it's exactly the same.*

Mary referred to another common part of assessment within child protection practice which is to visit the homes of families unannounced, but once again Alan's perceived transparency and consistency meant that she had never been able to discover any hidden negative aspects of his care for his children. Mary also referred to observing consistency in Alan's approach in the foreseeable future, which was further highlighted in the following extract.

Mary: But there isn't a flux, and I think that's why we have seen the kids' emotional wellbeing settle down so much more than it ever has been, because that's what kids need, really, isn't it? It's that steady, stable, knowing what home looks like, knowing who's there, and getting that predictable stuff back from him, even if it's not always what we want him to say.

In this case, Mary suggested that Alan's consistency was beneficial to his children inasmuch as it provided them with stability.

7.6 The fluidity of fathering and families

It could be interpreted, from the social work interviews, that another positive attribute of the fathers' lives pertained to how the fluidity of their lives, and their family structures, permitted and accommodated the addition of their child into their day-to-day interaction and activities. This can be seen in the interview with Diane, the social worker for David's son, Luke.

Diane: Is it that these fathers and families can do what they want because there is no idea of what a perfect family is, because they have already broken the original mould.

Lee: So, there is no set way of thinking?

Diane: No, the original mould has gone already, by virtue of the fact that they weren't together when the child was born ...

Diane understood that fathers like David and his family have a level of freedom in how to undertake their family life as there is a lack of a blueprint for a family structure. Before considering this point further, what Diane also identified was that part of this flexibility of the family structure stemmed from the fluidity of David's experience of fathering, where she recalled that David was not living with his partner, Jane, when Luke was born. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, non-resident fathers experience non-standard paternal biographies (Lewis and Lamb 2007b), which include, amongst other things, never living with their child, not knowing of their child's existence, living with the child, being married, and cohabitation. Roy (2014) emphasises the importance of understanding social and personal changes in the lives of fathers. Similarly, Shadik (2020) suggests that an understanding of the fluidity of fathers who are involved with children's services is crucial for improving their involvement with their children.

Mary stressed that it was important to understand the role that Jane, Lucas' wife, played in his daughter eventually coming to live with him as well as how Jane's personal biography influenced her response to this change in circumstances.

Lee: Yeah. So, what role do you think Lucas' partner has played in this?

Mary: It's huge at the minute, actually. I don't know how influential she is. I think she has definitely had to overcome some adversity, and I think, for Meadow, that possibly helps. They have no illusion of being in a 2.4 family, and no aspiration or sense of that being better or worse. I think the way they do family is probably a good way for Meadow to find her way in that family. I mean, what is a 'conventional' family? It's ridiculous, isn't it? Because I don't think 2.4 exists. But there isn't any of that sense around Lucas or any of this family, if you know what I mean.

In this extract, Mary denoted that Jane had dealt with a previous marriage and having an older son in that relationship, which, in turn, made her more resilient, adaptable, and open to taking on the care of child that was not biologically hers. Mary then expressed her feelings about how Jane and the rest of the family, through accepting that they were not a conventional family and had no aspirations to become one, had ended up having a positive impact on Meadow.

This is consistent with previous child protection studies (Saltiel 2013; Brandon et al. 2017; Skramstad and Skivenes 2017; Nygren et al. 2020), which showed that the families with whom social workers worked were so diverse that the conventional nuclear family hardly ever featured. As Saltiel (2013) notes:

“The overwhelming majority of cases involved families with complex, unconventional networks of relationships that had built up as a result of divorces, separations, remarriages, new partners, and their families entering the family networks” (p. 15).

However, despite encountering such diversity, it has been observed that the language and assumptions of social workers, coupled with the legislation and policy that is applied in their reasoning and decision-making, still resides within the conventional nuclear family paradigm (Saltiel 2013; Skramstad and Skivenes 2017). Although these studies may have found an ongoing adherence to the nuclear family structure, the social workers in my study appeared to be more open and accepting.

It is not possible to ascertain whether the families that encounter child protection are representative of families within wider society. However, it has been argued that an epochal change has taken place in Western society apropos an increase in the incidence of reconstituted families, as a result of a rise in cohabitation, separation, stepfamilies, divorce and singles parenting (Williams 2004; Chambers et al. 2009). This change, and the ensuing uncertainty over what constitutes a family, has served as the catalyst for an “empirically driven motivation towards reconsidering the family” (Smart and Neale 1999a p.4). The result of this is that the family is no longer seen as a social institution, but rather as more of “a facet of social life” (Finch 2007 p.66). The modern family is no longer considered in terms of the fixed concept of a nuclear family consisting of biological parents, the white male breadwinner and their children living in one household (Morgan 1996; Williams 2004), as kinship has now become ever-more socially constructed as opposed to a biological fact (Jones and Hackett 2011). This notion is important when we consider the circumstances of Robert and Nigel, who both took on the full-time care of children for whom they were not the biological father.

Kerry: Tilly and Henley have got the same dad, they're Robert's stepchildren. So, they've got the same dad. Bob, he's only got Bob. Bob is his biological child, Mia and Henry are stepchildren.

Lee: And how old are Mia and Henry?

Kerry: They're 5 and 6, or maybe 6 and 7 actually. Robert sees Mia and Henry as his, as far as they're concerned, he's dad. So, that piece of work is yet to be done with them, that Robert's not your dad, and these are the reasons.

Lee: Do they not know then?

Kerry: They don't know yet, but now's not the right time. They needed to settle in with Robert. They've always called him dad. That life story work still needs to be done with them.

Here, the social worker appeared to place importance on the children always knowing him and referring to him as dad, and although some importance is accorded to them eventually being told that Robert is not their biological father, this is deemed to be secondary to both their relationship with him and settling in with him.

Katy: Obviously, prior to him separating from Jane, they had actually lived together for I think it were about nine years. So, he had actually parented these children and he did kind of see them as being his own children.

What is central in both these cases is that both fathers lived with their non-biological children from when they were very young prior to them leaving the family home, and as identified by

both Kerry and Katy, both fathers saw the children as their own as a result of the time they had spent with them. This is because as Williams (2004) suggests:

“...our network of affections are not simply given by virtue of blood or marriage but are negotiated and shaped by us, over time and place” (pg.17).

What this section has demonstrated is that the actual lack of structure in families as well as their fluidity and ability to bend and flex to accommodate children, whether biologically related or not, was seen as a positive for the social workers when assessing both the father and the child.

7.7 Family practices, display, and symbolism

The reconsideration of families within sociology led to the family being examined through the lens of social processes and relationships, that is, exploring what families “do” to both create new relationships and sustain and strengthen pre-existing relationships. The concept of “family practices” developed by (Morgan 1996, 1999, 2011, 2013) considers family life as a set of social activities. Finch (2007) built upon the work of Morgan (1996) and argued that if the family has become a set of practices, then it is imperative that they must be seen to be done, which she described in terms of a form of “family display” where:

“...individuals, and group of individuals, convey to each other and to significant others that certain of their actions do constitute ‘doing family things’ and thereby confirm that these relationships are family relationships” (p. 73).

Finch (2011) emphasises that the idea of a family display is primarily concerned with conveying meaning to these significant others within the family, rather than audiences external to the family unit. However, it has been argued that further consideration is needed regarding the influential role played by external audiences in shaping such family displays (Dermott and Seymour 2011; Heaphy 2011; Walsh 2018).

“Display helps families demonstrate to members and to others that they are ‘doing’ family an reinforcing their relationship to one another” (Hall and Sikes 2018 p.208).

The importance of relationships between family members is demonstrated in the next extract from the interview of Mary, who reflected upon the care that Alan had provided to his children in the year since they had come to live with him on a full time basis.

Lee: Is it a year they have been with him?

Mary: Yeah, just over a year. Yeah. I think it surprises him that because he is a dad, and because he does have three kids chasing around him, and four and five when it comes to the school holidays, because his children's older siblings come back, even though they are not biologically his. They used to stay with mum, and now they stay with Alan.

Lee: Wow.

Mary: A bit of me thinks, "Is that about the sibling's stuff, is that about Alan?" I don't know where the magic of that is, because it's not really magic, it's just chaos. "There's no beds for anybody anyway, Alan and now there's an extra two bodies, and they both bring their boyfriends back with them."

Interestingly, Mary appeared to suggest that *magic* in some way exists in this family practice of everyone staying over in the school holidays had now transferred from the home of the mother to their father's home. Mary suggested that there should be some level of order. What is interesting about this particular extract is that she is perhaps not only referring to an event each summer, but rather highlighting the importance of the relationship between these siblings, who appeared to annually gravitate towards each other and one of their parents. Whether this practice also constitutes of a family display is not known, because not all practices can be classified as displays:

“...it is not the type of action (or event, or conversation) which makes it recognizable as a family practice, rather it is the embeddedness in a particular set of relationships which makes it a taken-for-granted practice where there is no need for display” (Finch 2007 pg.79).

What is also pertinent is how this strong sense of family permeated beyond their own biological children, with Alan willing to accept a fluid and unstructured family arrangement. A similar theme was explored in the following excerpt.

Mary: When I look at Lucas' wider family, and I say this as a good thing, they are a bit of a wonky family. There are lots of nieces and nephews and stepbrothers, in a really good way, like the nieces and nephews, some of them have got brothers and sisters from their dads, but they all go up on the family wall, and even though they're not, strictly speaking, related to Lucas, they all go camping with his grandma and his stepdad in summer. So, they take seven children camping in the summer, and just get on with it, really. Sometimes one of their

granddaughter's half-brothers comes and is part of the gang too, and he's up on the family wall with all the children. So, I guess they have got a strong sense of family

According to Finch (2007), the need to display becomes more important the more diverse and fluid families are as well as the further relationships move away from those which are readily recognisable as constituting family relationships. In the case of Lucas' family, the social worker described nieces, nephews, stepbrothers, and half-brothers, and with the addition of Meadow, a half-sister.

What is interesting about this section is that it could serve as evidence of both family practices and display. The reconstituted family, it could be suggested, are engaging in this annual camping trip with Lucas' grandma and stepdad as a family practice, while, simultaneously, they are displaying family.

Finch (2007) also suggests that the broad concept of "display" implies that meaning is not dependent on immediate and direct social interaction; rather, meanings can be transmitted and fortified through indirect means, such as via relationships and "display tools" (Finch 2007pg. 77), which take the form of pictorial representations such as photographs (Ribbens-McCarthy et al. 2012; Rose 2016). In an earlier study by Ribbens (1994) it was found that photographs were ever-present in the homes of the mothers in her study and denoted:

“...powerful images of family togetherness. Outings from the home can also at as potent representations of happy 'family life' if undertaken all together” (p. 63).

Therefore, it could be interpreted that “*the family wall*” conveys to others—both those within the family and “relevant” external others—what constitutes Lucas' family, irrespective of biological or legal parentage. It is not possible to ascertain if this family wall is a display for family members only, as purported by (Finch 2007, 2011), or if it is also for the benefit of an external audience.

Both Mary's interview and the work of Ribbens (1994) place importance upon outings and holidays, which was also a recurring theme in a number of the interviews with the fathers. In the following extract, Lawrence reflected upon his own childhood.

Lawrence: *As a kid, I had a good home, I got taken on holidays, and I tried to do same for my kids, I'd take them on holidays. My dad was worked seven days a week to pay for the things I got taken on a load of trips out to school, holidays, just things like that.*

Lawrence equated having a good home and upbringing with school trips and holidays, and how his father worked hard to make these things possible for him. Similarly, Nigel equated good parenting with going on holidays, noting:

Nigel: *I mean, as far as parents go, they were great. You know, what I remember is we went on holidays.*

What both fathers thus referred to in their interviews was replicating their childhood experiences for their own children. In the case of Nigel, he recalled a specific formative period in his life.

Nigel: *Being a young lad, doing what young lads do at that age, and then at 23 I thought, "Right, it's time to knuckle down," when I had Billy. And I did, I knuckled down. I started working full-time, started bringing money in, going on holidays.*

Similarly, as well as equating good parenting with going on holiday, Lawrence also wanted to repeat this with his own children.

Lawrence: *Well, I know, but as soon as I've grown up, I choose to think to myself, my parents were good parents and I had a good upbringing because I had a nice home, I got nice clothes, I got taken on nice holidays, so, it's something I want to try to give my children.*

Similar to Lawrence's reference to his father, Nigel referred to hard work or as having to *knuckle down* in order to provide for his children to go on holiday, both of which he saw as a positive sign of being a responsible adult and father. Lawrence referred to his father having to work seven *days a week*, while Nigel noted that he worked *full-time* in order to pay for a holiday. Hall and Holdsworth (2016) identified the inherent irrationality of holidays, on the grounds that they involve saving up for by working longer hours, which, in turn, means spending less time with each other in order to have some time away together. This perhaps signifies the importance that both fathers and families from working class families attach to holidays. Another explanatory factor for taking their children on holiday could be working class aspirations to be "better" or enjoy a "better" life, by virtue of going on these holidays. Indeed, Lawrence regarded holidays, clothes, and a nice home as being indicative of a good upbringing, thus perhaps reflecting a utopian middle-class ideal of a happy, comfortable, and successful family. Lawrence also discussed children who do not experience holidays.

Lawrence: Because for some children who don't have anything, who don't get taken on holidays or nowt.

Lawrence appeared to underscore the aspirational nature of holidays, discussing the importance they played in his life, and the fact that, at least to some extent, he saw them as a necessity for a good upbringing. Parallels can be drawn here with this theme and the work of Hamilton et al. (2014), who argue that in a consumer society such as the UK, normal life is structured around consumption, where good consumers are perceived as respected and hardworking, aspiring members of the consumer society, whereas people from poor and lower socio-economic backgrounds become the victims of stigmatisation, due to their inability to purchase what are perceived to be socio-cultural necessities (Hamilton et al. 2014 pp.1834). They argue, however, that a lack of economic resources does indeed negate one's aspirations to consume these perceived necessities, which in the case of Lawrence, referred to holidays.

Holidays and tourism have for a long time been synonymous with social class in the UK (Urry 1988, 1990, 2007). Indeed, the British seaside industry was created for, and catered to, workers from industrial areas, while from the 1970s onwards specific places in Europe such as Spain have become dependent upon income from British working class holidaymakers. However, the emergence of budget airlines and holiday companies have meant that ever-more destinations are now available to families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Holidays, it has been suggested, provide a platform through which to demonstrate, reinforce, and redefine one's social class (Prieto-Arranz and Casey 2014). In a similar vein, Finch (2015) found that holidays are a place where people from different classes have the opportunity to encounter and observe each other, and assess and compare themselves and reaffirm or change their sense of class identity. (Lawler 2005) argues, however, that it is ultimately the middle-class who possess the power to decide what experiences or identities are worthwhile or positioned as lacking. Prieto-Arranz and Casey (2014) contend that the working class have recently accessed tourist sights previously reserved for the middle-class, who, in response, have used their economic advantage to seek out new destinations and distance themselves from the working classes.

An additional way through which to understand Lawrence and Nigel's position is that holidays constitute practices of display and the sharing of intimate relations, where family members, and the relationship between them, are more open to public scrutiny and observation (Urry 1990; Haldrup and Larson 2003; Urry 2007), and, as such, are a place where people seek to be seen as a "real" family, doing "real family things" (Finch 2015 p.74). It has also been found that both the physical act of going on holiday and the planning of holidays are acceptable

topics of casual conversation with friends and other family members (Hall and Holdsworth 2016). In the next extract, Lawrence talked about the importance of being recognised as the person who took his children on holiday.

Lawrence: It feels good when I take them on holiday and I treat them, because they don't get any other treatment like that from other people, it's only me. My children have been on holiday four times, and it's always been me who has taken them. They have been to the theme park maybe two or three times, and it's always me who takes them.

Lawrence compared himself with other people who are in his children's lives, and how he views taking them on holidays or to theme parks as a display of good fathering, insofar as his children received a form of special treatment that was unique to their relationship.

7.8 Summary

This chapter has explored the themes emanating from the social work interviews, where they have considered the positive aspects of the fathers' behaviour and lives during their involvement with and assessment of them. It was explored how the positives consisted of a strong commitment to their children through willingness to change any negative behaviour, and to engage with, and complete the assessment, even when this proved challenging for the fathers. This finding challenges previous studies of social workers' experiences with, and views of, fathers in child protection which have consistently found negative stereotypes of fathers as uncaring, uncommitted and unwilling to change (Scourfield 2001a, 2003; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Ewart-Boyle et al. 2013; Skramstad and Skivenes 2017; Brewsaugh et al. 2018; Nygren et al. 2018) and supports the study of (Zanoni et al. 2014) who found the opposite construct.

The data from social worker interviews demonstrated how both love and intimacy that the father's showed towards their children during their assessment, both on a physical and emotional level. Finally the chapter explored the fluidity of fathering and families, firstly questioning the persistence, and existence, of the nuclear family in families involved with social services and also within wider society. Then through the work of Morgan (1996) and Finch (2007) I questioned the concept of the "family", suggesting instead that instead of a structured entity a family consists of displays and family practices. I argue that for several of the fathers and their children, the fluidity of their family so was a positive factor, as it meant that several children were merely moving within this fluidity, or if they were joining the family, such as Meadow, the lack of structure meant that their transition would be easily

accommodated, with the children simply joining in with the existing family practices and displays.

The next final findings chapter will further consider the intimacy and the relationship between the fathers and their children, when it will consider how the father's positioned themselves as fathers and reflected upon how they experienced becoming their child's primary carer.

Chapter Eight:
How the fathers positioned themselves as fathers,
and experienced the primary caring role for their children.

8.1 Introduction

The following chapter explores the final of the four research areas in this study, namely how the non-resident fathers subjectively positioned themselves as fathers, and how this subsequently impacted upon their ability to become potential full-time carers for their children. In terms of positioning, I have analysed how, via their words and phrases, the fathers communicated the adoption and negotiation of wider societal gendered notions of fathering (Hollway 1984, 2006; Harre 2012), with their individual sense of what constitutes good fathering, through reflecting upon their own biography as well as the influences of family and friends.

