‘Being-together-with’ children: An interpretive phenomenological study of social workers’ relationships with young children during initial assessments

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Central Lancashire

January 2021

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ABSTRACT

When children are referred to social services in England for assessments for family support or child protection services, social workers are required to undertake a holistic assessment of children and families' needs. Social workers are expected to adopt a participatory practice approach by ensuring that children are respected, their views heard and that children are able to build up trusting and stable relationships with the professionals who are working with them. It has been found that social workers tend to work in less participatory ways with children under the age of eight years. This study therefore explores social workers' positive practice experiences of relationship building with children under the age of eight, to identify how increased participation can be achieved.

Building on existing understandings of how to build effective relationships with children that are crucial to social work practice (Ferguson, 2016a; McColgan and McMullin, 2017; Winter et al., 2019; Ruch et al., 2020), this study deepens understanding of practices with two to seven year olds. The study uses an interpretive phenomenological research approach to analyse semi-structured interviews with ten English local authority social workers who shared their practice experiences of working with children aged 2-7 years whilst undertaking initial assessments of risk and need. Phenomenological theoretical insights from the work of Heidegger (2010), Merleau-Ponty (2012, 2014) and Levinas (1981) are used to analyse and interpret practitioner accounts of worker-child relationship building in order to explore practitioners' understandings of the nature, meaning and purpose of social worker-child relationships in an initial assessment context.

This study found that social worker-child relationships were an embodied and *intercorporeal* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) negotiated accomplishment, where practitioners and children spatially, vocally, and emotionally-physically co-created the relational environment of each encounter and where the generation of a *comfortable relational environment* was seen as facilitating the process of relationship building.

This thesis also explores the temporal and ethical (Levinas, 1981) nature of human *being* in relation to social worker-child relationships through the phenomenological lens of *lived time* (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2012), examining the moment by moment nature of social worker-child encounters. This study found that more meaningful worker-child relationships were generated when social workers were able to *be-in-the-moment* with children; sustain a holistic *personal-professional* form of presence; retain a sense of *relational proportionality* in their interactions; and when practitioners and children were temporally intercorporeally able to co-create an existential ethical sense of '*being-together-with*' one another as individuals who were acknowledged and accepted as persons of equal worth (Levinas, 1981).

Temporally sustaining a humane, ethical form of practitioner presence is identified as central to the generation of meaningful social worker-child relationships, as persons are phenomenologically understood as ethical beings before they assume any other identity or role (Levinas, 1981). It is therefore argued in this thesis, that acknowledging each person's (including social workers' and children's) '*shared humanness'* (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016: 7) is what makes any human relationship meaningful and is pivotal to understanding how more meaningful social worker-child, or indeed *any* professional-service user relationship, can be generated and sustained.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all those social workers who willingly gave up significant amounts of time from their busy working day to talk to me about their experiences of relationship building. Thank you also, to the local authorities who gave their time and support to this study.

To my supervisors Cath Larkins, Clare Stone and Nigel Patrick Thomas. Many thanks for your unwavering support and determination to stick with me throughout the whole 6-year period of this research study. Your ongoing guidance, advice, support and encouragement has been invaluable in keeping me motivated and on track. The intellectual stimulus and challenge you have provided, has undoubtedly improved the quality of my thinking and understanding and has positively contributed towards the intellectual rigour of this thesis.

I would also like to acknowledge several other staff at UCLan who have offered their support and guidance to me during the completion of this study. Thank you to John Wainwright, Stephen Gethin-Jones, Helen Spandler and Alastair Roy for your individual support and for organising and facilitating the PhD research student workshops in the School of Social Work. These workshops have provided wonderful opportunities for the sharing of ideas, worries and for learning about different ways of undertaking research and analysing data. Thanks also, to Lynn Froggett for helping me to have more confidence in my ideas. I would like to especially thank the University of Central Lancashire for awarding the research studentship that made it financially possible for me to undertake this study as a part time student. I genuinely could not have undertaken the PhD without it.

Finally, I would like to thank Adrian for supporting me unconditionally, despite my regular disappearances under a mound of files, papers, journal articles and books.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Italics are used to demonstrate direct quotations from literature and from research study participants. I have also used italics to signify the use of key theoretical concepts, key phrases or words. Whilst I have used pseudonyms for all participants' and children's names, I have additionally italicised these names in-text, to further emphasise that the names are all pseudonyms. I have also used italics when I have wanted to especially emphasise a specific word in-text.

Square brackets [ ] are used to provide additional, clarifying information in relation to the transcript extracts.

The use of an ellipsis ... signifies that some of the text from interview extracts or literature quotes has been omitted.

Hyphens between words such as *being-together-with* or *being-in-the-world* and certain other groups of words, are used to denote the non-linear nature of these terms and to indicate the terms represent conjoined phenomena.

Quotation marks ‘ ’ are used for direct quotes that are in-text. Quotation marks are also occasionally used in relation to my referencing of specific words (such as ‘self’ for example) in order to acknowledge that I am using a term that is used in different paradigmic contexts or has contested meanings.

The terms *interpretive phenomenology* and *existential-hermeneutic phenomenology* have been used interchangeably in this thesis as they refer, broadly speaking, to the same understanding of phenomenology. Whilst existential-hermeneutic phenomenology can be regarded as a specific form of interpretive phenomenology (as explained in Chapter 2), it is for reasons of brevity that I sometimes use the term interpretive phenomenology, rather than existential-hermeneutic phenomenology.

ABBREVIATIONS

ADCS Assistant Director of Children’s Services

ADCS Association of Directors of Children’s Services

BASW British Association of Social Workers

DCS Director of Children’s Services

HCPC Health and Care Professions Council

IFSW International Federation of Social Workers

KSS Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Social Work

INTRODUCTION

For children and young people who are referred to the local authority for assessments under the Children Act 1989 (as amended by s53 of the Children Act 2004), social workers are required to undertake a holistic assessment of the child and their family. This assessment has the dual aims of promoting children’s welfare and safeguarding children from significant harm (HM Government, 2018). Whether the initial social work assessment results in a child being viewed as a child in need of family support services or requiring further intervention to protect them from harm, statutory guidance makes it explicit that professionals should ensure that children are listened to and that children have the opportunity to build up meaningful relationships with the professionals who are working with them (HM Government, 2018).

This research study provides an exploration of English local authority social workers’ experiences of working with young children whilst undertaking initial assessments of need and risk. The study focuses on examining practitioners’ understandings of the nature, meaning and use of relationships within the specific context of working with *young* children (under the age of eight) during the process of undertaking assessments.

In this thesis, the term *relationship* is understood as referring to the connections between people and between things. In relation to people, the term relationship is defined in the dictionary as ‘*the state of being connected’* (Hanks, 1976: 1232) where the nature of the person to person connections may be vocal, verbal, physical, cognitive or emotional in character (or embody all these features). The term *relationship* is also used to explain the nature and purpose of the connection between people, such as when describing mutual dealings

between two parties (a business, family or professional relationship such as a social worker-service user relationship, for example).

There is sometimes a distinction made in literature that explores social worker-service user relationships, between the terms *relationship* and *rapport*, where the word *relationship* is used to mean an ongoing type of relationship occurring over time (see for example Trevithick, 2005) whilst the term *rapport* is separately used to describe the instant or initial contact phase of communication between service user and social worker (Hill, 1997; McMullin, 2017). The term rapport is also sometimes used more holistically to represent the initial stages of relationship forming that represents the start of the process of building a meaningful relationship with the child (Bannister, 2001; Pack, 2012). Bannister (2001), for example, suggests that one of the core conditions of being able to establish a meaningful relationship with a child and ascertain their views is through establishing trust between practitioner and child, and this needs to be built through building an immediate rapport with the child.

In this study, I intend to use the term relationship in this second, more holistic sense, encompassing both social workers' experiences of their first contact (initial rapport) with children as well as practitioners' ongoing interactions with children during the assessment process. I would argue that building a meaningful working relationship with a child starts from the very first encounter (as well as in part prior to it, in terms of worker conceptualisations of children and their capacities). I therefore intend to define all the interactions between social workers and children as involving either the initiating or maintaining of some kind of practitioner-child relationship.

This study adopted a phenomenological research approach to obtain rich, holistic understandings of social worker-child relationships by asking practitioners to talk about their practice experiences of working with one particular child in detail. Interviewees were asked to talk about their experiences of relationship building starting from the workers' *initial encounters* with children, before exploring the subsequent process of social worker-child relationship building throughout the rest of the assessment process. The emphasis was also on asking practitioners about their *positive* rather than negative practice experiences of relationship building. The rationale for this emphasis, for using an interpretive phenomenological research approach and for selecting this topic focus, is explained below.

Rationale and motivation for undertaking the study

My motivation for undertaking this research study is simultaneously both a personal and a professional one. I have lived experiences as a social worker and as a university tutor. My direct experiences alongside discussions with social work students and their practice supervisors during student's completion of their local authority practice placements, led me to believe that students and social work practitioners often formed meaningful relationships with children during the process of completing assessments of risk and need.

At the time I began this research study (in 2013) however, only a limited amount of research attention appeared to have been paid to exploring practitioner perspectives of social worker-child relationship building. Most of the literature that explored social worker approaches to establishing and maintaining relationships with young children (with some exceptions such as Kanter, 2004

and Tait and Wosu, 2013 for example) did so from the perspective of service user experiences (C4EO, 2010; OCC, 2010, OCC, 2011; Ofsted, 2011; Cossar et al., 2013) or from the perspective of workers with a slightly different role such as that of a guardian ad litem (Head, 1998; Winter, 2011a) or from a play therapy (Axline, 1971; Oaklander, 1978) or psycho-therapeutic background (Jewett, 1984) rather than from the viewpoint of the lived experiences of local authority social work practitioners themselves. My research study therefore set out to contribute new knowledge and understanding of social worker practices of relationship building with young children, by exploring practitioner accounts of their own lived experiences of establishing and sustaining meaningful working relationships with children.

The rationale and motivation for focusing specifically on practitioners' working relationships with *young* children under the age of eight years was that research evidence indicated that the degree of children's participation in child welfare decision making was significantly reduced below the age of eight years and even more so, under the age of five (Grimshaw and Sinclair,1997; Thomas, 2002; Cleaver et al., 2007). Other research however, contrastingly suggested that working with children under eight, and as young as three or four years old to ascertain their views and feelings about their lives, was clearly achievable (Clarke and Statham, 2005; D'Cruz and Stagnatti, 2010; Winter, 2011a; Handley and Doyle, 2012; Di Santo and Berman, 2012).

During the 6-year period of this study, a significant amount of research has been published, that now provides local authority social worker perspectives on practitioner-child relationships developed during assessments. This research has predominantly used ethnographic approaches to explore social worker practices (see for example Ferguson, 2011; Holland, 2011; Jeyasingham, 2016,

2017; Winter et al., 2016; Ruch et al., 2017; Winter et al., 2019) but other researchers have also undertaken semi-structured interviews with practitioners (see for example, Whincup, 2017; Morrison et al., 2018; Hood et al., 2019). Whilst these more recent research studies did not provide the motivation for this study, these studies will be referred to in Chapters 1 and 8 respectively, in order to situate the research study and its findings within the context of current research that explores the nature of social worker-child relationships.

A phenomenological research approach to explore social workers' experiences and understandings of relationship building is a relatively underutilised way of exploring, analysing and interpreting social worker practice experiences. This is despite the frequent use of, and value attached to, phenomenological research approaches to studying the complexities and embodied nature of the work of practitioners in other people-based or caring-based professions such as for example, in nursing (Benner, 1994), midwifery (Thomson et al., 2011), teaching (Diekelmann and Diekelmann, 2009), psychology (Willig, 2012; Smith and Osborn, 2015) and psychotherapy (Finlay, 2011).

The benefit of an existential-hermeneutic phenomenological research study approach (see Chapter 2 for further details) to exploring practitioners' lived experiences of building relationships with children is that it enables a holistic, embodied and narrative understanding of the process of worker-child relationship building to be foregrounded, adding to the diversity of '*practice-near'* (Froggett and Briggs, 2012: 1) understandings of social worker practices.

At the start of this study, literature that explored social worker-child relationships predominantly did so within the context of longer-term social worker involvement with looked after children (Munro, 2001; McLeod, 2007; McLeod,

2010; Winter, 2009) or in relation to ongoing court proceedings (Mantle et al., 2006) rather than focussing on the period of initial assessment (Turney, 2012). My study therefore focused on the underexplored area of practitioners' experiences of building relationships with children in the context of completing initial assessments.

The way social workers conceptualise children's competence (Thomas and O'Kane, 1999; Fern, 2012) has been found to be linked to differing conceptualisations of children, which in turn has an impact on the willingness of professionals to use a participatory approach. This research evidence suggested to me that social workers' abilities to build meaningful relationships with children therefore started from their initial encounters with children, but also to some degree prior to it, in terms of how social workers conceptualised children and their capacities. Focusing on the nature of social workers' *initial* as well as subsequent encounters with children, therefore constituted an important part of this research study.

An initial examination of literature analysing child and family social worker assessment practices suggested that often social workers did not develop meaningful relationships with children during assessments (Winter, 2009) and children were frequently not visible or represented within social work assessments or in assessment documentation (Horwath, 2011; Holland, 2001; Thomas and Holland, 2010). In instances of child death or serious injury, reports also indicated that social workers almost completely failed to see, hear or listen to children (Sinclair and Bullock, 2002; Haringey, 2008; Brandon et al., 2012).

The increasingly mechanistic and proceduralised approach to social work practice (Aldridge, 1996; Dominelli, 1996; Calder and Hackett, 2003: Munro, 2011) has additionally been identified as eclipsing the need to develop meaningful relationships as a prerequisite of effective social work practice (Trevithick, 2003; Schofield, 2005; Foley and Leverett, 2008; Leeson, 2010; Kedell, 2011; Stanley et al., 2014). The priority given to performance management targets and completion of assessment proforma has been seen to result in the objectification of children by social workers (Winter, 2009) whilst, contrastingly, both young people (Morgan, 2006; Ofsted, 2011) and adults (Levin, 2004) cite the personal qualities of social workers as being of significance to them and as influencing the quality of their experience when receiving social care services.

These descriptions of social work assessment practices contrasted sharply with some (but not all) of my own practice experiences as a social worker and of my understandings of practice generated from working directly with students and practitioners in social work agencies. This dissonance between my own more positive experiences and understandings of social worker practices and the bleaker findings of research studies regarding the nature of practitioner-child relationships, was another factor that influenced my decision to further investigate the topic of social worker-child relationships.

There was also dissonance between mechanistic, proceduralised and objectifying practitioner approaches cited in existing studies of child and family social worker assessment practices and governmental expectations of how social workers should work with children and their families. Legal, statutory and practice guidance documents state for example, that social workers should engage in collaborative practices and work in partnership with parents and

children (Department of Health, 1995a; 1995b; Department of Health, 2001; HM Government, 2018); develop purposeful, effective and meaningful relationships with service users throughout the assessment and intervention process; and that practitioners should use a participatory approach (Levin, 2004; Oliver and Pitt, 2011; Pinkney, 2013; DfE, 2014).

Despite this governmental emphasis on collaborative working between social workers and service users, concerns have continued to be expressed about how social workers sometimes overlook the importance of developing an individual relationship with, or addressing the needs of, children. Overlooking the importance of building relationships with children is cited as sometimes stemming from social workers focussing primarily on meeting the needs of adults in families (Carlisle, 2012; Laming, 2003). In other instances, it is suggested as being due to social workers taking a formulaic (Thomas and Holland, 2010) and automatic rather than thoughtful, deliberative approach to their assessments of, and interventions with, children (Higgins, 2019).

At the start of this research study, whilst some research exploring child welfare practices did attempt to capture positive as well as negative service user experiences of social work practice (see for example Fauth et al., 2010; Larkins et al., 2015b), the overwhelming focus of research findings was centred on highlighting what had *not* worked well in terms of social worker practices, rather than attempting to establish a body of positive evidence about the approaches that *were* working well. I therefore chose to undertake the research study starting from a strengths-based (Saleebey, 2013) rather than a deficit-based perspective of social work practice, attempting to find out what practitioners felt worked well, rather than adding to the dominant and almost incessant practice discourses of criticism and failure (Brandon et al., 2008; Brandon et al., 2009;

Ofsted, 2011; Brandon et al., 2012; Green and Halliday, 2017). As mentioned earlier in this introduction, several research studies exploring social worker-child relationships during assessment and intervention work with families, have subsequently been completed during the six-year period of this study. These recent research studies have moved significantly away from employing solely deficit-based understandings of social work practice, to offer more positive and nuanced accounts of practitioner-child relationships and of social worker assessment practices.

However, (see Chapter 1) to date relatively little attention has been paid to utilising phenomenological philosophical understandings to explore the nature of social worker-child relationships. Interpreting practitioner accounts of their lived experiences of relationship building through the application of theoretical insights from the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas has led to a phenomenological exploration in this study, of the intersubjective embodied, spatial, temporal and ethical nature of social worker-child relationships. Using aspects of Heidegger's (2010) phenomenological exploration of the nature of human *being* to as a way of interpreting practitioner accounts of relationship building, offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding practitioner-child relationships that goes beyond understanding the relationship as between 'social worker' and 'child', instead reconceptualising the worker-child relationship first and foremost as a relationship of one human being to another. This research study additionally argues the importance of considering Heidegger's phenomenological exploration of human *being* alongside Levinasian ethics (1981), as a way of acknowledging the inescapably ethical as well as social nature of human existence and explores the significance of this

ethical understanding of human *being,* for exploring how social-worker child relationships can become meaningful relational encounters.

The initial intention at the beginning of this research study was to focus on exploring the nature and significance of social worker-child relationships in an initial assessment context by foregrounding a particular age range of children and by focussing on interviewed practitioners' positive practice experiences of relationship building paying particular attention to each practitioner's first encounter with a particular child. Using a phenomenological lens to explore the nature of human *being* as a way of examining the nature and significance of social workers' relationship with young children has, however, ultimately resulted in a broader more philosophical theoretical exploration of social worker-child relationships becoming the central focus of this thesis. Undertaking a phenomenological analysis of social worker-child relationships through a philosophical exploration of human *being,* involved a deeper exploration of what makes *any* human relationship meaningful. It is this philosophical and phenomenological understanding of human *being* that has ultimately been explored in this thesis as a means of illuminating how social worker-child encounters can become meaningful relational experiences.

A guide to the chapters

Below, I provide an outline of the content contained in each chapter of the thesis. In Chapter 1, I discuss the range of literature that informed and framed the study.

Chapter 2 provides a summary of the existential-hermeneutic (interpretive) research approach used in this study and its underpinning epistemological and ontological stance. This chapter outlines the process of methodological, theoretical and philosophical exploration that led me towards my eventual choice of this particular research approach and explains the rationale for my choice.

Chapter 3 provides an account of how the study was conducted, including my analysis and reflections on the process and methods used. The approach I used to search for relevant literature to inform the study is also explained. This chapter then highlights some of the ethical issues and challenges I encountered during the study and explains how these issues were addressed.

The findings are presented in Chapters 4 to 7. Chapter 4 provides a summary of the key thematic findings of the study and an overview of the diverse organisational contexts of social worker-child relationships that ten practitioners discussed in their interviews. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 each address a key thematic finding of the study. These chapters provide detailed interpretations of social workers' accounts of relationship building with young children, using existential and hermeneutic phenomenological understandings to illuminate different understandings of the nature and meaning of social worker-child relationships.

Chapter 5 explores the embodied and intercorporeal (Merleau-Ponty, 2014), physical-emotional nature of the relational environment of worker-child encounters and the range of practices social workers used in their initial as well as subsequent encounters with young children, in order to create a comfortable relational environment during their meetings with children. The second section of Chapter 5 explores the spatial nature of practitioner-child relationships, using

a phenomenological understanding of space as *lived space* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) to explore the temporally unfolding spatial-physical, emotional and mental (cognitive) meaning of worker-child encounters.

Chapter 6 considers the temporal nature of social worker-child relationships, using the existential-hermeneutic understanding of time as *lived time* (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2012) to explore the moment by moment way practitioners experienced the process of relationship building. The nature of practitioner presence (*being*) is discussed in this chapter and practitioner presence is identified as a temporally generated and inescapably personal-professional and humane form of ethical (Levinas, 1981) practitioner presence. Sustaining a *humane* form of social worker presence is additionally identified as central to the establishment and maintenance of meaningful worker-child relationships. It is argued that sustaining a humane form of practitioner presence is especially important when organisational or other issues impact negatively on the time workers have available for relationship building. Sustaining a humane form of practitioner presence is also argued to be of equal importance when social workers exercise the more coercive aspects of their role.

Chapter 7 extends the phenomenological discussion and interpretation of the temporal and ethical nature of practitioner presence by exploring how practitioners' relationships with children become meaningful person to person rather than purely instrumental interactions, through foregrounding four temporal moments of social workers existentially ethically '*being-together-with'* children.

Chapter 8 situates the research study in existing literature, discussing the ways in which the findings accord with, contrast with, or challenge, existing knowledge regarding the nature of social worker-child relationships. The nature of the original contributions to knowledge made by the study are then outlined and the limitations of the study are discussed. Next, recommendations for social worker education, training and practice developed from the findings of the study, are summarised. The concluding section of the thesis argues the importance of promoting a contextualised and holistic understanding of social worker-child relationships and highlights the centrality of humane, ethical practitioner *being* or *presence,* to the achievement of meaningful social worker-child relationships.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature on social worker-child relationships in which this research is grounded and outlines how and why I undertook this review. First, the chapter outlines the range of strategies used to search the literature during different phases of the research study, explaining how these accord with a phenomenological research approach. (Reflections on the approach used to review literature are discussed in Chapter 3). Next, the chapter outlines the landscape of existing literature that explores social worker-child relationships. The chapter then explains how this study's exploration of the nature and meaning of social worker-child relationships in the context of undertaking initial assessments has the potential to add to existing understandings of relationship building through providing an in-depth, phenomenological exploration of how effective and meaningful worker-child relationships may be generated. The range of literature that informs the study is considered in three sections: existing literature that examines the nature of social worker-child relationships in relation to child and family social work practice; literature that explores phenomenology in the context of social work; and literature relating to social pedagogy and social worker-service user relationships, but the chapter begins by outlining how and why the review was undertaken.

Approach used to search and review literature

An initial review of literature about social worker-child relationships was undertaken in 2013, during the development of the initial research proposal. This comprised of an initial '*dip*' (Grix, 2010: 40) into key social work related literature, achieved by hand searching (Aveyard, 2010) chronologically backwards (from 2013 to 2000) through the abstracts and titles of journal articles from a selected number of social work related journals (see list below) in order to get a general picture of the research landscape in relation to the potential topic areas I was considering within the broader subject area of child and family social work. My initial journal search list was selected by using the Community Care Social Care Research Journal Guide to identify an initial list of 35 social work related journals from which I then selected a smaller number of journals whose title suggested they were most likely to include articles with a child and family social work focus. The eleven journals I subsequently selected to hand search were: the British Journal of Social Work; Child and Family Social Work; Child Abuse and Neglect; Child Abuse Review; Child Development; Children and Society; Journal of Social Work Practice; Qualitative Social Work; Research on Social Work Practice; Journal of Social Work and Social Work Research. I scanned the abstracts and titles of articles, looking out for key terms such as for example, 'social work', 'social worker', 'assessment', 'communication', 'child protection', 'relationship', 'child' and 'children'. This process enabled me to quickly identify which of my initial range of possible research topic areas might be the most suitable or viable to explore further.

Choosing a viable size of topic for this study was established by identifying which child and family social work topic areas had already been

comprehensively covered in existing journal articles; may have conversely only been briefly or minimally explored; or whether there was a complete lack of published data or academic discussion in relation to a particular topic area. The available timescale for undertaking this initial process of searching the literature in order to choose a final research question and write an initial research proposal, was two weeks (in order to meet the deadline for a PhD studentship application). My initial strategy for exploring relevant literature was therefore undertaken to inform the development of my initial research proposal within a tightly defined timescale. This initial sweep of abstracts enabled me to narrow down the focus of my research study to that of exploring social worker-child relationships, focusing especially on practitioners' relationships with children under the age of eight years. This was because I identified that social workers' relationships with children under the age of eight years had been less comprehensively explored than social workers' relationships with older children (see a discussion of this issue in the Introduction). This initial journal search also made me more confident that undertaking a study to explore the nature of social workers' relationships with younger children from the point of practitioners' first encounters with children and in the practice context of initial assessments, had the potential to add new understandings about social worker-child relationships, rather than to simply replicate existing studies (Eco, 2015; Silverman, 2011).

As the research study progressed, an ongoing review of literature was undertaken. This aided the process of exploring new theoretical concepts and ways of understanding the topic of social worker-child relationship building. For example, a range of phenomenological, existential, social work and social pedagogical related literature was utilised to help analyse, discuss and enhance

the exploration of emerging ideas and understandings that were generated during the process of analysing and making meanings from the research study data. The combination of strategies used to review literature whilst undertaking and analysing the interviews with practitioners and writing up the thesis, was predominantly that of following up in-text references from books, reports and journal articles; pursuing other sources identified as relevant to the study through my attendance at seminars, workshops and conferences; and by reading texts recommended by colleagues.

Towards the end of the research study (conducted over a 6-year period), a further final check for the existence of more recently published literature relevant to the focus of the study, was additionally undertaken. A search for relevant literature (from 2013 to 2020 inclusive) using Web of Knowledge and ProQuest Social Science electronic databases, was completed. I used differing combinations of keywords to search these data bases, using keywords such as for example, 'social work', 'children', 'assessment', 'relationships', 'initial assessment' and 'phenomenology'. This was to establish the existence of more recent publications that might assist in explicating, supporting, or challenging the research study's findings. Identifying the existence of more recent publications helped in situating the focus of the study and the nature of the original contribution being made by the thesis, in relation to current literature.

This approach to reviewing literature is consistent with the interpretive phenomenological research approach of this study, which values the subjectivity of human experiences and retaining a stance of openness towards what it means to *know* something, which has implications for how the literature review process is approached as well as for how fieldwork is conducted as:

> *...the pathways that interpretive thinking must follow cannot be dictated by rigidly controlled road maps...the with-world is not some enclosure one enters and exits from time to time but always obtains as an open becoming* (Diekelmann and Diekelmann, 2009: 10-11)

The process of searching the literature using a phenomenological approach is therefore much more about a philosophical way of *being* as a researcher: a way of being that is open to reflexively following an ongoing experience of reading, searching, thinking, writing and reflecting with the literature alongside engaging in discussion and debate with others (such as fellow PhD students, interviewees and supervisory team members, for example). All of these activities intersect and lead to the generation of new ideas, triggering off new trails of literary exploration and help to illuminate new meanings in the interview data. Reflections on the approach to reviewing the literature are discussed further in Chapter 3.

The iterative, ongoing literature review process undertaken in this study does not translate into a codified method of neat, linear literature review steps (Smith et al., 2009) that can potentially be used as a criterion of validity to help evaluate the quality of the research. Nor I would argue, does it need to. There is no unified qualitative research paradigm: no '*unified body of theory, methodology or method that can collectively be described as qualitative research'* (Rolfe, 2006: 305) and each individual study is unique. Nonetheless, the chapter is structured into the themes that have emerged from this iterative literature reviewing and analysis process.

The above chapter section has outlined the approach I used to review literature over the course of the study. The next sections consider the range of literature that informs the study. This encompasses existing literature that examines the

nature of social worker-child relationships in relation to child and family social work practice; literature that explores phenomenology in the context of social work; and literature relating to social pedagogy and social worker-service user relationships. This is done to situate the research study in relation to published work.

The importance of relationships in social work practice with children

> *Relationships are a bit like the air we breathe. Though they are necessary for our existence – biological, social and psychological – we tend to take them for granted unless something exceptional happens...Human relationships, and usually their **quality** or **loss**, form the ordinary content of everyday social work. In nearly all social work transactions relationships are involved somewhere and, in some instances, such as bringing a child into care, the breakdown of a relationship is often at the heart of the matter*
> (Hennessey, 2011: 8-9)

Social work is inescapably a relational endeavour (Winter, 2015; Ingram and Smith, 2018). Prior, as well as subsequent to, the development of social work in England as a regulated profession (GSCC, 2004) the social worker-service user relationship has been regarded as central to the processes of assessment, intervention and achieving change (see for example, Biestek, 1957; Perlman, 1957; Pincus and Minahan, 1973; Hollis and Woods, 1981; Sudbery, 2002; Trevithick, 2003; Ruch et al., 2010; Winter, 2011; Megele, 2015; McColgan and McMullin, 2017, Engstrom, 2019).

In a child and family assessment context, social workers are expected to build professional working relationships with children so that a holistic assessment of

children's and their families' circumstances can be achieved (HM Government, 2018). Assessments provide the foundation for social work intervention with children and their families, enabling practitioners to identify and subsequently provide for children's needs (Adams and Leshone, 2016) as well as helping practitioners to ensure children are protected from harm (Walker and Beckett, 2011; Holland, 2011; Marshall, 2017).

The nature of the relationships generated between social workers and children during the assessment process are of central importance, as the quality of the practitioner-child relationship impacts on the quality and effectiveness of the assessment that is produced. For example, the degree to which a social worker understands children's thoughts and feelings or is able to listen to and comprehend the child's point of view, affects the accuracy of the overall assessment (Schofield, 2005; Holland, 2011). The development of trusting relationships between social workers and children helps practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of children's needs and circumstances and assess risks to children, by enabling children to talk about their concerns (Whincup, 2017). This can help social workers make more informed judgements about how best to safeguard and protect children's welfare (Burton, 2009; Dickens and Williams, 2017). High quality worker relationships with individual children and families have also been identified as strongly linked to good outcomes (APPGC, 2017).

Developing more participative worker-child encounters has also been identified as increasing the effectiveness of interventions by making interventions more responsive to children's wishes and allowing more realistic plans to be developed (Vis et al., 2011). Young people additionally perceive assessments to be better when they are given clearer explanations, listened to more and their

views and experiences are respected (Cleaver and Walker, 2004), with Ofsted (2017a) for example, identifying the context for best work with children living with domestic abuse as being one where children are listened to and their views taken into account. Children have indicated that they want stronger relationships with their social worker and want social workers to spend time getting to know them, keeping them informed and also involved, to enable better decisions to be made (Care Inquiry, 2013b). Whilst it has been identified that children want to build better relationships with their social workers, it is also suggested that social workers can sometime fail to recognise the importance of these relationships (Winter, 2015). This study therefore aims to explore the practice experiences and understandings of social workers who feel they have successfully established meaningful relationships with children during assessments, in order to better understand how social workers can enable stronger practitioner-child relationships to be developed.

There is an expectation that meaningful social worker-child relationships should underpin any kind of social work intervention with children and adults (Lishman, 2009; OCC, 2011). This is because relationship-based practice is valued by service users and has been found to support service users' participation in the assessment process (De Boer and Coady, 2007; OCC, 2010; OCC, 2011; Vis et al., 2012). The importance of the establishment of meaningful practitioner-child relationships in ensuring that children are consulted and involved in, rather than excluded from, the decision making processes in child welfare interventions, however, continues to be raised as an issue of concern in relation to social work practice (Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018; Cudjoe, et al., 2020). Ofsted (2017a) for example, has identified an ongoing concern that the voice of young children is often still missing from assessments due to children being seen by

practitioners as too young to be able to give a view. This study's focus on exploring practice experiences where practitioners perceive they have developed a meaningful relationship with a young child during an initial assessment, can therefore help to expand existing understandings of the pre-conditions for hearing young children's voices in assessments.

Effective relationships in social work continue to be identified as central to successful outcomes (Ingram and Smith, 2018), with the development of positive worker-child relationships additionally identified as sometimes constituting a transformative experience, leading to therapeutic benefits for the young person (Lemma, 2010). It has also been argued that working directly and participatively with children offers the opportunity for building children's resilience, confidence and self-esteem, through children experiencing positive interactions (Vis et al., 2011; Tait and Wosu, 2013; Marshall et al., 2019). Research into therapeutic interventions with children additionally identifies the relationship between practitioners and children as the most important factor in achieving positive therapeutic outcomes (Geldard et al., 2013).

Developing meaningful working relationships with children is also important because it is a statutorily required element of the social worker's assessment and intervention role. Statutory guidance on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children (HM Government, 2018) requires social workers to listen to children and take their views seriously, with an emphasis placed on practitioners ensuring that children are active participants in the assessment process, with the behaviour of practitioners also guided by the expectation that children should develop '*ongoing stable relationships of trust with those helping them'* (HM Government, 2018: 9).

The practice guidance, *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH, 2000) similarly offers detailed guidance on the information social workers should ask families to share with them as part of the assessment process, and recommends that social workers should see, observe, engage with, talk, and do activities with children, as part of the information gathering and assessment process. This practice guidance suggests that the quality of working relationships developed with families impacts on the ability to develop an agreed understanding of what is happening and on the ability of workers to provide help. Social workers are therefore expected to establish '*good working relationships with the child and family'* (DoH, 2000: 14) during the assessment process.

There is also a professional expectation that social workers will build relationships with younger, as well as with older, children (DoH, 1990) to ensure that the perspective of very young children as well as older children, is included in assessments (Ofsted, 2017a). Social workers are therefore expected to build relationships with *all* ages of children during the assessment process. Governmental expectations of social workers' professional relationships are that social worker-child relationships should be purposeful and effective, with practitioners helping children and families to work towards change through the building of respectful and trusting worker-service user relationships (DfE, 2014; HM Government, 2018).

Social work in England is a profession that has '*a dual role of care and control on behalf of the state'* (DfE, 2014: 3). Whilst the nature of social work in England is partly defined by the profession itself (BASW, 2012), the profession has become increasingly shaped by central government demands with successive governments continuing to exert their influence over and oversight

of, the processes and organisations involved in regulating the social work profession. Central government for example, instigated the establishment of social work as a protected title (GSCC, 2004) and oversaw the setting of minimum standards for professional proficiency and conduct (HCPC, 2016; HCPC, 2017, SWE, 2019). Government ministers also invited reviews of the state of social work education and training (Narey, 2014; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014) and introduced new routes for social work education and training (Smith et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2016). In addition, the government have also revised their expectations regarding the knowledge and skills base required for child and family social work (DfE, 2014).

As well as government having an impact on the nature of child and family social work, mass media reports since the 1970's onwards, have repeatedly vilified social workers in relation to a series of high-profile child deaths (Ayre, 2001). This has led to a culture of fear, blame and mistrust to pervade social work practice, leading to a defensive and increasingly proceduralised approach to child welfare and protection work (Munro, 2011). This increasingly defensive social work practice approach has encouraged the development of an increasing 'scienceitisation' of professional expertise (Munro, 2008) where a model of '*Technical Rationality'* (Schon, 1991: 21) holds sway. This technical-rational model suggests that the application of fixed, evidence-based approaches (Nevo and Slonim-Nev, 2011) and scientifically based techniques can offer more certainty and consistency of social work practice. Whilst adopting a technical-rational social work approach can be seen as providing a kind of amulet of protection against the complex, emotional and messy realities of day to day social work practice (Helm, 2013), this approach can distract

organisational and practitioner attention away from valuing relationship-based and '*bottom up'* (Singh and Cowden, 2009: 1) understandings of practice.

