# Perceptions of murder-suicide

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# Summary

The thesis is an exploration of discourse on a particular type of familial child homicide referred to as 'murder-suicide' and often appearing to occur 'out of the blue'. The purpose of the research is to contribute to social work understanding of the cultural context of murder-suicide through description and exploration of how murder-suicide is perceived and constructed in five specific cases. The empirical basis includes a narrative analysis of selected newspaper reports, semi-structured interviews with social workers using vignettes and semi-structured interviews with relevant professionals who had post-incident involvement in the cases.  The structure of the thesis follows the format of an introductory chapter; a review of the literature relevant to murder-suicide, family ideology, childhood and the role of professional social work and the influence of the media on the creation of discourse; followed by a discussion of the research methods; and three empirical chapters concerned with narrative analysis of newspaper reports and interviews of social workers and relevant professionals. The thesis concludes with a chapter on the relevance to social work.

The key theoretical perspectives are a focus on the social construction of social problems and the existence of multiple discourses. The thesis concludes that a single interpretation of murder-suicide is insufficient. Social workers in particular identify a range of social and individual factors, intertwined and difficult to disconnect from each other, that contribute to the actions of the individual in committing murder of their own children. Familiar discourses are identified within which the phenomenon of murder-suicide is described and made sense of, including gender roles, domestic abuse, power and control and mental health. The thesis concludes that for murder-suicide, like other forms of child abuse, social workers must give up ideas of omnipotence and accept the fallibility of social work in protecting all children.

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# Chapter 1

# Introduction

## 1     Purpose of the research

This research is concerned with familial child homicide followed by the suicide of the parent perpetrator, referred to as 'murder-suicide'.  This phenomenon often appears to occur 'out of the blue' in families that are not known to social services or about whom other welfare related agencies are not concerned.  For this reason, murder-suicide poses significant challenges to social work in terms of its ability to detect its potential and prevent harm to children.

Probably because of the limited experience of social work as a profession in working with families in which 'out of the blue' murder suicide occurs, there appears to be a limited professional discursive framework to help social workers understand the cultural context of the phenomenon.   The purpose of this research is to contribute to understanding about how these incidents are constructed and perceived and to describe and explore, from a UK perspective, discourse on five specific cases, as derived from newspaper reports and child care social workers. In relation to the five specific cases, the research also considers perceptions of police officers, fire officers, coroner records and an expert in domestic abuse, where relevant to do so because they were involved in the five cases.

From this exploration, I anticipate being able to propose some analytical/conceptual insights into the construction and perpetuation of discourse and contribute to social work understanding of the cultural context of 'out of the blue' murder-suicide.

## 1.1    Origins of the research

The idea for this research evolved over many months.  I recall many discussions with friends and colleagues about cases of murder-suicide occurring across the UK and observing with incredulity the reporting of each new case where on the face of it, families appeared to have been caring and nurturing towards their children and did not have a known history of neglectful and abusive behaviour.  Social workers are familiar with families who inflict abuse and cruelty on their children but seldom remain undetected.   Many a professional discussion deliberated over how it was that many families who ended up carrying out these acts of extreme violence and abuse against children were not known to statutory child or adult social services,

third sector welfare organisations the police or mental health agencies. As such there was little in the way of a discursive framework within which social workers could make sense of the phenomenon. That is not to deny however that much research into risk indicators linked to perpetrators has taken place and that there exist well established discourses on homicide, suicide and child abuse. As the idea for enquiring into the nature of professional discourse on murder-suicide and how this could contribute to social work understanding of the cultural context of 'out of the blue' murder-suicide matured I began collating newspaper reports of incidents of murder-suicide and the dearth of social work involvement in cases was stark. It was evident that gathering data on the perceptions of social workers was unlikely to be as a result of their involvement in specific cases.

The remainder of this chapter includes an overview the interrelationship of child homicide and social work, the construction of belief and knowledge that informs social work and the role of discourse in social work before concluding with my research questions and the structure of the remainder of the thesis.

## 1.2    Familial homicide of children

The violent death of a child is a rare event and when it occurs within the family setting, it attracts horror and outrage and challenges our notions of the family being a place of nurturance and care for children. This horror and outrage is played out in news reporting of such incidents, which attracts public and professional interest. If the somewhat sensationalist reporting of high profile child homicides is taken at face value, one might be led to believe that contemporary British society is awash with child murderers and abusers and that families should be fearful for their children's safety. In reality there has been an overall decline in the rate of child homicide of 66% over the past 30 years[1]. To avoid a naive interpretation of the statistics it is worth noting that some deaths may be as a result of concealed abuse and thus the real cause of death potentially hidden and recorded in another category such as 'other external cause of death'[2]. Stroud and Pritchard (2001) make the point however that even if the exact rates of child homicide are subject to debate, rates are relatively low.

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[1] based upon a total of all children aged 0-14 years www3.who.int/whosis/mort/table1

[2] One of the categories of cause of death from the World Health Organisation (WHO 2009)

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Although not enough is known about the extent of how various agency interventions may have contributed to the decline in the rate of child homicide it is likely that changes in policies, health practices, economics and welfare provision have been influential as well as the work of the child protection systems (Williams and Pritchard, 2006). The safeguarding agenda of agencies that work with children and families persistently pursues the 'truth' about what contributes to the maltreatment of children; particularly through processes of inquiries and case reviews when things go wrong. The focus of inquiries and reviews is usually on the efficacy of agency interventions and whether professionals fulfilled the role they were expected to play in protecting children from abuse. Inquiries and reviews for the past 70 years have raised the same issues yet despite recommendations for improvements in practice being implemented, children continue to be killed by their parents or primary carers. Comparing and contrasting the Maria Colwell and Victoria Climbié Inquiry reports produced in 1974 and 2003 respectively, Parton (2004) claims that although inquiries have influenced policy and practice in that they have been influential in bringing about change, the child protection systems introduced have at times failed children and can thus be seen as much part of the problem as the solution. The Colwell inquiry report is considered to have been influential in the development of child protection systems and the Climbié inquiry report criticised the operation of those systems.

As a consequence of high profile child abuse inquiries during the 1980s, child protection practice has been affected by the quest for certainty and a pre-occupation with establishing risk factors and predicting 'dangerousness' has been encouraged. This is both due to the need to ration and use resources more effectively as well as the need to increase accountability for service delivery and worker activities (Kemshall et al., 1997). Explanations for child abuse are often given in terms of mitigating factors which prevent parents from providing care and nurturance. Risk assessments attempt to measure and manage the impact on children of parental capacity to parent and protect in circumstances of parental mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic abuse and poverty. Difficulties arise for social workers and other professionals when the issues that affect parenting capacity are not evident to them and judgements cannot be made about the potential impact on a child within the family.

The Biennial Analysis of Serious Case Reviews reporting in 2008, 2010 and 2012 reported a recurring finding that fewer than half of the children subject to the review

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were open to children's social care at the time of the incident (Brandon et al 2008, 2010, and 2012).  The 2012 analysis identified that in notified cases, at the time of the incident, less than half of the children and families were receiving a service from children's social care (42%). Just over a fifth (21%) of the children had never been referred to children's social care.  These issues highlight that whilst the majority of notified cases had been referred to children's social care and almost half were in receipt of services from children's social care, there remains a proportion of children where opportunities to intervene effectively may be few or not ever available to social workers and limited to a few other professionals for whom there is a mandate for involvement with the family.

## 1.3    Constructions of belief and knowledge

Social work knowledge reflects the profession's diverse epistemological base. Professional decision-making is a complex process and social workers are frequently confronted with multiple versions, accounts or perspectives of the same set of events, generated by different people and different theoretical perspectives. Based on observation of the day to day interaction in a social work office, Scourfield and Pithouse (2006) assert that it is routine for social work practitioners to simultaneously draw on lay and professional sources for their knowledge-in-practice.  Parton (1998) asserts that health and welfare professionals need to acknowledge the uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity that lie at the heart of their practice.  There may be equally valid versions of the same phenomenon and it is not always easy to find a 'best fit' hypothesis about a situation (White, 1997).  If it is the case that there are often multiple and competing accounts given and perspectives held by different people, or the same individual in different contexts, then what is unsaid or could have been said in a different way may become extremely significant (McHoul, 1994).

Professional talk will make use of or invoke certain dominant ideas which may be cherished aspects of professional ideology (Taylor and White, 2000:138). Foucault's work (1973, 1976, and 1980) on power and knowledge has argued the importance of paying attention to the power of dominant ideas and their supporting organizational and institutional frameworks.  The concept of 'category entitlement' expresses the idea that 'certain categories of people, in certain contexts, are treated as knowledgeable' (Potter 1996:133).  We invest in people the entitlement to be knowledgeable on the basis of their membership of a particular category such as coroner, social worker or police officer.  Category entitlements can be built up or

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undermined in accordance with counter-claims and evidence produced by others. Because professional dominance can lead to 'silencing' of particular versions, it is necessary to study the narratives of different sources.

Different interpretations of events result from cultural expectations and inferences about moral character. Cuff (1993) points out that moral adequacy is often assessed by reference to membership characterisations and sub-characterisations and the range of morally sanctioned behaviours associated with them; individuals enact their encounters within particular discursive frameworks, for example about what is 'normal' and 'deviant'. When familial child homicide occurs within the context of neglectful and abusive families that are known to statutory social services, professionals and lay persons make sense of the matter by reference to widely available and understood discursive frameworks about professional accountability, childhood, 'violent men' and 'bad mothers'. An example of how the discursive framework on professional accountability can be used to make sense of child abuse is aptly demonstrated in the case of Peter Connelly[3] whereby the response of politicians and tabloid newspapers was to condemn child protection services for yet another failure (Toynbee, 2008). Professional accountability is only one discursive framework and the discourse of 'bad mothers' is not only relevant to mothers who kill their children and offend societal myths of maternal grace and mother love (Oberman, 1996). Drakeford and Butler (2010) discuss how the offence of familial homicide, introduced by the 2004 Domestic Violence Crime and Victims Act, has given the discourse of the 'bad mother' a new legitimacy in both popular understanding of child abuse and inside the criminal justice system. Media reporting on the case of Aaron Gilbert in Swansea, who was killed at the age of 13 months by his mother's partner focused more on the mother than the child's killer (Herring, 2007). Similarly, Panko (1995:74) nicely describes the glorification of motherhood and argues that "at the root of the belief that mothers who fail to protect their children are morally reprehensible, and thus criminally punishable, lies a condemnation not so much of their failure to perform acts of a physical nature but rather of their failure to perform acts of love – the way mothers should love their children". Whether or not a discursive framework has potency or endures will depend upon how well it is supported, developed and challenged by those whose experiences, perceptions and accounts are influential in developing stories and generating ideas and knowledge. In this research, news media, professionals

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[3] Peter Connelly died in 2007, aged 17 months having sustained over 50 injuries

involved in cases of murder-suicide and social workers tasked with protecting children are considered to be in positions of influence in the generation of discourse on murder-suicide.

## 1.4    Discourse on murder-suicide

Fairclough (1992:3) argues that discourse is a difficult concept because various theoretical and disciplinary standpoints have given conflicting and overlapping definitions.  However, Fairclough (2003) sees discourses as ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' or thoughts, feelings and beliefs, and the social world.  He acknowledges that it is generally necessary to consider the relationship between different discourses because particular aspects of the world may be represented differently.  Different discourses are thus different perspectives on the world, associated with the different relations people have to the world which are dependent upon how they stand in relation to others and their own personal identities (Fairclough, 2003:124).  It is wholly conceivable therefore that there will be a range of discourses in relation to the phenomenon of murder-suicide according to one's position in relation to a particular case, to the incidence of homicide, the incidence of suicide or the phenomenon more generally.  The media plays an important part of the development of understanding about the cultural construction of murder-suicide.  Because of its rarity compared to other types of child abuse it is unlikely that they will have encountered the phenomenon professionally, through their social work training and continuing professional development, or in their personal lives.  Warren-Gorden et. Al., (2010) assert that the use of newspaper reports to examine murder-suicide has been an accepted technique because of the lack of statistical datasets available.

By acknowledging multiple discourses on the phenomenon of murder-suicide and by analysing how these discourses are constructed to warrant particular claims and to undermine other claims, a more rigorous approach to professional practice and a greater degree of reflexivity can be achieved (Taylor and White, 2001).

## 1.5    Research questions

This doctoral research project seeks to explore the construction of discourse on familial murder-suicide and consider the role of child protection social work in these cases. The specific research questions are as follows:

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- What is the role of child protection social work in cases of murder-suicide?

- How do social workers understand and make sense of specific cases of murder-suicide and the phenomenon more broadly?

- What informs social workers in reaching conclusions and developing ideas and knowledge about murder-suicide?

- Recognising that because murder-suicide cases are very rare, media reports are likely to be a key source of social work knowledge about murder-suicide; how do newspaper reports present and construct stories and perceptions about cases of murder-suicide?

- Do newspaper reports on cases of murder-suicide differ in the way in which the event is recorded according to the type and brand of newspaper and if so, what impact might this have on professional discourse?

- How does social work interface with newspaper reporting on issues of child abuse and what implication does this have for the development of discourse on murder-suicide?

In the remainder of this thesis, chapter two reviews the literature relevant to murder-suicide and chapter three describes the methodological processes followed. Chapter four examines the role of newspaper reports in the social construction of the phenomenon of five cases of murder-suicide. This type of analysis is important because the written media plays a key role in the generation of discourse. Few professionals or lay people are likely to encounter cases of murder-suicide other than when they feature in media reports. Chapter five examines non-social work professionals and social work interviewees' perceptions in relation to the same five cases. The perspectives of non-social work professionals who have worked on real-life murder-suicide cases are interesting in their own right in terms of the assumptions made about cases. A consideration of the perspectives of these professionals also allows us to look at differences in between professions and understand more about the role of social work and the extent to which it is distinctive. The research would ideally have included the constructions of social workers who had experience in cases of murder-suicide but only one case had any social work involvement and participation in the research was declined. Social workers who were not involved in cases of murder-suicide were included so that I

could consider how this group of professionals, who work with children and families to prevent child abuse and help them overcome its effects, regard and make sense of the rare incidence of murder-suicide. I was also interested in how social workers see their own professional role in relation to the phenomenon of murder-suicide.

# Chapter 2

# A review of the literature relevant to murder-suicide

## 2      The literature review

In this chapter, I will make the case for the relevance of this research to social work. The chapter starts with conceptualizing murder-suicide and examines the research evidence on perpetrator characteristics and a range of discourses that can be applied to an understanding of murder-suicide. I will then locate the relevance of the phenomenon to social work within a context of contemporary societal values and family ideology, emphasizing the role of social constructionism and issues related to risk and childhood. The role of the media in creating and maintaining discourse about the phenomenon is also explored.

Social workers and other professionals are used to working with high risk cases where the risks to children are identifiable and harm and death are preventable. Conversely, murder-suicide often appears to be unpredictable and this aspect of the phenomenon is often emphasized in media stories with it being described by journalists as a random event occurring 'out of the blue'. Underpinning professional practice in the area of child abuse and neglect is a plethora of research and a well developed discursive framework within which to make sense of it. There is no such well developed discourse in respect of deliberate murder of children by parents where there is no such history of abuse and neglect known to professional agencies and thus no identifiable risks. This lack of alternative discourse within which to make sense of murder-suicide can perhaps be attributed to the relative rarity of the phenomenon and paucity of available information about children that might be at risk or who were victims. Added to this, media representation which is sensationalist and depicts the events as random and inexplicable, may prevent professionals from focusing on the underlying issues. If murder-suicide of children and parents is to be understood by social workers it is necessary to identify a discursive framework within which it can be conceptualized in terms of the role of social work in its prevention.

Conducting the literature review was a cyclical recursive process which started with a key word and key phrase search of the university library for text books, using the terms 'murder-suicide', 'familicide', 'child homicide' and 'infanticide'. I undertook a

similar search of subscribed electronic databases and journals using Metalib which included ASSIA, ERIC and PsycINFO.  From identified books and journal articles I sourced other references. I also made use of Google Scholar and followed up references provided by my tutors.  Predominantly the literature on murder-suicide that I identified early on in the research concerned perpetrator characteristics although as the research progressed discursive text books and journal articles on the nature of the phenomenon and its cultural context were identified. Consideration of cultural context included domestic violence, gendered ideology and mental health issues.   In the absence of an explicit social work discourse on the phenomenon of murder-suicide I considered social work knowledge more broadly which led to literature on social constructionism and how the phenomenon of child abuse and risk to children is constructed and made sense of by social workers.  The ways in which notions of childhood and family life are constructed inform the development of discourse about child abuse and logically the phenomenon of murder-suicide. Additionally, one of the key questions which this research seeks to consider is how newspaper reports present and construct stories and perceptions of murder-suicide and so I considered media related literature on the influence of the media on developing discourse.

## 2.1    Defining murder-suicide

Murder-suicide manifests itself in different ways and can include both high-profile mass killings such as the April 20 1999 Columbine massacre[4] and familial murders, claiming the lives of offspring and sometimes spouses.   Relatively few murder suicides occur in the context of 'spree' killings such as the Queen Street (1987)[5] and Strathfield (1991)[6]  incidents.

In cases of familial murder-suicide, typically the assailant commits murder and this is followed by their suicide within a short time period after the crime.  The office for National Statistics (ONS) holds data in relation to homicides and also suicides. In 2011/12, there were 47 homicide victims aged under 16 years and in line with

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[4] The **Columbine High School massacre** occurred on Tuesday, April 20, 1999, in Columbine, US. Two students embarked on a massacre killing 12 students and a teacher, as well as wounding 23 others, before committing suicide.

[5] The **Queen Street massacre** was a murder-suicide that occurred on December 8, 1987 at the Australia Post offices in Melbourne, Australia. The attack resulted in 8 fatalities and 5 injuries.  The intended victim who was a former school friend of the assailant, escaped unharmed.

[6] The **Strathfield massacre** was a shooting rampage in Sydney, Australia on Saturday, August 17, 1991. The shooting left eight dead and six wounded.  The gunman killed himself at the end of the massacre.

previous years, 60% of these victims were killed by a parent or step-parent (ONS, Violent Crime and Sexual Offences, 2011/12). In respect of suicides, in 2011 there were 4,552 male suicides and 1,493 female suicides in people aged 15 and over and between 2010 and 2011 the UK suicide rate increased significantly from 11.1 to 11.8 deaths per 100,000 population. The highest suicide rate was in males aged 30 to 44 (ONS, Suicides in the United Kingdom 2011). The Home Office report 'Homicides, Firearms and Intimate Violence 2010/11' shows that between 2000 and 2011 (Table 1.02, pp. 33) there have been 353 cases where perpetrators suspected of homicide have committed suicide. In 2010/11, the number was 40. This data does not identify the number of homicides that refer specifically to the murder of an intimate partner and children followed by suicide.

There are a range of familial murder-suicides but I am concerned only with cases involving birth or step children and parents. Typically cases of familial murder-suicide include filicide-suicide which is the killing of one's children and then oneself where women are frequently the perpetrators of these events and are often mentally ill (Bourget and Gagne, 2002) and familicide-suicide whereby typically depressed, paranoid or intoxicated males kill their entire families and themselves (Felthous and Hempel, 1995; Marzuk et al, 1992). My research focuses on five specific cases of murder-suicide which involve male perpetrators only, drawn from a larger initial sample which included both male and female perpetrators in a range of social contexts. Agreement by professionals to participate in the research was gained in respect of these five cases only and they cannot be considered wholly representative of the wider population of murder-suicides. This issue will be given fuller consideration in chapter three.

For the purposes of this research I am concerned only with cases where suicide or attempted suicide occurs within a one week period following the murder of the child. According to Moskowitz et al. (2006) most authors consider that suicides occurring more than 3 days or one week after the murder are not considered murder-suicide events (Barraclough and Harris, 2002; Marzuk et al, 1992), although intervals as long as 3 months (Allen, 1983) and as short as 3 hours (Lecomte and Fornes, 1998) have been proposed. Some have excluded suicides in custody regardless of the time interval (Milroy et al, 1997), although no such strict definition is imposed in my research.

## 2.2    Summary of the research evidence on underlying characteristics of perpetrators

Much of the research on this subject has been concerned with the means by which crimes of murder-suicide are committed and also the perceived motives or causes. It is not necessary to dwell on the means in this chapter but it is sufficient to note that it is well documented that internationally firearms are the most commonly used means (violence policy centre, 2002; Hatters Friedman et al, 2005; Eliason, 2009).

Newspaper reports on the phenomenon of murder-suicide often lead the reader to believe that the incident is inexplicable because it is carried out by a mild mannered, successful, family-orientated man with no criminal history.  This suggests that both the producers and readers of newspaper reports have pre-conceptions and stereotypical images of men who murder their families which are at odds with the placid family man image described above. Dobash et al. (2009) argue that murder of an intimate partner appears to come 'out of the blue' because conventional men are not expected to perpetrate such a crime because they are not offenders, are considered to be good family men and have a job, whereas stereotypically, men who murder their partners are poorly educated, abusers of their partners and perhaps their children, unemployed and frequent offenders. However, their 'Murder in Britain' study found that 'a considerable proportion of men who murder an intimate partner do not fit the commonly held stereotype of men who commit suicide' (Dobash et al, 2009:2).  Earlier reported studies (Dobash et al., 2004; Dobash et al., 2007) have revealed that men who murder an intimate partner appear to be relatively conventional in terms of demographic characteristics such as childhood backgrounds, adult characteristics and situational factors.  The alternative explanation suggested by Dobash et al., (2009) lies in the circumstances at the time of the murder which 'provoked' the act such as infidelity or threats to end a relationship.  Under such circumstances a conventional non-violent man might 'snap' and act in this extremely violent way that is outside of their normal character.

Taxonomies of causal factors including gender difference, chaotic abusive relationships (Selkin 1976, Berman 1979, Shepard 1961, Marzuk 1992, Carach 1998, Stack 1997, Felthous 1995, Elias, 2009) violence (Felthous 1995, Harris-Johnson 2006), altruism (Marzuk 1992, Stack 1997, Hatters-Friedman 2005, Milroy 1995, Elias, 2009), murder as secondary motive (Milroy 1998, West 1965, Leyton 1995) and psychopathology (Felthous 1995) are also well documented.  Other

factors associated with intimate partner violence that have been reported include, adverse childhood experience (see Browne, Williams & Dutton 1999; Hamberger & Hastings, 1986; Magdol, Moffit, Caspi & Silva, 1998; Schumacher et al., 2001, Dobash, Dobash & Cavanagh, 2009), economic and social disadvantage, problems in adulthood such as substance abuse and a history of violence and problems with personality and cognitive processing (Dobash, Dobash & Cavanagh, 2009).

Some of these factors are discourses that social workers regularly refer to in their work with children and families and these are considered more fully below.

2.2.1    Domestic violence

Child homicide assailants are extremely rare.  Pritchard et al. (2012) identify three distinct within-family assailant categories; mentally ill parents, mothers with a child on the child protection register and men with previous convictions for violence. Violent men are reported by Pritchard to kill over five times the rate of mentally ill parents.  The murder-suicide cases with which I am concerned are undeniably an extreme form of violence against a partner and child.

Domestic violence is a major indicator of risk to children and perpetrators who are violent to their female partner are also frequently violent to their children (Saunders, 2004). Between 2000 and 2011 there have been 440 children under the age of 16 years murdered by a parent (Smith, 2012).

In respect of child homicides, research by Saunders (2004) into 29 cases of child homicides in 13 families found that domestic violence featured in 11 of the families. In one of the remaining cases the mother had spoken of her ex-partner's obsessively controlling behaviour; a characteristic feature of domestic violence (see Pence, 1985).  In two of Saunders' cases, violent fathers were facing the ultimate loss of power and control as they faced custodial sentences for violent offences against their partner. Instead they killed their children and themselves.   Saunders argues that in these cases, professionals did not have an understanding of the power and control dynamics of domestic violence and did not recognize the increased risks following separation or the mother starting a new relationship.  In some cases, although statutory agencies knew that the mother was experiencing domestic violence, children were not viewed as being at risk of significant harm even when she was facing potentially lethal violence.

Although the act of murder-suicide can be perceived as the ultimate act of power and control over partners and children, the family histories in the five murder-suicide cases in my study, as far as they are known from media reporting, do not in fact appear to fit the conventional image we see in the domestic violence literature of an abusive male and abused female partner with children who experience adverse impact as a result of the adult relationships within the household. Paradine and Wilkinson (2004) identify three antecedents to child homicide: prior history of child abuse; prior agency contact and a history of domestic violence in the family. None of these antecedents appear to feature in my five cases either, insofar as their histories are known from media reporting, but that in no way suggests that domestic violence as described above is not a feature within cases of murder-suicide; chapter 3 will discuss the relationship of these cases to a larger case sample of murder-suicides. It is not necessarily surprising that newspaper reports do not report on the existence of domestic violence within these families because most cases of domestic violence are unreported (Gracia, 2004). Gracia argues that reported cases of domestic violence are the 'tip of the iceberg' and represent usually the most severe end of violence and homicide. Reasons for non-reporting are personal in terms of embarrassment, fear of retaliation and economic dependency and societal in terms of imbalanced power relations in society, privacy of family and victim-blaming attitudes.

There is not only one experience of domestic violence and it is acknowledged that partner violence cannot be understood without acknowledging important distinctions among types of violence, motives of perpetrators, the social locations of both partners and the cultural contexts within which violence occurs (Johnson and Ferraro, 2000). The Cardiff Women's Safety Unit, NSPCC and South Wales Police developed 15 significant risk factors with reference to a review of 47 local domestic homicides which include financial problems, mental illness, jealous/controlling behaviour, separation, conflict over contact and suicide threats or attempts (Johnson, 2004). Johnson and Ferraro assert that a full understanding of partner violence must ask questions about the role of control 'in the generation of violence that may have little to do either with patriarchal traditions and structures or with individual patriarchal motives' (pp. 955). Of equal relevance are questions about the role of control in non violent relationships which are well documented (Follingstad et al., 1990; Lawrence & Ehrensaft, 1999; Johnson, 2006).

Referring to non-lethal violence, Dobash, Dobash and Cavanagh et al., (2009) state that there is worldwide and historical evidence that violence in intimate relationships usually occurs within the context of conflict about other issues which include fidelity, authority, children and resources.  They further state that other major issues include men's sense of entitlement, jealousy and possessiveness.  It is within these contexts that the act of murder-suicide might be more conceivable.

<u>2.2.2   Discordant adult relationships</u>

Much international research has been done into the significance of discordant adult intimate relationships and their influence on the occurrence of murder-suicide.  A recent study (Logan et al., 2013) identified that of the incidents that they describe, 81% with paternal perpetrators and 59% with maternal perpetrators were preceded by parental discord.  Carach and Grabosky (1998) found that nearly 70% of all murder-suicides occur in the context of disputes relating to termination of a relationship, jealousy or other domestic matter with the most common relating to disputes over the termination of a relationship.  Studies in Hong Kong (Chan, 2003), Paris (Lecomte, 1998) and Western Australia (Harris-Johnson, 2006) found that most events were motivated by a chaotic relationships, separation, termination or marital or sexual relations, domestic disputes including violence and threats, disputed custody and/or access, obsessiveness, dominance, control, jealousy and egocentrism in the male perpetrator. These findings are consistent with risk factors identified by others (Wallace, 1986; Silverman and Mukherjee, 1987; Easteal, 1993, Polk, 1994, Wilson 1995, Johnson and Hotton 2003).

Polk (1994), focusing on the relationship between the victim and offender which leads up to the killing, writes about homicide as a form of conflict resolution. An example of such conflict resolution is that of a parent whose motive is suicide but they cannot face leaving their dependents behind and in their view unprotected.  In this type of case, altruistic intentions appear to motivate the perpetrator to take the life of the child and the welfare of the child is the perpetrator's primary concern rather than hostility toward the victim (Wallace, 1986).  Equally proprietary are cases where depressed males take the lives of their sexual partners as part of their suicide plan and women are viewed as commodities over which the male has rights. For these men it is inconceivable that the woman should be left alone to fend for herself (Polk, 1994). Campbell et al.  (2003) found that these sources of conflict were more apparent in cases where prior to the murder there had been no history

of violence towards the partner.  Tallant (2011:229), writing about murder-suicides that occurred in Ireland, supports the importance of concepts of entitlement and possessiveness in making sense of murder-suicides and suggests that disconnection from others is a trait found in most mass killers.  Although many mass killers form relationships they still live a relatively isolated existence and do not appear to fit into society.  The family relationships, tentative as they may be, are their world and most mass killers feel a sense of ownership over their wives and children.  The concept of men viewing women in proprietary terms, where women are seen as possessions over which men expect to have exclusive rights is referred to by Daly and Wilson (1988) who consider the motivation to be bringing women under control when they are perceived to be moving away in a relationship or moving out of the male's control.

2.2.3   Gender ideology

Contemporary discourses on the role of individuals contribute to the construction and constitution of narratives about murder-suicide in different ways, positioning people in different ways (Fairclough, 2002; Kitzinger, 2004).  In any particular culture and historical context women and men have particular ideological role obligations such as wife and mother or husband and bread-winner. The label child, mother or father has connected with it a whole host of expectations about behaviour.   These ideological role obligations are influential as they are implicitly understood and taken for granted, informing the perceptions of the professional, journalist and reader as they attempt to make sense of a story.  In a newspaper story about murder-suicide a woman may be placed as an innocent victim if felt to be a good wife and mother and thus blameless, or instigator of the crime should she have committed some act of infidelity or failed to protect her child from harm. This position is reinforced by Gee (1999:22) who emphasizes that what is spoken or written comes from a particular perspective on what the world is like; what is normal and not, what is acceptable and not, what is right and not, what is real and not, what things are like or should be like and so on.

Issues of male proprietary behaviour can be considered within discourse on gendered social roles.  Identities constructed by individual men will acknowledge and reproduce the definition of masculinity prevailing within particular cultures and time periods (Edley and Wetherell, 1995).  According to Connell (1987, 1995) the currently idealized form of male identity in Western societies is a rational and

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physically powerful masculinity. This ideal symbolizes male power and authority epitomizing patriarchal society. The influence of 'hegemonic masculinity' can be seen in a range of different settings. Issues relating to a masculine identity of being invulnerable to illness despite medical opinion to the contrary (see Hodgetts and Chamberlain, 2002; McVittie, Cavers and Hepworth, 2005; McVittie and Willock, 2006) and the perception of men who do not conform to expected employment patterns are relevant to this research. Loss of business, employment and income often feature in cases of murder suicide and McKinlay and McVittie (2012) identify that unemployment or redundancy, not through choice, can leave men experiencing disempowerment in being unable to fulfill the socially expected role of male breadwinner.

2.2.4    Mental illness

Moskowitz et al. (2006), writing about homicide-suicide events in New Zealand, concluded that they appear broadly similar to such events in other countries and that mental illness plays a significant role in some forms of homicide-suicide. However, they assert that there is considerable variation in the prevalence of mental illness in studies ranging from 15% to 91%, due in part to differences in the definition of mental illness used. A related difficulty relates to not being able to be certain that mental illness was active at the time of the homicide-suicide for those who had a diagnosis or prior treatment but no recent contact with mental health services (Harris Johnson, 2006).

The role of depression, broadly defined, in incidents of murder-suicide has been supported by a number of authors (Rosenbaum 1990, Lecomte et al 1998, Milroy et al 1997). In a review of the prevalence of mental illness in cases of homicide-suicide carried out in Asia, Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States of America over the past sixty years (Roma et al, 2012) depression was the most frequently reported disorder and the review indicated that mental illness plays an important part in homicide-suicide.

Pritchard et al (2001) note that parents kill children substantially more often than strangers and that in their study 55% of parents were mentally disordered, this being 22 x the rate of the severely mentally ill in the general population (Jenkins et al., 1998). Pritchard et al. (2001) identify a role for social work and argue for a better understanding of the child protection – forensic psychiatric interface, to identify those most at risk. In respect of a role for social work in those known to

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have mental illness, Professor Casey cited in Tallant (2011:245), commenting on a report into a high profile murder-suicide case in Ireland, believes that parents in psychosis need psychiatric help and not social work.

2.2.5   Types of familicidal killer

These themes all come to the fore in Websdale's (2010) research into 211 familicide cases conducted over a 12 year period.  Websdale identified 2 distinct groups of familicidal killers.  The first he named 'livid coercive' who are violent, controlling partners who have a history of domestic abuse and use threats, intimidation and violence to coerce their partners.  Websdale argues that these men are extremely jealous and feel a great deal of shame or inadequacy about their role as husbands, lovers or fathers.  The second group Websdale named 'civil reputable' who are described as being controlled and stoic; often pillars of the community and good providers for their families.  Websdale describes these perpetrators as appearing to the outside world as being kind and community minded; not letting their anger show.   According to Websdale these cases are harder to identify although depression is a key sign and perpetrators, like their 'livid coercive' counterparts, have feelings of shame.  Key to Websdale's explanation of what drives the familicidal killer is the concept of shame which stems, in large part from their sense that they have failed to live up to the dominant modernist ideas about masculinity.  Websdale argues that we should consider things from the standpoint of the perpetrator; what for some people is simply a challenge when things in life start to go awry, can be absolutely overwhelming for others.  He suggests that for some people, it is possible that they experience a complete break with reality; a psychotic breakdown for the first time ever.


## 2.3    Child murder within the context of family ideology

The circumstances and behaviours of perpetrators cannot be considered in isolation and how the phenomenon of murder-suicide is perceived and made sense of must take account of the society within which it is manifested.   In contemporary society and in our particular socio-political and economic context, the horror and outrage that accompanies deliberate harm to children is conditioned by the cultural experiences and social identity of many UK citizens whose belief systems about family values and moral behaviour dominate although arguably it is unlikely that any society considers the deliberate harm of children to be acceptable.

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The concept of morality moves us from what is individually rational to what is collectively rational, from concern for ourselves to concern with and about others. Collective rationality is a somewhat utopian vision and it is naïve to think that it has relevance for all individuals or families in modern society which is characterized by pluralism and secularism and social transactions appear to be impersonal, episodic and changeful (Rojek et. al., 1988:146). Perhaps we should not be surprised then that some people feel isolated with only loose affiliations to family, community and nation and do not subscribe to normative values and behaviours. Family life itself is diverse in the UK and whilst the classical family unit characterized by a mother, father and their birth children is still popular, a range of other family units exist such as lesbian and gay parents, single parents and step-parents. Right wing politicians, supported by the right wing mass media, often appear to blame the departure from the classical family unit as the norm for social ills and a lack of morality in society. The state continues to impose its socially constructed normality on family life at macro and micro levels. For example, the historical system of state benefits such as tax allowances favored heterosexual marital relations and for many years gay and lesbian couples were not recognized as legitimate partnerships. At a micro level, whatever the family formation, state agents such as social workers appear to be mandated to maintain an order of the care of children within the family, supported by the underpinning structures of legislation, guidance, policy and procedures. It is difficult to argue against the maintenance of order unless anarchy is to be preferred and Freud (1999) considers that even in revolutionary times, social workers responsible for the welfare of children are called upon to apply some standards of normality regarding how children are reared in families

Just as concepts of the family and good childrearing are socially constructed, so are the concepts of child abuse and risk to children. Gelles (1975) asserts that there is no objective phenomenon which can automatically be recognized as child abuse and Freeman (1983) observes that being 'at risk' is not an objective condition but a social construction derived from the value structure of a social group (see also Taylor, 1989:46).

## 2.4   The social construction of childhood

The ways in which notions of childhood and family life are constructed inform the development of discourse about child abuse and logically then the development of discourse about the phenomenon of murder-suicide. In turn, these discursive

frameworks guide the professional response to child abuse. It is difficult to construct the murder or deliberate harm of a child in any way other than it being deplorable and thus it may be obvious that society should be concerned with neglect and maltreatment of children. The protection afforded to children is not a static given however and has been subject to change at different historical times. How the 'essence' of childhood is defined will be influential in how the issue of child abuse is perceived (James and Prout, 1990; Buckingham, 2000; Kemshall, 2002). In contemporary western societies, for the most part childhood is conceptualized as a time of innocence and assaults against children are interpreted as a violation of innocence. Acts against children such as murder, neglect, abandonment, physical and sexual abuse are not new phenomena but are now considered to constitute maltreatment, as defined in The Children Act 1989 and related guidance.

An example of the way in which the perception of phenomena becomes socially constructed can be exemplified with child sexual abuse. The sexual abuse of children whilst undeniably real has been constructed in different ways in different historical contexts. Kitzinger (2004) argues that whilst there has been a long history of concern about the sexual exploitation of children from late nineteenth century when 'social purity' campaigners and early feminists campaigned, highlighting how working-class girls were trapped into prostitution (Jeffreys 1985 cited in Kitzinger 2004:33), and concerns were raised by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Salvation Army (Jackson 2000 cited in Kitzinger 2004:33), real change in the conceptualization of sexual behaviour involving children occurred in the 1980s when the media, including television, started to confront ideas of exploitation of children by adults as acts of violence. Kitzinger asserts that Esther Rantzen's programme *Childwatch* and the accompanying launch of the children's helpline, 'Childline', signaled the start of broader public recognition in the UK. The *Childwatch* programme was accompanied by expansion in attention to child sexual abuse from TV and print media and this raised public awareness and provided a framework for thinking and talking about the issue, with the subject becoming a topic for public debate and personal conversation (Kitzinger, 2004:32). The identification of social problems such as sexual abuse of children does not happen in isolation however. As well as occurring within the broader context of the Women's Liberation Movement, the success of professional and public interest and outrage about child sexual abuse gathering momentum can be partly attributed to the discovery of the 'battered child syndrome'. This discovery

had already prepared people for the idea that parents were not always nurturing and protective (Parton 1985; Nelson 1984).

Whilst it is now both conceivable and evident that not all parents are nurturing and protective, acts of deliberate harm to children are typically perceived to occur within neglectful and abusive families.  It is insufficient to rely on this dominant discourse for making sense of murder-suicide when it appears to occur within families that do not fit the stereotypical notion of being neglectful and abusive.