The chapter begins by exploring how the fathers positioned themselves, or not, as financial providers for their children. Drawing upon the discussion in section 2.5, I examine the importance of employment through the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), in addition to considering the role that intergenerational transmission played in perpetuating this position (Brannen and Nilsen 2006; Bosoni and Baker 2015). I focus on the day-to-day care and nurturing of their children as well as how the fathers positioned themselves with respect to this role. I illustrate how several of the fathers believed that it is a mother's role to be primary carer, while other fathers adopted a more balanced position of the role being interchangeable. Finally, through the lenses of borderwork (Thorne 1993; Doucet 2006a), I consider how the fathers negotiated the crossing of gendered borders by virtue of becoming the primary carer, and the possible benefits that it brought to both themselves and their children, which they would not have otherwise experienced.

This study involved me interviewing previously non-resident fathers, and asking them to reflect upon the point at which they became the primary carer for their child, and how this affected their position as a father. Dermott (2008) suggests that reflexivity can be weak and non-transformative when asking fathers to reflect upon the point of transition from non-father to father, due to the "shock of the new" (p. 129). Genuine reflexivity, she argues, can however be a feature of non-resident fathers' parenting, because in order for them to have a meaningful relationship with their children, they need to adjust their perception of fathering. Equally,

Dermott (2008) suggests that male primary carers are in a much more precarious position than fathers in a two-parent family, as they are forced to have a heightened consciousness of their fathering due to the necessity of reflecting upon previously unconscious rules of fathering. Dermott also posits that:

“Possibilities for critical reflection also occur when men are parenting in allegedly ‘fragile’ situations, as these more tenuous positions can permit the reformulation of the practices of fatherhood” (p. 231).

When considering the individual biographies of the fathers in this study (see Appendix 9), it was evident that for many of the fathers, their position could be considered as “fragile”, not only due to them being sole carers, but also as a result of the number of children in their care, their housing situation, their children’s behaviour and their own personal issues and challenges. Therefore, in consideration of both of the issues highlighted by Dermott (2008), one could argue that the fathers, by virtue of their position and experiences transitioning from initially non-resident fathers to eventually becoming primary carers, had ample opportunity to engage in reflexivity.

8.2 Employment and the provider role

As discussed previously in section 2.5, it was suggested that the notion of a “good father” has traditionally been defined in British political discourse and policy-making as someone who is economically active in the labour market (Collier 2001). More specifically, dominant images of fatherhood have been, and continue to be, linked to employment and the role of the breadwinner (Morgan 1992, 2001; Strier 2014; Miller and Dermott 2015). In addition, Yarwood (2011) suggests that:

“The concept of hegemonic masculinity mobilises the discourse of measuring success by paid work and financial rewards within the norms of society” (p. 153).

Consequently, unemployment is seen as posing a major challenge to masculinity (Haywood and Ghail 2003; Castrillo et al. 2020). However, scholars have also argued that financial provision is no longer sufficient for affirming the “good father”, as involvement in their child’s care is now considered to be as important, or in some cases even more important (Dermott 2008; Norman 2017).

Only three of the thirteen fathers in this study, Lawrence, Norman, and Liam, referred to employment in any context in their interviews, with only Lawrence positioning himself as the provider. This finding is consistent with Storhaug and Sobo-Allen (2018), which found that none of the fifteen fathers in their study closely associated their identity to that of the breadwinner. This, it was suggested, derived from the fact that the majority of the fathers had “a relatively weak attachment to the labour market” (p. 11). Applying this point to the present study, only four of the fathers were employed (see Table 1 in section 4.8) at the time of our interview, with eight of the remaining fathers claiming unemployment benefits, and one claiming Disability Living Allowance. Moreover, the three fathers who were in employment worked in unskilled manual positions²⁸, which, it has been argued, have been in decline over the last several decades, thus eroding the employment opportunities for some working class men and limiting their potential to be “providers” (Brannen and Nilsen 2006).

It was not possible to determine whether any of the other fathers in the study positioned themselves as the breadwinner, as they failed to refer to this in their interviews. In section 4.5.2 of the Methodology chapter, I underscore the importance of the narrative approach for interviewing the fathers in this study, in that it enabled them to tell their story. However, it is also important to note that this resulted in inconsistencies in the availability of data about the fathers’ past and present positions as providers. It was only when the fathers themselves raised the topic of employment in their interviews that I asked follow-up questions to clarify or expand upon the discussion.

Comparing the findings from extant studies on employment and fathers also proved difficult due to the divergent circumstances and journeys of these fathers in this study. As discussed in section 2.5, previous studies have tended to recruit fathers who were married, and/or living with their child and mother. Additionally, for fathers in a number of previous studies, the decision to cease employment and become the primary caregiver was a *choice*, in that coming from middle class backgrounds, the fathers were financially secure or had reached a comfortable position in their career. Even in situations where the fathers found themselves involuntarily unemployed, their partners were still employed and therefore provided both a source of income and additional support for the fathers’ caring role. These circumstances are very different to those experienced by the fathers in this study and as such, there is no available data that aligns with the participants in my study.

²⁸ See list of fathers’ employment in Table 1

Beginning with Lawrence, who had ceased his employment as a full-time car spray painter after ten years, in order to become the full-time carer for his children, I asked him whether, as a previously non-resident father, he had ever considered taking on the primary responsibility for his children.

Lawrence: *I didn't fancy taking them on, because it isn't a dad's responsibility, is it? As everybody else knows, the dads don't take on the kids, really, it's always their mums. Because the bloke always has a job.*

Lee: *No. So, do you think that means that children are 'women's work'?*

Lawrence: *Well, it always has been, hasn't it? The dad goes to work, and their mum stays at home. It has always been like that, and I don't know how come, but it has always been like that, hasn't it?*

Lawrence suggested that when parents separate, the child should always remain in the care of their mother, because *the bloke always has a job*. Lawrence's account used the phrases *isn't it?* or *hasn't it?*, but it is unclear from the interview whether Lawrence was using these phrases to question himself, to seek validation for his views, or whether it simply reflected his regional style of communication. What this account does point to however, is the persuasive and enduring nature of the provider discourse, which is consistent with other studies. For example, as discussed in further detail in Chapter 2, Castrillo et al. (2020) found that fathers appear reluctant to abandon the position of provider, and, indeed, in some instances continue to identify themselves as primary providers despite not being in employment. Similarly, Shirani et al. (2012) found:

“...men across the sample clearly articulated expectations that it was their responsibility to provide financially, often regardless of actual financial and employment circumstances” (p. 287).

Pailhe and Solaz (2008) found that even when fathers stayed at home while their partner worked, the division of childcare still strongly reflected gender norms, as mothers still spent more time caring for their children than fathers. In the next statement however, Lawrence suggested that his position of provider was not appreciated by social workers when I asked him about his experience with social services prior to his assessment.

Lawrence: *Well, obviously, I was cheesed off because I had to take time off my job to go to all these core groups and meetings, and I was cheesed off because it wasn't down to me, because I didn't have any phone calls about me being a bad dad, or having parties, or drinking.*

Lee: *Yeah.*

Lawrence: *So, I was cheesed off because I had to take time off work, and then I was losing pay, and I had to go to all of her meetings. Sometimes she didn't even turn up to them.*

Lawrence was disgruntled at having to adopt a role that he did not see as his responsibility. Through the phrase, *because it wasn't down to me*, he put forward the argument that he was not to blame for the involvement of social services, and *was cheesed off* he had *to take time off work*, which had financial consequences. This statement from Lawrence is indicative of the prevailing ethos of children's services which, because of its focus upon mothers, did not pay any consideration to Lawrence regarding when meetings would take place, in spite of his work commitments. For Lawrence, his annoyance with this could perhaps relate to him wanting to reaffirm the importance of the provider role, or simply the fact that paid work was a necessity for him. As aforementioned, the four fathers in my study who were employed were in low paid and often precarious employment and therefore needed to continue to work.

The following passages are taken from the interview with Colin, the social worker for Edward and Christian who were placed in the care of their father, Lawrence, and his partner. Edward had severe autism and resultant aggressive behaviour, which meant that he required constant monitoring at home. Colin discussed Lawrence's decision to cease employment in order to care for Christian.

Lee: *What factors, do you think led to this outcome?*

Colin: *Well, I think he's got a quality about him, Lawrence, that you don't – a giving quality that not all men, I don't think necessarily show very easily. They may have it, but they certainly don't show it very easily and a lot of men maybe, you know, would need to identify for their self-esteem and things like that with work. Lawrence talked about needing to work and how he'd not been able to work because Christian was living with him. To me, that showed a real kind of, in a way, resilience, that he was able to sort of put Christian's needs above that kind of natural need for a man to work for his... And I think it has affected him. He does feel low at times and has real wobbles, but I do think there is that innate quality where he can give. I think he's quite a well-balanced male as well if I can put it any different.*

Colin's reflections on Lawrence's attributes can be considered within a wider construction of traditional gender roles, and the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 2000). Hegemonic masculinity is linked to employment and the role of the breadwinner (Langvasbråten and Teigen 2006; Brandth and Kvande 2016). Colin refers to Lawrence needing to give up work due to his care commitments and how this directly impacts upon his

identity as a man, thus suggesting that work is a “*natural*” and intrinsic component of a man’s identity.

Paradoxically, in the same passage Colin proceeded to express that in his view Lawrence also possessed an ability to care, noting that he has *a giving quality* and that *there is that innate quality where he can give*. An interesting point to consider with respect to these two statements is whether Colin would describe the child’s mother in the same positive way, for it has been argued that when fathers perform even minor child care tasks they are often regarded as heroic figures, whilst mothers are not afforded the same accolades because it is accepted that this is their role (Taylor and Daniel 2000; Strega et al. 2009). This theme is revisited in section 8.6.1 which explores how fathers who take on the caring role are viewed as “hero dads”, whereas the caring role is simply deemed to be “natural” and intrinsic for mothers. Indeed, in the next section, I will discuss how several of the fathers, including Lawrence, despite taking on the full-time care of their children, viewed the care of children as being the primary responsibility of women. A reference to this gendered nature of caregiving can be seen in the following extract when I discussed with Lawrence how he first became aware of the concerns of social services around the care of his children.

Lee: *Right. Were you thinking then about getting involved with the kids?*

Lawrence: *I didn’t fancy taking them on, because it isn’t a dad’s responsibility, is it? Like everybody else knows, the dads don’t take on the kids, really, it’s always their mums.*

Lee: *Right.*

Lawrence: *Because the bloke always has a job.*

Lee: *So that’s how you see yourself, more as a financial provider?*

Lawrence: *Well, at first, I did. Things have changed though now, haven’t they?*

Lee: *Yeah.*

Lawrence: *So now I’m a single dad, and it isn’t good. It’s hard. It’s the hardest job I’ve ever had.*

The excerpts from Colin and Lawrence suggest that Lawrence demonstrated a caring masculinity, while, simultaneously, struggling with his identity as a financial provider, which he was no longer able to fulfil. His account suggests that he would have preferred to have remained in his more familiar role as a breadwinner and enjoy the attendant freedom from childcare responsibilities that this potentially affords. Furthermore, one could interpret his statement, *It’s hard. It’s the hardest job I’ve ever had*, as a sign that he believed that a “paid” job was an easier option than parenting. In this respect, employment appeared to be central to Lawrence’s identity. This is in contrast to Storhaug and Sobo-Allen (2018) findings in their

study of fathers in contact with child welfare services in Norway, where none of the fifteen fathers closely associated their identity and self-concept to employment, but rather aligned themselves with the discourse of a father who was *present*, which was expressed through emphasising elements such as "...communication, trust and looseness in their contact with their children" (p. 493). This problematises the relationship between caring masculinity and fathering related to hegemonic masculinity. It is argued that a hierarchy exists within masculinity, with hegemonic being the dominant form (Butler 1990; Connell 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, such findings raise the question of whether hegemonic masculinity is in fact changing or whether fatherhood has always been an aspect of hegemonic masculinity. In the next extract, I asked for further clarity on Norman's decision to cease employment in order to take on the care of his son, Tom.

Norman: When I gave up work because I had to give up work, I committed to Tom. Because you're used to getting a set amount and then it's totally different when you don't enjoy it, you know when you struggle at first. Now I'm working again, you get yourself back in the routine of what you can buy and stuff like that. I'll put electric on and gas and that and make sure he's always got food and he can eat. It's hard at Christmas because I've got his birthday at the beginning of December, then Christmas, eldest lad's at the end of January and my daughter's at the beginning of February, so that two months is just everything. As they get older, they know what they want, and it seems to be more and more.

Norman reflected on his decision to initially give up work in order to take on the care of his son, and the ensuing struggles that this produced. He then referred to returning to work and how his income not only paid for the necessities of electricity, gas, and food, but also allowed him to be the kind of father he wanted to be; treating them at birthdays as well as responding to their wishes and needs as they get older. Norman did not reject the breadwinner role, but rather needed to adopt the identity vacated by the mother of paying bills, buying presents for the children, and responding to their changing needs. This perhaps made him more aware of how the money he earned was spent on his children and the actual costs involved. This is also perhaps an example of borderwork (Doucet 2006a) where Norman had taken on tasks that, as part of the day to day caring for children, are normally the responsibility of mothers.

8.3 The second-class parent

Another position that several of the fathers adopted prior to taking on their children was that of the secondary or a "second-class" parent in relation to the child's mother. I draw upon the

interviews with Liam, Lawrence, and Lucas to explore this position. I asked Liam to clarify his beliefs on childcare, which was prompted by an earlier comment he had made in passing.

Lee: *Do you see children as being the mothers' role to look after their children*

Liam: *Yes.*

Lee: *- more than a man?*

Liam: *Well, yes.*

Lee: *- out of the two?*

Liam: *We don't have those instincts with... I think... Like, I'm older... it might sound a bit sexist, but I don't mean it like that [laughter] but the house and the kids are the woman's domain. That's how I've been brought up. We can't love the kids like a mum can. They've carried them, they've got that internal instinct, haven't they? But I try my best and that's all you can do.*

In stating *They've carried them; they've got that internal instinct*, Liam was alluding to the popular belief that women have a unique innate and biological ability to care. This is consistent with the study of Storhaug and Sobo-Allen (2018), where it was found that a number of fathers developed their notion of fathering through the adoption of a "gender essentialist understanding" (p. 11). While the arguments to support this notion that there are innate, biological and hereditary influences on women's ability to care for children (Elliott 2015), Hollway (2006) questions these unexamined assumptions and argues that people have the capacity to care given the appropriate opportunities and support, and, moreover, that their capacity to care is determined by their own experience of care and how they internally process these experiences. In fact there is a growing body of research to suggest that fathers and mothers are much more similar in parenting than they are different (Fagan et al. 2014; Doucet 2018). In a recent UK study of men who adopted the primary caregiving role, it was found that fathers in this position were just as adjusted to the role as parents as mothers, with the study finding that there was also no difference in the quality of the parenting between the parents (Jones et al. 2021).

Liam distanced himself, as a father, from so-called inherently motherly characteristics; *We don't have those instincts and the house and the kids are the woman's domain*. This is consistent with the findings from Doucet (2006a), who found that fathers explicitly drew attention to the differences between fathering and mothering. In Doucet's (2006a) study, the fathers believed that mothers had a different connection to their children, which was both stronger and more profound. Similarly, Storhaug and Sobo-Allen (2018) found that fathers involved with social services ascribed greater importance to the mother of their children, than

to themselves. Therefore, one could argue that fathers like Liam, by adopting this position, are accepting a subordinate position with respect to their children. As Liam stated, *we can't love the kids like a mum can, but I try my best and that's all you can do*. One possible explanation for this is the need for fathers to distance themselves from femininity and its association with care, which for a long time has been a "woman-specific concept" (Scambor et al. 2014 pg. 17). Like women, whom it is argued are also undervalued in society, to be a carer is to be materially and symbolically subordinated (Lynch and Lyons 2009).

One alternative interpretation of Liam distancing himself from the mothering role is that it is driven by a lack of confidence in his ability to fulfil the caring role. Indeed, several studies have found that not all men are comfortable seeing themselves as involved fathers, and that some men harbour serious doubts over their competence in this role (Henwood and Proctor 2003; Shirani et al. 2012; Norman 2017).

Liam had developed a strong sense of his position as a father, and Hobson (2002) argues that to understand such a position we need to see it in the context of other relationships. In light of both this in and the previous quote from Liam that *That's how I've been brought up*, I asked Liam what he felt about having full-time care of his children in the future.

Liam: *Yes. As I said, you know I would like them to return to their mum someday because you know they miss her and it breaks my heart to see that they're gutted and stuff, you know. Yes, they like living with me but I think some of the time they wish that they were back with their mam. You can't beat your mam, can you? Your mam's your mam.*

Liam's motivation for his children possibly returning into their mother's care was fuelled by seeing his children upset over missing their mother, who had been the primary carer. However, he again alluded to his position of being second best with respect to the level of care he could provide in comparison to the children's mother; *You can't beat your mam, can you? Your mam's your mam*. Here, Liam made explicit reference to his relationship with his own mother to set the parameters and expectations of his own fathering.

Lawrence: *It was always mum. She used to take me to school, pick me up from school, she'd take me to scouts, football training, things like that, it's always been down to my mum.*

It was clear throughout Lawrence's interview that both his mother and father had a positive impact upon his life, which informed his own understanding of his position as a father.

8.4 Fathering – Individualised or part of a family system?

As explored in Chapter 5, although the fathers ultimately had a choice over whether to agree to be assessed to be the permanent carer for their children, this choice was limited and influenced by personal and external factors, while a number of the fathers had little or no time to make this choice. In this section, I explore the fathers' reflections on this decision as well as the emotional and practical journey of becoming their child's primary carer. The discussion is informed by the fathers' thoughts on their own biographies as well as broader gendered norms around childcare.