Alongside the above ideological changes towards understanding child welfare work, the implementation of a policy of austerity has resulted in child and family social work moving away from the provision of preventative and support services to families (Cooper and Whittaker, 2014) to become increasingly oriented towards delivering an investigative, child protection and family intervention or child rescue oriented service (Parton and Williams, 2017; Bunting et al., 2018; Bilson and Munro, 2019).

The relevance of this socio-political climate for the nature of social worker-service user relationships is that it has resulted in an organisational shift of focus regarding the nature of practitioner-child relationships. The increased emphasis placed on investigating rather than supporting families (Bilson and Martin, 2016) has led to an increased importance being attached to the authoritative rather than compassionate aspects of social worker-service user relationships (DfE, 2014). Hingley-Jones and Ruch have coined the term '*relational austerity'* (2016: 237) to reflect this increasing movement towards a more combative and authoritarian, rather than authoritative and compassionate, practice approach. This is because practice is produced by organisations as well as individuals (Forrester et al., 2018). This *investigative turn* (see Bilson et al., 2017) within child and family social work has additionally led to an increased tendency for social work organisations to focus on monitoring the achievement of specific, timely intervention outcomes (HM Government, 2018) rather than paying attention to the human, ethical and processual nature of social worker-child relationship building during the process of undertaking of assessments of risk and need (Featherstone et al., 2014).

Developing positive social worker-child relationships therefore remains a core element of social work practice, despite the relatively longstanding barriers to this practice that arise from government policy, media pressure, technical-rational cultures, austerity and the more recent investigative turn in social work. Exploration of positive practitioner-child relationships that have been established may therefore provide further insights into how relationship based social work can persist and resist within this challenging culture.

Existing explorations of social worker-child relationships

Overview of literature and current gaps

There is (see Introduction discussions) a broad range of existing child and family social work related literature that explores the nature and quality of social worker-child relationships in relation to various aspects of the child welfare and safeguarding assessment (O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016); decision making (Healey et al., 2012; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2019); and intervention process. Aspects of the social work intervention process explored include for example, examining the nature of practitioner-child relationships in relation to: home visits (Ferguson, 2011, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Broadhurst and Mason, 2014; Winter and Cree 2016; Cook, 2017); court proceedings (Higgins, 2019); and children's participation in child protection meetings (Cudjoe et al., 2020). There has also been an examination of the nature of social worker-child encounters taking place within varied phases of the child welfare, child protection and intervention process (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015, 2019; Horwath

and Tarr, 2015; McLaughlin, 2017; O'Reilly and Dolan, 2017; Hood et al., 2019; Stabler et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2019; Hadfield et al., 2020; Ruch et al., 2020).

Other literature that discusses the nature of social worker-child relationships, explores practitioner-child relationships within the contexts of working with children who are looked after in residential or foster care (see for example, Winter, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2015; McLeod 2010; Holland, 2012; Stanley et al., 2015; Roesch-Marsh et al., 2016; Connor et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2018; Petrocchi et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2020); and in relation to children returning home after a period living in local authority care (see for example, Mateos et al., 2016). Ferguson et al. (2020) have additionally recently explored the nature of social worker-family relationships within the context of long-term social work involvement with children and their families.

At the time this research study began in 2013, with a few exceptions (see a discussion of this issue in the Introduction), there was a substantial focus on exploring service user perspectives of social worker-child relationships, with relatively less attention paid to examining local authority social workers' perspectives of relationships building.

A rich, detailed and varied range of studies have now been undertaken, that explore the nature and significance of social worker-child relationships from a local authority practitioner perspective (see for example Broadhurst and Mason 2014; Ferguson, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018a; Jeyasingham 2016, 2017; Ruch et al., 2017, 2020; Morrison et al., 2018; Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018; Winter et al., 2019; Hadfield et al., 2020). These studies have predominantly utilized ethnographic research methods to provide researcher observations and interpretations of social worker-child relationships, alongside undertaking

additional interviews with practitioners, or have alternatively undertaken narrative (Cook, 2019) or focus group and semi-structured interviews with practitioners (see for example, Whincup, 2017) to explore the nature and quality of social worker-child relationships. Many of these more recent research studies have incorporated analyses of instances of social worker-child relationship building in respect of children under the age of eight years (see for example, Ferguson, 2016b, 2017, 2018b; Ruch et al., 2017, 2020; Winter et al., 2017, 2019; Morrison et al, 2018; Hadfield et al., 2020).

This growing body of literature provides a rich understanding of the nature of social worker-child relationships in relation to a wide variety of practice contexts, and particularly during child and family assessment encounters as outlined in the subsection above. However, theoretically grounded explorations of how workers initiate and end their relationships with children during initial assessments remain relatively sparse.

Conceptions of participation and childhood

The professionally expected starting point for social workers building relationships with children during assessments is one of presuming children to be competent persons (Lansdown, 2005). The legislative and statutory guidance underpinning social worker assessment practices in England espouses a child-centred approach to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and the protection of children's rights founded on the: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNGA, 1989; Winter, 2011b); Equality Act 2010; 1989 and 2004 Children Acts; and the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (see HM Government, 2018). These aforementioned documents are

based on a positive, '*evolving capacities*' conceptualisation of children (Lansdown 2005: vii) where competence is viewed as a dynamic phenomenon related to specific situations, rather than as a property of individuals (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998).

There is a statutory expectation that social workers will use a participatory approach when working with children, based on children's right to be consulted, to express their views and to have their views taken into account when decisions are being made about their lives (Dickens and Williams, 2017). The expectation that social workers should use a participatory approach implies an understanding that practitioner-child relationships should be founded on the basis of social equality, where children are viewed and treated as fully social beings who are interpretively competent, meaning that children are perceived by practitioners as being able '*to use interpretive procedures to assign meaning to the world'* (Mackay, 2003: 31). Legislative and practice guidance principles, however, have to be understood, interpreted and subsequently enacted by professionals in their day to day practice with service users. The ways in which social workers cognitively conceptualise or understand notions of children, childhood and child competence (Archard, 2004; van Bijleveld et al., 2015) and vulnerability (van Bijleveld et al., 2019) will therefore impact on how practitioners perceive young children and influence how social workers attempt to build relationships with children.

Childhood studies and sociology of childhood literature challenges normative assumptions about notions of childhood and children, regarding the notion of childhood as a social construction (James and Prout, 2015) that leads adults to conceptualise children as '*human becomings'* (Qvortrup, 2005: 5) rather than as fully social human beings who are actively involved in constructing and

determining their own lives (Qvortrup, 2014). This understanding of children and childhood challenges the minority status and current social positioning of children as a social group relative to adults. Mayall (2001), for example, argues that children's societal contributions should be equally valued, as children are social actors who contribute societal resources as well as being the recipients of services and resources.

The ways in which notions of children or childhood are understood by social workers, therefore generate different possibilities for relationship-building. For example, how practitioners conceptualise notions of children and childhood can influence the degree to which practitioners enact a participatory practice approach (van Bijleveld et al., 2019), as the way children as a social group are valued and perceived by practitioners will influence how social workers interact with children. For example, whether children are perceived as active, competent meaning makers (Clark et al., 2005), or alternatively as passive not-yet-citizens, where differences in adult-child communication may be taken as indicating a deficit (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Warming, 2013) will affect how practitioners build relationships with children, through influencing what possibilities practitioners perceive for building meaningful worker-child relationships.

Whilst it has been argued that a period of childhood (regarded as being between the ages of 0 and 7 years) has consistently been regarded as distinct from adulthood and has been regarded as representing a time of child dependency on adults (Thomas, 2002), notions of child dependency are seen as rooted in social relations (Qvortrup, 2014), where child dependency is regarded as relational and based on the exercise of power. In child welfare work, all children's communications are ultimately interpreted by adults (Komulainen, 2007; Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018), with social workers expected to

determine what actions are regarded as being in the best interests of the child (HM Government, 2018). Whilst children's rights are enshrined in sets of principles and guidelines for action (Winter 2011b), these principles are relationally enacted (Orme, 2002), with practitioners having the power to influence how children's rights are enacted in their day to day lived experiences. How practitioners conceptualise children and childhood can therefore influence how power relations are negotiated between social workers and children (Fern, 2012), as the attitude or degree to which practitioners feel young children should be actively involved in the assessment process is affected by how the competence of the child is constructed and negotiated through social interactions between practitioners and children (Thomas and O'Kane, 2000; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2019).

Existing research undertaken with older children (of eight years and above) suggests that several factors can impact on practitioners' willingness and ability to promote the participation of young people in child welfare cases. These include: the degree to which the worker perceives the child as being competent (Thomas and O'Kane, 1999; Fern, 2012); the belief that participation may be harmful to the child (Winter, 2011a; Vis et al., 2012; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2019); and the ability of the worker to build a trusting relationship with the child (Bell, 2002; McLeod, 2007; Roesch-Marsh et al., 2015; Cossar et al., 2016). The way adults perceive children, therefore influences the willingness of practitioners to engage with children and the degree to which they are prepared to listen to what children are communicating (Clark and Moss, 2011; Larkins et al., 2015a) with a capacity oriented practitioner approach being identified as assisting in the achievement of meaningful social worker-child relationships (Ruch et al., 2017).

As discussed in the Introduction, the age of children has been found to affect practitioners' willingness to use a participatory approach, with the degree of child participation being found to be significantly reduced below the age of eight years, and especially so below the age of five (Grimshaw and Sinclair, 1997; Thomas, 2002; Cleaver et al., 2007). Ferguson (2016a) has additionally identified that where children were *not* seen alone by social workers on home visits, in the majority of instances practitioners cited the child as being too young (aged under four years) as the reason that this was not done.

Other research undertaken into the nature of social workers' encounters with young children during assessments, has shown practitioners to have divergent views regarding the age at which it was appropriate to see and work with young children alone. For example, in relation to investigative interviews (see Jones, 2003) practitioners preparing children for investigative interviews discussed doing so in relation to children from at least the age of four years; Handley and Doyle (2012) reported that some child-care practitioners felt able through direct communication, to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children from the age of two years upwards; whilst Nicolas (2012) suggested she would not generally interview a child of two years and under alone when undertaking child protection work but would regard meeting a three-year-old child alone as appropriate. Ferguson's (2016a) ethnographic observations of social workers' child protection practices have found that social workers generally did not see children alone under the age of five years, whilst Winter (2011a) has described undertaking one-to-one work with children known to social services, from the age of four years upwards.

Whilst existing research that examines practitioner-child encounters during social work assessments and interventions explores practitioner-child

interactions for children both above as well as below the age of eight years (O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016; Ferguson, 2017, 2018a; Winter et al., 2017, 2019) the diversity of practitioner responses found in existing literature regarding the impact of children’s age on the nature of social worker-child relationships (see for example, Kris and Skivenes, 2015; van Bijleveld et al, 2015; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2019) suggests that interaction with younger children still warrants further exploration. Existing research also indicates that building meaningful relationships with children requires that social workers start from the position of recognising children's rights and capacity to participate in a social welfare context. However, not enough is currently known about how practitioners understand notions of participation, childhood and children within an initial assessment context and when building relationships with young children.

Emotional aspects of relationships

The ability to see, recognise and respect other persons, is not generated solely through cognitive processes. Rational and emotional processes are intertwined phenomena, and emotion is central to human relationships (Bilson, 2007). Biology of cognition research demonstrates that the world is primarily encountered in emotional rather than cognitive terms, with emotions forming the basis of ethical actions (Maturana, 2012). How social workers understand and are attuned to their own emotions or feelings and the feelings of others therefore comprises an important aspect of practitioner-child relationships, as emotions influence how social workers connect with children (Kroll, 2010; Ruch, 2014; Ferguson, 2017; Winter et al., 2019). This section therefore explores

existing understandings of the emotional dimension of social worker-child relationships.

The assessment process is a relational process in which the emotional responses of social workers and children may (or may not) connect, act and react within each individual session or encounter. An interactionist view of emotion means not perceiving emotions as separate, disconnected entities but instead, seeing emotions as interactionally generated, cognitively as well as socially oriented phenomena (Hochschild, 2012). Emotions are important for the development of relationships as they help to '*oil the wheels of everyday social life*' (Howe, 2008: 36) through connecting people to one another.

The emotional connections between social workers and children are affected by the nature of the social work role and workers' dual 'care and control' responsibilities where practitioners compulsorily as well as voluntarily intervene in families' lives. This is because social work involves articulating and managing feelings, both those of service users and those of practitioners' themselves (Pinkney, 2011) where the achievement of positive social worker-service user relationships is linked to the degree to which social workers are able to identify their own emotional responses and those of service users (Morrison, 2007; Munro, 2011; Ingram and Smith, 2018). Workers need to be able to create the emotional space for meaningful connections to be made (Kroll, 2010).

The stressful nature of the authoritative aspects of the social work role (DfE, 2014) means that social workers have to find ways to manage their emotions that enables practitioners to protect themselves from stress (Froggett, 2002; Ruch, 2014) whilst still remaining emotionally open to the feelings of others. The emotional attunement and empathy of practitioners forms the foundations of

open and trusting social worker-service user relationships (Ingram, 2013a). It has also been recognised that workers responding to children's emotional needs is central to children's experience of feeling valued, as well as helping children's self-confidence and development of a sense of self (Marshall et al., 2019).

Ferguson suggests the '*expressive*' (2005: 783) dimension of social work practice is embedded in relationships, arguing that where insufficient attention is paid to allowing social workers to process and reflect on their feelings, this may militate against the building of deeper relationships with children. One consequence of this, Ferguson argues (2005, 2009a, 2017), is that social workers are not then able to do meaningful child protection and welfare work. As well as social workers needing to manage and to sometimes 'contain' (Ruch 2008, 2010) difficult feelings (either their own, or the feelings of others), the generation of *positive* emotions can conversely help to generate meaningful social worker-child relationships and contribute to children's wellbeing (Petrie, 2011). Children, for example, have indicated that they want their social workers to have a good sense of humour, a positive attitude and a sense of fun as well as to be caring, kind and understanding (Morgan, 2006; C4EO, 2010). Emotional capacity and responsiveness are not just generated individually, but are also socially produced (Morrison, 2007; Winter et al., 2019). This means that contextual, organisational and socio-cultural factors (Ferguson, 2017) can also influence how emotions are managed and responded to.

Building meaningful relationships with children therefore requires emotional engagement and attunement between social workers and children. However, not enough is currently known about how social workers can achieve more meaningful emotional connections with young children within a practice

environment that is currently characterised by local authority financial pressures (Action for Children, 2016a), increasing referrals to social care services (Bunting et al., 2018), high caseloads (Ofsted, 2016) and an increasingly investigative orientation towards social work interventions with families.

Doing relationships bodily

Emotions and actions are interconnected, as emotions can facilitate social interactions (Morriss, 2015) but can also prevent social workers from connecting with children (Ferguson, 2017). Lefevre et al. (2008) identify communicating with children through *doing* (or the skills and techniques practitioners use) as a key communicative capability that enables social workers to interact effectively with children. This section therefore examines how practitioners bodily ‘do’ relationships with children.

The communicative capability of *doing* is sometimes alternatively referred to as undertaking *direct work* with children (see for example, Aldgate and Seden, 2006; Luckock and Lefevre, 2008; Tait and Wosu, 2013; Whincup, 2017). Undertaking direct work with children is frequently discussed in terms of identifying specific tools that social workers can use when they are with children, for example: reality boxes (Winter, 2012); ecomaps and genograms (Howes, 2010); painting and drawing (Oliver and Pitt, 2011; O' Reilly and Dolan, 2017); music craftwork, dough, water or sand (Oaklander, 1978; Lefevre 2008b; Winter, 2011a); figurines, dolls, puppets, bricks or footballs (Lefevre, 2008b; Dickins and Williams, 2017); or computer games (Ahmed et al., 2008). Doing an ordinary everyday activity with children such as walking (see Roesch-Marsh et al., 2015, for example), is also seen as an effective way to build meaningful

worker-child relationships (see also Ferguson, 2010b; Cameron et al., 2011; Gibson and Edwards, 2015) with non-verbal worker-child interactions highlighted as a valuable and important way of communicating effectively and dialogically with children (Ruch et al., 2020).

Playing with children is recognised as an important way of communicating with young children (Lefevre, 2010; Ferguson, 2011), as play has the capacity to contribute to a process of healing (Meares, 2005) as well as to be a fun and engaging activity that can help build children's sense of wellbeing and self-esteem through the generation of positive experiences (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011; Tait and Wosu, 2013). Play is also regarded as a way of building individual and social competence (Storo, 2013) and of empowering children to learn and develop (Charfe, 2019), enabling worker-child interactions to be child initiated and directed, rather than always being led by the adult (Oliver and Pitt, 2011). Doing activities with children during assessments enables social workers to engage with children in a more holistic manner (Padget et al., 2007; Ruch et al., 2017), rather than focusing solely on asking children to verbally share information about themselves and their family's circumstances. It has also been argued that focusing on and valuing the non-verbal aspects of social worker-child interactions rather than allowing verbal interaction to dominate, is important for generating a co-operative form of communication between practitioners and children (Ruch et al., 2020). Non-verbal methods may also be the preferred way that a child communicates (Adams and Leshone, 2016; Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018).

Social workers have reported the use of play-based methods as enhancing their communication skills with children during assessments, appearing to make children more relaxed and enabling the practitioner to gain a better insight into

the child's world (O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016). It has also been argued that engaging in play is comfortable for children as it is their medium of expression and that play enables children to act out thoughts and feelings that they may not be able to verbalise (O'Reilly and Dolan, 2017). Children may also use words, sounds, cries, body language or hand and face gestures to communicate their views and feelings (Larkins et al., 2015b; Adams and Leshone, 2016). Practitioners may therefore need additional time to establish the child's preferred method of communication and to determine whether the practitioner themselves is familiar with this method (Dickens and Williams, 2017) or alternatively, whether the practitioner needs to seek additional assistance or resources to help them understand what the child is communicating to ensure an inclusive communicative approach (Adams and Leshone, 2016). This may mean the practitioner needs to use communication aids such as PECS (picture exchange communication system) for example (see Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018); Talking Mats (Mencap, 2017); or to use the services of an interpreter (see for example, Westlake and Jones, 2018; Lucas, 2020).

Using a range of different strategies to work with young children has been found to be an effective way of supporting children's participation and of facilitating the co-construction of meanings between adults and children (Clark and Moss, 2011), as this approach values the multiple languages, symbols and codes (Rinaldi, 2005) that children use to communicate, with play additionally identified as potentially also generating a positive experience and sense of child empowerment and wellbeing (Hatton, 2013).

'Doing' relationships bodily, requires social workers to be in close physical proximity to children and to use touch, with touch identified as potentially adding to a sense of connectedness (Megele, 2015) as well as offering a possible

therapeutic dimension in circumstances where a worker may express care through physical interaction (Ferguson, 2010a) or may communicate comfort (Lefevre et al., 2010). Ferguson (2011) found that the effectiveness of social workers' communications with children depended on each practitioner's level of confidence in getting close to children and on their confidence in using what Ferguson called *professional touch*, as part of the process of relationship building. The phrase professional touch was used by Ferguson to refer to the kinds of touch social workers use in everyday social interactions, such as when *'lifting a toddler to say hello'* (2011: 102) for example. Whilst some social workers have been observed as being physically avoidant towards children, other social workers were seen using play or making use of items such as toys, pens and paper, for example, to communicate with children alongside talking with children Ferguson (2016a). Social workers who place more emphasis on using 'doing' rather than solely verbal communicative interchanges with children, have also been identified as generating more co-operative and dialogical forms of practitioner-child encounter (Ruch et al., 2020).

Meaningful relationships with children can therefore be built through doing physical or creative activities with children such as through play, games or the use of a range of tools to facilitate practitioner-child interactions. Further exploration is needed, however, of how social workers can effectively use these approaches to bodily 'do' relationships with young children in an initial assessment context, including the development of a better understanding of how social workers negotiate the use of touch when striving to build meaningful practitioner-child relationships.

Conceptions of self, values and being

Understanding social worker-child relationships as embodied experiences (Ferguson, 2018b), means that the degree to which children and social workers feel able to physically and cognitively-emotionally engage with one another will depend on the willingness and ability of each party to develop a degree of trust (Jones, 2003; Munro, 2011; Baraldi and Farini, 2013) and a degree of reciprocity (Turney, 2012; Ingram and Smith, 2018; Ruch et al., 2020). This is because the relationship that develops between social workers and children is the medium through which successful communications are generated (Lefevre, 2008a). The personal values and attitudes of both social workers and children will therefore impact on the nature of the worker-child relationship that develops.

The ability of social workers to form positive working relationships and communicate effectively with children is often conceptualised as a skill (see for example, Lefevre et al., 2008; Schmeid and Walsh, 2010; Hennessey, 2011; Karpetis, 2018) but constructing the core meaning of relationships predominantly in terms of skills inadvertently moves attention away from acknowledging and valuing the more personal and attitudinal aspects of relationship-building (Howe, 1998; Hill, 1999; Megele, 2015). Notions of self, values and attitudes are important aspects of social worker-child relationships and so will be explored next.

Working with young children is fundamentally relationship-based work (Trevithick, 2005): a mutual relational process where practitioners and children develop an evolving understanding of one another (Larkins, 2015b). It is emphasised for example, that for a meaningful relationship to develop between workers and service users there needs to be a foundation of respect and trust

(Hill, 1997; Turney, 2012; Christensen, 2013; Pinkney, 2013). The development of trust has also been identified as having a significant impact on the use of a participatory approach (Bell, 2002; McLeod, 2007; Cossar et al., 2016). In a child protection context, for example, children who are able to trust their social worker are identified as being more likely to be able to let their worker know when family circumstances have deteriorated (Cossar et al., 2011). It is also perceived as emotionally helpful for children to be able to air their anxieties with a person they can trust (Aldgate and Seden, 2016). Attitudinal as well as affective issues are therefore central to exploring the nature of social worker-child relationships, as they constitute a significant part of how social workers relate to and connect with children during assessments.

Notions of respect and trust underpin psycho-socially informed perspectives of social work practice with psycho-social perspectives focusing on social workers' use of relationships as a medium or tool for intervening in the lives of service users (Ruch, 2000; Sudbery, 2002; Lefevre, et al., 2008; Megele, 2015). Psycho-social perspectives also place a strong emphasis on the affective or emotional as well as attitudinal aspects of social work practice (Morrison, 2007; Howe, 2008; Ruch, 2012). Psycho-social therapeutically oriented literature sees the relationship between practitioner and client as the essential ingredient of change (Krill, 2011), arguing that the attitudes and values of professionals can impact on the way practitioners behave with service users. Social work is therefore not solely regarded as a technical, knowledge or skills-based activity but also as a moral (ethical) one (Clarke, 2006; Bell and Hafford-Letchfield, 2015).

Psycho-social conceptualisations of the emotional nature of human relationships are founded on a fluid, interactional view of *self* or identity, that

does not see the notion of self as representing a single, definable entity. Instead, psycho-social (Ward, 2010) and sociological (Goffman, 1963) understandings of identity regard self as a social construction, arising out of the process of interaction with others. Self is therefore perceived as a temporally and relationally enacted phenomenon (Lawler, 2014). Understandings of the 'self' of the social worker are expressed in social work and psychological literature via the use of a whole range of differing terms such as personal attitudes, core conditions (Rogers, 1980); attributes (Geldard et al., 2013); personality (Hennessey, 2011); personal styles (Butler and Williamson, 1994); personal qualities (Howe, 2008); character traits, virtues (Bowles et al., 2006); or values (Lefevre et al., 2008). This type of self is not, however, seen as a fixed entity, but as a socially and temporally generated form of self that becomes visible through action and interaction.

Children have indicated that they regard the 'self' of the social worker as important. For example, children have stated that they want their social workers to have particular personal attributes, such as being caring; honest; understanding; empathic; approachable; non-judgemental; and prepared to listen to what the young person has to say (Morgan, 2006; OCC, 2010; Care Inquiry, 2013a). Children involved in the child protection system have additionally indicated that they want to be able to develop a trusting relationship with their social worker and for the social worker to get to know them as people (OCC, 2011).

Accepting that personal attributes or aspects of self are socially and temporally generated leads to an understanding that social workers may behave differently when working with different children and when placed in different types of situations. Forrester et al. (2013) for example, found that a significant factor that

affected the variability of quality of social worker-child relationships was the attitude of the social worker. The same type of practitioner approach may also be experienced and understood differently by different service users (see Stabler et al., 2019). The impact of organisational culture on practitioner-child relationships however, also been acknowledged as an important factor (Forrester et al., 2013; Hadfield et al., 2020).

Understanding self as a temporally generated phenomenon means that change is always possible. Social workers' attitudes or values may change over time and social worker attitudes and values can also be learnt (Bowles et al., 2006). From this perspective, the process of social worker-child relationship building is thereby understood as a lived and socially interactive experience, with relationships mutually temporally constructed by social workers and children. Whilst practitioner-child relationships are co-constructed, they are also individually perceived and experienced. This is because relationships are embodied experiences that are ultimately viewed, felt and temporally experienced from the perspective of each person's own lived body (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). This dual social-individual understanding of self is compatible with an Aristotelian, or virtue based, understanding of ethics (Banks, 2006), where ethics or morals are seen to reside within the individual as personal traits, but are then extended through an ethics of care, showing how the self is then constructed as a self-in-interaction-with-others (Bell and Hafford-Letchfield, 2015). This contextualised understanding of ethics reflects the way the ethics or morals of each person become expressed in interaction, in specific practice contexts. Social workers therefore enact their values and ethics relationally (Held, 2006; Hay, 2019), through their everyday interactions with children.

The term ethics is often used interchangeably with the term values, where values can be seen to mean '*particular types of belief that people hold about what is regarded as worthy or valuable'* (Banks, 2006: 6). Although I intend to use the terms ethics and values interchangeably in this thesis, it needs to be acknowledged that some other writers such as Bowles et al. (2006) believe a distinction should be made between the two. Social workers are seen as simultaneously holding a set of both personal and professional values in their relationships with children. Whilst personal values (see the discussion of values and ethics above) can be seen as being a set of personal virtues or character traits, social work's professional value base is expressed in the form of a written code of principles and values that social workers are expected to hold as members of a British as well as a global profession (BASW, 2012; IFSW, 2014). such values include an ethical commitment to respecting '*the inherent worth and dignity of human beings'* (IFSW, 2014: 3) as well as a commitment to upholding human rights and issues of social justice (BASW, 2012).

BASW's code of ethics contains elements of Kantian (deontological or rights and duties based), consequentialist (social justice based) and virtue-based ethics (Bowles et al., 2006), incorporating elements of a personal and socio-political as well as a professional approach to ethics and values. This intersection of the personal, professional and political is inevitable, as social work practice is centrally, a human service (Munro and Hardie, 2019) carried out within networks of human relationships where the self of the practitioner is *'collaboratively re-constituted, re-enacted and re-performed in different social situations'* (Hennessey, 2011: 59). Social work is therefore a personal as well as professionally enacted practice, with children indicating that they want the

practitioners who work with them to be caring, warm, understanding and to treat them with respect (Jones, 2003; Care Inquiry, 2013b).

The assessment task required of child and family social work practitioners is therefore not just a statutorily defined and required professional role or task but is also inescapably about '*a disposition, a way of being'* (Megele 2015: 100) where the social worker uses their own self as a resource, both in terms of *self as person* and *self in role* (Hennessey, 2011) in their day to day practice. Relationship-based practice understandings of social work (Howe, 1998; Sudbury, 2002; Trevithick, 2003; Ruch et al., 2010; Winter, 2011a; Megele, 2015) consequently conceptualise social workers' use of relationship as both a *method* and a *medium* of practice where the *self as person* is permanently embedded as a *self in role*, within the broader practice context of social work's knowledge, skills and value base (Hennessey, 2011).

This conception of social workers as comprising a personal as well as a professional self, reflects a humanistic concept of self where it is seen as ultimately impossible to separate out the roles, tasks or skills aspects of social work from the *person* that they are (Lefevre, 2010), as it is both personal and professional values that dictate how practitioners communicate with children.

Existing psycho-social understandings of social workers' 'self', values and attitudes have been identified as interlinked and connected in some way to notions of *being* (Lefevre, 2008; Megele, 2015). Whilst the concept of *being* is identified as central to understanding the nature and quality of practitioner-child communication, the way in which notions of self, values and attitudes relate to the concept of *being* is currently undertheorised.

Existing studies also indicate that the unique qualities that constitute the personal and ethical 'self' of the practitioner, inescapably impact on the nature of social workers' professional 'self' through their interactions with children. This is because the professional, personal and ethical 'self' of the social worker is understood as being simultaneously both individually and socially (relationally) produced. The ways in which social work practitioners temporally enact aspects of their personal and professional 'selves' or aspects of *being,* in order to generate more meaningful relationships with young children in an initial assessment context, is however, still relatively underexplored.

Relationships in spaces and places

Social work practice takes place in a variety of different spaces and locations, with the location of initial and subsequent worker-child encounters dependent on the context of the case (Winter et al., 2017). Social worker-child relationships therefore do not develop in isolation but are always situated within a particular social, temporal and spatial context. The spatial context of practitioner-child relationships will therefore be considered next.

The most common places for social worker-child encounters to take place have been cited as being schools, cars, social work offices and family homes (Ferguson, 2011). Other places identified have included cafes, hospitals and police buildings (Winter et al., 2017) or residential and foster homes (Ruch, 2014) but the majority of social workers' meetings with children are identified as occurring in the family home (Ferguson, 2016b; Cook, 2020).

As part of the assessment process (and especially where there are potential child protection concerns) social workers are expected to see children alone

(Munro, 2011). The type of locations where children may meet alone with a social worker vary considerably according to the circumstances of the assessment. For example, in circumstances where a criminal investigation may be required, the meeting may need to take place in a hospital room or in a specialist interview room equipped with recording facilities for taking a video-recorded statement (MoJ, 2011). Whatever venue is used to meet with children, it is seen as important that the space offers a welcoming and relaxed environment for the child (Lefevre, 2010); a private or confidential space for the child in terms of not being overheard (Richman, 2000); and an emotionally safe space (Ruch, 2007) where social workers and children are not going to be interrupted. Offering children a degree of choice in terms of where to meet with practitioners is seen as beneficial (Marchant, 2008) although children are not always offered a choice. For example, Westcott and Davies (1996) found that only one quarter of the children and young people in their data sample were offered a choice of venue for their investigative interview, with one third of those children *not* offered a choice, indicating they would have preferred somewhere else to have been used.

The type of space or place used when practitioners meet alone with children is also important because '*rooms have meanings'* (Tai and Wosu, 2013: 29). For example, a bedroom may be a location where the child has suffered abuse, or conversely be a place of refuge and relaxation for the child. Ferguson (2009a, 2010b) also highlighted that spaces could also evoke bodily and emotional responses in practitioners as well as children, as environments are emotionally as well as physically experienced. The nature of social worker-child relationships can therefore be shaped through individuals' experiences of emotionally interacting with spaces, as well as with people. It is also argued that

social workers and service users can also *produce* space through social action, with the nature of spaces experienced as temporally changing lived experiences that make new experiences of space possible (Jeyasingham, 2014).

Accepting the emotionally changing nature of spaces and places (Jeyasingham 2017, 2018) means it is important that practitioners ensure the place they use to meet with children is perceived by the child to be an emotionally safe space (Archard and Skivenes, 2009). What may be viewed as a safe space by the child or practitioner may vary and include places such as cars, school buildings, outside spaces or even a social worker's office, depending on the nature of the building or location (Featherstone and Evans, 2004; Ferguson, 2009b, 2010a).

Places are therefore constructed through '*relationships between people as well as through the physical environment*' (Stanley et al., 2015: 1) so the warmth or degree of emotional comfortableness evoked by a particular location may be related to the quality of the interactions generated by the persons present, as well as to the physical and material features of the surrounding space. Whilst Ferguson has explored the embodied and mobile nature of social worker practices during home visits (see for example, Ferguson, 2018b) and Jeyasingham (2014, 2016, 2017, 2018) has examined the spatial nature of social work in a child safeguarding context, phenomenologically understanding the ethical (Levinas, 1981) and temporal (Heidegger, 2010) as well as the spatial and embodied (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) aspects of practitioner-child relationships in relation to initial assessment work, remains relatively underdeveloped.

Relationships in and across time

There is a substantial body of evidence that suggests a lack of time available for building practitioner-child relationships in social welfare work is a barrier to the development of meaningful worker-child relationships (Winter, 2011a; Turney et al., 2012; Larkins et al., 2014b, 2015b; O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016; Cossar et al., 2016). Social worker caseloads (Forrester et al., 2013, Winter et al., 2019), organisational timescales (Munro, 2011; Ruch, 2014) and technical, bureaucratic and administrative issues (Morrison, 2016; Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018) have all been identified as negatively impacting on the time available for; value placed on; priority given to; and quality of social worker-child relationships.

The governmentally determined 45-day timescale for the completion of child and family assessments (HM Government, 2018) means the time available for social workers to build relationships with children is relatively short. It has been identified that prescribed timescales can combine with other organisationally driven activities (such as the gathering and recording of evidence and the need to follow detailed criteria) to pre-occupy social work practitioners, resulting in the face to face time spent with children being devalued by practitioners, despite the need for social workers to spend a significant amount of time with each individual child in order to complete a good child-centred assessment (Ruch, 2014).

Spending a significant amount of time with each individual child is seen as important in order to achieve an accurate assessment (Holland, 2011) and to achieve a better understanding of children's needs (Burton, 2009). Despite this, in ethnographic studies of social worker child protection practices, considerable

variation has been reported in the amount of time social workers spend with children (Ferguson 2016a, 2017; Winter et al., 2017) with practitioners sometimes observed spending as little as between 5 and 16 minutes alone with children during social workers' first or early encounters with them (Ferguson, 2016a). It is also recognised however, that the length of social workers' encounters with children can vary considerably according to the particular purpose of the visit, such as depending on whether it is a family support or child protection investigation visit, for example (see Winter et al., 2017).

During the time that social workers *do* spend with children, children have indicated that they wish to be: heard; informed about and involved in what is happening; understood and able to develop an ongoing stable relationship of trust with those who are helping them (HM Government, 2018). The way that social workers manage their initial encounters with children also has consequences, as the way practitioners introduce themselves to children sends an initial signal to the child about whether the practitioner regards their involvement in the assessment process as important. During a practitioner's first meeting with a family for example, social workers should not just introduce themselves to parents and carers but should also introduce themselves directly to children, saying who they are and why they are there (Lefevre, 2010; Howes, 2012; Nicolas, 2012). This is because children need to understand why a social worker is visiting them (Holland, 2010) and children themselves have indicated that they want to be provided with clear explanations and be kept informed about what is happening (C4EO, 2010) right from the start of a practitioner's involvement with the family.