## 2.5    Risk and childhood

The concept of risk to children is inherent within contemporary social constructions of childhood.  Jackson and Scott (1999:90) argue that underlying the social construction of childhood and the everyday experiences of children is a preoccupation with prevention and risk management. A symbiotic relationship between prevailing ideas about childhood and those about risk is also referred to by Critcher (2003:166).  Within the media, discourse on childhood and discourse on risk are frequently debated, often in the context of the failures of social workers to manage risk and prevent harm to children.  Douglas and Wildavsky (1982:7) raise the question of how social systems come to identify some risks and ignore others, contesting that 'the type of society generates the type of accountability and focuses concern on particular dangers'.  Contemporary society recognizes dangers to children from adult caregivers and supports the elimination of risk factors in attempts to protect them from harm from adults. Earlier in this chapter I argued that social workers are used to working with the concept of risk supported by a framework based on prediction of risk factors.  The seeming unpredictability of murder-suicide poses particular challenges for social workers, hence the need to contribute to social work understanding of the cultural context of murder-suicide.

## 2.6    The influence of the media on public and professional discourse

The mass media are key arenas through which contemporary social issues are defined and transformed.  The media can have a key role in agenda setting, telling us what to think about and making certain issues or events more salient or significant.  Zucker (1978) shows that agenda-setting events are most likely to occur for unobtrusive issues; those that lie outside of the individual's personal experience and for which the media provide virtually the only frame of reference (see also Johnson and Covello, 1987:179-80).  Ayre (2001:889) refers to the work

of Hutson et al., (1994) and Robinson (1992) in making the point that 'where people have little direct personal knowledge, the image portrayed by the media becomes for them their image of the issue in question'. Arguably, the phenomenon of murder-suicide resonates with this position and the lack of a social work framework for discourse on the phenomenon of murder-suicide gives the role of newspaper reports in presenting facts and representing concepts and ideologies an important focus in this research. At the outset of this chapter I argued that media representations of murder-suicide incidents are often sensationalist and depict the events as random and inexplicable, potentially preventing professionals from focusing on the underlying issues. This part of the chapter will explore more fully how written media contributes to the discursive framework within which the incidence of murder-suicide is perceived and understood.  It would be misleading to suggest that there is no professional discourse on the issue of murder-suicide and that media reports rely solely on the journalist's perceptions and hypotheses. Instead, the journalist interprets, constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs stories as told by the public, professionals such as police officers and coroner narratives. However, these public and professional perceptions are often case-specific and have not been organized into a conceptual framework within which sense can be made of the phenomenon.   The role of perceived collective consciousness influencing reporting rather than direct knowledge of individual cases is an area for further research.

### 2.6.1   Media influence on child protection discourse

In the case of murder-suicide, despite the lack of a social work discursive framework for explaining its incidence, its representation as a horrific event makes sense in the context of media representations of the horror of child abuse.   When considering the power and influence of the media, it is helpful to refer again to the work of Kitzinger (2004:6) who focuses on how 'ordinary people interpret, recall, relate to and use media coverage in making sense of child sexual abuse'.  Kitzinger demonstrated how the massive increase in media coverage of sexual abuse during the 1980s raised awareness, influenced and was used by victims, leading to sexual abuse becoming a topic for public debate.  In making the subject of sexual abuse newsworthy journalists were able to capitalize on the previous discovery of 'battered child syndrome' which had already raised awareness of the potential for parents to abuse their children.  The process at work here is the use of media templates which are powerful tools for helping shape the ways in which people make sense of the world and 'serve as rhetorical shorthand helping journalists and

audiences to make sense of fresh news stories', providing context for how problems are understood and new events are interpreted (Kitzinger 2004:78). Analogies with prior events are encouraged and these can become templates that pattern our understanding of the main issues, shape past memories and influence how we interpret new stories as they unfold. This process is potentially very powerful as in the absence of knowledge about a particular phenomenon, the discourse of the popular media on a subject can dominate professional understanding and ultimately professional discourse. Kitzinger uses the example of how reporting on wrong accusations of sexual abuse in Cleveland 1987 informed subsequent reporting in Orkney 1991 and Rochdale, resulting in professional and public ambivalence about whether sexual abuse had actually taken place. For this reason, it is important to get beyond what is reported in the written media and begin to understand the perceptions of professionals as they interact with the phenomenon.

Although powerful in its own right in shaping perceptions, the media interacts with public audiences and other social forces such as professional organizations whose professional response to a phenomenon can be considered to legitimate its existence by recognizing it as a social issue and providing a professional response to it. Audiences are not passive recipients of information and the reader might interact with written text to affirm what they believe about the world or to challenge the dominant ideology. For example, media reporting of the Cleveland and Orkney cases of child abuse might be considered by some to redress the imbalance of the moral panic about child abuse and by others as evidence of a backlash that seeks to maintain the status quo of men's power within the family.

As well as being powerful in determining what is newsworthy, the media is influential in determining what people believe to be the facts of an event or a phenomenon. Potter and Wetherell (1987) refer to how social texts construct a version of events having social and political implications and White (1997:101) argues that hard news reports inflect the events they describe with cultural and ideological meanings and act to construct and to naturalize a model of social stability, morality and normality. Similarly Parton and O'Byrne (2000:17) argue that social problems are versions of events or situations which people use to justify certain courses of action or undermine other courses of action. However, it is generally expected that news reports should be factual, neutral and free of subjectivity (White, 1997:106) and it is presumed that news reporting can attain this

(White, 1997: 101).  Departures from this are apparent when we look at some newspaper reports on child sexual abuse in Orkney.  Headlines gave subjective opinion such as 'for the sake of all the broken hearted families, we must get rid of the social workers and think again' (Daily Mail, 5 April 1991 cited in Kitzinger, 2004) and 'How could this happen again – storm as sex abuse kids fly home' (Daily Mirror, 5 April 1991 cited in Kitzinger, 2004). These headlines were developed within a media template of reporting on sexual abuse in Cleveland four years previously.  Less blatantly than these examples, whilst verbal or written text may appear to be objective it can work in favour of some values and against others by appealing to systems of culturally determined values (Clark 1991:123). For Iedema et al (2004), impartiality is not a measure of how accurately reports reflect reality or adhere to the 'facts'.  It is instead a measure of how well the text presents, projects or construes a set of value judgments as fact and knowledge rather than as opinion and belief.  News stories are a mode of narrative then that construct reality rather than merely represent it.

### 2.6.2   The influence of social work as a profession on media stories

Hall et al (1997a) remind us that both professionals and the media have a story to tell and an interest in promoting a preferred image of child protection and that the child abuse professions have been active in the provision of discourse.  Conversely, Ayre (2001:898-99) suggests that professions have sought to avoid engagement with the media for fear of exposure and this is a hazardous approach leaving the media with a story which they want to tell but with large gaps in the narrative. He argues that professions should abandon avoidance as a strategy and become more sophisticated in their understanding of the media and of how news is created; 'to make real progress, we must begin to understand and address the fundamental discourses created by and creating media coverage'.  This supports the thrust of this research which is to understand the creation of discourse on murder-suicide and how better this can serve the child protection professions.

Lastly, it is important to note that news stories also concern narratives of personal experience told in face to face conversation, giving the journalist or researcher a key opportunity to ascertain perspectives, question beliefs and understandings and gather insights into the phenomenon in question.   The news stories on murder-suicide that I have read from local newspapers, tabloid newspapers and the BBC website sometimes include the perspectives of those affected by a particular

incident or those who knew the family.  Interviews such as these trespass into a sensitive research area beset with ethical difficulties concerned with interviewing those affected by a murder-suicide. Whilst interesting, it is beyond the scope of this research to engage with the families and personal associates of those involved in cases of murder-suicide.

In conclusion, this research is concerned with contributing to social work understanding about the phenomenon of murder-suicide and its cultural context. My research questions concern the role of child protection social work in cases of murder-suicide, how social workers make sense of specific cases of murder-suicide and the phenomenon more broadly, what informs social workers in reaching conclusions and developing ideas and knowledge about murder-suicide and how newspaper reports present and construct stories and perceptions about cases of murder-suicide.  An initial review of the literature on murder-suicide revealed an abundance of literature on perpetrator characteristics but a lack of social work discourse on the subject. Social work has much relevant knowledge and experience which it can draw upon in understanding murder-suicide and I have explored the ways in which notions about childhood and family life are constructed and inform the development of discourse about child abuse which in turn can be used to inform social work discourse on murder-suicide.  I have identified the significant role the media has played in generating discourse on the subject of child protection to inform the element of this research that is concerned with the how newspaper reports present and construct stories about murder-suicide.

# Chapter 3
# A framework for researching perceptions

As the title of the thesis suggests, this research is about how the phenomenon of murder-suicide is perceived. In particular, this research concerns how five specific cases of murder-suicide are portrayed in newspaper reports and how the same five cases are perceived by social workers and where relevant, other professionals who had involvement in the case.

This chapter will address methodological considerations, the research design and the influence of my biography on selecting this subject for research. Pseudonyms have been used throughout where quotations from interviewees are cited.

## 3      My biography and the research

An important aspect of the qualitative research process is the concept of reflexivity. To practice in this way inevitably raises questions about whether and in what ways my own 'moral concerns' direct my stance towards my subjects' constructions of their world and influence my observations of this research into perceptions of murder-suicide (Sarbin and Kitsuse, 1994). The constructionist approach to the study of social problems evolved in challenge to the dominant objectivist stance which defined social problems in terms of objective conditions in society (Best, 1989). Objectivist study might include the scale of the problem and how it occurred whereas in contrast, constructionism defines social problems in terms of claims-making which focuses on subjective judgements about putative conditions which may or may not exist. Constructionism is not concerned only with acknowledging that social problems are constructed, but addresses questions such as whose claims bring the social problem to our attention, how claims typify the situation and how professionals and the public respond to claims. Constructionism explicitly acknowledges and sanctions differential perspectives in the observation and interpretation of social phenomena. Best (1989) refers to 'strict constructionists' who argue that assumptions about objective reality should be avoided and claims-maker's perspectives should be studied without presuming to make judgements about the accuracy of the claims. Woolgar and Pawluch in Rubington and Weinberg (1995) in a critique of constructionism, argue however that constructionists base their analysis on hidden objectivist assumptions. They assert that whilst the focus of constructionists might be on subjective judgements or claims, there is some

assumption of objective social conditions. A different version of constructionism known as 'debunking' (Best, 1989) assumes that the researcher knows the actual nature of objective reality. This position is challenged for not focusing on the process of claims-making and for being concerned with the more objectivist stance of the actual nature of social conditions. The middle ground between these two stances is referred to by Best (1989) as contextual constructionism which remains focused on the claims-making process whilst acknowledging some assumptions about actual social conditions. This stance reflects my position with this research in that I am concerned with the way in which the phenomenon of murder-suicide is constructed in newspaper reports and in interview talk with social workers and other professionals, yet I assume that there is an ontological reality, at least in relation to the deaths in the five cases, that influences how perceptions about this social problem can be made sense of. The gap between ontological reality and construction of circumstances is highlighted by a coroner interviewed for this research:

> '*Cases like this, where there's often actually nothing at all to go on erm... the inquest process as I say can actually be very straightforward. I mean you've got 2 unlawful killings and a suicide and that's really all*' (Charles, coroner)

Collins (1990:232) argues that in order to make legitimate knowledge claims, researchers should have lived or experienced their material in some fashion. As a white, middle class, professional woman living in a long established lesbian relationship with three children I have little in the way of personal experience that has influenced me in pursuing this particular research subject. However, my professional experience over the last 2 decades has been hugely influential; in particular the last 12 years during which I have authored reports for many serious case reviews involving deaths of children of which some do not appear to have been predictable or preventable. Social work is tasked with protecting the most vulnerable from harm yet it seems that not all children and young people can be protected. It is in some way inevitable that children being reared in neglectful environments are more likely to suffer significant harm and potentially death, yet almost inconceivable that some children and young people in seemingly loving and nurturing family environments are killed in a premeditated manner by their parent. It is this experience that underpins my concern with, or moral impetus to contribute to social work understanding of the cultural context of murder-suicide.

My biography has also influenced the methodological approach of accessing different sources to attempt to get at perceptions and social constructions in relation to murder-suicide. Seventeen years in a range of practitioner, first line managerial and senior managerial professional social work roles has taught me that there is no single reality about a phenomenon and that meaning is constructed within and between families and professionals on a number of different layers. By this I mean that meaning is constructed within a single profession, between professions, within an individual family and between a family and different professions (see White 1997, Parton 1998, Taylor and White 2000, Taylor and White 2001). As a social worker I was acutely aware of the difficulties in categorising service users in a way that allowed a specific social work response to be made. For example, even when it was apparent that child protection procedures or court proceedings were the required response, within each family a different way of working may be required. Service users experience a multiplicity of difficulties including poverty, drug and alcohol addictions, domestic abuse, disability, victimisation and social exclusion to name a few and these difficulties may or may not contribute to why some adults harm their children. The stories of families whilst recalling the same or similar abusive phenomenon will differ in the factors said to contribute to their situation as will the weight afforded these factors by the social worker in determining responsibility and potential to change.

## 3.1    Preparation

In preparation for undertaking this research I considered both those things that I was familiar with and those things that I was not familiar with.

I had already spent two years familiarising myself with the phenomenon of murder-suicide. This was not least because whilst initially I knew I was interested in this as a subject for research, I did not know what in particular I wanted to focus on. Much of my early reading was concerned with the detailed studies that have been conducted into developing typologies and taxonomies of risk factors including chaotic abusive relationships (Stack 1997, Felthous 1995) and perceived altruism (Milroy 1995, Hatters-Friedman 2005). I was also familiar with the number and types of cases that had attracted the interest of the media and resulted in a plethora of newspaper reports.

Having less experience of documentary and narrative analysis I undertook broad reading around analysing discourse to better equip me in the analysis of the interview transcripts, coroner records and newspaper reports in my selected publications.

## 3.2    Methodological considerations

Hermeneutic and phenomenological intellectual traditions that are concerned respectively with the theory and method of the interpretation of human action and the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them have influenced the stance of interpretivism and are of relevance to this research.  Max Weber (2004:13) advocated a 'Verstehen' approach, describing sociology as a 'science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its cause and effects'. Although more complex than this in its original application, Weber is emphasising that social action is meaningful to actors and therefore needs to be interpreted from their point of view.  Influenced by Weber, Schutz (1962) also asserts that it is the job of the social scientist to gain access to people's 'common-sense thinking' and hence interpret their actions and social world from their point of view.  The theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism has also been regarded as a further influence on interpretivism.  The argument being made is that interaction takes place in such a way that the individual is constantly interpreting the symbolic meaning of their environment and acts on the basis of this imputed meaning (Bryman, 2004:14). Following in this tradition, I took an interpretive approach to this research, employing predominantly qualitative data collection, recognising the subjective meaning that is brought to making sense of the social world.

## 3.3    Research design

The original research design was intended to achieve the purpose of understanding how the incidence of murder-suicide is perceived and to describe, explore and develop, from a UK perspective, discourse as derived from public, professional and documentary sources. This was to be achieved via a qualitative cross-sectional design which would examine and analyse perceptions of murder-suicide from social workers and where relevant other professionals involved in such cases, coroner reports, journalists and newspaper reports during a specific period of time. The research was to look at a small number of cases in depth with a view to being able to propose some analytical and conceptual insights into how social workers and

other professionals understand and makes sense of the phenomenon of murder-suicide. The number to be studied would be somewhat determined by what could realistically be achieved in a study of this nature as well as the response rate. Mc Cracken (1988) emphasizes the value of the critical reflection and depth of understanding that can be gleaned through a detailed focus on a small sample. Whilst a robust generalization about how social workers and other professionals make sense of and understand the phenomenon of murder-suicide cannot be made, there is potential for 'moderatum generalization' (Payne and Williams, 2005). Moderatum generalizations are limited generalizations which bring a semblance of order and consistency to social interaction. They do not attempt to make sweeping generalizations that hold sway over long periods of time rather what they claim is moderate and are open to change. Payne and Williams (2005) claim that in qualitative research, moderatum generalizations are unavoidable but should be planned for and explicitly formulated within a context of supporting evidence.

It was my intention to undertake a detailed analysis of each case in the following way:

- Qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with professionals, including social workers and coroners, that had been involved in the case either prior to the murder-suicide or in response to the incident, providing the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of the concepts, beliefs and knowledge that they use to inform their perception of the case

- Qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with journalists who had written the newspaper reports, providing the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of the concept, beliefs, knowledge and practices they employ in generating the report.

- Qualitative analysis of the coroner record for each case in terms of how the record is constructed and whether there is a distinct coroner perception contained within the record.

- Narrative analysis of selected newspaper reports on the specific cases to develop an understanding of the journalistic construction of the story

Undertaking this research in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition meant that understanding about murder-suicide could not be obtained from a quantitative analysis of newspaper reports and coroner records alone. It would not have been adequate to undertake a quantitative documentary analysis only, as I would not be

able to get at the subjective meaning behind what was written.  It was thus necessary to undertake a qualitative stance and explore and interpret perceptions and beliefs, generating ideas about how those particular meanings are constructed and the context within which those particular perceptions and beliefs are generated. The work of Taylor and White (2000), referred to in my introductory chapter, provides a supporting rationale for the qualitative analysis of professional discourse on health and welfare issues.

## 3.4    Methods of data generation

If I were concerned with establishing a comprehensive understanding about the phenomenon of murder-suicide, it might have been appropriate to employ the strategy of triangulation (Denzin, 1978).  However, the purpose of employing different methodologies was not to look at murder-suicide from more than one standpoint and reveal multiple aspects of a single empirical reality about the phenomenon.  More helpfully, Miller and Fox (2004:35) articulate the analytic potential for qualitative research of building bridges between different approaches to benefit from the mutual information that can be brought from linking two or more analytic formations, whilst at the same time respecting individual integrity and distinctive contribution as a particular qualitative approach.  The bridging approach uses several methodological strategies to link aspects of different sociological perspectives; the underlying philosophy is not to construct an all-encompassing theory about a single social reality or discover indisputable facts.

When we consider the phenomenon of murder-suicide, multiple discourses might be employed to describe and make sense of the event.  The term 'discourse' has been used in varying ways but following Gilbert and Mulkay (cited in Potter and Wetherell, 1987:7) I am using the term discourse in its broad sense to refer to spoken interaction and written texts.   One of the concerns of this research is with the discursive categories and practices associated with newspaper reports,  social workers, other professionals and how members in their respective occupations use them to depict murder-suicide events in particular ways.  Different professions might be said to provide discursive resources to their members and also the opportunities for constructing social realities through writing newspaper reports and reaching judgements in a coroner's court for example.  Silverman (1987) argues that situationally-provided discourses shape and guide but do not determine what might be said in social settings.  Social realities are always locally constructed and contingent; built up through the organisation of the professional, the use of

discursive resources and available opportunities in concrete events. The concept of localness is important because the meaning of what is said is inextricably linked to the practical circumstances in which it is voiced and interpreted by others. The same description of an incident may have a different meaning in a different setting. This research is concerned with the analysis of the spoken and written word both in terms of the meaning of what is spoken or written and also the ways in which professionals use their setting, available discourse and experience of concrete events to influence their spoken and written perceptions and beliefs.

### 3.4.1    Interviews with non social work professionals involved in cases of murder-suicide

Being concerned with the meaning of the phenomenon of murder-suicide to social workers and other professionals it seemed appropriate to undertake qualitative interviews. The strength of this method is the opportunity it provides for the collection and rigorous examination of narrative accounts of murder suicide by professionals who had been involved in specific cases (Miller and Glassner, 2004:137).   Radical social constructionists would argue that no knowledge about a reality in the social world can be obtained from the interview because the interview is obviously and exclusively an interaction between the interviewer and interview subject; a social encounter (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004) in which both participants create and construct narrative versions of the social world.  The point being made is that interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within the respondents (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004; Mishler, (1986). Holstein and Gubrium (2004:140) refer to this as active interviewing, emphasising the interactional and interpretive activity that is present in interviews. Although active interviewing can be criticised for creating contamination and bias as more is going on than simply retrieving information from respondents, if one accepts and understands that the participant is constructing meaning in the context of the interview and is transparent about this, then we can be less concerned with issues of  contamination.

Interviews were undertaken with fire-fighters, police officers and a coroner that were steeped in real events. These professionals often gave detailed accounts of the murder-suicide incident and their actions.  An interview with the Domestic Violence Service covered more than the specific case that it had commented on, seeking to generalise about incidents of violence and abuse.  Later on in the chapter the sourcing and sampling of cases will be described.  With the exception of one case,

there was an absence of social work involvement in the cases sourced for this research. This absence of social work involvement meant that another method of eliciting social work perceptions on the phenomenon of murder-suicide was required. To this end I employed the method of interviewing social workers on vignettes based on the cases used for this research. These interviews required the interviewee interpreting the vignette in a way that could not rely on direct experience of the case.

3.4.2    Interviews with social workers using case vignettes

Barter and Renold (1999) identify the vignette technique as a method that can elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses to stories. In order to elicit the perceptions of social workers, a vignette derived from each case was developed as material for focused interviews with social workers. In accordance with Hazel's (1995:2) description and to satisfy the need for internal validity (Hughes and Huby, 2004; Gould, 1996; Flaskerud,1979), the vignettes were concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which social workers were asked to give their perspective. The material contained within each vignette was taken directly from newspaper reports on the case and each vignette was developed using the same three stage format of providing a first section which included factual information about the event, a second section which included additional contextual information about the family and a third section which included statements from others about their perceptions as stated to journalists. This format corresponds to the structure of newspaper reports as reported in chapter four, in respect of there being an event, family circumstances and the portrayal of the perpetrator and his family by others. Both Hazel (1995) and Hughes (1998) recognise vignettes as a complementary technique that can be used alongside other methods to either enhance existing data or generate data that have not been accessed via other methods. Barter and Renold (1999) identify a main purpose of the use of vignettes in social research as being to provide a less personal and less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics. Whilst deciding on a non-threatening approach has to be an ethical consideration in any qualitative project which explores sensitive subjects, in this case, the selection of this methodology was primarily guided by the need to get at the perceptions of social workers about a subject they had little or no direct professional experience of. I was concerned not only with social work perspectives on the general subject of murder-suicide, but specifically in relation to adding to a more in-depth analysis of the five cases that were being analysed in terms of the perceptions gleaned from other professionals

and newspaper reports. By using the same vignettes and the same interview schedule, I was able to compare social work responses across cases to see whether there were different perceptions according to the type of case.

### 3.4.3   Analysis of coroner records

Whilst documents are not transparent representations of organisational routines (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004) or surrogates for other kinds of data they do in their own right constitute particular kinds of representations of realities. Atkinson and Coffey (2004) lead the researcher to regard documentary materials as data in their own right rather than as secondary data that provides a cross-reference or context to primary data. Scourfield et al (2012) further argue that it is legitimate to use coroner file records as both primary and secondary data. In this study because I had very limited access to coroner records, they are used as secondary data rather than as data in their own right from which valid interpretation and conclusions about coroner records generally can be drawn.

### 3.4.4   Newspaper reports

The role of the media in both reflecting and shaping the form and expression of social life is articulated by Bell and Garrett (1998) who states that the daily happenings of our societies are expressed in the stories told in the media. Fairclough (1995) refers to language being a socially and historically situated mode of action in a dialectical, meaning that it is both socially shaped and socially shaping, relationship with the social world. I selected newspaper reports, as opposed to television or radio media reports because I was concerned with the written story rather than other social aspects of story-telling such as spoken emphasis or presentation of the speaker. Newspaper reports were also straightforward to source and accessible for the purposes of narrative analysis. The aim of analysing newspaper reports was to look at the sequential structure of the stories and what this says about the point of the story being told. I was seeking to ascertain whether stories were constructed in particular ways in newspaper reports and whether there were recurrent instances of the reporting of particular phenomenon or perceptions held by journalists and others contributing to the journalist's story. The purpose of this was to see whether there were particular themes or perceptions that are reported and to consider how this might impact on social workers' understanding of the phenomenon when considered alongside their own views on the influence of newspaper stories in shaping understanding of and beliefs about the phenomenon.

As well as analysing what the newspaper reports said thematically about the murder-suicide cases I was interested in determining whether there appeared to be any manifest or latent emphasis of newspaper reports according to newspaper brands, type (tabloid or broadsheet) and editorial stance. This makes it relevant to analyse media reports in terms of whether there were different patterns of reporting across different newspaper groupings and whether there were different patterns of reporting within groupings according to the case in question. Certain newspapers can be grouped together in terms of 'quality' and 'popular' and these terms are most frequently used to characterize the editorial style of the paper as well as sometimes the readership e.g. 'Top People Read *The Times*' (Halloran et al. 1970:86). Newspapers are also frequently classified according to the political attitudes that they express. However, this can be ambiguous due to party affiliations of readers and differences in political attitudes expressed by newspapers that would be grouped together.

### 3.4.5   Sourcing of cases

Specific cases were sourced via a search of the Lexis Nexis database for the period October 1999 to February 2010 using the search criteria of 'murder-suicide', 'filicide' 'familicide' and 'child homicide'. I identified twenty one cases where a child had been murdered by a parent who then committed suicide and each of these yielded a variable number of newspaper reports ranging between three and in excess of five hundred and fifty.

### 3.4.6   Sampling for cases and interviews with non social work professionals

It was not easy to determine the number of cases and interviews that would give me sufficient data to begin to address my research questions. Different authors have identified different numbers that they consider to be adequate. For example, Warren (2002:99) states that the minimum number of interviews should be between twenty and thirty whilst Gerson and Horowitz (2002:223) write that convincing conclusions cannot be supported by fewer than sixty interviews. I anticipated that the number I would use would depend upon the success of achieving access to relevant professionals. My sampling for interviewing professionals that had experience of cases of murder-suicide was purposive. For the twenty-one cases identified through my search of the Lexis-Nexis database, I obtained contact details for professionals who were named in the newspaper reports as either commenting on the case or as being involved in the early investigations. None of these however

were social workers.  All professionals named for each case were written to (Appendix A) inviting them to participate in the research as detailed in **Table 1**.  For each of the twenty one cases, whether named or not in the newspaper reports I contacted the coroner's office and the relevant Police Force on the premise that both would routinely have involvement in cases within their jurisdiction.   I also contacted the social services department in relation to the two cases where there had been social work involvement with the family prior to the murder-suicide.  The other named professionals were variable across the different cases.

**Table 1 – Professionals contacted for each of the twenty one cases**

| Cases / Professional | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coroner/ HCJ[7] | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Fire & rescue | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |
| CPS[8] |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| FSS[9] |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |
| DVS[10] |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |
| Police/ Gardai | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| School | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| College | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |
| Journalists | X | X |  |  | X |  |  | X |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  | X | X | X | X | X |
| Community Centre | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Pathologist |  |  | X | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |
| Psychologist |  |  |  |  | X |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |
| Hospital |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| HSCT[11] |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Church |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |
| Social Services |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  | X |  |

The initial response rate is shown in **Table 2.**

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[7] High Court Judge
[8] Crown Prosecution Service
[9] Forensic Science Service
[10] Domestic Violence Service
[11] Health and Social Care Trust

**Table 2 – Responses from professionals contacted**

| Cases Professional | A | F | C | I | M | P | Q | U |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coroner/ HCJ[12] | | X | X | | | | X | |
| Fire & rescue | X | | | | | X | | |
| DVS[13] | | | | | | | X | |
| Police/ Gardai | X | | | X | X | X | | X |

Despite sending follow-up invitations, responses were received for only eight of the twenty-one cases. Follow up discussions with the individuals who had agreed to participate in the research resulted in the sample decreasing further. In case C, although the coroner I had contacted had agreed to participate, further discussion revealed that the case was not within his jurisdiction. The relevant coroner was contacted but declined to participate. In case I, despite making three arrangements for telephone interview, the police officer did not keep the appointment and I could not make contact with him despite further attempts to do so. In case M, discussion with the police officer revealed that although the case was initially considered to be a murder-suicide, the baby had died as a result of dehydration after the father had killed the mother and then himself. This case was removed from the sampling frame as it no longer fulfilled the criteria of the parent killing the child and then committing suicide.

The final sampling frame of cases was therefore dictated by the response rate to my invitation and subsequent follow-up invitations to participate in the research. I was left with five cases with confirmed participants but with fewer participants within cases than I had initially anticipated. Initially, in order to gain an in-depth insight into each of the cases from different perspectives I wanted to interview at least two different professionals for each case as well as having access to the coroner file. In reality I was left with two cases where there was agreement to participate from one professional per case and three cases where there was agreement to participate from two professionals per case. **Table 3** shows the final case selection and the sources of data collection. Although a social worker had been involved with the family in case Q, they did not agree to participate in the research and thus none of

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[12] High Court Judge
[13] Domestic Violence Service

the cases included social workers as a data source other than at the stage of using case vignettes.

**Table 3 – Final case selection and available sources of data per case**

| Cases<br><br>Professional | A | F | P | Q | U |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coroner/ HCJ[14] | | 1 inquest recording | | 1 file and interview | |
| Fire & rescue | 3 interviews | | 1 interview | | |
| DVS[15] | | | | 1 interview | |
| Police/ Gardai | 1 interview | | 1 interview | | 1 interview |

I undertook eight interviews across the five cases as detailed in Table 3. The same police officer was interviewed in respect of cases P and U. As well as an uneven distribution of interviews with the same professions across cases, there was uneven distribution of interviews within cases. For case A, I interviewed 3 fire fighters who had different roles in responding to the incident. This final sample was a significant departure from my original plan to have access to the coroner file, interviews with the coroner, journalists and two professionals for each case, one ideally being a social worker. None of the journalists reporting on the cases had agreed to an interview and with the exception of case Q, none of the cases appeared to have involvement with a social worker.

This sampling approach was somewhat problematic in that the final sample was selected on the basis that professionals involved in cases were willing to take part in the research, as opposed to being selected as representative of the overall sample of twenty-one cases of murder-suicides that had occurred. Table 4 below shows the twenty-one cases in detail in terms of whether the perpetrator was male or female, their social context as reported in newspaper reports and whether their partner/spouse was included in the murder-suicide.

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[14] High Court Judge
[15] Domestic Violence Service

Table 4 - The twenty one cases and their social context

| | Case | Perpetrator M/F | Method | Context | Partner/spouse |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | A<br><br>Final sample | M | Fire | ♦ Depressed<br>♦ Troubled<br>♦ Described as controlling of wife and children – not wanting them to become westernised | Wife included |
| 2 | B | F | Fire | ♦ Severe depression | Male partner not included in m-s – not children's father |
| 3 | C | M | Carbon monoxide poisoning in car | ♦ Separated from wife and children's mother.<br>♦ m-s took place during access visit<br>♦ father told mother he would harm the children | Ex wife not included in m-s |
| 4 | D | F | | ♦ Mental health<br>♦ Suicidal | Child's father not included in m-s |
| 5 | E | M | Hammer – head injuries | ♦ Adoring father<br>♦ Professional occupation<br>♦ Shouting in household on night of incident – Police had been called to domestic abuse previously<br>♦ Depression?<br>♦ Wife having affair? | Wife included in m-s |
| 6 | F<br><br>Final Sample | M | Stabbed | ♦ Mental health/depression<br>♦ Loss of business contract<br>♦ Loving father | Wife included |
| 7 | G | M | Carbon monoxide poisoning | ♦ Troubled marriage<br>♦ Domestic problems<br>♦ Troubled state of mind | Wife not included in m-s |
| 8 | H | M | Carbon monoxide poisoning | ♦ Troubled marriage<br>♦ Violent and controlling<br>♦ Access to children issues<br>♦ Loving father | Wife not included in m-s |
| 9 | I | M | Shooting | ♦ Access to children<br>♦ Separated from partner<br>♦ Angry and depressed<br>♦ Domestic dispute at time of incident | Female ex-partner included in m-s |
| 10 | J | M | Smothered and Fire | ♦ Serious mental health issues<br>♦ Concerned about own business – later no | Wife included |

| | | | | evidence that there was anything to be concerned about<br>♦ No marital concerns<br>♦ | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 1 | K | M | Head injuries | ♦ Separation from spouse<br>♦ Loving father | Female ex-partner not included |
| 1 2 | L | M | Pushed/fell – failed suicide attempt | ♦ Troubled relationship<br>♦ Mental health | Wife not included |
| 1 3 | M<br><br>Not a murder - suicide | M | Baby died of dehydratio n | ♦ Arguments between parents<br>♦ | Female partner included |
| 1 4 | N | F | Asphyxia | ♦ Post natal depression<br>♦ Mental health<br>♦ Killed sons to protect them from diseases she thought she had given them | Husband not included in m-s |
| 1 5 | O | F | Overdose to son | ♦ Separated from child's father<br>♦ Left note suggesting killed child out of spite – would not leave child to be brought up by him and his new partner after her suicide<br>♦ Mother framed as evil | Male ex-partner not included in m-s |
| 1 6 | P<br>Final sample | M | Shooting and fire | ♦ Loss of business and lifestyle<br>♦ Devoted father | Wife included |
| 1 7 | Q<br>Final sample | M | Smotherin g | ♦ Troubled/story relationship<br>♦ Separated<br>♦ Contact issues<br>♦ Phoned children's mother to warn her of harm to children<br>♦ Controlling/dominating | Ex-girlfriend not included |
| 1 8 | R | F | Fire | ♦ Disabled daughter harassed in community | - |
| 1 9 | S | M | slashed throats – failed suicide attempt | ♦ Troubled relationship<br>♦ Phoned ex-wife to say she would regret everything<br>♦ Mental health? | Ex-wife not included in m-s |
| 2 0 | T | F | Smothered | ♦ Mental health<br>♦ History of violence to others (not child or partner)<br>♦ Thought child's father had committed suicide | - |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | and thought they could be reunited after death | |
| 21 Final sample | U | M | Head injuries – beaten to death | ♦ Loss of business and lifestyle ♦ Devoted father | Wife included in m-s |

A summary of the similarities across the twenty-one cases in respect of gender of perpetrator and the social context that was reported in newspapers following the murder-suicide is shown in Table 5

Table 5 – Summary of similarities across the twenty-one cases in respect of gender of perpetrator and social context

| | Depression / mental health | Troubled relationship / separation/ divorce | Domestic abuse/ controlling /violence to others | Loving father | Business/ employment | Contact with children issues | Spouse / partner included in m-s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | A, E, F G, I, J, L, S | A, C, E, G, H, I, K, L, M, Q, S, | A, E, G, H, I, Q, | A, E, F,H, K, P, Q, U | J, F, P, U | C, H, I, Q | A, E, F, I, J, P, U |
| Female | B, D, N, T | O, | T, | - | - | - | - |

Of note is that according to the newspaper reports, depression and mental/health was a feature in 80% of the cases with female perpetrators compared to 50% of the cases with male perpetrators. A troubled relationship featured in 20% of cases with female perpetrators compared with 69% of cases with male perpetrators and domestic abuse featured in 20% of cases with female perpetrators compared to 38% of cases with male perpetrators. The incidence of domestic violence must be treated with some caution most cases are unreported (Gracia, 2004). Invariably in my overall sample of cases with female perpetrators business/employment issues, contact with children issues and the inclusion of a spouse/partner in the murder-suicide did not feature. In this sample, this sets female perpetrators aside with some distinct differences to male perpetrators. In terms of how my sample of five male perpetrators compares to the overall sample of twenty-one cases and total male sample, Table 6 shows a comparison in percentages which are rank ordered.

Table 6 - Percentage of variables featuring in the overall sample of twenty one cases compared to the total male sample and my sample of five cases, with rank ordering

| | % featuring in total sample | Rank | % featuring in total male sample | Rank | % featuring in my male sample | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 15 (71%) | | 15 (100%) | | 15 (100%) | |
| Female | 6 (29%) | | 0 | | 0 | |
| Depression/mental health | 12 (57%) | 1 | 8 (53%) | 2 | 2 (40%) | 4 |
| Troubled relationship/ separation/ divorce | 12 (57%) | 1 | 11 (73%) | 1 | 2 (40%) | 4 |
| Domestic abuse/ controlling /violence to others | 7 (33%) | 3 | 6 (40%) | 4 | 2 (40%) | 4 |
| Loving father | 8 (38%) | 2 | 8 (53%) | 2 | 5 (100%) | 1 |
| Business/ employment | 4 (19%) | 4 | 4 (27%) | 5 | 3 (60%) | 3 |
| Contact with children issues | 4 (19%) | 4 | 4 (27%) | 5 | 1 (20%) | 5 |
| Spouse/ partner included in m-s | 7 (33%) | 3 | 7 (47%) | 3 | 4 (80%) | 2 |

I am not laying claim to my sample being representative of the overall sample of 21 cases although it does share an incidence of the same variables within the overall sample and total male sample.  The first difference is that my sample excluded female perpetrators which accounted for 24% of the overall sample. For ease, I have ranked the variables from 1 to 5 where 1 is the most frequently occurring across cases and 5 is the least frequently occurring across cases.  In the total sample, depression/mental health and a troubled relationship featured equally and most frequently, followed by the perpetrator being a loving father, followed by the incidence of domestic abuse and inclusion of the spouse in the murder-suicide and lastly and equally the incidence of business/employment issues and contact with children issues.  Similarly, the total male sample featured a troubled relationship most frequently, followed by depression/mental health and being a loving father, followed by the incidence of domestic abuse and inclusion of the spouse in the murder-suicide and lastly business/employment and contact with children issues.

My sample of five cases with male perpetrators departed from this in that being a loving father featured most frequently, followed by inclusion of the spouse, followed by business/employment issues, followed equally by depression/mental health, troubled relationship and domestic violence, followed lastly and similarly to the other two samples with issues in relation to contact with children.