It is suggested that both individualisation and reflexivity have played an important role in modernity in western societies (Morgan 2002). In the transition from a traditional to modern society, changes and uncertainty within the social and moral fabric have resulted in people having to take on greater responsibility over their lives, in turn, making themselves the nucleus in managing and planning the course of their lives (Westering 2015). Resultantly, people have been less able to rely upon existing structures and norms to guide them, and instead have been required to create new and often unique forms of life. These new forms, so it is argued, are not necessarily associated with fewer restrictions and greater freedoms; rather, they have merely been replaced by another set of restrictions, which are more modern and attractive (Williams 2011). One aspect of individualisation with particular relevance for this study, is the role of individual biographies. In this section, I delineate how a number of the fathers both permitted and encouraged the formation of new and unique biographies via individualisation, which are described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) as follows:

“Biographies are removed from the traditional precepts and certainties, from external control and general moral laws, becoming open and dependent on decision-making, and are assigned as a task for each individual” (p. 5).

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the fathers' biographies were formed initially through their decision to be considered as primary carers, and then subsequently through the new family structure this created the relationships they forged with their children, and the attendant change in their identity as fathers that occurred by virtue of them becoming the primary carer. As Williams (2008) found in his study of changes in contemporary fathering:

“...fatherhood is increasingly individualised and to the extent that fathers are forced to respond to situational circumstances, it is highly reflexive” (p. 49).

Examples of responses to situational circumstances can be discerned throughout the interviews with Liam, David, Norman, and Tony in terms of the decisions they made around working and caring.

Liam: *Oh yeah, people say like, my family say "we are well proud of ya" you know and there are not many people who would do what you have done, and I say, and I appreciate that but, it's something you have got to do, you know, you're the parent, at the end of the day when you make a kid its sort of like getting married, in a certain way, you promise that you will care for them, and you know hopefully later on in life they will return the favour with you.*

Liam displayed his awareness, through the comments from his family that *not many people* would have taken on the role of primary carer, that he had written a different biography. The role of primary carer was given external validation by his family who were positioned as 'proud'. However, Liam considered that his actions were borne out of necessity and a wider moral responsibility as a parent, *something you have got to do, you know, you're the parent*. Furthermore, he also wished to instil the same sense of morality in his children, and hoped that later life his children *will return the favour*. In the following extract David reflected on how he built his career as a fitness instructor around caring for his son.

David: *So, for me, it's always been to have a job that I enjoy, that I'm my own boss and spend as much time as possible with the little one. So, it's a lifestyle really. It's all in one. Again, I wouldn't be going for custody of Olly, or wouldn't have done it, if I knew I was having to get him up at 7 to put him into childcare to go and work until 5 to go and pick him up at 6 o'clock to get him home to feed and put to bed. I wouldn't have done that to him: that's not fair. But, because I know that I can spend all this time with him, which is what I want*

David contemplated an alternative life in which he was not the primary carer for his son, if he had not been able to choose the job of a private fitness instructor after leaving the armed forces and finding employment that met his own expectations of the caring role. He suggested that placing his son in childcare, whilst he worked long hours, would not be fair to him, and that he would not spend as much time with him. David's position as a father challenged the traditional role of provider, where employment is central. Instead, although David acknowledged that he enjoyed his job, it was ultimately secondary to caring for his child. This is in line with the findings of Westering (2015), who, through applying the concepts of individualisation and reflexivity to changing fathering practices in Denmark, found that individualisation led to a:

“...proliferation of novel forms of family life and a shift in the existing cultures of care and intimacy” (p. 212).

Through also examining data from the interviews of Norman and Tony, further parallels can be drawn with Westering’s study, namely the fact that both fathers expressed expansive and varied notions of parenting and family life. For example, when I asked Norman whether he felt children should be automatically cared for by their mothers following the separation of parents, he stated:

Norman: I would say it’s more common than natural. In our days you saw more kids with mums, not dads if you know what I mean. Everything’s different now.

Lee: Has that changed your view?

Norman: Yes. Years ago, when I was younger, not being funny, if it was single parenting it would be the mum and the kid. It was never the dad. It is quite weird. But now it depends on the circumstances and stuff like that, but I wouldn’t change anything.

Norman exhibited a rather pragmatic approach to parenting. He reflected on his own upbringing as a means through which to illustrate the prevailing gendered norms around parenting, which then positioned mothers as the main carers, even in single parent families. However, he wholly acknowledged that contemporary parenting is more circumstantial, rather than being rigidly based on these previous gendered norms. He can see the past but has reflected on a different path and future. Norman again drew upon his own biography, when noting *in our days* and *Everything’s different now*. As discussed at length in Chapter 2, there has been a noted change in fathering practices from the 1980s onwards, which has led to a culture of ‘involved fathering’; one which promotes nurturing, practical care and co-parenting above the traditional role of the breadwinner (Clarke and Popay 1998; Ranson 2001, 2012). The extent to which this shift has happened in reality has been the subject of contention, with studies showing that a gap exists between rhetoric and reality (LaRossa 1997; Machin 2015). In the following interview excerpt, I asked Norman about his decision to agree to be assessed by social services.

Norman: Even though I was settled in a job and stuff like that, your kids and family come first. It didn’t really cross my mind not to do it.

Lee: What do you mean not crossed your mind?

Norman: Because I’m used to being on my own and I work all hours, which you do. But it didn’t cross my mind to say, “No, I’m not going to do it”, you just do it. You just change your habits around it, you know what I mean, like ways and stuff like that to fit in with him. You put

whatever he needs first before I need anything whereas before I could do what I wanted to do you know what I mean. Because I was on my own, I could go where I wanted and come back when you wanted and stuff like that. Now everything's worked around him.

Lee: How do you feel about that?

Norman: I don't mind. You just get into a routine and get on with it. Now I'm working. When I gave up work because I had to give up work when I committed to taking on Tom

Here, Norman did not reflect a great deal on his own biography or broader gendered constructions of parenting, but rather appeared to see him taking on the care of his children as something that was expected of him. In the next extract, Norman delineated the reasons behind his pragmatic reasoning.

Norman: When you think about it, not being funny, but every home life is different. So, it's just the way it works out. Some women have done what she's put the kids through and other times it's the fellas that have done it. It's just that situation for that family.

Norman demonstrated reflexivity when dismissing the prevailing norm of a homogenous family structure by stating that *every home life is different* and noting how families negotiate changes and challenges on an individual basis. He also reflected on how both the mother and father can struggle at times to provide adequate care for their children, but ultimately that it was important for one of the parents to take on the caring role when needed. This is consistent with the findings of Williams (2011), who noted that when there was a “situational change in the family circumstances, gender roles were abandoned, where it was a case of all hands to the pumps” (p. 51). Similarly, in the following extract, Tony showed his understanding of the need for flexibility in parenting roles in order to provide care for his child. I asked him to reflect on whether as a non-resident father he would have ever planned on becoming more involved in the care of his child, to which he replied:

Tony: It's hard to say really. She's the mother. She deserves to be in her life, you know, but she's not well enough to care for her. She's not safe enough to care for her. That's it. I would have been there 100% either way for my daughter to make sure she would have the best future.

In contrast to the positions of Liam, Lucas, and Lawrence (see section 7.3), who assigned greater importance to mothers, Norman and Tony's approach intimated an understanding that not only are parenting roles interchangeable, but also that each parent is equally responsible for, and capable of, providing care. This stance is in line with Storhaug and Sobo-Allen (2018)

work, who found that a number of fathers "... emphasised that they are equally suited as caregivers" (p. 11). This is further illustrated in the next excerpt from Tom.

Lee: Where do you see mother and father's roles, then? Who does the caring?

Tony: The parents, don't they? really.

Lee: Do you see fathers and mothers differently at all?

Tony: Not really, no. My father did as much upbringing as my mother. My mum did most of the early caring as I went to go live with him when I was thirteen.

Lee: You went to live with your...?

Tony: Father. My mum couldn't cope because I was a bit of a handful.

Tony drew upon his own biography to underscore that for him the "norm" was that both his parents cared for him and, more importantly, that they were equally capable of doing so, and how this was necessary at a time when one parent was unable to cope with his behaviour. Tony's disclosure about having being cared for by both parents raises an interesting point about his capacity to care for his children. Hollway (2006) adopted a psycho-social approach where the internal psychological process of understanding expectations and one's capacity to care are inextricably linked to the life histories of individuals and their subjective experiences of care (and the lack of). (Hollway 2006) suggests that "The experience of being cared for is essential in developing the capacity to care" (p. 6). Considering this approach, what is interesting is that a number of the fathers talked positively about their experiences of the care they received from their mothers or, in the case of Tony, both parents. It is not possible from the data to determine what the subsequent effect of this was on the fathers' capacity to care.

Another way in which to understand the fathers' responses in this situation is through Family Systems Theory (Wood 2001; Cox and Paley 2003; Walker 2012) where family members are conceptualised as interdependent, with each member of a family dynamically influencing the other members. Although the fathers above were non-resident they still considered themselves, and were still considered by other family members, to be part of the family unit. Similarly, although it not possible to ascertain whether this actually occurred from the data, in section 2.3.5 the study of (Bakker and Mulder 2015) identified the concept of "continuing family life", where after separation both parents had found an amicable position, with no blame being apportioned by either party. Instead, they were morally obligated to their children and sought to minimise the impact of their perceived failure of their relationship upon their children.

Fathers drew on their own biographies, which included a number of traditional gendered parenting responsibilities, in order to conceptualise what they had done and how they positioned themselves as parents. Broader societal norms around parenting were intertwined with personal experiences to form the fathers' ideas about what was considered "normal" or necessary. The next section focuses on how the fathers experienced and adapted to the role of being the primary carer for their children, exploring both the positive aspects and challenges that this role provided.

8.5 Purpose and Solidarity

This theme pertains to the instances in which the fathers reported that taking on their child had given them purpose in life, and a sense of solidarity with their children.

David: So, for me, I kind of... I like having something to do today. He motivates something rotten. When I was coming home and having five or six weeks at home and only seeing him, I was like: I don't need to get out of bed tomorrow sometimes. If I had a lazy day, I was just like, "I'm just going to stay and watch 'Game of Thrones' all day [laughter]." I wouldn't even get out of my pyjamas. Then the day turns into three days, four days. I have got to drive up North. I don't know... I didn't have any motivation unless I was getting to see him. So, now, every day for me... from my point of view, I love it that I've got a reason to go to bed, to get up early to get my boy sorted and raise him.

David referred to how caring for his son, Luke, had provided him with motivation in life. This is in accordance with the study of Hanlon (2012), who noted that:

"In the conversations caring obligations for one's children were noted to provide life with meaning and purpose by giving life a clear focus and a feeling of solidarity" (p. 136).

A similar sentiment was communicated in the interview with Nigel.

Lee: How does it make you feel having him here?

Nigel: I'm more content with life and that. It doesn't feel like you're just wasting your life and going along doing your work, you know what I mean?

For Nigel, caring for his son provided him with contentment, and meant that his life was no longer dominated by employment. This sense of having a new purpose also featured in the interviews with Richard, Norman, David, Nigel, and Victor; I would argue that the fathers

sought and found a “safe haven” with their children, through creating a unique family unit and investing both their time and emotions into their children. I asked Richard whether he intended to seek out and form a new romantic relationship, to which he replied:

Richard: *No, because they have seen too much. They have seen too many men in and out of their lives from that side, and yeah, I do have a fair few women friends. It's not necessarily them coming around and jumping straight into bed with me, but it's like, what if the kids see that differently? Do you know what I mean? So as from now, it's just going to be me and the kids. I think that's what it should be, and I'll try and work on making my parenting better for them, rather than concentrating on other stuff like women because women can come and go.*

Although Richard started to talk about how he felt a strong need to protect his children from having different mother figures in their lives, he also referred to feeling the need to give all of his time and energy to his children; *from now, it's just going to be me and the kids*. Here, he outlined his view of forming a new family unit, *because women can come and go*. In contrast to such fleeting romantic relationships, his relationship with his children was framed as being much more enduring and stable. This resonates with the notion of the pure relationship (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Jamieson 1999), where, as relationships between parents are increasingly failing in society, parents have sought the need for unconditional love through their relationship with their child. This is further illustrated in section 8.6.2. Similarly, in the following conversation with Norman, we discussed the fact that he had taken on the care of his son as a single father.

Lee: *It's interesting like you say, you've done something that not many have.*

Norman: *I don't really see myself as a single parent because it's me and him if you know what I mean. I don't really see it as that, it's a normal home life to us.*

Norman reframed his relationship with his son and himself, noting that *I don't really see myself as a single parent because it's me and him*. This could be interpreted as him no longer seeing the need for either an adult partnership in his life or a mother to be part of his relationship with his son, as his son brought him fulfilment and security in his life; as Norman put it, *it's a normal home life to us*.

8.6 The positives and challenges associated with being a full-time father

Inadvertently, this study predominantly became a study of non-resident fathers who had become the sole primary carers for their children. This was not the intention at the outset, as

the recruitment strategy was for any non-resident father who had taken on the care of their children, irrespective of their living arrangements. Ultimately, this provided an ideal opportunity to fully explore scenarios in which fathers have taken on the role of primary carer for children, domain ordinarily reserved for mothers. It is also important to note that prior to taking on the sole care of their children, these fathers are likely to have experienced the same challenges identified in the literature in section 2.6, for example, poor or unsuitable accommodation, a lack of knowledge about their children and also a limitations of the role they can adopt with their child. In addition, for the fathers in this study, the transition from non-resident father to sole carer was often at short notice and as the ‘last resort’. In this section, I explore some of the challenges and opportunities that the fathers referred to in their interviews.

8.6.1 The monotony of care

Several of the fathers reflected on the adjustment of taking on the day-to-day caring responsibilities and duties for their child, and noted that this posed a considerable challenge for them. For example, I asked Graham how his life changed after becoming the sole carer of his three children.

Graham: So, it's quite weird just sat at home every day and like same routine, take them to school, come home, do housework, go pick him up, you know what I mean.

Graham appeared to reflect upon the monotonous physical aspects of care that he carried out, in unfamiliar territory that was *quite weird* to him. In the following interview extract, Alan also reflected upon the process of taking on the primary caring role.

Alan: Everything is thanks to dad. I've tried every day, thanks to dad. They've got clean clothes on all the time, they are looked after, thanks to dad. Because they are not late for school, they are picked up every night. Everything the same, they are all thanks to dad. I am doing what any parent would do, I'm not doing anything different, or, you know, what somebody else is not doing It's seeming a natural thing, feed them, clean them, clothe them, you know, you do all the things.

An interesting aspects of these extracts is the way in which these fathers describe caring through physical activities ; *feed them, clean them, clothe them*. as opposed to the emotional aspects of care. This excerpt from Alan's interview also highlights how he believed he was no different to other parents in the care he was proving to his three children. Indeed, in the

following excerpt, in which Alan referred to the comments he received from the teaching staff at his children's school, it is the teaching staff who have a different view of his parenting.

Alan: Everything's thanks to dad, it's like they were saying, "Thank you for bringing them to school." And how many people go through that gate on a morning or an evening to pick their kids up, and they say, "Oh, thanks to you, they are getting picked up," or "Thanks to you, they are here."

It could be interpreted that this is an example, as noted previously, that when fathers perform even minor child care tasks they are often regarded as heroic figures, whereas mothers are not accorded the same accolades as it is simply seen as being their role (Taylor and Daniel 2000; Strega et al. 2009). Similar to Alan, the following extract from Lawrence reflected on his challenging transition to becoming a full-time carer.

Lee: So how do you feel now? How do you feel about what has happened?

Lawrence: Yeah. It has been hard for me because I haven't been socialising really. In the past, I would socialise if I went out to do a job, now I don't go out drinking or anything like that, so I haven't really been socialising since April. I don't have anybody who will come and have the children for me, because Edward is hard work. I have applied for short breaks through the Social Services, so I'm hoping I can have a few hours a week where somebody comes and takes him out for me, on a Saturday or a Sunday, just so then I can socialise again.

Lawrence coupled employment with socialising and drinking *in the past*. This is in line with Doucet (2006a) study in which a number of the fathers who were primary caregivers tended to relate to, and seek out, traditional sources of masculine identity within the public domain. An alternative interpretation, one that draws on the work of Hanlon (2009, 2012), is that a number of fathers, although receiving emotional benefits as will be discussed in section 7.4.2, also found caring to be burdensome, because of both the amount of time it took and the fact that it directly competed with their personal interests. The burdensome nature of caring was also highlighted by Lawrence, who repeatedly referred in his interview that caring for Edward was *'the hardest job I've ever had'*.

Additionally, Castrillo et al. (2020) found that a number of the fathers in their study contended that they felt the need to be "compensated" (p. 6) for caring alone for their children by having time for themselves. Perhaps this testifies to how Lawrence's new position challenges the patriarchal dividend (Connell 1995), that is, the fact that occupying the privileged position in the gendered order had previously allowed Lawrence the choice over if, and when, he would

spend time caring for his children. It could be argued that this account from Lawrence reflects an aspect of a traditional masculine identity, where men frequent public spaces and women reside at home; however, his account could equally have emanated from an interview with a mother, as it is indeed the case also that women need time away from their children to socialise, which means that it is not an exclusively masculine desire. As well reflecting upon the challenges of taking on the primary caring role for their children, a number of fathers also reported a number of positives, which will be explored in the next section.

8.6.2 The benefits of being a full-time carer

One of the benefits that Liam reported that he experienced through caring for his children was that he learnt something new about himself. Below, I asked Liam how having his son living with him had changed his life.

Liam: Well, obviously now I look after them full time, so I feel like I'm a lot busier, and you know I feel like I've got to be mum and dad rolled into one, you know and I feel like I've got to tread on eggshells, when they ask me stuff, I've got think hard about what I'm going to say, you know, so I don't say the wrong thing to upset them, but I think it has made me, you know realise that, I've got tools that I never even knew I had.