Young people have indicated that they find it strange and uncomfortable to share information about themselves and their family with social workers, so

giving the child the opportunity to get to know the social worker forms an important part of building a degree of trust between worker and child (Cleaver and Walker, 2004). The children with whom social workers work, may have suffered abuse or have been consistently let down by adults (Tait and Wosu, 2013) so children may consequently be cautious about investing in a relationship with a social worker and trusting them (Pinkney, 2013). Trust continues to be identified, however, as the basis for effective relationships within child safeguarding work (Cossar et al., 2016; Warrington and Larkins, 2019), with a period of rapport building being seen as especially important at the beginning of practitioner-child encounters (Trevithick, 2005; Winter, 2011b; McMullin, 2017) to provide an opportunity for the development of trust. Sometimes, it may be necessary to have another person present alongside the social worker who is familiar with the child's method of communication and who is trusted by the child (Adams and Leshone, 2016). Alternatively, more than one meeting may be required in order to establish a degree of trust in the professional working with them to enable children to communicate effectively (Jones, 2003).

Spending time with children has been identified as a key factor that facilitates relationship building (Larkins et al., 2015b) as children have to feel able to trust others (La Valle et al., 2012; Cossar et al., 2013, 2016) and to feel sufficiently confident and safe (Ruch, 2008) in order to speak out. As children who become involved in child and family assessments may live in a variety of different circumstances and will have diverse needs (Marchant, 2010; Dutt and Phillips, 2010) time and resources will be required to support the effective participation of children in the assessment process (Larkins et al., 2015b). For example, child safeguarding guidance suggests that special provisions may need to be put in

place to facilitate communications between practitioners and children where social workers are working with children '*who have communication difficulties, unaccompanied children, refugees and those children who are victims of modern slavery'* (HM Government, 2018: 10).

Whilst existing research indicates that sufficient time and resources need to be made available to allow for an inclusive communicative approach, to enable a period of practitioner-child rapport building and the development of trust and for social workers to provide children with a clear explanation of why the practitioner is visiting them, the amounts of time available to practitioners to conduct assessments is often constrained by a combination of individual, organisational and other contextual factors. Further understanding is therefore needed of how social workers can effectively use or expand the limited amount of time available to them to develop more meaningful social worker-child relationships, especially during initial assessments when professional involvement with children is likely to be short term. Whilst existing literature also provides guidelines for effective social worker introductory practices (for example, Kroll, 2010; McMullin, 2017), relatively less specific attention has been paid to understanding social workers' introductory practices and subsequent relationship building within the specific practice context of time limited initial assessments. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by exploring how social workers try to establish relationships with children from the initial worker-child assessment encounter onwards.

Social work involvement with children may be brief (Action for Children, 2018) or longer term (McLeod, 2010) in nature but in either circumstance, it is seen as beneficial at the end of each practitioner's involvement, that their relationship with the service user is brought purposefully to an end (Trevithick, 2005;

Solomon, 2010; Winter, 2011a). This is to ensure that practitioners demonstrate to children that the worker-child encounter has been meaningful (Lefevre, 2010); that there is a sense of completion; but also to reduce the likelihood of the service user feeling abandoned (Solomon, 2010) as it has been found that children sometimes feel upset and confused when the relationship with their social worker ends (Westcott and Davies, 1996; Bell, 2002). The emotional impact of building and subsequently ending relationships with children affects social workers as well as children, however, (Winter et al., 2019). This is because undertaking child welfare work involves dealing with painful and distressing feelings (Ironside, 2008; Ruch, 2012) that practitioners and children need to process.

As well as needing to develop strategies for managing children's and workers feelings during the assessment process itself (Ruch, 2010), ending relationships in a respectful manner also ensures there is an opportunity for social workers and children to say goodbye to one another (Lefevre, 2010). Saying goodbye is also part of sustaining open and honest communications between social workers and children (Smith et al., 2012) by giving children a clear explanation as to why the practitioner will no longer be involved in working with them (Lonne et al., 2016). This ensures that children are included right through to the final stage of the assessment process, by allowing them a participatory ending (Perlman, 1979). Saying goodbye to children may require practitioners to organise an additional meeting with children but this can be helpful in enabling a practitioner to let the child know how they can make contact with the worker, their service or another service in the future if further support is required (Gupta, 2008; Holland, 2011) as signposting the availability of other sources of support has been cited by young people as important when social work involvement is

ending (Jobe and Gorin, 2013). Taking the time to introduce any new worker when the existing practitioner's involvement may be ending, is also perceived as beneficial (Wylie and MacDermott, 2017). Practitioners should also try to end worker-child encounters with some positive (but truthful) comment about the child so that children are not left feeling discouraged (Richman, 2000) with children being thanked for giving their time, as this is a way of demonstrating to children that their contribution has been valued (Winter, 2011a).

Whilst existing literature identifies the importance of having sufficient time available to practitioners to build meaningful relationships with children and to begin and end relationships appropriately, a relative paucity of theoretically informed approaches to studying the temporal nature social worker-child relationships has been identified. There are, however, some notable examples that utilise phenomenologically oriented theoretical understandings to explore aspects of social work practice that can deepen understanding of the gaps in literature that have been identified in this and previous sections. These are explored in the next section of this chapter.

Phenomenological approaches to studying social work relationships

Phenomenology and social work

Using a phenomenological research approach to explore and generate understandings of the nature of social work practice is a relatively underused research methodology. Work that has used this approach (Pack, 2012; Hood, 2015, 2016; Freund and Band-Winterstein, 2017; Mixon-Mitchell and Hanna,

2017; Gorman, 2018; Bartoli, 2019 and Cudjoe et al., 2020) indicates that a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiries into social work is beneficial, as it epistemologically values and places importance on exploring the significance and meaning of the everyday lived experiences of social work practitioners (see further discussions in Chapter 2). Phenomenological research approaches also have the capacity to offer a rich, holistic and sensory examination of how participants make sense of their lived experiences in '*the 'face to face' sphere'* (Houston and Mullan-Jensen, 2011: 275).

A phenomenological approach to understanding practitioner-child relationships foregrounds an embodied understanding of how the world is experienced (Merleau-Ponty, 2012), where the meaning of an experience is always personal to the individual who is experiencing it and where lived experiences are also always understood from a position that is also historically, culturally and spatially situated (Gadamer, 2013). From a phenomenological perspective, the world is also temporally and socially experienced, with each individual's lived experience of *being-in-the-world* always inescapably involving being in the world in relation to others (Heidegger, 2010).

There is a spectrum of understandings of what constitutes a phenomenological research approach or phenomenologically oriented methods, in research (Finlay, 2009, King et al., 2008) that encompasses a range of descriptive (Giorgi, 2009), interpretive (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Smythe, 2011; Smith and Osborn, 2015) and even post phenomenological understandings (Idhe, 1993). In relation to the application phenomenological approaches in social work research, it is similarly identified that there are '*many 'phenomenologies''* (Pascal, 2010: 2).

Some researchers, for example, have used phenomenologically oriented methods alongside other research methods such as visual methods (Bartoli, 2019), thematic analysis Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018; Cudjoe et al., 2020) or discourse analysis (Hood, 2016), as a way of exploring and analysing aspects of social work practice. Other phenomenologically oriented studies of social work have alternatively applied phenomenological theoretical lenses as a way of conceptually exploring aspects of social work practice and research such as examining the benefits of using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a way of exploring the social as well as psychological dimensions of social work (Houston and Mullan-Jensen, 2011); applying theoretical understandings from the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to develop an eco-social work approach to social work education (Houston 2016a); using Heideggerian theoretical concepts to explore social work in relation to death and survivor bereavement (Kominkiewicz, 2006, Jirasek and Velesky 2013) or the experiences of cancer survivors (Pascal, 2010). Smeeton has additionally applied theoretical understandings from the work of Arendt (Smeeton, 2017) and Heidegger (Smeeton, 2020), to respectively explore the different forms of child protection social work activity and to undertake a phenomenological ontology of risk in child protection social work.

Other explorations and analyses of the embodied and spatial nature of social work child protection practice also briefly directly reference phenomenological conceptualisations such as the *lived body (*Ferguson 2009a), *lived experience* (Ferguson, 2010b) and *lived time* (Ferguson, 2008). Within these studies, however, Ferguson primarily cites psychosocial and sociology of mobilities perspectives and the application of systemic and complexity theory, rather than phenomenological understandings, as his central theoretical framework for

exploring and analysing the mobile flow and the emotional and visceral nature of child protection social work.

Other work by Ferguson (2018a, 2018b) and Jeyasingham (2014, 2018), however, contains evidence of further indirect, but still ultimately phenomenologically influenced, understandings of child and family social worker practices. For example, Ferguson and Jeyasingham respectively explore the sensory and improvised (Ferguson 2018a, 2018b) and socially generated affective and spatial nature (Jeyasingham 2014, 2018) of social workers' embodied child protection practices. The sensory and mobile ethnographic methods used by Ferguson to analyse the embodied and environmentally generated nature of child protection social work practices during home visits, are themselves rooted in phenomenological understandings (see for example, Pink and Leder-Mackley, 2016 in Ferguson 2018b). Ferguson describes the '*flow of the home visit*' (2018b: 3) where social workers creatively *make* the conditions for meaningful work to be done with families through practitioners' encounters with space and objects as well as people. Elsewhere, Ferguson also uses the phenomenologically oriented anthropological work of Ingold (2011), see for example in Ferguson (2018a), to explore how the sensate and mobile body of the practitioner shapes the practitioner's ability to think and act. Ferguson foregrounds the sensory, affectual and spatially experienced environment of social worker-child encounters through the tacit incorporation of a Heideggerian understanding of the nature of *being-in-the-world*, as Ingold's anthropological work is itself substantially founded on Heideggerian phenomenological ideas of *being* (see Ingold, 2000).

Similarly, Jeyasingham (2014) has in part, phenomenologically explored social workers' understandings of *lived space* through the application of Lefebvre's

spatial dialectics to analyse how social workers move through spaces when undertaking children's social work. This analysis of how space operates in social work (Jeyasingham, 2014) considers how spaces and opportunities for changing the nature of the environment can be created by social action, through bodily actions and postures. Although Jeyasingham does not directly state that Lefebvre's spatial dialectics encompass a phenomenological element, it is argued elsewhere that Lefebvre's spatial dialectics contains phenomenological threads of understanding woven within it (Kinkaid, 2020).

Jeyasingham (2016, 2018) has additionally explored the affective nature of spaces and places in child protection work through the application of understandings from cultural geography. These analyses respectively consider how the nature of office spaces impact on social workers' experiences of social work practice (Jeyasingham, 2016) and examine the environmentally oriented nature of affect in social work practitioners' accounts of place and space- (Jeyasingham, 2018). The theoretical understandings underpinning the notion of the 'uncanny' used by Jeyasingham (2018) to explore the nature of the feelings evoked by social workers in response to specific places, is also ultimately phenomenologically oriented, as it is grounded in a Heideggerian, relational phenomenological understanding of *being-in-the-world*. Phenomenological theoretical understandings of space, place, emotions and the embodied nature of social work practice, are therefore already beginning, albeit mainly indirectly to date, to permeate existing analyses of child and family social work practice and to foreground a more socially and environmentally generated understanding of social work practice. This study therefore seeks to extend current phenomenologically oriented explorations of social work practice

by a more explicit use of philosophical phenomenological perspectives to analyse the nature of social worker-child relationships.

Whilst Ferguson and Jeyasingham have especially focussed on the affectual, emotional, mobile and spatial aspects of practice, less specific attention has currently been paid to examining the temporal nature of social work practice. This study therefore seeks to positively contribute new understandings in this area by using a phenomenological lens to explore the temporal nature of social work practice in an initial assessment context.

Aside from the phenomenologically influenced work of Ferguson and Jeyasingham discussed above, the existence of other phenomenological research studies (Gorman, 2018) or studies that utilise some phenomenological methods to explore the nature of social worker-child relationships (Carey and Jones, 2018 and Cudjoe et al., 2020), is fairly limited. All three of the aforementioned studies utilise some form of thematic analysis Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018; Cudjoe et al., 2020) or construct a constellation of superordinate themes and subthemes (Gorman, 2018) as a way of analysing and interpreting interviews with children or practitioners rather than adopting insights from phenomenological theoretical concepts, as a way of illuminating and interpreting the nature of social worker-child relationships, as is the approach adopted in this research study. The findings from these above, fairly limited number of phenomenologically oriented studies, indicate that building and maintaining a relationship of trust between social workers and children is central to effective social work practice (Gorman, 2018) but that children are often consulted rather than collaboratively involved by social workers (Cudjoe et al., 2020).

Prynallt-Jones et al. (2018) used phenomenological interviews to explore social workers' experiences of working with children who communicate using nonverbal methods and found that the organisational context of high caseloads, tight timescales, lack of time to build relationships and trust, alongside the need for additional resources and training and practitioner confidence, impacted on practitioners' ability to build relationships with children. In relation to this same research study (see also Carey and Jones, 2018) it was additionally argued that institutional norms and ethical codes had the potential to marginalise or exclude disabled children through the tendency of ethical codes to strengthen embedded discourses, dominant professional narratives and acceptance of institutional norms, thereby underplaying specific needs. The structural and cultural context of practice was therefore identified as being of significance in understanding the nature of social worker-child relationships.

Existing phenomenological research into social worker-child relationships therefore highlights that issues of time, space, embodiment, ethical, institutional, cultural and organisational factors all impact on the quality and nature of social worker-child relationships. Existing research predominantly (although not exclusively) focuses however, on the barriers that prevent meaningful practitioner-child relationships from developing rather than considering how social worker-child relationships can be successfully achieved, as is the focus in this study. The above factors identified in existing research as significantly impacting on the quality of worker-child interactions may therefore benefit from further phenomenological exploration, by exploring relationships that are experienced positively (at least by the social worker). This might help extend understandings of how meaningful social worker-child relationships can be generated and sustained despite the significant barriers that exist.

Whilst it has been argued above, that phenomenological theoretical and philosophical perspectives can help to expand existing understandings of the nature and significance of social worker-child relationships, there is an additional field of theoretical understanding that (in common with phenomenological perspectives) also conceptualises service user-social worker relationships from a holistic and embodied perspective and privileges lived experience as a way of understanding social worker-child relationships. This is the field of social pedagogy and will be discussed next.

Social pedagogy and social work

As explored in previous chapter sections, the emotional, cognitive and bodily aspects of worker-child interactions are understood as intertwined aspects of lived experience. This holistic lived understanding of the nature of practitioner-service user relationships, is embedded in social pedagogical theoretical and philosophical understandings of social work practice that have become of increasing interest over the last ten years as way of helping to enhance the quality of service user-practitioner relationships and the quality of social welfare services (Charfe and Gardner, 2019).

An exploration of social pedagogical theoretical and philosophical perspectives and their relevance to social work, needs to be distinguished from explorations of the discipline of social pedagogy as a professional role, (see Ucar, 2016; Kraus and Hoferkova, 2016; Fox and Thiessen, 2019) as social pedagogy is a term that can be used to refer to a specific professional discipline as well as representing a range of theoretical and philosophical understandings of how to work with children and adults across a range of professional disciplines

(Hamalainen, 2015). It is social pedagogy as a range of theoretical and philosophical understandings, that is being referred to in this thesis.

The theoretical and philosophical roots of social pedagogy have been influenced by phenomenological understandings of human relations (Hamalainen, 2015). The central theoretical background of social pedagogy in terms of its German origins, for example. One of the central theoretical concepts underpinning social pedagogy is its '*life world'* orientation (Cameron et al. (2011: 35). The term *life world,* in a social pedagogical context*,* represents the understanding that each individual has their own distinctive perception of the world, based on their own unique history of their own lived experiences including the particular socio-historical context they inhabit. There is a clear theoretical thread of congruence between this foundational theoretical aspect of social pedagogy (Hamaleinen, 2003; Hamaleinen, 2015) and Husserl's (2012) phenomenological conceptualisation of the *lifeworld* (see also Chapter 2). Husserl phenomenologically saw all understanding (including scientific understanding) as founded on the *lifeworld*, a term Husserl introduced and used to refer to '*the spatio-temporal world of things as we experience the*m' (Smith, 2003: 191). Husserl believed that all understandings of the world including scientific investigations, were ultimately founded on this taken for granted *lifeworld* (or world of everyday experience). Husserl argued that this must be the case, because theoretical or scientific abstractions of the world could only have existential validity (exist as rational accounts of the world) if the world of everyday experience itself had existential validity (Smith, 2003). All scientific abstractions are therefore ultimately founded on and also relate back to, the *lifeworld*, as the world of everyday experience is what science initially arises from and is the source of science's meaning. Social pedagogy's conceptual

links with Husserl's *lifeworld* (the world of everyday experience) therefore thread through into social pedagogy's valuing of workers' and children's everyday experiences and activities (Roesch-Marsh et al., 2015) through the need to acknowledge and respect practitioners' and children's shared *'lifespace'* (Smith, 2012:51) or '*living space'* (Cameron et al., 2011:15) when building meaningful relationships.

Whilst social pedagogical philosophical and theoretical understandings were initially applied in the UK as a way of improving the quality of practitioner-service user relationships predominantly within the context of residential social work (Berridge, 2016; Timonen-Kallio and Hamalainen, 2019) and foster care (NCB, 2011; The Fostering Network, 2019), the relevance and applicability of social pedagogical theories is increasingly being considered more broadly in relation to all areas of social work practice, including social work with adults (Gardner, 2019a; Kirkwood et al., 2019); children, young people and families services (Chavaudra et al., 2014; Charfe, 2019; Smith and Monteux, 2019) as well as within social work education and training (Ganpatsingh, 2019; Reith-Hall, 2020).

A social pedagogical philosophical and theoretical understanding of how to build effective relationships and work with service users, encourages social workers to do everyday activities with children (such as washing up, cooking or playing), as a way of promoting child growth, confidence and wellbeing (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011) as well as offering opportunities for practitioner-child relationship building. Practitioners are also encouraged to use a holistic and embodied *head*, *hands* and *heart* approach in their practice to help build more meaningful relationships with service users (Gardner, 2019b). From a social pedagogical theoretical perspective, the *head* is seen as representing the theoretical and

intellectual foundation that underpins practice (Hatton, 2013); the *heart* reflects a strong emotional and moral value base (Stephens, 2013); and the *hands* represent the use of physical and creative activities to build relationships with children (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012). The development of embodied practice approaches informed by social pedagogical theories are being foregrounded as having value in helping child and family social workers to develop more meaningful relationships and communication with children (Ruch et al., 2017).

As with psycho-social understandings of practitioner-service user relationships discussed in an earlier chapter section, social pedagogical theory also foregrounds the importance of *being* in respect of understanding the nature of service user-worker relationships (Bird and Eichsteller, 2011). *Being* is linked, in social pedagogical theory, to notions of worker authenticity and genuineness and the use of practitioners' own personality, where each practitioners' attitude or mindset (known as *Haltung*) is seen as critical to understanding how meaningful worker-child interactions can be generated (Ruch et al., 2017).

There is, however, a relative paucity of theoretically grounded explorations of the notion of *being* in social pedagogical as well as psycho-social understandings of social worker-child relationships, including understanding how *being* links to notions of practitioners' attitude, personality, values and to notions of 'self'. This study therefore aims to address this gap by undertaking a phenomenological philosophical and theoretical exploration of the notion of *being* through exploring the significance of *being* in relation to the development of meaningful social worker-child relationships.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained how and why the literature review was undertaken and outlined the range of literature informing the study. The importance of social worker-child relationships within a child and family assessment context has been considered alongside an exploration of the embodied nature of social worker-child relationships by considering the conceptual, emotional, physical, spatial, temporal and ethical aspects of practitioner-child relationships. The way in which adopting a phenomenological approach to the study can help to address the current undertheorisation of the concept of practitioner *being,* has been explained and the importance of *being* for understanding the nature of social worker-child relationships, argued.

In the light of the continuing identification of the lack of young children's voices in assessments, it has been proposed that this study's focus on exploring practitioners' positive experience of relationship building with young children has the potential to expand existing understandings of how the meaningful participation of young children in assessments can be achieved. The adoption of a phenomenological research approach has also been argued as offering a rich and detailed perspective that can enable the relatively less well explored aspects of practitioners' initial encounters with children and the ending of social workers' relationships with children, to be examined, as well as extending understanding of the significance of the temporal, embodied, ethical and spatial dimensions of practitioners' lived experiences of relationship building.

Although some literature has been identified that explores how social workers build meaningful relationships with young children during initial assessments and in respect of social worker-child initial encounters, there remains a gap in

relation to understanding the nature of initial social worker-child encounters and in relation to explaining the nature and significance of practitioners' relationships with young children (under the age of eight years) in relation to initial assessments, that this study seeks to address.

This chapter has considered how the nature of worker-child relationships is shaped by the social and cultural context in which they take place, as social worker practices are shaped by organisations as well as individuals. The later findings chapters (Chapters 4 to 7) therefore begin with an exploration of the already situated cultural and organizational context of social worker-child relationships that interviewees talked about, alongside providing an overview of the key thematic findings of the research study. The next chapter (Chapter 2) however, focuses on explaining the rationale and justification for the interpretive phenomenological research approach used in this study. Chapter 3 then explains how I conducted the study and includes a discussion of the methods used, the challenges I encountered and the reasons behind the research choices I made.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The preceding chapter outlined some of the existing literature that examines the nature of social worker-child relationships. This chapter explains how and why I decided to use a qualitative phenomenological research approach in this study. The nature of phenomenology as philosophy and as a form of research approach is discussed, and differing understandings of phenomenology are explained. I provide an outline of the key aspects of Husserlian phenomenology, descriptive phenomenology, existential and hermeneutic phenomenology and reflect on the process of exploring these different methodologies. I then explain how my decision to use an existential-hermeneutic research approach was related to its congruence with the aims of the study and my own professional and personal value base. In Chapter 3, I provide an account of how adopting an existential-hermeneutic research approach shaped the methods used in the study, the way the interviews were conducted, and influenced the process of data analysis and presentation of the study’s findings.

Choosing the ‘right’ research approach: exploring different methodologies

The research process is a complex and iterative process that involves the researcher in an incremental process of creation (Carter and Little, 2007). Multiple interconnecting threads of thought, understanding and action are generated as the research study progresses, with every thought and action being ultimately inter-connected, like the threads of a spider’s web. This is because there is an iterative relationship between epistemology (and its

embedded ontological position); theory; methodology and method. Reflecting on this interconnected web of relations between ontology, epistemology, methodology and method therefore comprises an essential part of the hermeneutic process of generating understanding, where meaning is generated by moving iteratively between the parts and the whole (Smith et al., 2009). Ensuring there is a clear and coherent theoretical and philosophical conceptual framework for the research study is also important as it contributes to the process of justifying, maintaining and demonstrating and the overall coherence and credibility of the research study itself (Bryman, 2012).

The central aim of this study was to develop new understandings of social workers' experiences of initial and subsequent relationship building with young children during initial assessments. This was to be achieved through exploring social workers' understandings and practice experiences of relationship building whilst working with young children. In considering what kind of research approach might be congruent with this research aim, I initially explored an eclectic range of research literature. This was to try to gain an understanding of the implicit theoretical positions and philosophical assumptions underpinning different types of research approaches or methodologies. I am using the term 'methodology' interchangeably with the term 'research approach' here, to refer to all *'the theoretical and philosophical assumptions linked to a topic and the ways in which any such topic will be investigated'* (Carey, 2009: 68).

I was aware that my own motivation and interest in exploring my chosen research topic already contained a tacit understanding of what I believed to be a 'suitable' type of research approach. I also realised (subsequently) that my understandings were already rooted in an interpretivist view of the world.

Understanding research from an interpretivist viewpoint means to accept that it is impossible for the researcher to uncouple or separate out their own assumptions, cultural context and language from the overall research process. This is because each person creates their own meaning from their own social experiences. Knowledge therefore does not represent a separate entity but is instead '*derived and created from the experiences of the social actors*' (McLaughlin, 2012: 29).

Prior to commencing this study, I already understood that my own already situated perceptions, understandings, and political and social positioning (developed through working as a child and family social worker, for example) would inevitably permeate and influence each stage of the research process. Consequently, researcher reflexivity assumes a high level of importance throughout the whole of research study, as the researcher needs to consistently acknowledge that:

> *...there is no one way street between researcher and the object of study; rather, the two affect each other mutually and continually in the course of the research process* (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000: 79)

Demonstrating researcher reflexivity throughout the study is one way of providing evidence that the research has been conducted in a rigorous manner (Creswell, 2013). Here and throughout the thesis, I use the term *reflexivity* interchangeably with the terms *reflection* and *reflectivity.* I use all three of these terms interchangeably to refer to the three reflective processes of: thinking whilst in the midst of doing something; thinking back over something that has already happened; and thinking about future actions, trying to anticipate issues in advance (Thompson and Thompson, 2008). Reflexivity therefore has

temporal and cognitive dimensions, but is also an affective, corporeal process (van Manen, 2014). This is because reflection can take place both 'in'' and 'on' action (Schon,1983). Reflecting back on previous experiences and understandings is also an important way of developing new insights and of acquiring new knowledge as it forms part of the process of learning through experience (Moon, 2004). In this chapter I reflect on the way in which I came to adopt a phenomenological research approach. In Chapter 3, I detail my ongoing reflexivity during the research process. In Chapter 8, I reflectively think ahead by considering the possible future implications of disseminating the findings of this study.

As a former local authority social worker who worked for ten years with children and their families, I can see looking back, that the theoretical perspective underpinning my practice accorded with what I now understand to be an interpretivist conceptualisation of what it means to know something. This epistemological position is one that privileges understanding over explanations of human behaviour (Bryman, 2012) and how this positioning relates to my study, will be discussed next.

Using a qualitative research approach: epistemology and values

Qualitative research methodologies frequently although not exclusively (Carey, 2009) reflect an interpretivist paradigm (Blaikie, 2007). An interpretivist paradigm is based on the belief that it is not possible to study humans and society in the same way as the natural sciences, as interpretation, emotion and

subjective understanding are all required in order to gain understanding (McLaughlin, 2012). Qualitative research approaches are therefore commonly (but not always) associated with a constructionist epistemology, which suggests that the phenomena being researched are not separate, independent entities but are created (constructed) by the interactions between individuals (Kara, 2012).

The term *epistemology* refers to the nature of knowledge and represents how we come to *know* things or to justify what counts, what is valued or accepted as knowledge (Bryman, 2012). In terms of qualitative research, *epistemology* therefore refers to the types of knowing that are believed to be of value and are accepted as credible research knowledge.

My own world view, and therefore my own epistemological position, is very much a relational and socially constructed (constructionist) view of human beings and of society. A constructionist epistemology means: to adopt a critical stance on taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world; to recognise the historically and socially situated nature of the world; to view knowledge as constructed and sustained by people and social processes; and to understand social construction of the world as bound up with power relations, where constructions of the world can determine patterns of social action that have the potential to include or exclude others (Burr, 2003).

The term *social worker,* the name of my chosen profession and a key aspect of my identity, can also be argued (see for example, Witkin, 2012) to be similarly rooted in a socially constructed view of the world. Social work as a profession, gives primacy to the importance of building and sustaining relationships with others, values effective interpersonal communication and collaboration, and

promotes the values of social justice, equality and inclusion as an essential part of social work practice (HCPC, 2017).

Every epistemological position has an ontological view of the nature of being or reality embedded within it (Crotty, 1998). In a social research context, ontology represents the researcher's view of reality or what we can know. My own epistemological position therefore contains within it, an implicit and interdependent view of the nature of social reality (or realities) and of what we can know. My gradual development from an initial position of unconscious (unknowing) to a conscious (coming to know) epistemological and ontological position as a result of undertaking this research study is reflected on below.

At the start of the research process, whilst I had automatically assumed that a qualitative research approach would be the most effective and congruent way of exploring the phenomenon of social worker-child relationship building (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), I considered a range of different research approaches. In particular, I explored the possibility of undertaking a narrative (Reissman, 2001; Andrews et al., 2008) or a Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2008) research approach but began to understand that each of these approaches had their own epistemological and ontological positionings. I then made a new, and to me seismic, discovery of the existence of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009). This discovery led me towards undertaking a more detailed exploration of phenomenological, hermeneutic and existential philosophical and research literature.

As I began reading more about the philosophy of phenomenology and especially hermeneutic phenomenology, I had a really strong emotional reaction to it. I was immediately certain that this was the 'right' philosophical and

theoretical framework for my research. Heidegger (2010) would describe this process of recognising something as being meaningful (in existential-ontological terms) as inevitably being rooted within the pre-existing *fore-structure* of my understanding.

Reflecting back on this instinctive response to the philosophy of phenomenology a little later in the research process, I came to understand that epistemology is also axiological: that is to say it contains inherent values and is also located within a particular cultural value base (Carter and Little, 2007). I now understand that my positive and instinctive reaction to finding this literature and identifying it as the 'right' approach for my research study, was rooted in some of my pre-existing views and understandings of social work both as a profession and as a specific type of relational practice. I feel and understand now, that a significant part of my attraction to the philosophy and ideas contained within phenomenological and hermeneutic literature were that some of the implicit values underpinning phenomenological and especially hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, mirrored my own personal and professional values (BASW, 2012) and understandings of *being-in-the world* (Heidegger, 2010).

Phenomenology focuses on exploring and understanding the unique, lived experiences of individuals (Smith et al., 2009; Husserl, 2012) and values the seeking out of embodied, experiential meanings (Finlay, 2009). Using a phenomenologically oriented research approach was therefore congruent with putting social workers' lived experiences centre stage and affirmed the value of exploring practitioners' understandings of relationship building. Adopting a phenomenological research approach provided a strong theoretical justification for listening to and interpreting social workers' accounts of relationship building.

It offered a language for explaining why exploring practitioner understandings and experiences constituted a legitimate form of knowledge (Finlay, 2011).

Phenomenology also appeared to encapsulate values that were congruent with my social work professional and my own personal value base in terms of valuing the uniqueness of each individual person. Valuing each person as a unique human being is one of Biestek's (1961) seven casework principles for social work practice that I learnt about when undertaking my social work training over 30 years ago, and is still a core value that sits at the heart of social work practice.

The tacit value base underpinning my research study is founded on the nature of what I personally believe good social work practice to be: a practice approach underpinned by an empathic and caring approach to working with people (Rogers, 1980), where relationship-based practice is seen as central to good social work practice. This value base is explicit within the cultural value base of the social work profession itself (BASW, 2012; IFSW, 2014) and underpins all my methodological choices. This is because as a registered social worker as well as a researcher I am expected to work in accordance with professional values (as are all of the social work participants who I interviewed). The tacit value base of phenomenology therefore aligned with my own personal and professional value base.

As outlined in Chapter 1, much of the academic literature about the profession of social work suggests that the nature of social work, its value base and the practices of the profession are under threat from neoliberal, mechanistic, technocratic and managerialist approaches to working with individuals and families (Lonne et al, 2009; Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). This potential

dehumanisation of the delivery of social welfare services clearly raises the question as to whether and how social workers can successfully manage to uphold their professional value base by building and sustaining compassionate and productive relationships with service users (BASW, 2018) whilst operating in such a climate. My research therefore attempts to explore whether humane and meaningful social work practices (Featherstone et al., 2014) are still possible within the current difficult, political and economic circumstances.

Using a phenomenological research approach to explore the phenomenon of social worker-child relationships, felt like a useful and congruent way of examining this issue, because phenomenological research approaches are all rooted in the detailed exploration of human lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The epistemological position of the phenomenological approach selected also incorporates a particular philosophical ontological view of the nature of being or of reality (Crotty, 1998). The ontological assumptions underpinning my research study will therefore be discussed next.

Ontology

Ontology is a branch of philosophy that refers to *'the basic image of social reality upon which a theory is based'* (Grix, 2010: 170) and to the way in which each individual views the world. Within the social sciences, ontology asks 'W*hat is the nature of social reality*?' (Blaikie, 2007: 13). My own ontological positioning is therefore an integral part of, and needs to be consistent with, the epistemological and methodological framework I have chosen to work within when conducting this research study.

The relativist ontological assumption that underpins a phenomenological approach regards reality as being dependent on the way we come to know it (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This position suggests that rather than there being a single objective or 'true' reality, multiple realities exist (McLaughlin, 2012). What is regarded as 'real' therefore differs across both time and context (Heidegger, 2010). Adopting a relativist ontological position means subscribing to the view that the meanings of social phenomena are interactionally created and understood through the accomplishments of social actors (Grix, 2010). This view of social reality accords with my own understanding of good social work practice, which is centred around meaningful and person-centred, relationship-based practice (Trevithick, 2003; Trevithick, 2014). This ontological viewpoint is also implicitly represented within part of my research title: '*Being-together-with' children.*

Ontology and epistemology are to research '*what footings are to a house'* (Grix, 2010: 57) in that they underpin and influence every stage of the research process, from the initial framing of the research question through to the choice of research approach and methods used. A phenomenological and hermeneutic perspective underpins and drives my overall research approach, as these are the central philosophical, theoretical and ethical frameworks within which I have subsequently conceptualised and designed my research (Carey, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013). The rest of this chapter will therefore outline the phenomenological and hermeneutic ontological and epistemological research 'footings' that I believe underpin my whole research approach. Chapter 3 will then provide an account of the research methods used in this study and explain and justify the research choices I made during the process of undertaking the study.

What is Phenomenology?

Phenomenology is variously understood as being a way of doing philosophy (Husserl, 2012); as a theoretical perspective and a methodology (Crotty, 1998); and as a specific research method (Giorgi, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Although phenomenology sits within an interpretivist paradigm (Blaikie, 2007) there are a range of different phenomenological and phenomenologically inspired methodological approaches (some of them underpinned by differing ontological positions) that could potentially have been utilised and have been congruent with the aim of my research study. Part of the process of exploring a range of research literature has involved the critical consideration of several different phenomenological approaches situated within a continuum between two centrally recognised categories of phenomenology: descriptive phenomenology that encompasses Husserlian inspired approaches (see for example Giorgi, 2009) and hermeneutic (or interpretive) phenomenology with its origins in Heidegger's (2010) hermeneutic, interpretivist view of the world. Some of the key phenomenological approaches that I explored in the course of undertaking this study are outlined below, in order to explain my rationale for selecting an existential-hermeneutic (also interchangeably referred to in this thesis as interpretive) phenomenological research approach.

Husserlian Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl was a philosopher who is regarded as the founder of phenomenology both as philosophy and as a form of research (Moran, 2000; Husserl, 2012). Husserl saw himself as developing a foundational philosophy that he called a '*science of "phenomena"*' (Husserl, 2012: 1) that aimed to

explore phenomena and describe them *'as whatever appears and in the manner in which it appears...as it manifests itself to consciousness'* (Moran, 2000: 4).

In particular, Husserl (2012) developed a transcendental (psychological) phenomenology that he saw as aiming not to establish a science of facts, but instead a knowledge of *essences*, with the notion of *essence* meaning to generate understanding of how the different aspects constituted by the phenomenon being studied are experienced by the person experiencing it. Husserl (2001) attempted to identify the essential structures of consciousness using a phenomenological approach. He believed that no knowledge could be achieved, known or spoken about, without referring to or coming through consciousness: a concept known as *intentionality*. All sciences including the natural sciences therefore could in Husserl's view only be known through consciousness. The emphasis of Husserl's philosophical approach was on description rather than on causal explanation. Husserl subsequently further developed and modified his ideas and developed the concept of transcendental phenomenology and a transcendental phenomenological method.