The implications of this for the research are that findings in relation to the five cases considered in depth are likely to have some bearing on the wider population of cases of murder-suicide in terms of there being a number of variables that feature across the twenty one cases. However, the lower ranking incidence of depression/mental health, troubled relationship and domestic abuse coinciding with the higher ranking incidence of being a loving father and business/employment issues in my sample of five cases, reinforces the concept of some murder-suicides being unpredictable and appearing to occur 'out of the blue'. These five cases are, in that respect good examples to use through analysis of newspaper reports, interviews with involved professionals and interviews with social workers using case vignettes, in exploring the role of social work in cases that appear to be unpredictable. I identify in my conclusion the need to consider the features of a larger case sample in terms of the implications for social work.

3.4.7    Sampling for social worker interviews

The absence of social workers involved in the five cases meant that I needed to find another way of researching social work perceptions. To this end I sought out interviews with social workers located in local authority statutory social work departments. Whilst purposively selecting for interview social workers within local authority children's services departments, I was acutely aware that to some degree my sample would be one of 'convenience' (Wardhaugh, cited in Bryman 2004) in that I would rely on professional contacts to gain access to local authority teams and thereafter the goodwill of busy social workers who had no connection to the cases in my sample and in all likelihood little or no professional experience of murder-suicide. The final sampling frame was dictated by the response rate to my letter of invitation (Appendix B) and subsequent follow-up invitations to participate in the research. In total I undertook nineteen interviews with social workers, each interview concentrating on two vignettes, yielding thirty-eight case specific transcripts and nineteen transcripts of more generalised questions relating to murder-suicide. Eight of these were from local authority area A, two were from local authority area B and nine were from local authority area C in which I am employed. I intended assigning particular vignettes to local authority areas with a view to examining whether there were any patterns in perceptions on cases within a particular area. To this end, Vignettes A and P were assigned to eight respondents in local authority A where the first interviews were undertaken. This approach was

not successful because Area B yielded only two interviewees which limited the ability to generalise about any emerging patterns of perceptions within that authority. Area C yielded 9 interviewees and each interviewee was assigned a pairing of cases F and U, Q and F or U and Q ensuring that overall each case vignette was used on seven or eight occasions across the three local authority areas. At the time of deciding this approach I anticipated a greater and more evenly distributed number of interviews within local authority areas and more than three local authority areas taking part. With hindsight and with the experience of having an uncertain number of respondents, it might have been appropriate to assign vignettes to respondents in rotation, regardless of local authority area. The overall spread of interviewees is shown in Table 7.

**Table 7 – Number of interviews per case for participating local authority areas**

| Cases<br><br>Local Authority | A | F | P | Q | U | Total number of interviews |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Area A | 8 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 8 |
| Area B | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Area C | 0 | 6 | 0 | 6 | 6 | 9 |
| Total | 8 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 19 |

## 3.5   Access issues

I needed access to a number of sources for this research, some of which were easier to negotiate than others. Gaining access to coroner records was a lengthy and difficult process that had little success. Anticipating difficulties in gaining access to official records, in the first instance, I wrote to the twenty-one coroners in respect of every case that I had gathered media reports about, including the research proposal and a covering letter.

In the first letter I sought to engage the coroner by writing to ask whether they would agree to me contacting them to talk about the research. At this stage I did not name the specific case or give any suggestion that I would be seeking access to their official records of a case. This initial letter resulted in responses from nine coroners (43%) of which four agreed to a meeting, four refused to engage in research on the subject of murder-suicide and one advised that I would need to obtain the written consent of a close family member to access the inquest papers.

Whilst I am of the opinion that researchers should not shy away from issues that create ethical dilemmas, in this specific case further attempts to gain access to coroner records in this case were ruled out. I concluded that because contact with family members was not a fundamental part of this research project, attempting to make contact with one family and dealing with the ethical issues that this would raise, was neither a valuable use of time nor a risk to causing distress or harm that was worth taking.

Of the four coroners that initially showed interest in the research, further written contact which more explicitly detailed my request for access to their records and an interview with them proved fruitful in two cases only. Of the two positive results, one coroner agreed to an interview and gave me full access to his paper files. The other coroner later withdrew agreement for access to the files but did send me the audio record of the inquest. Whilst negotiating with these four coroners I wrote again to the eleven coroners who had not responded but again did not receive any response.

Non-social work professionals were provided with an information sheet appended to the engagement letter (Appendix A). This approach was based on my professional experience of busy professionals and the need to get quickly to the point enabling decisions to be made. Similarly to the response from coroners I received some immediate agreements, some requiring further information and some refusals. The final outcome was agreement to participate from three police officers in relation to four cases, four fire fighters in relation to two cases and a senior manager in a domestic abuse service in one case. Of the police officers, one made a number of arrangements with me for interview but was not available at the agreed time, reducing this to two police officer interviews in total in relation to three cases. In one case, three different fire officers who had different roles in the case were interviewed. Follow up letters were sent to all professionals who did not reply to the first letter although this did not yield additional interviewees.

The lack of willingness on the part of coroners to allow me access to official records and some police forces refusing me permission to speak with their officers is not altogether surprising. In a climate of blame of professionals for cases of child abuse, it is conceivable that senior officers were seeking to protect their employees or colleagues from perhaps disclosing information that might be in some way indicative of failure or liability on their part. Lee (1993) observes that where

research is potentially threatening, the arranging of access revolves around the 'politics of mistrust'.

It is not apparent to what degree being employed by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) at the time of making initial contacts influenced some professionals to agree to participate. The NSPCC is a popular charity that receives a great deal of public support and has a history of both commissioning and undertaking research into matters of child abuse. Four months later I moved to work for a local authority social services department. Whilst those who had already given agreement continued to agree once I informed them that I had changed employer, it is not clear whether the change in employer had any impact on the decision not to participate when I sent out follow up letters.

As take-up had been relatively low I was keen not to lose the good will of those who had given consent whilst I continued to negotiate access to professionals within the five specific cases. I maintained regular contact by letter and phone advising of any delays in progressing the interviews.

Access to social workers for interviews based on case vignettes was gained by writing to the Heads of Service of five Welsh local authority Children's Social Services Departments. The choice of area was pragmatic in that I had professional relationships with three of the Heads of Service which I anticipated might assist me in gaining their agreement for me to contact social work staff. All of the areas were within reasonable driving distance with a view to potential cancellations and rearrangements of interviews being simpler to deal with. Two out of the five local authorities gave agreement. In local authority A, I conducted eight interviews over two days. Local Authority B was significantly less fruitful and despite giving eleven different days over a six week period I had only three agreements to be interviewed, one of which did not turn up for the interview. I followed up the low take up with the manager and administrator who helpfully sent reminder emails but to no avail. I had followed up the three other local authority areas with a further letter but did not receive any response. I needed to reconsider my target for a sample and having given consideration to the potential for social workers to feel compelled to participate because of my job role or feel under scrutiny during interview in terms of their practice I approached the teams within my local authority area, informally by an email to all social workers including a copy of the information sheet for social workers. Nine social workers from my own local authority agreed to participate.

## 3.6    Field relations

Having been contacted by letter in the first instance, the uneasiness of some agencies and individual coroners to participate seemed apparent by their swift refusal to engage.  This is not altogether surprising given the sensitive nature of the subject-matter and one can be forgiven for thinking that my interest was voyeuristic.  Generally though, once agreement had been given by specific agencies, individuals were keen to participate and spoke freely about their direct experience.  Without exception, all interviewees agreed to follow up interviews for the purposes of clarification once the analysis of their interview data began.

In one of the local authority areas I had arranged two days of interviewing with two teams responsible for different areas of the Borough. At the end of the first day the team manager commented that team members had welcomed the opportunity to reflect on this subject and found it helpful to think about situations where families were out of sight and out of reach yet committed extreme acts of abuse.  I took from this a sense that my presence was neither threatening nor seen as waste of valuable social work time.  A similar experience occurred in my own local authority with early interviewees encouraging their colleagues to be interviewed, having enjoyed having time to reflect on a phenomenon that they have little experience or knowledge of.

The nature of parachuting in to undertake interviews inevitably means that there is little time in which to develop rapport and trust.  These were important considerations because asking professionals to give their perceptions on a subject that they have limited direct experience of can feel for the interviewee like being intellectually or professionally stripped and exposed.    Mindful of this, I made clear to individuals that I did not expect them to have prior knowledge or experience of the cases and that I was concerned solely with their perceptions based on the vignette content.  This seemed to work well and social work interviewees were relaxed and thoughtful in their responses.

I concluded overall that engagement had been good and responses were genuine and not biased towards wanting to appear knowledgeable or experienced.  I was impressed by the degree of honesty and openness in talking about the subject matter and I was touched by the compassion showed to those affected by the murder and suicide of loved ones.

### 3.7 Procedures of data generation

Data was generated through interviews with non social work professionals, social work professionals, analysis of one coroner record and a narrative analysis of selected newspaper reports. Each of these methods will be considered in turn.

<u>3.7.1 Interviews with non social work professionals involved in murder-suicide cases</u>

Interviews were conducted by telephone which in qualitative research is uncommon, largely due to concern about suitability for purpose. However, Tausig & Freeman, 1988: 420) identify that telephone interviewing may provide an opportunity to obtain data from potential participants who can be difficult to access in person. In this research, the decision to undertake telephone interviews was pragmatic based on interviewees being geographically dispersed which would have demanded significant financial and time resources to travel for many hours to different parts of the United Kingdom for single interviews. Additionally, as fire-fighters and police officers, interviewees were in jobs that meant they could not be certain that they would be desk based at the time of our interviewee and planned journeys could have been wasted.

The decision to undertake telephone interviews has a number of potential impacts on the quality of the data collected and the experience of interviewees. Robson (2002) argues that because of person-to-person interaction in interviews and involvement between interviewer and interviewee, quality of data is likely to be greater than with an impersonal questionnaire administered by telephone. Rapport is not as easy to establish in telephone interviews as in face-to-face interviews and the ability to record the context of the interview and non-verbal gestures is compromised in telephone interviews (Creswell, 1998; Czaja & Blair, 1998) whereas in face-to-face interviews there is a visual-interactional component between interviewer and interviewee (May, 1993). Czaja & Blair (1998) also defend telephone interviews arguing that they may be more suited to personal topics because they are more impersonal than face-to-face interviews and more suited to structured, short and simple interviews (see also Harvey, 1988; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). A particularly relevant issue to consider in relation to the suitability of telephone interviews was the sensitivity of the topic and the degree to which interviewees may prefer the relative anonymity of the telephone versus the

face-to-face interaction with the researcher (Fenig & Levau, 1993; Greenfield et al., 2000),  A distinction should be made however between sensitive topics that cause embarrassment for which anonymity might be important and sensitive topics which are emotionally painful, such as murder-suicide, where in-person interviewees may be beneficial.  Telephone interviews limit the ability of the interviewer to anticipate an emotional reaction due to the lack of visual clues of respondent distress and they limit the options of the interviewer to comfort respondents who become emotional during interview.

Whilst making a pragmatic decision to undertake telephone interviews I sought to mitigate against compromises to data quality and poor interviewee experience that could result from using this method.  I spent time developing rapport with interviewees prior to the actual interview.  Having secured written agreement to participate in the research, I had an initial telephone conversation with interviewees to discuss the research proposal, the purpose of the interview and areas that I wanted to cover, issues of confidentiality and anonymity and any concerns or issues that individuals wanted to raise with me.  Further to this, I undertook a second telephone conversation to confirm interview arrangements and check that the interviewee was still happy to proceed.  Both of these conversations provided the opportunity to develop rapport before the interview itself.  At the start of the interview I revisited the purpose and their consent, asked if there were any concerns or questions and reminded interviewees that the process could stop at any time if distressed.  Additionally, I had undertaken to signpost interviewees to support services in their area should the need arise.  This matter was addressed in the early engagement stages and referred to in the information provided to professionals (Appendix A).  I considered the importance of being able to read non-verbal gestures and record the spatial context of the interview and concluded that whilst this was not absolutely necessary for data quality, attention to non-verbal gestures would have given me opportunity to anticipate and respond to any emotional reactions.  To address this I was reflexive during the interview and listened for pauses, sighs and changes in voice tone might have been indicators of potential distress and used these cues to interject and acknowledge the difficult circumstances the interviewee was describing and ask whether the interviewee was happy to continue.

Digital recording equipment was used to audio record the interviews which were fully transcribed.  The interview schedule (Appendix C) was semi-structured,

leaving scope for the interviewee to follow lines of thought that seemed relevant or important to them. The interview schedule contained a list of questions to be covered but the semi-structured nature of the interview enabled me to be flexible and ask additional questions, ignore some questions that had been covered or did not seem relevant and respond to the direction that the interviewee took the interview. The interview had three distinct areas. Firstly, questions were orientated to allowing the interviewee to talk about their views, impressions, thoughts and personal and professional perceptions about the murder-suicide that they had been involved in. Secondly, questions were orientated to whether the professional thought that their views, impressions, thoughts and personal and professional perceptions about the incident were influenced by others including the media. Thirdly, questions were orientated to whether the professional thought that they or their profession contributed to the development of discourse on murder-suicide including what is reported by the media.

The small size of the sample was prohibitive to conducting a pilot interview as I needed data from all of the interviews. This was not overly concerning however because the interview schedule for professionals who had been involved in cases ]was by design intended to be an iterative process whereby I had broad themes to cover in the interview but did not intend to be prescriptive in terms of order or coverage of the themes.

It is worth commenting at this juncture on the quality of data obtained in the telephone interviews. Comparison of the quality of data yielded by face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews has been extensively researched and reported on and some researchers report no significant differences in responses whilst others report significant differences in reported information (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). In their own study which used telephone and face-to-face interviews to gather data from correctional officers and visitors at county jails, Sturges & Hanrahan (2004) found virtually the same amount and quality of data were gathered regardless of whether interviews were conducted by telephone or face-to-face. It is difficult to make a direct comparison between the telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews because the former were with non-social work professionals using one interview schedule and the latter were with social work professionals using a different interview schedule. The purpose of each type of interview was to get at perceptions but in the context of the different relationship non-social work professionals and social work professionals had to the five cases.

Had the same interview schedule and type of interviewee (non-social work or social work) been used in both telephone and face-to-face interviews, a comparison of data quality would have required further consideration.

### 3.7.2   Interviews with social workers using case vignettes

Interviews were carried out face to face at the individual's workplace.  Audio recording equipment was used and the interview was fully transcribed. A dedicated office was sourced in each local authority area which was free from interruption and other noise.  The purpose of these interviews was to gather the views, impressions, thoughts and personal and professional perceptions of social workers as they related to the specific cases that the other professionals were interviewed about.

The concept of 'fuzziness' being strength (West, cited in Finch, 1987) usefully describes my approach to presenting information in the vignettes (Appendices D – H).   Each of the social workers was interviewed in relation to two cases.  Each case vignette was presented in three stages and the interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix I) of open-ended questions that sought to gather from the interviewees their own insights into the events (see Yin, 1984: 82) and allow the interviewee opportunity to define for themselves the meaning of the situation (Finch, 1987). Open-ended questioning has been shown to have considerable value in vignette studies (Sheppard and Ryan, 2003; Hughes, 1998; Sumrall and West, 1998). Kalafat and Galiano cited in Hughes and Huby (2004) note that open-ended responses may provide a more realistic estimate of reactions in real life situations.

In the first stage, designed to gather first impressions, the vignette presented information specifically about the event of the deaths, without any contextual demographic information and other factors like family relations, marital relations, debt or business interests; all of which have arisen in the cases studied. Participants were asked to read the first stage and then to describe what happened in the case in their own words and describe their first thoughts and perceptions. This was akin to what had been described to me in the interviews with police officers and fire fighters where they had turned up at an incident with only the presenting scene to inform them in the first instance.

The second stage was designed to gather thoughts and impressions in the light of additional information based on reported contextual information about the family

and individuals within it.  Further information about the case was presented including personal information about family members such as marital and family relations, debt, mental health and cultural and religious interests.  This was akin to the experience described by police officers and fire-fighters who began to piece together what had happened in the context of additional information as it became available to them during investigation.  After reading the second stage information, interviewees were asked whether their first thoughts/impressions about the case had changed, to describe family members, describe personal feelings, identify risk factors and consider an underlying motive, which later became described as a catalyst for the murder-suicide.

The third and final stage was designed to explore the degree to which statements made by professionals, friends, family members and community members influenced how the interviewee perceived the incident. This stage involved the presentation of statements about the family or individuals concerned that had been made by professionals, family members or friends and were stated in the newspaper reports.  These perceptions concerned what had happened and often implied why the tragedy had occurred.  Interviewees were then asked whether there were any views that they found to be particularly influential and any that they did not give much weight to. This stage was similar to the third stage of the interviews with non-social work professionals which was concerned with being influenced by the beliefs and perceptions of others.  Finally some questions were asked about the phenomenon of murder-suicide generally and not in relation to specific cases, the vignettes having been used as a stimulus for this extended discussion (Bloor and Wood, 2006: 183) and having allowed the social workers to engage in acts of orientation to the phenomenon (Schutz in Jenkins et al., 2010).

### 3.7.3   Analysis of coroner records

To make sense of the coroner file I developed a framework for recording information contained in the file (Appendix J).  The framework detailed who the contributors to the records were, whether facts, hypotheses, assumptions or judgements could be identified, what evidence there was to support judgements, what information led to judgements being reached, whether the coroner record could be described as a distinctive product and whether or not there appeared to be a specific coroner perspective or perception that was evident.  I had access to only two different coroner records and both presented in different ways in that one was a paper file containing various documents and the other was a recording of an

inquest that I had transcribed. I could not determine the degree to which coroner records would constitute a specific genre and employ a distinctive discourse that is associated specifically with the creation of coroner records or whether the one file and one inquest record was representative of other coroner records. In addition to 'what' is contained within the coroner records, my analysis of these records was concerned as much with 'how' the record is constructed. The concept of intertextuality is important because the coroner record comprises the written and oral evidence of professionals and lay people. In coming to a verdict about a death, the coroner relies on evidence provided by a number of different agents including the pathologist, police officers, forensic experts and potentially family members. Each of these arguably has their own discourse and conventions for the recording of information. Thus the coroner record can be considered a hybrid of different contributions, angles and foci, the interpretation of which is likely to differ from one researcher to the next.

### 3.7.4    Newspaper reports

In an attempt to analyse a representative cross section of the written media and avoid too much bias by making assumptions about which coverage would be most relevant and interesting, I selected newspaper sources from broadly right and left wing broadsheet and tabloid national newspapers and regional/local newspapers reporting for the region or town in which the incident occurred (see Aldridge, 2007 for a full discussion on the role of local media reporting). Reports were thus selected from a non national newspaper for the region or town in which the murder-suicide took place (identified by virtue of the extent to which it reported on the incident), as well as The Daily and Sunday Telegraph, The Independent and Independent on Sunday, The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday and The Daily and Sunday Mirror.

**Table 8 – Newspaper sources and number of articles analysed per source**

| Newspaper<br><br>Case | Non national | Independent Left-wing broadsheet | Mirror Left-wing tabloid | Telegraph Right-wing broadsheet | Mail Right-wing tabloid | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 3 | 5 | 9 | 3 | 5 | 25 |
| F | 3 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 15 |
| P | 4 | 14 | 11 | 14 | 17 | 60 |
| Q | 9 | 1 | 10 | 3 | 4 | 27 |
| U | 4 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 15 |

I undertook an exhaustive analysis of the total number of newspaper reports in each of the five newspaper types which totalled 142. The small number of newspaper reports allowed for this exhaustive analysis as opposed to selecting a sample of the overall data source as others have done; Waitzkin and Britt (1993) and Trost (1986) cited in Denzin and Lincoln (2000:780) selected approximately 15% of their overall data source for analysis. The selected newspaper reports were chosen on the basis that they concerned the specific incident of murder-suicide and the story was related to the perpetrator, his family and lifestyle.

The total number of reports examined is fewer than the total number of reports for each case, having excluded those detailing the forensic investigation, those which named the perpetrator in relation to a story which was about another incident of murder-suicide and discursive reports which were not specific to the case. The total number of reports excluded for these reasons was 9; 5 of which featured in The Mail (case Q = n1, case U = n4), 3 of which featured in the non-national newspapers (case Q = n1), Case U = n2) and 1 of which featured in The Independent in relation to case P.

## 3.8    Ethics

As I was considering the phenomenon of murder-suicide and working out what it was about the phenomenon that was of interest to professional social work, I gave due consideration to the possibility of tracing and asking surviving family members and friends to participate in the research. Whilst accepting that approaching family members and friends who have lost their children and partner in a murder-suicide might be considered too intrusive and insensitive, I remain of the view that such approaches can be made with sensitivity and we should not shy away from certain areas of research for fear of being too intrusive. In any event, as the research questions became more clearly formulated it became apparent that to seek to involve family members and friends would add nothing to the research when it was

concerned with the perceptions of social workers, other professionals and the content of newspaper reports.

It was important to demonstrate that I was not undertaking the research because of prurient interest but because there were questions to be raised to inform professional social work practice. This was done at the outset in the letters to professionals with the research proposal appended, in the subsequent letters with research proposals appended and telephone conversations with coroners and other professionals. During conversations with professionals that I was seeking to engage in the fieldwork I gave explicit messages that I was not interested in discussing the details of specific cases in a way that required revelations about professional practice or disclosure of potentially confidential or restricted information. I talked to participants about wanting to get at their perceptions and constructions of the phenomenon of murder suicide which had been developed from their experience of working with such cases. Using this approach I hoped to lessen anxieties and minimise refusals to access to those professionals who had first-hand experience of specific cases. For the majority of cases, media coverage had been extensive and there had been police investigations and inquests into the deaths. It was not always easy to differentiate between the information that was already in the public domain, in media reports, heard in court rooms, recorded at inquests and that which was known only to the individuals being interviewed and their colleagues who were privy to such confidential information. I had not given any undertaking that I would not include in my notes or written thesis any specific details of a case if such information was forthcoming although a commitment was given to anonymity and ensuring that individual comments would not be attributable. It is difficult to give any assurance that the cases can be made difficult to identify because of scarcity of the phenomenon, the high media profile given to some of the cases and the fact that the cases had features that were distinctive such as perceived wealth and a fire of great magnitude. I have tried to maintain confidentiality and address these issues throughout by seeking to protect individual identify. Whilst my field-notes taken from audio and written recordings clearly identify the interviewee, their profession and workplace I have replaced all of these with pseudonyms. However, it should be acknowledged that the potential for real cases to be identified might be unavoidable.


## 3.9    Validity

I do not present, or even claim that it is possible to present an unchallengeable 'truthful' view of reality in this research. Essentially, questions of validity in this research relate to the adequacy of my understanding and representation of people's meaning (see Banister et al, 1994). For Marshall (cited in Banister, 1994), validity becomes a quality of the researcher in relation to their data including how the research was conducted, the relationship of the data in terms of the level of theorizing and contextual validity in relation to how the conclusions relate to other work in the area. Although this research presents some threats to validity which I will go on to talk about, these are to some degree offset by the recording and transcribing of interviews, the systematic analysis of newspaper reports and by giving a reflexive account about how the research was undertaken and how interpretations were reached. One of the first threats relates to my sample size and how it was obtained. I have already acknowledged the difficulties encountered in obtaining access to professionals involved in cases of murder-suicide and subsequently gaining access to social workers. Any claim to generalisation on the basis of data collected from the sample must be restricted to 'moderatum generalization' (Payne and Williams, 2005) given that I cannot evidence that I have accessed a representative sample of professionals involved in cases. Interviews are not a neutral means of extracting information from participants and meaning is socially constructed throughout the interview process which shapes both the form and context of what is said between interviewer and interviewee. Being transparent about this stance in the research removes the expectation that answers on one occasion will replicate those on another as they emerge from different circumstances, understandings and experiences. One question to ask of the research is whether the findings apply exclusively to those case studies and those professionals only or whether the findings have wider relevance to other cases of murder-suicide, social work and the other related professions per se. Researching a small number of cases and limited number of professionals does not warrant conclusions concerning similarities in professional perceptions and any claims beyond moderate generalization can only be made through the accumulation of studies in this area. Conducting interviews with different professions and social workers across different local authority areas did however allow me to consider similarities and differences, as did researching different newspaper reports on the same case. A further threat to validity is the degree to which I can claim that my analysis of the responses given in interview corresponds to the meanings held within the interviewee. Mindful of the gap between what is said and the analysis of this, any claims I make to validity are primarily derived from the ability of

interviewee answers to convey experiential realities that are locally comprehensible to similar or related professions without assuming that what is said is an indication of a particular institutional context. My interviews were audio recorded and transcribed making them accessible to scrutiny in relation to the observations drawn from them.

In respect of documentary data such as the coroner file, inquest transcript and newspaper reports, Peräkylä (2004) acknowledges that the researcher cannot control the focus of a given text that is used as data but can select the range of texts used. Undoubtedly I do not have a representative sample of coroner and inquest records but I have attempted to analyse a representative range of newspaper reports across right wing, left wing, tabloid and broadsheet publications.

A further consideration in relation to threats of validity concerns issues of bias in respondent and researcher. Whilst I cannot be wholly certain that such bias did not present itself, in this research I have no evidence to suggest that my presence interfered with the interviews as respondents were participating through choice and understood the interview context. Answers to questions did not appear to be biased toward what I might want to hear and I did not perceive that information was being withheld from me. However, it is useful here to refer back to the notion of active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004:140) which emphasises that interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within the respondents through processes of interactional and interpretive activity in interviews. I go on to talk about the need to manufacture distance from familiarity with social work culture to avoid making assumptions or having preconceptions about how social workers might think about the phenomenon of murder-suicide.

### 3.10   Reflexivity

In respect of the professionals that I was seeking to interview, I was familiar with the organisation of social work departments in Wales having both an insider perspective from working within statutory social work teams as practitioner and senior manager and an outsider perspective having worked as a practitioner, first line manager and senior manager within the voluntary sector, contributing to the multi-agency arena within with child safeguarding is strategically planned. These were two distinct experiences of management, as each involved a different set of strategic and operational responsibilities and priorities. Each setting also involved a

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myriad of different experiences and perspectives. I felt thus that I did not have a single perspective or stance on social work culture and how social workers might experience and make sense of murder-suicide. Notwithstanding this, I acknowledge that having 17 years of social work experience meant that I needed to be mindful of manufacturing distance (see McCracken 1988). This issue was not an overriding one in the analysis of newspaper reports, because social workers did not feature in the reporting of cases used in this research. However, the need for manufacturing distance emerged when I developed the vignettes and interview schedule and undertook interviews with social workers. As I developed the vignettes I had some awareness of the professional thresholds that were likely to be applied by social workers as they talked about these cases, although this might differ across local authorities according to variables such as staff resources, budgets and socio-economic conditions of the area. I was also aware of the moral and ethical frames that might be applied when making sense of a parent murdering a child regardless of the circumstances of the parent. I sought to step back from this familiarity by maintaining the integrity of the cases that I presented to social workers by providing vignettes based on information that was in newspaper reports rather than providing a vignette based on my interpretation of a case. By presenting information that was factual or presented as such in newspaper reports and asking open-ended questions designed to elicit perceptions, I sought to limit my imposition of the way in which the vignette should be interpreted, based on my experience of social work thresholds and moral frameworks. I was unfamiliar with the culture of the specific teams within which social work interviewees were located in two of the local authority areas and highly familiar with the cultures within my own local authority. Whilst I had experience of working strategically with the different local authorities in a previous job role, I did not know any of the managers or social workers that participated in two of the local authority areas. In respect of an imbalance of power in terms of seniority and knowledge I held about the subject matter, participants met with me as a researcher. With the exception of my own local authority area, interviewees were not aware of my level of seniority in my workplace although they were aware that I worked for a local authority and had experience and understanding of statutory social work.

I had little in the way of assumptions about non social work professionals such as fire fighters and coroners and how they might experience and perceive murder-suicide although I own some assumptions about the police officers being concerned with issues of crime over and above any other factors in the consideration of

murder-suicide. Again I was mindful of manufacturing distance in respect of this and used the same interview schedule and format as with other professionals in order to reduce any bias towards asking questions and probing to elicit responses that I might anticipate from police officers.

Lastly in this chapter, I have considered how my biography influenced my experience of and response to the research process and the topic of murder-suicide. As somebody who is in close proximity to the processing of harm and sometimes death of children in my working life I anticipated experiencing less emotional impact from the murder-suicide stories that I was working with than somebody who is not exposed to death and harm on a regular basis. The data that I was working with were generated from newspaper reports, a coroner file and inquest record, interviews with professionals with first hand experience of attending one of the five scenes of murder-suicide and social workers who did not have first hand experience of the five cases. Each of these sources had the potential to stimulate a different response in me. The newspaper reports constitute secondary data in that they contain accounts of the murder-suicide event that have been assembled by a journalist as opposed to me as researcher. I experienced little in the way of emotional distress in reading the newspaper stories possibly for a number of reasons. It is inevitable that any murder-suicide will have caused pain and suffering yet this was not evident to me in the newspapers narrative. The newspaper reports varied in size and detail and the events were described in broad factual terms which were devoid of detail or speculation about how the event might have been experienced by the perpetrator and victims. Having taken care to address the welfare of those professionals who had attended the scene of the murder-suicide and would potentially re-live the horror during interview, I was mindful that through this process I might experience 'pain by proxy' (Moran-Ellis, 1997). I was somewhat surprised by what appeared to be mechanistic descriptions of the scenes by some interviewees and a denial of emotional impact which interviewees attributed to being in close proximity to the horrors of fires and deaths for example as a routine aspect of their working life. Some of the descriptions of the scenes in case A however are ingrained in my mind and whilst I do not consider them frequently, I can retrieve them readily when I hear about similar situations and they evoke in me a sense of loss and despair despite having no connection with the family involved. The data generated through interviews with social workers had little impact as they recounted their own perceptions of events based on vignettes that I had developed from newspaper reports with which I was very familiar. My

familiarity with social work culture and supporting people who are working with painful and distressing experiences enabled me to focus on empathising with interviewees as they tried to make sense of what they were reading, rather than being concerned with my own reactions to what was being said.  The most profound impact on me arose when I read the coroner file and was party to witness statements and photographs of two deceased young children who had been smothered.  Witness statements had high emotional content from family members and graphic descriptions of the scene by police officers.  This data had been absent from any of the other sources that I had access to.  The photographic images in particular gave rise to feelings of anger and distress, despite the feelings of sadness for the perpetrator that were evoked in me when reading some of the witness statements. As a lone researcher I was aware of my dependency upon my partner and some work colleagues to talk about the cases and conflicts that were occurring as I tried to makes sense of them.  Immersed in reading newspaper reports, interviewing and reading and listening to coroner records became a large part of my day to day experience and I recall being accused by my partner of becoming disinhibited and forgetting that others would find the stories harrowing and upsetting.   I was mindful also of the need to maintain intellectual distance from the emotional aspect of the cases that was essential for critical analysis.  This was supported in part by the process of categorizing the data during which parts of stories were assigned to different categories so the whole story at times became disaggregated and removed from the experience of those who had died.

# Chapter 4

## The cases and their construction in newspaper reports

Media output of news stories is one way in which people receive information on subjects that they have no personal or professional experience of. Journalistic recounting, interpreting and explanation of events, in an attempt to get people to see things in a particular way (Fairclough, 1995), is one source of the social construction of the phenomenon of murder-suicide.

Using a Proppian (1968) narrative analysis, this chapter considers how murder-suicide is portrayed in selected newspaper reports. The purpose of analysing newspaper reports was to look at the sequential structure of the stories and to ascertain whether stories were constructed in particular ways and featured recurrent instances of reporting of particular phenomenon or perceptions held by journalists and others contributing to the journalist's story. This chapter also considers the use of membership categorisation devices (Sacks, 1972) and contrast structures (Smith, 1978) in the portrayal of the perpetrator and his family to achieve identities, realities, social order and social relationships through talk. In particular I was seeking to identify whether there were particular themes or perceptions that are reported and to consider the social constructions that might then be employed in making sense of incidents of murder-suicide.

### 4        Argument

Narrative analysis of newspaper report structure and content in relation to five specific cases of murder suicide showed that a discernible favoured structure to newspaper reports can be identified that presents information in terms of the event, a portrayal of the perpetrator, family circumstances and the inclusion of views of others in relation to the murder-suicide. Compared to the attention given to a portrayal of the perpetrator, there generally lacked inclusion of characteristics and attributes of the children's mothers; **case A** being the exception. Portrayals of the perpetrator were consistently positive across the five cases, less consistently negative across the five cases and the text brought into sharp relief the dissonance between the portrayal of being a 'good father' and the act of murdering your children. Attempts to create consonance or harmony between these contradictions are evident in the inclusion of 'state of mind' characteristics of the perpetrator. These can be interpreted as attempting to bridge the gap between a 'good father'

and one who murdered his children by enabling the reader to make inferences about the contributory role of mental health issues. The narrative analysis also concluded that there are a number of thematic commonalities across the five cases including loss of control over loved ones, loss of lifestyle through financial ruin, shame resulting from these losses and lastly and consistent across the five cases is the concept of saving loved ones from a perceived fate. This proto-narrative, developed from the narrative analysis of attributes and characteristics and information provided by characters introduced into the story suggests that in these cases the act of murder-suicide is altruistic and borne out of a desire to protect loved ones from a fate perceived to be worse than death. As such an act is not expected from a loving father and husband, it is conceptualised as coming 'out of the blue'. The associations between money/work problems and relationship breakdown and men's suicide are well documented in the literature (Canetto, 1977; Kushner, 1993; Stack. 2000; Stack and Wasserman, 2007, Scourfield, 2010, 2012) as are the concepts of honour and shame and their role in masculine identity (Bourdieu, 2001; Scourfield, 2012). Although I analyse gender representations as ideological constructs about masculinity, male suicide and the family context in making sense of the newspaper reports, what is missing is an explicit reference in newspaper reports to a feminist perspective on the phenomenon of murder suicide and the related issues of patriarchy and domestic abuse. This feminist perspective would potentially construct the perpetrators' wives as oppressed within their marital relationship, in their role as mothers and in relation to their role within the home.

The remainder of the chapter will set out the process by which these conclusions were reached and discuss the findings as they emerge.

## 4.1    The construction of stories in newspapers

News is generated from stories about logically and chronologically related events by reducing a series of complex events whose relationship to each other may be unclear, to a form of narrative order (Fairclough, 2003:84). One effect of newspaper texts concerns the representation of ideology and the operation of this as a form of social regulation. By drawing events together with a particular focalization, stories can regulate perceptions about and responses to events. News stories may elect to include and exclude certain events and of those selected set them into a particular relationship with one another. In this way, the creation of news stories involves a selective, interpretative and constructive approach rather than just being a presentation of the 'facts' of a situation. In applying this theoretical

framework to the analysis of news stories this chapter examines whether there is a narrative structure that is consistent in the presentation of information about cases of murder-suicide. This chapter also examines the function that component parts of newspaper story narratives play in telling the story.

## 4.2    Narrative analysis

This chapter focuses on the narratives contained within selected newspaper reports relating to five specific cases of murder-suicide which are described later in the chapter. A narrative is defined by Mishler (1986) as a particular kind of recapitulation which presents events as antecedents or consequences of each other.   Similarly, Denzin (2001) describes a narrative as a causal, temporal (relating to time) reproduction; a sequence of events or a story that has significance for both the narrator and the audience.  There is a beginning, middle and an end to the story and for the narrator at least, there is logic to it.  Narratives are not true pictures of reality; rather, they are social products and interpretive devices through which people represent their world.  Newspaper report narratives generate, reconstruct and interpret meaning and thus influence how we make sense of events and experiences of murder-suicide after they have taken place.    The language used in newspaper report narratives on specific cases, or the phenomenon more broadly, plays an important role in social interaction and society.  Rather than being neutral, the language in narratives is used to accomplish social ends and is thus implicated in the structuring and ordering of society.  This kind of analysis is thus important because it allows us to shift focus away from what actually happened as it appears in newspaper reports, to how we make sense of what happened.  Narrative analysis allows us to look at the way in which characters and their actions are employed to generate a particular perspective on an event.

Propp's (1968) analysis of the Russian fairy tale is an important early example of narrative analysis.  Propp applied a syntagmatic approach, which is a linear sequential structural analysis of text by which its structure is described following the chronological ordering of the text as it is presented.   This approach is concerned with denoting the relationship between the linguistic units which are used sequentially to create a structure.

Propp proposed four structural principles that can be applied to understanding fairy tales; stability of character role, limited functions/events within the story, identical sequence to events and fairy tales being of one type with regard to structure. The main emphasis of Propp's analysis is that stories convey meanings in standard structural forms. A different type of analysis in folklore, developed by Lévi-Strauss (1964) cited in Propp (1968) seeks to describe the pattern underlying folkloristic text. Rather than being concerned with sequential linear ordering, this paradigmatic approach takes elements out of order and groups them into analytic schema which are usually based on principles of opposition such as good/bad, life/death. As such, paradigmatic structures are deductive and speculative (Propp 1968: xii) whereas the syntagmatic approach is described as inductive, empirical and can be replicated.

One of Propp's structural principles is that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages, making possible the study of the tale according to the functions of its *dramatis personae* (Propp, 1968:20). Two observations are made by Propp in relation to functions. Firstly, functions of characters are stable and constant elements in a tale regardless of by whom they are fulfilled or which actions are used to fulfil them. Secondly, there are a limited number of functions known. In considering one particular type of tale, Propp identifies a number of different functions including 'absentation' whereby somebody absents themself from home; interdiction, whereby a request or advice as to what to do or not to do during this absence is addressed to a 'hero'; violation, whereby the interdiction is violated; reconnaissance, whereby a 'villain' who is introduced into the story in the role of causing some kind of misfortune makes an attempt at finding out for example the whereabouts of his victim; delivery, whereby the 'villain' receives information about his victim or an answer to question in the attempt at reconnaissance; trickery, whereby the villain attempts to deceive his victim; complicity, whereby the victim submits to deception and helps the enemy and villainy, whereby the 'villain' causes harm for example kidnaps, causes damage, plunders, casts a spell, commits murder. Propp observes that one function develops out of another with logical necessity and that a number of functions are arranged in pairs such as 'prohibition-violation', 'reconnaissance-delivery'. Tales with identical functions can be considered as belonging to one type. In addition to functions, tales have other elements, one of which Propp refers to as 'motivations' which are the reasons and aims underlying an action. Identical acts can be motivated in varied ways. Whilst

writing about the structure of fairytales, Propp's main emphasis is that stories convey meanings in standard structural forms (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:57).