Liam felt he had taken on both parenting roles, having to be both *mum and dad rolled into one*. He then proceeded to discuss how he was occupying territory that was unfamiliar to him, namely a listening and understanding role, which was previously the domain of their mother. As explored in section 2.3.3, non-resident fathering poses a number of challenges for fathers with respect to sustaining or redefining a 'normal' fathering role (Olmstead et al. 2009; Troilo and Coleman 2012, 2013). Specifically, both their knowledge of their children and capacity for emotional warmth are limited as a result of either the time restrictions on contact and accommodation (Amato and Dorius 2010; Philip 2014) or the gatekeeping and mediating role that mothers play apropos their relationship with their children via monitoring, supervising and delegating certain tasks (Smart and Neale 1999b; Pasley and Minton 2001). However, it has also been identified that non-residency for fathers can have a transformative effect upon them, namely that they become more attentive and develop a stronger bond with their child (Kruk 2011; Philip 2013). Liam appeared to reflect on the transformative nature of being the sole carer, noting that he had the time and space, and one could argue, had little choice but to take on this nurturing role. Liam stated *I've got tools that I never even knew I had*, which suggests that he developed skills in organising and multi-tasking that were often exclusively associated with the mothering role.

Elliott (2015) makes a similar point as part of their argument against the essentialist conception of women's natural disposition towards care. This could be interpreted as an example of the transformative nature of caring, which as Elliott (2015) suggests:

“...it does not matter, then, if men do not “care about” (have nurturing attitudes and emotions) to begin with. By “caring for” (doing care work) nurturing attitudes and emotions can develop in men” (p. 255).

Similarly, in the following extract, Lawrence, who positioned himself strongly as the financial provider, also reflected on the positives associated with becoming the primary carer for his two sons.

Lee: *How do you see it? What does it feel like?*

Lawrence: *With Leo, it feels good, because I'm the only person that can control and cope with him. Nobody else can cope with him. I've had family come and try to have him for me for the night, and they say, "I can't control him," or, "I can't cope." So, it gives me enjoyment that I can cope with him.*

Lee: *Does he respond to you well?*

Lawrence: *Yeah, he's loving to me. I'm the only person who he'll come and kiss or cuddle. I get enjoyment out of him always saying, "Love you, daddy. You're the best daddy in the world."*

Lee: *Yeah, it's a nice feeling, isn't it?*

Lawrence: *Like appreciated, isn't it?*

Lawrence communicated both a sense of confidence and pride in being the only person that could deal with his son's challenging behaviour. It also appeared that Lawrence enjoyed reciprocity in his relationship with his sons, noting that *I get enjoyment out of him always saying, "Love you, daddy. You're the best daddy in the world."* Hanlon (2012) found that reciprocal emotional benefits were highlighted by the fathers in his study as a motivating factor for caring for their children. Although, as discussed in Chapter 6, Lawrence's principal motivation for agreeing to take on the care of his children was his fear of his children being taken into care, one could also posit that his motivation for taking on the day-to-day care of his children was also fuelled by a need for emotional reciprocation, which was evidenced by the fact that he referred to his son *always* saying that he loved him and that he felt *appreciated*. Although, as previously stated, that none of the fathers in this study used the word love to

describe their relationship with their children, it is important to note that fathers, such as Lawrence, did report of their children them loving them.

Similar to Hanlon (2012), Westering (2015) found that the fathers' involvement with their children is not only for the sake of the children, but rather also about doing something for themselves. Rather than requiring a reciprocal response, however, he suggests instead that involvement is motivated by the relationship itself, where the relationship becomes a constitutive part of the men's narrative account of "who they are". Similarly, Williams (2011), through recourse to the notion of the pure relationship (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1999), argues that as relationships increasingly fail in society as a result of divorce and separation, parents have switched their need for unconditional love in such a way that:

"The child is becoming the object of unconditional love, as an individual seeks to develop a continual, constant and unfailing emotional love in their increasingly fragmented and unstable lives. The relationship with your children appears to be the only way parents can "guarantee" a source of love that will not fail, as their relationships appear to be constantly failing" (Jamieson 1999 p.35)

Similarly, Held (2006) using an ethics of care focus, argues that people in caring relationships are seeking to work cooperatively for the well-being of those in that relationship and the well-being of the relationship itself. The stance for those in a relationship it is suggested is non-confrontational and is situated between the polar positions of egoistical or altruistic, instead:

"Those who conscientiously care for others are not seeking primarily to further their own individual interests; their interest are intertwined with the persons they care for. Neither are they acting for the sake of all others or humanity in general; they seek instead to preserve or promote an actual human relation between themselves and particular others." (Held 2006 pg.12)

One interpretation therefore is that Lawrence experienced this form of unconditional love, and the need preserve the relationship with his children, which was reflected in his repeated reference to the enjoyment he gained from his relationship with his sons and the sense of feeling appreciated. When we consider another extract from David's interview, I would argue that this point is a little more nuanced.

David: *So, when it comes to showing emotion with my boy, I love the fact that me and him bounce off each so much. And I don't walk around trying to be the alpha male when I'm with*

him or without him. I enjoy life and I really don't care about trying to perceive myself as something that I'm not and I don't try to impress other people either.

David appeared to suggest that the now full-time relationship with his son had changed him and created a new definition of who he was. He defined his masculine identity via his relationship with his son, contrasting his present position to previous performances of masculinity by noting that he was no longer trying *to be the alpha male and impress other people*. Such performances, one could argue, are congruent with the culture of the Royal Marines where David spent the first part of his adult life. Therefore, like other fathers in the study, he drew upon his individual biography and present circumstances to reassess and change his masculine position as a man and father, which is consistent with Doucet (2006a) who found that:

“Living and working for sustained periods as primary caregivers, the fathers are in a unique position to create new forms of masculinity” (p. 238).

It is indeed interesting to consider which form of masculinity David was now performing. The concept of caring masculinity purports that men do not need to depart from or reject masculinity per se (Miller 2011b, 2011a; Miller and Dermott 2015), but rather need to reject domination, while, simultaneously, adopting more positive and traditionally feminine characteristics (Elliott 2015). This was demonstrated by David when he talked about rejecting a dominant alpha male position and *showing emotion*. What perhaps is also being demonstrated, as identified in section 2.5 is how masculinity changes overtime and across the life course of individual men, and more importantly what David has reflected upon in his interview on how masculinity is a performance (Shirani 2011) as suggested by Whitehead and Barrett (2001)

“In other words, since masculinity is something that one ‘does’ rather than something that one ‘has’, it would be appropriate to say that men ‘do’ masculinity in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings, depending on the resources available to them. “
(p.18)

8.7 Summary

In this final findings chapter, I have completed the journey of the fathers becoming the primary carer for their children by exploring how a number of the fathers positioned themselves subsequent to taking on the care of their child, and how they then negotiated their life with their child. The findings suggest that although a number of the fathers deferred to a traditional

understanding of parenting by seeing men as the financial provider for their children, through crossing gender borders (Doucet 2006b) they subsequently changed their position to some extent by taking on the day-to-day care of the children, and appreciated and enjoyed the reciprocal nature of caring. Supporting the argument from Hanlon (2012)

“...caring is believed to offer common rewards including feeling loved and respected for doing it, experiencing emotional intimacy and self-esteem, respect, and competence” (Hanlon 2012 p.137)

This chapter has demonstrated the transformative nature of care in how the opportunity to become full-time carers of their children demonstrated and developed the father's capacity to care. Fathers like Lawrence, who clearly expressed an internal upholding of traditional gender roles, eventually came to experience, and accept a different role and form of masculinity by virtue of taking on the primary care of his two sons. Similarly, a number of the fathers found that becoming their child's carer and engaging in these intensive relationships provided them with a purpose in life as well as a sense of solidarity and belonging

The fathers in this study did not appear to exhibit common or pre-conceived reactions; rather, they displayed their ability to adapt and change their position in accordance with their own personal history and, more importantly, based on what they saw around them and what life presented them with. Similar to findings in the study by Yarwood (2011) the fathers were reflexive and chose to cross over gendered borders as they saw fit and depending on the changes they observed around them. It is undoubtedly now more acceptable for some men to cross these gendered boundaries because they can observe these shifts in their own history or in the wider world around them. Some of the themes above will be revisited in the following chapter, which will conclude this thesis through drawing together the main themes and message that emanated from analysis of the data, and offer recommendations for future practice and research.

Chapter Nine:

Conclusions and recommendations

9.1 Introduction

The topic for this thesis came out of my previous professional practice, studies, and teaching around the engagement and assessment of fathers in child protection social work practice. Despite the relative dearth of research over the last three decades in this area, there is an emergent body of knowledge investigating the opportunities and challenges posed by this engagement and assessment (Milner 1993; O'Hagan 1997; Scourfield 2003; Cameron et al. 2012; Philip et al. 2018b; Critchley 2021). One of these studies, commissioned by the Family Rights Group, found that:

“In child protection services, the limited research which exists suggests that men who wish to care for children have to struggle to be seen as resources by professionals even in situations where mothers cannot look after children safely” (Ashley et al. 2006).

Setting out from a counter position to this finding, the central aim of this thesis was to explore what factors were present in instances in which fathers *had* been seen as a resource for their child by social workers. Subsequently, thirteen former non-resident fathers as well as their children's social workers were recruited and interviewed about their involvement in the unusual phenomenon of non-resident fathers becoming their children's primary carer. As discussed in Chapter 1, at the outset I envisaged that for the majority of cases, such an event would occur as a consequence of the pre-proceedings stage of child protection procedures. Unfortunately, this proved to not be the case. Indeed, this thesis has continually underscored that all of the fathers' journeys to becoming their child's primary were unique. The only common factor in all thirteen cases was that social workers' concerns for the welfare of the child centred around mothers' mental health problems and/or drug and alcohol abuse. As aforementioned, this finding is in line with factors identified in previous studies that considered the health vulnerabilities of parents involved with child protection services (Erickson and Tonigan 2008; O'Donnell et al. 2015; Johnson et al. 2022).

This concluding chapter first summarises the main findings of the thesis through revisiting the research questions of the study. The limitations of the study are then discussed, followed by an account of how the findings could inform future child protection practice with non-resident fathers. Finally, suggestions for future research in the area are delineated.

The following three sections document points of similarity and contrast between the findings of this study and those from other studies with fathers involved with social services. One possible explanation for contrasts is that the samples in previous research were representative of fathers from the whole child protection population (Zanoni et al. 2014), whereas I purposely recruited my sample from a population of fathers who had already demonstrated a positive commitment to, and involvement with, both their children and social services.

9.2 Findings

This first section discusses the main findings of the thesis in relation to the key aims of the study, by drawing on the analysis of the data from the interviews with the fathers and social workers. Next, I consider where these findings are similar or contradictory to those found in previous studies.

9.2.1 What were the fathers motivations for becoming the full-time carer for their children, and what were the fathers experiences of involvement with social services?

Section 3.2 discussed how studies have consistently found that the default position in society, following parental separation, is for a gendered model of parenting to be adopted, with the father becoming the non-resident parent (Bradshaw et al. 1999a; Kielty 2006; Philip 2014). Therefore, one could argue that the previous intended actions of social services recruited the fathers in this study as travellers on a journey to a destination that they were unlikely to have envisaged, experienced or even chosen.

As noted in section 6.3.3, many of the fathers in this study described themselves as the ‘last resort’ for their child, with the majority of them having limited or no notice in which to respond to the concerns of social services. Consistent with Brandon et al. (2019) earlier study, the fathers only became aware of the concerns of social services either at the point at which their child was removed or when their child was already in the care of the local authority. In all but one case, either no other family members had come forward to be assessed or they were deemed to be unsuitable alternative carers. For those children already in the care of the local authority, alternative permanent placement options, such as adoption, were being explored alongside the assessment of the father. This predicament was an explanatory factor in the fathers’ motivations for becoming their child’s primary carer. This is concordant with previous studies, where fathers shared their fears over, amongst other things, the detrimental effect that the care system would have upon their children (Dominelli et al. 2011), the loss of contact and the fathering role (Kielty 2006; Philip 2012, 2014; Dermott 2016), and expressed a need for

their children to know that in the event that their assessment was not successful, that they had fought to avoid them spending time in the care system (Clapton 2003; Clapton and Clifton 2016).

Section 8.2 reflected on the point that none of the fathers directly mentioned that their love and care for their child was a motivator for them becoming their child's primary carer. Rather, it was the social workers who observed what they interpreted as 'love' between several of the fathers and their children, which they regarded as a motivator for them becoming the child's primary carer. While social workers may certainly have recorded behaviour in their observations that they defined as being representative of 'love', one possible explanation for why the social workers emphasised the salience of 'love' was that it provided a rationale and justification for their decision to place the children with these fathers, both to the researcher and to themselves. Indeed, as one social worker suggested, *on paper* a number of these fathers did not look like a suitable carer for their child due to the negative aspects of their lives; in this respect, narratives of 'love' offered up a wholly different conceptualisation of these fathers.

In Chapter 8, several possible explanations were offered as to why the fathers did not express their motivations in terms of the love and care they felt for their children. Aligning with earlier research, it was suggested in section 8.2 that fathers consider love to be a verb and, hence, something they did as opposed to talked about (Macht 2020). It was also discussed how fathers sometimes find it difficult to express their emotions in these terms (Dermott 2008; Rochlen et al. 2008).

As discussed in section 6.3.3, the main challenge for fathers associated with finding themselves as the last resort for their children did not necessarily correspond to their position as an alternative carer to the mother, or being requested to take on this role, but rather had more to do with the lack of notice the fathers were given. However, one positive factor for many of the fathers was their ability to respond promptly to the concerns of social services, with six of them stepping in to take on the care of their child prior to their pending removal by social services, while a further two fathers agreed, at short notice, to care for their child at the request of social services. This, willingness of the fathers to take on the care of their children could be related to their continuing relationship with, and close proximity to, their child, as the majority of fathers in this study engaged in contact with their children on a regular basis. This finding is consistent with those found by Bellamy (2009) and Brandon et al. (2017), with the latter finding that fathers were rarely entirely absent from their children's lives, and that most wanted to stay involved. Moreover, this finding challenges the construction of

fathers as passive objects that was identified in Storhaug (2013) work, where it was suggested that fathers had to be brought in to be the part of the case, and in some cases the child's life. In contradistinction to this, I found that when faced with the authority and power that is endemic in child protection practice, the fathers in this study were not passive recipients, but rather demonstrated resilience and exercised agency, which, in turn, shifted the power imbalance between themselves and social services. Furthermore, the actions of the fathers negated the need for care proceedings in these cases. Finally, and in line with previous research, this study found that the involvement with social services was, except for two of the fathers, generally a negative and antagonistic experience. The fathers reported issues of mistrust, unreliability, and confusion over both timescales for the assessment and the work practices of social workers (Storhaug and Oien 2012; Brandon et al. 2017; Philip et al. 2020). Despite these challenges, however, the fathers demonstrated commitment and resilience, through maintaining a relationship with the social workers.

9.2.2 What were the social workers' experience of assessing the fathers' capacity to be their child's potential full-time carer, and how they negotiated this assessment?

As a result of the different locations and legal standings of the children in these cases, both the approaches to and the basis of the assessments by the social workers were varied. Irrespective of what auspices the assessments were carried out under, the social workers appeared to assess the fathers in terms of their positive and negative attributes and were committed to giving fathers the best opportunity to prove themselves as primary carers. For nine of the fathers, this involved the social workers considering their history of violence, including against their child's mother. It was not possible to explain in detail from the social workers' accounts their reasoning and analysis of this behaviour in their assessment, as several of the social workers only made brief comments about this, while I was not able to obtain the social worker data for three of the fathers with a history of domestic violence. For those that did talk about violence by fathers, they appeared to separate the violent man from the caring father (Thomas and Adams 2000) in their assessment of them, taking into consideration the context and the relationship in which the violence occurred.

As discussed in section 6.2, in making this decision I suggest that a positive factor was the extent of discretion that the social workers employed in their decision-making. It is argued that discretion is not only unavoidable but should be a core characteristic of professional work (Miller 2010a; Freidson 2011). Molander (2016) posits that the argument in favour of discretion is based upon "...the necessity of ensuring flexibility and adaptability to individual needs and circumstances" (p. 2). In relation to the data generated in this study, I would agree

with this statement and would argue that it is essential when working with the ambiguity and complexity that characterises these fathers and their children's lives.

When exercising such discretion, however, it is important that social workers adopt a pragmatic institutional and rational approach (Keddell 2011; Segatto et al. 2020) to their decision-making, in conjunction with a flexible and individual approach. I would argue that an essential component of social workers exercising discretion is to reflect upon and utilise their own personal experiences and values in their assessments (Thompson and Thompson 2018), which would involve managers and frontline workers being provided with opportunities, through supervision, to reflect upon their own experiences of fatherhood (Swann 2011, 2015).

Even those social workers who were involved in the scrutiny of care proceedings appeared to have been afforded discretionary space (Murphy 2021) and employed discretion in their professional judgement (Evans 2013). It was not possible to determine whether this space was afforded to social workers within either their organisations or the wider professional arena, as this was not the focus of this study. However, several social workers referred to needing to often challenge the opinions of other professionals who did not feel that the father was a suitable carer, and stand by their reasoning and conviction. It could be suggested, although no evidence was found to corroborate this, that as these fathers were the last resort for the child going into or remaining in care, that the social workers were allowed more discretionary space to make the placement a successful one. Looking at Victor as an example, whilst it impossible to know for sure, nevertheless it could be suggested that a different social worker may have reached a different outcome after considering both his very recent and historical violence and drug use. The fact that the child was placed with the father in a foster care placement for six months suggests that the social worker was allowed discretionary space, which they used to create a creative care plan that afforded the best possible chance for this father to care for his son on a permanent basis. However, perhaps a negative aspect of exercising discretion present in a number of the social work accounts was the denigration of the mothers as a rationale for investing in the fathers. Constructions of the bad mother were present despite the fact that the fathers had often demonstrated the same, or even more detrimental behaviours.