Husserl's transcendental phenomenological method centred on the achievement of the *phenomenal reduction* that was to be achieved through the process of *epoche* (sometimes also referred to as *disconnecting or bracketing*). The process of epoche for Husserl was a way of achieving the transcendental realm which involved first of all putting '*out of action'* (Husserl, 2012: 57) all positions taken towards the already-given objective world and any assumptions regarding the existence of the reality. The process of epoche or suspension of the *natural attitude* through the act of bracketing, served the purpose of enabling the philosopher to stand aloof from anticipatory ideas of any kind in

order to explore phenomena in their various different modes *of givenness*. Through a series of stages of epoche, the phenomenological reduction would eventually result in being able to describe the structure of the chosen phenomenon in its totality: describe its essence (Willig, 2013).

A central aspect of all Husserl's phenomenological philosophical thought was bringing the attention of philosophy back to '*the living human subject'* (Moran, 2000: 5). Husserl introduced the concept of the *lifeworld* [*Lebensweld*], suggesting that only the lifeworld offered an experiential grounding for the objective scientific world (Husserl, 2012). This pre-scientific lifeworld was regarded by Husserl as referring to the background or horizon of all experience on which each object stands out as itself. The lifeworld was regarded by Husserl as personal and intersubjective, and as the world in which each one of us lives. As such, the lifeworld underpins the naturalistic stance of science.

It is through the critiquing of Husserl's foundational phenomenological ideas by other existential philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty, that other phenomenological approaches subsequently developed. A critical exploration of these latter existential phenomenological viewpoints and the descriptive phenomenology of Giorgi (2009) is therefore the focus of the next three sections of this chapter. All of the phenomenological approaches explored below, were considered by me during the process of selecting the existential-hermeneutic phenomenological approach that I finally chose as the most congruent approach to use with regard to my research aims and value base.

Descriptive Phenomenology

Whilst the *'study of experience'* (Smith et al., 2009: 11) with lived experience regarded as the most primordial, unreflective and fundamental form of human experience remains a central component of all phenomenology, a range of different philosophical phenomenological perspectives began to move away from the realist and idealist descriptive positions of Husserl, towards more interpretive (or hermeneutic) and existentialist perspectives. A core of support for the continuing use of a descriptive phenomenological research approach continued, however, with Giorgi (2012) being one of the main proponents of Husserl's more descriptive phenomenological method.

Giorgi applied Husserl's suggestion of the need to assume '*the phenomenological attitude'* (2009: 87) to the role of the researcher, suggesting that the assumption of the phenomenological attitude requires the researcher to look at everything from the perspective of consciousness and to view objects from how they are experienced. Once the essence (or essential structure) of the phenomenon has been determined, the researcher is then expected to describe the structure of the phenomenon as accurately as possible without adding or taking away anything from the description of the intentional objects of experience (i.e. participants' descriptions of how they experience them). It is only after the process of description of the data and production of the finding is complete, that the researcher can then engage in dialogue with other literature (Giorgi, 2012).

While exploring Husserl's and Giorgi's phenomenological understandings as part of the process of deciding what approach to use in my own research, I was strongly attracted to the concept of exploring the everyday or *lived experience*

of social work practitioners (Husserl, 2001). I was also initially attracted to the idea of trying to remain open to exploring the phenomenon of practitioners' everyday experiences by (in Husserlian terms) setting aside my *natural attitude* (meaning the researcher puts aside all of their presuppositions).

Subsequently, however, I began to question whether the setting aside or bracketing of this '*natural standpoint'* (Husserl, 2012: 54) was possible to achieve in practice. To me, it seemed the only way to achieve this presuppositionless state would be not to do any thinking at all. The descriptive phenomenological template for data analysis offered by Giorgi (2009) also seemed to me to already require the researcher to make use of some pre-understandings. I therefore struggled to reconcile this descriptive phenomenological approach and its requirement to set aside pre-suppositions, with the fact that it appeared impossible to set aside all pre-suppositions in practice.

On reading a range of other phenomenological writers, I gradually became aware that whilst there were other individuals who like Giorgi, continued to use broadly descriptive, transcendental or Husserlian inspired phenomenological methods in their research (see for example, Broome, 2012), there were alternative phenomenological options available to me. In particular, a range of phenomenological research approaches that had evolved along more interpretive (hermeneutic) and existential lines. It is this range of phenomenological research approaches that will be discussed next.

Existential and Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Heidegger, along with other philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, for example, made key contributions to what is sometimes termed existentialist, as well as hermeneutic (or interpretive) phenomenology.

The term existential basically means relating to existence, especially human existence. Within the field of philosophy, it refers to philosophy based on personal experience and emphasises the empirical and concrete (or lived) nature of experience as opposed to abstract understanding. An existential perspective regards the Husserlian process of reduction (especially the transcendental stage of reduction) that aims to describe the structure or essence of the chosen phenomenon in its totality, as illusory. This is because from an existential viewpoint, the world is prior to all reflection and the process of epoche (or the suspending of the *natural attitude*) is not capable of achieving foundational truths, as the transcendental world is not disengaged from the world (Ashworth, 1996).

Martin Heidegger was a pupil of Husserl and used a phenomenological philosophical approach but did not focus on an exploration of consciousness as Husserl did. Heidegger instead explored the question of the meaning of *being* and what it means '*to be*' or '*not be*' in the world (Heidegger, 2010: Foreword, xviii). Heidegger's central focus was on the ontological exploration of existence, rather than consciousness. Heidegger developed an existential conceptualisation of science as '*a mode of existence and thus a mode of being-in-the-world'* (Heidegger, 2010: 340). Rather than accepting a logical conceptualisation of science, Heidegger aimed to develop a fundamental

ontology that he saw as originating in the '*existential analysis of Dasein'* (Heidegger, 2010:12) or *being*.

Heidegger used the term Dasein, to represent the being [*Sein*] that is concerned with its own being [*Seiende*]. Any explication of the meaning of being [*Sein*] therefore must be preceded by an explication of Dasein as the '*idea of being in general already lies in the idea of such a constitution of being'* (Heidegger, 2012:12). A fundamental structure of Dasein (being) was regarded by Heidegger as '*being-in-the world'* (Heidegger, 2010: 39). The essential relations of *being-in-the worl*d, Heidegger regarded as: *being together with the world* (the concept Heidegger termed *taking care*); *being with the world* (which Heidegger termed *concern*); and *being a self* (or *who*) (Heidegger, 2010).

Dasein was regarded by Heidegger as a primordial and existential kind of being, rather than a corporeal thing or object. Heidegger's notion of the world is therefore a shared and relational one. It is an intersubjective understanding that suggests each individual's relatedness to the world is a fundamental part of each person's constitution, and that being in the world is always '*in relation to something'* (Smith et al., 2009: 18).

Heidegger additionally regarded the notion of *temporality* (experience of time) as being central to what it means to exist. Rather than seeing existence as an object, Heidegger viewed existence as an active kind of becoming. Existence was therefore always in the process of being created through an ongoing process of meaning making. Heidegger (2010) also foregrounded the factical nature of human existence, using the term *facticity* to refer to the range of pre-existing limits that exist in the world we are thrown into, such as physical,

psychological and social factors and our historical situatedness (Langdridge, 2007: 30).

Heidegger believed that *'being in the world, as a fundamental constitution, requires a prior interpretation'* (Heidegger, 2010: 62). This is because meaning is an existential constitution of Dasein. Understanding and interpretation are therefore '*always contained in what is expressed'* (Heidegger, 2010: 162). Heidegger's approach to phenomenology therefore adopts a hermeneutic or interpretive stance (Smith et al., 2009), rejecting the Cartesian dualism of mind and body implicit in Husserl's initial understanding of phenomenology. Heidegger suggested that it was only through philosophy that *being* (meaning existence or Dasein) could be revealed. However, the ontic or '*particular facts about entities that exist'* (Langdridge, 2007: 29) such as human beings for example, could still be revealed through empirical investigation.

Another existential-hermeneutic philosopher (and psychologist) Merleau-Ponty built on Heidegger's work. Merleau-Ponty used phenomenological methods, not to explore the nature of being as Heidegger did, but instead to explore the phenomenon of perception (Moran, 2000). Merleau-Ponty emphasized the embodied nature of each person's relationship to the world, believing that the body '*structures one's situation and experience within the world'* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: Preface). Merleau-Ponty saw perception as manifesting itself in bodily capacity, and he regarded lived experience as being simultaneously anchored in a point of view as well as opening out into the world, with the body constituting the '*pivot'* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 81) of the world. This means that each person's perception and experience of the world is always directed through each person's own point of view.

For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness was not regarded as fixed solely either in the mind or in the world but was instead fixed in the body, meaning there was no separation between existence and embodiment (Moran, 2000). This rejection of the notion of a subject-object dualism means that each person is viewed as a '*body-subject*, *with consciousness embedded in the body and intentionality that of the body-subject, rather than simply one's own consciousness'.* (Langdridge, 2007: 37). Merleau-Ponty therefore focussed on exploring individuals' lived experience of the world: what Husserl referred to as the *lifeworld* or *Lebenswelt* (Smith, 2003).

Merleau-Ponty further developed his phenomenological understanding of embodiment to emphasise that the phenomenological body is not understood as being separate from the world. There is instead, a dynamic relationship or ontological connectedness between body-person and world (Finlay, 2006; Dahlberg et al., 2008). The body-person indissolubly both constitutes the world in which we live and at the same time is constituted by it (Koch, 1995). The lived body, from a phenomenological perspective, is therefore a dimension of *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 2010) and is experienced as a '*sensorial entity*' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 155) where emotions, thoughts, actions, speech and other sensory experiences such as sight hearing and touch, are accomplished by the body. The body is, however, both perceiver and perceived and remains part of the overall fabric or flesh of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) where the inside body as flesh and outside flesh of the world are permeable to one another (Moran, 2000). From a phenomenological perspective, there is therefore no mind-body dualism nor any clear separation between person and world. The phenomenal body is ontologically all one 'flesh' where intersubjectivity is a '*primordial quality of the human world*' (Dahlberg et al.,

2008: 57) and intersubjectivity is also '*intercorporeity*' (Merleau-Ponty 2014: 141).

Merleau-Ponty additionally understood the nature of embodiment as also being spatio-temporal, meaning that the phenomenal body-person understands the meaning of space and time through the body's dealings with the world or by how we experience or live it. Merleau-Ponty used the terms '*Temporality*' (2012: 433) and '*Lived Space*' (2012: 293) to represent the lived human understanding and experiencing of time and space, with time and space from a phenomenological perspective, both constituting relations of human *being*.

The phenomenological understandings of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty resonated more positively with me than the descriptive phenomenological approaches of Husserl and Giorgi, as the rich range of existential interpretive dimensions of temporality, corporeality, relationality, spatiality and materiality or lived things (van Manen, 2014) seemed to represent a relativist conceptualisation of the world and additionally align with my own experience and understanding of being in the world. An existential-hermeneutic phenomenological approach also seemed to be the most congruent research approach to use in relation to my research aims.

Social work is an embodied and spatially situated form of practice (Ferguson, 2011). The historically changing and contextually situated nature of social work as a profession is a recurrent theme in the literature about social work, as explored earlier in Chapter 1. Adopting an existential-hermeneutic understanding of *being* (where *being-in-the-world* means being in the world in relation to others) reflects a conceptualisation of human agency that includes the capacity for persons to change. This understanding of human *being* is

similarly reflected in the underpinning values of the social work profession (BASW, 2012; IFSW, 2014) and in the espoused values (Agyris and Schon, 1974) underpinning my research approach. Adopting an existential understanding of *being* also provides a way of addressing the gap in existing social work literature (see Chapter 1) regarding the current undertheorisation of practitioner *being*.

My research study is a small scale, detailed phenomenological exploration of interviewed social workers' experiences of relationship building, in order to explore and better understand the meaning of social worker-child relationships. My enquiry into the lived experiences of social workers, starts from the premise that human experience is not regarded as objective (Heidegger, 2010) but inevitably involves an interpretive exploration of the world including the feelings, perceptions and attitudes of the research study participants. I have also undertaken my study from the perspective of seeing individuals as having an embodied relationship to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012), meaning that any experience is personal to the individual experiencing it. The world of lived experience thereby constitutes '*both the source and the object of phenomenological research'* (van Manen,1990: 53). My study therefore seeks to explore the lived experiences of social worker participants through analysing and interpreting interviewees' accounts of their experiences of forming meaningful working relationships with young children during assessments.

I would describe my research approach as being hermeneutic (interpretive) as well as existential because I understand the nature of *being-in-the-world* as interpretive (Heidegger, 2010). The term hermeneutics, however, also has a more specific meaning that is related to the interpretation of texts. The way in which a textual understanding of hermeneutics has evolved and been applied

within the field of phenomenology is therefore discussed below, in order to situate the study more fully.

Hermeneutics and Phenomenology

The origins of the term hermeneutics as an '*art of interpretation'* (Grondin, 1994: 1) lies within seventeenth century developments of the analysis and understanding of historical texts or signs within juridical, philosophical and theological disciplines. The concept of the art of interpretation, however, has much older Greek and Stoic roots. When applied to phenomenology, the term hermeneutics is taken to mean that any interpretation of lived experience is never pre-supposition-less. The very nature of our '*being-in-the-world'* (Heidegger, 2010: 39) means that we already have a particular standpoint or perspective in relation to it (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Each individual therefore always has a *fore-conception* (Heidegger, 2010) or pre-conceived idea of the world.

Hermeneutic phenomenology differs from more descriptive phenomenological approaches in that the researcher makes use of theoretical knowledge as an '*orienting framework*' (Lopez and Willis, 2004: 730) during the research process to guide the choice of data sample and the type of research questions to be asked, as well as in the interpretation of the findings. This contrasts with descriptive phenomenological research approaches, where theoretical knowledge is only used after the process of description of the data and production of the findings is complete (Giorgi, 2012).

Alongside some of the key existential-hermeneutic philosophers already mentioned in this chapter (Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) the theoretical framework underpinning my research has additionally been strongly influenced by the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. An initial explanation of Gadamer and Ricoeur's central hermeneutic ideas is, therefore, introduced here. The way all of these existential and hermeneutic phenomenological understandings permeated my research approach will then be examined in more detail in the next chapter (Chapter 3), where I provide an account of how I chose the data sample, collected the data and analysed it.

I have separated out my discussion of the hermeneutic philosophical ideas of Gadamer and Ricoeur from the existential-hermeneutic philosophical ideas of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, because Gadamer and Ricoeur's ideas place a particular emphasis on hermeneutics as oriented towards the explication of texts, rather than directly explicating lived experience itself (van Manen, 2014).

A key aspect of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics centred around the notion of developing a phenomenology of human understanding. Human existence was of central concern to Gadamer, but speech and language were regarded as the main ways in which an interpretive or hermeneutic view of existence revealed itself (Langdridge, 2007). Gadamer (2004) explored the phenomenology of human conversation, language and understanding by applying and adapting some concepts from textual hermeneutics. This involved for example, Gadamer foregrounding the importance of keeping an open mind and maintaining a view of the broader significance of the text, rather than focussing solely on critiquing narrow, selected statements (van Manen, 2014). As well as maintaining a broader textual viewpoint, Gadamer additionally

argued that any textual interpretation needed to be placed within the horizon of the reader's own social-historical existence (Gadamer, 2004).

In relation to developing a phenomenology of human understanding, Gadamer conceptualised understanding as an evolving accumulation of knowledge that is both partial and perspectival. Gadamer regarded speech as always constituting a speech from somewhere, meaning speech always comes from a particular perspectival position that is also historically, culturally and spatially situated. Gadamer used the concept of a *horizon* of understanding (Gadamer, 2013) to explain that no individual is able to see a single, whole, absolute truth. Rather there is a myriad of different horizons of understanding (differing truths or realities). Each individual possesses their own individual horizon(s) of understanding that are also always open to other horizons, that subsequently overlap and fuse with each other (Moran, 2000). Horizons of understanding are therefore not fixed, standalone entities. Horizons of the past continually become fused with new horizons of understanding but '*without either being explicitly foregrounded by the other'* (Gadamer, 2013: 317). This process results in the creation of a new horizon of understanding. Gadamer's concept of a horizon of understanding helped me to understand that transcribed interviews and theoretical texts could be used together throughout the process of data collection and analysis, to generate new understandings and interpretations of the phenomenon of social worker-child relationships. (This process of analysis and interpretation is explored further in Chapter 3).

This view of human understanding suggests there is always an ongoing tension between a historically situated understanding of a text and a present understanding of it. Rather than trying to recreate a prior historically situated understanding of a text, Gadamer suggests that the original understanding of a

text is never lost. Instead, a present dialogue with a previously published text generates a new, contextualised understanding that is arrived at through a '*fusion of horizons'* (Gadamer, 2013: 317) through dialogue. There is a merging or overlapping of horizons of understanding through consensus and shared understanding of meaning.

Ricoeur was a philosopher who used phenomenology to explore a range of issues, focussing latterly on issues of discourse, text and action. Ricoeur made a distinction between the terms discourse and language (Ricoeur, 2008), understanding discourse to be an event of speaking: a temporally created phenomenon where meaning is constructed by a subject (or human agent) which is not reducible to the individual words of which it is comprised. The term language was regarded by Ricoeur as specifically referring to '*the system of signs that makes up discourse'* (Langdridge, 2007: 45). The basic unit of language was perceived as the sign, which could be phonological or lexical in nature.

All spoken discourse, Ricoeur argued, implies the presence of a subject, an 'I' who speaks and is also relational, as 'I' is always addressed to another person. Discourse is also always about something, as discourse is where '*the symbolic nature of language is exemplified'* (Langdridge, 2007: 45). Ricoeur (2008) distinguished between the nature of spoken and written discourse, using the term *text* to describe discourse that is fixed in writing. The written nature of text means that it is no longer a discourse with another human being. The text leaves the original temporal, spatial, relational context of its original production and enters a new world of '*second-order reference, a non-situational reference to a symbolic world'* (Langdridge, 2007: 46). Whilst language is a-temporal, discourse as speech only exists temporally. Writing does not therefore fix the

speech event itself, but instead it only fixes the meaning of what was said in speech. This understanding of the distinction between discourse and language and between speech and written discourse influenced how I understood and carried out the process of transcribing (as well as analysing) the data and is discussed further in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the range of phenomenological theoretical and philosophical assumptions that together comprise my overarching methodological framework for the research study. In particular the existential-hermeneutic research approach used in this study is strongly informed by the writings of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. My approach is also informed by the concept of Gadamer's fusion of horizons and Ricoeur's understanding of the differences between discourse as speech and as text. All of these philosophical hermeneutic (interpretive) understandings have in various ways, shaped the research approach and methods used in this study. They have provided, for example: the theoretical justification for the use of interviews as my main research method; impacted on how the interviews with social work practitioners were conducted; the way the interviews with social workers were recorded, analysed and interpreted; and the way the research study's findings are presented.

The specific ways in which my existential-hermeneutic phenomenological understandings have shaped the research methods used in the study will be discussed in the next chapter. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research process I followed. This includes my reflections on the process of undertaking

the literature review, a discussion of the methods I used to collect the research study data, the sampling approach I used, and an explanation of the nature of the data sample. The next chapter also discusses the methods I used to analyse and interpret the data, explains the rationale behind the research choices I made and offers a reflexive account of the process of undertaking the research study.

CHAPTER 3: CONDUCTING THE STUDY

As summarised in the preceding chapter, this study is best described as adopting an existential-hermeneutic phenomenological research approach. Whilst the previous chapter focussed on explaining the phenomenological, existential and hermeneutic knowledge and ideas underpinning my research approach, this chapter summarises the process of undertaking the research study. The chapter explains: the methods I used; the reasoning and justification for the research choices made; the challenges and affordances (Greeno,1994) encountered during the completion of the study; how my research approach relates to my research goals; and my reflexive understanding of the research process.

The variety of epistemological and ontological positionings that exist under the umbrella term *qualitative methodologies* where my study's phenomenological methodology would also sit, means that there is no set of agreed criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Cresswell, 2013). Transparency (Applebaum, 2012) and rigour (Lincoln et al., 2011) in the processes followed are, however, consistently identified as key requirements. Whilst many different approaches to evaluating qualitative research have been suggested (see for example Braun and Clarke, 2006; de Witt and Ploeg, 2006; Yardley, 2015), one way of dealing with this lack of agreed criteria has been suggested by Rolfe (2006). This is to embrace the *practice* of research, foregrounding the importance of researcher reflexivity within the researcher's account of the research study process. I have therefore attempted to provide a reflexive account of the way I conducted the research study, in this chapter.

The first chapter section contains my reflections on the approach I used to review the literature. Next, the chapter explains the choice of interviews as a research method, describes the process of gaining ethical approval for the research study, provides an overview of the process of obtaining local authority and participant consent and explains how I contacted and interviewed the participants. Information about the research study sample is then summarised. The chapter then explores the process of transcribing, organising and interpreting the data. The final section discusses how the quality of the research was maintained throughout the process of conducting the study.

Undertaking the literature review

Research methods are much more than the mechanistic application of a series of procedures. The researcher makes active decisions throughout the research process as to what research methods to use and how to use them. The methodology and epistemology of the research study become visible through the description of the '*praxis*' (Carter and Little, 2007: 1325) of the study. My description of undertaking the literature review in this chapter therefore reflects, and makes visible, how my interpretive methodological approach towards exploring the literature developed over the course of the study.

Doing an initial literature search at the start of the study provided me with a jumping-off point for the study and gave me a framework of understanding that guided me during the initial stages of the research process. After the initial search, I subsequently undertook a series of *mini literature reviews.* These were focused searches of specific areas of methodological or topic-based literature such as, for example, when exploring theoretical and philosophical perspectives

in order to strengthen the theoretical grounding of my study. Undertaking a series of mini literature searches helped me frame my explorations of different topic areas within the context of existing work (Bryman, 2012). Reading broadly also assisted me in analysing the research study interviews through a variety of textual lenses. This led me to, for example, choose to utilise existentially oriented phenomenological literature such as the work of Heidegger, (2010), Merleau-Ponty (2012, 2014) and Levinas (1981) as a way of understanding the temporal, embodied, and ethical relational nature of human presence when interpreting the practitioner interviews (see further discussions in findings chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7).

Taking an exploratory approach to reading literature was beneficial in enabling me to link diverse theoretical threads (Hart, 1998), generate new ideas, and conceptualise social worker-child relationships in a number of different ways (Dunleavy, 2015). This helped me to think about the meaning and significance of human relationships, from different perspectives (Smythe, 2011). As the study progressed, I sometimes stopped reading for short periods of time, giving myself the space to consider the usefulness or relevance of what I was reading in relation to my central research aim. These periods of reflection, looking backwards as well as forwards, and of looking at the overall picture of understanding as well as at the smaller pieces of disparate meanings contained within the writing of different subjects and disciplines, helped to keep my efforts focused. These periods of 'taking stock' stopped me from going too far astray from the central focus of the study. In hermeneutic terms, this process would be described as being involved in a hermeneutical, circular process of understanding, where the '*meaning of a part can only be understood if it is related to the whole...and the whole only from the part'* (Alvesson and

Skoldberg, 2009: 92). The literature review has therefore been an ever-present activity: a source of new thoughts, ideas and ways of knowing. Utilising a phenomenological research approach means to question the way we live in the world and how we experience it, as human beings (van Manen, 1990). The process of reviewing literature has therefore assisted me in critically questioning and undertaking a detailed exploration of social workers' understandings of practitioner-child relationships, through the process of dialogical questioning and interpretation (Smith and Osborn, 2015).

This section has explored the process of reviewing literature in this study. The next section discusses why I chose interviews as the research method for this study, describes the application for ethical approval and explains how I decided on the size of interview sample.

Choosing interviews as a research method

I chose individual interviews as the most appropriate way of exploring the meaning and significance of practitioner-child relationships, as this approach allowed for contextualised and detailed accounts of the phenomenon being studied (Carey, 2009) to emerge. I also decided to conduct fairly lengthy interviews with practitioners (eventually lasting between one and one and a half hours). This was to allow time for practitioners' experiences of relationship building to be explored in greater detail than would have been possible to achieve in interviews of a shorter duration (Finlay, 2011).

Whilst ethnographic research (see for example Ferguson, 2011; Winter et al., 2018) has already been used by others to generate valuable knowledge about

what social workers do in their practice by observing practitioners *doing* it, interviews are an appropriate and useful method to use for studying social workers' understanding of the meaning of their lived worlds and how they interpret them (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). This is because relationships are temporally shared relational experiences that develop as a result of interactions between people, as well as being individually experienced phenomena (Stern, 2004; Benjamin, 2018). Each person's understanding of what constitutes a relationship is therefore unique, as each person views the phenomenon from the perspective of their own relational experiences. The best way to find out what social workers understand a meaningful worker-child relationship to be, is therefore to ask them directly.

Gaining ethical approval for the research

Research Programme Approval for this study was received, based on a proposal that was developed whilst undertaking the first steps of the literature search described earlier in this chapter. An application was then made to the university's Ethics Committee to gain ethical approval for the study. The Ethics Committee requested minor amendments to some of the proposed research forms. Once these changes had been made and accepted, ethical approval for the study was granted. The research study process is an ethical process where the researcher is professionally (RCUK, 2011), organisationally (UCLan, 2019) and morally (Shaw, 2008) expected to behave in an ethical manner at every stage of the research process. A discussion of ethical issues is also central to demonstrating that the research study has been conducted in a rigorous and trustworthy manner (Heilferty, 2010). While this section has briefly outlined how

issues of ethics were managed initially. The discussion of how subsequent ethical issues were addressed, are interwoven into the later sections of this chapter.

After the university approved the research study, the support of individual local authorities was also required before I could undertake any interviews with social work practitioners. The process of deciding on the size of interview sample, gaining local authority support for the study and obtaining the consent of each participant to proceed with an interview, is therefore described below, in the next three sections of this chapter.

Deciding on the size of interview sample

In a phenomenologically oriented research project, human experience is not regarded as objective (Heidegger, 2010). Researchers and participants are viewed as having an embedded relationship to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) which means that the essence of any experience is personal to the person experiencing it.

The aim of this research study was to explore the unique, lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) of each interviewed social worker in relation to the phenomenon of establishing and sustaining working relationships with young children during assessments. From this perspective, it is the unique meaning and understandings generated from each interview that is of primary importance, rather than the number of interviews that are conducted (Smith et al., 2009). In line with previous studies (see for example Wros,1994; McCormick, 2010; Cowan et al. 2011) and interpretive phenomenological

suggestions (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009) I therefore sought to complete a maximum of between eight and twelve practitioner interviews. I believed this would be a sufficient number of interviews to enable a detailed exploration of the phenomenon of social worker-child relationships to be produced and thereby enable me to achieve my central research aim (Smith and Osborn, 2015). This was also the maximum number of interviews that seemed feasible to complete, transcribe and analyse in the time available, especially given the amount of time it was likely to take to recruit each participant to the study in the context of other demands on social workers' time. I eventually completed ten practitioner interviews in total.

Each interview was conducted on a different day apart from the last two interviews which were both conducted on the same day. There was usually a gap of several weeks following each interview. This was beneficial in that it enabled me to spend time reflecting on each interview immediately after its completion. It also allowed sufficient time for transcribing and starting to analyse the meaning of each interview before doing the next one. This meant I was able to begin to generate different interpretations of the phenomenon of social worker-child relationships, from the first practitioner interview onwards (Alvesson, 2011).

After completing ten interviews with social workers, I did not attempt to undertake any further interviews. I felt that the richness, detail and diversity (Rizq, 2012) of practitioners' understandings of relationship building contained within these ten accounts was sufficient to enable me to undertake a detailed exploration and analysis of practitioner understandings of social worker-child relationships and thereby achieve the aim of the study (Silverman, 2013).

Approach used to obtain the data sample

I approached local authorities on an individual basis to ask for permission to interview their child and family social workers. The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) website indicated that it was acceptable for researchers to approach children's services departments on an individual basis if no more than three local authorities were to be involved in the research (ADCS, no date).

I chose to interview social workers from a maximum of three different local authorities, as only a small number of participants (between 8 and 12) were required for this study. It was envisaged it would be possible to obtain this number of interviewees by speaking with three or four social workers from each authority. Of the ten practitioner interviews subsequently completed, four participant interviews were conducted in the first authority, with three interviews being conducted in each of the other two local authorities.

I used a non-probability or non-random sampling method initially (Bryman, 2012). This was achieved by using a purposive sampling approach (Silverman, 2013). My sample was purposive in that I aimed to interview those practitioners who could best help explicate the phenomenon being studied: the nature and meaning of social worker-child relationships during assessments of risk and need. I therefore chose to interview local authority child and family social workers who had statutory responsibility for undertaking assessments of risk and need under the Children Act 1989 (as amended by s53 of the Children Act 2004).

Local authority child and family social workers work within different organisational team structures (such as locality-based teams or duty and

assessment teams for example). Practitioners also work in different types and sizes of local authority (including Independent Trusts, Metropolitan Borough, Unitary and County Councils). I therefore thought about what types of local authorities I was going to approach for this study. My sample was therefore criterion-based (Braun and Clarke, 2013) in that I was using specific criteria as part of the process of selecting my research sample. I wanted to explore the experiences and understandings of social workers who worked within different child and family teams and local authority organisational structures, to gain a broader understanding of social worker experiences of relationship building within different organisational contexts. This was because existing research exploring the quality of social worker assessments indicated there were variations between local authorities in relation to the quality of social worker assessments; the application of thresholds for responding to referrals; and in the degree to which professionals engaged with children and young people to produce effective assessments (Turney et al., 2011).

Barriers to high quality assessments were also identified as encompassing national, organisational and wider procedural and policy factors, as well as personal and interpersonal ones (Turney et al., 2011; Forrester et al., 2013). The Department for Education report (2016) *Putting children first: Delivering our vision for excellent children's social care* similarly suggested that the type of workforce, structure, organisational environment, culture and values all positively contributed towards effective social work practice. Exploring social workers' understandings of practitioner-child relationships where interviewees were employed in different local authority contexts and organisational team structures, therefore, allowed for different organisational, team or local authority

procedural issues to be foregrounded by participants if interviewees regarded these issues as important in relation to social worker-child relationships.

The final interview sample for this study ended up largely being a self-selected convenience sample: one that was '*simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility'* (Bryman, 2012: 201). Although my original intention had been to undertake social worker interviews within three different types of authority (i.e. a county council, metropolitan borough council and a unitary council or independent trust), in the end it was not possible to gain the support of a county council for this study. I therefore interviewed social workers from two different Metropolitan Borough Councils and from one Unitary authority. The reasons for this, and fuller details about other aspects of the data sample, are explored in the next two sections of this chapter.

Securing local authority support for the study

In order to decide which local authorities to approach first, I tried to get an initial sense of whether some authorities might be more open than others, to a direct research study request. As a proxy measure for openness, I looked through the most recent Ofsted reports for a range of councils, drawing up a priority list of authorities with a 'good' or 'outstanding' rating. I also looked at individual council websites to see if these contained information about how to make an external research application. I prioritised contacting authorities where a clear external research application process was in place.

My approach to making initial contact varied slightly between authorities but was in accordance with the range of approaches outlined in my ethical approval

document. For example, where authorities had a clear external research study application procedure in place, I followed their application process. There was a need to respond flexibly because different organisational arrangements existed in each authority. A period of further negotiation with different staff members was often required before councils could confirm their willingness to support the study. For example, in my original research application approved by the university's Ethics Committee, I had intended to offer an Amazon voucher to research participants to acknowledge their contribution to the study. When seeking the agreement of the first local authority to support the research study, however, the local authority took a different view of this. A senior manager within the council felt that offering a voucher would set an inappropriate precedent for staff, as it would be offering staff payment for participating in the research study, when the social workers being interviewed would be speaking to me during their paid employment time. The authority was prepared to support the research study, but only on the condition that any reference to a voucher for participants was removed from the research forms. This experience reinforced for me that research ethics and values are relationally and situationally negotiated rather than fixed entities (Braun and Clarke, 2009) and may involve the navigation and accommodation of conflicting views and priorities. I therefore returned to the chair of the UCLan Ethics Committee to ask for the relevant amendments to be made. The above changes were subsequently approved, and the local authority then gave their permission for me to proceed with the research.

Securing local authorities' support for the study was an ongoing process of negotiation and consent. It required not just the making but also the sustaining of relationships with key staff members to ensure the progression of the

research study request. Staff and organisations change, and several layers of gatekeepers may need to be contacted and arrangements negotiated before it is possible to proceed with a study (King and Horrocks, 2012). Initial progress can grind to a halt if staff leave or organisations re-structure and this happened in some instances. Conversely, possessing quasi-insider knowledge (Kara, 2012) can be helpful and this was the case with the two authorities mentioned below who both supported the study.

In respect of one authority, my understanding of the council's research application process (due to my prior knowledge of the authority through a previous professional role) assisted the process of gaining support for the study. Gaining access to organisations through pre-existing networks of contacts (Holly and Altrichter, 2011) can be another a way of securing support for research. In respect of a second local authority, for example, it was it was the information and support provided by a colleague (who provided me with a local authority contact name and supporting introductory email) that helped me to gain initial access to key personnel in the authority. For two of the three councils supporting this study, having some kind of inside information about the council's research processes or having a pre-existing relationship with staff members employed within the authority, significantly assisted the process of negotiating support for the research study (Kara, 2012).

It was not easy to obtain the support of three local authorities. Several unsuccessful approaches to councils were made before permission from a third local authority to proceed with the study, was gained. Some of the reasons councils gave for not supporting the study included: the imminence of an Ofsted inspection; the decision to no longer support external research applications unless they were applied for through the ACDS research application process;

the impact on staff of a difficult recent Ofsted evaluation; and the recent reorganisation of the council's children's services teams. On one occasion, a positive initial response, subsequently dissipated when two key staff members left the authority.

I originally intended to try to get three different types of local authority to participate in the research study but found this difficult to achieve, so then adopted a more pragmatic approach, broadening my search to include any type of third authority. I emailed groups of between five and seven authorities at a time at roughly three-monthly intervals until the support of a third local authority was obtained. By the time I succeeded in gaining permission from a third local authority to proceed with the study, I had emailed 31 local authorities in total including several county councils, unitary authorities and metropolitan borough councils, out of a potential 152 local authorities in England.

Contacting participants and obtaining consent

I was given the email addresses of the social workers who had expressed an interest in participating in the study by the delegated contact person in each authority. I subsequently emailed each practitioner directly (see Appendices 1, 2 and 4 for copies of the information sent) to introduce myself and request practitioners to contact me by phone or email if they were interested in taking part in the study. This was to ensure that social workers felt in a position to choose whether to make further contact or not, ensuring their right to withdraw from the study at any time, was respected (Creswell, 2013).