Fairclough (2003) notes that whilst writing news stories is an interpretive and constructive process this does not mean that news narratives are the same as fictional narratives. News narratives, unlike fictional narratives, have a 'referential intention' which makes them open to questions about the relationship between the actual events and the story that is told about them (Fairclough, 2003). In this chapter, the approach is used as a framework within which newspaper reports on murder-suicide are tabulated and analysed. This allows us to see both how the narrative is structured in terms of component parts and the function that each component plays in telling the story. The function here refers to what is explicitly or implicitly implied by the particular component. For example, one way in which murder-suicide newspaper story narratives might be analysed is in terms of the moral tales they tell about the mighty and powerful falling from grace. This has particular resonance for this thesis when considered in terms of gendered ideology about masculinity. Although newspaper reports might not make explicit oppressive patriarchal relations within a family that can be used to explain murder-suicide, by focusing on issues of success and failure murder-suicide becomes explicable by considering it through the gendered ideological constructs about the feelings of male shame and powerlessness when no longer able to provide for or retain a proprietary role within their families. Scourfield (2012) identifies that money and work are important aspects of the traditional hegemonic breadwinner model of masculinity and 'a life marked by a loss of masculine honour is not seen as worth living' (pp13).

The next section of the chapter describes the five cases that this research is concerned with. After describing the five cases, I identify components that comprise the narrative structure of the newspaper reports seeking to establish whether there are discernible patterns or preferences in the sequencing of the components in relation to the specific cases and in relation to the different newspapers.

Drawing on Propp's (1968) thesis I then undertake a more in-depth analysis of the narrative that is concerned with the attributes/ characteristics of the perpetrator, motive, the roles assigned to others and lastly whether the case can be given an

overall descriptor that related it to the other cases in terms of similarity or difference.

Of overall importance, is what the story serves to illustrate. Through tabular analysis of elements of the newspaper story and consideration of the ordering of different elements, it may be possible to demonstrate that rather than being merely a transparent reflection of the facts of a seemingly 'out of the blue' event occurring as a result of provocation or extreme stress for example, newspaper reports are constructed in a way that enables the analyst to detect an underlying patriarchal family within which exist relations of male power, control and sometimes violence over women.

## 4.3    The cases

Maintaining anonymity of the cases is challenging due to the relative rarity of the events compared to other homicides and the high media profile that they attract. This is a particular challenge in the next chapter that deals with interviews of professionals involved in the cases as by virtue of their role they could be identifiable.   In this chapter, the case information presented is all in the public domain and has been drawn only from published newspaper reports or where stated, other publications.

Case A

A mother and her four daughters aged from 3 to 16 years died in a house fire.   The girls' father was treated in a hospital burns unit before dying within 2 days of the fire.   The blaze was treated as suspicious and it was established that it was an 'inside job'; the house had been locked up from the inside and flammable materials used.  It was later determined that the children's father had deliberately set the fire, killing his wife and children.  The girls' mother was born in the UK but had been educated in South Asia.  She returned to the UK when she was about 16.  Before her death she worked for a local cultural association which works with schools and mosques and was held in high regard for her work on building good relations between different backgrounds.  Although a Muslim, she came from a mixed English and South Asian background and was considered by her colleagues to be well placed to understand the concerns and feelings of everyone.  As well as being employed in the cultural association, the children's mother also helped out as an interpreter for the local authority, was a school governor and board member on several diversity groups. The girls' father spent all but the last 17 years of his life in

South Asia where he met his Anglo-Pakistani wife when her father sent her there to find a husband.  After an arranged marriage, he and the girls' mother returned to the United Kingdom and he took on a series of low-paid jobs.   His command of the English language has been described as poor, limiting his employment opportunities.  He was described by neighbours as a 'good family man' who was very quiet and did not socialise other than at his local mosque.

Case F

Three children under the age of eight years and their mother died having been knocked unconscious and then stabbed.  The children's father was found hanging from a banister by a nylon rope.  Just before the tragedy, the self employed father learned he could lose two-thirds of his business from a particular customer. A hearing heard that he was still worried about keeping his house after being declared bankrupt some years previously.  The children's father had discussed concerns that, in his words, he was manic depressive and was being treated with medication for depression after becoming trapped in what he described as a "vicious circle" of periods of work then inertia.  The mother and father married 6 years prior to this incident and there had been no history of violence in the family.  The children's mother, aged 27, was a housewife who had a few part-time jobs. It is understood she was preparing to undertake a college course.  The family had been engaged in routine activities with family and friends in the days leading up to the murder-suicide.

Case P

A father shot his wife and teenage daughter killing them before setting fire to the family home.  The man died from smoke inhalation.  The father was a multi-millionaire businessman whose business went into compulsory liquidation with reports of significant debts to suppliers and money owed in taxes.  The father had kept his business problems from his wife but had told friends he would not let liquidators take his possessions.  The daughter was a popular and hard-working girl who attended a local private college.  The murder-suicide took place in the early hours of the morning and the day before the family had been with friends at a party. It has been subsequently suggested that bailiffs were due to attend the property the following day.

<u>Case Q</u>

Siblings, both under the age of four years, were murdered by their father at his home.  The father then hanged himself at his adjacent place of work after making a phone call to family telling them what he had done and that he loved them.  The children's mother had attended a convent school for girls and was introduced by a friend to the children's father when she was aged 16 years; he was eight years her senior. The couple had been in a relationship for about 5 years when they split up and the children's father lived between his mother's address and his own home. The children's mother had continued living at the couple's home with the children. The separation was acrimonious and It is claimed that the children's father took all the furniture when the couple split up, leaving only a cooker in the kitchen, forcing the children's mother to borrow a mattress for herself and the girls to sleep on. Friends and neighbours said the couple had often argued and that the children's father appeared depressed in recent weeks.  Their relationship was described by a friend of the children's mother as 'stormy'.  The father's employer described the father as having marriage problems over the past year and that was getting the children's father down.  The tragedy was understood to have taken place on the first weekend that the father had been allowed to see his children since the break-up which had occurred approximately four months before.

<u>Case U</u>

A mother and daughter were found beaten to death after police officers received a call from the husband/father to attend their home at around 5am.   Both wife and daughter suffered severe multiple head injuries from which they died.  The husband/father was later found hanging at his business address.  The father was a successful businessman and his business appeared to be going well although it later transpired that his main customer had suspended a contract.  The family home was in an affluent area and they had recently returned from holidays in the USA and Europe.  The mother had been previously married and had two grown up children from this former relationship.  The daughter, a former head-girl, attended sixth form and was taking 'A' levels.  She was looking forward to taking a gap year abroad and doing voluntary work.

**4.4    Analysis of the sequential structure of newspaper reports on the five cases**

This section of the chapter examines the narrative structure of 142 newspaper reports for the five cases, the selection of which is detailed in chapter three.  In an attempt to analyse a representative cross section of the written media and avoid too much bias by making assumptions about which coverage would be most relevant and interesting, I selected newspaper sources from broadly right and left wing broadsheet and tabloid national newspapers and regional/local newspapers (see Aldridge, 2007 for a full discussion on the role of local media reporting). Reports were thus selected from a non national newspaper for the region or town in which the murder-suicide took place (identified by virtue of the extent to which it reported on the incident), as well as The Daily and Sunday Telegraph, The Independent and Independent on Sunday, The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday and The Daily and Sunday Mirror.

This next section of the chapter analyses the narrative structure of the five cases, highlighting similarities and differences within newspapers and within cases.   An analysis of content of the narrative will be dealt with later in the chapter where I present a more detailed analysis of the characterisation of the perpetrator and other family members, motive and the functions of other characters introduced into the story.

4.4.1   Narrative structure

Table 9 details the narrative structure for each case in the five newspaper types as I have interpreted its appearance in the newspaper reports.  I have sought to identify the prototype sequence, to be read down the columns, per newspaper for each case, by using the sequence that appeared most frequently across all reports from each newspaper type per case.  The detail contained under each component illustrates the information on which I am basing my categorisation.

## Table 9 – Narrative sequence of five cases across newspapers

| Case A | The Mirror | The Telegraph | The Mail | The Independent | Non national |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | The event | The event | The event | The event | The event |
| | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>The children's mother is described as a respected community worker | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Perpetrator feared Westernisation of wife and daughters<br><br>Marital disharmony | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Marital disharmony<br><br>Life limiting illness of son | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Marital disharmony<br><br>Life limiting illness of son | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Life limiting illness of son |
| | <u>Family circumstances</u><br><br>Perpetrator feared Westernisation of wife and daughters<br><br>Marital disharmony | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>Perpetrator described as being handicapped by a lack of English, moody, isolated and his life being centred on the mosque.<br><br>The children's mother described as being bright, bubbly and a role model for young Asian women.<br><br>The children are described as being pretty, happy and angelic. | <u>Introduction of characters</u><br><br>Stunned reactions from perpetrator's son, friend and a local councillor<br><br>Feels unreal to best friend | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>Perpetrator described by a neighbour as a good family man.<br><br>The family are described as loving and close.<br><br>The children's mother described as vivacious and involved in the community<br><br>The children described as flourishing in Britain. | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>The children's mother described as a popular community worker |
| | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>Perpetrator Described as being respected and well liked by a shop keeper. | | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>Perpetrator Described as somebody who did not speak much.<br><br>The children's | <u>Introduction of characters</u><br><br>Family member speaks of the separation being due to the different ways in which they approached | |

| | The Mirror | The Telegraph | The Mail | The Independent | Non national |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | The children's mother described as beautiful, a pillar of the community and as somebody who got on with everybody<br><br>The Children are described as 'angels'. | | mother described as: mixed race more westernised than her husband popular and sociable tireless campaigner leading figure | their life | |

| Case F | **The Mirror** | **The Telegraph** | **The Mail** | **The Independent** | **Non national** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | The event | The event | The event | The event | The event |
| | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Debt and fear of loss of home | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Money worries | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Depression because of money worries | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>**Perpetrator**<br>Described as a devoted family man | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Financial problems<br><br>Fear of business loss<br><br>Mother's illness |
| | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br>**Family**<br>Described by neighbours and relatives as quiet, happy<br><br>**Perpetrator**<br>Loved his children and wife.<br><br>**Children**<br>Described as enthusiastic, charming and happy. | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br>**Perpetrator**<br>The coroner states that the perpetrator's love for his family may have been his downfall. | <u>Introduction of characters</u><br><br>Grandparent struggling to come to terms with the tragic loss | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Financial trouble<br>Depression | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>**Perpetrator**<br>Relatives describe him as a loving father with an ideal family life.<br><br>The coroner states that the perpetrator's love for his family may have been his downfall.<br><br>Described by his mother as a devoted father. |
| | <u>Introduction of characters</u><br><br>Neighbours were stunned | | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u> | | <u>Introduction of characters</u><br><br>A friend advised the |

| Case P | The Mirror | The Telegraph | The Mail | The Independent | Non national |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | and shocked because it was a nice quiet family.<br><br>Relatives and friends had no clues as to the perpetrator's depression. | | **Children**<br>Described by the head-teacher as happy and popular.<br><br>Described by neighbours as 'angels'.<br><br>**Perpetrator**<br>Described by friends as being 'normal' when they visited. | | perpetrator to seek help about his depression.<br><br>The perpetrator's brother knew he had been depressed and had felt suicidal.<br><br>The Perpetrator had told his mother that he was manic-depressive.<br><br>The GP had been told by the perpetrator that he was depressed and stressed.<br><br>It was stated that there was no indication of the perpetrator taking his own life. |

| Case P | The Mirror | The Telegraph | The Mail | The Independent | Non national |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | The event | The event | The event | The event | The event |
| | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Debt and business collapse.<br>Luxury lifestyle | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Debt and business collapse.<br>Luxury lifestyle | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Debt and business collapse.<br>Luxury lifestyle | <u>Family circumstances</u><br>Debt and business collapse.<br>Luxury lifestyle | <u>Introduction of characters</u><br>Local people are described as being shocked, bewildered and stunned |
| | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>**Perpetrator**<br>Portrayed by his brother as acting in anger; getting back at the world; | <u>Introduction of characters</u><br><br>Perpetrator's brother reacts with shock and disbelief that he took the lives of his family; does not want to believe his | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>**Perpetrator**<br>The act is described as evil by his sister-in-law.<br><br>Described by | <u>Portrayal or perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>**Perpetrator**<br>Psychologist suggests the act could be 'perverted altruism' and the perpetrator | <u>Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others</u><br><br>**Perpetrator**<br>Described by business associate and Judge as someone not to be trusted |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| destroying everything so no one can have anything.<br><br>Perpetrator described as loving his life of luxury and not being able to bear losing it.<br><br>Described by business associate and Judge as someone not to be trusted<br><br>Described by associate as not a nice man.<br><br>Described by former accountant as a good family man and nice chap.<br><br>**Daughter**<br><br>Described by head teacher as a lovely girl with all the skills for a very bright future. | brother did anything wrong.<br><br>Friends and the perpetrator's GP knew of his suicide threat<br><br>A colleague knew the perpetrator would rather kill himself that let anybody take his things.<br><br>A former business associate knew the perpetrator was concealing what was going on from his wife. | business associate and Judge as someone not to be trusted<br><br>The family is described as close and loving.<br><br>**Daughter**<br>Daughter is described as a beautiful grand-daughter and lovely girl. | is not necessarily mentally ill.<br><br>Psychologist suggests the perpetrator might have applied a 'twisted logic' that if he couldn't have what he had built up nobody was going to take it away from him.<br><br>A business associate fears the perpetrator 'flipped' because the pressure was too much for him.<br><br>Described by associate as not a nice man.<br><br>Head-teacher describes the parents as being a loving and united family.<br><br>Described by a colleague as a good family man, a nice, ordinary, everyday chap.<br><br>A friend describes the perpetrator as seeming completely normal the day of the event.<br><br>The perpetrator's mother | A business associate fears the perpetrator 'flipped' because the pressure was too much for him.<br><br>**Daughter**<br>Favourable tributes from her friends. |

| | | | | suggests he could not face telling his wife and daughter that they were going to lose everything.<br><br>**Daughter**<br><br>Described by head teacher as lovely, charming, popular, bright, hard working and having all the skills to go far. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Introduction of characters<br><br>Perpetrator's brother reacts with shock and disbelief that he took the lives of his family.<br><br>A parishioner describes shock at the event happening in their district.<br><br>Colleague knew perpetrator would rather kill himself that let anybody take his things. | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others<br><br>**Perpetrator**<br><br>Described by a neighbour as a nice family man who loves animals and children.<br><br>A business associate fears the perpetrator 'flipped' because the pressure was too much for him.<br><br>**Daughter**<br><br>Described by head teacher as a lovely girl with all the skills for a very bright future.<br><br>Described by friends as friendly and happy. | Introduction of characters<br><br>The perpetrator's mother knew nothing of his financial situation.<br><br>A colleague knew the perpetrator would rather kill himself that let anybody take his things. | Introduction of characters<br><br>Perpetrator's brother reacts with shock and disbelief that he took the lives of his family.<br><br>Financial difficulties had not been shared with anybody – the tragedy could not have been predicted.<br><br>A colleague knew perpetrator would rather kill himself that let anybody take his things. | |

|  | The Mirror | The Telegraph | The Mail | The Independent | Non national |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Case Q | The event | The event | The event | The event | The event |
|  | Family circumstances Marital disharmony | Family circumstances Separation from wife | Family circumstances Separation from wife  Perpetrator depressed since separation  Custody issue. | Family circumstances Acrimonious split from wife.  First contact with children since separation | Family circumstances Acrimonious split from wife.  First contact with children since separation |
|  | Introduction of characters  The perpetrator had told his mother, estranged wife, two friends and a work colleague that he was suicidal. Having threatened this before he was not believed. | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others  Perpetrator Described by people that know him as helpful and as loving his children The social worker described the parents as calm and thoughtful.  Children Described as princesses and full of mischief | Introduction of characters  The perpetrator had threatened self harm and told a colleague he wanted to end it all and told a friend he would kill himself. |  | Introduction of characters  The perpetrator had told his estranged wife that he would kill himself.  The perpetrator's employer knew he was depressed because of relationship problems.  A work colleague stated the perpetrator appeared happy and it seemed strange that he would do this. |
|  | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others  Perpetrator Described by the children's mother as being an amazing father.  Described by a former girlfriend as | Introduction of characters  Perpetrator had threatened to kill himself but never mentioned harming the children.  Friends and neighbours knew the perpetrator | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others  Perpetrator His estranged wife cannot reconcile the loving dad with what he did.  Described by a neighbour as dominating conversations |  | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others  Perpetrator Described by a work colleague as a really good dad, by his boss as a doting family man and by the children's mother as being an |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| mentally unstable, a fantasist and a liar.<br><br>Children Described by their mother as 'guardian angels', funny and pretty. | had been depressed in recent weeks.<br><br>Colleague knew the perpetrator was depressed because of relationship problems.<br><br>Friends were stunned and could not believe it. | Children Described as gorgeous. | | amazing father.<br><br>Children Described by their mother as princesses.<br><br>Perpetrator's estranged wife Described as being a brilliant mother |

| | The Mirror | The Telegraph | The Mail | The Independent | Non national |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Case U | The event | The event | The event | The event | The event |
| | Family circumstances Money worries due to business irregularities | Family circumstances Money worries | Family circumstances Business facing collapse; financial ruin and tarnished reputation.<br><br>Luxury lifestyle | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others<br><br>**Perpetrator** A neighbour stated something has happened to make him 'flip'; this is out of character and he has acted like he was out of his mind.<br><br>Neighbours describe family as ordinary, good neighbours and good people.<br><br>A community member describes a very special family who were helpful and for whom nothing was too much | Family circumstances Financial problems |

| | | | | trouble. Daughter is described by a friend as a bright and beautiful girl who is nice, sweet and honest. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others. **Family** Neighbour describes family as lovely and level headed **Perpetrator** Described as having to have been 'beside himself' and not in his right mind. | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others **Daughter** Described as a bright and beautiful girl | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others **Family** Parents described as a nice couple who are well suited. **Perpetrator** Outwardly respectable but may have had secret sordid live Described by colleague as a loving family man and the last person to do this. Perpetrator must have been 'beside himself' – out of his mind. Described as a family man and hard working. **Daughter** Described as bright, beautiful, nice, sweet and honest. | Introduction of characters A neighbour stated that this is stunning news and unbelievable. | Portrayal of perpetrator/ family by others **Family** Neighbour described an ordinary family. **Perpetrator** Family friend stated that he doted on his daughter. Described as family orientated. Daughter Described as a clever and pretty girl. |
| | | Introduction of characters Friends are neighbours in shock and could offer no explanation | Introduction of characters Perpetrator gave no indication of the crisis overwhelming him. | | Introduction of characters Neighbour is shocked at the event. A close family friend states |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Neighbour described the perpetrator's actions as unimaginable.<br><br>Friends and family are baffled. No sign of financial or marital difficulties. | | the financial problems 'don't ring true' and he cannot relate any of what has happened to the perpetrator as a father. |

Determination of the narrative structure was arrived at through reading and re-reading each of the 142 newspaper reports and coding the information as it appeared sequentially in each report. Initially, this process involved considering the sentences and paragraphs within individual reports, comparing these across other reports and deciding on the thematic content of the sentence or paragraph that could be used as a category. These were then reduced into broader themes through grouping paragraphs and sentences within newspaper reports that appeared to serve the same purpose, for example to describe the perpetrator or a family member. Once these broad categories of information types were established, each report was considered in terms of the order in which these information types were produced in the report. From this, the most frequently occurring pattern or information type was selected as the prototype narrative sequence for each specific newspaper as depicted in Table 21 below.

The first observation is that across all five cases and the five newspaper types there appears to be a simple and coherent structure to the newspaper reports in that they contain four identifiable components. These components are:

- the event,
- the circumstances of the family,
- portrayals of the perpetrator and his family,
- the introduction of characters into the story that are ascribed the function of trying to make sense of the murder-suicide based on what they know or believe about the circumstances of the perpetrator and his family.

Within these four elements there are variations in terms of details and characters specific to each case but these do not detract from the overall structure.

**The event** includes descriptive information about the event.  For example, two children and a man believed to be their father have been found dead.

**Portrayal of the perpetrator and family by others** includes descriptions of the perpetrator, his wife and the children from various sources.  Inclusion of the portrayal of the perpetrator by others in narratives about murder-suicide is important because these portrayals can be used to vindicate or vilify the perpetrator. Table 22 and a discussion of the narratives later in this chapter emphasises how characters are introduced into the newspaper story in the role of providing vilifying or vindicating information.  For example, in case A, vindicating and vilifying information is provided in that the perpetrator is portrayed as a good family man who was experiencing some marital difficulties.

**Family circumstances** include information about marital disharmony, health, employment and financial issues for example.  For example, in case F, references are made to debt and the perpetrator fearing the loss of his business and home.

**Introduction of characters** includes quotations and representations of commentary by family members, community members, neighbours and professionals.  For example, in case P, reactions of the perpetrator's brother and mother are included in the narrative.

Whilst these four components exist, within each case there are variations in their sequential presentation across the newspaper reports.   The remainder of this section will present and analyse the narrative structure of the newspaper reports in the following ways:

1   Chronological sequencing of story elements across the five newspaper types for each of the five cases in turn (Tables 10-14 in Appendix K), concluding with an overall preferred chronological sequence for each case and a preferred chronological sequence overall. The purpose of this analysis is to try to determine whether for each case, the different newspaper brands or types favour a particular linear construction of the narrative which emphasises particular ideological constructions to the reader.

2    Chronological sequencing of story elements across the five cases for each
     of the newspapers in turn (Tables 16-20 in Appendix L), concluding with an
     overall preferred chronological sequence for each newspaper and a
     preferred chronological sequence overall.  The purpose of this analysis is to
     try to determine whether within each newspaper brand, there is a favoured
     linear construction of the narrative that emphasises particular ideological
     constructions to the reader.

In order to simplify the analysis of the narrative structures each component of the
story was assigned a letter as follows:

A       The event
B       Circumstances of the family
C       Portrayal of the perpetrator/family
D       The role of others – what they knew

### 4.4.2   Chronological sequencing of narrative across the five newspaper types for each case

Identifying how newspaper stories on murder-suicide are structured gives us insight
into how the reader is persuaded to make sense of the phenomenon in a particular
way by being provided with selected information about a case. It also enables us to
see how the order in which these are presented helps the reader to contextualise
the event and make inferences and hypothesise from these.  For example, the
information presented in Table 9 about how the perpetrator is portrayed might at
face value render the reader unable to reconcile the presentation of a 'good father'
with his act of killing his children. In particular, this could be the case because of the
lack of explicit reference to domestic abuse and issues of power, control and
violence in the newspaper narrative.  It is through reference to gendered social
constructs about patriarchy and masculinity, or from their own experience, that the
reader might begin to analyse the presented contextual information about loss of
marital relations and loss of business and generate hypotheses derived from a
feminist perspective for example.  Such a reading would resist the hegemonic 'out
of the blue' reading that newspaper reports appear to encourage by absenting from
them feminist interpretations of the event.

The significance of the role played by the reader is emphasised by Hall (1973, 1980) who proposed a model of mass communication which highlighted the importance of active interpretation of narrative and rejected the idea that decoding follows inevitably from what has been coded. Morley's (1980) study of the television programme 'Nationwide' was concerned with variance in individual interpretation, particularly in relation to the socio-cultural background of the viewer. Both argue that decoders do not passively receive information but decode what is received and may accept the hegemonic reading, or may negotiate the code and broadly accept the preferred reading but resist or modify it to reflect their own position or experience or take a counter-hegemonic or oppositional reading. Here the reader understands the preferred reading but their experience or own position puts them in a directly oppositional position to the dominant code.

Tables 10 – 14 at Appendix K present the chronological sequence across the five newspaper types for each case.

For **case A** the preferred sequence of narrative elements is A, B, C which is consistent across The Telegraph, The Independent and the Non national newspapers. There are two variations in that The Mirror interrupts this sequence by introducing a portrayal of the perpetrator and his family (C) before describing the family circumstances (B), and The Mail interrupts this sequence by introducing other characters (D) into the story before portraying the perpetrator and his family (C). The last variation of note is that The Mirror, The Telegraph and Non national newspapers do not introduce other characters (D) into roles within the story.

In **case F**, the most consistent sequence is A, B, C, which is found in The Mirror, The Telegraph and the non national newspapers. The uninterrupted sequence of A, B, C, D is consistent across The Mirror and non national newspapers. The Telegraph follows the sequence A, B, C and excludes the introduction of other characters (D). The Independent interrupts this sequence by introducing a portrayal of the perpetrator and his family (C) before describing the family circumstances (B) and excludes the introduction of other characters (D). The Mail also interrupts this sequence by introducing other characters (D) into the story before portraying the perpetrator and his family (C). The last variation of note is that The Telegraph and The Independent do not introduce other characters (D) into roles within the story.

In **case P**, the uninterrupted sequence of A, B, C, D is consistent across The Mirror, The Mail and The Independent.  The Telegraph interrupts this sequence by introducing other characters (D) into the story before portraying the perpetrator and his family (C).  The Non national newspapers also interrupt this sequence by introducing other characters (D) into the story before portraying the perpetrator and his family (C) but they also exclude the family circumstances (B). The Non national newspapers are the only type to exclude information about the family circumstances (B) in this case.

In **case Q,** the chronological sequence (A, B, D, C) is consistent across newspaper types with the exception of The Telegraph which provides a portrayal of the perpetrator (C) before the roles of others (D) are introduced (A, B, C, D) and The Independent which reports only on the event (A) and the family circumstances (B). This is the first significant variation of the sequence of A, B, C observed in the other cases.

In **case U** the sequencing of the elements of the narrative was consistent in that it followed A, B, C, D across all newspapers although The Independent omitted information about the family circumstances (B) and The Mirror did not introduce characters into the story (D).

Table 15 depicts the most frequently occurring (preferred) chronological sequencing of narrative elements across newspaper types for each case

**Table 15 – Preferred chronological sequencing of narrative elements for each case**

| Case A | A | B | C |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Case F | A | B | C |   |
| Case P | A | B | C | D |
| Case Q | A | B | D | C |
| Case U | A | B | C | D |

Overall, we can see that across cases the preferred chronological sequence is the event, the family circumstances, portrayal of the perpetrator and his family followed by the introduction of characters (A, B, C, D) or the event, the family circumstances and portrayal of the perpetrator and his family (A, B, C).

<u>4.4.3   Chronological sequencing of narrative across the five cases for each</u>
<u>newspaper type</u>

Tables 16 to 20 in Appendix L show the preferred chronological sequencing of elements across cases for each newspaper.

For **The Mirror**, the overall preferred chronological ordering of components is the event, the family circumstances, portrayals of the perpetrator and his family and lastly the introduction of characters (A, B, C, D).  Case A follows this ordering overall even though it introduces a portrayal of the perpetrator and his family (C) both before and after the family circumstances (B).

For **The Telegraph**, the overall preferred chronological ordering of components is the event, the family circumstances, portrayals of the perpetrator and his family and lastly the introduction of characters (A, B, C, D).

For **The Mail**, the overall preferred chronological ordering of components is the event, the family circumstances, the introduction of characters and lastly portrayals of the perpetrator and his family (A, B, D, C).

For **The Independent**, the overall preferred chronological ordering of components is the event, the family circumstances, the introduction of characters and lastly portrayals of the perpetrator and his family (A, B, C, D).

For the **non national newspapers** the overall preferred chronological ordering of components is the event, the family circumstances, the introduction of characters and lastly portrayals of the perpetrator and his family (A, B, D, C).

Table 21 depicts the most frequently occurring (preferred) chronological sequencing of narrative elements across newspaper types demonstrating a coherent and generally consistent structure to newspaper reports that describes the event, provides information about the family and its circumstances that contextualises the event, introduces other characters with information to support or refute any implied or overt hypotheses drawn from the first two elements of the narrative and lastly describes attributes of the perpetrator and family members that can be interpreted as supporting or refuting hypotheses about what happened and why.

**Table 21 – preferred chronological sequencing of narrative elements across newspaper types**

| The Mirror | A | B | C | D |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Telegraph | A | B | C | D |
| The Mail | A | B | D | C |
| The Independent | A | B | C | D |
| Non national | A | B | C | D |

Overall, across newspaper types the preferred chronological sequence is the event, the family circumstances, portrayal of the perpetrator and his family followed by the introduction of characters (A, B, C, D). The Mail deviates from this by introducing characters (D) before portraying the perpetrator and his family (C). Given The Mail's deviation from the general sequencing of narrative elements, further analysis of different newspapers and different cases might be an area for further research to establish whether the editorial stance of the newspaper influences the chronological structuring of a story.

To summarise this section, I have identified four key elements that constitute the newspaper story narratives and shown how these are sequenced for each case according to newspaper type and each newspaper type according to case. I have identified variation in the chronological sequencing of the elements in the story but it has been possible to show a preferred chronological sequence for the cases overall and for the newspapers overall which is the event, the family circumstances, portrayal of the perpetrator and his family and lastly the introduction of characters (A, B, C, D). This structure bears some similarity to the structure identified by Labov (1970) which consists of basic structural units: an optional prefatory summary called the 'abstract', the 'orientation' which locates the story in terms of places, persons and times, the 'complication' which refers to the sequence of events that happened, the point of the narrative and point of view of the narrator known as the 'evaluation', the 'result' (resolution) of the story and the optional 'coda' which is the closing summary or recapitulation which closes the story sequence by either providing a conclusion or signalling that issues remain unresolved. In respect of newspaper reports on cases of murder-suicide, structuring the story in this way enables the reader to move beyond how the perpetrator is portrayed and contextualise the event in terms of information about the family and its circumstances and make inferences and hypothesise from these. These hypotheses are supported or

refuted for the reader according to the information provided by other characters, leaving the reader to generate their own conclusions which will be informed by the ideological constructions that resonate for them within the text.  In this way, as well as the story structure being of importance, it is the implicit and explicit information contained within each element of the story structure about gendered roles for example that is important in constructing how the event of murder-suicide is perceived and made sense of.  In particular, in reproducing a mythic narrative structure, the reader is perhaps likely to read these events as inevitable and having their own ideological coherence, rather than questioning the lack of information about, for example, prior histories of gender inequalities in the marriages.

Before moving on to consider the content of the newspaper report narrative components of the five cases, it is worth noting the words of caution from Edwards (1977: 276) who asserts that whilst helpful to have a structure within which to make sense of narrative form, an inherent danger is the temptation to 'fit' the narrative to the coding categories which can result in peculiarities about the structure of a particular discourse being overlooked.

## 4.5    Analysis of detail within the component elements of newspaper report narrative analysis

At the outset of this chapter I referred to Propp's (1968) analysis of the Russian fairy tale as an important early example of narrative analysis. I have not sought to systematically analyse whether newspaper reports contain the same component elements as folktales but I have sought to identify how Propp's analysis can provide a framework within which the structure of newspaper reports in relation to these five cases of murder-suicide can be understood.   The preceding section of the chapter concluded that there is a preferred discernible chronological ordering of components of the newspaper story narratives which is the event, the family circumstances, portrayals of the perpetrator and his family and the introduction of characters into the story (A, B, C, D).  Here I am seeking to determine what is considered to be culturally significant for inclusion in newspaper reports on murder-suicide.  The material selected for inclusion is important because it provides the reader with a context and material from which inferences and hypotheses can be generated to guide them in perceiving and understanding seemingly 'out of the blue' occurrences of murder-suicide.  This section will examine aspects of these different elements in more detail.

One of the first observations from the narrative analysis concerns the way newspaper reports start their story with the actions and plight of the *dramatis personae.* In Propp's terms, this equates to the initial situation which is a temporal-spatial depiction of the family which might include their location and composition. The following opening paragraphs of newspaper reports exemplify this.

Case P

At ...am on ..., the 16<sup>th</sup>-century three-storey (name of property), set in 15 acres of (name of County), was torched and the bodies of businessman ... (perpetrator's name), his wife and teenage daughter were later found in the charred building. Police believe (perpetrator's name) killed his family and then set fire to the house.

(The Daily Telegraph, September 27, 2008)

Case Q

*THE last time ... (mother's name) saw her two young daughters, their estranged father was picking them up for the weekend.*

*A day later, he phoned her to say he had killed them.*

(Daily Mail, September 23, 2008)

These paragraphs locate the families in a time and place and identify the relationship of the individuals to each other.

Some newspaper reports can be further equated with Propp's 'initial situation' component in that they include what might be conceived as 'prophecies, forewarning' or indications of 'well-being' prior to the 'complication'. For example, some reports present a particular aspect of the familial circumstances, such as depression or debt, which might be construed as the existence of warning signs or motivation. The inclusion of 'initial situation' information provides the reader with a context within which the murder-suicide can be made sense of and this contextual information may support or challenge hypotheses about motive or underlying cause of the tragedy. The inclusion of contextual information is exemplified in the following two extracts.

<u>Case U</u>

*A cash-strapped trader killed his wife and teenage daughter then drove to his warehouse and hanged himself yesterday.*

*... (occupation and name of perpetrator), (age of perpetrator), is thought to have been weighed down by money worries to do with his business.*

*(The Mirror, February 6, 2010)*

Propp (1968) identifies a number of different functions which follow from the initial situation. Two particular functions are of relevance to the newspaper reports of these cases of murder-suicide. The first is 'absentation' (Propp, 1968: 26) whereby one of the members of the family absents themself from home and the second is the 'complication' in which the villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family (Propp, 1968: 30). In Propp's analysis, sequentially, 'absentation' and the functions that follow pave the way for the 'complication'. The following excerpts demonstrate how in these newspaper reports, the two functions of 'absentation' and the 'complication' are introduced almost simultaneously and are intrinsically related through being fundamentally embedded in the description of the initial situation.

<u>Case P</u>

*Police were searching for a family last night after a suspected arson attack on their isolated country home.*

*... (name of perpetrator), wife ... and teenage daughter ... were still missing after a massive blaze destroyed their pounds 1.2million house.*

*(The Mirror, August 27, 2008)*

<u>Case U</u>

*Yesterday morning the (number of years)-year-old was dead, murdered by her father who also killed his wife before taking his own life.*

*(name of daughter), was found dead beside her mother, (name), (age), at their detached suburban home in (town), (County), just after 5am. (name of perpetrator) was discovered a few hours later, about 9.30am, in an industrial unit after apparently hanging himself.*
*(The Independent, February 6, 2010) Saturday*

It is apparent that in each of the five cases, both constants and variables are detectable. The existence of the initial situation is constant although the detail of the circumstances varies. Similarly, the functions of the act of villainy and absentation are constant but the characters and ways in which they fulfilled the function of murder-suicide vary:

- In case P the millionaire perpetrator shot his wife and daughter before setting fire to the family home and buildings; he lay down next to his murdered wife to die.
- In case Q the perpetrator, estranged from his wife and having voluntarily left employment, smothered his two children before hanging himself.
- In case A the perpetrator who was seemingly isolated, set fires within the family home in which his popular and talented wife and daughters died; he remained in the burning house and later died in hospital.
- In case U the perpetrator, facing potential disgrace through business dealings, bludgeoned his wife and daughter to death before hanging himself.
- In case F the perpetrator who feared losing his business and home stabbed his wife and children before hanging himself.

The unexpectedness of murder-suicide raises questions about the perpetrator, what he was like, why he committed the act, what precipitated the act, in what way, if any, did immediate family contribute to the circumstances of the act and can those closest to the family tell us about what happened and why. The newspaper reports analysed contain this information explicitly and implicitly through the language used and ordering of events in the telling of the story. Table 22 provides a more detailed narrative analysis of the newspaper story content that is concerned with the attributes/characteristics of the perpetrator, motive, catalyst for the event, the roles assigned to others and lastly whether the case can be given an overall descriptor that relates it to the other cases in terms of similarity or difference. In the absence of suicide notes and witnesses, it is difficult to establish motive and catalytic events. Within Table 22 I have sought to categorise narrative data about family circumstances and events leading up to the act of murder-suicide in terms of potential motive and catalyst, based upon what might be considered lay interpretations about people's behaviour in those contexts.