When considering the social workers' accounts, a further positive factor was the holistic approach that was exhibited in their assessment as well as their ability to recognise and appreciate diverse family structures and practices, thereby adopting a wider understanding of what constitutes a family, and thus allowing the wider parental family to be considered as a resource. The social workers in this study were also able to balance the positive and negative

aspects of the fathers lives, and consider how these impact upon the father's ability to provide supportive and nurturing care for their children in their own particular way. This is important, as Brandon et al. (2017) note that it is critically important for social work to reflect on how they understand fathering, and the ways in which they recognise it as being different but not necessarily inferior to mothering, as by measuring fathering solely in relation to mothering there is a danger that they are applying (either consciously or unconsciously) a deficit model of fathers' parenting

9.2.3 How did the non-resident fathers position themselves as fathers and how did this impact upon their ability to become full-time carers for their children?

The majority of the fathers in this study reflected on their experiences as a father primarily from the physical position of non-resident fathers, with only four of them having had any experience of living with their child, or any other child for that matter. Two of these fathers reported that they had previously fulfilled the traditional breadwinner role. Drawing on their own biography, and in line with the study of Storhaug and Sobo-Allen (2018), they viewed the care of children as primarily the responsibility of women, based on their preconception that women are innately better equipped to care for children. Becoming the sole carer for their child thus gave these fathers no other choice but to challenge these preconceptions about parenting and gender. Two fathers appeared to have been content with their previous position of non-resident father. Ultimately, it was not possible to ascertain from the interviews with the remaining fathers whether they were content with their previous position as a non-resident parent. For four of the fathers, parenting was viewed much more as an equal partnership in which each parent was capable of, and responsible for, taking on the direct care of their child when the situation necessitated it. What this demonstrated the variety of positions that the fathers held in the study in respect their fathering.

What is clear from all the fathers in this study is that fathering was seen as a lifetime commitment, where they continued to have responsibility for their child regardless of whether they were domiciled with them. In this respect, they adopted a position of not only wanting to remain involved in their child's life as a secondary carer,²⁹ but also to serve as a source of ongoing support and protection for their child. Four of the fathers talked non-judgementally and empathetically about their ex-partner's mental health and/or drug problems, adopting the position of ensuring the child was safe whilst their mother was not able to care for them.

²⁹ Four fathers were actively seeking contact with their children through the private law courts at the point when they became their child's primary carer.

Although far from ideal circumstances for the mother or the child, the concerns of social services provided fathers with the opportunity to experience being a sole carer, exposing them to both positive and negative aspects of the role. Besides experiencing the mundane tasks³⁰ for the first time, a number of fathers also reflected on how the role provided them with a purpose in life and allowed them to experience the benefits of a reciprocal relationship. These findings underscore the transformative nature of caring (Elliott 2015), insofar as the fathers also came to realise and appreciate the skills and attributes associated with caring that they never knew they possessed, while, simultaneously allowing a number of the fathers to reassess their own perception of, and position in relation to, caring and their own masculinity.

It could be suggested that the circumstances in which the fathers took on the care of the child provided them with permission and validation from an external audience, with a number of the fathers enjoying the accolades they garnered from family and the wider community for being the exception to the rule and becoming their child's sole carer. This is interesting, because based upon wider societal values around parenting and the socio-economic background of the fathers who took part in this study, it could be envisaged that any plan for the father to seek sole custody for their child in other circumstances may not have been so positively welcomed from family and friends. In this respect, the actions or intended actions of social services bypassed these hurdles and, in turn, allowed many of the fathers to be seen as a 'hero' for their actions.

9.3 Limitations of my research

No research is without its limitations, and this research is no different in this respect. This study was limited by my inexperience as a researcher as well as the lack of resources, including, amongst other things, a team of co-researchers. It took two years to recruit the thirteen fathers, which involved contacting several local authorities in the North of England, working through a number of layers of management before finally contacting the social workers who then contacted the fathers. As discussed in section 4.5.2 in the Methodology chapter, dealing with so many gatekeepers to recruit the non-resident fathers proved to be a time-consuming and laborious task, which involved first understanding the motivations of gatekeepers to engage (Clark 2010b) and then subsequently gaining their trust (Emmel et al. 2006). As discussed in section 1.2, the original research design involved the direct observation of social workers in a large local authority in the North of England whilst they engaged with

³⁰ The fathers reported mundane tasks such as taking the children to school, housework, laundry, and feeding their children.

and assessed non-resident fathers. While this approach would likely have made the recruitment of fathers easier, this approach was unrealistic given the time constraints associated with me also having a full-time lecturer post.

Conducting research in this area proved difficult due to the reliance on gatekeepers to recruit the fathers. Asking social workers, who were already busy with their caseloads, to spend time tracking down and contacting fathers for the study felt like I was adding additional pressure to their workloads. Another limitation of the study, that was raised in section 4.7.1, involved the retention of fathers. Several fathers agreed to participate in the study, but then withdrew before the first interview, and some fathers disengaged after the first interview. This meant that I was only able to conduct a second interview with three of the fathers. A second interview with the remaining fathers would have led to richer data and allowed me to build upon themes from the first interviews. In hindsight I feel the plan to conduct a second interview was unrealistic, as it has been discussed previously that engaging men and fathers in research is challenging, for example Mckee and O'Brien (1983) referred to the concept of the 'legitimacy of topic' (p. 151) when men are unaccustomed to talking about subjects such as children, especially to non-family members, due to wider societal prescriptions of masculinity. Therefore, disengagement may have been the result of the fathers no longer wishing to discuss further around the subject of themselves and their children. Therefore, having the fathers agreeing to undertake one interview was a positive outcome. In addition, studies have suggested that "research fatigue" (Clark 2008 p.953) or being over researched can lead to participants either not engaging in research in the first instance or dropping out of the research process. (Emmel et al. 2007; Clark 2008; Clark 2010a) As part of the data production, as discussed in the Methodology chapter, I was only able to use the timelines with two of the fathers, due to the practicalities of the venue for the interview. Greater experience and practice in using this visual method would have been beneficial, as it would have given me the confidence and experience to switch to other visual methods such as photo elicitation. As discussed in section 4.7.2 in the Methodology chapter, the use of visual methods in the interviews of the fathers would have been an advantage in terms of the need to fight familiarity as a social worker, and also it would allow the fathers to lead the lead and have control of the interviews. This however was achieved to an extent through the use of a narrative approach to the interviews of the fathers where they were allowed the space and opportunity to tell their story.

A further limitation of this study pertains to the sample of fathers who took part, namely the fact that all but one father came from a white working class background. The main reason for this was that the local authorities the fathers were recruited from were in traditional ex-mining

communities, where the majority of the population are white and working class (Foden et al. 2014). Consequently, the results cannot be straightforwardly generalised, and it is unknown if the findings reflect the national picture or reflect the motivations and experiences of fathers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, although it is a strength to produce representative findings where possible, it was not my intention to produce fully representative results, as the aim of the study was to produce nuanced insight into the subjective experiences of a small sample of fathers who had taken on the role of their child's primary carer as a result of the concerns of social services.

9.4 Research implications

In this section I will suggest how the main findings of this doctoral thesis could inform, and potential improve future child protection practice with fathers, and also how these findings may inform future directions of research in this area.

9.4.1 Practice

I do not want to be overly prescriptive in terms of what social workers should and should not do, but rather suggest some potential ideas for how social workers could engage with and assess fathers in instances in which mothers can no longer provide adequate care for their children. A further caveat is that having previously worked as a child protection social worker myself, I offer these recommendations being fully aware of the numerous challenges that social workers endure in their day-to-day work. As well as the intrinsic complexity and ambiguity involved in cases involving the protection of children, challenges also exist in respect of the fear of making mistakes (Featherstone et al. 2018; Munro 2020), high staff turnover (Diaz 2020), high caseloads and bureaucracy in child protection social work (Beckett 2007; Shoesmith 2016). This can lead to social workers having no time to think, plan or feel, which Forrester (2016) refers to in his description of the current profession as “zombie social work” (p. 8).

Based upon the findings in this study, I would suggest firstly that the pre-proceedings stage described in Section 1.1 needs to be accessed, where possible, more often by social workers when they are at the stage where they have sufficient concerns, and evidence, to consider removing a child into care. Secondly it could be argued that is too late in the process to consider non-resident fathers as a potential resource for their child, and that social workers should not consider them merely as an alternative primary carer to be called upon at the point that the mother is not able to provide a sufficient level of care. Rather, I would recommend

that social workers adopt the presumption that non-resident fathers will be a resource for their child from the start of their involvement and thus considered the ‘first resort’, involving them and their extended family at the earliest opportunity (Brandon et al. 2017). Therefore, they should not merely seek to find out who fathers are and what their whereabouts are, but rather assess their level of contact and encourage them to take a greater role in, and responsibility for, the care of their children. There is a risk that this, in turn, could trigger new or pre-existing animosity and conflict between the parents, and fathers could potentially take advantage of the situation to gain access to their children’s ex-partner and children to commit further abuse and harassment (Radford and Hester 2006; Harne 2011). Consequently, social workers would need to fully assess the potential risk of harm that this could pose to all involved before continuing. This study has identified that social workers should view parents as more than passive recipients, and instead realise that given the opportunity and the right kind of encouragement, they can and will exercise choice and agency with respect to their family. One useful tool that is currently being used by a number of local authorities is family group conferencing, which has the potential to shift power in decision-making away from social services to the family (Holland et al. 2005). I recommend that social workers should not see the separated parents as distinctive caring commodities, but rather as a family system that can be activated when needed.

Section 6.3 discussed how as professionals practising in the childcare arena, social workers operate in a world of timescales and possible futures for the child. Social workers, however, need to appreciate that fathers do not share this world and, as such, they need to be clear from the start, and reiterate throughout their involvement, about the state-enforced timescales and practices, in order to be transparent and manage the expectations of the fathers they are working with. Related to this, and consistent with the studies of Coady et al. (2012) and Phillips (2019), is the recommendation that social workers be reliable and follow through on their commitments and responsibilities, reply to messages in a timely manner, and keep fathers updated on what is happening.

The fathers that reported having a positive relationship with their child’s social worker referred to the ability of the social worker to balance challenges and encouragement, and, importantly for the fathers to then accept these two approaches. This suggests the need for a deeper understanding amongst social workers of both the emotional and practical position of non-resident fathers with respect to the care of their children. More specifically, a greater awareness of the emotional position of the fathers and how this affects their motivation and subsequent ability to put themselves forward needs to be encouraged. Although, as previously argued, non-resident fathers who have parental responsibility perhaps do have a moral

obligation to exercise this responsibility rather than allowing the state to take it over, they did not envisage taking on the role of primary carer, so as well as time and support in providing a physical environment for their child, they also need time and support in adjusting to their new role and responsibility. In addition to understanding the specific emotional position of non-resident fathers, social workers must also be cognisant of the emotional regime that is present within social work (Quick and Scott 2019). It is important to understand and recognise that fathers may withdraw, not because of a lack of commitment, but rather as a form of defence (Featherstone 2017), or they may become threatening and angry because of frustration and a lack of understanding of the assessment process and timescales. Social workers should attempt to respond to such negativity with support and understanding as opposed to coercion and counter-hostility (Coady et al. 2012).

Finally, although social workers have little choice but to consider different family structures as a result of the families they encounter on a daily basis, I recommend that both knowledge and skills should be developed in order to better understand and assess displays of family and practices within the wider family.

This study has demonstrated that fathers can be assessed by social workers as suitable and capable primary carers for their children despite a history of domestic abuse, where the social workers appeared to separate the violent man from the caring father. It is accepted that for many professionals and academics this is a contentious issue. However, I would argue that professionals, academics and society should not reject traditional thinking on male violence, such as, for example, the patriarchal model. But rather, it should be incorporated into a more extensive and wider knowledge base in order to develop a deeper understanding of domestic abuse that informs good social work practice with fathers, mothers and children. Social work decision making in this area would be strengthened by a robust engagement with the literature on differing types of domestic abuse and the risks attached as explored in a recent project on thinking and doing differently in domestic abuse (Research in Practice 2021). Another important point that was raised in this thesis is the manner in which the mothers in these cases were considered by the social workers. I found that their understanding of the mothers' situation was often narrow and negative, and I therefore suggest that social workers need to work in a much more holistic way with mothers who have problems with trauma, mental health and alcohol and/or drug misuse.

9.4.2 Future research

A number of the fathers in my study were in the initial stages of taking on the role of primary carer, while several of the fathers were still involved in assessments and care proceedings. It would be useful to conduct a longitudinal study with these or similar fathers to see how many of them were successful at caring for their children, in addition to looking at the longevity of this care in terms of permanency or whether any children returned to the care of the mother.

The majority of these fathers were put in a position in which they had little choice to take on the care of their children as they were on the brink of being taken into care. It would be expedient to study whether fathers' motivations for taking on the care of their child would have been different if the threat of the child being taken in to care was not present. One interesting study would be to examine non-resident fathers who were involved in the pre-proceeding stage. Another aspect would be to look at the assessments of non-resident fathers who did not agree to be assessed, were unsuccessful, or placements with non-residents as primary carers that failed.

For two of the fathers who became the sole carer for their children, they were the non-biological fathers of the children. In light of this, it would be interesting to explore the experiences, motivations and journeys of single fathers who have legally adopted children, as this would also allow for the study of men who are not under the same duress and pressures as the fathers in this study.

9.5 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated (albeit from a small sample) that, given the opportunity, fathers involved in child protection will 'step up' and become a resource for their child when the child's mother is not in a position to do so. The fathers in this study not only successfully challenged the gendered model of parenting through successfully taking on the primary, and for the majority of fathers, the sole care of their children. A number of fathers in this study exercised agency in order to avoid their children entering the care system and demonstrated resilience and a commitment throughout their assessment. The findings of this study it could be argued challenge the negative constructs of non-resident fathers which proliferate in Western societies, such as that they are 'deadbeat dads' or 'feckless' (Collier 2001; Abramovitz 2006; Sheldon 2009; Lammy 2015). As the majority of the non-resident fathers were in contact and in close proximity to their children, which allowed them to act promptly when needed, and or to be contacted by social services.

No other studies have hitherto specifically explored the *retrospective* experiences and motivations of social workers and non-resident fathers with respect to having children placed in their care. A positive finding of this study was that despite several challenges, and contrary to a number of previous research studies, the fathers and social workers managed to work sufficiently well together in achieving a positive outcome for the child. In respect of the social workers, a positive of their involvement with the fathers and their assessment of them, was the level of reasoning and discretion they exercised in considering the negative aspects of the fathers' lives, where they understand that the fathers were neither good nor bad, but a combination of both. With this 'combination' been viewed as sufficient in terms of them been a suitable primary for their children. A further positive of the social workers' approach to the fathers and the assessment was their ability to offer encouragement and challenge in equal measures and, for a number of the social workers, an understanding the father's emotional response to situations. Therefore, applying an Appreciative Inquiry lens to the findings of the study, it could be suggested that there were several positive factors from the engagement and relationship between the social worker and the fathers that led to the fathers been successfully utilised as a resource in child protection practice.

Appendix 1 – The ethical approval application form

Version 1.0 August 2015

Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Head of School - Professor Amanda Coffey FAcSS

Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol Caerdydd
Pennaeth yr Ysgol Yr Athro Amanda Coffey FAcSS



SREC Ref No:

STAFF, MPhil/PhD & PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE RESEARCH PROJECTS Ethical Approval Application Form

Must be submitted at least **TWO WEEKS** before a School Research Ethics Committee (SREC) meeting to:
Deborah Watkins, Research and Graduate Studies Administrator
(Email: WatkinsD2@cardiff.ac.uk / Tel Extension: 79051 / Room 0.23 Glamorgan Building)

SECTION A: PERSONAL INFORMATION

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| Please tick relevant project type: | Staff Project Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | PhD Project Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Title of Project: | Child Protection, Children and their non-resident fathers: An exploratory study into the expectations and motivations of social workers and non-resident fathers in seeking alternative family placements for children. | |
| Project Start Date: | January 2016 | Project End Date: July 2019 |
| Project Funder: | Self funded | |
| Name of Researcher(s) / Student: | Lee Sobo-Allen | |
| Signature of Lead Researcher / Student: | | |
| Student Number: | 1448554 | |
| Student's Email Address: | Sobo-AllenLS@cardiff.ac.uk | |
| Supervisors: | 1 Professor Jonathan Scourfield | 2 Dr. Dawn Mannay |
| Supervisors' Signatures: | 1 | 2 |

Before completing, please now read the Application Guidance Notes at the end of this form

SECTION A: DISSERTATION SUMMARY

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| 1. | Below , please provide a concise general description of your dissertation project |
| <p>Within the field of child protection social work, a point can be reached when working with a family where it considered that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm as a result of the care been afforded by their parent/parents. It is at this juncture that, in principle, the 'threshold' for care proceedings has been met, thus providing the Local Authority with the grounds to apply to the court for a care order and remove the child into care if necessary (care proceedings). Underpinned by the principles of the Children Act 1989 such as: "...children are generally best looked after within the family, with their parents playing a full part in their lives and with least recourse to legal proceedings" (DOE, 2014 pg.5) The Pre-proceedings stage requires Local Authorities to prioritise the identification of appropriate alternative placements with family and friends, thereby, where possible, avoiding the need for care proceedings. Similarly should a Local Authority have already initiated care proceedings they are required to identify and assess alternative suitable placements</p> | |

within the family.