Where a positive response was received, participants were then sent a further email about two weeks before the agreed date for each interview, with additional research study information attached (see Appendices 2, 3, 4 and 5 for copies of this information). This was to enable participants to revisit the forms that explained the focus of the study but also to give practitioners the opportunity to see the additional contextual information I would be asking them to provide as part of the interview process. This was to ensure participants were in a position to give informed consent to their involvement in the study (Silverman, 2011). The research study forms were signed by myself and each participant on the day of the interview, after each participant had confirmed they were willing to proceed with the interview. All interviews took place in the offices of the councils involved in the study.

Participants were offered the choice of having their interview audio recorded or alternatively having written notes taken of the interview. This was because I was aware that the professional code of conduct for social workers (HCPC, 2017) as well as statutory (HM Government, 2018) and organisational guidelines meant that confidentiality of service user information was a significant area of concern.

As a researcher who is also an HCPC registered social worker myself, this was an issue I was also concerned about. I therefore wanted participants to have the choice about how the research study information was recorded. Some social workers indicated they were nervous about their interview being audio recorded but were still happy for this to be done. Other practitioners had questions about issues of anonymity, such as being concerned about using the actual first name of the child in their interview for example but were reassured that all transcribed data was anonymised and that all service user and participant names used in

the study or in subsequent publications and presentations, would be pseudonyms (see Appendix 7 for a list of participant pseudonyms).

I also stated that I would additionally use my own judgement (as a registered social worker as well as a researcher) to potentially omit transcribing the full audio content of sections of the interviews if some of the more detailed information provided was identified by me as being potentially too specific or personally identifying of the participant or service user, to be transcribed (such as intimate details of abuse, for example). After discussing these issues and clarifying any concerns, all ten interviewees agreed to their interviews being audio recorded.

Research ethics are an ongoing consideration, as the researcher is charged with doing no harm (Bran and Clarke, 2009) throughout all stages of the research process. Whilst ethical codes of conduct for researchers (UKRIO, 2009) and social workers (BASW, 2012) provide ethical guides for conduct in the form of fixed statements or principles, these principles do not always translate easily into unique practice situations. The researcher therefore must use their situated judgement (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) to decide how to apply ethical principles in specific research situations. Safeguarding service user and practitioner anonymity and confidentiality for example, was an area of significant concern so it was an issue I paid ongoing attention to throughout the whole of the study. The way I situationally addressed these issues in the later phases of the research study, will be discussed later.

Conducting the interviews

I began each interview by asking one main opening question:

> *Please can you tell me about one of your own personal practice experiences of doing either a s47 investigation and any follow up assessment...or undertaking a s17 assessment where you feel you managed to develop some kind of meaningful working relationship with a particular child or children within one particular family*

This question was chosen in order to invite an open-ended discussion of practitioners' experiences of relationship building with a particular child and family. I did not always use the additional list of word prompts contained in the interview guide, however (see interview guide, Appendix 4). This was because each interview generally took on a more dynamic life of its own, representing more of a *'co-relating (give and take) experience'* (Diekelmann and Diekelmann, 2009: 298) than the imposition of a fixed approach. The interview process was more like a '*professional conversation'* (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 77) between me as the *social worker-researcher*, and each interviewee.

I use the term *social worker-researcher* here, because my prior experiences of working as a local authority child and family social worker influenced to some degree, the nature and framing of the interview discussions. For example, I had a good pre-existing understanding of local authority processes, procedures, organisational structures and of legal and professional terminology. Whilst in some interviews I needed to ask for clarification of certain specific terms or for an explanation of organisational structures, mostly I did not need to interrupt the flow of the interview conversation for this purpose. The dialogue of the interviews also started from a common (tacit) professional base of

understanding of the social worker's role. The fact I was a registered social worker as well as a researcher (and thereby bound by the same professional social work code of conduct and ethics as the interviewees) may also have influenced the kinds of practice experiences practitioners chose to talk about and the amount of detail they were willing to share in interviews. However, it is not possible to know exactly what impact my social worker-researcher identity had on interviewees. I certainly responded to practitioners differently within each interview encounter.

I sometimes asked specific questions prompted by something an individual participant had said, and sometimes made comments or observations in response to a particular practice related point. I often asked participants to revisit specific aspects of their described experiences to obtain a more detailed account of the nature of a particular worker-child interaction and interjected in some interviews more than others. In a few interviews, I contributed interview comments where the roots of my understanding came from my own practice experiences, but this was less so in other interviews. In this way, each interview was a unique co-creation of knowing and understanding (Armour et al., 2009). A creative process of data generation through dialogue (Finlay, 2011).

This type of interview approach is congruent with an interpretive phenomenological understanding of the interview process. Interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology posits that the world is always perceived thorough each subject's own embodied point of view and that language inescapably reflects each individual subjects' '*taking up of a position in the world' (*Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 199). Researchers and participants therefore cannot escape their own subjective, embodied stance. My own pre-understandings (Heidegger, 2010) whether from my own experiences as a social worker or from other

aspects of my life, therefore inescapably impacted on the course of each interview.

As discussed in Chapter 2, from a phenomenological perspective, individuals only ever have a partial understanding of the world because individual horizons of understandings are temporally, historically and culturally situated (Gadamer, 2013). Each person remains continually open to other horizons of understanding, with horizons of the past continually fusing with present horizons to form new understandings. The process of undertaking the research interviews therefore involved a hermeneutic process of continually evolving understanding, generated through the co-constructed dialogue or conversation between myself (the researcher) and each interviewee. The term understanding is used in a hermeneutic sense here, to mean a way of *knowing* (an issue of epistemology) but also one that encompasses the ontological issue of *being*.

Ricoeur ontologically conceptualises hermeneutic understanding as *'a way of being and a way of relating to beings and to being'* (Ricoeur, 2008: 52). This reverses the Kantian approach of giving primacy to theory of knowledge over theory of being (Ricoeur, 2008). The verbal dialogue of the interview is seen from this hermeneutic and phenomenological perspective, as located in a unique, contextually and temporally situated, reality-in-common between researcher and participant (van Manen, 2014). Ultimately it is therefore impossible to separate out the impact of the researcher's and participant's prior understandings on the direction and focus of the interview. The understandings of the researcher and participant interact and fuse together in the co-construction of shared meaning (Gadamer, 2013). The verbal contributions made by both me (the sole researcher) and each interviewee are however recorded in the audio-file of each interview and in each transcript. This ensures

that the contributions of both parties can potentially be made visible to others. These audio and written recordings of the interviews provide a degree of accountability, transparency and auditability in respect of the interview process (Bryman, 2012; Yardley, 2015).

The research sample

During each interview, participants were asked to fill in a demographic and contextual information sheet (see Appendix 5). This information, with other additional contextual data obtained from interviewees, is summarised in the following sections of this chapter. This data provides an overview of: the types of local authority and team setting participants worked in; the amount of time interviewees spent doing assessments; interviewees' age, gender and length of pre-qualification and post-qualification experience of working with children and their families; and the approximate length of practitioner involvement with the child who was the central focus of the interview. Some demographic information about the children and families interviewees talked about, is also provided.

Local authorities and teams the participants worked in

Ten social workers were interviewed from three different local authorities. Two of the participating local authorities were Metropolitan Borough Councils. The third council was a Unitary authority. The three interviewees from the Unitary authority and three interviewees from one of the two Metropolitan Borough Councils, all worked in referral and assessment teams with one exception. One of these six interviewees was a senior practitioner who worked with families

across both the short-term referral and assessment and long-term teams within their authority.

In both of the above local authorities where there was a referral and assessment team structure in place, the referral teams dealt with all initial assessments of children and their families. Social workers in these teams worked within what I have termed an 'office duty' system where workers were responsible for collecting details about and responding to, every referral that the team received. Ongoing support for looked after children and their families was provided separately, by long-term teams of social workers working in other teams. In the third local authority involved in this study, the council's child and family teams were configured differently. All four interviewees from this Metropolitan Borough Council were employed in geographically based teams undertaking referral and assessment work on a rotational basis alongside long term casework with children and their families.

As a way of distinguishing between the three participating local authorities here and elsewhere in the thesis, the two authorities with a specialist referral and assessment team structure will herein be referred to as authorities A and B. The third authority (consisting of teams undertaking a duty and assessment role alongside longer term work with children and their families) will be referred to as local authority C. Of the four interviews completed in local authority C, one interview was with a social worker employed to work with children with complex and additional needs. This practitioner worked in a specialist children with disabilities team. However, this team still undertook the same social work role as the other locality-based teams in the authority, being responsible for undertaking both duty and longer-term work with children and their families.

Amount of time participants spent doing assessments

All research study participants were asked to estimate the percentage of time they spent doing assessments. Five of the six interviewees from local authorities A and B stated that they spent all (100%) of their time doing assessments. The single practitioner from authority B who reported a variation in the amount of time they spent doing assessments, stated they spent between 0% and 80% of their time on assessment work. This difference was due to their role as a senior practitioner, having responsibility for working on cases across both the duty and assessment teams and longer-term teams in the authority. The four interviewees from local authority C (where social workers undertook both short and longer-term work with families) variously estimated the amount of time they spent doing assessments as 10%, 17%, 50% and 70% of their overall time at work. One practitioner additionally remarked that having to spend 50% of their time doing initial assessments left them with little time for re-assessing the longer-term needs of other children on their caseload.

Information about participants: age, gender, pre and post-qualification experience

The ages of the social workers interviewed in this study ranged from 21-29 years to over 60 years of age. In terms of the length of their post qualification social work experience, interviewees ranged from having 0-2 year's post-qualified social work experience to having over 21 years of post-qualified social work experience. Eight of the social workers interviewed self-identified their gender as female and two, as male. Tables 1 and 2 below offer a numerical

overview of the age and amount of post-qualification experience respectively, of the ten social workers interviewed in this study.

Table 1: Ages of social workers interviewed

Age range of social workers	21-29yrs	30-39yrs	40-49yrs	50-59yrs	60-69yrs	
Number of participants	2	2	3	2	1	Total 10

I have provided a general overview of the ages, gender and length of social work experience of the interviewees instead of producing a composite pen picture for each individual participant. This is to reduce the likelihood of any contextual information provided in this chapter being combined with information later in the thesis, to produce a more detailed profile of an individual practitioner. I have similarly chosen not to specify the regions of England in which the three local authorities are located. I decided to use this approach because the local authorities and social workers who agreed to participate in this study, did so on the basis that their contributions would be anonymised. Every attempt has therefore been made to present these findings in such a way that neither the local authorities involved, individual social worker participants nor any of the service users that practitioners talked about in their interviews are easily identifiable, whilst ensuring that some contextual aspects of organisations and personal information about individual interviewees can still be provided.

Table 2: Number of years social work qualified

Years social work qualified	0-2	3-4	5-6	7-9	10-12	13-15	16-20	21+
Number of participants	3	2	2	1	1	0	0	1

Total participants = 10

In addition to their length of post qualification experience, seven out of ten interviewees had three or more years' experience of working with children or young people in one or more other types of employment role, prior to their employment as a qualified social worker. The range of prior child-related roles participants talked about during their interviews included working as a residential social worker, teaching assistant, nurse, support worker in a domestic abuse service, youth offending team worker, youth worker, substance misuse worker, family support worker, childminder and worker in a voluntary sector service supporting children and families.

In terms of enhancing the trustworthiness and credibility of the research (Lincoln et al., 2011), it is important to provide factual information about the nature of the research study sample. The need for transparency however (Yardley, 2015), needs to be considered alongside the ethical requirement that the researcher's actions should not cause harm to others, as for example when ensuring that the confidentiality of information provided by participants is respected (Silverman, 2013). Later in this chapter I explain how I managed issues of protecting the

confidentiality and anonymity of information that interviewed practitioners shared about themselves and the lives of the service users they worked with. Additionally, in findings chapters (4, 5, 6, and 7) where more detailed, individualised information about children and their families is shared, I have only included specific descriptive references to the age, gender or other individual attributes of social workers or family members, where I feel this information is of direct relevance to explicating my analysis or interpretations of the data.

Families and children the participants talked about

Participants were asked to share their experiences of working with one particular child within one family in detail, with the aim of generating rich, '*focused and full'* (Charmaz, 2009: 14) accounts of practitioner experiences of developing a meaningful working relationship with one particular child during an assessment. Most of the interview data generated in this study is therefore comprised of practitioner accounts of working with one particular child or sibling group and their families. Some practitioners did additionally refer to other experiences of worker-child relationship building. The contextual information about families provided in the next section, however, only summarises information about the ten central families or households the interviewees discussed. Where additional experiences of relationship building have been referred to by interviewees, this will be identified in-text.

In their research study interviews, social workers talked about working with families where there were a broad range of ages and numbers of children living within each household. Families ranged from having only one child to having up to six children living in the household at the time the child and family

assessment was undertaken. The youngest child social workers talked about in their interviews was aged two. The oldest children discussed were teenagers, including children up to the age of sixteen years. The aim of this study (see Introduction) was to explore social workers' experiences of relationship building with children under the age of eight years. The main focus of the analysis and interpretations of the data in this thesis therefore relate to interviewee experiences of relationship building with children between the ages of two and seven years.

In the majority (9 out of 10) of the households or families that formed the central account of each practitioner interview, the children practitioners worked with were living at home with their parent or carer at the time the practitioner first met with them. In the one remaining instance, the child had already been placed in foster care. On one occasion, an interviewee chose to talk about their experiences of working with a family whilst undertaking their final year placement as an unqualified social work student (within the same local authority where they were now employed as a qualified social worker) rather than about their current experiences. In all other instances, interviewees chose to talk about experiences of building relationships with children whilst employed in their current post.

Length of time practitioners worked with children and their families

Practitioners described experiences of making meaningful relationships with children when meeting together with a child on as few as two occasions, up to and including working with a child over a period of more than ten years. Most of the practice experiences interviewees talked about involved working with

children over a period of several weeks. The circumstances in which each family became known to social services such that a child and family assessment was required, were unique and varied and will be described in further in the next chapter, where I also explore practitioners' understandings of the organisational context of their practice and their assessment role.

Transcribing the interviews

My transcription style evolved over the course of conducting the interviews. I started off using a very detailed notational style but after completing further interviews, moved towards using a verbatim approach (see Appendix 6). I used a more detailed style of transcription initially, as I hoped I would be able to capture some of the *felt sense* (Gendlin, 2003) of the face to face interviews. The change in my transcription practice to a more verbatim style occurred partly because I discovered this was a very time-consuming process (transcribing the first interview took me four days), but more importantly because my understanding of the purpose of transcribing the interviews changed.

The change in my understanding of the purpose of the transcription related to an issue I wrestled with early on in the research process: how to capture emotions within written text. In one of the first few research study interviews I completed, I experienced a series of strong researcher-participant emotional interchanges over the course of the interview (feelings of resistance, shame, grief and loss for example) that would be described in psycho-social terms as representing transference and countertransference experiences (Megele, 2015). Despite the strong feelings evoked by the interview and the residual feelings that stayed with me for a considerable time after the interview ended,

when I came to transcribe this interview, I found these emotions were not tangibly present either within the audio recording of the interview, or in my written transcript.

At a logical, rational level I should of course have known this, but to experience such strong emotions in a face to face interview and then be unable to capture them in an audio recording or translate them into written text, was a significant point of learning for me and turning point in my transcription practice. This interview and transcription experience challenged a tacit assumption I had been unaware I was carrying around with me. I had hoped I would be able to somehow capture and transmit the intensity of the emotional experiences involved in social work in my interview transcripts. This interview experience helped me to realise that experiencing emotions was a much more ephemeral form of lived experience, where even the most detailed form of transcription could never capture the whole, embodied nature of lived experience. Nor could any audio recording wholly represent it. Emotions are conveyed through the gestalt of interpersonal interaction rather than through hearing or through transcribed words. It was the experiencing and subsequent transcribing of this interview, that enabled me to understand this (Gendlin, 1997).

I began to understand (as previously discussed in Chapter 2) that my transcripts were not representations of social workers' lived experiences of their practice but were rather my own textual *re-presentations* (Ricoeur, 2008) of practitioners' accounts of their practice experiences. Minutely detailed transcripts would therefore not necessarily bring me any closer to understanding the meaning of the interviews. I realised a verbatim style of transcription would be therefore be sufficient for the purpose and focus of my study. I also made the decision to

transcribe all the interviews myself. This was because I saw the process of transcription as an opportunity to reflect on and analyse the interviews.

Analysing and generating meanings from interviews

The process of analysing the social worker interviews involved listening and re-listening to the audio files, transcribing them and then reading and re-reading the transcripts of the interviews. Transcribing the audio files required me to play every audio recorded interview all the way through at least twice and often more than this, as I checked the accuracy of my transcribed text against the audio recording. The process of transcription was also a process of listening: of thinking about the meaning of the data and of noting down some of my initial understandings.

Initially, as I listened to the audio recording of each interview, I tried to be as open as possible to attending to whatever aspects of the interviews initially presented themselves to me as being important. I made notes in my research diary of any aspects of the interviews that initially resonated with me as being significant in some way: taking a *spontaneous* approach to analysing the data. I did not try to analyse *why* I selected any of these aspects as being significant at this point in the study. I sought only to capture my initial reactions to the data, hoping that these thoughts might offer some insights into or generate some understandings of the phenomenon of worker-child relationships. These reflective notes sat alongside other reflective jottings that included the notes I made sitting in my car after the end of each interview. The notes I made in the car after each interview were (as with my initial thoughts about the audio

recordings mentioned above) about attempting to capture some of my immediate responses to the interviews. For example, I made notes after each interview about some of the bodily and emotional types of practitioner and researcher responses that occurred during the interview. I subsequently began to generate meanings from the interviews through multiple 'listenings' to, and readings of, the audio recorded and transcribed interview data and jotted down my thoughts in my handwritten research diary.

Taking an interpretive phenomenological approach to analysing the transcripts involved exploring different ways of generating meaning from the transcripts through a subjective process of interpretation where I was the medium connecting with the textual data: seeing the data through a *'for-me*' perspective (Gadamer, 2004: 482). This analytical process was also a dialogical one, which involved the making of a series of *'interpretive conjectures'* (Gadamer, 2004: 481) towards the data. A hermeneutical understanding of the analytical process regards the transcribed interviews (and other data such as reflective diaries, books and journal articles) as representing only one part of the hermeneutical conversation, as the research study data ultimately '*speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter'* (Gadamer, 2004: 405) meaning myself, the researcher.

The process of creating meaning from the interviews therefore began with the embodied interview encounter between each interviewee and myself. This lived experience (Husserl, 2012) subsequently became re-presented in a series of different forms (such as in an audio recording and then as transcribed text) from which a series of meanings were generated. The lived experiences of each interviewee and myself during each research interview, were therefore gradually de-contextualised as events of *being*, to become events of speaking and

hearing, before being subsequently being re-contextualised as a written discourse. (See earlier discussions of this issue also, in Chapter 2).

This process of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation meant that my understanding of the original interview experience was no longer tied to the understanding of the interviewees. Instead, each reading or interpretation of the data represented my own temporal interpretation of *being-in-the world* (Heidegger, 2010). Each time I analysed the textual data, a new horizon of understanding was therefore being formed (Gadamer, 2004), opening a new representation of the world originally presented by speech, in the form of a new textual world or horizon of understanding '*in front of the text*' (Ricoeur, 2008: 82). In this way, the process of data analysis was a multi-horizonal process of analysis (Moustakas, 1994), where I gained new insights and understandings from experiencing, listening to and transcribing each interview and from reading through the text of each interview.

What counts as data?

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I continued to read, and sometimes re-read, a broad range of literature throughout the whole period of the research study. I often discovered new areas of knowledge between the completion of each interview. I attended seminars and training courses about different research methods (on narrative analysis and Heideggerian analysis for example), or on specific topics such as social pedagogy. The reading and face to face learning all contributed to my analyses and understandings of the research interviews and as such, constitute parts of the data used in this study. For example, my research diaries provided a chronological handwritten record

of my learning, thoughts and reflections over the course of the study. The diaries contained: my reflections on the interviews with participants; notes of my initial understandings of the audio recorded and transcribed data; my thoughts in advance of or after supervision meetings; and summaries of information gleaned from the training courses I attended. I also used my research diaries to record summaries of key information, ideas and quotes from all the books I read, and to record my different understandings and interpretations of the data. The research diaries also provided an audit trail of the process I followed, offering a source of accountability in addition to its use as a reflexive tool (King and Horrocks, 2010).

After the last interview was completed, I scanned through all my research diaries, summarising and condensing what I felt were the core understandings contained in each of these diaries into a single, 40-page diary. This was a process of *re-orienting* myself: looking back at where I had come from and thinking about where to go to next. Doing this enabled me to get an overview of the main facets of social worker-child relationships that had been explored so far, whilst giving me the opportunity to re-consider what ways of understanding social worker-child relationships now seemed to be either more (or potentially less) meaningful, important or relevant in relation to my chosen research focus at this point in the study. This was also about reducing the mass of information I had collected into more manageable units of understanding to focus on (Silverman, 2013).

Organising and interpreting the data

My process of analysis focussed primarily on analysing the data's meaning rather than its language (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) and on understanding the '*quality and texture'* (Willig, 2012: 22) of social workers' experiences of building relationships with young children. I initially looked at the data holistically by reading and analysing the interviews as whole interviews. I tried to take a very open approach to analysing the data, making a note of anything that spontaneously emerged from the data (see my discussion of this, earlier in this chapter).

I recorded my initial interpretations of the transcripts in my handwritten research diary but also in word documents. I found that some of the existential phenomenological categories I initially considered (see Chapter 2) as ways of organising and analysing the data did not actually easily 'fit' the interview data. I felt I was sometimes forcing the transcribed data into some of these categories and so subsequently ceased using several of these categories, only ultimately retaining the categories of *temporality* and *spatiality*. This was because I found these two categories conversely *did* provide meaningful ways of understanding social worker-child relationships. Taking this approach is congruent with existential-phenomenological research approaches used by other researchers, as it is acknowledged (see Ashworth, and Ashworth, 2003) that differing ranges of existential categories of the lifeworld are used by different phenomenological researchers, with researchers rarely using all features of the lifeworld in their analysis of human experience.

After all the research interviews were completed, I also changed my approach to storing, organising, and analysing the interview transcripts. After initially only

using word documents and my research diary to store and organise my analyses, I began to make use of Nvivo software to store the anonymised transcripts and for organising and storing different groupings of extracts of the transcribed data (Bazeley, and Jackson, 2013). (The Nvivo project where the interviews were stored was password-protected, to ensure the confidentiality of the transcripts). Using Nvivo was beneficial in that it enabled me to more easily and quickly sort the interview data in into different patternings, such as for example when I wanted to look at all interviewee comments about organisational issues according to the type of local authority or team the practitioners worked in. Nvivo also enabled me to check for the occurrence of specific words, such as when I wanted to explore the frequency with which participants used a particular term such as the word *consent* for example.

I initially organised the interview data in Nvivo under some of the main thematic headings that I used in my previous handwritten analyses (such as *temporality* and *spatiality* for example). Subsequently, I used different groupings or categories to look across all of the interviews, in order to explore the data in numerous different ways. One example of this was when I grouped together all the interviewee transcript extracts that related to social worker-child first encounters, for example.

When organising the interview transcripts into different thematic patterns using Nvivo and even when doing word searches, I chose to always retain the broader context of the data. I therefore did not employ a line by line coding approach but organised the data into much larger chunks of text, what has been described as using a *lumping* rather than *splitting* approach to organising and analysing data (see Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). This was to ensure that the contextual meaning of the data was retained when I divided it into different

patternings. These chunks of text were not randomly selected and separated out from the whole transcripts, but were consciously selected '*meaning units'* (Giorgi, 2009: 143) that I identified as I identified a new meaning emerging each time I read through each transcript.

Nvivo software was also useful for enabling me to identify the frequency with which certain words or phrases appeared in different interviewee accounts and to find their contextual location quickly within each transcript. I was not using this approach for the purpose of counting the frequency of words or phrases for their own sake. It was to enable me to locate information about particular phenomena quickly, so I could then explore the *qualities* and importance of these phenomena, rather than to simply note their quantity (Bazeley, 2013). One example of this was when exploring the issue of worker and child *comfortableness* (see discussions in Chapter 5).

I tried many ways of making sense of the data. I discovered some groupings of meanings that seemed to be useful or meaningful, whilst other patternings were explored but then abandoned. I tried for example, to use some of the analytical categories commonly used in other existential phenomenological analyses of data (Galvin and Todres, 2013; Dahlberg et al., 2008; van Manen, 2014) such as *spatiality*, *temporality*, *embodiment* and *intersubjectivity*, in order to do more focussed readings of whole transcripts. Whilst some of these categories (spatiality and temporality) appeared useful as ways of understanding the data, other existential categories seemed less useful for explicating the nature of social worker-child relationships.

I looked for commonalities across different interviews as well as exploring the meanings generated within each individual transcript. Building up of a range of

different understandings of the interviews was an iterative and incremental process. It involved the generation and subsequent synthesis of increasingly diverse threads of thought and understanding from the interviews and other sources of reading (Bazeley, 2013). Some of these threads of meaning were clearly connected to one another, with other areas of meaning seeming patchy or unconnected. In order to develop a more coherent pathway of understanding through these disparate understandings of the data, I had to make decisions about what interpretations I believed were of most importance or relevance to the focus of my research study: explicating the nature of social worker-child relationships.

Making meanings and choosing interpretations

The process of analysis and interpretation was iterative and circular. I was influenced for example, by reading social pedagogy (Cameron and Moss, 2011), human geography (Ingold, 2000), material culture (Miller, 2010) and specific pieces of psycho-social literature (Stern, et al.,1998; Benjamin, 2004; Stern, 2004) in the way I engaged with the data. Reading these different theories impacted on the process of analysis, encouraging me to explore social worker-child relationships up close, by analysing small moments of worker-child interaction described in the interviews, as well as to look at worker-child relationships from a greater distance so that environmental as well as individual understandings of social worker-child relationships were explored.

Ultimately, however, I chose to use phenomenological theoretical lenses to interpret the data (see findings chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7), using insights from the work of Heidegger (2010) and Merleau-Ponty (2012, 2014) to consider the

embodied, intercorporeal, spatial and temporal nature of social worker-child relationships. I also used insights from Levinas's (1981) phenomenological exploration of the ethical nature of human *being,* to explore the ethical nature of social worker-child relationships.

My journey towards using Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas began with sustaining a position of '*engaged openness'* (Diekelmann and Diekelmann, 2009: 11) to the emergence of different meanings. This was beneficial in ensuring that a range of different interpretations of the interviews were considered when reading through the interview transcripts. The diverse literature I used, helped me to gain deeper understandings of, and further insights into, the nature of practitioner-child relationships but this did make the process of trying to establish a cohesive overall narrative for explicating worker-child relationships more difficult.

Some of the additional ways I looked at the data for example, included looking at the interview transcripts from the perspective of what surprised or troubled me (Ricoeur, 1970) and producing a narrative account or story (Gunaratnam, 2009) of the participant interviews, to try to encapsulate a contextualised understanding of each participant's account of how they generated a meaningful working relationship with a child. I found writing short, one to two-page narrative accounts helpful, as they offered a holistic way of understanding and encapsulating the unfolding nature of practitioner-child relationships. I subsequently used one of these narrative accounts (see *Susan* and *Harry* in Chapter 6) as an exemplar (Benner, 1994) in order to explore the spatial-material nature of social worker-child relationships.

Ultimately, selecting one meaning inevitably means closing off other potential meanings. I therefore had to choose what interpretations I regarded as being of most importance or as having the most value in relation to explicating the phenomenon I was exploring. For me, taking a phenomenological approach meant not seeking for hidden meanings underlying the text (see Chapter 2) but instead trying to focus on looking at and questioning what was conversely lying nearby (Heidegger, 2011) such as understanding for example, how social workers and children physically approached (or did not approach) one another.

Adopting an interpretive phenomenological approach also meant undertaking a constant questioning of my pre-suppositions (Husserl, 2012; Heidegger, 2011). I critically considered what aspects of each interview represented descriptions of meaningful social worker-child relations and why interviewees or myself as the researcher, felt particular happenings constituted meaningful worker-child relational experiences. This process of dialogical questioning led me to question further what I felt (or had tacitly assumed) was meant by the term 'meaningful' in relation to relationships between social workers and children. It also meant questioning why the generation of relationships between social workers and children might (or conversely might not) be regarded important.

This process of questioning led me towards a deeper exploration of phenomenological, existentially oriented literature and to additionally utilise insights from work of Levinas who explores the ethical nature of human *being* (1981), alongside phenomenological insights from the work of Merleau-Ponty (2014) and Heidegger (2010). These aspects of phenomenological literature were central to the way I made sense of or interpreted the interviews, as they helped me to explore the intercorporeal, spatial, temporal and ethical nature of human *being.* An exploration of human *being* became a foundational aspect of

my whole research approach, as from a phenomenological viewpoint, the nature of *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 2010) is fundamental to understanding the nature and meaning of human relationships and thereby also, to understanding social worker-child relationships.

Ensuring the quality of the research study

Adopting a phenomenological understanding of the world means regarding every person's view of the world as unique and embodied but if this research study to be regarded as having credibility, some criteria need to be referenced to demonstrate how the quality of my research methods and research approach used, have been upheld over the course of undertaking the study (Silverman, 2011).

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there are numerous lists of criteria that have been suggested for evaluating the quality of qualitative research (see Bryman, 2012). These lists all offer different guidelines for judging how well the research process has been carried out, as well as for assessing whether the findings produced are useful and trustworthy (Yardley, 2015). Earlier in this chapter, I have indicated how I have attempted to: make the research process as transparent as possible (Applebaum, 2012); provide a reflexive account of the research process (Rolfe, 2006); and maintain an accountability or audit trail of the research process followed (Lietz et al., 2006). This section therefore focuses on providing a more detailed account of how I have tried to ensure the quality of the research in relation to the process of interpreting the interviews.

It is sometimes suggested that researchers should member check or validate their interpretations of the interviews with interviewees, in order to increase the trustworthiness of their findings by ensuring the researcher's impressions and findings are congruent with the views of those interviewed (Bryman, 2012). I chose not to do this, as my interpretivist understanding of the process of creating meaning from the data is that the researcher and interviewees will each interpret and analyse the text of the interview from their own temporal and embodied perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Checking out my interpretations of the transcribed data with interviewees therefore would not result in the production of a more 'correct' or 'truthful' account of the phenomenon of practitioner-child relationships, as findings are produced in specific contexts (Finlay, 2011).

Whilst there may have been moral grounds for sharing my interpretations with participants (Ashworth, 1993), at the start of the study I had already decided it would not be practicable or feasible to do so, given the workload pressures social workers were under. This opportunity was therefore not offered to participants, but interviewees were offered the opportunity to receive a copy of the transcript of their interview.

It is suggested that using the different standpoints and the perspectives of different researchers during the process of interpreting the data, can improve the quality of the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). For me as a lone researcher this was not an option. Instead, I shared short, anonymised extracts of interviews with my supervisory team and with small groups of PhD students at different points in the study in order to get different perspectives on the data. I also shared my written analyses and interpretations of the interviews, with my supervisory team. These two processes added interpretive depth to my findings

(van Manen, 2014), as getting other views and discussing different interpretations helped me to become more aware of (and sometimes challenged) my own interpretations of the interviews. For example, on one occasion I shared a short (anonymised) extract of what I felt was a positive practitioner-child interchange with a small group of other PhD students for the purposes of shared analysis and discussion. I was shocked when other members in the group interpreted the social worker-child encounter as controlling.

This was an extremely valuable experience, as it helped me to recognise that because I was a social work practitioner as well as a researcher, I had been tending to shy away from exploring the coercive nature of the social work role and how it underpinned practitioner-child relationships. It was hard for me to acknowledge the degree of inequality of power relations inherent in child and family social work. Sharing this interview extract with others, helped me to face and acknowledge this issue. It also enabled me to start seeing some of the things I had not previously wanted to see in the interview data. This and other dialogical processes (such as doing presentations about my research, for example) helped to deepen my understanding of the interviews and added a degree of interpretive rigour (Lincoln et al., 2011) to the process of generating meanings from the data and in selecting what meanings to privilege. Ultimately however, the decisions and responsibility about what interpretations and analyses (or ‘findings’) to present in this study, are mine.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the process of undertaking the research study including how I: undertook the literature review; gained ethical approval for the study; recruited and interviewed participants; transcribed, analysed and interpreted the data; attempted to sustain a transparent, reflexive and rigorous research approach; and ensured the quality of the research. The next chapter provides a summary of the key findings of this study. It also offers an overview of the organisational context within which interviewees formed relationships with children.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS: SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND OVERVIEW OF THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

The analysis and interpretations of the ten interviews with English local authority social workers who shared their experiences of initial and subsequent relationship building with young children during initial assessments, are discussed in this, and three subsequent chapters of the thesis. This chapter presents a brief overview of the key findings or interpretations presented in detail in subsequent findings chapters of the thesis. The chapter then focuses on the organisational context of social worker-child relations, considering the already-situated nature of social worker-child relationships. The sense of urgency underpinning the assessment context and the organisationally and procedurally driven imperatives that require social workers to form rapid relationships with children whilst undertaking assessments, is explored, as these form the already-situated practice context within which social worker-child relationship building takes place.

Summary of key findings

Echoing the findings of previous studies, the interviews confirmed that social workers attempt to build meaningful relationships with children by: *talking-together-with* children in a reciprocative manner (Clarke, 2005, Bryderup and Frorup, 2012); using encouraging noise and words to indicate giving children their full emotional as well as physical attention (Petrie, 2011a); using humour

(Jordan, 2017); meeting together with children in familiar spaces and alongside familiar people (Adams and Leshone, 2016; McMullin, 2017); doing shared activities and sharing 'selves' with children (Smith, 2012; Roesch-Marsh et al., 2015); and creating opportunities for social worker-child agency (Esser, 2016; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2019) and social worker child reciprocity (Petrie, 2011b). Social workers interviewed this study also built relationships with children by moving through and using spaces (Ferguson, 2008, 2018b; Jeyasingham, 2014, 2017); using everyday objects (Ferguson, 2010a, Miller, 2010); and by seeking to narrow the physical-spatial gap between workers and children by getting physically down and alongside children (Lishman, 2009; Petrie, 2011a).

In addition, the practitioners interviewed in this study provided further details of practices that have received only limited attention in previous studies. These included further understanding of the child's embodied agency in directing the relationship building process; in co-creating laughter, humour a period of problem free talk and emotional tone; in co-directing use of private and semi-private spaces to meet; using a process of physical-spatial negotiation; and through collaboratively generating a different type of bodily movement to change the emotional tone of encounters. Interviewees' ability to spatially-corporeally 'disappear' from space was additionally identified as a practice used by workers during assessment encounters. Deeper insight was also provided on how to co-create common ground and reciprocity from a position of respecting children first and foremost, as fellow human beings, rather than seeing them primarily as 'children'. The inseparable personal-professional nature of understandings of the appropriateness of touch as a factor influencing workers' and children's comfortableness with the use of touch, was also identified.