**Table 22 – Narrative analysis of newspaper story content**

| Case A | |
|---|---|

| **Perpetrator attributes/ characteristics** | Positive | Negative | State of mind |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Good father | Controlling | Depressed |
| | Good family man | Unsuccessful | Troubled |
| | Respected | Moody | |
| | Life centred on the mosque | Limited ability to speak English | |
| | | Did not speak much | |
| | | Isolated | |

| **Possible motive** | Regaining control of his family where there was marital disharmony, his wife and daughters enjoyed a westernised lifestyle which the perpetrator did not approve of and his son was suffering with a life limiting illness.<br><br>An 'honour killing' brought on by the perpetrator's belief that his wife had brought shame on the family. |
|---|---|
| **Catalyst** | The perpetrator and his wife are thought to have argued hours before the fire.<br><br>The perpetrator's wife had been out to dinner with a male friend/ colleague the evening of the fire.<br><br>The perpetrator visited his son who was suffering with life limiting disease, hours before the fire. |
| **Role assigned to child victims/ attributes/ characteristics** | Beautiful  'angels'<br>Talented  Flourishing in Britain<br>Pretty  Happy |
| **Role / attributes/ characteristics assigned to 'others'** | The family are described as being close and loving.<br><br>The perpetrator's wife was described as:<br>• more westernised than her husband<br>• a beautiful and talented wife and mother<br>• popular and sociable<br>• a respected community worker<br>• a pillar of the community who got on with everybody<br>• bright, bubbly and a role model for young Asian women<br>• vivacious and involved in the community<br>• a tireless campaigner |
| **Introduction of characters and role in the story** | Shock<br>Perpetrator's son, a family friend and a local councillor provide reactions of shock.<br><br>Helplessness<br>A colleague and friend of the perpetrator's wife had no indication of what was to happen.<br><br>Vilification<br>Family member provides information about marital disharmony and differences in lifestyle between the perpetrator and his wife. |

| | Vindication/defence<br>Members of community and neighbours provide positive images of the family; good family man, wife as popular community worker. |
|---|---|
| **Descriptor (commonalities/ differences)** | Loss of control over loved ones.<br><br>Shame.<br><br>Saving loved ones from a perceived fate. |

<br>

| **Case F** | |
|---|---|
| **Perpetrator attributes/ characteristics** | <table><tr><td>Positive</td><td>Negative</td><td>State of mind</td></tr><tr><td>Good father</td><td></td><td>Suicidal</td></tr><tr><td>Loved wife and children</td><td></td><td>Mad</td></tr><tr><td>Devoted family man</td><td></td><td>Depressed</td></tr><tr><td>Businessman</td><td></td><td>Isolated</td></tr><tr><td>Caring</td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>Happy</td><td></td><td></td></tr></table> |
| **Motive** | Preventing his wife and child having to suffer the consequences of loss of home and income. |
| **Catalyst** | The perpetrator was going to lose a major business contract which would impact on his income. |
| **Role assigned to child victims/ attributes/ characteristics** | Friendly       Popular<br>Childlike      Endearing<br>Beautiful      Angelic<br>Enthusiastic   Charming     Happy |
| **Role / attributes/ characteristics assigned to 'others'** | |
| **Introduction of characters and role in the story** | Shock<br>Neighbours and relatives provide a reaction of shock and describe the family as quiet, happy and the perpetrator as somebody who loved his children and wife. Friends are used to support the reaction of shock describing the perpetrator as being 'normal' when they visited.<br><br>Helplessness<br>Relatives and friends had no clue as to the perpetrator's depression<br><br>Potential Saviours<br>A friend described how he advised the perpetrator to seek help about his depression.<br><br>The perpetrator's brother knew his brother had been depressed and had felt suicidal.<br><br>The perpetrator's mother had having been told by the perpetrator that he was manic depressive. |

| | The GP had been told by the perpetrator that he was depressed and stressed. <br><br> <u>Vindication/defence</u> <br> Relatives are used to describe the perpetrator as a loving father with an ideal family life.  The perpetrator's mother describes him as a devoted father.  The coroner is quoted as saying the perpetrator's love of his family may have been his downfall. |
|---|---|
| **Descriptor (commonalities/ differences)** | Financial ruin. <br><br> Saving loved ones from a perceived fate. |

| **Case P** | |
|---|---|

| **Perpetrator attributes/ characteristics** | Positive | Negative | State of mind |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Good father | Selfish | Suicidal |
| | Loving | Untrustworthy | Mentally unstable |
| | Friendly | Vengeful | Troubled |
| | Successful | Failed | Despairing |
| | Caring | Not nice | Mad |
| | Nice | Decadent | Depressed |
| | Mild mannered | Ruined | Isolated |
| | Businessman | Spiteful | |
| | | Evil | |
| | | Controlling | |
| | | Violent | |

| **Motive** | Prevention of putting his wife and daughter through a degrading change in lifestyle and avoidance of them not being able to cope with this. <br><br> Ensuring that bailiffs and creditors could not have what he was no longer able to have. |
|---|---|
| **Catalyst** | The perpetrator knew the bailiffs were expected to arrive at the property the following day. |
| **Role assigned to child victims/ attributes/ characteristics** | Friendly, popular and high achieving daughter. <br><br> Beautiful granddaughter and lovely girl. <br><br> Lovely, charming, popular, bright, hard working girl with all the skills for a bright future. |
| **Role / attributes/ characteristics assigned to 'others'** | Loving and united family. |
| **Introduction of characters and role in the story** | <u>Shock</u> <br> Local people react with shock and bewilderment. The perpetrator's brother reacts with shock and disbelief that he took the lives of his family and does not want to believe he has done anything wrong. <br><br> <u>Helplessness</u> <br> Friends with whom the perpetrator and wife and child had spent the day |

establish that the occurrence could not be pre-empted; the perpetrator seemed completely normal.

The perpetrator's mother knew nothing of his financial situation.

Potential Saviours
A friend and former business associate as well as the GP knew the perpetrator had considered suicide.  A colleague knew the perpetrator would rather kill himself than let anybody take his things.

Vilification
A Business Associate and a Judge describe the perpetrator as not a nice man and somebody not to be trusted. The perpetrator's brother, who has already reacted with shock is given a dual and somewhat conflicting role by now being introduced to support this less favourable perspective by portraying him as acting in anger and getting back at the world; destroying everything so no one can have anything.  The perpetrator's sister in law provides further support by describing the perpetrator as evil.

Vindication/defence
Friends establish the perpetrator as a family man who loves animals and children and that the family were nice, normal and happy.

A former accountant provides support to this position describing the perpetrator as a good family man; a nice, ordinary, everyday chap.

The perpetrator's mother suggests he could not face telling his wife and daughter that they were going to lose everything.

The daughter's friends provide favourable tributes after her death.

A business associate states he fears the perpetrator 'flipped' because the pressure was too much for him.

A psychologist suggests the act could be 'perverted altruism' and the perpetrator is not necessarily mentally ill.

A psychologist suggests the perpetrator might have applied a 'twisted logic' that if he couldn't have what he had built up nobody was going to take it away from him.

| **Descriptor (commonalities/ differences)** | Financial ruin.<br><br>Shame<br><br>Saving loved ones from a perceived fate. |

| Case Q | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Perpetrator attributes/ characteristics** | Positive attributes | Negative attributes | State of mind |
| | Good father | Selfish | Suicidal |
| | Loving | Vengeful | Mentally unstable |
| | Caring | Spiteful | Troubled |
| | Nice | Evil | Mad |
| | Happy | Controlling | Depressed |
| | Helpful | Wicked | Isolated |
| | | Liar | |
| | | Fantasist | |
| | | Dominating | |

| **Motive** | Ensuring he was no longer separated from the children. |
|---|---|
| | Protecting the children from perceived suffering in their home conditions. |
| | Revenge on the children's mother who was in control. |

| **Catalyst** | The perpetrator had been allowed to see the children for the first time since the break-up and was due to return them home to their mother the day he committed murder-suicide. |
|---|---|

| **Role assigned to child victims/ attributes/ characteristics** | Childlike | Endearing | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Beautiful | Angelic | |
| | Princesses | Full of mischief | |
| | Funny | Pretty | Gorgeous |

| **Role / attributes/ characteristics assigned to 'others'** | Loving wife and mother. |
|---|---|
| | Brilliant mother. |
| | The social worker described the parents as calm and thoughtful. |

| **Introduction of characters and role in the story** | Shock<br>A work colleague stated the perpetrator seemed happy and it seemed strange that he would do this.<br><br>The perpetrator's estranged wife cannot reconcile the loving dad with what he did and describing him as an amazing father.<br><br>Potential Saviours<br>The perpetrator's estranged wife, his mother, two friends and, a work colleague and his employer had been told at different times by the perpetrator that he 'wanted to end it all'.  Having threatened this before, the perpetrator was not believed.<br><br>The perpetrator's employer knew the perpetrator was depressed because of relationship problems.<br><br>The mother's best friend knew that 24 hours before he was allowed access to the children, the perpetrator had threatened that he would kill himself.<br><br>The perpetrator's mother and brother knew that the day before seeing the children he had threatened that he would kill himself.<br><br>Vindication/defence<br>A work colleague describes the perpetrator as a really good dad.<br>The perpetrator's employer describes him as a doting family man. |
|---|---|

| **Descriptor (commonalities/ differences)** | Loss of control over loved ones. |
|---|---|
| | Saving loved ones from a perceived fate. |
| | Revenge on estranged wife. |

| Case U | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Perpetrator attributes/ characteristics** | <u>Positive attributes</u> | <u>Negative attributes</u> | <u>State of mind</u> |
| | Good father | Decadent | Despairing |
| | Businessman | Untrustworthy | Troubled |
| | Loving | Twisted | Mad |
| | Caring | Violent | Isolated |
| | Friendly | | Beside himself |
| | Mild Mannered | | Flipped |
| | Family man | | |
| | Hard working | | |

| **Motive** | The consequences of the perpetrator's |
|---|---|
| | Avoidance of shame for immediate and wider family members once exposed for fraud and betrayal of trust which left him facing the collapse of his business, financial ruin and his reputation tarnished. |
| | Protection from a perceived fate of suffering for wife and child as a result of anticipated financial ruin and loss of luxury lifestyle. |

| **Catalyst** | The day before the occurrence the perpetrator had been confronted by bosses of his main customer about invoice irregularities and discrepancies and business with him was suspended with immediate effect. |
|---|---|

| **Role assigned to child victims/ attributes/ characteristics** | Bright | Beautiful | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Nice | Sweet | |
| | Honest | Successful | Talented |

| **Role / attributes/ characteristics assigned to 'others'** | Family are described by somebody in the community as very special, helpful and for whom nothing was too much trouble. |
|---|---|
| | Neighbours describe the family as ordinary and good people, lovely and level headed. |
| | Parents are described as a nice couple who are well suited. |

| **Introduction of characters and role in the story** | <u>Shock</u><br>Neighbours are in shock and could offer no explanation. A neighbour states that the news is stunning and unbelievable; the perpetrator's actions are unimaginable.<br><br><u>Helpless</u><br>Friends and family are baffled.  There was no sign of financial or marital difficulties.  The perpetrator is said to have given no indication of the crisis overwhelming him.<br><u>Potential Saviours</u><br>Main customer is given the role of catalyst and as having the power to have acted as the perpetrator told them 'that's me finished' when they suspended business with him<br><br><u>Vilification</u><br>One newspaper intimates that the perpetrator was outwardly respectable but may have had a secret sordid life.<br><br><u>Vindication/defence</u><br>The perpetrator is described by a colleague as a loving family man and the last person to do this.<br><br>A close family friend stated that the financial problems 'don't ring true' and he cannot relate any of what has happened to the perpetrator as a father. |
|---|---|

| | A neighbour provides an explanation for the actions staring something has happened to make the perpetrator 'flip' and act like he was out of his mind. The Perpetrator is further described as having to have been 'beside himself' and not in his right mind. |
|---|---|
| **Descriptor (commonalities/ differences)** | Financial ruin |
| | Shame |
| | Saving loved ones from a perceived fate. |

The narrative content can be considered thematically and in the following section of the chapter, drawing on examples from the five cases, I will examine how the construction of these cases in newspaper reports serves to influence how these cases of murder-suicide can be perceived.

## 4.6    Construction of characters through the use of characteristics and attributes

This section of the chapter will show evidence of the use of membership categorisation devices (Sacks, 1972) and contrast structures (Smith, 1978) in the portrayal of the perpetrator and his family within the newspaper reports in telling of moral tales about failure and success. Membership categorisation devices are used by interviewees to achieve identities, realities, social order and social relationships through talk. People make sense of phenomena by mobilizing membership categorisation devices and associated activities and using them to organise their characterisation of what they see and hear. Membership categorisation is evident whereby the perpetrator is assigned for example to the category of father, husband, son, businessman, mosque attendee and by doing so, category-bound behaviour is ascribed, establishing for the reader a set of cultural expectations about how individuals in these categories should behave. For example, cultural expectations about being a father might involve being a provider, being strong, responsible and caring. Contrast structures juxtapose characterisations of traits or behaviours with statements that guide interpretation of the trait or behaviour as unusual or problematic. Anomalies are accomplished by constructing relationships between rules or definitions of situations and descriptions of behaviour so that the former do not properly provide for the latter.

One way in which this is done is through the assembling of contextual information in a way that sets up expectations about what is normal and expected, and then providing information that deviates from this (Taylor and White, 2000). Contrast structures are evident whereby deviance becomes ascribed to the perpetrator as

his actions of murder-suicide are not conducive to cultural expectations about fathers, husbands, sons and businessmen.

What can be immediately seen is that the newspaper reports used a variety of characteristics and attributes in relation to the perpetrator, some of which are shared across the five cases. I have sought to categorise these into positive, negative and state of mind attributes based on my subjective interpretation of how the attributes are being used within the context of the narrative. In these stories, the positioning of the perpetrator and his family in the story by the use of attributes and characteristics is inexorably linked to the construction of motive.

There are commonalities across the five cases in respect of positive attributes and characteristics. Descriptions of a good father and a good family man who loved his children and wife feature without exception. The clustering of these attributes with others such as being happy, mild-mannered and caring create a positive image of the perpetrator. Additionally, in three of the cases, the inclusion of characteristics of businessman, successful and life-centring on the mosque add an additional veneer to this positive image. Alongside this positive image, support is given to the concept of a happy and trouble free family through the inclusion of attributes and characteristics of the children. Without exception the children are described positively in terms of being beautiful or pretty, happy, popular, angelic, endearing, hard-working, talented and successful. The absence of consistent inclusion of characteristics and attributes of the children's mother suggests that the emphasis of the narrative appears to be on the dissonance between being a good father and murdering your children.

The use of negative attributes in respect of the perpetrator is less consistent across cases and the inclusion or exclusion of these affects the interpretation placed on individual cases but more significantly from a structural perspective whether or not these acts of murder suicide are constructed as acts of violence and domestic abuse or acts borne out of a distorted desire to protect loved ones. This issue will be considered more fully later in the chapter.

**In Case A**, there are negatively contextualised portrayals of the perpetrator which are culture bound, relating to his ability to use the English language, isolation and life centring on the mosque. The perpetrator is also described in terms of his state of mind as being depressed and troubled. Whilst these characteristics in

themselves are insufficient to explain the act of murder-suicide, through the contrast of these characteristics with those of the perpetrator's wife as somebody who is more westernised than he, popular and sociable, vivacious and involved in the community, alongside reports of marital separation because of differences and the perpetrator fearing his family was becoming too westernised, a picture of cultural and marital dissonance emerges. This construction of the marriage and cultural integration provides a backdrop against which different hypotheses about motive can be generated. One hypothesis is that the perpetrator was powerless and losing control over his wife and children and the motive in this case is to regain control and reunite the family in death, or regain honour in a situation of marital disharmony, loss of his wife and daughters to a lifestyle that he did not approve or perhaps to protect his wife and daughters from the fate of becoming too westernised.

**In Case F** there is no inclusion of contextually negative attributes and characteristics but the perpetrator is portrayed as somebody who experienced depression and felt suicidal because of money worries and the fear of losing his business and home. The lack of negative portrayal, inclusion of 'state of mind' portrayals, alongside the use of the adjective 'mad', allows for a consonance between the conflicting portrayal of a good father and committed family man and the act of extreme violence against his wife and children, suggesting it was an act of 'madness' as opposed to being an intentionally evil act. In this case there is perceived loss of control over livelihood and ability to provide for his family. In the absence of negative attributes or descriptions of marital/familial disharmony, there is potential to interpret this murder-suicide either as an act to protect his wife and children from a fate resulting from loss of livelihood and home or as an act occurring completely out of the blue perhaps as a result of mental illness.

**In case P**, it is apparent that there are a greater number of negative attributes and characteristics assigned to the perpetrator than positive ones. In respect of interpreting the act of the murder-suicide, the over emphasis on negative attributes is somewhat tempered by the inclusion of state of mind characteristics which suggest that the perpetrator was suicidal, troubled, despairing, depressed and mentally unstable or mad at the time he committed the murder-suicide. In this case, there are a number of testimonies to the perpetrator's motive as he is reported to have told different people that he would rather die than allow his possessions to be taken from him. In this, it could be assumed that his wife and daughter are included as possessions. It is also reported that he wanted to protect

his wife and daughter from a degrading change in lifestyle and the motive might then have been altruistic.

**Case Q** is unique in that it is the only case in which the children's mother was not murdered.  In terms of portrayal of the perpetrator a similar pattern of incongruity can be seen.  He is portrayed as an 'amazing father' who loved his children, a good dad and doting family man but conversely there is an overemphasis on negative portrayal as somebody who is selfish, vengeful, evil, spiteful, controlling and dominating. State of mind characteristics again serve to moderate this negative portrayal suggesting that the perpetrator was troubled, depressed, isolated, suicidal and mentally unstable.  Reports on this case highlight the perpetrator's acrimonious separation from his wife and limited contact with his children.  Issues of loss and lack of control again appear evident, and one hypothesis might be that murder-suicide was the mechanism for regaining control and reuniting the family.  However, other motives are conceivable which include revenge against his wife by depriving her of her children and making her responsible for his actions through her decisions to separate from him and deprive him of his children.  This motive gains support through the absence of any portrayal of the perpetrator as loving his wife.  Another potential motive concerns the perpetrator protecting his children from suffering in their life with their mother.  This motive gains support from information provided about the perpetrator referring concerns to social services although is tempered through the inclusion of attributes ascribed to the children's mother such as being a 'brilliant mother' and loving mother and wife.

**In Case U** Whilst negative characteristics are included, within the newspaper reports they refer to the catalyst event of potentially fraudulent activity being uncovered and his violence in the act of murder.  The state of mind characteristics support the portrayal of the perpetrator as once his potentially fraudulent activity was discovered, being troubled, despairing, 'beside himself' and having 'flipped' and committed the act of murder-suicide. This case is similar to Case P in that both perpetrator's enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle which was about to be taken away from them.  The imminent fall from grace, both experientially and in the eyes of others, is a unifying factor in both of these cases.

## 4.7    Motive

Although I have sought to identify how hypotheses about motive can be constructed through a consideration of perpetrator and family attributes and characteristics, it is

helpful at this juncture to consider whether any such analysis in relation to motive and catalyst is informed by Propp (1968). Propp (1968:34) observes that in tales where there are acts of villainy, these proceed from a situation of insufficiency or lack. Whereas actions occurring in the middle of a tale are naturally motivated by the course of the action, villainy, as the first basic function of a tale, requires some supplementary motivation (pp.75). This motivation can be seen to derive from the 'lack', which is presented in the newspaper reports after the act of villainy and absentation is described which equates to the underlying circumstances or a catalytic event. In respect of these cases of murder-suicide, the concept of 'lack' is significant when considered in terms of gendered ideology about masculinity and fatherhood. Chapter three and earlier sections of this chapter refer to the associations between money/work problems, relationship breakdown and men's suicide and the concepts of honour and shame and their role in masculine identity.

- In case A, the perpetrator appeared to have lost his wife and children to a westernised lifestyle, there were differences within the marriage and there was the anticipated loss of son who had a life-limiting illness.
- In case F the perpetrator feared the loss of his business and home.
- In case P the perpetrator had experienced the collapse of his business, associated debt and there was the anticipated arrival of the bailiffs and the prospect of a diminished lifestyle.
- In case Q the perpetrator had experienced marital breakdown and loss of children who lived with their mother.
- In case U, the perpetrator anticipated the collapse of his business and shame as a result of alleged business discrepancies in dealings with a close friend to whose business he supplied goods.

The motivation might be in direct response to already experiencing the impact of the 'lack' through the loss of loved ones who are no longer under the control of the perpetrator through some form of physical or emotional/spiritual separation or parting, as in cases A and Q for example.

Case A

*A father killed his wife and four daughters in their sleep because he could not bear them adopting a more westernised lifestyle, an inquest heard yesterday.*

*(Name of perpetrator), (age of perpetrator), found it abhorrent that his eldest daughter wanted to be a fashion designer, and that she and her sisters were likely to reject the Muslim tradition of arranged marriages.*

*(The Daily Telegraph, February 21, 2007)*

Case Q

*The inquest in (name of town) heard that (name of perpetrator) and (name of children's mother), (age of children's mother), had split up in August this year and that (name of perpetrator) had been given weekend access to look after the girls.*

*But in the days before the killings, (name of perpetrator) grew angry because he was not seeing the girls enough and had threatened to kill himself, although he never mentioned harming the children.*

*(The Daily Telegraph, November 28, 2008)*

The motivation may also be to prevent fulfilment of the anticipated lack, for example the loss of business and by association lifestyle in cases F, P and U.

Case F

*(Perpetrator's name, a (occupation), faced with mounting debt and the loss of a vital contract,*
*(The Independent July 16, 2002)*

Case P

*(Company name) went into liquidation in October 2007 leaving (name of perpetrator) in "severe financial difficulty".*

*The inquest heard he loved his life of luxury and could not bear to lose it all.*
*(The Mirror April 3, 2009)*

Case U

*... business associates told the court they had suspected him of overcharging them more than pounds 500,000 over a period of seven years and had threatened him with police action.*
*(Birmingham Evening Mail September 3, 2010)*

### 4.8    Roles assigned to others and their function in the narrative

Propp argues that the unifying element of the fairytale narrative is not to be found within the specific characters that appear in the story but their function in the narrative (Propp, 1968:21).  Despite the superficial diversity of detail and large number of characters, the functions they fulfil are limited.  This section seeks to identify whether there are discernible character functions within the newspaper report narratives.  Propp also finds that character functions appear in the narrative in the same sequence although I have not sought to analyse the sequential introduction of character functions.

Taking each case in turn, I classified the introduction of characters into the narrative according to the type of information they were giving and the purpose it appears to serve, rather than according to the type of character itself, for example neighbour, family member or business associate.  Out of this categorisation I developed five different character functions as detailed in Table21.  The purpose here is not to determine whether specific characters fulfil discrete functions, rather I acknowledge in these reports that characters may fill more than one function in the newspaper report and at times these may appear to be contradictory in that the same person might provide information that fits for example both the function of vilification and vindication.

The first observation is that the reaction of **shock** is evident in each of the five cases, regardless of the circumstances or status of the family.  With the exception of case Q which concerned the perpetrator being separated from his wife and children, characters fulfil a function of being **helpless** to have intervened in a way that could have changed the course of events.  With the exception of Case A where the perpetrator feared the loss of his wife and daughters to a westernised lifestyle, characters fulfil a function of **'potential saviour'** having been in possession of information about the circumstances or state of mind of the perpetrator that with hindsight indicates that all was not well.  This classification of 'potential saviour' is not intended to imply that the information known to different characters in any way was indicative that the perpetrator would commit murder-suicide and that action on their part could have prevented this tragedy. It is merely used to indicate that underneath the veneer of outward ordinariness, there were concerns about the perpetrator and his family.   With the exception of case F, characters fulfil the function of **vilifying** the perpetrator through providing information about his

character that questions his integrity or challenges the positive attributes and characteristics identified by others. All five cases have characters introduced into the story which provide information that **vindicates** and defends their actions.

Whilst it is apparent that some characters held information about the perpetrator's circumstances and state of mind, whilst perhaps concerning for some characters, this information or concern does not appear to have been significant enough to trigger any thoughts that murder-suicide was a possible outcome.

## 4.9    The existence of a proto-narrative

What is evident is that in these cases there was no warning to anybody and the reporting of this lack of forewarning by characters, coupled with positive portrayals of the perpetrator and family life within the story serves to reinforce the idea that these familial murder-suicides occur out of the blue. Looking beyond this superficial reading of the story though there are a number of thematic commonalities across the five cases including loss of control over loved ones (A, Q), loss of lifestyle through financial ruin (F, P, U), shame resulting from these losses (A, P, U) and lastly and consistent across the five cases is saving loved ones from a perceived fate (A, F, P, Q, U). This proto-narrative, developed from the narrative analysis of attributes and characteristics and information provided by characters introduced into the story suggests that in these cases the act of murder-suicide might be altruistic and borne out of a desire to protect loved ones from a fate perceived to be worse than death. Because such an act is not expected from a loving father and husband, it is conceptualised as coming 'out of the blue'. Another construction based on the themes identified above relates to patriarchal proprietary family relations and male dominance. Although the content of the newspaper texts contain clues about what might have contributed to the incident of murder-suicide, the absence in newspaper reports of a debate about the gendered power relationships and issues of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence within the family exacerbates the difficulty in providing an explanation for the act of murder-suicide by a loving father within the newspaper report itself.

## 4.10   Discussion

It is difficult to conceive of a conceptual framework within which the act of murder is anything but an extreme form of abuse or violence. An ideology that construes the act of murder-suicide as an altruistic act of love and protection serves to obscure

the gendered dimension of power, control and violence. Family circumstances in these five cases mostly reproduce patriarchal familial structures of male bread-winners and females as wives and mothers. Implicit in these patriarchal structures are relations of male power, control and sometimes violence over women which do not get represented in the newspaper report accounts. Although there is a lack of evidence in the newspaper narratives to suggest that overt use of power, control and violence was evident in the familial relationships in these five cases it cannot be assumed that this did not exist. It is conceivable that newspapers purposefully select certain character functions that emphasise both altruism and 'out of the blueness' as the social construct for these cases. This might be because of a refusal to acknowledge the issues of violence against women and attempts to gain control of women that are implicit in these acts and an attempt to reposition them as a kind of moral 'fall' as a result of some kind of provocation resulting from extreme stress.

Domestic violence is a relevant issue for social work and the way in which it is portrayed and understood influences legislation, policy, guidance and practice. There are different models of domestic abuse and although feminist perspectives are multiple (Saulnier, 1996), the principle of the feminist model is that intimate partner violence is the result of male oppression of women by men within a patriarchal system in which men are the primary perpetrators and violence and women the primary victims (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walker, 1979). However, it is acknowledged that it is important to look at the intersections between gender and other systems of oppression such as age, disability, race, national origin, class and sexual orientation (Collins, 2000). In these five cases, there is an absence of a reported or perceived oppressive patriarchal set of relations that can be used to solely explain these murder-suicides and it is likely that the psychological, sociological and neurobiological theoretical explanations for domestic violence proposed by Chornesky (2000) will also have relevance to how cases of murder-suicide are perceived and understood. Some of the specific explanations that fall under these three broad categories have particular resonance with these five cases of murder suicide including male shame, men feeling powerlessness rather than powerful, psychopathology and personality disorders, negative self-concepts and male proprietariness.

Taking into consideration the underlying oppositions presented within newspaper reports, it is apparent that murder-suicide is not presented as something that can be

easily explained.  The overall message of the text does not make explicit that the male perpetrators dominated or abused their wives and children, rather it perpetuates the idea that perpetrators are good fathers and husbands but acted in violence to protect their loved ones as a response to situations of extreme stress to which no other solution could be found.

Whilst the output of newspaper reports is very public, the reception of this output is very private.  Research into media reception has shown that texts are variously interpreted by audiences (Fairclough, 1995).   This next chapter moves away from an analysis of media reporting on cases of murder-suicide to a consideration of the perceptions of social workers who considered the cases using written case vignettes and other professionals who were directly involved in responding to the five cases.

# Chapter 5

## Interview accounts of five cases of murder suicide

### 5        Introduction

This research is ultimately concerned with the role of social workers in cases of murder-suicide which in social work terms can be conceived of as at the extreme end of the continuum of child abuse.  To this end, this chapter focuses mostly on social workers who have had no direct experience of cases of murder-suicide but it also incorporates the perspectives of other professionals who were actually involved in the five cases which are the subject of this research.  These professional perspectives are interesting in their own right in terms of the assumptions made about cases and the context within which they are interpreted and made sense of.  A consideration of the perspectives of other professionals who have had involvement in cases of murder-suicide also allows us to look at differences in the professional perspectives and understand more about the role of social work and the extent to which it is distinctive.  I have decided to include the analysis of social work interview data and other professional interview data together in this chapter as opposed to two separate empirical chapters.  The rationale for doing so is primarily because the 'other professional' data is limited in quantity and provides only a partial and thin coverage of the five cases from which it is difficult to make comparisons and draw conclusions.  The data are therefore used here to support or contrast social work perceptions on the five cases.

### 5.1     Interview processes

The process of data collection with social work interviewees involved the case being presented to them via an anonymised vignette. The information contained within each vignette (Appendices D – H) was taken directly from newspaper reports on the case and each vignette was presented using a three-section format as detailed in chapter three.

Non-social work professionals were interviewed about their involvement in the cases using a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix C).

The purpose of the interviews was to capture the perceptions of social workers and non social work professionals in relation to five specific cases of murder-suicide

through categorisation and thematic representation of interviewee perceptions and descriptions. Baker (2004:169) uses the term 'perspective display' for this conventional approach to analysing the interview data and describes the process as moving 'from thought through language to themes'. This chapter will describe and consider how understanding about the phenomenon is constructed through the use of membership categorization devices (Sacks, 1992) and demonstrate their usage in the generation of a version of reality about the cases (see Baker, 2002; DeVault, 1990; Gubrium and Holstein, 1994, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994; Riessman, 1993; Silverman, 2001).

## 5.2     Analytical approach to the interviews

The analytical approach to the interviews is underpinned by the principle that talk is social action and interviewing is an interactional event.  Discursive psychology emphasises the way versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse.  The concern is with how interviewees' constructions are accomplished and undermined as well as recognition of the constructed and contingent nature of researchers' own versions of the world.  There is an emphasis on reflexivity; what the researcher writes is a version "selectively working up coherence and incoherence" (Potter, 2004:202), telling historical stories and presenting and constituting an objective out-there reality (Ashmore, 1989; Atkinson, 1990; Potter 1996).  Interviewees, through the interview process, achieve identities, realities, social relationships and social order, which according to Rojek et al. (1988) must be placed in the context of natural, historical and social relations.   How interviewees describe and make sense of phenomena involves making pragmatic selections from a range of possibilities.  For example, the membership categorization used to describe the perpetrator in these cases might include father, husband, son, businessman and colleague.  The interpretation placed on the perpetrator's behaviour will thus be influenced by the expectations assigned to him in particular roles, which are culturally and socially ascribed. Edelman (1977) writes about the way in which professionals employ professional language to categorise people, determine how best to treat them and render these activities as too specialised to be understood or judged by the lay person.  Building on this,  Rojek et al (1988) emphasise that the language used by social workers is not neutral, is made up of received professional wisdom and ideas relating to professional values and standards and that language is a form of power in that it enables the labelling of people in ways that can result in the regulation of behaviour.  It is to be expected then that social workers and other professionals will

categorise people into particular social roles and make judgements about their actions according to socially ascribed role expectations.

The interviews were not designed to generate thick descriptions or accounts (Baker: 2004:167) through a process of accounting on both sides.  However, I am inextricably implicated with the interviewee in the assignation of sense and meaning to the phenomenon of murder-suicide through my organisation of the characteristics of what is said by the interviewee in the interpretation and analysis of the interview data.

The following themes emerged from interviewees: the perpetrator as a father, the perpetrator as villain and victim, the role of other family members, gendered constructions relating to patriarchy, mental health, domestic abuse and power and control.  Interviewees also talked about the method of murder, motive and how their perceptions are influenced by the views of others.  These thematic schemata were derived from analysis of each interview transcript and coding the content which was organised using NVivo software.  This involved categorising sentences and paragraphs within the interview transcript according to the broad areas of questioning within the interview schedule.   For example, I collated descriptions of the perpetrator, the children or their mother, perceptions on risk factors and perceptions on motive.  Within this collated data on perpetrator characteristics for example, I identified emergent themes based on the language used in description, more of which will be described as the chapter progresses.  It is also relevant to note that these themes reflect those within the wider literature referred to in chapter two and the analysis of newspaper reports in chapter four.

In addition to discussing the emergent themes, throughout, attention will be paid to:

- How the perpetrator is produced in interview talk.
- How the perpetrator/others are assigned to particular categories.
- Whether assumptions are attached to different categories.
- Whether cultural knowledge about constructions of murder and suicide and categories such as parents/husbands are displayed
- Whether and what moral assumptions are being made.

### 5.3 Conceptualisation of gendered familial roles

Before examining the interview data in the following sections, I am adding a comment on my use of specific terminology.  In each of the five cases, the family comprised a traditional heterosexual marriage and child-rearing unit' although in one case at the time of the murder-suicide the parents had separated.  The male perpetrator is the individual of whom there is most consideration in newspaper reports and thus he features predominantly in the constructions generated by interviewees. I have included perceptions about immediate family members (wives, mothers and children) where applicable.  There is a plethora of feminist writing on how the language of patriarchy situates men in particular roles and women as passive and maternal (Spender, 1980; Connell, 1987; Acker, 1989; Walby, 1989, Waters, 1989) and the way in which gendered practice and professional case talk can reinforce cultural formations of motherhood and family life is also well researched and reported on (Hearn, 1982; Milner, 1993; Hall, 1997b; Parton, 1997, Farmer and Owen, 1998, Scourfield 1999, 2001, 2002).  It is with an awareness of this that I am consciously referring to the children's mother as the perpetrator's wife. It is not meant to condone patriarchal views of ownership of one's spouse, but is simply a pragmatic short-hand, using the terminology of the news reports.

The following sections of the chapter will give an overview of the non-social work interviews and social work interviews before thematically analysing these professional perspectives on the five cases of murder suicide. The non-social work professionals did not focus very much on constructions of the perpetrator and family members within interview and contribution from these interviews to the themes described later in the chapter is limited but included where relevant.  All names used throughout the chapter are pseudonyms.

### 5.4 Overview of non-social work professionals

The non-social work professionals consisted of fire fighters, police officers a coroner and an expert in relation to matters of domestic violence.  There was not an even distribution of professionals across cases (Table 3, chapter three) and only 8 interviews of this nature were conducted in total.  Whilst the perceptions of these professionals cannot be considered as representative of the professions concerned, they do however provide insight into the perceptions of professionals who have had direct involvement in a case. This is interesting because a consideration of the perspectives of other professionals who have had involvement in cases of murder-

suicide also allows us to look at differences in the professional perspectives and understand more about the role of social work and the extent to which it is distinctive.

Fire fighters were interviewed in respect of cases **A** and **P** and police officers in respect of cases **P** and **U**.  The coroner was interviewed in respect of case **Q** and an expert in matters relating to domestic violence was interviewed, having been quoted in a newspaper report in relation to case **Q**.  This interviewee elected to talk about the subject of murder-suicide more broadly than just in relation to case **Q.** With the exception of the expert in domestic violence and the coroner, these non-social work professionals are concerned with detecting and preventing crime and responding to and preventing fires.  Their professional roles extend beyond involvement in specific cases to universal service provision through general policing and fire prevention activities.

For police officers and fire fighters, the incident first and foremost was a crime or fire scene.  In respect of these five cases, police officers and fire fighters described their first impressions of the case as being focused on the incident in hand, tackling the fire, rescuing victims and preserving a potential crime scene.  Whilst it was important to establish what had happened and how, beyond this fire officers believe that they did not take part in much speculation about reasons underlying the incident or the motive of the perpetrator.

The primacy of the job role and this being just another fire is exemplified in the following extract which is from a fire fighter recalling being asked to participate in this research but having difficulty in recalling this specific case:

*'yeah, it was history to us, it was gone'.*  (Ron, Fire Officer)

The police officers also thought they avoided speculation about motive whilst conceding that it is their role, via regular briefings, to encourage investigating officers to generate ideas, consider the unusual, consider the evidence and hypothesise in order to solve a crime.  Officers described the importance of being impartial and establishing what went on for the sake of the criminal justice system and bereft families who need to understand what happened. The responsibility of presenting facts to the coroner to make sense of the deaths was highlighted as a good reason for not entering into speculation and the coroner was seen to be

responsible for the verdict about what happened, how and why.  From this, it seems reasonable to propose that these police and fire officers constructed the cases of murder-suicide primarily within discourses of crime and protection.

## 5.5    Overview of Social work professionals

In comparison, whilst social workers also employed discourse on protection, they also made use of a range of other discourses in the consideration of cases. This is not surprising because the role of the social worker is to understand the origin of social problems and address these to bring about change with a view to reducing and managing risk.   Franklin and Parton (1991) describe the knowledge base of social work as a mixture of the practical, the social scientific and the personal, with many judgements being based on interpretation.  Understanding the issues underlying human behaviour is critical for social workers who are trying to support families to change and it is usual for social workers to speculate and hypothesise about why people behave in particular ways, drawing upon different social and psychological discursive frameworks about oppression, power, mental health and behaviour for example.  None of the social work interviewees had involvement in any of these specific cases.

## 5.6    Thematic constructions from interviews

This section contains predominantly analysis of the social work interviews but where relevant includes analysis of the non-social work interviews.   Perhaps not surprisingly, due to the availability of contextual information provided in newspaper reports and thus included in the vignettes, the perpetrators in cases **A** and **P** were subjected to the most developed characterisation.  The information available in respect of cases **U, F** and **Q** was more limited and this is reflected in the interviewee data.

### 5.6.1   The perpetrator as a father

During interviews, the perpetrator was produced in talk through the implementation of a number of obvious and consistent categorisations across each of the five cases as a 'father', a 'husband' through the inclusion of the category 'wife' and as somebody to whom his wife and children belong through reference to 'his wife and children'. The predominant categorisation by all interviewees was of the perpetrator in the role of father.  Social constructionist perspectives view fatherhood as learned through acculturation into a particular socio-cultural and historical context (Lupton

and Barclay, 1997). This perspective is reinforced by Cabrera et al (2000) who argue that cultural diversity suggests different views of the appropriate roles and behaviours of fathers and mothers and challenges a universal concept of fatherhood. In British contemporary society fatherhood is commonly portrayed as an opportunity for men to be more involved in the upbringing of their children than their own fathers were and an opportunity for them to take an equal role in parenting.  Alongside this nurturing role men are still expected to participate in the economic sphere and provide for their family. This increased emphasis on the expectations of men to nurture their children and the difficulty in reconciling acts of violence towards children by fathers is evident in the responses of fire officers and emphasised most clearly in the following extract in relation to case **A**. In this extract, the interviewee is referring to his colleagues wanting somebody other than the father to have been responsible for the arson.