This study will specifically consider where social workers have identified and are considering the non-resident father as such an alternative placement. The aim of the study is to develop an understanding of the social workers and the non-resident fathers relative positions in this process of engagement and assessment in terms of their expectations and motivations. The study will critically consider and apply number current divergent discourses of fathering. Fathering is alleged to have undergone changes in the past number of decades with the pronouncement of a 'new fatherhood' in Western Societies (Dermott, 2003) Central to this discourse is the notion that fathers are aspiring to be 'good' fathers, Which is depicted in academic literature and everyday discourses, not only as fathers who are intimately involved in their child's life, nurturing, caring and co-parenting in everyday family life. But at the same time rejecting of a discourse of the traditional fathering who is disinterested, absent and emotionally distant (Dermott, 2008, Lupton and Barclay, 1997, Lewis and O'Brien, 1987, Dermott and Miller, 2015). However, the extent to which this has happened in reality has been questioned where the actual behaviours of fathers are out of step with the depicted representations and discourses of the new fathers (LaRossa, 1988, Machin, 2015). Additionally, questions have been raised as to whether this discourse of fathering be applied to non-resident fathers. Through experiencing non-standard paternal biographies (Lewis and Lamb, 2007) each non-resident father's understanding of fathering will be likely to differ but there will also be commonalities. Encapsulating and incorporating wider issues of gender and masculinity the study aims to capture these life stories through timelines in order to develop an understanding of the fathers 'lived life' and how they have reacted to it, (Adriansen, 2012) and how it affects their motivation to engage with the assessment with social services. Through allowing fathers to construct their own timelines as a opposed to responding to number of direct questions, it is expected to elicit more responses due to been less confrontational method of data collection (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001).

In exploring the social worker's expectations of non-residents in the assessment process, the influence of existing negative constructs of non-resident father which exist in Western Society such as 'deadbeat dads' and 'feckless' will be considered (Lammy, 2015, Collier, 2001, Abramovitz, 2006, Sheldon, 2009). It could be also argued that in British society, a narrow role for the non-resident father exists, with the focus is merely upon ensuring fathers fulfil their role as financial providers to their children rather than any moral obligation to provide care for their children. Previous studies, have consistently found that a number of barriers exist between fathers and social workers throughout child protection procedures, as consequence of the gendered organisational culture of social work (Scourfield, 2006, 2001, 2003) and how men and fathers are constructed and viewed.(O'Hagan, 1997, Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, Brown et al., 2009, Zazoni et al., 2014)

This ethnographic study will involve the collection of qualitative data through a number of methods. Data produced with social workers will consist of direct observations in team meetings and home visits and the use of mobile research methods (Ferguson, 2014, Ross et al., 2009) Where interviews will take place on the journey to and from the home visit. Data production with the non-resident fathers will involve one to one semi structured interviews that will involved the creation of a timeline. (Berends, 2011, Sheridan et al., 2011).

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| 2. | <p>What are the research questions?</p> <p>How do social workers negotiate and undertake assessments of non-resident fathers as potential full time carers for their children?</p> <p>What are social worker's expectations of non-resident fathers during the assessment process?</p> <p>How do non-resident consider themselves as fathers and how this impacts upon their motivations and ability to become alternative full time carers for their children?</p> |
| 3. | <p>Who are the participants ?</p> <p>Qualified social workers working in long-term child care teams from two local authorities in the North of England.</p> <p>Non-resident fathers who have are in the process of been assessed as alternative full time carers for their children.</p> |
| 4. | <p>How will the participants be recruited ?</p> <p>The social workers will be recruited through Service Managers within children services. Their participation will be voluntary and they will be inform that their decision to take part will not affect their employment opportunities.</p> <p>All potential interviewees for the qualitative study will be identified by local authority staff. Service users will only be contacted once they have given permission for this via their social workers. They will be informed that taking part or refusing to take part will not affect their level of service</p> |
| 5. | <p>What sort of data will be collected and what methods will you use to do this?</p> <p>Observations of team meetings and the office environment will be collected through field notes and the researcher using a data recorder to record their observations and thought. Similarly field notes and data recordings will be taken of discussions/interviews with social workers on the way to and on the way back from home visits. Field notes and audio-recordings of the home visit between the social worker and service user will be taken. Timelines and interviews will be employed with non-resident fathers in the study.</p> |
| 6. | <p>How and where (venue) are you undertaking your research?</p> <p>1. The direct observations of social workers in team meetings and in the office environment will take place in</p> |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|------------------------------|------|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|-------|-----------------------------|
| | <p>the social workers place of work.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Discussions between the social worker and researcher will take place in a car or on public transport on the way to and from the home visit. The observations of meetings with non-resident fathers will take place in either social services offices or the non-resident father's family home The individual interviews of non-resident fathers will take place in their own home or at a neutral space such as a coffee shop. Decisions about where the meetings take place will be based on the preferences of the participants. <p>What is the reason(s) for using this particular location ?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Observing social workers in the office environment will result in direct observations taking place in a familiar and safe environment for the social workers. Due to the time constraints and pressure within social work practice, collecting data during journeys to and from home visits is practical and efficient. Additionally it is a space where social workers are able to plan for, and reflect upon a visit before arriving back at busy office or another home visit. Therefore potentially a valuable opportunity to collect data. The venues for meetings between the social worker and the non-resident father are likely to be at the social services offices or the father's home. This will allow a sense of familiarity and safe environment for the non-resident father as we explore issues around their life and fathering experiences. It will not be known the nature of relationship between the non-resident father and social services as the assessment process is progressing, it could be positive or negative or indifferent. To this end holding the meetings in social services office may not be appropriate and allows the research study to be distanced from social services. As suggested the decisions about where the meetings take place will be based on the preferences of the participant. However, in completing a timeline, meeting in a public place not be appropriate with the potential of disclosing personal information. | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. | <p>Will you be analysing secondary data ?</p> <p>No</p> <p>If YES, does approval already exist for its use in further projects such as yours ?</p> | | | | | | | | | |
| SECTION B: RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>(a) Does your project involve children or young people under the age of 18?</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No X</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(b) If so, have you consulted the University's guidance on child protection procedures, and do you know how to respond if you have concerns?</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table> | (a) Does your project involve children or young people under the age of 18? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X | (b) If so, have you consulted the University's guidance on child protection procedures, and do you know how to respond if you have concerns? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | | | |
| (a) Does your project involve children or young people under the age of 18? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X | | | | | | | | |
| (b) If so, have you consulted the University's guidance on child protection procedures, and do you know how to respond if you have concerns? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | | | | | | | | |
| 9. | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>(a) Does your project involve one-to-one or other <i>unsupervised</i> research with children and young people under the age of 18 ? If Yes, go to 10(c)</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No X</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(b) If your project involves only <i>supervised</i> contact with children and young people under the age of 18, have you consulted the head of the institution where you are undertaking your research to establish if you need a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check? If Yes, and you do need a DBS check, then go to 9(c); if you do not need a DBS check, then go to Question 10.</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>(c) Do you have an up-to-date Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check ? (<i>Please give details below if you have a pending application</i>)</td> <td>Yes X</td> <td>No <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table> | (a) Does your project involve one-to-one or other <i>unsupervised</i> research with children and young people under the age of 18 ? If Yes , go to 10(c) | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X | (b) If your project involves only <i>supervised</i> contact with children and young people under the age of 18, have you consulted the head of the institution where you are undertaking your research to establish if you need a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check? If Yes , and you do need a DBS check, then go to 9(c); if you do not need a DBS check, then go to Question 10. | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | (c) Do you have an up-to-date Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check ? (<i>Please give details below if you have a pending application</i>) | Yes X | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (a) Does your project involve one-to-one or other <i>unsupervised</i> research with children and young people under the age of 18 ? If Yes , go to 10(c) | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X | | | | | | | | |
| (b) If your project involves only <i>supervised</i> contact with children and young people under the age of 18, have you consulted the head of the institution where you are undertaking your research to establish if you need a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check? If Yes , and you do need a DBS check, then go to 9(c); if you do not need a DBS check, then go to Question 10. | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | | | | | | | | |
| (c) Do you have an up-to-date Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check ? (<i>Please give details below if you have a pending application</i>) | Yes X | No <input type="checkbox"/> | | | | | | | | |
| 10. | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Does your project include people with learning or communication difficulties?</td> <td>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No X</td> </tr> </table> | Does your project include people with learning or communication difficulties? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X | | | | | | |
| Does your project include people with learning or communication difficulties? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X | | | | | | | | |

| | | | |
|--|---|------------------------------|--|
| 11. | Does your project include people in custody? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| 12. | Is your project likely to include people involved in illegal activities? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| 13. | Does your project involve people belonging to a vulnerable group, other than those listed above? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| 14. | Does your project include people who are, or are likely to become your clients or clients of the department in which you work? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| SECTION C: CONSENT PROCEDURES | | | |
| 15. | Will you obtain written consent for participation ? | Yes X | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. | <p>What procedures will you use to obtain informed consent from participants ?</p> <p>The researcher will outline the purpose and details of the research studies to social workers in their team meetings prior to the commencement of the project. An information sheet and consent form will be also handed out (see attached). The social workers will then have sufficient time to consider their position, and inform the researcher by email or telephone if they wish to be involved in the research project.</p> <p>Social Workers will contact the service users prior to a planned home visit and provide them with information about the study and obtain at this stage verbal consent. Once at the service user's home further oral and written information about the project will be provided the researcher and written consent will be sought prior to the observation taking place.</p> <p>The obtaining of informed consent for the individual interviews of the non-resident fathers will firstly involve the social worker providing the father with verbal, and written information, about the study (see attached), and verbal consent for the researcher to contact them directly. The researcher will then make contact with the non-resident father and obtain written consent prior to the commencement of the individual interviews.</p> | | |
| 17. | If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed ? | N/A <input type="checkbox"/> | Yes X <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 18. | Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary? | Yes X | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 19. | Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reasons ? | Yes X | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 20. | Will you give potential participants a significant period of time to consider participation ? | Yes X | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 21. | Does your project provide for people for whom English / Welsh is not their first language? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| SECTION D: POTENTIAL HARMS ARISING FROM THE PROJECT | | | |
| 22. | Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| 23. | Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing a detriment to their interests as a result of participation? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| 24. | <p>Below, please identify any potential for harm (to yourself or participants) that might arise from the way the research is conducted (see related guidance: http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/research/researchethics/guidance/index.html)</p> <p>PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE BOX BLANK</p> <p>The researcher is aware of this issue and the potential for distress in the interviews and the impacts for both participants and researchers have been fully considered. If participants need further support around any related issue the research team will provide signposting and ensure that all interviews are conducted in a sensitive and supportive framework. Participants will also be made aware their participation is voluntary and confidential. Participants will be also informed that the confidentiality of information that they disclose will be limited, in that any information that the researcher deems could be placing people at risk of significant harm such as the researcher, or children in the family, will be shared with</p> | | |

social services and other relevant authorities. It will be made explicit throughout the interviews that participants are free to withdraw from the research at any time for any given reason(s) they see fit

25. **Below, please set out the measures you will put in place to control possible harms to yourself or participants** (see related guidance: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/research/researchethics/guidance/index.html>)

PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE BOX BLANK

The social workers can seek support from colleagues and through informal and formal supervision with their line manager about any issues that have arisen through taking part in the study.

During the initial stages of the study the researcher will identify, with the social workers, what possible support is available within social services and the wider community for fathers taking part in the study.

SECTION E: RESEARCH SAFETY

Before completing this section, you should consult the document 'Guidance for Applicants' – and the information in this under 'Managing the risks associated with SOCSI research': <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/research/researchethics/guidance/index.html>

| | | | |
|-----|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 26. | Are there any realistic safety risks associated with your fieldwork? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| 27. | Have you taken into account the Cardiff University guidance on safety in fieldwork / for lone workers ? | Yes X | No <input type="checkbox"/> |

SECTION F: DATA COLLECTION

The SREC appreciates that this question will not in general relate to research undertaken in SOCSI. However, for further University guidance and information on the Human Tissue Act, please see: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/govrn/cocom/humantissueact/index.html>

| | | | |
|---|--|------------------------------|------|
| 28. | Does the study involve the collection or use of human tissue (including, but not limited to, blood, saliva and bodily waste fluids)? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| If Yes , a copy of the submitted application form and any supporting documentation must be emailed to the Human Tissue Act Compliance Team (HTA@cf.ac.uk). A decision will only be made once these documents have been received. | | | |

SECTION G: DATA PROTECTION

| | | | |
|--|---|------------------------------|------|
| 29. | (a) Are you collecting sensitive data? [Defined as: the racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs (or similar), trade union membership, physical or mental health, sexual life, the commission or alleged commission any offence, or any proceedings for any offence committed or alleged to have been committed the disposal of such proceedings or the sentence of any court in such proceedings.] | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No X |
| If Yes , how will you employ a more rigorous consent procedure? | | | |
| | (b) Are you collecting identifiable data ? [Please note, this includes recordings of interviews/focus groups etc.] | Yes X | No |
| If Yes , how you will anonymise this data ? | | | |
| The interviews will be anonymised at the point of transcription but the audio recordings will have identifiable data, although I will try to limit this as much as possible. | | | |

| | | | |
|--|---|-------|--|
| | (c) Will any non-anonymised and/or personalised data be retained ? | Yes | No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <p>If No, what are the reasons for this and how you will handle the data ?</p> <p>The audio data will be retained for five years in line with university guidelines but it will be stored on a password-protected device.</p> | | | |
| | (d) Data (i.e. actual interview recordings, not just transcripts) should be retained for at least five years or two years post-publication. Have you noted and included this information in your Information Sheet(s) ? | Yes X | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 30 | <p>Below, please detail how you will deal with data security. Please note, personal laptops (even password protected) stored in personal accommodation are not acceptable. Storage on University network, or use of encrypted laptops is required.</p> | | |
| <p>To ensure that data are protected, data recordings, field notes and transcripts will be uploaded to a secure and password-protected university server and then deleted from any audio recorders.</p> | | | |

If there are any other potential ethical issues that you think the Committee should consider please explain them on a separate sheet. It is your obligation to bring to the attention of the Committee any ethical issues not covered on this form.

Appendix 2 – The ethical approval confirmation letter

Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Head of School Professor Amanda Coffey FAcSS
Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol Caerdydd
Pennaeth yr Ysgol Yr Athro Amanda Coffey FAcSS



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www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsci
Prifysgol Caerdydd
Adolad Morganwg
King Edward VII Avenue
Caerdydd CF10 3WT
Cymru Y Deyrnas Unedig

30th November 2015

Our ref: SREC/1783

Lee Sobo-Allen
PhD Programme

Dear Lee

Your project entitled '*Child Protection, Children and their non-resident fathers: An exploratory study into the expectations and motivations of social workers and non-resident fathers in seeking alternative family placements for children*' has been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University subject to the following:

1. Consent Forms: Please update the text to the end of this document to give my details as the (new) Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee and my contact telephone number: Tel: 44+ (0)29 2087 9050.
2. Response to Question 29(c): Following recent guidance to the Committee on the University data retention policy, please also note that you must retain **both** your original data, i.e. interview audio files, questionnaires etc. (this is non-anonymised data) **and** your transcripts for for no less than five years or two years post-publication.

The reason for this clarification is that, as far as the University is concerned, the primary objective of retaining the source data is to ensure that the data or records contain sufficient information to establish their authenticity and to make them a reliable source of evidence to support any final research outcomes. The University Records Manager has previously issued related guidance as part of the *FAQs on Data Protection and Writing a Research Protocol or Applying for Research Ethics Approval* which can be accessed via:
<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/govrn/cocom/accinf/dataprotection/datap/dpguidquestions/index.html>

"10. Do I need to keep my original digital/audio tape as well as my transcripts?
Yes, the University's Research Governance Framework does not explicitly state that original digital/audio tapes should be kept but it does include the expectation that researchers will keep clear and accurate records of all results obtained including primary data. It is therefore advisable to retain any original digital/audio recordings as well as any transcripts made for the full retention

period. This will ensure that the original material is available should any queries arise after publication and guard against any allegations of fabrication or falsification of data. Some research councils (such as MRC) also require raw data to be kept in its original form alongside transcripts, so it is advisable to check any guidance from your funder. If your tapes and transcripts relate to a clinical trial there are specific requirements as set out in the University's Standard Operating Procedure for Archiving records from Clinical Trials of Investigational Medicinal Products.

If you are considering destroying original digital/audio tapes it is advisable to assess the risk of only retaining transcripts. If you do not have any documented transcription procedures and do not carry out verification checks it may be difficult to prove that the transcripts are a true reflection of the original recording."

If you need clarification concerning this, please contact me.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

All ongoing projects will be monitored every 12 months and it is a condition of continued approval that you complete the monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely



Professor Alan Felstead
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

cc: C Perkins
Supervisors: J Scourfield
D Mannay

Appendix 3 - The information sheet and consent form for the fathers

PhD Researcher: Lee Sobo-Allen



Information Sheet for Fathers

Title of Research Project:

Child Protection, Children and their non-resident fathers

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and if you need further information then please contact me using the email address at the end of this information sheet.

Who is the researcher?

The researcher, Lee Sobo-Allen, is a student on a part-time PhD course at Cardiff University.

What is the purpose of the Study?

The aim of the study is to explore how fathers, like yourself, and social workers have worked together when social workers are assessing fathers as possible full time carers for their child/ren. I am interested in "your side of the story" and I hope, through this, to provide social workers with a better understanding of the experiences and feelings of non-resident fathers.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been asked to take part in this study because you are a father who have or are currently working with social services.

Do I have to take part?

Your decision to take part in this study is entirely voluntary and you have the option of withdrawing, without giving a reason, before the study commences or stopping at any point in the study. You will also be able to withdraw at any point after the study and ask to have any information about you to be destroyed.

What do I have to do if I take part?