Through the iterative process of drawing theoretical insights from the data, as described in Chapter 3, three themes emerged that can deepen the theoretically grounded understanding of these practices. First, the spatially situated and the embodied physical-emotional nature of practitioner-child relationships can be understood through a lens of *intercorporeity* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) where interviewed practitioners are perceived as working together with young children and others to co-create a *comfortable relational environment* for each worker-child encounter. Second, the temporal nature of human *being* with regard to worker-child relationships can be understood through the lens of *lived time* (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2012) and the temporal enactment of ethics (Levinas, 1981) when practitioners are temporally present-in-the moment with children; sustaining a personal-professional form of presence; and ethically managing the tensions between time constraints and personal-professional ways of *being* with children in moment by moment social worker-child relationship building. Third, intercorporeal (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) and ethical (Levinas, 1981) forms of presencing can be drawn into the existential sense of '*being-together-with'* (Heidegger, 2010) in order to understand how to facilitate the co-creation of meaningful practitioner-child relationships when practitioners are in different temporal moments of relationship building including moments of anger, chaos, joyfulness and mutual recognition. These three theoretically informed themes and related practice are explored in detail in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

Using an interpretive phenomenological research approach means foregrounding the often taken-for-granted background landscape of everyday life in order to consider the relationship of persons to the world (Leonard, 1994). As discussed in Chapter 2, Heidegger regarded individuals as always existing in

a world that already culturally-historically precedes them, an understanding also shared by Merleau-Ponty. In order to understand practitioner practices in context, the next section therefore explores the already-situated set of relationships, organisational practices and professional discourses that interviewed practitioners described within their accounts of relationship building.

The cultural-organisational context

Echoing practitioner accounts in previous studies, the interviewees described the challenges of: the referral and assessment context of interviewees' work (APPGC, 2017); organisational thresholds and levels of risk (Benbeishty et al., 2015; Bunting et al., 2018); the in and out nature of assessment (Action for Children, 2018); caseloads and time (Forrester et al., 2013); and the rapid nature of initial social worker-child encounters. Phenomenological theoretical understandings are used in this section to help illuminate the ways in which these contexts impacted on interviewees attempts to building meaningful relationships with children through impacting on the possibilities for building meaningful relationships.

Learning from Heidegger (2010), who uses the term *facticity* to refer to the pre-existing limits or *thrownness* of human existence, the above contexts within which social worker-child relationships were being developed can be understood as the pre-existing historical and cultural context that human beings are thrown into as part of *being-in-the-world*. In this study, interviewee accounts of relationship building contained references to the impact of pre-existing organisational and cultural factors on the possibilities for relationship building, with the already legislatively, organisationally and procedurally defined nature of

the social work role appearing to shape, to some degree, some of the parameters of practitioner-child interaction. In addition, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the way in which individuals are inescapably situated within a social, historical and cultural '*field or dimension of existence*' (2012: 379) where current moments of lived experience always contain some background traces of past (as well as future) horizons of meaning that project themselves upon present experiences, can also help to foreground the way in which organisational and cultural factors can temporally permeate into, and impact on, present interviewee experiences of relationship building. Interviewees' experiences of elements of their cultural-organisation context are therefore detailed below, to provide context for the following chapters where interviewee experiences of worker-child relationship building are discussed in further detail.

The referral and assessment context of worker-child relationships

In this study, interviewee accounts of relationship building contained references to the impact of pre-existing organisational and cultural factors, on the possibilities for relationship building, with the already legislatively, organisationally and procedurally defined nature of the social work role appearing to shape some of the parameters of practitioner-child interaction. As outlined in Chapter 3, social workers interviewed in this study worked in two different types of organisational environments: a duty and assessment team where the practitioner’s role was to complete short term, initial safeguarding investigations and assessments, and a geographically based team where practitioners undertook child protection duty work alongside doing longer term assessment and intervention work with families. Interviewees within both types

of team environment described practitioner experiences of taking referrals and undertaking duty assessments where issues of concern were raised about children being potentially at risk of significant harm. Interviewees spoke about building relationships with children where a child was referred in order to assess children's exposure to: potential female genital mutilation; physical assault and injury by a parent; domestic abuse and multiple family issues of neglect, sexual, emotional and physical abuse. Also, one referral related to a parental wish to relinquish a child born prematurely, as it became apparent the child was likely to have significant ongoing care needs.

In responding to an office duty referral, practitioners cited experiences of needing to undertake a *same day* visit to see children to assess their wellbeing and to identify if there were any immediate potential safeguarding issues. Interviewees linked the necessity of providing a same day assessment response in relation to potential safeguarding concerns, to the legally underpinned nature of the social work role. For example, interviewee *Sheila* described an immediate visit to see a child at their school after receiving a telephone referral whilst on office duty.

> *It was a section 47 inquiry…the four-year-old had gone to the toilet at school and had not been able to fasten his top button on his trousers properly so the teacher had tried to help him and he'd lifted his top up and noticed that he had some severe marks all over his body*

Whilst in some practice circumstances, including the one described above, the nature of the initial concerns in respect of the children's wellbeing was already clear, in other instances (as described by *Karen* below) the degree and nature of the concerns could be more ambiguous and the referral information, more limited.

It came in on duty...it was really unclear whether it was going to be a section 47 or a section 17 because the details on it were that mum had gone into school [the school made the referral to social services after the mother reported an incident of domestic abuse to a member of staff]...we didn't really know

Whilst most practitioner same day meetings with the child and other family members were in response to duty referrals, interviewees also described meeting the child and their family a few days after the initial referral was received by the social work team. Practitioners mostly did not directly explain the reason why they either needed to see the child on the same day or within a few days of receiving the referral, but those interviewees who did proffer a degree of explanation, cited the response time as being influenced by organisational timescales. Practitioner *Sophie* for example, contextualised her visit to three-year-old *Maya* a few days after receiving the referral as related to organisational procedures.

The case was referred through midwifery there's a pan-[name of local authority] protocol where if its identified at midwifery or anywhere really if there's concerns of FGM [female genital mutilation] in this case mum had...presented at midwifery pregnant...and through screening questions disclosed that she had FGM as a child she already had a [age of child] called [name of child]...the initial visit was to be completed within ten days of the initial referral [this ten day timescale refers to the local authority's own protocol or organisational timescale for completing the visit]

Same day responses appeared to be related to the degree and immediacy of the perceived risk to the wellbeing of the child. Practitioners cited section 47 (of the Children Act 1989) as constituting the main reason a same day assessment response was required. The term section 47 (s47) appeared to be used by

interviewees in their accounts, as a shorthand way of indicating the existence of a possible immediate child protection issue, '*it was a section 47 I went out'* (*Sophie,* discussing working with a second family). The immediacy of safeguarding concerns can be seen, for example, in *Kate*'s description of responding to a police referral about the physical injury of a child.

> *The police referred it to us - so they'd arrested dad during the day and me and mum and [name of child] met at the hospital*.

In a few instances, practitioner accounts of relationship building took place in a slightly different assessment context where the practitioner was taking over responsibility for working with a family from a social work colleague. In these instances, prior information about the family (in agency records) was available to interviewees in advance of their first meetings with children. This was because an assessment of the family's circumstances had been completed during a previous episode of social work involvement with the family. Practitioner accounts of relationship building in these circumstances did not contain the same sense of urgency, as can be seen in the account given by interviewee *John* below.

> *It was a handover from another worker in another team at team around the child level...at that time it was family dysfunction not attending school so much, family stress, mum asking for help and a willingness to want to improve things really around school and arguing and fighting and then...the older lad had some sexualised behaviour...and nobody had really resolved that and it was some time since that had happened*

This lower level of perceived risk appeared to impact on the sense of urgency experienced by interviewees in relation to conducting the assessment. For example, the handover of responsibility for working with a family described by

Susan, took place in a planned manner and with little sense of urgency, as the child had already been placed in foster care and consequently was perceived to be at less risk of immediate harm.

> *When I first met him [the child] I went out with [name of worker] who has just left this week...so I asked her to come and introduce me so we arrived at the house on the [date] about mid-morning*

John similarly explained that the family's circumstances at the point of one case handover, were not regarded as constituting what he termed a *'child protection'* level of concern, as the family had already been assessed by the previous social worker as requiring ongoing family support services rather than an immediate child protection intervention. *John* also used the phrase '*team round the child level'* in his discussion of the circumstances of the case handover, as a way of explaining that the level of risk to the child and their family constituted a lesser degree of risk than that of an immediate child protection concern. Social worker-child initial encounters in this study were described as already taking place then, within different types of practice contexts where the degree of urgency to meet with the child and the level of perceived risk to the child was already differently shaping the nature of the initial social-worker-child encounter through the legally and procedurally defined nature of the social work role. As noted above, interviewees' used terminology such as '*team around the child level'* (*John*), *'section 17'* (*Karen*) or '*it was a section 47'* (*Sophie*). This reflects a form of professional assessment language that has its origins in the legislation underpinning the social work role and is also found in statutory safeguarding guidance.

The tendency of practitioner accounts of relationship building to be situated within crisis-based assessment contexts was undoubtedly related to the nature

of interviewees' organisational role, as the majority of interviewees worked in referral and assessment teams. However, interviewee accounts could also be regarded as to some degree reflective of broader practice patterns identified elsewhere. These practice patterns include the overall shift of social work priorities away from preventative work and towards more crisis-based interventions (Munro, 2011; Corby et al, 2012) and the increased tendency towards focussing solely on child protection concerns (APPGC, 2017). Interviewees accounts at least, do not contradict this view.

Thresholds, timescales and assessments

Interviewees commented on the organisational-procedural impact of the requirement for local authorities to define fixed thresholds for the provision of early intervention, child in need and child protection services (HM Government, 2018). All three local authorities set longer timescales (up to 45 days) for the completion of assessments where the initial practitioner assessment seemed to indicate a child protection (s47) type of situation, compared with shorter timescales (typically between 10 and 25 working days depending on the authority) where the initial practitioner assessment seemed to indicate that the family's circumstances fitted child in need (s17) or universal services criteria but did not reach s47 thresholds. For example, one practitioner stated, '*the aim of our team is to do assessments in ten to fifteen working days*' whilst another interviewee from local authority B explained:

> *In cases where it doesn't go to a strategy meeting or an initial conference we would complete the assessment within – the longest time is 45 days but really its more fifteen to twenty five and then we'll either transfer or close the case to social care.*

So the average time is probably 3 weeks we'd be involved for I think

An interviewee from local authority A echoed this 45-day timescale, but also indicated flexibility, stating:

We have a 15-day assessment and I think I must have completed it within the 15 to 20 days, so it was quite a quick turnaround

This interviewee stated the assessment could be completed over a slightly longer time period if the worker presented a case to their manager that additional time was required to obtain all the relevant assessment information. The onus, however, was placed on the social worker to argue the case for being allowed to take extra time to complete the assessment. The default organisational expectation found in interviewee accounts from all three authorities, was that initial assessments of families perceived by practitioners as fitting the local authority's threshold categories of child in need or early intervention, should be completed somewhere within 10 and 25 working days.

For interviewees in this study, then, social worker-child relationships took place within an already-situated legislative, organisational and procedural context that to some degree generated initial parameters for practitioner-child relationships, in terms of the likely length of the working relationship and in relation to the (in some instances) relative sense of urgency with which practitioners felt they needed to arrange to meet with children for the first time due to the professional categorisation of the child's presenting situation as one that constituted a 'child protection' level of concern.

Partial understandings of needs and conducting 'in and out' assessments

In all of the practice instances of relationship building shared by practitioners in this study, whether social workers were responding to an office duty referral or to a case handover situation, interviewees reported having some degree of prior knowledge about the family and understanding of the immediate circumstances of concern. This knowledge was partial and often fragmented in nature, both in respect of new referrals and where families may have been previously been known to or involved with social services, as illustrated by practitioner *Susan's* comments below.

> *He [the child] was removed at crisis point...since that time he had three different social workers who were agency who then left...I was asked to just pick it up and run with it needed a full child and family assessment*

Interviewees also made references to families being referred and then subsequently re-referred to social services on several occasions after initial social work involvement with the family ended. Practitioner *Helen* for example, talked about a family who were re-referred to the team via the office duty system, after a previous period of social work involvement had ended.

> *It came in he got an injury and said that mum had done it and six months prior to that there had been another sibling of his that had an injury who said mum had done it and the finding from that medical investigation was that it was unlikely to be a non-accidental injury and then this one prompted another section 47*

This pattern of families being referred and re-referred to social services and families experiencing episodic short-term social work interventions at points of crisis rather than longer, more consistent periods of support, has been

recognised as an issue of concern elsewhere (Troncoso, 2017; Action for Children, 2018). As in the instance described by practitioner *Helen* above and in her additional comments below, one consequence of this type of episodic pattern of social care involvement is it can be difficult for social workers to obtain a cohesive and detailed picture of the nature of the family's life and functioning and to get to the bottom of the range and depth of concerns regarding children's wellbeing.

> *It's been kind of very kind of in and out and if you its only when you sort of back track...over that sort of two or three years there has been that sort of in assessments and the kind of (pause) mistake that they need parental support that they need a family support worker but that's not happened, staying closed and sort of back in so lots of too-ing and fro-ing lots of dv [domestic violence] referrals between her and partner*

The fragmented nature of children's services knowledge about some families was also perceived as being linked to frequent staff changes that were experienced within some social work teams, as seen in the previously cited comments by *Susan,* reiterated below.

> *He had three different social workers who were agency who then left...I was asked to just pick it up and run with it needed a full child and family assessment*

The consequence of frequent staff changes for the depth and quality of child and family assessments was identified by *Susan* in this instance, as resulting in an incomplete assessment of the child and family's circumstances. *Susan* consequently felt she had to in effect, complete the child and family assessment all over again.

Issues of staff turnover and the need for local authorities to use agency staff to cover vacant social work posts has been recognised as an issue of concern in relation to children and families social work (Baginsky, 2013) and has been identified as impacting on the quality of child welfare services (DCSF, 2009; National Audit Office, 2016). Ofsted for example, noted that authorities rated as inadequate had ongoing staff recruitment and retention issues (Ofsted, 2018). Frequent changes of social worker have also been identified as negatively impacting on the quality of social worker-child relationships, with consistency of staff found to be important for the development of trusting worker-child relationships (APPGC, 2017).

Caseloads, time and assessments

The issue of practitioner caseloads or workloads featured in interviewee accounts of relationship building in all three authorities involved in the study. An increase in interviewee caseloads was seen as negatively impacting on the time practitioners had to complete assessments and potentially also, on the depth of assessment reports. The number of cases social workers were expected to work with, impacted on the amount of time available to practitioners to work with each individual case. An example of this can be seen in the instance described below, by a practitioner from local authority C.

> Practitioner: *There was a lot of work spent with each individual child...each of them did have their own plan drawn around their own issues, wishes and feelings. Would I have the same amount of time and effort with a caseload of 25 I don't know. I had a caseload of about 10 at that time.*
>
> Researcher: *What's your caseload now then?*

> Practitioner: At w*orst it's been 25. It's about 15 at the moment...I got a bit overloaded and then the team manager recognised that 'oh you've got too many allocations'*

Research into the impact of social worker caseloads, has similarly found that the number of cases practitioners have, determines the amount of time workers have available to spend with children and families (Forrester et al., 2013) with high caseloads being seen as a barrier towards the development of quality relationships (Barnes, 2012, Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018). Conversely, more manageable caseloads have been seen to support good outcomes (Ofsted, 2017; Sebba et al., 2017).

For interviewees in this study, making meaningful worker-child connections took a longer time with some children than with others and interviewees recognised that more time was needed to build a meaningful connection with some children.

> Researcher: *What things might lead you to <u>not</u> being able to form a meaningful relationship with a child*
>
> Azeem: *I think some of it could be down to not having the time obviously if you're under pressure having a caseload or you don't have enough time to because you won't always get children that are going to engage from the get go so they may need that more time...*
>
> Researcher: *Are you allowed as a worker to ask or more time if you think it is needed*
>
> Azeem: *Yeah I think I am <u>now</u> I think but if I would when I first started, I don't think I would have maybe had the confidence or I would have lacked my own kind of-kind of placing importance <u>on</u> that. Just getting it done because we need to get it done because my manager wants it in*

Time was seen as a precious commodity by interviewees, with a lack of time for worker-child relationship building being cited as an issue of concern. Practitioners felt they were not always able to exercise their professional judgement in terms of being able to specify or have professional control over the differing amounts of time needed to build meaningful relationships with individual children. This was because practitioners had to obtain the permission of their manager if they felt additional time was needed to build a relationship with a particular child. Asking for more time to complete assessments in respect of individual children was, however, also related to levels of professional confidence and practitioners' understanding of the importance of taking extra time in order to build meaningful relationships with children.

The unprepared nature of social worker-child initial encounters

Regardless of whether interviewees recounted the social work assessment context of social worker-child relationship building as starting from a same day referral, a case handover, or through responding to a less urgent assessment situation, social worker accounts of their first face to face encounters with children were often described as taking place in circumstances where the children had not had much, or any, prior notification of or preparation for their encounter with the practitioner.

> Helen: *Yeah I mean there's one very recent one where I had to my first introduction to the child was with the police officer... it came in [on duty] he got an injury and said that mum had done it...*
>
> Researcher: *So had he already gone home from school then?*

Helen: *No he was still at school*

Whilst children may receive little or no notification that they are about to meet a social worker, practitioners themselves similarly had little time to prepare for their first encounters with children. Interviewees indicated the amount of time they had to prepare for their first meetings with children was often limited by the urgent nature of the assessment response needed. Social worker *Helen* for example, explained she only had a brief amount of time available to read through and absorb the existing (already known) information about one family she worked with, before needing to go out and do the initial investigation in response to a duty referral.

> *I knew that given prior to sort of a very brief scan of the records and thought there's more going on here...there was no current involvement...there had been quite significant mental health issues with the eldest...mum had moved areas about four times in refuges, violent relationships*

Practitioner accounts of relationship building were generally situated within an assessment context where the social worker was having to leave their office quickly, to meet with children and other family members for the first time in order to glean further information about any wellbeing concerns. This investigative aspect of the social work role meant practitioners were entering relatively uncertain and unknown relational environments with the aim of obtaining further information about family members and their circumstances. This was in order to clarify the existence and nature of any safeguarding concerns as fast as possible. One example of this can be seen in the referral situation described by practitioner *Azeem* below.

> *It was a referral from the police there was a domestic abuse incident between parents mum had disclosed a history of*

domestic abuse and children had also disclosed physical abuse by father so the immediate safeguarding was done via the EDT team [social work emergency duty team] so we came into work on Monday and I was allocated the case as a section 47...so during their initial section 47 the social worker on EDT had spoken to the children...so they'd initially kind of captured some of the information in terms of their concerns but because of their kind of team constraints etcetera it wasn't all addressed ...the first time we meet we may need to get everything and you know we might not be able to go back because of the nature of our job so it's just kind of there and then that instant kind of you know the way they are that's how you would tailor your approach.

The urgency of assessment response needed and lack of time available for *Azeem* and other social workers to prepare for the first worker-child encounter was additionally linked in some interviews, to the time of day the referral was received.

Researcher: *So you went out as like a duty call*

Karen: *It was a duty visit yeah*

Researcher: *So what time of day was it*

Karen: *Three o'clock just before school finished*

Even when the practice situation described was not a duty referral but instead involved a handover of case work responsibility from one practitioner to another, the amount of time practitioners had to prepare for working with a family was not necessarily much greater. Interviewee *John* for example, expressed a feeling of almost being *thrown into* a relatively unknown practice situation as his experience of the first meeting with family members.

> *Well yeah I met the mum and the dad at a team around the child meeting. A great handover [ironic tone] just go to the meeting chair the meeting... 3rd week [working in the team] whatever*

This professional-organisational relational landscape of uncertainty and of the fast-paced nature of practice, has been commented on elsewhere (see for example, Forrester et al., 2013), with the consequence of this for practitioner-child relationship building being described by interviewees as creating a need for workers to form rapid relationships with young children.

Conclusion

Interviewees accounts of their lived experiences relationship building were similarly situated within descriptions of a broader, pre-existing cultural-organisational relational landscape characterised by: the short-term nature of social worker-child assessment relationships; a lack of time available to practitioners to prepare for worker-child first encounters; the need to act quickly in order to provide a fast initial assessment and investigative response; and the need for practitioners to meet the child and other family members whilst possessing only a limited and fragmented knowledge about the family's circumstances and about the nature of any child wellbeing concerns.

Interviewee descriptions of the cultural-organisational contexts of their work also appeared to reflect wider social work practice norms about the nature of risks that are in need of urgent assessment. Some organisations added further time pressures by setting additional assessment deadlines for practitioners. The sense of urgency felt by social workers in this study could be relieved in situations where previous workers or interviewees already had some contact

with the family, or prior knowledge of families' circumstances. Social worker knowledge in these practice instances still tended to be partial, but conversely, turnover of agency staff could also lead to gaps in knowledge of families.

Despite the challenging circumstances of crisis point, lack of time, tight timescales and uncertain environments, the interviewed social workers gave accounts of attempting to, and sometimes seemingly succeeding in building meaningful relationships with young children. The next three chapters explore what strategies interviewees employed in response to these challenging circumstances in order to attempt to build meaningful relationships with children.

CHAPTER 5: THE EMBODIED AND SPATIAL NATURE OF CO-CREATED SOCIAL WORKER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

This chapter explores interviewees' experiences of their initial and subsequent encounters with children, utilising aspects of the phenomenological theoretical and philosophical understandings of Merleau-Ponty (2014) to illuminate the embodied and spatial nature of the relational environment created during these social worker-child encounters. Through his phenomenological exploration of embodiment (see also Chapter 2) Merleau-Ponty posits that our understanding of the world is an embodied understanding that is rooted in the sensory and situated spatiality of the body where each body-person phenomenologically understands the world through their spatio-temporal dealings with it. Merleau-Ponty perceives the lived body not as being separate from the world, proposing instead, an intersubjective understanding of embodiment, where the lived body is conceptually understood as a dimension of human *being* (where being is understood in a Heideggerian sense) that simultaneously both constitutes the world and is constituted by it. The situated spatiality of the body and the phenomenal field of person to person interaction (of social workers, children and others) is thereby regarded as simultaneously both socially constituted *and* personally understood by the body where intersubjectivity is also '*intercorporeity'* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 141).

The conceptualisation of the phenomenal body as *intercorporeal,* is based on an understanding that there is no dualism between mind and body or between person and world. This is because the phenomenal body is understood as both

perceiver and perceived (Moran, 2000) where the inside '*flesh'* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 138) of the body always remains part of the overall outside *'flesh'* of the world, as the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world are intertwined and permeable to one another.

This chapter explores the *intercorporeity* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) of practitioner-child encounters during initial assessments, to illuminate how the embodied and spatially lived interactions of practitioners, children (and the presence of other people) co-create meaningful practitioner-child relationships through the generation of a phenomenal field of meaning where individuals constitute meaning together (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Utilising the notion of *intercorporeity* deepens understanding of the lived experiences of social workers' and children's bodies in space, through highlighting the blurring of embodied experience between the boundary of the individual embodied 'flesh' of social workers and children and the worldly 'flesh' of the surrounding space within which social workers and children encounter one another (Merleau-Ponty, 2014).

Practitioners involved in this study foregrounded the importance of using a range of spatial-embodied practices with children in order to generate a relational environment of *comfortableness* within social worker-child encounters. Generating an environment of *comfortableness* was identified by interviewees as key to the development of a meaningful worker-child relationship, with practitioner descriptions demonstrating an awareness of the relational impact of the entire embodied physical-cognitive-emotional (see Chapter 1) and spatially lived environment on the generation of meaningful worker-child relationships (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). Whilst the spatial and embodied aspects of lived experience are inter-related phenomena that are, from a phenomenological

viewpoint, ultimately inseparable (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) the chapter is structured in two parts. The first section will focus predominantly on illuminating the co-created intercorporeal aspects of worker-child encounters, with the spatially lived nature of social worker-child relationships explored further, in the second chapter section.

Intercorporeity and social worker-child relationships

A range of co-created embodied and intercorporeal practices were evident in interviews, including how social workers and children introduce themselves to one another; ensure the initial presence of other person(s) already known to the child; use humour and problem-free talk; share activities and 'selves'; and co-create relational '*common ground*'.

The co-created intercorporeal nature of social worker-child introductions

Practitioners interviewed in this study described their initial encounters with children in embodied, intercorporeal terms where the vocal and emotional as well as verbal aspects of person to person interactions were used by practitioners and children, to introduce themselves to one another. Speech and vocalisations, through a phenomenological lens, are perceived as expressions of the body (Moran, 2000).

When practitioners verbally introduced themselves to children and attempted to explain their role, a common introductory approach used was to introduce themselves to children by the worker's first name, state they were a social

worker and then ask children if they understood what a social worker was and what a social worker does. This approach was used to ensure that children were given a direct explanation of why the practitioner was meeting with them but at the same time, allowed practitioners the opportunity to explore each child's understanding of why the social worker was visiting them, as described below by practitioner *Kate.*

> *I will always say to children 'I am [Kate] look at my badge' and say that I am a social worker 'do you know what a social worker is' erm and don't think any of them [the children the practitioner was discussing] really know other than [name of oldest child] what a social worker is so again just reiterate 'my job is to make sure that you are happy and that you are safe and if you are* <u>*not*</u> *then it is my job to try and resolve that you know try and make things a little bit better for you'. I asked them why they think I am involved as I like to know what they think, what they've been told, what their mum's said, why do they think I'm there, and then if they're* <u>*right*</u> *then I'll say 'absolutely that's the right reasons' but if they say something else then I'll say well actually what you've said is this, this and this...cos I like to know where they are at before I start giving them loads of information*

Providing an explanation to another person does not mean the explanation is necessarily understood. As explained by *Kate* above, interviewees therefore attempted to check out children's existing understanding of what a social worker's role was, before then clarifying or expanding their explanation of their professional role if it appeared the child did not know or understand what a social worker was. Practitioners also tried to use simple and straightforward language when explaining their role such as: '*my job is to keep you happy and safe and if you are* <u>*not*</u> *then it is my job to...try and make things a little bit better for you' (Kate)* in order to make their role understandable to younger children.

Most practitioners described the process of informing the child who they were as a verbal dialogical discussion between worker and child: a *talking-together-with* rather than a unidirectional *talking-at* approach to introducing themselves. This approach of *talking-together-with* young children appeared grounded in a worker expectation of social worker-child relational reciprocity (Clarke, 2005; Petrie, 2011b; Bryderup and Frorup, 2012) and in a practitioner understanding of young children as being competent persons (Lansdown, 2005). The verbal interchanges between practitioners and children were thereby intercorporeal, in that they were embodied exchanges, rather than unidirectional.

Vocalisations and the tone of the practitioner's voice were important ways of conveying meaning to children. *Margaret* for example, talked about the importance of adopting a particular tone of voice when she had to bring 3-year-old *Max* into care, when she wished to try and convey an emotional sense of comfort. Whilst driving *Max* to the foster home, *Margaret* verbally explained to *Max* that she was taking him to live with a foster carer but also simultaneously adopted '*a soothing tone'* of voice as *Margaret* indicated she wanted to try to reduce the degree to which *Max* became upset. Practitioners sometimes used encouraging noises alongside encouraging words and actions, to show that they were giving children their full emotional as well as physical attention (Petrie, 2011a). *Sheila* for instance, described using animated, positive sounds and phrases such as '*ooh Thomas* [the tank engine] *my favourite*' to create a more comfortable emotional environment for a particular worker-child encounter. Using positive expressive noises as well as words, is recognised as a way of generating a kind of positive emotional resonance that can serve both as a way of recognising children and of giving children value (Meares, 2005).

From a phenomenological viewpoint, issues of emotional resonance and comfort are embodied and intercorporeal happenings, where verbal, vocal and emotional exchanges all holistically contribute to the generation of a particular relational environment within each worker-child encounter. This holistic and embodied approach to understanding the nature of person to person communication contains an implicit understanding that all interaction is communication, where communicative messages pass between persons *'through touch, sounds, gestures and experiences as well as words'* (Petrie, 2011a: 19).

The lived body of the practitioner and child is thereby, from a phenomenological perspective, perceived as a '*sensorial entity*' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 155) where practitioners utilise all aspects of their body (including for example, sight, hearing, emotions, thought, speech and vocalisations) to communicate with children but where children similarly communicate with practitioners in an embodied, 'sensorial' manner. The intercorporeal field of worker-child interaction that is generated during worker-child introductions is therefore a shared, but also at the same time, a personally lived experience as each worker-child encounter is also understood by each individual in terms of their own lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2014).

The co-created presence (or absence) of social worker, a familiar person and child

In addition to introducing themselves clearly to children, another way in which interviewees attempted to generate a comfortable relational environment during their initial meetings with children, was through meeting children for the first

time in the presence of a familiar, trusted adult: a person the child already had an existing relationship with, such as a teacher, parent or foster carer. Practitioner accounts of their first encounters with young children were therefore often multi-relational encounters that included the presence of at least one other adult already familiar to the child.

Building trust is a relational accomplishment that does not always happen instantly (Cossar et al., 2013). Whilst social workers may be expected to build relationships rapidly with children as part of their required role, this was not something that interviewees perceived to be within the sole control of the practitioner. It was an ongoing relational accomplishment (Held, 2006; Christensen, 2013) between social workers and children, that had to be requested and correspondingly gifted. Interviewees understood that gaining children's trust was not something that could be taken for granted but needed to be worked at. Practitioner *Sophie* for example talked about the importance of taking time to build a degree of trust between worker and child before seeing a child on their own. This was perceived as important also in terms of encouraging the child to talk to the worker more openly.

> *So it might be within ten days a ten day period I've not seen the child alone but I'm building that relationship up to the point where I can do that and go into school and then you know they trust me they can open up*

In many safeguarding situations however, social workers need to speak with children immediately and to speak with them away from the presence of their parents. In these practice circumstances, the degree of time available to social workers and children to build up a degree of trust is extremely limited. In such practice circumstances, interviewees saw it as important to have another adult

who was already known to the child present, in order to generate a comfortable relational environment for the worker-child encounter as quickly as possible. One such practice situation was described by practitioner *Sheila*.

> *We met the parents and spoke with them and then we went the children were in a separate area...teacher...me and the police officer went down cos obviously we wanted someone that they [the children] knew with them you know not just us going in a room and speaking...it's about they have to feel an instant comfort if you know what I mean they have to feel 'oh she's actually alright this lady'*

Sheila described how having a familiar person present during the initial social worker-child encounter facilitated the process of social workers and children getting to know one another.

> *We wanted somebody that they knew with them you know not just us going in a room and speaking to children they don't know us...we'd got this teacher who was amazing with them*

In this situation, the teacher facilitated the introductory process by explaining to the children who the social worker and (non-uniformed) police officer were. The teacher also attempted to offer the children a degree of reassurance by explaining that the practitioner and police officer were there to make sure that the children '*were okay'* (*Sheila*). The teacher additionally stayed in the room during the initial practitioner-child meetings and subsequently accompanied the children to the social worker's car, when the children had to be taken to a hospital for medical examinations due to the presence of suspected non-accidental injuries. The process of worker-child relationship building was therefore an intercorporeal experience in the sense that it was not solely the embodied interactions of practitioners and children that generated the relational

environment of worker-child encounters. Sometimes it was also the contributions of other persons that helped to facilitate the process of worker-child relationship building and the building of trust, a finding echoed elsewhere (see for example, McMullin, 2017).

Children themselves were also cited by interviewees as active participants who could support or alternatively undermine, the process of relationship building. This included children, for example, '*voting with their feet*' (*Karen*) and either emotionally-verbally or physically-spatially withdrawing or moving away from social workers when not wanting to talk to them, regardless of the presence of a familiar adult. Here, *Karen* is recognising and valuing children's embodied agency in directing the relationship building process and *Karen's* comment also appears to reflect a relational understanding of agency, where agency is understood as a dialogically enacted, socially produced phenomenon (Esser, 2016). Relationships between social workers and children were perceived by interviewees as co-constructed and negotiated interpersonal (intercorporeal) accomplishments developed through social interaction, rather than as the embodied accomplishment of practitioners alone. Through a phenomenological lens, the degree of emotional, physical and spatial presence or absence of practitioners, children and other people was an intertwined lived experience, where the intercorporeal capacity for building relationships was not located in one persons' feelings, bodily actions or understandings but was instead a co-created, socially generated experience. One dimension of this intercorporeal capacity for building relationships identified in interviewee accounts, was the practice of using humour to build relationships.

Humour, laughter and 'problem free talk': co-creating emotional tone

The use of humour and the creation of an initial period with children of '*problem free talk'* (*Azeem*) were two intercorporeal practices that interviewees used to generate a more informal and comfortable relational atmosphere before practitioners moved on to discuss more sensitive issues with children. Social worker *Azeem* for example, talked about his first meeting with seven-year-old *Liam* away from his parents, in the headteacher's office.

> *I was just a bit conscious that I didn't want to delve straight into it obviously he only knew - he had only met me once kind of within a 30 second one minute introduction and I didn't want to go straight into the reason why I was there this is what we know can you tell me what's happened, so I thought some of my aim was to kind of ease him in really just to kind of make sure he was kind of comfortable and we'd had a period where it was kind of problem free talk...just not talking about the issues straight away...luckily at that time the head teacher had some food in I think she was doing one of the delis had made some home food for us so she had it at the desk and we were kind of joking around that so that was kind of - I mean we were able to ease break some kind of more because obviously it was quite sensitive information that had happened quite serious you know*

Talking with children about everyday things unrelated to the immediate issue of concern, was seen by interviewees as an important way of generating a comfortable emotional atmosphere. Problem free talk was not perceived purely as a disembodied verbal interchange that constituted only *what* was said (the choice of topic and words used). Equal importance was attached to the emotional aspects of the encounter in terms of *how* the talk was delivered. In this instance, jokes and humour were used to create a more comfortable emotional environment. This was described by *Azeem* as a co-created

accomplishment, generated by the collaborative involvement of others (*Liam* and his headteacher) rather than solely created by *Azeem* himself. In this practice instance, the use of humour generated a relaxed, more comfortable and informal emotional environment for all those present during the encounter.

The emotional tone that is intercorporeally generated during social worker-child encounters can act as a relational barometer for practitioners to assess whether a child feels comfortable in the worker's presence or not. An uncomfortable emotional tone for example, can act as a relational signal to a practitioner that they have not yet been able to develop a sufficient degree of trust between the young person and themselves. It has been identified (see also Chapter 1) that children need to feel confident and safe in order to speak out in situation where there has been child maltreatment (Jobe and Gorin, 2013) with it sometimes taking more time for a child who has suffered significant trauma to feel emotionally safe enough to share their feelings with a social worker (Ruch, 2008). The emotional attunement and empathy of practitioners has been suggested as forming the foundation of open and trusting social worker-service user relationships (Ingram, 2013a).