*'I was asked... probably... well on more than one occasion... many many occasions... could it have been, is it arson?  They wanted another legitimate cause... anything they could grasp their hands on um y'know that might have been a flaw in the investigation, but they tried to make that little crack bigger to say y'know it were an accident and you were wrong.  Normally... if there's something that's um deliberate, the crews are quite happy to point it out but it was the perception I got this time of the way they were reporting it was completely alien to the normal thinking'.*(Ryan, Fire Officer)

Social workers also struggled with accepting the actions of the father in case **A** as intentionally harmful towards his children and interviewees displayed a sense of sympathy for the perpetrator as he was perceived to be struggling without support from his wife or from others, having difficulty with the English language, not socialising within the community and having difficulty coping with the success of his wife.  In this way the perpetrator began to be portrayed as in some respects a victim of his circumstances.    It is conceivable that more sympathy for the perpetrator was evoked in this case because social workers were seeking to be non-oppressive in interpreting racial and cultural difference and because of the low socio-economic status of the perpetrator which placed him in a potentially powerless position.

5.6.2   The perpetrator as villain and victim
The power of the written media to influence how somebody feels about something is articulated by Loseke (2003a) who claims that it is possible to construct effective

motivational frames (the way in which claims-makers construct the grounds on which somebody should care about something) that appeal only to emotion and that the category of something as a social problem is as much about how we feel as about how we think. She argues that we tend to reserve the status of victim for people to whom we are sympathetic, having concluded they are victims through no fault of their own.  Whereas victims are harmed by the condition, villains are constructed as responsible for the condition.  Loseke proposes that the rules of cultural feeling, blame and responsibility should be accompanied by feelings of hatred and condemnation and behaviourally expressed with punishment.  However, complicated reasoning surrounds the assignation of blame and Loseke proposes that feeling rules do not necessarily promote condemnation even when blame is assigned.   Blame tends to be assigned when it is determined that the perpetrator intended to cause harm and hatred does not necessarily follow blame.  The reason for causing harm is evaluated before feelings of hatred are accepted.  Such evaluation is subjective and what one person determines as an acceptable reason for causing harm will differ in another person.  For these reasons, claims-making about villains is not straightforward and portrayal of particularly horrifying circumstances and consequences plays a critical role in how perpetrators are perceived by others.  On a case by case basis, people might identify with the villain and evaluate the condition as "unfortunate, but understandable" (Loseke, 2003:86). In this way, it becomes clear that the framing of the perpetrator as somebody who was a victim in his own right, is likely to generate feelings of sympathy for his plight even though he has committed the act of murder of his children and wife. These arguments are observed in action when considering how interviewees perceived the different cases.  Comparisons were made between cases **A** and **P** where sympathy was evoked for the perpetrator in case **A** on account of him being perceived to struggle with cultural differences as opposed to the perpetrator in case **P** whose actions were perceived to be based on greed and selfishness.  Whilst the perpetrator in case **A** was somewhat perceived as a victim of circumstances, the perpetrator in case **P** was ascribed characteristics that place him in the realm of being responsible for his own downfall.  These included being characterised villainously by social workers as arrogant, greedy, short-sighted, highly intelligent and capable of understanding the consequences of his business actions, proud, materialistic, vengeful for his losses, placing importance on possessions and not facing the consequences of his bankruptcy.  More sympathetically and probably in an attempt to reconcile these perceptions with the positive portrayal of him as a

good father, the perpetrator was also described as being at his wits end and desperate.

In cases **P, U** and **F** the perpetrator was faced with an actual or perceived loss of his business. However, the cases were perceived more or less favourably according to the degree to which the perpetrator was considered to be responsible for his circumstances prior to committing murder-suicide. The perpetrator in case **P** is perceived less favourably than the perpetrator in case **U** who in turn is perceived less favourably than the perpetrator in case **F.**

In cases **P** and **U** the perpetrators were described by social workers as having acted fraudulently and as enjoying extravagant lifestyles. Both perpetrators were described as being ambitious and materialistic but the similarity ended there and in case **U**, there was no assignation of villainous personality type characteristics as perceived in case **P**. The perpetrator in case **U** was perceived as a provider to his wife and child, implicit in this being a sense of responsibility as opposed to the perpetrator in case **P** who was perceived as acting irresponsibly and not facing up to the consequences of his actions. There are five key differences between cases **P** and **U** which appear to underlie the different perceptions, despite the similarity in circumstances. Firstly, there appears to be a history of reportedly dubious business dealings in respect of case **P** whilst there is only one reported fraudulent dealing in respect of case **U**. Secondly, whilst both perpetrators enjoyed extravagant lifestyles, the perpetrator in case **U** did so on a lesser scale. Siding with the less fortunate and opposing privilege is not an uncommon theme in social work practice which has a long history of dealing with individuals who experience inequality and oppressive social conditions as a result of class-based divisions in society. Thirdly, the perpetrator in case **P** had concealed the demise of his business and his debts from his wife whilst the perpetrator in case **U** learnt only of his downfall the day before committing murder-suicide. The method in which the deaths were executed also differed. In relation to case **P,** social work interviewees identified that a high degree of planning had taken place including ensuring that everything owned by the perpetrator or about to be taken by bailiffs was destroyed. In case **U** the attack on the perpetrator's wife and child was perceived to be more frenzied and less planned, having taken place very quickly after he learned that his fraudulent business transactions had come to light. Lastly, the perpetrator in case **P** had told friends and colleagues that he would not let anybody take his possessions. In case **U** the perpetrator left a suicide note signalling remorse for his actions.

The perpetrator in case **F** was not ascribed any villainous characteristics and is identified as a victim of circumstances in that he feared the loss of his business and ultimately his home having experienced this previously, was worried about his business, was being treated for depression and had expressed concern to his mother that he was 'manic-depressive'. He was perceived as somebody who was struggling with his circumstances in an ordinary existence as opposed to the lifestyles in cases **P** and **U**.

Case **Q** evoked responses of anger and sadness from social workers as they struggled to understand the rationale as to why the perpetrator murdered his two children. In particular, judgements were made about his actions towards his wife in telephoning to tell her what he had done; this was seen as vindictive, cruel and selfish.

Vanda constructs a more villainous role for the perpetrator in Case **Q** than in case **F**:

*Honestly, I think I feel more sympathy towards this person (case **F**) than the other one (case **Q**). Thinking about it now, they both found themselves in situations they couldn't cope with, so why the difference? I suppose, looking at it from a societal point of view and societal expectations on people, this situation is more socially understandable than the first scenario (Case **Q**).* (Vanda, social worker)

Here, Vanda is comparing the perceived loss of a business, income and home in case **F** to the breakdown of a marriage and limited contact with children in case **Q**, suggesting that it is more acceptable for murder-suicide to be a response to a situation of perceived significant loss, as in case **F**, compared to lesser loss in Case **Q**. This is possibly because in case **F** the perpetrator felt he had no control over a situation of great loss, whereas in case **Q**, the perpetrator was perceived as being having greater control because he had a job, a temporary home and an arrangement to have contact with his children. The circumstances in case **Q** might be perceived as one of strength compared to the potential significant losses that were perceived by the perpetrator as about to occur in case **F**.

There is further evidence of the application by social workers of subjective judgements about what is sufficient in terms of adverse experience to warrant the

act of murder-suicide.  Talking about case **F,** Donna implicitly judges the actions of the perpetrator in response to a situation of perceived potential bankruptcy by comparing this with her own experience and management of stress and how she considers she would manage bankruptcy.

*And I suppose it's different value bases.  If I was made bankrupt tomorrow I'd just carry on, but then I've also been under a huge amount of stress.  I can see how people do... perhaps I've taken steps to manage it, whereas other people don't have the resource or know how that enables them.* (Donna, social worker).

The perceptions of those interviewed in respect of cases F, P and U appeared to frame more favourably perpetrators who were perceived to be more virtuous in terms of being honest, more ordinary and had more in common with interviewee life experiences.

5.6.3    The role of other family members

Where it is not easy to blame the perpetrator, this may be deflected onto somebody or something else and 'the family', is one potential site of blame.  In the absence of suicide notes or expert witness records it is difficult to determine motive and to makes sense of the interplay between the functioning of the perpetrator and the family that led to the event.  On a number of occasions social workers talked about expecting information to come to the fore that would explain the act such as the family being dysfunctional in a way that might precipitate such an act.  The expectation being established here is that these acts of extreme violence are more extraordinary because they occur in families which on the surface appear to be successful whereas sense can be made of extreme acts in the context of family dysfunction.  By implication, murder-suicides would be less extraordinary in family where social problems and dysfunction are evident.

The vignettes contained varying amounts of information about relationships within the families.  In case **A** there was a lot of information relating to perceptions about the marital relationship, employment and parenting.  This information was considered by interviewees in the context of knowledge and assumptions about cultured and gendered dimensions of occupational, family and social roles and what the family was expected to be like. It is evident throughout that interviewee constructs about family relationships in case **A** are embodied with references to

culture in a way that is not evident in the other four cases concerning white British families.

In case **A**, there was evidence of social workers conceptualising the perpetrator as being unhappy with the balance of power within the adult relationship as a result of their respective occupations; he a low paid factory worker and she a respected community worker and also the degree to which they were respectively integrated within and respected by the community. Combined with the perception that the perpetrator's life was centred on the mosque and he lacked fluency in the English language, assumptions were made that he was in some way less socially integrated and less fulfilled than his wife. References were made to a lack of self esteem due to the perpetrator's wife being in a more respected occupational position, lack of 'kudos' in the community, social isolation, lack of integration, value and respect within the community and to the perpetrator feeling left behind by his wife. The perpetrator was described as living within the traditions of Pakistani culture and religion and as such he would expect to be head of the family. This assumption led social workers to assume that he would be disempowered within his relationship with his wife and children as a result of his low employment status and lack of community integration, compared to his wife.

*...isolated, quiet, obviously isolated because he has poor, his English language is poor, limited employment opportunities... quite a religious man as well, spends a lot of time going to the local Mosque and socialises, it looks like socialises in his own culture and religion rather than branching out in the wider community. So he might not have been, he's been isolated from the English community, he's socialising within his own culture within that area. (Ava, Social Worker)*

The perpetrator's wife was portrayed as having taken on the role of 'head of the household' including endorsing a western lifestyle for their female children. These different cultural expectations were perceived to be a potential underlying stressor within the family and these cultural assumptions led social workers to suggest that the perpetrator was controlling and frustrated with a seeming lack of control over his wife and children.

*...he wanted to prevent his daughter from enjoying the westernised lifestyle, you know he's very controlling it seems by the clothes, I suppose a loss of identity for him in this situation that the culture is very very different... cultural clash – she*

*perhaps felt more liberated; lived a more liberated life – had effect on him... a change to his upbringing, his understanding of the ways of life, his relationship, systems – difficult perhaps for someone in that culture to accept our ways as it is for us to accept those ways: when I think of would I want to live like that and I couldn't think probably of anything worse, so is that the way perhaps he felt about the situation. (Alison, Social Worker)*

In case **U**, the perpetrator's concerns about loss of his business and his mental health were known to his GP, brother and a close family friend but it is not apparent that that these were known to his immediate family. A judgement was made about the role in case **U** of the perpetrator's wife and daughter in ensuring that the family circumstances did not arise in the first place:

*It's crumbling around his ears and they can't see it, perhaps they've never asked him where the money is coming from – he's only selling flowers. With all due respect they should have tuned in but they're living in their bubble. (Vera, Social Worker)*

The perpetrator in case **P** appeared to have managed to conceal his concerns from his family but alluded to them with close friends and business associates. In respect of case **F** it appears that the perpetrator did not confide any of his concerns with anybody and acted very quickly after learning of his downfall. Donna appears to be making an assumption that in case **F** family support was lacking and this contributed to the downfall of the perpetrator:

*If he had a supportive family you'd think that would hold him on the right side of sanity. (Donna, Social Worker)*

Whilst blame of the family was not explicit or overt in the spoken perceptions of interviewees, there is some evidence of subtle placing of responsibility for perpetrators feeling out of control. This is not a uniform experience across cases because with the exception of case **A,** the vignettes contained little information about the perpetrator's wife and children and this was reflected in the degree to which interviewees managed to generate perceptions of them. In case **A** the perpetrator's wife was described positively on the basis of her job role and involvement in the children's school. Assumptions were made about her having strength of character, independence and being focused and driven. She was

portrayed by social workers as a non-traditional Muslim woman because she was active and well known within the community. This perception of a strong and successful wife, who might have brought about her husband's feelings of loss of control, could be seen as an example of deflection of blame. More broadly however, there was an absence of apportioning blame to family members other than the perpetrator. Although social workers emphasised vulnerabilities such as age and naivety of the perpetrator's wife in case **Q** and ignorance of business liquidation and the impending visit from bailiffs in case **P**, social workers portrayed positive images of wives as being successful, wanting to achieve and as good parents on the basis of their children's achievements.

### 5.6.4   The gendered dimension of social roles

Despite the limited information available in respect of adult relationships and specifically the perpetrator's wives, there was evidence of interviewees assigning gendered roles within the family. In all of the cases, interviewees drew upon their own knowledge and experience of cultural norms in 21$^{st}$ century British culture in relation to what is expected of the multiple roles inhabited by adults within relationships, including being a father, mother, parent, husband and wife.

It was universally acknowledged by social work interviewees that adults live mostly within patriarchal economic structures whereby men more so than women are perceived as successful and as providers for wives and children. This was conveyed by social workers in particular in case **A** where they described how the perpetrator might be feeling left behind by his wife who was a successful community worker whereas he worked in a 'backstreet' factory. Cases **P** and **U** were perceived by social workers to contain particular issues around male identity as being successful and providing for their families. The following extract relates to case **P**

*...he could not cope with his wife knowing that he's a failure and he's lost everything and maybe that's why she was with him, or he felt she was with him in the first place because he could offer... maybe this is what made him this important person and without the money what would he be in his mind? (Dot, Social Worker)*

Although seemingly not related to economic success in case **Q** the lack of success generally in respect of the role of husband and father, having been left by his wife who retained the children with her, was conceptualised as contributing to the

ultimate downfall of the perpetrator. These interpretations sit comfortably within patriarchal ideology and feminist ideology within which analysis of the perpetrator's motive is considered later in the chapter.

Case **A** generated a lot of consideration and judgements in respect of gendered roles. Conceptualising the perpetrator's wife as successful and failing to recognise and act upon his perceived distress demonstrates the subtle use of moral assumptions about the role of women as responsible for the happiness and success of their husbands but failing to do this when they are themselves successful.

*Power balance is between him and his wife's relationship and if they seem to be – if kind of like out of the community... if she's, you know, doing certain jobs and she's well respected and well liked and then maybe he feels that he's not because of the job that he does and then I suppose it questions how that then reflects within the family home* (Dolores, Social Worker, talking about case A)

Social workers hypothesised that the perpetrator's wife in cases **A, P** and **U** might have been engaged in affairs with other men. The rationale for this speculation is unclear in cases **P** and **U** but in respect of case **A**, where the wife's infidelity was alluded to in the vignette, an act of infidelity was considered as sufficient to antagonise and disgrace the perpetrator, making his act of suicide something that could be comprehended within his belief system. Whilst social workers were not agreeing with women being held responsible for antagonising and disgracing their husbands, they nonetheless felt that a male might well perceive his wife's behaviour in this way as a result of cultural and societal expectations about women being honourable, obedient and not transgressing socially acceptable marital behaviour by entering sexual relations with another. This hypothesis was used to provide a rationale whereby the perpetrator would need to save face and serve punishment.

Judgements about gendered roles were not restricted just to the perpetrator and his wife. The paternal grandmother in case **Q** was judged by interviewees as a mother and grandmother, rather than simply as somebody who had information that she could have acted upon. The social work principle of the child's welfare being of paramount importance came to the fore in interviews. Whilst the paternal grandmother might conceivably be perceived to be 'motherly' in protecting her son by her comment that he 'had a lot of guts' to commit suicide, this was seen as an

abhorrent comment by social workers.  Social worker interviewees expected 'maternal instinct' to make the paternal grandmother act to prioritise the safety of her grandchildren when she became aware that her son was feeling suicidal and having contact with his children.

In contrast, the non-social work professionals made little reference to gendered roles other than that of being a father and the difficulties experienced in reconciling the role of a father with the act of murder-suicide.  A notable exception to this was the domestic abuse expert who conveyed her view that murder-suicide should be considered within a domestic abuse paradigm.

5.6.5   Mental health

Social constructionists emphasise how the meaning and experience of illness is shaped by cultural and social systems and that what comes to be identified as a social problem is determined by successful claims-making and moral entrepreneurialism (Becker, 1963; Gusfield, 1967; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). Allied to this is the tradition of symbolic interactionism which emphasises how individuals construct self-hood through social interaction (Goffman, 1961, 1963; Blumer, 1969) and how the experience of illness itself is socially constructed.  In these five cases, 'depression' was reported as being a feature in the experiences of some of the perpetrators. It would seem reasonable to hypothesise however, that where symptoms of depression were reported to medical practitioners or known about by family members and friends these were not perceived as being something that might be significantly impacting on the perpetrator to the degree that murder-suicide was a potential outcome.  How the reported 'depression' was perceived by medical practitioners and family members and friends is important.  Conrad and Barker (2010:68) make the point that where sufferers' symptoms are not readily associated with a discernible medical abnormality, it can be difficult to obtain acknowledgement or treatment of the condition and they might be subjected to suspicion that their problems are all in their heads.

Not surprisingly, given the reports of depression in particular cases, social work interviewees used a mental health discourse within which to try and makes sense of the murder-suicides.  State of mind type categorisations were popular, whereby the perpetrator was seen as in despair, having suddenly 'lost his mind' and with it, the ability to act in a rational way.

*'And just awful for the father as well, because I think if you've got to that state, to actually do that to your children. It's bad enough doing it to another person, but doing it to your children, you must be completely at the end of your tether'. (Abigail, Social Worker talking about case **A**)*

*'...this is a person who is finding it difficult and is clearly not in the same frame of mind or clearly thinking so it's difficult to put any rationale around their actions'. (Reg, Police Officer talking about case **P**)*

In case **F**, the perpetrator was quickly categorised as somebody who had a complete breakdown, acted irrationally and lost all reasoning. The mental health of the perpetrator in case **Q** was questioned but not expanded on particularly by social workers who accepted that he may have felt depressed but not consulted the GP in relation to this. The perpetrator in case **U** was described by social workers as having a breakdown and being out of control based on the attack being frenzied and no prior indicators of mental health issues.

However, for social workers, the act of murder suicide was not a rational response to the experience of the social problems being experienced.

*From my rational perspective I think yes, it's bad, your house and your money and everything, but that wouldn't lead to ending it all. (Donna, Social Worker talking about case **F**)*

Vanda questioned how somebody could become so depressed as to want to end the lives of their family as well as their own. Elaborating on her theme she talks about depression being a consequence of a man's failure to meet social expectations on him to be employed and successful. Vanda acknowledges that these social pressures and failures are not isolated to this family but suggests that depression and mental health issues might prevent men from being able to withstand them. Similarly, Dot talks about the bankruptcy issues in case **P** serving to strip the perpetrator of his identity.

Although attempting to make sense of murder-suicide by placing the act within the context of mental health problems, social workers interviewed talked about their lack of understanding about mental health issues. For the social workers, in none of these three cases were the mental health issues perceived to heighten a risk of

harm to self through suicide or harm to others.  They felt that this lack of understanding is reflected more widely within communities and families where people do not see and can misinterpret mental health problems and do not understand the impact of issues on those around them.    Two of the perpetrators (**F** and **P**) however, were consulting with a GP about their mental health and the perpetrator in case **Q** had talked to others about being depressed. This matter emphasises the challenge for medical practitioners to recognise risk and intervene to prevent acts of murder-suicide when the presenting issues are not considered indicative of such an act.

5.6.6   Domestic abuse
Explicit references were made to the perpetrator as a killer and the person responsible for bringing about the deaths of his children and in four cases, his wife.

Although not reported on in newspaper reports, domestic violence was questioned as an underlying issue in each of the cases as social workers sought to conceptualise how an extreme act of violence against one's children and wife could occur without a known history of abusive behaviour. The concealed nature of domestic abuse is referred to in research undertaken by Stanley et al (2012) to inform a social marketing campaign targeting men's violence toward women.  Male focus group participants emphasised that domestic violence was a submerged issue at family and community levels where its presence was known but not acknowledged.

What counts as "violence" is socially constructed, has varied over time, and reflects power relationships (Muehlenhard and Kimes, 1999).  The concept of domestic abuse is relatively new and the idea that violence occurred within families and other close relationships and terms such as wife rape, date rape, wife beating, and courtship violence only began to come into existence in the late 1960s (Bergen, 1998; Loseke, 1989). Domestic abuse is defined by the Home Office (2012) as 'any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality'. This definition encompasses but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse.  In social work culture there are stereotypes about what constitutes domestic abuse including rape, physical abuse and making women financially and emotionally dependent upon a man.  Although referring to rape and

physical battery, Kahn, Mathie and Torgler (1994) make the point that individuals whose experiences do not match stereotypes might not regard themselves as victims. Others too might not perceive or identify women as being in abusive relationships where the symptoms do not fit cultural stereotypes. From a social constructionist perspective, no true definition exists and debates are ongoing as to how domestic violence is framed.

Underlying traditional views of what constitutes domestic violence are what Loseke (2003b) refers to as formula story narratives that place "battered women" and "abusive men" at the centre of depictions of domestic violence. As such, the narrative becomes a virtual template within which the experience of domestic violence becomes defined. However, the relationship between the formula narrative of domestic violence and the reality of the experience of it can be ambiguous. Interviewees attempted to make sense of the complications of lived experience by applying formula narratives about domestic abuse and power and control, in the absence of overt evidence of either. Recognising that domestic abuse is not always recognisable to onlookers, social workers considered that issues of power and control manifesting themselves as a form of domestic abuse, may have existed within the relationships.

*I think I lots of ways it sounds like a form of domestic violence to me but I am sure that perhaps to him everything that he's ever known and understood is just a huge belief between our worlds really and what we would perhaps see as domestic violence, he wouldn't.* (Alison, Social Worker, talking about case **A**)

In relation to case **A** Carol considers that there might have been a history of domestic abuse and that the perpetrator might be a controlling and paranoid type of partner.

*My immediate thought perhaps that this was a controlling paranoid type of partner and that then perhaps I thought there might have been a history of domestic abuse (*Carol, Social Worker)

In case **Q**, social workers picked up on issues of a stormy relationship but did not consider this in itself was sufficient indication to social workers, family or friends that there was domestic abuse within the parental relationship. However, Chadra perceived the same case as follows:

*Well there's the one where he was always jealous, controlling and violent before she left – that's why she left him* (Chadra, domestic violence expert)

Whilst it might be commonly conceived that men are violent in order to control women, in these cases social workers introduced issues of power and control as a way of conceptualising domestic abuse that perhaps did not involve overt violence to family members until the final act of murder.

5.6.7    Power and control

Regardless of perceived motive, the murder was unequivocally referred to by social workers as an act of domestic violence where the death of the family was the means by which the perpetrator could regain control over his family.    This view implies recognition that men, as husbands and fathers both desire and expect to be in control of their household and that they perceive their wives and children as possessions over which they have control.   Social workers consistently perceived the perpetrator, whether acting to protect his wife and children or wreak revenge, as behaving in a manner that they are his possessions to do what he wants with, setting aside their autonomy or self determination.  In case **A** it was proposed that the perpetrator had lost control over his successful wife and westernised children so he regained control through ending their lives.  This was similarly proposed in relation to case **P** where the perpetrator told people that nobody will take his possessions from him and the burning of the property, building and possessions ensured that nobody would have them after his death.   In case **Q** it was hypothesised that the perpetrator could not live without his children yet could not foresee that he would have the care of them so acted to keep them together and prevent their mother from having what he could not.  Social work interviewees identified other indicators of issues of control in relation to case **Q** namely the perpetrator's wife being described as 'a girl', immature, inexperienced and sheltered, based on her age and religious upbringing, compared to her older husband.  The issue of treating wives and children as possessions was less blatant in cases **F** and **U**, yet there remained the fact that the perpetrators had chosen to end the lives of their wives and children and thus acted in way that suggests they assumed control.

Chadra, speaking as an expert in issues of domestic violence against women believes there is no ambiguity about male control in these cases:

*'Uh they've usually been controlling but not physically violent prior to the breakdown of the relationship.  You usually get a constellation of traumatic events in that man's life immediately prior to... Uh so it's usually he's lost his job, uh she's left him or filed for divorce, uh maybe she's got a new boyfriend the kids are calling him dad and there's some constellation of those kind of things.  So it involves him feeling that he, rightly or wrongly, that he no longer has control over anything  but his way of thinking uh is so distorted that he actually thinks that he's doing the wife – the children at least – a favour by taking them with him.  ...control is actually the most dangerous type of abuse but it's the one that gets paid the least amount of attention – we can't even quantify it within our criminal justice system.  Y'know we're talking micro-managing of this woman's life but no physical violence'.*
(Chadra, domestic violence expert)

Similarly, one police officer identifies issues of control that are not as evident as those in what he classes as usual cases of domestic violence:

*'It's clear it's domestic violence but where there's a loss of temper and all the emotions that go with it this is different... a completely different mindset and not necessarily these openly violent and uncontrolled people... in fact it might be that they are too controlled, they think too clearly but not correctly and it's a different... I do see it as a different mindset to the normal type of domestic violence'.*
(Robert, Police Officer)

## 5.7  Method of murder

Social workers speculated over the method of the murder, drawing comparisons between what appeared to be frenzied and spontaneous acts in cases **F** and **U** and those meticulously planned on the basis of requiring fire accelerants or preventing rescue services from gaining easy access to the property as in cases **A** and **P**.  The concept of the perpetrator being 'tipped over the edge' by difficulties in their life as perceived to be the situation in cases **F** and **U,** appeared to be a more palatable explanation to social workers than the idea that the act of murder-suicide had been rationalised, thought through and subjected to planning and preparation.  Debbie expressed anger and disgust at the perpetrator in case **P** for the degree of planning that appeared to take place.

There was also a differentiation based on the degree of violence used in the murder. Talking about case **F** Vicky differentiates between the violence of using a lump hammer and knife and a nicer way of murdering children. At the same time, she observes incongruence in the manner of the killing in case **F** and her perception that the perpetrator did not want to leave his family behind after his death:

*If this was planned, he might have left them in their beds in a nice way but it's violent how he's randomly gone around and killed them. It's quite interesting isn't it, you get this sense of his hopelessness and not wanting to leave his family behind without him but then the way it's done is incongruent.* (Vicky, Social Worker)

Similarly, Vera suggested there was a nicer way of murdering children by portraying the deaths of the two young children in case **Q** as one over which care had been taken because he is not angry with the children:

*...that young, suffocation presumably wouldn't take that long and they'd slip gently off. There's a kind of care about this. ...Maybe he tries to appear to be a good dad to the children.* (Vera, Social Worker)

She goes on to compare this with the perceived intent to harm the mother who was excluded from the murder-suicide:

*...he rings her to tell her – he's not out to do her any favours.* (Vera, Social Worker)

Vera also makes a value judgement about the method of the murders observing that in case **U** the method was violent:

*..it's a horrible way for the mother and daughter to die. (Vera, Social Worker)*

For this reason, this social worker perceives this murder to be more difficult to accept.

## 5.8   Motive for murder

Two dominant motives emerged from interviewees. The first and most commonly occurring is that of the perpetrator rescuing his family from a fate worse than death and the second is that of wreaking and revenge and punishment on the family. It is

not however as straightforward as assigning a single motive to a case and for some cases, both motives seemed possible.

In case **A,** drawing upon the interviewees' own beliefs about Asia and Islam, the perpetrator was perceived to want to rescue his daughters from a Westernised lifestyle. Anna hypothesises that the perpetrator might have been scared of losing his wife and children and acted in desperation to keep them together by locking them in the house and setting the fire. The perpetrator was also perceived to have acted to protect honour, by bringing the family back under control and preventing further perceived betrayals of culturally acceptable or expected behaviours from his wife and children. It was conceded that this could only partially provide a rationale as there seemed no sense in murdering the youngest daughter who unlike her mother and sisters embraced the Asian culture and attended mosque.

Similarly in case **U** the perpetrator was perceived as wanting to protect his family from a perceived situation of loss of his business and home, but his method of murder was perceived to be vengeful.

*...very frenzied attack... very different to somebody who wants to be with their children and smothers them which is much more loving...* (Verity, Social Worker talking about case **U**)

*..in this one (case U) I don't feel as much sympathy for the father... perhaps the age of the daughter as well... it's not like protecting your little babies by taking them to heaven with you.* (Vinny, Social Worker)

Case **Q** was conceptualised as one in which the perpetrator wrought revenge on the mother for separating from him and depriving him of his children.

Case **P** was conceptualised as involving an act of revenge on beneficiaries of his asset liquidation and impending visit from bailiffs. Social workers also perceived the perpetrator as acting to keep his family together and protect his wife and child from a fall from grace and shame arising from loss of lifestyle and esteem.

In case **F** the perpetrator was perceived to be acting to protect his wife and child from shame arising from his fraudulent activity being discovered. In respect of the method of murder and degree of violence used, some social workers suggested

anger against his wife and child, perhaps for placing expectations on him to provide a lifestyle that could no longer be sustained.

With the exception of case **U,** perpetrators did not leave suicide notes.  It was proposed by social workers that the perpetrators in cases **F** and **P** were also suicidal but did not want to leave their wives and children to live in reduced circumstances.

## 5.9    Interviewees being influenced by the views of others

The vignette concluded with a number of statements that were drawn from the newspaper reports on the case.  The statements that were most influential were those that were congruent with the interpretation that social work interviewees had already applied to the cases.  In relation to case **A** these included statements about the perpetrator being controlling and jealous, the perpetrator being left behind by his successful wife and views about a perceived clash of cultures.  In case **P** the most influential statements by others were those that supported the view that the perpetrator acted in response to the anticipated loss of lifestyle, accompanying feelings of degradation, wanting to prevent others from having what had once been his.  Social workers were not overly inclined to be influenced by the views of others where they could not be substantiated or where it was felt the person speaking would have only limited knowledge of the family; for example in respect of case **Q** where neighbours talked about the perpetrator dominating a conversation.  The views of close family members and friends were likely to be more influential than those of neighbours or people within a community who were considered to have only a partial view of the family and inclined to speak favourably based on their limited interaction.

The following extract relates to case **A:**

*The neighbour saying they were a nice respectable couple.  I'm sure to all intents and purposes we all are. It's those closest to us that know what's really going on. I'm sure they were lovely children, most children are aren't they?  You know, I don't think you can judge very much from what a neighbour says about what goes on.* (Vinny, social worker)

The views of the social worker in case **Q** were given limited attention as her role was considered to be in relation to making an initial assessment which was perceived as lacking in depth as she had not spent much time with the family.

The views of the children's mother in case **Q** raised tensions for social workers as they tried to reconcile her talking about the perpetrator as a loving father after he had committed the murder of his children. This concept challenged social worker preconceptions that a mother should find it abhorrent if her child is killed or harmed by its father.

The concept of being influenced by the views of others is important for social work assessments of a child's safety. Social workers rely upon the professional judgements of education and health workers for objective reports on development and wellbeing but also on 'soft' information provided by people who are considered to have relevant knowledge about the family or insight into their circumstances. This 'soft' information is tested out through observation and assessment by professionals but nevertheless relied upon to inform overall judgements. Generally, assessments will be informed by extended family members where they are considered to be neutral in the situation and not overly biased toward or against the family. Congruence of observations is an important factor and in my experience little attention is paid to the view of family members where their observations are incongruent with the assessment of professionals. In some cases, experts are also engaged to provide an impartial view of a family where there are concerns that professionals and families relationships are entrenched and subject to collusion or bias.

## 5.10   Discussion and conclusion

This chapter started with some broad conceptualisations by non-social work and social work professionals in relation to their role in dealing with specific cases of murder-suicide. The main emphasis of this chapter however is the perceptions of social workers on the same five specific cases of murder-suicide. If anything is clear it is that the construction of the phenomenon of murder-suicide in relation to these five cases is complex. There is no evidence of a single discourse which emerges in making sense of the phenomenon of murder-suicide. Instead, social workers employed a range of discourses within which they constructed and made sense of the cases, attempting to do so in a manner that is recognizably familiar, orderly and moral.

Compatible with their occupational focus on understanding the causes and issues underlying social problems, social workers were concerned with why murder-suicide had occurred.  In contrast, non-social work professionals talked primarily about the criminal and forensic aspects of the murder-suicide, as opposed to generating constructs about the perpetrator and his family context.  In doing so, non-social work professionals applied a somewhat more straightforward assignation of responsibility as their roles demanded investigation into what happened and how.

The chapter has focused on perceptions of the perpetrator and, where relevant, his family members and family circumstances.

### 5.10.1  Conceptualisation of the perpetrator

Social work interviewees used membership categorisation devices to identify the perpetrator as a father and husband; roles which are culturally imbued with responsibilities such as being loving, caring, protective and a provider. Categorisation of the perpetrator in this way supports the conceptualisation of the murder of one's children and wife, followed by suicide as something that is abhorrent and inexplicable.   In each of these cases, forensically there are clear relational pairs of villainous murderer and victims.  Whilst it is unequivocal that the perpetrator carried out the murder of his wife and children, it is evident that there are inherent tensions for social workers in the portrayal of a villainous perpetrator whilst acknowledging him also as a victim of circumstances.  This is not surprising when one considers the underpinning principles of social work.  Social workers are bound by a nationally set code of practice (Care Council Wales) which describes the standards of practice and professional conduct required of them in their work. The code of practice fundamentally underpins social work practice of protecting and promoting the rights and interests of service users and carers.  Amongst other principles and values, social care workers are required to treat people as individuals, support people to exercise control over their lives and make choices and respect diversity and different cultures and values.  It is this underpinning belief system that encourages social workers to perceive people who are in some way marginalised or lacking on control over their lives, in a sympathetic way.

In trying to reconcile this tension of villain and victim, social workers applied a complex interpretation of the degree of blame and responsibility assigned to the murderer and those killed, assembling the social worlds of perpetrators and their

families, generating descriptions and explanations about what could be the case and how the social order of their lives and the act of murder-suicide might be explained.

### 5.10.2  The perpetrator and his family circumstances

In consideration of family circumstances, social workers did not perceive the difficulties faced by the families in these five cases as being extraordinary.  Debt, bankruptcy, marital disharmony and family breakdown were considered to be issues that face people on a day-to-day basis and are considered to be somewhat representative of contemporary British society facing economic recession.

Social workers focused on social context in terms of employment, marital relations and mental health but did not focus at a macro level on the underpinning economic and political structures.  As well as social context, social workers emphasised the role of individual agency and why the perpetrators in these families responded to their changing and adverse circumstances by committing murder and suicide.

### 5.10.3  The professional construction of blameworthiness

The assignation of blame and responsibility is not straightforward, as described earlier in the chapter (Loseke, 2003).  Contradictions and ambiguity in the assignation of blame and responsibility were evident throughout social work constructions of the perpetrator and family.  In cases **A**, **F** and **Q**, to different degrees, the perpetrator is assigned the role of victim of certain lifestyle circumstances. In cases **P** and **U** the perpetrator was portrayed less favourably, having fallen from an extravagant lifestyle and in case **P** in particular, the perpetrator is held responsible for his fall from grace.  In case **A**, the perpetrator's wife is somewhat subtly portrayed as somebody that in part contributed to the perpetrator's downfall through her success and rejection of his values and also as somebody who should or could have seen his suffering and acted upon this.  In case **F**, the perpetrator was portrayed as an ordinary family man under threat of losing his business and in case **Q** the perpetrator was portrayed as somebody who had lost his wife and children through separation.

In trying to weave a path through the individual circumstances and context of the family, social workers constructed a moral order, making judgements about families, gender roles, behaviours and motives.  Social workers differentiated between perpetrators who were more, or less, worthy of sympathy dependent upon

the degree to which they were perceived to be responsible for their own downfall. Traditional social work values about support for the oppressed and vulnerable came to the fore as social workers sympathised with perpetrators who were perceived to be suffering with mental health problems or were victims of their circumstances. Less sympathy and support was evident for those perpetrators perceived to have brought about their own downfall through reckless behaviour and flamboyant lifestyles. Social workers also employed the discourse of gendered roles in their perceptions of the five cases. Making reference to patriarchal societal structures they implied in case A that the perpetrator felt overshadowed by his successful wife and in case Q, the perpetrator was not able to assert control over his estranged wife who had custody of their children.

Social workers also used mental health, domestic abuse and power and control discourses as the framework within which to order their perceptions and explain behaviour and motive. Mental health was applied as being an inevitable factor, as how otherwise can such an act be rationally carried out? However, the mental ill health of the perpetrator was not considered to have been sufficiently prominent to alert anybody to the events that took place in the five cases. The need for perpetrators to establish power and control in the face of adversity and loss was also a consistent feature in the perceptions of social work interviewees. The lack of a pre-signature of domestic violence led social workers to speculate that issues of power and control existed in all of the relationships even though they did not manifest themselves to others. This view was supported by the expert in domestic violence who proposed that control is not even quantifiable.

5.10.4 Reflexivity and the exercise of moral judgement

The idea that social workers and others involved in child protection are required to exercise moral, rather than professional or technical judgement is not new (Thorpe, 1994; Wattam, 1996: Jack 1997). Jack (1997:661) suggests that definitions of what constitutes abuse are 'inconsistent, contested and increasingly widely cast'. This is not necessarily problematic however if one perceives social work as much a practical-moral activity as a technical-rational one (Taylor and White, 2001). Evidence-based practice can be perceived as offering some certainty in decision making, by developing a vocabulary in which 'the language of goals, objectives, outcomes and effectiveness challenges the reliance on sentimentality, opinion-based practice, intuition or lay knowledge' (Shaw, 1999:42); it is an arena in which rationality takes over from alleged emotion and irrationality. This is the 'head'

aspect of the dichotomous relationship between 'head and heart' where 'head' is privileged as best (Taylor and White, 2001:40) when it comes to informing decision making. However, evidence-based practice provides only a partial explanation of the complex considerations that take place in social work assessment and decision-making. Taylor and White challenge some of the ideas and assumptions which underpin evidence-based practice, namely its assumption of the existence of certainty and it conceptualisation of knowledge as an objective and pre-existing given. They argue that reflexivity provides a firmer footing for social work where epistemological questions about ways of knowing about the world are not ignored in favour of a focus on which theories are most helpful and relevant in informing social work. Opposing the realist stance where the social worker supposedly stands outside of the situation and makes an objective assessment based on the evidence or facts and decides how to respond, Taylor and White argue that professional judgement is not that simple. They argue that social work judgements do not rely on formal knowledge alone but also on moral judgements about blameworthiness and creditworthiness, responsibility and irresponsibility. This builds on Latour's (1999) proposal that emotions are integral in decision making and judgement. What this means for social work is a reflexive approach that values the scrutiny of evidence and the weighing up of it against available information before reaching a judgement. Through this process, moral standards become reviewed and reshaped. In respect of social work responses to these cases of murder-suicide, whilst there is no suggestion that the killing of a child is not wrong, social workers engaged in making value judgements about these parental murders and the seemingly irreconcilable relationship between father and murderer. These judgements were based on an appraisal of the family circumstances and context including issues such as the perpetrator's mental health, the degree to which they themselves were perceived as victims of circumstances, the method used in the murder and the degree to which this was perceived as kind or brutal. Judgements were also made in respect of the perpetrator's lifestyle and whether or not his downfall was perceived as deserved and brought upon himself.