I will want you to take part in individual interviews with me where we will talk about:

- your experience of working with social workers, and the assessment of you to care for your child on a full time basis
- the reasons behind you deciding to be assessed by social services to care for your child on a full time basis
- about your experiences of being a father, and together we will create a timeline (see example attached) to look at how, as a father, you have reached your current position.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I do not think that there will be any negative consequences for you in taking part in this research study. The information that you provide to the researcher during the interviews will not be shared with social services and so will not affect your relationship

PhD Researcher: Lee Sobo-Allen



with them.. The only information that would be shared with social services is information that is felt is placing children or adults at risk of significant harm.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Taking part in this study will provide you with an opportunity to share your experiences of your involvement with social services, your experiences of fathering and the reasons for you wanting to be care for your child on a full time basis. This information will give social workers more understanding of the experiences and feelings of fathers like yourself, and so hopefully work better with fathers in the future.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All the information that is collected about you in the study will be kept strictly confidential. Unless as stated above where it is felt that is placing children or adults at risk of significant harm. The information from the interviews will be anonymised so you will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. The anonymised information will then be uploaded to a secure and password-protected university server on the Cardiff University server and retained for five years. Any audio recordings will be held on a secure and password protected device for five years in line with university guidance.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The findings from the research will be submitted to Cardiff University in the form of a report and be written up in journal articles, presented at conferences and inform social work practice through workshops and training to social workers.

Contact for further information

If you wish to take part in the study and/or need any further information, you can contact me:

Lee Sobo-Allen
0113 8121947
Sobo-AllenLS@cardiff.ac.uk

Project Supervisors

Professor Jonathan Scourfield scourfield@cardiff.ac.uk
Dr. Dawn Mannay mannaydi@cardiff.ac.uk

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this information

PhD Researcher: Lee Sobo-Allen



Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project:

Child Protection, Children and their non-resident fathers

Name: Lee Sobo-Allen Sobo-AllenLS@cardiff.ac.uk

Initial the box if you agree with the statement to the left

- 1 I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
- 2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
- 3 I understand that my responses will be kept confidential unless any of the responses are deemed to be placing children or adults at risk of significant harm, in which case Lee Sobo-Allen will contact social services and/or other relevant authorities.
- 4 I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I am aware that the anonymised data from the interview will be uploaded to a secure and password-protected university server on the Cardiff University server and retained for five years; and audio recordings will be held on a secure and password protected device for five years in line with university guidance.
- 5 I agree to the direct observations and interviews to be audio recorded
- 6 I agree for my data to be used in future research
- 7 I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform Lee Sobo-Allen should my contact details change.

PhD Researcher: Lee Sobo-Allen



Name of participant
(or legal representative)

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

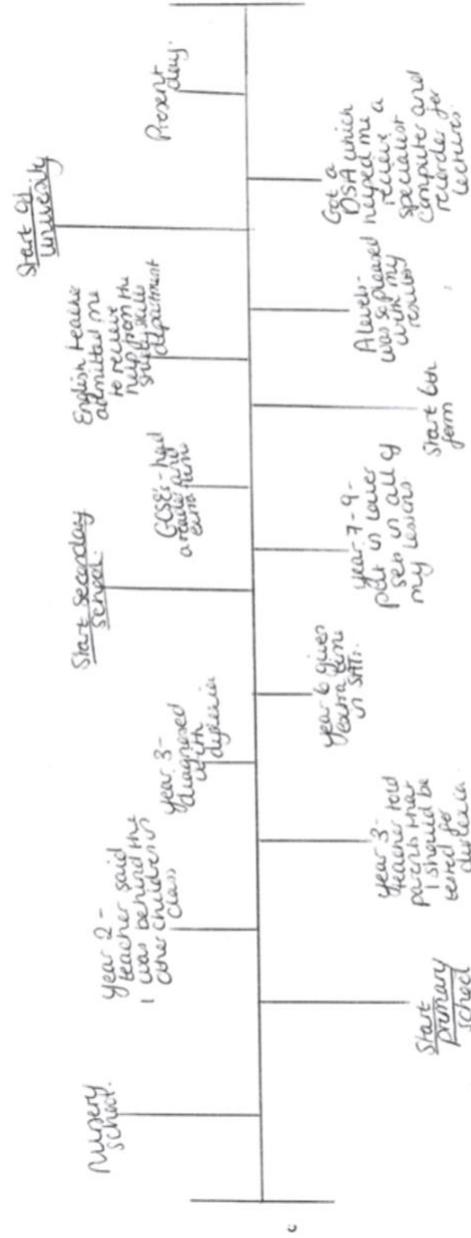
Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies: Participant, Researcher

If there are any concerns regarding the conduct of the study, please contact the Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee: Professor Adam Hedgecoe
Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Glamorgan Building
King Edward VII Avenue
Cardiff CF10 3WT
02920 875004

Example timeline



Appendix 4 – The information sheet and consent form for the social workers

PhD Researcher: Lee Sobo-Allen



Information Sheet for Social Workers

Title of Research Project:

Child Protection, Children and their non-resident fathers: A narrative study of the experiences and motivations of non-resident fathers who have had their children placed in their full time care by social services

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and if you need further information then please contact me using the email address at the end of this information sheet.

Who is the researcher?

The researcher is a student on a part-time PhD course at Cardiff University.

What is the purpose of the Study?

The aim of the study is to explore the expectations and motivations of both social workers and non-resident father, when social workers have identified and are assessing the non-resident father as an alternative placement either in the pre-proceedings process or during care proceedings. If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to reflect upon your professional practice, especially your decision making about how and why you engage with non-resident fathers.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been asked to take part in this study because, as a qualified and practicing social worker in the field of child protection, you have the relevant knowledge and day to day experience of working with children and their families.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you have the option of withdrawing, without giving a reason, before the study commences or discontinuing at any point in the study. You will also be able to withdraw at any point after the study and ask to have any data relating to you destroyed.

What do I have to do if I take part?

You will be required take part in direct observations with the researcher during team meetings and during your home visits to assess fathers. In addition to individual interviews with the researcher to and from home visits.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

PhD Researcher: Lee Sobo-Allen



I do not envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part in this research study. The subject to be discussed in the interview is something you are familiar with on a day to day basis. Also, I am aware that reflection is a professional strategy that is part of everyday social work practice.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Taking part in this study will provide an opportunity for you to discuss and reflect upon a particular area within social work practice, as well as having the time to reflect upon your own values, thinking and practice.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All the information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. The data from the interview will be anonymised so you will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. The anonymised data from the interview will be uploaded to a secure and password-protected university server on the Cardiff University server and retained for five years. Any audio recordings will be held on a secure and password protected device for five years in line with university guidance.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The findings from the research will be submitted to Cardiff University in the form of a thesis. It is envisaged that the findings will be written up in journal articles and submitted to an appropriate social work journals and other appropriate academic publications. The findings from the research will also be presented and discussed at conferences and workshops.

Contact for further information

If you need any further information, you can contact me:

Lee Sobo-Allen
Sobo-AllenLS@cardiff.ac.uk

Project Supervisors

Professor Jonathan Scourfield – scourfield@cardiff.ac.uk
Dr Dawn Mannay – mannaydi@cardiff.ac.uk

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this information



Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project:

Child Protection, Children and their non-resident fathers: A narrative study of the experiences and motivations of non-resident fathers who have had their children placed in their full time care by social services

Name: Lee Sobo-Allen Sobo-AllenLS@cardiff.ac.uk

Initial the box if you agree with the statement to the left

- 1 I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
- 2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
- 3 I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I am aware that the anonymised data from the interview will be uploaded to a secure and password-protected university server on the Cardiff University server and retained for five years; and audio recordings will be held on a secure and password protected device for five years in line with university guidance.
- 4 I agree to the direct observations and interviews to be audio recorded
- 5 I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research
- 6 I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the principal investigator should my contact details change.

Name of participant (or legal representative) Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

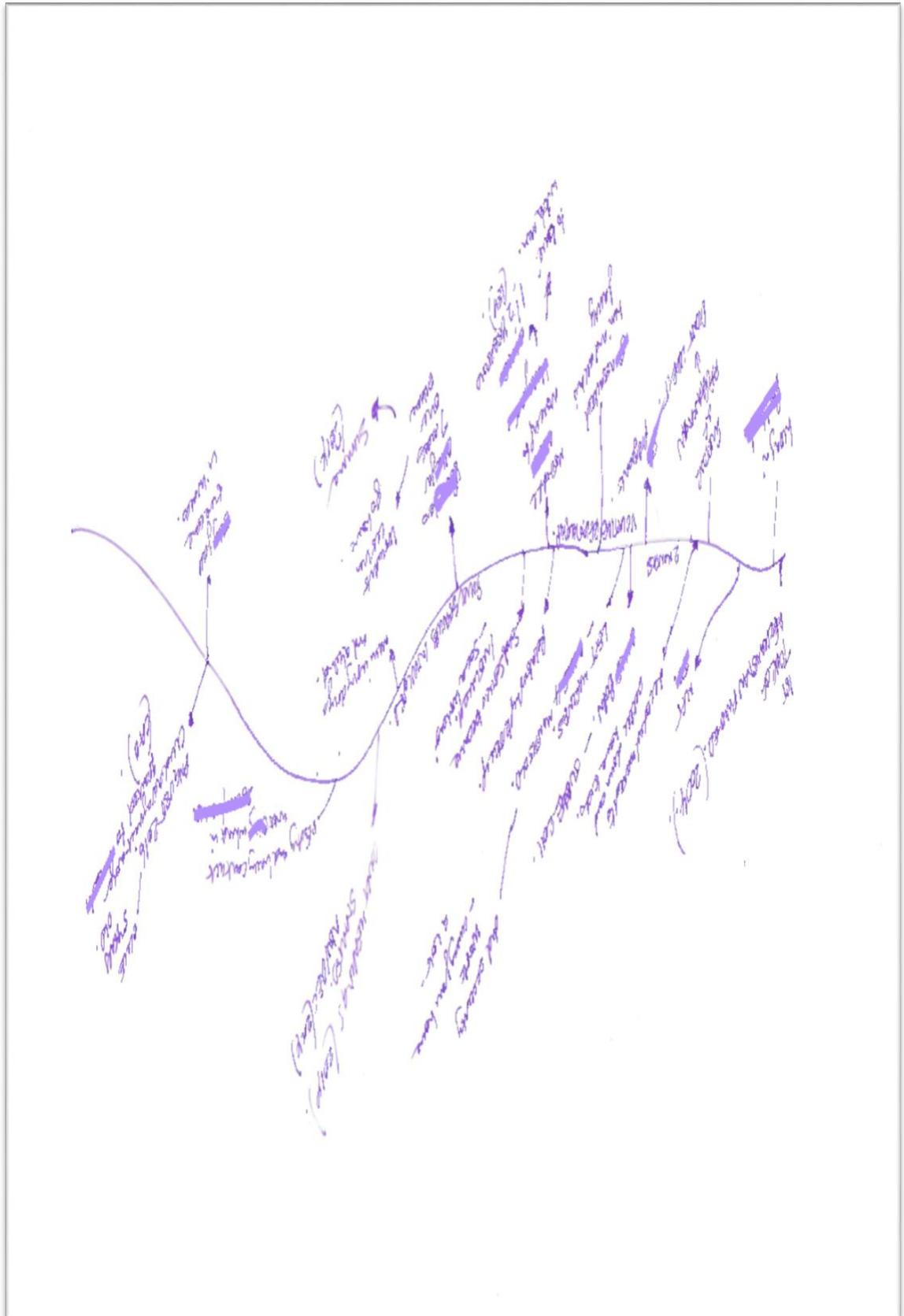
PhD Researcher: Lee Sobo-Allen



Copies: Participant, Researcher

If there are any concerns regarding the conduct of the study, please contact the Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee: Professor Adam Hedgecoe
Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Glamorgan Building
King Edward VII Avenue
Cardiff CF10 3WT
02920 875004

Appendix 5 - The timeline produced with David



Appendix 7 – An example of NVivo themes coding – The positioning of the fathers

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface with a list of codes and their associated data. The interface is divided into several sections: a top navigation bar, a left sidebar, and a main content area.

Top Navigation Bar: Includes icons for Home, Edit, Import, Create, Explore, Share, and Modules. Below these are icons for Clipboard, Item, Organize, Visualize, Code, Autoencode, Unencode, Codes In Vivo, Spread Coding, Case Classification, File Classification, and Workspace.

Left Sidebar: Shows the project name "PhD - 2018 (NVivo R1)(1).nvpx" and a menu with sections:

- IMPORT:** Data, Files, File Classifications, Externalis
- ORGANIZE:** Coding, Codes
- EXPLORE:** day to day experience, motivations of fathers, Negative perceptions..., Social Work nodes, Cases, Notes, Sets, Queries, Visualizations

Main Content Area: A table with columns: Name, Files, References, Created on, Modified on, and Color. The data is as follows:

| Name | Files | References | Created on | Modified on | Color |
|---|-------|------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------|
| <input type="radio"/> Always wanted to be father | 3 | 3 | 4 Nov 2020 at 10:27 | 5 Nov 2020 at 16:58 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Caring Masculinity | 4 | 4 | 4 Nov 2020 at 10:31 | 9 Nov 2020 at 21:25 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> External validation of th... | 3 | 3 | 12 Oct 2020 at 19:18 | 4 Nov 2020 at 19:12 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Protector | 3 | 5 | 25 Oct 2020 at 19:14 | 14 Nov 2020 at 16:15 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Reciprocation | 2 | 2 | 4 Nov 2020 at 10:34 | 9 Nov 2020 at 21:23 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Rescuer | 4 | 7 | 4 Nov 2020 at 10:32 | 9 Nov 2020 at 21:22 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Change of lifestyle | 6 | 7 | 12 Oct 2020 at 19:15 | 9 Nov 2020 at 19:46 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Gendered care | 5 | 10 | 30 Mar 2019 at 18:16 | 5 Nov 2020 at 16:50 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> It's a mum's job | 4 | 8 | 30 Mar 2019 at 18:16 | 14 Nov 2020 at 16:17 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> He's mine | 1 | 1 | 25 Oct 2020 at 19:... | 25 Oct 2020 at 19:01 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Importance of Work | 4 | 17 | 19 Nov 2018 at 21:45 | 9 Nov 2020 at 19:47 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Never wanted to be a father | 1 | 2 | 5 Nov 2020 at 19:23 | 5 Nov 2020 at 19:33 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Proving themselves as fat... | 1 | 3 | 12 Oct 2020 at 19:11 | 12 Oct 2020 at 19:15 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Expecting him to fail | 1 | 1 | 12 Oct 2020 at 19:23 | 12 Oct 2020 at 19:25 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Rescuer redeemed | 1 | 1 | 25 Oct 2020 at 19:14 | 25 Oct 2020 at 19:17 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Responsible for their upbr... | 1 | 2 | 6 Nov 2020 at 11:25 | 6 Nov 2020 at 11:28 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> Saviour of the children... | 1 | 1 | 6 Nov 2020 at 13:03 | 6 Nov 2020 at 13:07 | LS |
| <input type="radio"/> This wasnt my plan | 3 | 3 | 4 Nov 2020 at 17:39 | 4 Nov 2020 at 19:12 | LS |

Appendix 8 – An example of NVivo themes and coding- The motivations and experiences of the fathers

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface with a list of codes and their associated data. The interface includes a top menu bar with options like File, Edit, Home, Import, Create, Explore, Share, Modules, Layout, View, Window, and Help. Below the menu bar, there are several toolbars for Clipboard, Edit, Import, Create, Explore, Share, and Modules. The main area shows a list of codes with columns for Name, Files, References, Created on, Modified on, Modified by, and Color.

| Name | Files | References | Created on | Modified on | Modified by | Color |
|-------------------------------|-------|------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------|-------|
| Agency | 1 | 1 | 9 Mar 2021 at 20:00 | 9 Mar 2021 at 20:15 | LS | |
| Compassion | 1 | 1 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:10 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:23 | LS | ● |
| allowing relationship wi... | 1 | 1 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:23 | 30 Mar 2019 at 11:16 | LS | |
| amicable separation | 1 | 1 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:13 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:13 | LS | |
| looking after other men... | 1 | 2 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:12 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:17 | LS | |
| Not my fault | 1 | 5 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:22 | 30 Mar 2019 at 11:15 | LS | |
| Rescuer | 1 | 1 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:26 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:27 | LS | |
| Control | 1 | 1 | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:... | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:16 | LS | |
| Having a choice | 1 | 1 | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:15 | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:... | LS | |
| Drug use in mothers | 0 | 0 | 21 Jul 2018 at 20:21 | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:15 | LS | |
| Fear of care system | 4 | 10 | 17 Feb 2019 at 11:45 | 30 Mar 2019 at 18:21 | LS | |
| damage of care system | 2 | 3 | 30 Mar 2019 at 17:... | 30 Mar 2019 at 18:31 | LS | |
| Lived experience | 2 | 5 | 30 Mar 2019 at 11:17 | 30 Mar 2019 at 11:25 | LS | |
| loss of role through care | 1 | 1 | 30 Mar 2019 at 17:... | 30 Mar 2019 at 18:... | LS | ● |
| home on trial on care order | 2 | 5 | 4 Jul 2019 at 19:12 | 10 Jul 2019 at 08:19 | LS | |
| Involvement of profession... | 1 | 4 | 19 Nov 2018 at 21:57 | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:... | LS | |
| Negative involvement | 1 | 3 | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:15 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:30 | LS | |
| positive involvement | 1 | 1 | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:14 | 19 Nov 2018 at 22:... | LS | |
| Leo, because I didn't want... | 1 | 1 | 19 Feb 2019 at 07:10 | 19 Feb 2019 at 07:10 | LS | |
| Loss and Grief | 11 | 15 | 17 Feb 2019 at 11:53 | 30 Mar 2019 at 11:14 | LS | ● |
| The Fight | 2 | 2 | 30 Mar 2019 at 18:... | 27 Jun 2019 at 11:03 | LS | |
| Past guilt | 1 | 2 | 17 Feb 2019 at 11:43 | 17 Feb 2019 at 11:51 | LS | |
| Protector of children | 0 | 0 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:08 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:08 | LS | ● |
| From future harm | 1 | 2 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:11 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:34 | LS | |
| from going into care | 0 | 0 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:15 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:15 | LS | |
| From other men | 1 | 3 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:09 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:30 | LS | |
| From the mother | 1 | 2 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:11 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:24 | LS | |
| Reparation | 1 | 1 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:10 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:18 | LS | ● |
| Being a successful father | 1 | 2 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:20 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:21 | LS | |
| Resentment of mother | 1 | 1 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:28 | 28 Nov 2018 at 11:29 | LS | |
| Time | 1 | 2 | 9 Mar 2021 at 20:01 | 15 Mar 2021 at 09:... | LS | |
| Rushed and slow | 7 | 9 | 15 Mar 2021 at 09:37 | 15 Mar 2021 at 14:51 | LS | |
| the future talk by SW | 2 | 2 | 25 Jun 2019 at 21:35 | 27 Jun 2019 at 11:21 | LS | ● |
| the last resort | 4 | 5 | 25 Jun 2019 at 21:14 | 4 Jul 2019 at 19:09 | LS | ● |
| When they found out | 1 | 1 | 17 Feb 2019 at 11:46 | 15 Mar 2021 at 09:31 | LS | |

Appendix 9 - The Fathers

Alan

Alan was a 54-year-old white British single male, who at the time of our interview had had his three children, Meredith (14), Sebastian (9) and Chloe (7), living in his care for one year. He had separated from his wife, Andrea, two years earlier and had continued to live nearby and care for his children on a regular basis. The couple had been together for thirty-four years but never married, which meant that Alan did not have parental responsibility for his children. According to the children's social worker, Mary, social services were working with Andrea under a child protection plan due to neglect of the children as a result of Andrea's mental health problems. These concerns escalated when the local authority became aware of Andrea's intention to move a known sex offender into her home, and they started to plan to remove the children into care. When Andrea was informed of the plan, she contacted Alan and made arrangements to place their children with him. According to Mary, social services were concerned about this arrangement because of Alan's lifestyle, which included periods of heavy drinking and previous criminal activity. Consequently, the children remained the subject of a child protection plan under the category of neglect whilst an assessment of his parenting was being carried out. This assessment proved successful and social services agreed that the children could remain in his care, and he was supported in applying to the court for a child arrangement order so that he would gain parental responsibility.