Whilst it is already recognised that emotional capacity and responsiveness are not just generated individually, but are also socially produced (Morrison, 2007; Winter et al, 2019), existing literature more frequently focuses on the impact of organisational and socio-cultural factors on social worker's emotions (Ruch, 2014) or makes use of psycho-social theoretical explanations to explore the internal emotional 'worlds' of social workers and child (Ferguson, 2017, 2018a). Understanding emotions and the development of trust through a phenomenological lens, helps to foreground the importance of understanding the socially *intercorporeally* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) generated nature of

emotions in the development of trust and the building of meaningful practitioner-child relationships, where other persons, children and practitioners collectively shape the emotional nature of worker-child encounters. If a child does not feel comfortable in the worker's presence for example, they may be unwilling to participate in the assessment or to share information with the social worker. This was a situation practitioner *Sophie* found herself in when she tried to speak with 3-year-old *Nadia* away from her parent's presence, at her nursery school.

> *I think because she was a young three year old I'd only met her at home once and I just didn't think she you know she didn't want me to be there she didn't know me and she's very used to her own little life at home...I just asked her to draw her mummy and to explain what her mummy was like and do the same for her dad drew a picture of herself and tell me what was she like but very minimal nice good she just didn't want to she didn't feel comfortable*
>
> Researcher: *Did you make the decision to kind of curtail the session then*
>
> Sophie: *Yes*
>
> Researcher: *So how long would you say you spent with that child*
>
> Sophie: *Erm half an hour I think and I tried a lot of different things so colouring using her nursery work so she could talk about that so asked her keyworker to get me a book she liked so we could talk about it or a piece of work that she'd done - so she showed a painting that she'd done and we spoke about another little girl that is coming in nursery again just to get sort of open her up a little bit but I just didn't think it was going well for her and I just thought she wasn't enjoying it*

Whilst *Sophie* made attempts to change the emotional tone of the encounter, she was unsuccessful in doing so and *Nadia* communicated an unverbalised

but embodied reluctance to participate in the activities suggested by *Sophie,* throughout the worker-child encounter. *Sophie* responded by accepting *Nadia's* guidance that further discussion would not be appropriate at this time. An additional factor that may have negatively impacted on the emotional tone of this encounter was the fact that English was an additional language for *Nadia*. *Sophie* therefore had to use an interpreter for the meeting. This meant that rather than only one unfamiliar adult (the social worker) needing to be present during this initial worker-child encounter, 3-year-old *Nadia* was (unavoidably) confronted with the presence of two adult strangers in addition to the presence of her nursery keyworker. The emotional atmosphere generated in the above relational encounter is therefore at the same time, both intercorporeally generated through the bodies of all four parties to the encounter as well as individually experienced, as (see the introductory section of this chapter) the 'flesh' of the body always remains part of the overall fabric or 'flesh' of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). The issue of reciprocity in this intercorporeal encounter is explored in more depth in a later subsection of this chapter.

Whilst the distracting or intimidating impact of the presence of other family members on social workers' ability to form meaningful connections with children has already been identified (see for example, Ferguson, 2017), social workers interviewed in this study highlighted the potentially oppressive impact of having numerous adults present during meetings with children, on children themselves, with interviewees making attempts to reduce this where it was possible to do so: *sometimes it can be easier for a child if that's one to one you know not as many strangers* (*Ruth*).

Being able to shift the emotional tone of relational encounters appeared to be an important way in which interviewees and children generated a collaborative

and comfortable atmosphere and facilitated the participation of children within assessment encounters. The generation of a positive emotional-relational tone through co-created shared laughter was highlighted as one way of achieving this. Practitioner *Ruth* for example*,* described how the initially quite tense emotional atmosphere of her first meeting with 5-year-old *Troy* and his mother gradually shifted towards a more positive tone through co-created shared laughter and parental-child-practitioner involvement in play.

> *He [Troy] started showing me kind of games...whilst he was playing he was also talking and you know there were parts where I was just observing his play and he would ask me to hold something...and he'd ask his mum as well...and we...it was really good because him doing that as well you know mum it kind of created more informal light-heartedness because mum and I were kind of sharing laughter about what this game was and you know really getting involved in it so it helped ease the tone a little in the room*

Whilst humour can help to lighten the emotional atmosphere in a potentially serious situation by relieving anxiety and by making the worker more approachable (Jordan, 2017), the absence of humour may indicate a lack of comfortableness between social worker and service user, as illustrated in *Sophie's* earlier account of her meeting with *Nadia*. Whilst humour and laughter have the potential to be used to belittle others, such as when the laughter or joke is directed *at* another person (see for example, Billig, 2005) laughing or joking *with* others can be a positive way of establishing and sustaining relationships. This is because humour and laughter are collaborative events that offer opportunities for shared moments of humanity (Morriss, 2015; Jordan, 2017). The description of *Troy's* actions above, however, underlines the role of children themselves in co-creating this atmosphere of shared laughter and

humour. In this practice instance, the '*corporeal field'* (Dahlberg et al, 2008: 63) of practitioner, child and parent interaction holistically incorporates emotional, verbal and vocal as well as physical aspects of shared experience. The phenomenal field of meaning is collaboratively generated, enabling parents, social workers and children to interact on more equal embodied and intercorporeal terms.

Sharing activities and 'selves'

Part of the process of creating a comfortable relational environment involved interviewees getting alongside children to bodily 'do' (see Chapter 1) shared activities with them. Intercorporeity in these practice instances, encompassed verbal and emotional-physical aspects of worker-child interaction but also included practitioners sharing temporal aspects of their lived experiences with children. (Issues of temporality and worker-child relationships will be explored further in Chapters 6 and 7).

Practitioner *Helen* for example described driving six-year-old *Jamie* to hospital in her car for a medical examination, after a potential non-accidental injury to him was reported to the social work team.

> *You want to make them feel at ease and give them something to do in the car like I gave him my sat nav and said I know the way but said 'can you show me the way tell me when to turn'...during the course of the journey he became more chatty I think he had a snack in his bookbag and he had his snack and we were laughing and I said getting food on his seat you know er I've got [number of] children and I often find that then that is they then talk to you a bit more...I've always shared a bit of personal stuff about me because I'm asking that person to share stuff about themselves...it's about*

> *being self-aware isn't it and mindful about what you're saying but understanding for me that I have to give a little bit to get something back.*

Sharing an object (the sat nav) and a little bit of personal information about themselves was seen as one way that interviewees could proffer a degree of relational reciprocity to children. Practitioners recognised that their social work role required them to ask children to share personal information about their lives. Interviewees indicated it that it was therefore only fair if the worker was asking children about their own lives, that practitioners were prepared to at least some degree, do the same. This appeared to be about interviewees trying to establish a degree of equality or fairness in their relationships with children (Hatton, 2013) in practice circumstances where professional-service user relations were recognised by practitioners as unequal.

A phenomenological understanding of human *being* posits that there is no mind-body dualism or clear separation between person and world (Dahlberg et al., 2008), a perspective that is also reflected in social pedagogical understandings of relationships where it is seen as important that professionals recognise that practitioners' personal and professional 'selves' are inevitably interwoven (Smith, 2012) in their day to day working practices. From this viewpoint, doing everyday activities with children therefore necessarily involves practitioners using aspects of their personal as well as professional 'self' as a way of facilitating the development of worker-child rapport and trust (Roesch-Marsh, et al., 2015). It is only the practitioner's *private* self that is expected to be '*kept apart from those we work with'* (Smith, 2012: 50). *Private* self here refers to sensitive personal information about the practitioner's own life that would usually only be shared with close family and friends (Eichsteller and Holthoff,

2012). The inseparable nature of the personal-professional presence (or 'self') of social work practitioners, is therefore central to understanding what makes social worker-child relationships meaningful and will be explored in further detail in Chapters 6 and 7. The interviewees accounts add insight into this process of sharing self, by showing how the tensions of this personal-professional divide can be navigated. Where interviewees choose to share a little bit of personal information about themselves with children, this appeared to be a considered practitioner decision. *John* for example explained:

> *It's elements of relationship based practice around giving a little bit of yourself so I do want to tell them who I am and be real about that and say we're going to learn about this [shared task] together and do this together and I want to tell you what I am and what I like. I'm not scared of sharing a little bit about myself in terms of...'I like football what do you like'...and then later on in the work with the 6 ½ year old we did find quite a lot of things we could just talk about and play with motorbikes and stuff like that and I do have a genuine interest in motorbikes...I feel I can just about do a connection and feel as though this is not an interrogation - power is as mitigated as it can be with an adult going into a room*

Practitioners were acutely aware of the power invested in their social work role and of their generational power as adults but also implied there were risks involved in sharing too much or inappropriate information. Sharing a little bit of personal information about hobbies helped *John* and other interviewees attempt to create a more shared space of relational interaction with children. Social worker *Helen* described doing activities together with children as a form of embodied sharing of self, generating '*a sort of camaraderie in some ways, the kind of we're in this together let's sort of get through this day'.*

When practitioners talked about meeting with children to investigate the nature of potential safeguarding concerns, playing together with children or doing an everyday activity *together-with* them such as singing, were ways of lightening the atmosphere of the worker-child encounter despite the serious reason for the social worker's presence, through generating a more positive, shared relational experience. This was one way that practitioners (as well as children) shifted the emotional tone of social worker-child encounters and was especially important in circumstances where practitioners were required to undertake difficult and emotionally traumatic actions such as compulsorily removing children from the care of their parents, as seen in the practice instance below described by social worker *Sheila*.

> *It was really really difficult because the daughter just did not want to leave her mum...she was screaming hysterical wanting her mum I obviously felt upset as well the two [siblings] were in the back of the car...they obviously didn't know who I was apart from playing with them at the hospital...so while I was in the car with them...the only thing I could think of doing was singing Frere Jacque...eventually the two [other siblings] in the car started to sing I said let's sing it louder [animated tone of voice] and the little girl joined in...and when we got there [to the foster home] I'd got the three children smiling and singing and laughing*

Undertaking a collaborative activity together with these children helped *Sheila* and the children with the process of trying to generate more positive emotional tone in extremely distressing circumstances. Singing together helped to generate a more comfortable relational environment between *Sheila* and the children and to ameliorate the children's immediate distress. Using a collaborative practice approach has the potential to lessen the sometimes unavoidably traumatic impact of the social worker's role and presence, through

creating a form of relational space within which social workers and children can get to know to one another on a more shared footing. Interviewees referred to this generation of shared relational spaces of interaction as finding a degree of relational '*common ground'* (*John*) with children.

This notion of being '*in this together'* and '*common ground'* implies a practitioner understanding of worker-child relationships that accords children respect as equal persons, meaning practitioners relate to children as '*one person in relation to another'* (Boddy, 2012: 117). Interviewees descriptions of their encounters with children suggested that meaningful relationships were built where practitioners viewed and respected children first and foremost as fellow human beings, rather than seeing them primarily as 'children'. Practitioners' embodied understandings of children as agential and competent persons (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2019) were expressed intercorporeally through the way practitioners interacted with children, through acts of sharing.

Co-creating relational 'common ground': reciprocity, power and choice

The process of seeking out a degree of *common ground* was an embodied relational process that encompassed physical-emotional-vocal, intercorporeal happenings (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). Interviewees tried to avoid completely dominating or controlling the relational space of the worker-child encounter by enacting practices of sharing, for example, by being willing to follow the child's lead rather than always being the one-leading, as summarised in the practice instance outlined by *Karen.*

> *Taking their lead and what they want to talk about initially trying to find that common like a common ground that you can start out*

> *with and then try to explore other things but also trying to ensure they are comfortable*

Meaningful worker-child relationships were perceived by interviewees as co-constructed accomplishments, involving an intercorporeal, dialogical process of worker-child negotiation generated through a series of shared physical and emotional lived experiences. The process of co-constructing meaningful worker-child relationships was not understood as requiring the attainment of equality of worker-child reciprocity but was more about ensuring at least *some* degree of reciprocity was present during each encounter. The process of relationship building was perceived by practitioners' in this study as an organically unfolding, ongoing *too-ing and fro-ing* of relatedness, where children as well as social workers could be the initiator as well as the recipient of interactions, as practitioner *Sophie* described in her first meeting with 3-year-old *Maya.*

> Researcher: *So what kind of when you very first kind of came to the door was she at the door with her mum*
>
> Sophie: *Yeah she couldn't wait she [Maya] opened the door and she wanted to bring me in she came with her mum to the door as well which is you don't always get that...she wanted to come and see who it was you know...*
>
> Researcher: *At what point did you introduce yourself to the child or say what your role was or whatever terms you used*
>
> Sophie: *I think she asked me actually 'why are you here' do you know like you know like they do*

As illustrated in the above interview extract, practitioners interviewed in this study understood children as having a degree of power and the ability to exercise choice in terms of deciding whether or not to participate in the assessment process and respond to the approaches of the practitioner. The

capacity for children to resist as well as respond positively to social workers has been identified in other studies (see for example, Morrison et al., 2018) but in some practice instances in this study where a meaningful worker-child relationship was not regarded by the interviewee as being achieved, the lack of intercorporeal worker-child reciprocity was particularly foregrounded, as shown in the practice instance described below.

Due to the potentially serious nature of the safeguarding concerns being raised, *Sophie* needed to arrange to interview 3-year-old *Nadia* (an interaction discussed earlier in this chapter) at her nursery school away from the presence of her parents but in the presence of another adult: an interpreter who was also a stranger to *Nadia*. *Nadia's* resistance to the interaction, which may have arisen from the lack of intercorporeally generated comfortableness and absence of reciprocity between *Nadia* and *Sophie*, led *Sophie* to draw the interview to a close, respecting *Nadia's* indications that she did not want to participate in the meeting. Discussing her experiences of working with *Nadia* prompted *Sophie* to additionally reflect on the difficulty of communicating holistically with a young child when an interpreter does not also translate the social worker's tone of voice, facial expression and body language alongside their words, in order to generate a more holistic, embodied form of relational communication.

> *I have worked with some interpreters that will do exactly what you do so body language and gestures and although it might seem a bit silly actually it makes sure that everything is translated and nothing gets lost so you can say something and the way you are saying it means that it might come across a lot differently than if you're just sat there so I think that is very important*

In the above practice circumstance described by *Sophie,* the 'disembodying' of the communications between practitioner, interpreter and child can be seen as reducing the intercorporeal richness of the worker-child encounter, thereby negatively impacting on the process of meaning making. This reduction of the communicative power of the whole lived body to a predominantly verbal veneer of interpreter-child interaction, was perceived by *Sophie* as negatively impacting on her own ability to build relationships with children. Communicating meaningfully with children is therefore about more than the particular words used. It is about the richness of the whole embodied nature of worker-child communications. The nature of the whole physical-emotional-vocal and spatial environment created between children, practitioners and others affects the quality of the relational environment that is generated.

Phenomenologically understanding social worker-child relationships through the lens of intercorporeity (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) foregrounds the embodied nature of person to person interactions but other phenomenological understandings may additionally illuminate and aid understanding of the ways the broader social context within which practitioner-child relationships are situated, can situationally constrain (as well as enable) practitioners' and children's agentic capacity (Larkins, 2019).

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the *factical* constraints on individuals' freedom or capacity to act in the world come from the pre-existing limits that exist in the world we are *thrown* into (Heidegger, 2010) such as our historical situatedness, physical, psychological and social factors (Langdridge, 2007). The nature of *being-in-the-world* is thereby filtered through the projection of a '*set of possibilities'* (Moran, 2012: 239) for *being.* This phenomenological understanding to some degree, aligns with new childhood studies perspectives,

in relation to understanding agency as a dialogically enacted capacity that is situationally (relationally) produced in different social contexts (Esser, 2016). Agency is therefore not something that children or adults have but is achieved in particular contexts and in multiple reinforcing and contradictory ways (Larkins, 2019).

For example, whilst both social workers and children bring their personal capacities into their encounters with one another, *Nadia's* corporeal freedom to choose her social role in the practice instance described above (as participant or non-participant in an assessment interview) is constrained by *Nadia's* intersecting social positions as a child and non-native English speaker in the circumstances of insufficient time available to build a more meaningful worker-child relationship. In this above situation, the initial concerns regarding the family were not regarded as sufficient to warrant s47 investigation. There was therefore no strong, legally underpinned mandate for *Sophie* to insist that *Nadia's* parents allow *Sophie* to get to know *Nadia* over a period of time. Any social work involvement with the family was voluntary. While *Nadia's* parents had agreed to allow *Sophie* to meet with *Nadia* away from their presence, they were only prepared to give their consent for a single practitioner-child meeting to take place. There was therefore a pressure on *Sophie* to build a meaningful relationship with *Nadia* in circumstances that were already constrained to a one-off practitioner-child meeting.

It can also be seen as oppressive that children experiencing assessment, as a social group, have to do so in disadvantaged circumstances where they are required to navigate adult gatekeeping and injustices related to public spending priorities such as in relation to cuts in public services (see Action for Children, National Children's Bureau and The Children's Society, 2016). In such ways,

agency becomes manifest as part of a larger network of social relations that is socially achieved (Raithelhuber, 2016). *Nadia's* disadvantaged social circumstances (as a child and non-native English speaker) can be seen as limiting *Nadia'*s opportunities to experience a shared positive emotional tone and shared activities, that might have then enabled her to reflect on a positive initial experience with *Sophie* and potentially choose to engage in a longer interaction with her. In this way, children in similarly disadvantaged social circumstances to *Nadia's* express *primary agency* (as *'overlapping collectivities of subjects'* (Larkins, 2019: 417)), managing and resisting these circumstances. Nadia's capacity to exercise choice is constrained but the experience of being with Sophie will nonetheless contribute to an internal dialogue as a relational S*elf* or *Social Actor* (Larkins, 2019) through which Nadia is choosing goals for and paths within the moment of encounter.

From a phenomenological viewpoint, the corporeal 'flesh' of both *Nadia* and *Sophie* always remains intercorporeally woven into the overall fabric or 'flesh' of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) where body-flesh and world-flesh are intertwined and permeable to one another. The intercorporeal encounter between *Sophie* and *Nadia* is therefore always impacted on by the *factical* constraints of human existence (Heidegger, 2010) as the body can embody and internalise socio-cultural dimensions (Muzicant and Peled, 2018). *Sophie's* account of her perceived lack of success in building a meaningful relationship with *Nadia* (reflected in the lack of intercorporeal richness of the worker-child encounter) is, from a phenomenological viewpoint, significantly impacted on by the already situated social-cultural and organisational 'world-fleshly' constraints that permeate through into the corporeally lived encounter and have an impact on it.

Spatiality or *lived space* and worker-child relationships

Whilst the above chapter section has foregrounded the emotional, verbal and vocal aspects of intercorporeity, the phenomenological body is also spatially and temporally experienced. The temporal nature of practitioner-child encounters will therefore be explored further in Chapters 6 and 7. The next chapter section considers the spatial nature of social worker-child relationships and explores the emotional-physical nature of spaces including: how practitioners and children negotiate private and semi-private spaces for worker-child encounters; how practitioners and children move through and use space; foreground their bodily presence or absence; narrow the gap between workers and children; spatially express vulnerability and agency; and use touch.

An interpretive phenomenological understanding of space regards spaces as situationally and relationally created phenomena whereby the meaning of a particular space or place is generated from how the space is lived or directly experienced by each individual person, as space is an individually experienced as well as intercorporeally shared lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 2014). Lived space is therefore an emotional-physical, social and mobile lived experience, where the meaning of a space temporally unfolds and is uniquely experienced by each individual involved in any given encounter, whilst also being collaboratively generated and shaped by material objects and human beings (Miller, 2010). The particular emotional and physical characteristics of the spaces and places within which social worker-child encounters took place in this study, were integral to interviewee accounts of relationship building and practitioner descriptions of their embodied lived experiences, with practitioner accounts containing a range of different worker understandings of the lived

meanings of both space and place in their accounts of how social worker-child relationships were initiated and sustained.

The emotional-physical nature of spaces

Whilst social worker-child initial and subsequent encounters usually began in a place familiar to the child such as in a school or family home, the investigative process frequently required practitioners and children to then move together between different locations, for example to: go to hospital for a medical examination, return a child back to their family home, or drive or walk with a child to a foster home or other placement.

Interviewees' descriptions of their initial and subsequent encounters with children were thereby situated within spatial environments that were not perceived as static, but as fluid and often-changing *lived spaces,* where the presence and utilisation of everyday objects as well as the presence (or absence) of people, formed an ecological field (Ingold, 2000) of human-material spatial relations. Practitioner accounts of their lived experiences of relationship building incorporated understandings that spaces had personal as well as shared meanings, with material objects as well as people shaping the nature of the relational space of each worker-child encounter and contributing towards the quality of the relational environment (Miller, 2010). In particular, it was perceived by interviewees as important that a *private* or *semi-private space* was established during some encounters, to speak with children about sensitive issues, where the notion of privacy included how spaces were sensorially-corporeally experienced (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

Negotiating private and semi-private spaces for social worker-child encounters

Several social workers interviewed in this study described a *semi-private* rather than completely private space as being a preferable way of meeting with young children alone for the first time, away from a parent or carer. This approach was especially used by interviewees when children were five years old or younger. *Semi-private spaces* in family homes and schools, were described as spaces where children remained within the semi-hearing distance of a familiar adult and where the potential physical exit route for a child to reach a familiar adult was not completely blocked off. This ensured children were within the physically open reach of a familiar person when meeting with the practitioner, giving the child a potential choice of whether to stay with or leave the presence of the social worker. One example of such a semi-private space can be seen in the interview extract from *Kate,* talking about one of her first individual meetings with several children in the family home where *Kate* used the kitchen to meet separately with each child whilst the children's mother stayed in the lounge.

> Researcher: *Had you decided what room*
>
> Kate: *Yes all in the kitchen because I thought a neutral place you know...and I'd just said to mum 'yeah ask them if they'll come and say hello to me' and she did to be fair and then one by one they just came into the kitchen*
>
> Researcher: *Was there anything like on in the background [in the lounge] like a telly...*
>
> Kate: *Yeah they did the telly was on yes definitely yeah...*
>
> Researcher: *And did you do the same thing with the door [referring to the kitchen door being left slightly ajar]*

Kate: *Yes just slightly open again and I explained to all of them that basically if they wanted to go at any point they didn't have to stay with me you know I wanted to talk to them but if they didn't feel they wanted to or they wanted their mum that was absolutely fine to go out*

A degree of auditory semi-privacy was created in the kitchen through the noise of the television coming through from the lounge next door, with a degree of physical semi-privacy also generated by keeping the kitchen door slightly open.

Having the presence of a familiar adult in a physically accessible place nearby, alongside an accessible physical exit route for the child, was often referred to in practitioners' accounts of their first meetings alone with children. This appeared to be one way in which practitioners attempted to create a degree of emotional reassurance, as well as offer a degree of physical-spatial choice to children, by allowing children to choose whether to stay in the space of the social worker-child encounter or to move into an adjacent space.

It is recognised that the type of spaces and places where practitioners meet with children is important because rooms and spaces have emotional meanings (Tait and Wosu, 2013) that can impact on children's lived experience during worker-child encounters. This is because individuals' understanding of the world is embodied, including perceptions, memories and emotions (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Children's and practitioners' lived experiences of spaces can therefore generate individual, embodied reactions. However, the world is also intercorporeally, sensorially and spatially experienced (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). Social workers and children are therefore also able to temporally generate or *produce* space (Jeyasingham, 2014) through their social actions, generating different lived experiences of spaces. As in the above encounter described by

Kate, interviewees sought to ensure there was a degree of spatial choice available to children during worker-child encounters, as one way of spatially generating a more shared experience but practitioners simultaneously strove to create a sense of privacy within the spatial environment through shaping the auditory nature of the space.

Meeting with children in a *familiar space or place* such as in a school, family home or foster home as well as in the presence (or nearby presence) of *familiar people,* were also important aspects that contributed to the creation of a comfortable spatial as well as emotional relational environment during initial and subsequent social worker-child encounters (a point echoed elsewhere, see for example, Adams and Leshone, 2016). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, interviewees referred to the importance of ensuring a degree of child *comfortableness* in their initial and subsequent meetings with children where the term *comfortable* was used by practitioners to refer to the emotional relational environment (including issues of familiarity, safety and trust). The preferred types of spaces and places for meeting together with children were described as physical-emotional spaces that generated a particular type of feeling, such as constituting '*safe*', *neutral*', '*friendly*', or '*informal*' spaces. The term *comfortableness* was also used when discussing the degree of *physical privacy* afforded by the immediate spatial environment within which social workers and children were situated as practitioners sometimes needed to see children separately in a *semi-private* or *private space* away from the family home. For example, practitioner *Karen* chose to meet 4-year-old *Eve* alone for the first time in the *semi-private* school environment of the school library.

> Karen: *You could hear the other classrooms they were all close to the door but you could kind of overhear kind of the children in class*

which I think probably made them [Karen separately interviewed two siblings on this day] feel more comfortable I think because if I'd gone into the place where the head teacher in the head teacher's office they wouldn't have had any toys there...

Researcher: *So the library was empty so it was like er quiet space for the...*

Karen: *Semi-quiet semi-private and semi-quiet*

Researcher: *What do you mean semi-private how do you mean*

Karen: *Well it was a big area and around the last library there was like room dividers...the big tall five-foot six-foot room dividers and behind there was a corridor with the classrooms off it*

Researcher: *Oh okay so is it kind of open to the corridor*

Karen: *Yeah*

Researcher: *But some distance away*

Karen: *Yeah so nobody really would overhear any conversation but the children that I was talking to would have been able to overhear the conversations [in the nearby classrooms] and what was going on...I think with these children they were of an age where it was more about making sure that they were comfortable where they were to speak to me yeah*

The auditory reassurance of other children's voices nearby and the physical structures that semi-divided rather than fully divided off the space, were mentioned by *Karen* as contributing towards the quality of the overall relational environment of the worker-child encounter by making it more '*comfortable'.* How the lived space might be experienced by a child was also considered in advance of the meeting by *Karen*, in relation to the impact of the presence of particular material objects within the room such as beanbags and books.

Through a phenomenological lens, the nature of the spatial environment of the above, and other worker-child encounters, is corporeally experienced through the lived bodies of each individual person (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). However, lived spaces are also intercorporeally emotionally and sensorily shared, where the spatial availability, presence or absence and positioning of material objects and people, also shape how spaces are experienced.

Moving through space: human beings and material objects

Taking forward Ferguson's (2008, 2009a) and others explorations of the mobile and emotional, embodied practices of social workers and the atmospheric barriers encountered by child protection social workers in building meaningful relationships with children, interviewee accounts in this study foregrounded workers positive practice experiences of relationship building, describing instances where the mobile practices of workers contributed to making practitioner-child encounters more meaningful. Moving into a completely different physical space or location with children or simply moving around together with children, were spatial ways in which practitioners managed or helped to shape the nature and tone of the social worker-child relational environment. *Helen* for example, talked about the importance of movement as a spatial-relational response when one of the two children she was speaking with became extremely anxious.

> *We were talking about the incident the older lad that did the fight...and I said what did mum do when this was happening. He froze just went absolutely white and couldn't speak...it was almost as if he was having a panic attack. I went to get the teacher and gave him some water and he slowly came back*

round...that told me now was not the time to sort of probe any further on that...instead of driving them home we ran home which is twenty minutes ran through the park chatting all the way...it kind of tried like sort of defuse any sort of difficulties of the afternoon so that hopefully they can go back home that evening and sort of feel a bit calmer

The change of environment appeared to facilitate a sense of emotional and physical release for *Helen* and the children at end of what had been a difficult and stressful encounter at the school. Both the Helen and the children became collaboratively involved in generating a different type of movement (running) in the park, that to shape the emotional-physical nature of the lived space.

Children and material objects as well as practitioners, were described by interviewees as spatially shaping the nature of worker-child encounters. During practitioner *Susan's* first meeting with 5-year-old *Harry* in his foster home, *for example, Harry* initially refused to allow *Susan* to come upstairs to see his bedroom. After subsequently giving *Susan* permission to enter his bedroom, *Susan* described how she was then invited by *Harry* to sit down next to him on his large, almost bed-sized bean bag. *Harry* got up and down several times from the bean bag to show *Susan* several of his toys and books. *Harry* then asked *Susan* to lie down on the bean bag and offered *Susan* his throw and pillow.

Susan: *He brought this throw over and he put it on me and then he said "lie down lie down and I'll get my pillow" and then he came back with a pillow lined it up...it's a bizarre story but it showed that we'd built a relationship quite quickly*

Researcher: *You know you've been accepted then don't you*

Susan: *Yeah that was what he was doing he was saying ooh you're going to be alright*

As illustrated in the above extract, interviewees accounts of meaningful relationship building mentioned material objects found to hand in the environments within which social worker and children encountered one another, as forming an integral part of the process of worker-child relationship building. Material things or 'stuff' (Miller, 2010) were accorded relational meaning and significance, with interviewees incorporating a relational and agentic understanding of material objects as well as people. For example, the way *Harry* got a pillow for *Susan* and put a throw over her, was interpreted by *Susan* as a form of material gesture that indicated a positive relational invitation from *Harry:* '*what he was doing he was saying ooh you're going to be alright'.* It was not only what *Harry* said to *Susan* but the manner in which he used the throw and pillow that proffered a material-relational indication of his willingness to build a relationship with *Susan*.

Material things can be noticed or go unnoticed in everyday life, but material objects may still determine how a particular space is used and experienced. Heidegger (2010) describes the presence of an object as coming actively into view as an object only when it has something to do (Guignon, 2006).the material existence of objects therefore often goes unnoticed, as their presence is often taken for granted but objects are not context free. Material things can guide or shape people (Miller, 2010), as human being are neither divorced from their own materiality nor form the materiality of the world they exist in.

As in the encounter between *Susan* and *Harry*, other practitioners used various objects they found to hand in the room or immediate spatial environment where they met with children, to help support the process of relationship building, as illustrated in *Helen's* comments.

> *We all sort of sat down on the floor and we had a 'who's talking' you know like 'let's listen to each other say what you're gonna say and let's make some rules about cutting across and hearing one person out' and we used a football as the kind of when you've got the football so it gives you [something to you] know bounces and play around with*

Here, the football is used both as a shared activity and as a material tool to aid the process of turn taking when speaking and listening together. As well as making use of material things already available in the immediate spatial environment, practitioners sometimes bought items with them (for example, pens, paper, flash cards or toy figurines) to help facilitate worker-child interactions. Interviewees appeared to have an ecological understanding of relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) where the spatial-material as well as social environment was understood as impacting on the nature of social worker-child relationships. This reflected an intertwined body-world (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) understanding of worker-child relationships where '*the environment, therefore is us and we are the environment*' (Andreae, 2011: 247).

Whilst the significance of material objects within rooms and spaces were integral to practitioner accounts of relationship building, social workers also talked about the materiality of their own lived bodies and how they positioned or adapted themselves within spaces to influence the degree to which practitioners were intercorporeally either predominantly *perceiving* others or being *perceived by* others (Moran, 2000). Interviewees for example described sometimes physically-spatially moulding or adapting themselves and their bodies to either foreground themselves, or to alternatively merge in with the surrounding environment, in order to generate a more passive or less noticeable form of worker presence during particular encounters.

Physical space: presence and absence

Further developing existing explorations of how children's social workers experienced and negotiated space and place, including the malleability of social workers bodies (see Jeyasingham, 2017), interviewees described how they adjusted the degree to which they spatially-corporeally foregrounded themselves or alternatively receded within a particular space, in order to assert or minimise the impact of their physical and emotional presence during their encounters with families. One interviewee described the need for example, to blend into the background environment of the family home during one visit by '*going into the furniture a little bit'* when wanting to sit back and observe family dynamics as part of the overall assessment. Another practitioner similarly described this process as involving the adoption of a kind of chameleon-like approach to worker presence '*you can merge into the surroundings and use what's around you'.*

Merging into the background was one of the ways in which social workers created some space for themselves to observe and evaluate family interactions as part of the child and family assessment process. This ability to merge into the surrounding environment afforded practitioners an opportunity to watch and absorb information about the ongoing relational interactions taking place by a process of what another practitioner referred to as '*soaking up everything else from the room'*. Interviewees were therefore not always exclusively focusing on building relationships with children. An important part of social workers assessment role was also to observe and assess the quality of children's and parents (or carers) relationships with one another (Butler, 2015) and workers strived to simultaneously build relationships with parents as well as with children. Interviewees described the process of worker-child relationship

building as sometimes constituting a backwards and forwards juggling of relational focus, with workers (especially during home visits) swapping their relational attention between parents and children, as well as practitioners sometimes alternately physically withdrawing or amplifying the nature of their presence within the family environment.

Practitioners counterbalanced moments of merging into the background during family and child encounters, with periods of more actively foregrounding their social worker presence within the spatial environment. Interviewees especially tried to ensure they were able to get physically (spatially) closer to all of the children present in the household at some point during a home visit or when meeting together with children elsewhere. Practitioners achieved this by sometimes waiting for the child to narrow the physical-spatial distance between worker and child, or by the worker trying to do this themselves. Physical distance became absent on the occasions when social workers and children touched. (Examples of these spatial dynamics will be examined in more detail below). Understanding such instances through a lens of spatial intercorporeity (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) can help to provide insights into the interactional nature of practitioners' and children's lived experiences of space and how the sustaining, increasing, reducing or the absence of physical distances between persons are negotiated during the process of relationship building.

Narrowing the gap between social worker and child

Social workers' intercorporeal accounts of their experiences of relationship building were described in spatial-dialogical as well as in vocal-dialogical terms. Both children and practitioners moved between spatial positionings of worker-

child closeness and distance during the course of an encounter in order to build a relationship. For example, interviewee *Ruth* talked about holding back and waiting for a child to physically approach her, rather than forcing a situation of worker-child physical proximity too soon into the worker-child encounter. In this practice instance, *Ruth was* meeting 5-year-old *Troy* for the first time only a few hours after he had been picked up and taken by the police to stay at a relative's house following a serious instance of domestic violence. *Troy* was wandering backwards and forwards in the family lounge, showing *Ruth* his toys.

> *I felt it was really important to take a real interest in these games that he was showing me and allowing him to - you know - cos at five years of age especially someone who's maybe a little hyper you know he needed that to maybe feel a bit safe and rather than me saying 'oh why don't you come and sit down' you know I let him move around and still managed to kind of get a really good dialogue going with him*

Ruth's desire for *Troy* to feel emotionally '*safe*' in her presence, appeared linked to *Ruth's* understanding that *Troy* needed to be able to keep a degree of physical distance between himself and *Ruth*, and to be in control of when or whether to get physically closer to her. Whilst practitioners sometimes waited for children to reduce the physical distance between social worker and child, other interviewees recounted instances where children much more instantaneously sought to close the gap between practitioner and child, an experience that *John* described.