Whilst I am not suggesting that phenomenological questions in relation to the phenomenon of murder-suicide should be placed into 'the abyss of relativism', where there are no objective benchmarks against which to assess claims to truth or rightness (Krausz, 1989), I am guided by Taylor and White (2001) who assert that it is by acknowledging multiple accounts and by analysing how they are constructed

to warrant particular claims and undermine others, a more rigorous approach to professional practice can be achieved .

# Chapter 6

# The relationship of social work to the phenomenon of murder-suicide

This chapter describes and analyses interviewees' perceptions about murder suicide more broadly than the five specific cases and explores the relationship between social work and the phenomenon of murder-suicide as an extreme form of child abuse. In particular this chapter relates to Part B of the interview schedule for social workers (Appendix I).

## 6      The context of contemporary social work

In order to understand how social work relates to murder-suicide as a specific form of child abuse, it is necessary to understand the historical and contemporary contexts within which the profession operates. Since their beginnings in the late 19th century, child protection agencies have been concerned with how to protect children from avoidable harm and death and up until the mid twentieth century, hundreds of children were dying every year in child protection casework.

## 6.1     From philanthropy to the certainty of technical management of social problems

Child protection social work has a long history of intersecting with issues of social deprivation and poverty and starving and neglected children have provided evocative images for child protection organisations since the 19th century (Rowntree, 1901). In the last quarter of the 19th century, child protection was practised in the guise of philanthropy, dealing with issues of poverty and infant mortality arising from the consequences of rapid capitalist development in cities. The growth in numbers of 'social workers' led to increased identification of cases of cruelty and deprivation and what had been considered as deaths arising from disease began to be conceptualised as arising from neglect and parental irresponsibility. From the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century, child protection was socially constructed as a technical problem about which something could be done (Ferguson, 2004:5) and an idea and ideal of child protection emerged; that it is possible through social intervention to protect children from avoidable harm and even death. From the beginning of the twentieth century 'a new conception of risk and optimistic professional belief began to be constituted which held that these deaths could be prevented and reformation of deviant parenting effected through

social intervention' (Ferguson, 2004:43). As the number of children dying in open cases decreased during the 1920s and 1930s, there was a concurrent increase in the faith in expert systems to assess risk, intervene and protect children which was widely shared. By the late 1930s failures to protect children were not made public and were hidden away through processes of sequestration (Giddens, 1991) involving the structured concealment of information that was potentially troublesome and threatened the trustworthiness of expert systems. This process contributed to the shaping of the professional social work discourse that child death could be prevented and excluded externalities such as poverty and social inclusion from its discourse (Giddens, 1991).

## 6.2    From the certainty of technical management to the uncertainty of reflexive modernism

Little was written about child protection practices until the 1970s after the discovery of the 'battered child syndrome' by Henry Kempe in the 1960s (Wolff, 1988). By this time child death had re-emerged as a social issue and social work practice today is conceptualised as having shifted from simple to reflexive modernism where the new focus is on deliberate harm, non accidental injury and the central role of co-ordinated inter-agency work, procedures and managerialism (Ferguson, 2004). Reflexive modernity brings with it the knowledge that no expert system can guarantee safety and will not fail (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992). High profile scandals and failures to prevent the deaths of Maria Colwell in 1973, Jasmine Beckford and Tyra Henry in 1984, Victoria Climbié in 2000 and Peter Connelly in 2007 have shaken the faith held in the ability of child protection workers to protect children. Whereas from the 1970s to the mid 1980s policies and procedures for identifying and responding to child abuse were developed, from the latter part of the 1980s the focus has shifted to refinement of policies and procedures to address child protection. The outcome of all of this is an increase in the sense of risk and danger in child protection work.

## 6.3    Current social work practice

Since the implementation of the Children Act 1989 in 2001, the identification of children eligible for social services intervention has been a multi-agency responsibility. Referrals to social services are made predominantly by health visitors, medical professionals, teachers and other educational professionals, the Police, Probation and voluntary organisations with whom the family is in contact.

For a child or family to be assessed and allocated services it must first be identified and referred to social services and secondly reach the threshold for receiving intervention. The threshold that justifies compulsory intervention in family life is the concept of significant harm which was introduced with The Children Act 1989. In legislative terms, significant harm is defined as ill-treatment or the impairment of health and development through neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse or a combination of these. This is a significantly broader categorisation of 'child abuse' than the original 'battered baby syndrome' (Dingwall, 1989). Where a local authority has reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, it has a duty under section 47 (1) (b) of The Children Act 1989 to make enquiries or cause enquiries to be made. Making judgements about what constitutes significant harm is not reliant on a set of absolute criteria and could result from a history of events and circumstances or from a single isolated event.

In addition, social workers support children who are defined as in need and intervention in these cases is on a voluntary basis with agreement from family members. Child in need services such as short breaks for disabled children or leisure activities might be sought after by families as opposed to other interventions which are often resisted by families. Local Authority social services provision faces the mounting challenge to meet its statutory duties and provide services to children in need in the face of rising expectations from families who want services and decreasing budgets. This is not a new problem and the resources required to meet the demands placed upon social services by the Children Act 1989 were not available at the time of its implementation (Health Committee Second Report, 1991: Schorr, 1992). The consequence of this is that the provision of services becomes focused on those defined as most in need, that is, those to whom significant harm might occur if services are not provided. The focus becomes differentiating the 'high risk' from the rest (Parton et al., 1997). Although during recent years Welsh Government funding via Cymorth and during 2012 'Families First' funding streams has been made available to develop services for children in need, contemporary preventative social work within social services in Wales remains targeted at those families who are on the periphery of statutory interventions such as child protection procedures or being 'looked after'. For these families difficulties are evident and will have been subjected to professional assessment (Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families, 2000).

## 6.4 The notion of risk within families

In four of the five cases in this research, the families were not known to social services and in the fifth case, social services had undertaken an initial assessment (DOH, 2000), concluding that no further action was required.  So, what marked out the four cases from the fifth and the five cases from the rest of the population of child abuse cases that do come to the attention of social services?

Parton et al. (1997) argue that the notion of risk has become the key signifier for child abuse in policy developments and for the purposes of practical decision making.  The historical roots of the concept of risk lie in the 17th century, originating in the context of gambling and the mathematical analysis of chance.  The connection of notions of risk to technical calculations of probability has weakened however (Douglas, 1986; 1992) and risk now equates to negative outcomes and danger and the possibility of making scientific judgements about exposure to danger.  Risk assessment thus suggests quantification and precision in determining tangible entities that can be labelled, reduced or managed.  This is less than straightforward however because to determine whether or not a situation presents a risk of harm to a child, the cause of potential harm must be able to be identified and this cannot always be done.  Risks are socially constructed according to prevailing issues and the media, different professions and political bodies play a role in defining what constitutes risk. Notwithstanding this, the concept of risk lies at the heart of social work and is used to inform and account for decision making. The social workers interviewed for this research are all employed within local authority social services and are familiar with the child protection discourse of contemporary social work.

## 6.5 Risk factors

It is against this backdrop that social workers considered the existence of identifiable risk factors in the five cases that might, under assessment, have given some indication of the potential for the children to suffer significant harm.  Although social workers could not identify specific risk factors, they did identify a range of family and environmental factors (Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families, 2000) in each of the family's circumstances which were considered to be indicative of pressures within the family.  The first type concerns the financial circumstances of the family where loss or potential loss of livelihood and home was a reality or a perceived threat (cases **F**, **P** and **U**).  The second type

concerns marital disharmony and a break-down of the family unit (cases **A** and **Q**). Thirdly, mental health issues and depression were considered to be evident in cases **F**, **P**, **Q** and **U.**

6.5.1    Financial circumstances

In respect of case **P**, a social worker interviewee (Dolores) noted that the perpetrator asserted to friends that he would not let liquidators take his possessions and that he would be carried out in a box first.  She clarifies that this assertion alone however, would not have raised concern for the welfare of the perpetrator's daughter.  In the absence of assertions that he would harm her and in view of her young adulthood, it is unlikely that any child-focused social work intervention would have been provided to this family.

The following extract also relates to case **P:**

*It may well be that the school weren't really aware of any financial difficulties if the money was still being paid to the school.  Then if children are going to a fee-paying school how many questions can you ask if there are concerns?  You don't hear of many assessments being done on multi-millionaire children. (Davina, Social Worker)*

Locating the 'problem' of child abuse within the family as something from which children can be protected, as opposed to being rooted within societal structures is not a new concept.  Ferguson (2004:81) describes how up to the 1970s there was a 'hardening of the meaning given to smell, dirt and disorder in decisions about parental deviance and children's well-being'; themes resonant in Housden's  (1955) 'hopeless homes' and Allen and Morton's (1961) writing about the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.  A more contemporary context for the social worker's perception is provided by Jack (1997: 671), who argues that 'child protection discourse has helped to shape bureaucratic systems which operate on the assumption that all families raising their children in the contexts of poverty, deprivation and discrimination pose a potential threat to their children's well-being'. The converse of this is that families raising their children in the context of extreme wealth do not pose a potential threat to their children's well-being.

No specific risk factors were identified in respect of case **U**, despite its similarities to cases **F** and **P** in respect of the financial downfall of the perpetrator.  This is not

surprising however as it would seem that the time between the perpetrator realising that his business and lifestyle was potentially going to fall apart and the act of murder-suicide was only one day.  This can be compared to the longer periods of time that perpetrators in cases **F** and **P** had harboured anxieties and concerns about their business interests and talked to others about these.

6.5.2   Marital disharmony

In case **A**, social workers did not identify any risk factors, despite similarities to case **Q** in respect of marital disharmony.  Conversely, in case **Q** the parental separation, acrimonious relationship and perpetrator's depression were identified as potential risk factors when considering the welfare of two children aged less than five years.  Specific acts on the part of the perpetrator such as taking the furniture from the family home were perceived to heighten risk of harm to the children both as a direct result of living within poor home conditions and indirectly as a result of having contact with a father who by this act appeared unable to place the needs of his children above his own needs.  The need of the perpetrator for the furniture was considered to be illegitimate in that he could have no use for it whilst living in a caravan.  The act of depriving his wife and children was thus conceived to be borne out of spite and a desire to do harm.   One social worker interviewee (Violet) considered that had the perpetrator's wife reported the removal of furniture, the act would likely be perceived as the perpetrator being awkward as opposed to being indicative of something more sinister such as the murder-suicide.  Whilst social workers considered that specific issues such as the perpetrator's depression, his accommodation and relationship with his estranged wife would give rise to some concern about the quality of contact that the children would have with him, the act of murder-suicide was not foreseeable.

In this case and in case **A**, the lack of concern from other agencies such as education and the police, is highlighted as reducing the conceivability that serious harm was to come to the children within these families.

6.5.3   Mental health and depression

Interviewees considered that although perpetrators may have been experiencing mental health difficulties these were insufficient to cross the threshold for services over and above those being provided by their GP.

The following extract summarises the general consensus of social workers across the five cases:

*...there's lots of families where a parent may experience some degree of depression and there's plenty of families where a parent will be diagnosed with manic depression and they still manage to care for the children ok. Lots of people have difficulty with debt. You go on to see that the children are attending school, they're lovely children, there's no history of violence. They've been married for 6 years and it appears to be stable so you can't really see... there's a few things there but nothing that would alert you that something awful is going to happen here. (Vinny, Social Worker talking about case F)*

6.5.4    The difficulty in identifying families at risk of murder-suicide

The preceding section highlights that social workers did not identify specific risk factors but did identify some family and environmental factors that suggested the families were experiencing some difficulties in respect of their financial circumstances, marital relationship and mental health. The existence of these factors alone is insufficient to raise any concern for the welfare of children and social work discourse emphasises the capacity of parents to provide adequate care to their children when determining the degree of risk posed to them. This is a point made by Parton et al (1997) who contest the assertion that social workers actually assess risk of harm or injury, rather they assess whether a child is adequately cared for.

In these cases of murder-suicide, there is no suggestion that the children within the five families are not adequately cared for. The family that had received a social work service did so under the auspices of 'child in need' as opposed to statutory intervention and it was concluded that no further action was required. Taking into consideration the dimensions of the assessment framework (DOH, 2000) in the remaining four cases there were no known concerns about the children's development, no evidence of parental incapacity to ensure safety, emotional warmth and stability and whilst in each of the cases there existed family and environmental factors associated with social integration, income, employment and family functioning, these were not known about or sufficiently evident to raise concern to the level that a referral would be made to social services. On this basis, it is to be expected that social workers would not perceive these five, or similar, families as likely to harm their children given their outward presentation and what

was known about their social circumstances.  Conceptualising murder-suicide cases more broadly, interviewees perceived the difficulties experienced by perpetrators as being no different to the experience of many families on a daily basis.  For this reason, their problems would not be extraordinary enough or sufficient to warrant referral to social services, making the role of the social worker almost inconceivable.

The coroner highlighted the difficulty in identifying the small number of cases of potential murder-suicides amongst the vast number of families experiencing relationship breakdowns and financial pressures, where it cannot be predicted that murder-suicide could happen and even after the event, it is difficult to understand why it occurred in the absence of any hint of it.  The preoccupation of social work in attempting to identify 'high risk' situations is relevant here and is an issue identified by Parton et al (1997: 220) who question how cases of child abuse can be differentiated when 'the broad signs and symptoms that have come to be associated with it seem to characterise normal families and typify adult-child relations'.  Even if families were identifiable, being able to provide suitable help would be a challenge for all professional agencies.

*'...you see even if social services were sitting on top of a case... even if they were sort of virtually monitoring the family on a day to day basis, I mean what would they have been able to do if he'd disguised his intent and said he was just going down the road to the park with his children'.* (Charles, coroner)

This is a view echoed by social worker interviewees who consider that even when cases are open to them, unless the risks are so heightened and apparent that protective action is taken, little can be done to prevent a parent from murdering their child and committing suicide.

*'...you have to have quite a high degree of expression that you're going to harm yourself before services kick in'.* (Carol, Social Worker)

When considering the magnitude of the decision to murder your children and take your own life, it is difficult to conceptualise how there was no outward manifestation of the difficulties being experienced within these families, however 'ordinary' these difficulties were perceived to be.   Drawing on knowledge about other cases reported in the media, interviewees perceived families in which murder-suicides

occur as having greater privacy and resourcefulness which enabled them to 'keep things under wraps', avoid detection, prevent others from knowing that they are not coping and stay 'below the radar' of health agencies and social services. These families were perceived as living relatively private lives where a lot of things go on behind closed doors but 'what goes on in the house stays in the house'. Social workers perceived families as treating problems as their own and as drawing on each other for support compared with families who typically come to the attention of social services and live their life more publicly where their problems are shared with others and are often known to professional agencies. Social workers also believed that if somebody wants to commit suicide they will find a way to do so, regardless of the type and amount of intervention put in. Similarly, perpetrators were perceived as deliberately avoiding detection in order to get the opportunity they were privately looking for to commit murder-suicide. The act of murder-suicide was perceived as being controlled and planned and not likely to be verbalised to people or hinted at in behaviour.

> 'I mean, obviously the easiest way of not getting contact with your children is to sort of run around threatening you're going to kill them if you do'.
> (Charles, coroner)

Despite the perception that problems were dealt with within the family, there is some contradictory evidence in that close family members and friends did not appear to be aware of how the difficulties within the family were being experienced by the perpetrator.

## 6.6    Prioritisation of resources

Social worker interviewees perceived the murder of a child in the context of murder-suicide as something that should be of concern to social workers even though it is not something that can be prioritised because of the difficulty in predicting it and the scale of the problem being relatively small compared to the experience of childhood neglect for example.    Prevention was considered to require a lot of resources that are not available to social services departments and for some social workers scarce resources were perceived to be better spent on families where concerns are apparent. Other social workers considered that it should be a priority area because social workers are tasked with preventing any harm to children, although the constraints and limitations on resources would make this incredibly difficult.

*'well it is the ultimate really, you know when any child dies, I can't think of the words really... the death of a child is the ultimate act isn't it; that you take away that child's life and liberty and in our society we see that that as the absolute end... it is the most serious act of child abuse'.* (Clara, Social Worker)

Congruent with social work discourse in this period of reflexive modernism, whereby progress is achieved through reorganization and "reform" and earlier ways of conceptualising something are rejected, for some social workers and other professionals, there is an acceptance that some children cannot be protected from harm.

*'...there are circumstances where nothing can be done. Everybody wants somebody to blame; usually it's social services, but sometimes there's nobody to blame except for the circumstances themselves. Sometimes the perpetrator'.* (Violet, Social Worker)

*'I think there are times though when you have to accept that nothing could have been done; it was inevitable because you cannot control human beings' actions... but to just say we can't do anything doesn't mean that we shouldn't look into it, research and try'.* (Vinny, Social Worker)

### 6.7    A role for social work and/or other professionals?

So, what if any, role is there for social work and other professionals in dealing with the phenomenon of murder-suicide?  Case work is only one way in which social workers seek to intervene in the lives of families to reduce risk and the likelihood of harm.  Some social workers considered that the social work role is more appropriate in terms of awareness raising, educating and advising both professionals and families.  Specifically, the need to raise awareness of murder-suicide as a potential response to stress within individuals was highlighted.

In respect of whether there is a preventative role for other professionals, social workers consider that there are identifiable roles for GPs as often the first place that somebody will seek help and for mental health services in identifying and managing risk, providing services and addressing the stigma attached to receiving a mental health service.  A role for education was also identified in respect of identifying children where adverse impact of family issues might be evident.    A role for 'guardians-ad-litem' was identified in respect of identifying children in the midst of acrimonious parental separations.  Close family members, friends and colleagues

were identified as playing a critical role in identifying risk and taking action to seek help and protect others, particularly when adults are saying that they feel suicidal or helpless.

## 6.8    Processes for multi-agency learning

Multi-agency safeguarding of children includes processes for shared learning about interagency work when a child dies.  It is not unusual for professional agencies to scrutinise their processes to look at intervention and where it assisted and where it went wrong when a child dies or is significantly harmed at the hands of its parents or another caregiver.  Murder-suicides where children are not known to statutory agencies are unlikely to be subjected to serious case reviews, despite the child experiencing significant harm at the hands of a parent.  There is thus no formal reviewing mechanism that scrutinises the family circumstances and considers whether there were opportunities for agencies to intervene.

*'...after a relationship has ended, I would say in that sense it's probably one of the prime triggers really for an actual suicide.  Um but the crossover between that and taking the lives of children in particular, um is it's just so remote in my experience that us, and in most cases I've ever had anything to do with hasn't even been the need for a sort of stewards enquiry if you like into whether something could or should have been prevented'.* (Charles, coroner)

Another respondent emphasises the low priority murder-suicides have in respect of seeking to establish whether or not the death could have been prevented by agency intervention.

*'...they're zero valued I suppose... why don't we do serious case reviews on these children?'* (Clara, Social Worker)

## 6.9    Social work's contribution to discourse on murder-suicide

Although the phrase 'out of the blue' has been used to refer to situations of intimate partner murder where the male perpetrator has no history of criminality and thus does not fit the commonly held stereotype of men who commit homicide (Dobash et al., 2009), it can be usefully deployed to describe those cases of murder-suicide where there is no history of violence or inadequate parenting and the act is unexpected and seemingly inexplicable.  In the absence of a specific social work

discourse within which to conceptualise murder-suicide, social workers might also conceive cases as occurring 'out of the blue'. By subscribing to the dominant media construct of these cases occurring 'out of the blue', being unexplainable and sensational events there is potential to assume the cases are random and thus difficult to predict and prevent. This also gives rise to the potential for social work to collude with a disregard of patriarchal and gendered social relations within families. If social work has limited ability to intervene and protect children in families where there is a risk of murder-suicide, there is perhaps potential to influence the generation of discourse on murder-suicide through dissemination of professional knowledge and experience of working with challenging social issues and the impact of these on individuals and families. In addition to raising consciousness about patriarchal and gendered relationships within families and their impact on parenting capacity, social work could help address the stereotypical public image of social issues such as debt, marital breakdown and depression, affecting certain groups in society who are perceived as worthy of such downfalls. Increased knowledge and understanding has the potential to reduce the conceptualisation of murder-suicide as something that occurs 'out of the blue' and raise public awareness about circumstances within which the phenomenon appears to occur.

### 6.9.1   Social work's relationship with the media

The media is an obvious channel for communicating messages to the public and informing debate on a subject. Social work does not have an easy relationship with the media however. More broadly than murder-suicide, deaths of children generate considerable public concern and debate (Franklin and Parton, 1991) and newspapers routinely provide extensive coverage of such events. Ferguson (2004:6) refers to how since the 1970s 'every conceivable aspect of child protection and welfare service has been subjected to controversy and placed under intense public scrutiny'. When social services have been involved in particular cases, stories tend to be sensational, negative, hostile and highly critical and in high profile cases of abuse and neglect social workers are vilified and admonished for professional neglect (Andrews, 1974; Lees, 1979; Shearer, 1979). Blom-Cooper (1985:5) asserts in the inquiry report into the circumstances of the death of Jasmine Beckford that social workers have become 'the butt of every unthinking journalistic pen whenever a scapegoat was needed to explain a fatality or serious injury to a child in care or under the supervision of the social services department of a local authority'. Similarly, media reports about the deaths of Kimberley Carlile and Tyra Henry in 1987 constructed negative stereotypes of social workers presenting them

as incompetent, non-judgemental and indecisive individuals who were reluctant to intervene in family life. Reporting on Cleveland by contrast personified social workers as authoritarian bureaucrats who disregarded civil liberties of adults and children and removed children unnecessarily from their parents. Social workers thus appear cast in the role of wimps, bullies, fools or villains (Franklin, 1989). Franklin (1998:4) asserts that 'the character assassination of the profession of social work has become a journalistic blood sport'.

In these five cases of murder-suicide social workers have been spared the usual public condemnation that accompanies cases of deliberate child death at the hands of their parents, probably by virtue of their lack of involvement with the families and the 'out of the blue' nature of the cases making it difficult to pinpoint how anybody could have intervened. However, social work interviewees were overwhelmingly negative in their perceptions of the media and its relationship to the issues that confront social workers in protecting children from harm. Social workers perceived the media to be very influential in guiding public perception about social workers when a child has not been protected by apportioning blame. There was a mistrust and expectation that the media will sell stories about social work going wrong rather than be truthful and accurate about the degree to which children are protected daily by social work intervention.

*'…will sell their paper rather than the truth, and it's been to the cost of professionals that are perhaps working really hard; typically social workers only even come up in the paper when there's been a mistake or something has gone wrong, but you know it never mentions all the children that are protected every day'.* (Alison, Social Worker)

*'I think the media have got little understanding of what it is social services actually do, but they don't report the hundreds of good things that we do on a daily basis'.* (Ava, Social Worker)

*'The media can focus on something that stops people seeing beyond that; you don't get the full story'.* (Verity, Social Worker)

Social worker perception of journalists being unsympathetic and lacking in knowledge and experience of social services to report matters adequately and

sensitively has been extensively researched and reported on (Phillips, 1979; Geach, 1982; Fry, 1987; Franklin and Parton, 1991).

Additionally, social workers perceived their profession as having no or little influence over the media in the reporting of incidents and child abuse generally. A comparison was made with doctors who are perceived to be treated as individuals when things go wrong, rather than the whole profession being castigated for the misdemeanours or errors of a minority. Some social workers identified the need to improve the public image of the work they do and saw this as a role for their professional body.

*'...Doctors have a positive impression and they are often seen in a higher light. It's just one faulty doctor and not the whole profession but for social workers it's not seen as just one faulty social worker, the whole system is criticised'.* (Vera)

They also considered that social work should be more challenging when information is incorrectly portrayed in the media.

*'I think sometimes some organisations or some authority may stand up and say actually this is how it was but that's very individual, department by department, and I don't think we have a collective social work voice across Britain'.* (Clara)

*'We should have the right to reply without breaching confidentiality'.* (Verity)

However, maintaining confidentiality is seen as a challenge and a barrier, albeit necessary, to being able to defend the profession when criticised about particular cases. Maintaining confidentiality and not speaking out is perceived by some social workers as supporting an image of social workers being defensive and obstructive.

*'After the initial event has been reported I think we can have an influence by our reaction to this and our relationship with the media. I think it's difficult but there are so many regulations and obviously in our professional life confidentiality is absolutely crucial so our hands are tied in terms of the way we can relate to the media. I don't think the media gets that and we can be deemed as being defensive and obstructive'.* (Vanda)

In response, journalists perceive social workers to be lacking in understanding about the operation of media organisations and suggest that social workers become proactive in media engagement to promote a more positive image of their work and profession (Rote, 1979; Fry, 1987; Hills, 1980; Franklin and Parton, 1991).

Beyond the portrayal of social workers, the media plays an important role in the influence of social policy and legislation. Encouraging the media to focus on the issues that led to the incident of murder-suicide has the potential to increase public and professional understanding of the phenomenon and bring about better outcomes for children. This is a view that is supported by Singer and Endreny (1993:139) who argue that what the media selects for emphasis and what information is presented becomes crucial in shaping public perceptions of hazards and their attendant risk. However, they emphasise that news stories about hazards ordinarily do not provide us with enough information to permit rational decisions and this 'brief focusing of attention on crisis situations may well be dysfunctional for rational public attitudes and behaviour (Singer and Endreny, 1993:41).

For social workers, the media has been influential in agenda setting (Zucker, 1978) on the subject of murder-suicide, rendering it as a significant issue when it occurs.

*'They determine what's reported, how it is reported, where it's reported and then the message that follows on from that really. I mean it's all sensation really'.* (Dolores)

The power of the media in this regard is not surprising. Johnson and Covello (1987:179-80) assert that agenda setting events are most likely to occur for issues that lie outside of the individual's personal experience and for which the media provide virtually the only frame of reference. If we accept this assertion we can begin to understand how the lack of a widely known and shared professional discursive framework within which to make sense of murder-suicide contributes to the media being able to stake a claim of primary representation and construction of discourse on the phenomenon.

Despite hostility towards media reporting of social workers, social work interviewees considered that the media could be harnessed in a positive way to raise public awareness about murder-suicide and encourage people to seek help.

*'If the public pick up on a particular portrayal of something it can make a situation riskier – if the public don't believe certain things about families they won't identify risks to others'.* (Verity)

Social workers perceived there to be opportunities to educate the public about the role of social work, the issues being grappled with and success stories through documentaries rather than isolated news items.

The potential for engaging the media for the good of social work is there if power relationships are redressed and social workers perceive themselves to be better valued and a source of information. For police officers, their relationship with the media is very different and they described being perceived by reporters as gate-keepers and in control of the information that can be released. This perceived power however has limited use as officers described having to balance releasing sufficient information to prevent media speculation whilst protecting an investigation and the interests of people involved in an incident.

## 6.10   Discussion and conclusion

Contemporary social work attempts to protect not only those who have experienced harm but also those considered to be at risk of harm, that is, at some point ahead in time. This brings anxieties for practitioners who may be blamed and scapegoated for failing to identify risk and act to prevent harm.

The idea that it is possible through social intervention to protect children from avoidable harm or death is described by Ferguson (2004:3) as 'taken for granted'. This 'ideal' has exercised child protection agencies since late 19th century when the social construction of child protection as a technical problem about which something could and should be done emerged. Contemporary social work discourse remains one of child protection but the 'ideal' is more realistically understood as one in which not all deliberate child deaths can be prevented. Whereas under simple modernity professionals had an inherent belief in their ability to protect children, Ferguson (2004:117) argues that the dominant belief among social workers now is that the safety of children cannot be guaranteed, no matter how effectively the child protection system operates. Social workers are aware that gaps in knowledge exist, about which children are at risk of murder-suicide for example, which cannot be converted into 'certainties' by scientific knowledge (Giddens, 1990).

The concept of 'fateful moments' (Ferguson, 2004), where children at risk of harm are discovered in fateful ways, contingent upon interactions between workers, parents and children at a given time  is particularly helpful when conceptualising how child protection procedures and practices can fail children and when concerns and evidence appear ambiguous.  When considering the protection of children in these five cases, and similar families, the notion of being able to protect only if a fateful moment occurs makes sense.  In these cases, the most robust and systematically operationalised child protection procedures would not have saved these children as they would not have come to the attention of child protection workers unless in a fateful way.

Davies (2008) suggests that social workers need to let go of omnipotent fantasies of child saving and recognise the limitations of social work practice as well as its capacities in establishing a helpful and realistic stance. Child protection systems operate with an assumption that their mandate is to detect and prevent child abuse. A corollary to the assumption that we can prevent child abuse and child deaths is that child protection workers are mandated to do this.  Davies explores possibilities for developing a child protection system that assumes fallibility and encourages a more realistic practice.  Davies suggests that acknowledging and tolerating maternal ambivalence in child protection practice, while difficult, can help to alleviate unmanageable anxiety for both mothers and workers.  It is not apparent, on the face of it, that the parents who murder their children before taking their own life have ambivalent feelings towards their children; on the contrary the perpetrator's actions are perceived as either revenge against the child's mother or an altruistic desire to save the child from a fate worse than death.  Perhaps, an acknowledgement of paternal ambivalence in families which appear to have no attachment and relationship difficulties between father and child is also sound advice to social workers.  The assumption of child protection organisations that child abuse and child death can be detected and stopped has given rise to a myriad of problems.  If child protection social workers fail they are held accountable and suffer the concomitant feelings of shame and anxiety.  Accountability is not least played out in media reports of high profile cases which castigate and scapegoat social workers.  In order to move forward with child protection practice the omnipotent expectations of predicting and preventing harm to children must be given up not only by social workers and other professionals but by journalists and the public, so that attention can be refocused on what is achievable.  Media

reporting becomes an input into the process of policy development in that the media is influential in structuring public perceptions of social and welfare issues and can create demands on government to legislate to placate heightened public anxieties (Golding and Middleton, 1979:5). Here then is an opportunity for social work to harness the influence of the media on an issue that it is concerned about but not generally implicated in.  In the case of murder-suicide, social workers will not necessarily be found wanting and made to account publicly for their action, which, is described by Stevenson and Parsloe (1978) as an omnipresent fear and influence on the way social workers experience their work.

# Chapter 7

# Conclusion

This research has sought to describe and explore, from a UK perspective, discourse on five specific cases of murder-suicide as portrayed in newspaper reports, from the perspectives of professionals involved in the five cases and from the perspectives of social workers who had no involvement in the cases. The purpose has been to contribute to social work understanding of the cultural context of this particular type of familial child homicide referred to as murder-suicide.

The research set out to explore the following questions which will be addressed throughout this chapter.

- What is the role of child protection social work in cases of murder-suicide?

- How do social workers understand and make sense of specific cases of murder-suicide and the phenomenon more broadly?

- What informs social workers in reaching conclusions and developing ideas and knowledge about murder-suicide?

- Recognising that because murder-suicide cases are very rare, media reports are likely to be a key source of social work knowledge about murder-suicide; how do newspaper reports present and construct stories and perceptions about cases of murder-suicide?

- Do newspaper reports on cases of murder-suicide differ in the way in which the event is recorded according to the type and brand of newspaper and if so, what impact might this have on professional discourse?

- How does social work interface with newspaper reporting on issues of child abuse and what implication does this have for the development of discourse on murder-suicide?

In one sense, murder suicide can be conceptualised in simple terms as exemplified in the following extract:

*'...cases like this, where there's often actually nothing at all to go on erm... the inquest process as I say can actually be very straightforward. I mean you've got 2 unlawful killings and a suicide and that's really all you've got.'* (Charles, coroner)

However, what gets reported in the media and discussed by professionals are not just two murders and a suicide but a set of circumstances that together create the phenomenon of 'murder-suicide'. That is not to deny the material reality of the deaths, but the conceptualisation of them as murder, suicide and ultimately murder-suicide is very much a matter of perspective. It is worth referring again to Gee (1999:5) at this juncture who asserts that '"truth"… is a matter of taking, negotiating and contesting perspectives created in and through language within social activities'.

In line with the order of the empirical chapters I am firstly going to address the question of how newspaper reports present and construct stories and perceptions about cases of murder-suicide. I will then address whether these reports differ in the way the event is recorded according to the type and brand of newspaper and the impact this might have on professional discourse.

What is interesting about the newspaper reports in these five cases is that they construe the act of murder-suicide as an altruistic act of love and protection. The overall message of the text does not make explicit that the male perpetrators dominated or abused their wives and children, rather it perpetuates the idea that perpetrators are good fathers and husbands but acted in violence to protect their loved ones as a response to situations of extreme stress to which no other solution could be found. Although there is a lack of evidence in the newspaper narratives for these five cases to suggest that overt use of power, control and violence was evident in the familial relationships it cannot be assumed that this did not exist. By not explicitly recognising or acknowledging in the newspaper report that the family make-up reproduces a patriarchal familial structure of male bread-winner and female as wife and mother, newspapers can obscure the real of implied issues of power, control and violence within the family or relationships.

I concluded in chapter four that it is conceivable that newspapers purposefully select certain character functions that emphasise both altruism and 'out of the blueness' as the social construct for these cases, perhaps  because of a refusal to

acknowledge the issues of violence against women and attempts to gain control of women that are implicit in these acts and in an attempt to reposition them as a kind of moral 'fall' as a result of some kind of provocation resulting from extreme stress.

In respect of whether reports differed according to type and brand of newspaper, a simple and coherent structure to the newspaper reports was observed across all five cases and all five newspaper types.  The most frequently occurring (preferred) chronological sequencing of narrative elements across newspaper types demonstrating this coherent and generally consistent structure to newspaper reports comprised a component that describes the event (A), followed by a component that provides information about the family and its circumstances that contextualises the event (B), followed by a component that introduces other characters with information to support or refute any implied or overt hypotheses drawn from the first two elements of the narrative (C) and lastly a component that describes attributes of the perpetrator and family members that can be interpreted as supporting or refuting hypotheses about what happened and why (D).

Whilst the details and characters differed within each component according to the case, this did not detract from the overall structure of the story which followed A, B, C. D.

A deviation to this structure occurred with the Mail which by introduced characters (D) before portraying the perpetrator and his family (C).  Given The Mail's deviation from the general sequencing of narrative elements, further analysis of different newspapers and different cases might be an area for further research to establish whether the editorial stance of the newspaper influences the chronological structuring of a story.

The next research question to consider is the role of child protection social work in cases of murder-suicide.  For lay people, based on what they read in newspaper reports, the phenomenon of murder-suicide may be nothing more than a topic of prurient interest in terms of its 'out of the blue' character and the lifestyles of some of those affected.  For social workers, the phenomenon is far from simple and interest extends beyond that of prurient fascination. At the outset of this research I stated a fundamental premise that the murder of a child by its parent is an extreme act of child abuse and on this basis, a study of the phenomenon of murder-suicide has direct applicability to social work as a profession.

My sample of five cases, according to newspaper reports, do not seem to feature a high proportion of known previous problems such as depression/mental health, troubled relationship and domestic violence compared to the overall sample of 21. The social context of my sample of five cases thus supports notions of 'out of the blueness' and suggests that some cases of murder-suicide are difficult to predict. An obvious matter of complexity for social workers is being able to identify and intervene in families at risk of murder-suicide because the troubles, motives and plan to commit murder-suicide sometimes remain concealed not only from the public and professional eye but from those closest to the perpetrator.

For social workers, harm to children, including death is a not unusual occurrence in their professional lives and there exists a professional discourse that informs understanding of child abuse and also constructs the professional response to situations of abuse. The event of murder-suicide however appears to be an irregular occurrence in the lives of social workers. This lack of experience of dealing with the phenomenon of murder-suicide means that the social work profession has yet to develop a discourse of its own for making sense of it. Instead, social workers draw upon a range of discourses that they are familiar with in dealing with child abuse and adult behaviours more broadly.

So, what are the implications arising from this research for social workers who on a day-to-day basis deal with cases of child abuse ranging along a continuum of harm?

Social workers are tasked with intervening in family life regardless of how 'family' is constituted. I concluded in chapter four that family circumstances in these five cases mostly reproduce patriarchal familial structures of male bread-winners and females as wives and mothers. Implicit in these patriarchal structures are relations of male power, control and sometimes violence over women but in these five cases there is an absence of a reported or perceived oppressive patriarchal set of relations that can be used to solely explain these murder-suicides. It is likely that the psychological, sociological and neurobiological theoretical explanations for domestic violence proposed by Chornesky (2000) will also have relevance to how cases of murder-suicide are perceived and understood. Some of the specific explanations that fall under these three broad categories have particular resonance with these five cases of murder suicide including male shame, men feeling

powerlessness rather than powerful, psychopathology and personality disorders, negative self-concepts and male proprietariness.   These are concepts that social work is familiar with and can readily employ to make sense of murder-suicide.