Abdel

Abdel was a 34-year-old Algerian national of Arab descent who did not have a partner. When I interviewed him his four-year-old daughter, Zara, had been living with him for two years. According to Abdel and Zara's social worker, Clare, he came to England from Algeria in 2007 seeking employment and a better standard of living. He soon met Zara's mother, Kirsty, and they had a daughter in 2011 who was subsequently removed into local authority care before being placed with her maternal aunt. According to Clare, Abdel was in prison at this time for committing burglary and theft, although Abdel did not allude to either of these events in his interview. Clare explained that social services had become involved during Kirsty's pregnancy, due to her illegal drug use and chaotic lifestyle. Zara was born in 2015 and removed into foster care on a care order immediately after her birth. She was born with neonatal drug withdrawal as a result of Chloe's continued drug use during pregnancy and continued to attend the neonatal accidents clinic until she was three years old.

At the time of their daughter's birth, Abdel and Kirsty were not living together, although he was at the hospital for the birth. According to Clare, he ran away from the hospital when she approached him. Abdel later attended the first court hearing of the care proceedings and applied to be a party in these proceedings. Consequently, social services began a child and family assessment to determine Abdel's suitability to take on the full-time care of Zara. A viability assessment was also conducted on Abdel's mother who had travelled over from Albania to England, but this assessment proved to be unsuccessful. At the commencement of his assessment, Abdel was living in shared accommodation, had no leave to remain, and had no income. As part of the assessment, he had contact with Zara weekly at the home of the foster carer, and he had to attend parenting classes at a children's centre and take English language classes. The outcome of the assessment was negative on the first attempt, which, according to Clare, was because of his reluctance to engage with the parenting classes and the whole notion of him providing direct care for his daughter. Following this outcome, he began to engage, and he subsequently secured suitable accommodation. An addendum to the assessment later approved him as a permanent carer for Zara. The assessment took two years in total with Zara being placed in his care subject to a child arrangement order and a supervision order.

David

David was a 28-year-old white British man who had been the sole carer of his four-year-old son, Luke, for six-months prior to our interview. Luke was the subject of a child arrangement order supported by social services. David had previously served in the Royal Marines, completing several tours of Afghanistan. When I interviewed him, he was a self-employed fitness instructor. He recalled that his relationship with Luke's mother, Jane, had lasted for four years and that they had lived in the South Coast of England. According to David, he and Jane had planned to have children and get married:

David: When I did Afghanistan again and it was that tour where it... It wasn't a nice tour, and I just was like... I want to... If I get home from this one, I want to get settled down and live properly and get married and have kids and stuff. And, I told her this and she was like, "Yeah."

According to David, Jane became pregnant a couple of months after he returned from Afghanistan, and he subsequently handed in his notice to leave the Royal Marines. According to Diane, Luke's social worker, Jane never wanted a child and threatened and made initial enquiries into having an abortion. This was also confirmed by David. David described his relationship with Jane as very difficult, making note of an especially serious incident where

she attacked him and members of his family, which was subsequently confirmed by Diane. Their relationship finally ended when Luke was two years old, after which Jane moved out of the family home with him. Diane confirmed that social services was involved with Luke after this time as a result of the concerns raised about Jane's drug use and mental health problems. David continued to have weekly contact with his son, with Luke often staying at his home on alternate weekends and summer holidays. Following a conversation between David and Luke's headteacher, where concerns were raised about Luke's care and behaviour at school, David exercised his parental responsibility and refused to allow Luke to return to his mother's care pursuing a child arrangement order, so that his son could reside with him permanently. Diane, who completed the assessment for the Section 7 report supported the child arrangement order, confirmed the concerns of the school, and supported the subsequent plan for Luke to live with his father permanently.

Graham

Graham was a 28-year-old white British divorced single man whose 12-year-old son, Jack, had been living with him full-time for three-months prior to our interview. Jack has Asperger Syndrome and attended a special school. Graham has two other children, Joe (4) and Jason (3), to his most recent partner. He had contact with Joe on alternate weekends prior to Joe coming to live with him. At the time of our interview, he had had no contact with Jason for two years.

Graham was recruited to take part in this study from an independent sector domestic abuse perpetrator program, and it was not possible to interview the social worker for Graham's children.

Graham met Jack and Joe's mother, Helen, in 2002, they married in 2004 and then Jack was born in 2006. It was during their separation in 2014 that Joe was born. Graham admitted to being convicted for assaulting Helen, which led to the breakup of their marriage. Helen, at that point, also stopped him from seeing both his sons, and it was then that he was first required to attend a domestic violence perpetrators programme. According to Graham, he had fought to see his two sons since the separation in 2014 via the Family Courts, with him finally gaining increased contact in 2017.

Graham recalled starting a new relationship with Melanie later in 2014, and their son Jason was born in 2015. According to Graham's account, further incidents of domestic abuse occurred with Melanie who ended their relationship in 2017. He had not seen his son Jason since their separation, with Melanie having obtained a contact order preventing him having contact with him. When I interviewed Graham, he was contesting not having contact with his youngest son in the Family Courts, with CAFCASS assessing his suitability to have contact

with his younger son, regularly testing him for alcohol consumption, and requiring him to attend a domestic violence perpetrators programme.

The circumstances leading to Jack coming to live with him on a full-time basis, according to Graham, were that there had been a deterioration in Jack's relationship with his mother due to his challenging behaviour, with alleged incidents in which his mother hit him on a number of occasions.

Lawrence

Lawrence was a 35-year-old white British man, who when I interviewed him was living alone with his two biological sons, Edward, aged six, and Christian, aged nine. Prior to the children coming to live with him twelve-months earlier they had lived with their mother, her new partner, and their younger half-brother. Edward had autism which caused him to be violent and destructive at times, and not sleep through the night. Before both boys came to live with Lawrence on a full-time basis, they used to stay every other weekend, in addition to visiting him during the week. Lawrence also often had Edward for short breaks for respite when his mother was unable to cope with his behaviour, according to his social worker. It was when increased concerns emerged about the risks to both children due to their mother's increased drinking and relationship with a violent partner, that they asked Lawrence if he would consider taking on the full-time care of his children. According to both Lawrence and the children's social worker, Colin, the decision to be assessed to take on the care of these children was not an easy one. Lawrence was living with his new partner, Zoe, and their ten-month old daughter, and Edward's behaviour could cause problems with this relationship. Lawrence decided, therefore, to cease employment and become the full-time carer for his children, with his partner and daughter leaving the home but the relationship continuing.

Liam

When I interviewed Liam, a 32-year-old single white British male, his two sons Tom, aged seven, and Matthew, aged eight, had been living with him for six months. Liam had lived with his children and their mother, Rachel, for five years before they separated. At this time, he also left the area. According to Liam, he continued to see his children every week, when they would often stay over for the weekend. The children's social worker, Clare, confirmed that a neighbouring local authority, where the children lived with their mother, was on the verge of initiating care proceedings as a result of the risk of actual significant harm from

neglect due to Rachel's chaotic lifestyle, which involved heavy drinking, domestic violence and leaving the children with inappropriate carers.

Before social services could execute their plan, the parents negotiated an alternative plan for Liam to take over the care of their children before they were taken into care, soon after which the case transferred to the local authority where Liam resided. Clare confirmed that an assessment was undertaken of Liam's parenting and suitability, which was eventually successful. Liam recalled that he spent a long period of his teenage years in the care system. (Discussed in section 7.3.4).

Lucas

Lucas was a 35-year-old married man who lived with his four-year-old daughter, Sophie, from his current marriage, seven-year-old stepson, Kyle, and three-year-old stepdaughter, Meadow, who came to live with him six-months prior to our interview through the involvement of social services. Lucas also had a 16-year-old daughter from a previous relationship who did not reside with him.

Lucas and Meadow's social worker, Mary, both confirmed that Meadow was the consequence of a one-night episode of infidelity with her mother, Tina. He was made aware of the possibility of the existence of Meadow, and his likely paternity through Tina's Facebook posts, but chose to take the matter no further. It was only when social services initiated pre-proceedings in a different area of England due to Tina's drug use that he was contacted, and a subsequent DNA test confirmed he was Meadow's father. According to Mary, Meadow was the fourth child to be removed from Tina's care by social services.

Meadow was removed from her mother's care and placed in the care of a maternal aunt during the duration of the assessment of her father. According to both Lucas and Mary, the assessment took over a year with increased contact between Meadow and her father before she was placed with him, his wife and Meadow's half-sister.

Mike

When I interviewed Mike, he was a single 30-year-old white British man who had his seven-year-old son, James, living with him on a full-time basis for one month. He was attending a local domestic abuse perpetrators program. Mike was not James's biological father, so he had recently sought and was granted a child arrangement order. James was also subject to a

supervision order from the local authority. James noted that this was because of concerns over his drug use and previous incidents of domestic abuse with James's mother, Helen. James met Helen when she was six-months pregnant with James. Mike described how the relationship became very volatile after James's birth, as both parents became heavily involved with illegal drugs, including heroin, cocaine, diazepam, ecstasy and MDMA. James recalled how there would be long periods of time where he lived away from the family home and lived with his mother. He also recalled numerous incidents of domestic abuse. One incident in particular was where he assaulted Helen in front of her son when he was three years of age. It was at this stage that Mike recalled that social services first became involved because of the domestic abuse and the use of drugs whilst James was in the house. According to Mike, Helen died thirteen months prior to our interview as a result of necrotizing bronchiolitis, which was complicated by high toxicity in her body as a result of a cocktail of prescribed medication. Mike stated that Helen had both threatened and attempted suicide on a number of occasions, but her death was actually the result of an acute chest infection. Following her death, Mike recalled that social services were not fully aware of his role as carer for James due to him not always being in the family home. When they did discover this, according to Mike, they placed James, who was then six, in the care of Mike's parent with the condition that Mike was not to stay in the same house as James or have unsupervised contact until they had assessed him. Over a period of a year, Mike was assessed, granted increased contact, regular drug, and alcohol tests, and attended a domestic abuse programme. He was then supported to apply for a child arrangement order by social services and the children's guardian, before then moving into his own house with James.

Norman

Norman was a 48 two-year-old white British divorced single man who, when I interviewed him, had had his 11-year-old son, Tom, living with him for 11 months. Prior to the commencement of assessment by social services, he had not seen his son since he was three, following the breakup of his marriage to Tom's mother. Following the breakup, Norman had moved away from Tom and returned to the town of his birth. It was, according to Tom's social worker, Hannah, Tom's maternal grandmother who initially contacted Norman to make him aware of the involvement of social services and their plan to remove Tom into care. According to Hannah, concerns for Tom centred around his mother's relationship with her new husband, which was abusive and controlling, not to mention that they were both heavily involved in illegal drug use. Following this initial contact, Norman approached social services and his assessment for caring for Tom on a permanent basis began. When the assessment commenced Norman was living in a shared flat and was working nightshifts in a local factory. During the

assessment, he managed to find suitable accommodation for both him and Tom and changed employment so that he could care for Tom on a full-time basis.

Nigel

When I interviewed Nigel, he was 42 years of age and the sole carer of his two children, Vicky (9) and Matthew (6). He recalled that when he met Sarah, she already had three children in her care from a previous relationship. These children were aged four, two and 13 months, respectively. Both Nigel and the children's social worker, Katy, confirmed that Nigel raised and cared for these children as if they were his own and they treated him as such.

Nigel recalled that he also had a previous twelve-year-long relationship to his one with Sarah, where he lived with his partner and her two daughters. They also had a son together, William. Nigel recalled how all three children were in their twenties, and that he had a positive relationship and regular contact with them.

Soon after Nigel started to live with Sarah and her three children, Sarah became pregnant with Vicky, and they then had a further son together, Matthew. The relationship ended two years prior to our interview, with Nigel leaving the family home but retaining regular contact with all five children on a regular basis. Social services became involved following concerns over neglect of the children, as a result of Sarah's mental health problems. As a result, the children were placed on a child protection plan. Katy recalled that it was during a scheduled meeting to review the child protection plan that Sarah walked out of the meeting, thus relinquishing her care of the children. Nigel was in the meeting, and it was agreed at that time that all five children would be placed in his care. However, this arrangement was not sustainable, according to both Nigel and Katy, because of the limited space in Nigel's home. The three children that were not biologically Nigel's were subsequently removed into local authority care.

Robert

Robert was a 29-year-old single white British single man who at the time of the interview had had three children living in his full-time care for the last ten months. Henry was seven, Mia was six, and Bob was four. Although Robert was only the biological father of Bob, according to both Robert and his social worker, Kerry, he had both lived with and cared for the other two children since they were babies; he considered them to be his children, and the two

children were not aware that Robert was not their biological father. Robert had married Chloe soon after they met, and Bob was born quickly after. Robert shared that both he and Chloe became heavily involved in cocaine use, but Robert wanted to stop using it as it was affecting his ability to sustain regular employment. This then caused problems in his relationship with Chloe, as her dependence on Cocaine became severe, leading to debt problems with drug dealers which Robert had to deal with. Robert also stated that Chloe became physically aggressive towards him and their children during this time, and there were episodes of infidelity. The relationship finally came to an end when Bob was two, and Robert left the family home. He continued to have regular contact with the children and supported them financially. During this time, Robert lived in a number of shared dwellings that limited his ability to have his children stay with him.

There were persistent concerns after Robert left the home over the neglect the children were experiencing as a result of squalid housing conditions, alongside poor presentation and attendance at school. Plans were made by the local authority to initiate care proceedings and remove all three children into care. Robert was contacted and successfully assessed to take on the full-time care of the children. Robert shared in his interview that he was in the care system from the age of 10, as a result of physical abuse and neglect by his parents. He disclosed throughout the interview that he is a very insecure person and lacks confidence around people. He also disclosed that he still regularly uses cannabis to deal with his emotional state and is trying to stop this through the support of a local drug organisation.

Tony

Tony was a 26-year-old white British male who had full-time care of his five-month old daughter, Alice, at the time of the interview. Tony was recruited to participate in the study from an independent sector domestic abuse perpetrator program, and it was not possible to interview the social worker for Tony's daughter. Therefore, his circumstances are taken purely from his own accounts. Tony recalled being attacked at the age of 16 and that this had left him with head injuries. He stated that he had seizures as a result of the injury, but had not had one for over 18 months. Within weeks of meeting Alice's mother, Karen, she became pregnant, and they subsequently moved into a house together. According to Tony, both during and after the pregnancy, Karen's mental health deteriorated, resulting in outbursts of aggression towards him. At no point during our two interviews did Tony admit being the perpetrator of any violence and thus the likely reasons that he attended a group for perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Shortly after Alice's birth, Karen left her mother's home with Alice, but with no food or any of Alice's belongings. It was at this stage that social services placed Alice in the care of her father. Tony admitted that in his claim for compensation he exaggerated the effects of the injury on his daily life, falsely claiming that he had regular epileptic seizures. According to Tony, social services became aware of this medical report during their assessment of him as a permanent carer for Alice. Consequently, a condition of his daughter being placed into his care was that he needed to have the close support of his father and stepmother in the care of his daughter.

Victor

Victor was a 56-year-old white Irish single man who lived with his four-year-old son, Sean, who was born with Down Syndrome. Victor had three children from two previous marriages in Ireland, two of whom are imprisoned, with Victor having contact with the third. Sean's mother, Carol, had five children removed from her care previously due to domestic violence and drug use. Both Sean's social worker, Hannah, and Victor reported that during her pregnancy Victor physically assaulted Carol, for which he served a six-month prison sentence and missed Sean's birth. The couple never got back together following Victor's release from prison, with Carol continuing to care for Sean on her own for a further two-year period. Concerns for Sean's well-being increased due to Carol's increased drug use and at the stage of initiating care proceedings social services contacted Victor who was actually already involved in private law proceedings to secure contact with his son. The assessment of Victor as a full-time carer for his child involved him addressing his alcohol problem, anger issues, and also agreeing to be placed in a foster placement for six months with Sean, where he could be assessed and learn parenting techniques specific for a child with Downs Syndrome. The assessment proved to be successful, and Sean was placed in the care of his father under the auspices of a care order.

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