Recognising social workers appear to have little experience of cases of murder-suicide, it is relevant to consider what  informs social workers in reaching conclusions and developing ideas and knowledge about murder-suicide?
In the absence of direct experience of cases of murder-suicide, social workers reported having recourse to the media to inform them.  However, this was with some scepticism and recognition of 'journalistic licence' in the telling of stories and selling newspapers.  However, the role of the media on influencing social workers was demonstrated in chapter four where it was argued that the overall message of newspaper reports does not make explicit that the male perpetrators dominated or abused their wives and children, rather it perpetuates the idea that perpetrators are good fathers and husbands but acted in violence to protect their loved ones as a response to situations of extreme stress to which no other solution could be found. To some degree, this perception was shared by social workers who struggled to reconcile images of good fathers with their acts of violent murder and took refuge in mental health discourse as a potential explanatory factor.  Chapter 5 demonstrated that social workers predominantly draw upon their professional knowledge and experience in making sense of murder-suicide, employing multiple discourses within which they constructed and made sense of the five cases, on interrelated issues of criminality, gender roles within families, domestic abuse, power and control, mental health and suicide.  From this it is reasonable to conclude that social workers need not perpetuate the hegemonic discourse of murder-suicide occurring 'out of the blue'.  Social workers are well placed to generate and disseminate a discourse that recognises the multiplicity of circumstances and diversity of families within which murder-suicide occurs that fall outside of what are traditionally perceived to be abusive and neglectful families.

In respect of how social workers understand and make sense of specific cases of murder-suicide and the phenomenon more broadly, social workers recognise that within each case of murder-suicide there exist a set of individualised circumstances and some that might be common across cases and indeed common to the experience of many people within 21$^{st}$ century British culture.  Social work interviewees did not perceive the difficulties faced by the five families as extraordinary; debt, bankruptcy, marital disharmony and family breakdown were

considered to be issues faced on a daily basis and somewhat representative of contemporary British society.  What is perhaps unique to each case is the way in which these experiences impact on the perpetrator and his ability to manage and resolve them.   In this way, I am suggesting that social workers need to consider both individual and structural issues and the interplay of these in their practice, as opposed to seeking solutions within the individual alone.  A consideration of the interplay of individual and structural issues in what may have appeared to be an 'out of the blue' murder-suicide might render the event to be not be as inexplicable as it seemed.

As well as not setting out to define a particular discourse on murder-suicide, neither have I set out to define how social workers should practise in addressing murder-suicide, not least because the scale of this study has not given me access to cases where the actual role of social work can be examined and analysed.  Regardless of this, it would not have been appropriate to make judgements and practice recommendations from a study which is concerned with perception rather than analysis of an actuality of casework.  Analysis of discourse on cases where there has been social services involvement with the family is a gap and an area for future research.

What the research has highlighted is the challenge for social workers which is implicit in all contemporary child protection discourse; the belief that it is possible through social intervention to protect children from avoidable harm and even death (Ferguson, 2004:3).  Greater recognition of domestic violence and mental health problems enables assessments of risk to be made and interventions put in place.  This can contribute to the safeguarding of children.  However, in the five cases in this research these issues were not at the forefront making the risks to children difficult to identify.  In this regard, social workers were not afraid of what Davies (2008) refers to as letting go of omnipotent fantasies of child saving, recognising that not all children can be saved from harm.  Interviewees had some compelling thoughts on prioritising scarce resources on identifiable cases of harm to children rather than attempting to protect those not known to be at risk.  However, these views are from a position of voyeur of the cases via newspaper reports and case vignettes as opposed to the position of having direct case experience of working with families affected by murder-suicide.  It is possible that this view could alter if

social workers had direct experience of cases and felt they could have intervened and in some way the course of events could have been altered.

Lastly, the research sought to consider the interface between social work and newspaper reporting on issues of child abuse and the implication of  this for the development of discourse on murder-suicide.  I have avoided making direct suggestions as to how social workers can play a part in the generation of discourse on the phenomenon of murder-suicide but am inclined to agree with interviewees that in the absence of an ability to intervene with families through casework, an appropriate intervention for social workers is through imparting knowledge and experience about child abuse, mental health and the interaction of individual and structural societal factors on family life.  I have also concluded that social workers need not collude with conceptualising murder-suicide as occurring 'out of the blue'.

Despite a seemingly distrustful view of the media from social workers and a media view of social workers as naive, there is potential for social workers to develop and influence discourse via a more proactive and positively weighted relationship with journalists.  In this way, messages about the phenomenon and the types of issues that appear to exist for families in cases of murder-suicide can be articulated to a wide audience.  This could contribute to the phenomenon being seen as occurring less 'out of the blue' and as something more ordinary than it appears in terms of its underlying issues.

In terms of theoretical issues for social work, the obvious one relates to the social construction of social problems and the existence of multiple discourses within which sense can be made of a phenomenon about which the profession has little knowledge and experience.  Social workers cannot be confined to articulating the murder of children by parents in a particular way that relates only to child abuse and an inability on the parents part to provide adequate care to their child.  These five cases have demonstrated that a single interpretation on murder-suicide is insufficient, just as a single interpretation on any incident of child abuse is unlikely to be sufficient.  There exist a range of social and individual factors, intertwined and difficult to disconnect from each other, that contribute to the actions of the individual in committing murder of their own children.  Issues of mental health, troubled marital relations, domestic violence and contact with children feature in cases of murder-suicide.  These are social issues that social work is familiar with but there is a need for social workers to understand more about the dynamics of domestic

violence, its under-reporting and concealed jealousy and control issues as well as having a greater understanding of the interface of mental health with child protection.  Social workers, and professionals who refer to social services, need to be better able to recognise controlling behaviour and enable children and women to speak out.  Social workers need to have a better awareness of risk to children when mental health and domestic violence issues are present so they can assist the non violent parent in understanding the risks to their children and enable them to make informed decisions.  Social workers can also contribute to reducing social tolerance of and inhibition in acknowledging domestic violence, helping to increase identification and reporting of domestic violence against women.  A further issue for social work is mainstreaming the idea that there is potential for murder-suicide to occur in families facing adversity, even where risks appear low or non-existent.  In particular, social workers need to consider the considerable impact on wellbeing that struggling with financial, employment, marital relationship and contact issues can have on parents.

Rojek et al (1988) suggests that post structuralism is relevant to social work in that social structures can influence people's identities and behaviour through the interplay of competing and contradictory discourses.  The individual therefore is socially constructed but their actions will be determined also by the circumstances and situation they are in.  Social workers are bound to operate within frameworks for assessment that seek to measure dimensions related to the individual child, the environment and parenting capacity and from the interplay of these factors, determine risks and how best to manage them.  The suggestion that not all human action that causes the deliberate death of a child is identifiable in advance and can be managed is one that could be welcomed by social workers who accept the fallibility of social work in protecting all children. For others, anxiety will continue to be provoked through the familiar unease of not being able to predict and control risks to children.

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**APPENDIX A**

**Letter of invite and information sheet to non social work professionals**

Dear

I am a part-time Postgraduate student with Cardiff University on a Professional Doctorate in Social Work Programme, undertaking research into the phenomenon of murder-suicide.  Additionally, I am employed full-time as an Assistant Director in Services for Children and Young People with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC).

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in this research project.  I am specifically making contact with you at this stage because your name has appeared in the media reporting of one of the cases that I am using to inform my research.  For this reason, your contribution to my research will be particularly valuable.

I have attached an information sheet which gives detailed information about my research.  I shall be pleased to answer any other questions you may have and you can contact me by telephone or email at the addresses given above.

The timing and location of interviews can be negotiated should you agree to participate.

I do hope that you will find this research project of interest and agree to participate. Please complete the consent form attached to the back of the information sheet and return to me in the prepaid envelope.

Yours

PERCEPTIONS OF MURDER-SUICIDE

**Information for professionals**

My name is Colette Limbrick and I am a part-time Postgraduate student with Cardiff University on a Professional Doctorate in Social Work Programme. I am employed full-time as an Assistant Director for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). The research is being supervised by Jonathan Scourfield and Bella Dicks at Cardiff University.

**Context of the research**

Murder-suicide has been a regular newspaper headline during the past few years and the reporting of this phenomenon is often sensationalist and describes it as occurring 'out of the blue'. Research in this area frequently concerns classification of offender and victim profiles and little attention has been paid to how the phenomenon of murder-suicide is perceived by the professionals involved in specific events e.g. coroners, police officers, social workers and journalists.

**Purpose of the research**

I aim to develop insights into how murder-suicide is perceived by professionals and how this contributes to how the phenomenon is described and thought about. I am interested in how these insights compare with media reports and official records (i.e. coroner reports) and how the perceptions of different professionals differ.

**Methodology**

I am seeking to interview selected professionals who have been involved in elected cases of murder-suicide. I will interview you for about an hour about your perceptions of cases you have been involved with and the matter more broadly. *You are free to withdraw from the research at any time.*

**Record keeping and confidentiality**

I propose audio recording our interview and forwarding a transcribed copy to you. The audio tapes and any written records will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

I will not use real names of families, addresses, locations, places of work or other identifying features in the written thesis. As well as the final research thesis, I may use some of the material for articles in journals or presentations to other interested parties.

**Researcher/participant relationship**

I will give you full details of how to contact me and ask you to agree to me making follow-up contact with you after the initial interview if necessary.

Your refusal to participate or subsequent withdrawal from the process will be accepted and I will not attempt to contact you further.

If you have any concerns about the way in which the research was conducted you can contact the Chair of the Ethics Committee for the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University and/or the Chair of the ethics committee at the NSPCC, 44 Curtain Road, London.

**Risks and Benefits**

I will do everything I can to allay any distress you may experience, when retelling specific events or talking about the subject in general, by providing you with as much information as possible prior to you taking part and reassuring you that you are free to withdraw your agreement at any time, without any further contact from me.

Prior to meeting with you I will make myself familiar with relevant support organizations so that I can help you make contact with them if you so wish.  Only with your consent will I contact any support organization specifically about how they may help you.

This research is important given its potential for influencing policy making in respect of preventative and post-incident support services.  For some individuals, knowing that research into tragic events that they have experienced may have public benefit can be a source of comfort. Additionally, this research will give you the opportunity to discuss your experiences and perceptions of an area that is enshrined in cultural taboo.

**Contacting me**

I can be contacted at the NSPCC in writing, by telephone or email:

Telephone 020 3188 3602
Email    climbrick@nspcc.org.uk

Colette Limbrick
Assistant Director South West Wales

**PERCEPTIONS OF MURDER-SUICIDE**

**Consent Form (all professionals)**

I have read the information sheet for this research project and understand what is says.

I agree to participate in an interview with the researcher that will be audio recorded, transcribed and used for the purposes as described in the information sheet.

I understand that I may withdraw from the research at any time but:
- if I withdraw during the interview I can ask for the audio recording to be erased
- if I withdraw after the interview has been transcribed it may not be possible to withdraw my transcribed interview from the research

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and that I can continue to ask questions by using the contact details given on the information sheet.

Please print your name and job title below

_____

Please sign your name below

_____

Date…………………………………………………………..

**Contact details of organization:**

**APPENDIX B**

**Letter of invite and information sheet to social work professionals**

Dear *please insert first name*

I am undertaking research into the phenomenon of murder-suicide (the murder of a child followed by the suicide of the parent assailant) for a Professional Doctorate with Cardiff University. This research has involved coroners, Police forces and Fire Services who have experience of dealing with these cases. Due to the dearth of social work involvement in these types of cases, my research lacks a social welfare perspective.

I am writing to request your agreement to me approaching social work teams in your Directorate with a view to participating in interviews. These interviews would be held at the convenience of teams and would not take more than one hour per interviewee in total. If you are in agreement, it will be helpful if you can contact me by email with contact details for team managers.

I attach a copy of the research proposal for further information; this outlines the relevance of this subject to social work. Additionally, I shall be happy to have a discussion with you if you require further information at this stage. In return for your assistance I would be happy to share the final research findings within your Directorate in a workshop or briefing as part of your training and development programme.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Colette Limbrick
Operational Manager, Children and Young People Services

**PERCEPTIONS OF MURDER-SUICIDE**

Information for social workers

My name is Colette Limbrick and I am a part-time Postgraduate student with Cardiff University on a Professional Doctorate in Social Work Programme.  I am employed full-time as an Operational Manager, Children and Young People Services, for the Vale of Glamorgan Council.  The research is being supervised by Jonathan Scourfield and Bella Dicks at Cardiff University.

**Context of the research**

Murder-suicide has been a regular newspaper headline during the past few years and the reporting of this phenomenon is often sensationalist and describes it as occurring 'out of the blue'.  Research in this area frequently concerns classification of offender and victim profiles and little attention has been paid to how the phenomenon of murder-suicide is perceived by the professionals involved in specific events e.g. coroners, police officers, social workers and journalists.

**Purpose of the research**

I aim to develop insights into how murder-suicide is perceived by social workers and where relevant other professionals and how this contributes to how the phenomenon is described and thought about. I am interested in how these insights compare with media reports and official records (i.e. coroner reports) and how the perceptions of different professionals differ.

**Methodology**

I am seeking to interview selected social workers who have not been involved in elected cases of murder-suicide.  Case vignettes will be used along with an open ended interview schedule.  I will interview you for about an hour about your perceptions of cases you have been involved with and the matter more broadly.  ***You are free to withdraw from the research at any time.***

**Record keeping and confidentiality**

I propose audio recording our interview and forwarding a transcribed copy to you.  The audio tapes and any written records will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

I will not use real names of families, addresses, locations, places of work or other identifying features in the written thesis. As well as the final research thesis, I may use some of the material for articles in journals or presentations to other interested parties.

**Researcher/participant relationship**

I will give you full details of how to contact me and ask you to agree to me making follow-up contact with you after the initial interview if necessary.

Your refusal to participate or subsequent withdrawal from the process will be accepted and I will not attempt to contact you further.

If you have any concerns about the way in which the research was conducted you can contact the Chair of the Ethics Committee for the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University and.

**Risks and Benefits**

I will do everything I can to allay any distress you may experience, when retelling specific events or talking about the subject in general, by providing you with as much information as possible prior to you taking part and reassuring you that you are free to withdraw your agreement at any time, without any further contact from me.

Prior to meeting with you I will make myself familiar with relevant support organizations so that I can help you make contact with them if you so wish. Only with your consent will I contact any support organization specifically about how they may help you.

This research is important given its potential for influencing policy making in respect of preventative and post-incident support services. For some individuals, knowing that research into tragic events that they have experienced may have public benefit can be a source of comfort. Additionally, this research will give you the opportunity to discuss your experiences and perceptions of an area that is enshrined in cultural taboo.

**Contacting me**

I can be contacted at the Vale of Glamorgan Council in writing, by telephone or email:

Telephone 01446 725229
Email    climbrick@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

Colette Limbrick
Operational Manager, Children and Young People Services

**APPENDIX C**

**Interview schedule for non social work professionals**

**Briefing and introduction**

*Purpose of the interview.*
You agreed to participate in this research project to give your perceptions of cases of murder-suicide. I am aware that you have direct professional experience of case(s).

Today I would like to ask you about the case(s) of……………..
I have already sent you some information but before we start I will remind you about the interview and how I will use what is discussed today.

I have some questions to guide the interview process but will ask additional questions that may arise as a result of what you tell me. The process is likely to take between half and one hour.

*Withdrawing from the process*
You can change your mind about continuing at any time. If you ask to stop part way through the interview because you want to withdraw from the research I will erase the audio tape unless you agree to me using the information that you have already given.

*Confidentiality and anonymity*
I will be recording our interview and then this will be transcribed into a written document. The recording and any written notes I make will be kept in a locked cupboard at my place of work. The typed transcript will be kept securely on a laptop computer and password protected.

When I write up the research, I may quote things that you have said but your name or other identifying features will not be used.

Although this is unlikely to apply to you, it's important to remind you that everything you say today will be kept confidential unless it suggests you may be in danger of

harming yourself or someone else. In this case I might have to pass that information on to somebody else.

If you experience any distress as a result of this process and decide that you need professional support, I will signpost you, where possible, to a relevant organization.

*Check with interviewee as to whether they have any questions and are happy to continue.*

## Interview questions

### General

Can you tell me about your relationship to the particular case or people we are talking about today?

Did you know the family other than in a professional capacity?

How did you first hear about what had happened and from whom?

What were your first impressions/thoughts?  How did these change over the course of your involvement?

Was there a difference between your professional and personal perceptions about the cause of the event?  If so, what were the differences?

How far do you think your experience of a case(s) has influenced how you perceive other cases?  Can you give me an example?

### Being influenced by others

Did other people involved with the case have a different way of looking at it? Whose and in what way?  Were there any particular divergences in professional opinion about what had happened and why?  Can you describe these?

Were you at all influenced by the views of others about what had happened and why?  If so, whose views?  Were you influenced more by other professionals or family/friends for example?

Can you give me some examples of how others influenced your perceptions?  Were there any perceptions that you did not give much weight to?

Did you impressions/thoughts change when you had ceased involvement but there was still media exposure of the case?  If so, in what way?

How influential do you think the media are in guiding people's understanding and beliefs about murder-suicide?

**Influencing others**

The media has an important role in influencing at lease public perception of murder-suicides. How do you think you/your profession influences the media in the reporting of incidents?

What role do you think you and/or your profession plays in constructing the story behind each case?  How influential are you/your profession in constructing what people understand about murder-suicide?

Is there anything else you would like to talk about in relation to this subject area?

**APPENDIX D**

## Vignette – Case A

### The Case

A mother and her four daughters aged from 3 to 16 years died in a house fire in Northern England.  The four children and mother were rescued from the burning house but were dead on rescue. The girls' father had to be resuscitated by a fire-fighter at the scene and was treated in a hospital burns unit before dying within 2 days of the fire.   The blaze was treated as suspicious and it was established that it was an 'inside job'; the house had been locked up from the inside and flammable materials used.  Early indications were that whoever set the fire did not leave the premises.  It was later determined that the children's father had deliberately set the fire, killing his wife and children.

### The Family

The girls' mother was born in the UK but had been educated in Pakistan.  She returned to the UK when she was about 16.  Before her death she headed a child improvement programme for a local cultural association which works with schools and mosques.  The manager of the centre described has a 'warm, kind and sincere person', paying tribute to her 'high civic virtues', saying she was a 'beacon' for building good relations between different backgrounds.  'She was extremely popular and described by a colleague as a real pillar of the community.

Although a Muslim, the mother came from a mixed English and Pakistani background and was considered by her colleagues to be well placed to understand the concerns and feelings of everyone.

As well as a project co-ordinator, the mother also helped out as an interpreter for the local authority, was a school governor and board member on several diversity groups.

The girls' father spent all but the last 17 years of his life in the North West Frontier region of Pakistan where he met his Anglo-Pakistani wife when her father sent her to the sub-continent to find a husband.  After an arranged marriage, he and the girls' mother returned to England and he took on a series of low-paid jobs.

The girls' father was believed to work at a back street plastics factory.  He was described by neighbours as a 'good family man' who was very quiet and did not socialise other than at his local mosque.  His command of the English language was described as poor limiting his employment opportunities.

**Information provided about the family during investigation**

Police later stated that there had been a breakdown in the relationship between the mother and father who had been married for 20 years. Police revealed that the mother may have grown apart from her husband. After her father died she "suddenly felt less beholden to" her husband.

A friend said. "She started to develop her own circle of friends ..."

Friends said that the children's father felt left behind by his vivacious wife and is said to have harboured suspicions of a developing friendship with another man.

According to family members the children's father is thought to have started the fire because he could not cope with his wife's western lifestyle.

Relatives and friends of the family told police a bitter rift had developed between conservative Muslim Mr ... and his wife over her determination to bring up their children with western lifestyles.

The children's father made every conceivable attempt to prevent his wife and daughters enjoying their Westernised lifestyle. He destroyed their clothes - modest by Western standards but tight fitting by his own - when they came out of the wash and he railed against plans to allow alcohol at his terminally ill son's 18th birthday party - which had been brought forward because of his prognosis.

"... was a very jealous and controlling person. He wanted everything his own way. He didn't want to adapt to a different way of life or anything to do with England."

A relative said the couple were experiencing a marriage breakdown because the children's father was unhappy with the children's mother taking an active role in the community.

She began to work with women who felt suppressed by Asian culture and many saw her as a role model for young Asian women.

The children's father, 49, found it abhorrent that his eldest daughter wanted to be a fashion designer, and that she and her sisters were likely to reject the Muslim tradition of arranged marriages.

The eldest daughter had a passion for fashion design; the next daughter, 13, loved rap music and wanted to be an MC, while the youngest daughter was the closest to her father. She embraced Asian culture the most and was a regular at the mosque.

**APPENDIX E**

## Vignette – Case F

### The Case

Police broke into a family home after being alerted because the children's mother had failed to drop one of the children off at her father's house. Officers found a seven year old and two year old child lying dead in their pyjamas in a downstairs room. Their sibling aged six, was also dead lying near toys in an upstairs bedroom. The children's mother was found dead in the couple's bedroom and the children's father was hanging from a banister by a nylon rope. A home office pathologist told the inquest that the mother and the children had been knocked unconscious with a lump hammer and stabbed with a kitchen knife.

### The Family

Just before the tragedy, the self employed father learned he could lose two-thirds of his business from a particular customer. He was still worried about keeping his house after being declared bankrupt some years previously, the hearing was told.

The children's father had told his mother that he thought he was a manic depressive, like his father, and was being treated with medication for depression after becoming trapped in what he described as a "vicious circle" of periods of work then inertia.

The seven year old was described as a model pupil at school while the middle child ..."enjoyed school life very much and was always smiling".

Neighbours, friends and teachers all knew them as "lovely" children.

There had been no history of violence in the family.

The father was made bankrupt by the Inland Revenue owing thousands of pounds and the bankruptcy had lapsed the previous year.

The children's mother, aged 27, was a housewife who had a few part-time jobs. It is understood she was preparing to undertake a college course.

The mother and father married 6 years prior to this incident.

The mother was out shopping with her mum on Saturday afternoon and the father was seen by a friend at the house on Friday evening.

**Information provided about the family during investigation**

His GP told the inquest: "... he mentioned he was depressed and stressed and was in a vicious circle where he worked and got money then would slacken off, which would get him into financial problems. "We had a little chat and then came to the conclusion that a steady pattern of work would be appropriate."

His brother told the inquest that the father had been depressed in the months leading up to the murders. He said the stress could have come from a combination of factors, including their mother's fight against cancer and financial difficulties.

The wife of the father's best friend, who works with addictive-behaviour patients, said she had talked to the father about his depression and advised him to seek treatment. She stated "It was possible that he may not have seen a way out. In my professional experience, depression can produce a sense of hopelessness and not being able to see a way out," she said.

His brother said at the inquest that the father was worried needlessly by debt, the poor condition of the family car and the recent death of his mother.

Relatives told yesterday's hearing that the father was a loving father with an ideal family life but he had become caught in a vicious circle of debt. He feared losing his business, which caused something to "snap" inside him, the inquest was told.

A neighbour said: "It's a terrible shock as it's so near home. They were a very nice respectable couple." Her husband added: "They were lovely little children, and they appeared to be a happy family. I can't believe it."

The coroner said the family had seemed in many ways "ideal" and .......'s (perpetrator) love for them may have been his downfall. "He probably had a sense of hopelessness; probably felt there was no way out. There's no doubt he adored his children and wife. He was a very happy man," said the coroner. "He felt a duty to his family and children to provide for them. But something snapped inside him. "When someone's in a state like that they can act totally out of character."

The paternal grandmother said "He was a devoted father and loved his children. He was never violent and he never argued."

The Police said "One of our lines of inquiry is the financial situation and we are also going to talk to the family doctor. But there is no history of violence in the family. There is nothing in the background to suggest this terrible outcome."

## Vignette – Case P

### The Case

A father shot his wife and 15 year old daughter killing them before setting fire to the family home. The man died from smoke inhalation. A horsebox with deflated tyres was used to block the entrance to the property making access for the emergency services more difficult. 3 horses and 4 dogs were found dead on site having been shot. Spent and unspent gun cartridges were found scattered around the property. CCTV recovered from the house showed a man thought to be the father shooting a rifle in the grounds of the property, buildings going up in flames and a horsebox being moved down the driveway in front of the gates to the premises.

### The Family

The father was a multi-millionaire businessman. The business went into compulsory liquidation with reports of £4m + debts to suppliers and an additional 800k owed in taxes. The father had kept his business problems from his wife. The family home was estimated to be worth £1.2m before it was destroyed by fire and there were multiple mortgages on the home. The father told friends he would not let liquidators take his possessions, promising "they will carry me out of the house in a box".

The mother and father met via a mutual interest in MG cars.

The daughter was a popular and hard-working girl who attended a local £16,500 per year college.

### Information provided about the family during investigation

The father had previously told police he had received letters warning of a plot to kidnap his daughter and chop off her fingers. He also claimed he had been sent blackmail threats by his former accountant.

The father said to a friend that his wife and daughter had become accustomed to a certain quality of life and he felt they would not be able to cope if they needed to take "a few backward steps"; they would be "degraded if they lost their high standard of living".

A former business associate said 'I think he would have been vindictive enough or anti-liquidator enough to think, "If I can't have it, they can't have it either."'

A Police financial expert said: "He loved the millionaire lifestyle and he loved his country pursuits, changing cars at every opportunity." Over the years he owned a Ferrari, Bentley, Porsche and Range Rover.  He added: "Owing pounds 1million with no income must have been horrendous."

Prior to this incident the father had been branded "bereft of the basic instincts of commercial morality" by a High Court Judge in relation to some business dealings.  He added that the father was someone "not to be trusted".
The head teacher said they always seemed to be a close, loving and united family.

The family GP said: 'He told me he was boxing in all his problems. He presented himself as rational and not psychotic. It did not fall within the realm of sectioning him under the Mental Health Act.'  He had not expressed any intention of hurting his family.

Detectives believe the father suffered a breakdown triggered by the collapse of his company and decided to destroy his home rather than see it sold to pay creditors.

The daughters' head teacher said there was no hint of any problems in the family.

The father's estranged brother said "we are not apportioning blame or condoning his actions...  but we wish to highlight that preventative measures such as improved communication between GPs and police or firearms officers in the future could help stop a similar tragedy happening to another family."

# APPENDIX G

## Vignette – Case Q

### The Case

The police were called to the children's mothers' home on Sunday evening. A neighbour dialled 999 after receiving a frantic phone call from the children's mother. Sisters aged three, and 14 months, were murdered by their father in the caravan where he lived in the grounds of a garage in Southern England. The father then hanged himself in the car sales garage after making a phone call to family telling them what he had done and that he loved them. The children's mother received a phone call from the children's father saying that 'the babies had gone to sleep forever and he was about to hang himself'; he then hung up. Police found the children's bodies as well as that of their father following a 999 call shortly before 7pm on Sunday, September 21. The dead children were aged one and three

Post-mortem examinations on the children showed they had died of asphyxiation induced by smothering. The children's father died from strangulation by hanging.

A Hampshire Police spokesman said that they were not looking for anyone else in connection with the deaths.

### The Family

The children's mother attended a convent school for girls in a city. Her friend introduced her to the children's father when she was aged 16 years; he was eight years her senior. She moved out of her family home and they rented a small bungalow on the outskirts of the city in southern England.

After the bungalow, the couple moved to a nearby suburb. They had been in a relationship for about 5 years when they split up and the children's father headed for the garage where he had worked for four years as he had nowhere to put his caravan. The children's father had been living part of the time in a caravan at the garage and was also living nearby with his mother and sister. The children's mother had continued living at the couple's three-bedroom semi with the children

Friends and neighbours said the couple had often argued and that the children's father appeared depressed in recent weeks. Their relationship was described by a friend of the children's mother as 'stormy'. The father's employer described the father as having marriage problems over the past year and that was getting the children's father down.

It is claimed that the children's father took all the furniture when the couple split up forcing the children's mother to borrow a mattress for her and the girls to sleep on. All he left in the kitchen was a cooker.

The children's father had been caring for the youngsters for the first time after an acrimonious split with the children's mother about four months before. The tragedy was understood to have taken place on the first weekend that the father had been allowed to see his children since the break-up.

### Information provided about the family during investigation

The children's father had split up with the children's mother, aged 20, a month earlier and was angry at not seeing enough of their daughters. The hearing was told the split between the children's parents had been protracted with both sides calling the police and social services. She had accused him of trying to run her over in 2007 and he had called the police over the theft of money.

An ex-girlfriend of the children's father said "There was something weird about him. I knew *he* wasn't right in the head. "He was an attention-seeking control freak who had a thing about teenage girls." She told how the children's father began texting her up to 60 times a day and was convinced she was cheating on him with boys her own age.

A neighbour said: the children's mother "was very nice - but very young and innocent. They were here for over a year and in all that time I don't think I said more than a few words to her. 'He completely dominated the conversation. It was obvious that their relationship was very strange. She was so much younger than him. She was just a schoolgirl really.'

A friend of the children's father said he was stunned about what had happened. ``You would never have thought this of him," he said. ``He was such a nice bloke, he'd do anything for anyone and was very helpful and he absolutely loved his children.
The ex-girlfriend said "He bragged about being rich and told me he'd saved £ 32,000 and tucked it away in an off-shore account."Once, he took me to HMV and blew £ 300 on me in one go. He told me how beautiful I was. It didn't occur to me then that it was wrong for a 28-year old man to lavish so much attention on a young schoolgirl."

The ex-girlfriend said she realised the children's father was living a life of fantasy when he told her he had a heart condition which gave him just two years to live. She said: "We went out to a club and he disappeared, saying he needed fresh air. I went outside and found him on the pavement clutching his chest. He said it was a heart attack so I called an ambulance. "But the paramedics couldn't find anything wrong with him.

The children's mother said he was a loving father but she could not forgive him.  She described her estranged boyfriend as a good father. ``The only way I can explain what he did is that he couldn't be apart from the girls,'' she said. ``I still can't reconcile the way he was such a loving dad with what he did".

The paternal grandmother said "Personally I think it took a lot of guts to do what he did. He must have been tortured. I hope he's at peace with the girls now."  She added that what her son had done was wrong but he felt it was the only way out.
The employer of the children's father said he saw him on Saturday and described him as "very, very low"."He was a nice lad. He was a very good worker. He kept himself to himself, he was mellow. He was a doting father - it sounds ridiculous but he was a doting father."

The children's father called social services to complain about the state of the house the girls lived in. The social worker said that neither the children nor their mother were ever considered to be at risk from the children's father; she described both parents as being calm and thoughtful.  The social worker described the situation as an ordinary contact with a young family under stress and that she was not anxious about the children.

The paternal grandmother revealed that the children's father, 33, told her he would kill himself two days before he died.   "He was on his own ... and he was sobbing.  "He told me 'I will hang myself if I have to live without my kids.' I just said: 'please don't,'"

# APPENDIX H

## Vignette – Case U

### The Case

A mother and daughter were found beaten to death after police officers received a call from the husband/father to attend their home at around 5am. Both wife and daughter suffered severe multiple head injuries from which they died. Enquiries then led the Police to the business address where the husband/father was found hanging. The Police were not looking for anybody else in connection with the deaths.

### The Family

The father was a successful businessman and his business appeared to be going well. He had recently moved into new offices that he was renovating. The family's four-bedroom detached house was in an affluent area and they had recently returned from holidays in the USA and Europe. The mother had been previously married and had two grown up children from this former relationship. The daughter, a former head-girl, attended sixth form and was taking 'A' levels. Hours before her death, the daughter had been updating her facebook site hours before her death saying she was looking forward to attending the school 'ball'. She was looking forward to taking a gap year abroad and doing voluntary work in hospitals.

### Information provided about the family during investigation

A neighbour described him as somebody who was friendly and would help out at a moment's notice – a good friend.

Detectives believe the mild-mannered man snapped as he struggled to cope with spiralling debts.

He was rumoured to have snapped under the pressure of crippling debts he kept hidden from his family after spending thousands of pounds on two luxury holidays.

The family was described as happy, loving and devoted. A neighbour said they were a very close knit family; level headed and rational.

His sister said "It's unbelievable – he doted on his family, he would never harm them.. he was a gentle man who wouldn't hurt a fly".

Friends said the couple, who had been married for around 20 years, were "devoted to each other and doted on their daughter".

Neighbours said they were particularly close.

A neighbour said "there is no way he could have done something like that unless he was out of his mind. "it is ludicrous, this is so out of character, he has acted like he was out of his mind. Something has happened that has made him flip".

Shocked relatives were puzzled as to how such a "gentle man" could have flipped so drastically.

The daughter's boyfriend said they had never had any discussions about her home life that would indicate she had anything other than a great relationship with her mother and father.

**APPENDIX I**

**Interview schedule for social work professionals**

**Interview questions**

**General**

**I am going to give you a vignette to read (case details only)**
- In your own words, describe to me what happened in this case.
- What were your first impressions/thoughts about the case?

**I am now going to give you some more information about the family and then ask you a series of questions (the family)**

- Have your first thoughts/impressions about the case changed?  If so, in what way?
- How would you describe the children, the mother and then the father
- What is your professional opinion of what happened here?
- What are your personal feelings about what happened here?
- Were there any easily identifiable risk factors that could have alerted people to what was going to happen?
- What do you think the underlying motive was for this?

**I am now going to give you a series of statements made by professionals who were involved in the case and family/friends and then ask you a series of questions**

- Were there any views that you found particularly influential when thinking about what had happened and why?  If so, whose views and why?
- Were there any views that you did not give much weight to?  If so, which views and why?

Above questions to be applied to 2 vignettes and then follow with general questions on following page

**Questions not related to specific vignettes**

**Thinking broadly**

- Why do you think it is that some families who experience murder-suicide are not known to statutory child or adult social services, third sector welfare organisations the Police or mental health agencies?
- What role can social work take in preventing this phenomenon when it is not aware of families which might be at risk of such an occurrence?

- Is there a role for others, not just social workers? If so, what is this role?

- Is this phenomenon something that social work should prioritise in seeking to prevent - what are the reasons for your response?

- How influential do you think the media are in guiding people's understanding and beliefs about murder-suicide and child abuse generally?
- In what way do you think you/your profession influences the media in the reporting of incidents and child abuse generally?
- What role do you think you and/or your profession plays or can play in generating discourse and understanding about murder-suicide? How influential are you/your profession in constructing what people understand about this phenomenon?

**Coroner file recording framework**

**Date file accessed:**                    **Coroner:**

**Case name:**                             **Jurisdiction:**

**The record**

Purpose that Coroner's record is constructed for

Role of contributors to records

How the coroner's record is constructed as a distinctive product

Evidence used to construct the coroner's account

Personal authority – does the record use 'I', 'We'?

Does the text persuade and if so how?

**Within the record**

Are there findings of fact – what are they?

Are there hypotheses – what are they

Are there assumptions – what are they?

Are there lay judgements – what are they?

Is a context to the incident identified – what role does this play?

Are causal factors identified – what are they?

**People**

Are people assigned to social/cultural groups – what are they?

What other demographics are identified – what significance is applied to these?

How are people described – are they defined in particular roles?

Are risk factors identified – what are they?

Are motives identified – what are they?

Is blame apportioned – to whom?

Is there a focus on relationships?

**Discourse**

What is the dominant discourse – e.g. medical, criminal, social?

Are there actual or implied associations?

Are there any dichotomies – e.g. loving and devoted/hatred and violence?

**Other factors/issues**

# APPENDIX K

## Tables 10 to 14 - Chronological ordering of components across newspapers for each case

A       The event

B       Circumstances of the family

C       Portrayal of the perpetrator/family

D       The role of others – what they knew

### Case A

Table 10 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across the five newspaper types for Case A

| The Mirror | A | C | B | C |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Telegraph | A | B | C | |
| The Mail | A | B | D | C |
| The Independent | A | B | C | D |
| Non national | A | B | C | |

### Case F

Table 11 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across the five newspaper types for Case F

| The Mirror | A | B | C | D |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Telegraph | A | B | C | |
| The Mail | A | B | D | C |
| The Independent | A | C | B | |
| Non national | A | B | C | D |

### Case P

Table 12 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across the five newspaper types for Case P

| The Mirror | A | B | C | D |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Telegraph | A | B | D | C |
| The Mail | A | B | C | D |
| The Independent | A | B | C | D |
| Non national | A | D | C | |

**Case   Q**

Table 13 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across the five newspaper types for Case Q

| The Mirror | A | B | D | C |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Telegraph | A | B | C | D |
| The Mail | A | B | D | C |
| The Independent | A | B | | |
| Non national | A | B | D | C |

**Case U**

Table 14 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across the five newspaper types for Case U

| The Mirror | A | B | C | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Telegraph | A | B | C | D |
| The Mail | A | B | C | D |
| The Independent | A | C | D | |
| Non national | A | B | C | D |

**Tables 16 – 20 - preferred chronological sequencing of elements across the five cases for each newspaper**

Table 16 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across **The Mirror** for each of the five cases.

| Case A | A | C | B | C |
|--------|---|---|---|---|
| Case F | A | B | C | D |
| Case P | A | B | C | D |
| Case Q | A | B | D | C |
| Case U | A | B | C | |

Table 17 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across **The Telegraph** for each of the five cases.

| Case A | A | B | C | |
|--------|---|---|---|---|
| Case F | A | B | C | |
| Case P | A | B | D | C |
| Case Q | A | B | C | D |
| Case U | A | B | C | D |

Table 18 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across **The Mail** for each of the five cases.

| Case A | A | B | D | C |
|--------|---|---|---|---|
| Case F | A | B | D | C |
| Case P | A | B | C | D |
| Case Q | A | B | D | C |
| Case U | A | B | C | D |

Table 19 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across **The Independent** for each of the five cases.

| Case A | A | B | C | D |
|--------|---|---|---|---|
| Case F | A | C | B | |
| Case P | A | B | C | D |
| Case Q | A | B | | |
| Case U | A | C | D | |

Table 20 – Chronological sequencing of story elements across **Non nationals** for each of the five cases.

| Case A | A | B | C |   |
|--------|---|---|---|---|
| Case F | A | B | C | D |
| Case P | A | D | C |   |
| Case Q | A | B | D | C |
| Case U | A | B | C | D |