> *He [6-year-old child] ran over and found me before anyone else as I came in the [school] hall. He was almost looking for me... The little one the two-year-old would climb on me want to play shoot with me and stuff like that*

In other interviewee accounts, it was the social worker who decided to reduce the spatial gap between children and themselves through spatially-bodily *getting down* in order to position themselves at approximately the same physical level or height as the child to play with or do an activity with a young child. This often involved the worker getting down onto the floor to play with or do an activity with a young child, an approach which is acknowledged as being of value elsewhere (see for example, O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016). Practitioners described, for example, '*sitting on the carpet with'* children or getting down to '*be on a child's level'*. Getting down so that practitioners were physically on the same level as children, was seen as a way of equalising the physical-spatial power relations between workers and children through reducing the height difference between them. *Sheila* for example, indicated:

> *I think it's better that you try to come down...if you're stood up <u>there</u> and you're trying to explain to some little person I don't we wouldn't do that we'd sit down get down. I've even sat on the floor I would even sit on the floor if it was for a child or a baby or whatever you know to get that interaction from a child*

As well as getting down onto the same physical-spatial level as children, practitioners also tried to physically situate themselves alongside or *next* to children in preference to directly facing them: *'we were sat at the side together like that'* (*Sheila*). Bodily situating themselves alongside children appeared to be a way that interviewees sought to create a more equal spatial-bodily positioning of themselves in relation to children, with side by side bodily positioning also being identified elsewhere, as implying co-operation (Lishman, 2009).

Whilst getting down and alongside children, interviewees showed an awareness of the need to respect children's personal space and of the need to request or

receive a degree of invitation to approach children, if at all possible. If the child did not spontaneously physically approach the worker during the worker-child encounter, interviewees talked about how they tried to gradually reduce the degree of physical distance between themselves and the child through a process of physical-spatial as well as vocal negotiation, as in the practice instance described by *Karen.*

> *He wanted to choose a book...I said well where do you want to sit and he walked over to these seats so I took that from him he wanted to sit there because he was a bit more guarded than the little one [referring to another sibling] so I sat on the floor... and then he sat kind of behind me but sat on the edge it was only a low seat so he's got his head here (gestures to her shoulder)*

This process of physical-spatial negotiation and of how social workers try to position themselves alongside children, was not just a simple either/or dynamic of just the social worker or just the child solely leading and controlling the spatial interaction. It was described by interviewees in terms of an interwoven relational too-ing and fro-ing of spatial invitation and response: an intercorporeal bodily negotiation and use of space by practitioners and children as part of the process of relationship building where children as well as practitioners' contributed to the spatial nature of worker-child encounters.

Space, vulnerability and agency

Whilst practitioner accounts contained understandings of children as having agentic capacity, interviewee accounts also contained understandings of children as being agentic but also vulnerable persons (see also Morrison et al., 2018). Whilst interviewee accounts predominantly focussed on how

practitioners succeeded in getting down and alongside children to narrow the physical-spatial gap between them, there were some instances where this was not achieved. This has been identified as an issue of concern in a child protection context as it is suggested that ensuring that children move, is a way for practitioners to spot child abuse (Ferguson, 2010b). In interviewee accounts however, there was a recognition that in some social worker-child encounters, a child may simply not be willing to, or alternatively not feel psychologically, emotionally or be physically ready or able to, spatially-bodily approach the social worker as illustrated in the comments made by *Kate*.

> There'd been *another visit that I'd done...where I walked in and he [nursery school aged child] was just hiding under a table. I was there for an hour he didn't get out he didn't move and all you could see was his little eyes glistening under the table and you couldn't even you know me and a colleague said 'hiya you okay' and he just looked you know like a rabbit in a headlights...really really scared little boy*

Whilst recognising the child's vulnerability, *Kate* responded to his unverbalised embodied reluctance to come out from under the table by accepting his guidance that further physical-spatial sharing of the space was not appropriate during this encounter: accepting the child's choice not to physically-spatially approach her. Even when children may not always physically be able or willing to reach out to practitioners during worker-child encounters, spaces are at the same time, emotionally as well as physically experienced. Emotional communications can therefore still be intercorporeally shared, even if social workers and children are spatially distanced from one another. Agency can therefore be understood as an intercorporeal relational accomplishment

(Merleau-Ponty, 2014) that can be negotiated in emotional-spatial as well as in physical-spatial and verbal ways.

Touch and social worker-child relationships

Practitioners' experiences of building relationships with children through doing a shared activity with them often incorporated physical touch as part of the co-created worker-child activity. Touch has been identified as an important way of communicating with younger children, as it can be used to convey positive messages such as messages of acceptance and warmth, although it can also contrastingly convey negative messages, such as disrespect (Petrie, 2011a). Practitioners expressed concerns about transgressing pre-established norms regarding the use of touch when building relationships with children. The degree to which interviewees felt comfortable in using touch as part of their everyday embodied practice approach when working with children, also varied.

Practitioners were not always the instigators of the use of touch but described how they responded to children's approaches when a child physically touched them. Interviewees described having to decide in-the-moment, how best to respond to the child-worker bodily contact. *Karen* for example, described a meeting she had with a young child that she worked with some time previously. As she was waiting for the child to arrive for a video recorded investigative interview, the child:

> *jumped off some steps did a running jump and then threw herself at me but as she jumped I could - cos I was just going to pick her up and put her down but she didn't - she wrapped her legs around me and around my waist and I thought ooh er*

Worker accounts of direct physical-bodily contact with children were often accompanied by '*ooh er*' or similar expressions of nervousness about the appropriateness of the use of touch. Some interviewees were concerned whether their professional colleagues might question the appropriateness of their actions regarding physically touching children, as mentioned by *John.*

> *...and within about 30 seconds of every visit I went he'd jump on me [2-year-old child] just jump on me and I'd be on the floor... I kind of thought I remember having some sort of at different times thinking I wonder what [supervisory colleague] would say about the amount of jumping and he's in a nappy that's all. Half the time he was semi-naked...already at that time I was thinking what would other social workers do rather than what do I wanna do but actually I did do what I wanted to do. I kinda just worried a bit about it you know if this was observed would somebody be going 'be careful' or 'ooh don't' 'shouldn't do'*

Other social workers in this study linked their nervousness or wariness of physically touching children to their experiences of social work training regarding personal-professional boundaries. These workers felt their experiences of training led them to question whether *any* degree of physical contact with children was regarded as appropriate or as 'professional' behaviour.

> *Researcher: Did she sit close to you or*
>
> *Karen: Yeah*
>
> *Researcher: Did she snuggle up to your side or*
>
> *Karen: She was sat yeah she was sat quite close to me erm and I think sometimes cos we're taught at university you know you have to be careful of that your professional boundaries and if it was actually like well actually you are talking to a young child*

> *that automatically they do that, you're not going to say that you know you have to sit over there [researcher laughs] children will automatically do that with that age well children* <u>*I've*</u> *met do and if you want to build a relationship you can't push...you're not going to put your arms around them as a professional but you're not going to push them away either*

Some interviewees' instinctive feelings about what was the 'right' or appropriate physical response to proffer during a given encounter, conflicted with the practitioner's understanding of what was regarded as appropriate professional behaviour. Consideration was given by interviewees as to what represented a proportionate bodily response, taking into account both the specific nature of the practitioner's professional role and the length of time the social worker had been involved with the child.

Practitioner *Karen* for example suggested that her responses to a child touching her were generally '*instinctive*' and made in the moment of the worker-child encounter but that she might feel more self-conscious about a child '*running and jumping up to you and throwing themselves at you'* in the presence of a child's parent, but on the other hand, '*I think particularly if you've got a looked after child that becomes fairer then because they'll be seeking out some form of affection or closeness to whoever is working with them'. Karen* did not directly state but appeared to imply that as well as having a more parental form of professional responsibility towards looked after children, the longer-term nature of social workers' involvement with looked after children was also a factor that was considered. The importance of touch in child protection work has also been strongly argued by Ferguson (2011), both because it is an opportunity for social workers to express humanity towards children, but also because it can sometimes be a source of healing, such as when communicating warmth and

comfort to children (Lefevre, 2010). However, touch is additionally a way of social workers checking on children's physical wellbeing (Ferguson, 2010b) so touch in relation to social work, can be seen as having both a humane and a professional purpose.

From a phenomenological perspective (as discussed in Chapter 4), individuals always exist in a world that already culturally-historically precedes them (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2014) where there are social and cultural differences regarding how issues of physical closeness and distance are interpreted and understood (Lishman, 2009) and also cultural norms regarding the use of touch (Petrie, 2011a). Professional and personal cultural norms can therefore both impact on the willingness of individuals to communicate through touch and also influence to what degree touch is perceived as appropriate when communicating with children in a professional context. The tensions apparent in the above interviewee accounts of social workers and children communicating through touch, appeared to reflect a practitioner self-questioning as to whether personal and professional understandings of (intercorporeal) touch could be separated. A phenomenological understanding of embodiment as intercorporeity, regards the 'flesh' of the body as always intertwined with or woven into the 'flesh' of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). Using this phenomenological understanding to interpret interviewee accounts of communicating through touch, suggests that practitioners' bodily responses to children will always constitute an intertwined personal-professional and spatial-emotional-physical embodied response. Practitioners therefore have to make temporally situated judgements about whether and how to use tactile communication in their relationships with children (the temporal aspects of worker-child relationships are explored in Chapters 6 and 7).

Some practitioners in this study were much more proactive or relaxed than others, in responding to children in a tactile manner. *John* for example, said:

> *I'd always felt I suppose value about I'm not going to be a sort of stiff social worker who doesn't you know play with a child...I do remember having [2 year old child] on my knees whilst I'm on one of their sofas and bouncing and jumping and bouncing like a trampoline holding his hands whilst trying to have a conversation with mum*

Other practitioners however, preferred to use a mainly verbal rather than physical approach to relationship building with children.

> Researcher: *Have you ever had to do things like get down on the floor or*
>
> Azeem: *Yeah oh yeah...*
>
> Researcher: *So you don't really like doing it though*
>
> Azeem: *No for me it doesn't yeah I think ideally yeah I would like the verbal rather than that but obviously there has been there's always going to be times when that's not...when they're coming up on you younger children and getting your book and then I'm taking - tearing up paper and giving it to them and just engaging with them however they are in their environment and trying to get a kind of relationship a working relationship so you can know they feel comfortable to share things and we can obviously get to the bottom of what's going on*

As well as practitioners responding to instances of children physically approaching and touching them during worker-child encounters, interviewees sometimes initiated physical contact with children, with practitioners often deciding in the moment of the worker-child encounter, whether to do this or not. Practitioner *Sheila* for example, talked about taking three very distressed young children in her car from the hospital to stay in a foster home after investigating

an incident of physical abuse by a parent (an incident also mentioned earlier in this chapter). *Sheila* described how she tried to reduce the children's distress through singing together with the children but also through using touch.

> *...so while I was in the car I thought to myself what can I do now with these children...and the only thing I could think of doing was to sing... and the two boys started to join in and the little girl was obviously a bit more delayed in her and I was saying 'come on' [quietly encouraging tone of voice] and saying her name and touched her arm and said 'come on lets go louder' [energetic tone of voice]...and we sang and sang and louder and louder*

As mentioned above, touch can be used to comfort children, (Lefevre, 2010). Touch is also argued to be part of '*ethical good practice'* (Ferguson, 2011: 102) where social workers' use of touch in relation to working with children during assessments requires situated practitioner sensitivity and emotional attunement. Whilst it has been suggested that the appropriateness of touch should be considered through the situational lens of what the child needs (Lefevre, 2010), utilising phenomenological notions of embodiment and intercorporeity (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 2014) can illuminate the importance of practitioners holistically assessing the embodied emotional-physical-spatial messages being communicated by children. The incorporeal body is both perceiver and perceived (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). Touch is therefore an intercorporeally generated lived experience. Social workers therefore need to situationally and dialogically respond to the embodied communications of children, but at the same time retain a reflexive practitioner awareness of social workers' own embodied positioning and its impact on the nature of the communicative encounter.

Conclusion

In the context of the pressured and constrained organisational cultures described in Chapter 4, this chapter has outlined the embodied, intercorporeal and spatial practices used by practitioners and children in order to co-create a comfortable relational environment for worker-child encounters.

Examining worker-child relationship through the phenomenological lens of intercorporeity foregrounds the co-created nature of the process of relationship building, where the embodied verbal, vocal, physical-emotional and spatial aspects of the lived experiences of practitioners and children are socially created as well as individually experienced. The interviewee accounts of building meaningful relationships with children that are discussed in this chapter, emphasise the importance of generating a sense of worker-child togetherness through physical, emotional or spatial acts of sharing.

Conceptualising the process of relationship building as an intercorporeal accomplishment, shifts understanding away from social work as a disembodied skill or technique (see Chapter 1), instead highlighting a more holistic, spatial and corporeal or 'fleshly' (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) understanding of practice. Whilst the relational environment of worker-child encounters has been identified in this chapter as encompassing embodied and intercorporeal vocal, physical, emotional and spatial forms of relatedness, relational environments are also temporal in nature. The temporal aspects of the relational environments generated between social workers and children will therefore be explored next, in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6: TEMPORALITY OR *LIVED TIME* AND PRACTITIONER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The previous chapter explored social workers' understandings of the embodied, intercorporeal and spatial nature of social worker-child relationships. This chapter explores interviewees' understandings of the *temporal* nature of their relationships with young children and the significance and meaning of time, in relation to building meaningful social worker-child relationships.

First, the chapter outlines what is meant by the phenomenological term, *lived time*. The chapter then considers some of the embodied in-the-moment social worker responses to children described by some interviewees and explores the intertwined, personal-professional nature of practitioner *presence* and its fundamentally social and ethical nature. Next, the chapter considers the tensions that arose for interviewees in relation to time and social worker-child relationships, including how the availability of time impacted on practitioners' ability to ethically respond to children in humane and respectful ways, and how interviewees managed the ending of their relationships with children. The chapter ends by highlighting the ongoing temporal, moment-by-moment nature of social worker-child relationship building.

Lived time: ways of temporally *being* with children

A phenomenological understanding of time (*temporality*) conceptualises time not as chronological or clock time, but as temporally and individually experienced *lived time* where the particular meanings and significance of time are uniquely experienced by each person. Based on Husserl's (2012) original

ideas, both Merleau-Ponty (2012) and Heidegger (2010) further developed a phenomenological understanding of lived time that understood individuals as always existing in a world that culturally-historically (temporally) precedes them. Merleau-Ponty for example, argued that the social-historical world constitutes a dimension of each person's *being* but is only taken up through the way each person temporally *lives* or experiences the world. Merleau-Ponty used the term '*field of presence*' (2012: 438) to capture the temporally experienced nature of each person's own lived experience, suggesting that every current moment of an individual's lived experience also contains the background traces of past and potential horizons of meaning. *Lived time* therefore has a three-fold nature, as each temporal moment is individually experienced as a *past-present-future* moment of lived experience (Smith, 2003; Stern, 2004; Husserl, 2012). Each moment of human existence is therefore experienced as a past-present-future experience of *being*, where each person brings their past with them into each present moment of experiencing such that it forms part of each of our own as-it-is-happening lived experience. Present lived experiences therefore contain echoes of the past but also the traces of an imagined or potential oncoming future: a *can-be (*Diekelmann and Diekelmann, 2009).

From this perspective, there are no a-temporal entities such as personal traits or skills. Instead, practitioner techniques, methods and other ways of *being-in the-world* (Heidegger, 2010) with children are always temporally lived and temporally experienced relational phenomena. Practising as a social worker is therefore a '*living event'* (Perlman, 1957: 3) where social workers have to adapt, respond and decide within each temporal moment of every worker-child encounter, how to relationally interact or intercorporeally *be* with a child, moment by moment. This chapter therefore explores interviewee accounts of

relationship building through a temporal phenomenological lens, interpreting different temporal ways of *being* with children in order to explore how meaningful relationships with children can be generated. The profession of social work is underpinned by a code of ethics and values (see Chapter 1) that have to be temporally enacted when practitioners work with children, but it has been argued that Heidegger's exploration of the nature of *being* does not pay sufficient attention to examining the ethical nature of human existence (Brook, 2007). This chapter therefore additionally uses aspects of the philosophical work of Levinas (1981) to explore the ethical dimension of social worker-child relationships and consider how ethical aspects of practitioner *being* are temporally expressed during the process of relationship building. Heiddegger explored the relationship of *being* to time, considering what it means to '*come to presence'* (Moran, 220: 199) or to appear in time. I therefore sometimes use the terms *presence* and *presencing* in place of the Heideggerian term *being, as* these terms are rooted in the same ontological understanding of *being* but the terms presence and presencing are sometimes used as a shorter or more accessible way of talking about practitioner *being.*

Being present in the moment with children: '*I didn't think about it a lot to be honest, I just did it'*

Practitioners in this study described experiences of spontaneously acting without thinking, in terms of how they relationally responded to children. Practitioner *Helen* for example (in the way discussed in Chapter 5) talked about responding to children in an '*instinctive*' rather than a pre-planned, conscious manner. When trying to make a child feel at ease, *Helen* described instinctively

making use of an item that was immediately to hand in the surrounding space (her '*sat nav*'), in order to help make the child she had only met for the first time that day, feel more comfortable. In this practice instance there is a sense of speed and reaction as well as the use of an object. *Helen* was driving her car to take *Jamie* to hospital for a medical examination and wanted to give *Jamie* something to do during the journey.

> *I gave him my sat nav and said (I know the way) but said 'can you show me the way tell me when to turn'*

Foregrounding speed and reactivity here is not to suggest that practitioners randomly responded to children. It was more a practitioner expression of having an embodied or pre-cognitive *felt sense* (Gendlin, 2003) of how to relationally respond to children in the immediate moment of the as-it-is-happening experience.

One such embodied in-the-moment response was described by interviewee *Kate*, who was required to (jointly with the police) interview several children from a family where an allegation of sexual abuse of the children had been made. Part of the initial safeguarding assessment process involved all of the children being medically examined.

> Kate: *They were all seen at the [sexual referral centre] now me and the police officer that video interviewed the little girl it was me and him that did it all week...so when the medical took place and police officer left cos he was a male so he left and then the girls were given a choice about whether I stayed or not erm one of them bless her one of the older girls wanted me to stay and hold her hand so we just sort of stayed there together and I held her hand sort of while she had it done…*

Researcher: *Did that surprise you or did you think you had made a connection with her…*

Kate: *I just did it if that makes her feel a bit better then I'll take her lead I didn't think about it a lot to be honest I just did it*

Kate describes what is being relationally shared with the child in a moment of handholding as not just a physical connection. *Kate* also talked about making the young person '*feel a bit better',* proffering an emotional and arguably ethical as well as physical relational response. *Kate* described holding the young person's hand as a spontaneous act, '*I just did it'.* Other interviewees recounted similar relational experiences of expressing in-the-moment embodied physical-emotional rather than primarily cognitive responses to children.

Practitioner *Sheila* for example (also referred to in Chapter 5), talked about how she spontaneously began singing a nursery rhyme out loud in her car when transporting three distressed children to a foster home following a child protection investigation, as an in-the-moment response to the children's distress: *'I don't know where that came from. I don't know how I even thought of that at the time but I did*'.

In these types of instances, practitioners were describing instantaneous bodily-emotional responses to children: sensory, embodied responses where practitioners' attitudes, feelings, values and understanding could be argued as being temporally exposed by the body's actions (Camernon and McDermott, 2007). The importance of upholding an ethical (moral) or humane approach to social work practice remains a central professional concern (see for example, Featherstone et al., 2014; Bell and Hafford-Lechfield, 2015; Hay, 2019). Whilst the above moments could be viewed as practitioners providing taken for granted humane responses towards the presence of other persons in distress, a

phenomenological analysis of such moments involves a further questioning of such taken for granted instances of humane responding. What is the meaning and significance of responding humanely to another person, and how is the nature and quality of human presence or *being* of significance in creating meaningful social worker-child relations?

Humanely being with others: the ethical nature of human presence

Considering the meaning of the phrases, 'humane' and 'human presence' invites a deeper questioning of the nature of human presence and the meaning of human existence. It raises questions about what it means to *be* in the world, *to be-in-the-world-with-others* and what makes human existence meaningful (Heidegger, 2010). Levinas's philosophical exploration of the nature of human *being,* focuses specifically on exploring what constitutes '*the very humanity of the human'* (1981: Foreword) and offers a theoretical framework that can help explicate understandings of the nature of human presence and what is understood by the use of the term humane. Reading the work of Levinas (1981) provided me with a language and theoretical lens for generating a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of human presence and of understanding what constitutes a *humane* relational response between one person and another.

Being-in-the-world means to also always *be-in-the-world-with-others* (Heidegger, 2010). One ethical implication of this is that the very nature of human *being-in-the-world* creates an always already present obligation on each individual to respond to the plea or moral summons of other persons to share the world with them (Levinas, 1981). This co-existence of human *being*

therefore requires an always already present plea or demand to acknowledge and accept the other person as an equal human being in the world. Levinas therefore sees ethics as a fundamental condition of all human existence. Whilst ethics are also rights-based (deontic) in nature as they represent a responsibility and obligation towards others, it is the already present plea or demand to accept the other person as an equal human being in the world as an ethical condition of human existence, that gives life meaning (Levinas,1981).

Human presence or the nature of human *being-in-the-world f*rom this perspective, is therefore fundamentally social *and* ethical. Social phenomena are thereby also always inescapably moral or ethical phenomena and people are ethical beings before they assume any other form of social identity or role. From this viewpoint, the relational nature of social worker-service user encounters inescapably involves an ethical obligation towards other persons in the form of a moral plea to be accepted as an equal human being. Whilst the ethical obligation towards other persons may lead practitioners to respond humanely, this is not an inescapable consequence but a choice that practitioners make. The nature of practitioner presence during social worker-service user encounters is therefore a personal-professional and ethically obligated form of presence but it is only when this moral plea is responded to, that practitioners' relational responses become humane responses.

Sustaining personal-professional presence as a way of humanely being with children

Applying Levinas's (1981) understanding of the social-ethical nature of human being to social work practice, professional social worker-child relationships are

understood as founded on an ethical core of human presence that is also simultaneously both a personal *and* professional form of ethical presence. Worker-child relationships are personal-professional encounters where the ethical content of the relational encounter is generated in the temporally lived, as-it-is-happening experience or encounter between social worker and child.

Whilst Levinas identifies ethics at the core of what it means to *be* in the world and at the heart of what makes human life or existence meaningful, this does not mean that individuals have no moral agency. How we behave towards others or how we present ourselves in each temporal moment is a matter of individual choice. In respect of social worker-child relationships, it is also a moment of inseparable *personal-professional* choice. This is because the nature of each social worker's presence in any given moment reflects the tri-partite nature of temporally lived experiences (Husserl, 2012). Our past experiences come with us into our present moments of experiencing.

Prior personal as well as professional lived experiences are an inescapable part of every practitioner's temporal presence in every moment of experiencing. Social workers' encounters with children are therefore *always* personal-professional encounters. The fundamentally ethical nature of human presence requires practitioners to choose moment by moment, how they want to *be* as a personal-professional self in their encounters with children, and this personal-professional nature of practitioner presence was evident throughout all interviewee accounts of relationship building with young children, as illustrated in the comments made by *Susan*.

> *I am personally very hot on being on time. I hate children to be waiting around for the social worker to come...most of life experience teaches you how to talk to children doesn't it. I'm*

[number] years old. I've been a nurse I've been a child minder I am blowing my own trumpet but I would hope I can talk to children ...there are social work techniques that I have learnt to utilise as I am going along but innately in me I couldn't be anything else this is who I am. I am [name] safeguarding social worker this is who I am it's in me and that's part of me...

Researcher: *If you weren't a social worker would you approach the child in the same way or do you approach it in a certain way because you* <u>*are*</u> *a social worker*

Susan: ...*Well I'd just say it is a natural it's something that I do naturally I'm not thinking about it when I'm doing it I'm just being it*

The nature of social worker presence becomes realised in a temporally present worker-child encounter as a narrative of temporal unfolding (Ricoeur, 1991). This unfolding of a temporally present self is constituted by historicity (where the practitioner-person has come from) but also by the future, in respect of how the practitioner-person perceives themselves as the practitioner-person they want to be. This can be seen for example, in the comment made by *John*.

I'd always felt value I suppose value about I'm not gonna be a sort of <u>*stiff*</u> *social worker who doesn't you know play with a child... I've sat on the floor and played lego in playschemes. I kick footballs around and [have] gone to youth clubs and played tennis and hi-fived kids and it'll be fine. That's the sort of person I wanna be and within about 30 seconds of every visit I went he'd [2-year-old child] jump up on me and I'd be on the floor...and we got on really well...like I've got a [age of child] myself*

John indicated he felt relaxed when playing with 2-year-old *Laclan* in this instance, partly because that was how he wanted to *be* as a social worker, but also because of his previous experiences of working with young people in other employment roles and his experiences of being a parent of a young child. For

other interviewed practitioners, aspects of their professional approach were also linked to personal attributes. *Helen* for example felt the nature and sound of her voice helped her to build relationships with young children.

> *I'm not very grave...and maybe that comes across in the way I talk to mum and talk to the little one and erm I think my voice is you might notice is naturally really high so it doesn't lend itself you know to being severe really sometimes it disarms people*

Some practitioners referred to the fact that they personally found some age groups of children easier to relate to than others and that this had an impact (either positively or negatively) on the degree of relational comfortableness the practitioner felt. *Karen* for example said:

> *I've been told that I've got a nice way with younger children and I don't know whether it's because I've got children myself I don't know. I understand that age group and what they're and the way that they are flinging themselves around and that they want that praise*

Sheila similarly felt her prior personal life experiences positively contributed towards her ability to build relationships with young children. She also believed her ability to build relationships with children was because she loved being with children.

> *I've got grandchildren I've got great empathy with children. I just you know if I see a little one it's 'Hiiii' and you know or if I'm at if I go to a school well its really really difficult to go and speak to children cos they don't know you and it's about what they have to feel - an instant comfort if you know what I mean they have to feel 'oh she's alright this lady'...I feel I've got that - it's a gift...yes I just feel I've got that and I've got - I love children*

Another practitioner *Azeem,* alternatively felt more comfortable working with slightly older children than with younger ones, as he preferred to speak with children rather than to do physical activities with them

> *I think I am more comfortable with kind of seven eight plus because I think I mean it's just easier to speak about things and get kind of verbalise their concerns they are able to say what they want...I think with younger children I think obviously so a lot more observations and all kinds of enquiries using different kinds of tools maybe you don't get as much but you do still get something so it's obviously the way we engage*
>
> Researcher: *So because you find the verbal engagement easier than*
>
> Azeem: *Yeah that's right*

Other interviewees such as social worker *Kate*, used a particular tone of voice or adapted the style of language they used, to help build relationships with young children.

> *It's just about being really smiley with them and having a really soft tone of voice towards them. I know when I use a really stern tone of voice they're going to be terrified aren't they so say if I say things like can you tell me anything that you're scared of I don't know and I'll say 'I'm really scared of spiders' or something like that you know say 'actually you know you're not the only one that feels scared I'm scared sometimes' and trying to make them feel it isn't just like they're not the only ones...relating it back to me to say actually sometimes this is when I feel scared or this makes me when it is sunny that makes me really happy*

In the above practice instances, these practitioners were all describing instances of using their temporally prior 'selves' within the temporally present moment of being with children, and in some instances (see for example, the

comments by *John* below) additionally used the idea of the future self they wanted to be within the present moment of their encounters with children: '*I'm not gonna be a sort of <u>stiff</u> social worker who doesn't you know play with a child'*.

Each social worker is thereby a unique person who always brings something of themselves into their professional role (Stern et al., 1998). Each social worker also brings with them into each present moment, their own sense of personal values that the practitioner can choose to draw on or *not* to draw on, during social worker-child encounters. Sustaining a humane form of practitioner presence is therefore determined by how practitioners decide to enact particular bits of themselves and draw selectively on past personal or professional experiences and values in in any given moment by choosing how to relationally *be* with children.

> Azeem: *I suppose there is that element of your own values and your own kind of ethics and things like that but then there's also obviously what you've learnt from the you know course [social work course] or what you've kind of discussed...and I think you just pull it all together and it becomes kind of like an eclectic mix you just use you just draw on each in terms of to suit the circumstance...*
>
> Researcher: *How much of the way you are when you work with children is to do with you as a person or your personal values, or is it to do with the way you feel you should be with children in terms of your social work role...*
>
> Azeem: *I think for me it's kind of almost half and half cos obviously I can't my own values are the way I work and the way I speak to people and it's just it's just the way you are and then when you learn I just kind of join them up. I don't know how but it just seems to kind of work*

Striving to maintain a humane form of ethical presence is also simultaneously about how practitioners, in each present moment with a child, aspire towards the practitioner-person that they want to be, as *John* commented:

> *The messages in training [university social work course] still stuck with me and I hope they will still, continual professional development, it's not just that randomly you went on a course last week and you hope some key messages stick and at that time and I still am keen to uphold some of those values sort of stuff you know 'my social worker did something extraordinary' or well ordinary but extraordinary*

Ethics do not ultimately reside in institutions or organisations (Froggett, 2002) even though organisations do establish procedural parameters that guide social workers as to what constitutes ethical professional conduct. Ethics and values are relationally enacted. Child protection social work is characterised by the need for practitioners to build relationships with children in difficult and often traumatic circumstances. For child protection social workers, the role itself requires practitioners to intervene in the most intimate aspects of children's lives in what are often stressful, difficult, and sometimes also emotionally distressing environments. Striving to sustain a humane form of ethical presence requires considering what it means to behave in a humane manner towards other persons, in any given encounter.

A dictionary definition of the term *humane* suggests the term means '*characterised by kindness',* by sympathy or to inflict '*as little pain as possible'* (Hanks, 1983: 713). Whilst social workers may strive to show care, kindness and concern towards others, the nature of the professional role frequently requires social workers to also remove children from the care of their parents or to ask children to share distressing and personal information such as when

asking children to recall incidents of abuse. In such circumstances, aiming to inflict as little emotional pain as possible on a child may be as much as a social worker can achieve in some relational moments of being with children. Striving to sustain a humane form of practitioner presence is therefore at the heart of generating meaningful social worker-child relationships, as it is a humane form of practitioner presence that workers need to sustain when the worst circumstances occur.

Practitioners who holistically personally-professionally, temporally *presenced* themselves (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) also appeared to perceive their encounters with children not as solely task focussed experiences, seeming to understand that there was a need to have more than a purely instrumental approach towards building relationships with children. Interviewees understood there was a need to care about children as whole persons. There was a recognition however, that not all social workers necessarily understood this.

> Sheila: *I'm a bit soft do you know what I mean I'm not soft but I really do empathise a lot [with children] and understand what they're saying and I think that's probably due to probably my life experiences as well*
>
> Researcher: *Isn't that just about (pause) caring for other people really*
>
> Sheila: *I do care yeah I really do yeah...*
>
> Researcher: *Do you think all social workers do think that's what their role is*
>
> Sheila: *No I don't actually not with some social workers, sometimes I think they're a bit curt and a bit just get to the point and do what they need to do and not thinking about the family and what's going*

> *on for them. For me I always think how would I want to be treated if that was me*

In contrast to the above description, practitioners in this study appeared to see and relate to children as whole persons but additionally presenced themselves to children, as whole persons. Social workers in this study thereby understood their relationships with children as encompassing the generation of a personal as well as a professional connection, as can be seen in the comments made by *Helen*: *'I always try and give a little snapshot of me and a little bit of what I do, with children'*.

Sustaining a holistic form of personal-professional presence appeared to be an important way in which practitioners in this study chose to temporally *be* (Heidegger, 2010) with children. Sustaining this form of presence also appeared to positively contribute towards making practitioner-child relationships more meaningful. However, interviewees also cited instances where they felt meaningful relationships with children were *not* achieved. The next subsection therefore uses a Heideggerian interpretive phenomenological lens to further consider what ways of *being* with children might lead to such an outcome.

Being with other persons as 'theyness'

Using a Heideggerian understanding of human *being* as way of phenomenologically analysing what makes social worker-child relationships (or any human relationship) meaningful, is underpinned by Heidegger's notion (see also Chapter 2) of the *thrownness* of human existence, where *thrownness* highlights the social nature of being-in-the-world. Human beings, from a

Heideggerian viewpoint, always exist in a '*with-world'* (Heidegger, 2010: 125) where being-in-the-world always means to be-in-the-world-with-others.

On a day to day basis, Heidegger describes the everyday state of human existence as thereby constituting an *inauthentic* mode of existence or state of *fallenness*, where human beings come to exist '*only in reference to others*' (Thomson, 2012: 145) as human beings flee from confronting the ultimate finitude or being-towards-death of human existence through a form of tranquilisation generated by entanglement in the everydayness of the world. This *inauthentic* mode of existence is perceived as constituting the everyday or default mode of *being,* where everything is seen in terms of a socially non-differentiated '*sameness of being*' (Heidegger, 2010: 115) or as '*the they'* (Heidegger, 2010: 182) that Heiddegger terms *das Man.*

Whilst this *inauthentic* mode of existence is seen as the everyday mode of human existence where societal values and norms are unquestioningly accepted (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016), an *inauthentic* mode of existence has been identified as sometimes leading to individuals acting in '*a pre-programmed way'* (Healy, 2011: 222) with one another and as generating a tendency towards conformity (Chessick, 1996; Healy, 2011). An example of this can be seen in *Sheila's* description (outlined earlier in this chapter) of '*curt*', '*get to the point'* social workers where *Sheila* appeared to suggest that social work practitioners could sometimes use a pre-programmed or instrumental approach when relating to children, rather than proffering a more humane response.

Earlier in Chapter 4, the pressure of statutory timescales and professional norms including the use of organisationally defined thresholds to categorise family situations as 'in need' or 'at risk', were also identified as aspects of the

historically and socio-culturally situated context that could potentially constrain possibilities for meaningful worker-child relationship-building. Understanding *inauthenticity* as the everyday mode of human existence (Heidegger, 2010) can contribute towards understanding how families and children may sometimes be in danger of being perceived by practitioners solely through a lens of non-differentiated 'theyness' and be treated in a more instrumental, than humane, manner, resulting in meaningful social worker-child relationships *not* being achieved.

Heidegger suggests that it is only when the *inauthentic* everyday state of 'theyness' is disrupted (for example, by a sense of anxiety or fear of death) that each person's 'ownness' of existence comes into view and an *authentic* mode of existence becomes foregrounded (Brook, 2009). There are diverse and conflicting accounts in philosophical literature as to how Heidegger's notion of *authenticity* should be interpreted (see Henschen, 2012 for an overview of some of the range of different philosophical interpretations). Resolving philosophical debates about the meaning of *authenticity* is therefore beyond the scope of this thesis. There is some support, however, for taking the position that *authenticity* represents a kind of 'mineness': an individual ownership or taking responsibility for one's actions (Moran, 2000; McDonald and Wearing, 2013; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016) or as seeking one's own-most potential to *being* (Thomson, 2011) that still always forms an integral aspect of *the they*. There therefore remains the potential to investigate the relevance of Heidegger's concept of *authenticity* further, in relation to social worker-child relationships, but this avenue has not been explored in this thesis.

Tensions between time and personal-professional ways of being with children

There was a tension evident in some practitioner accounts between personal and professional, ethical ways of being with children that was related to the amount of time workers had available to be with children, and to perceptions of what constituted acceptable professional behaviour.

Practitioner *Helen* for example, talked about an instance of responding to two children in a way that instinctively felt '*good*' but at the same time *Helen* was unsure as to whether her actions could be regarded as '*professional*'. *Helen* had to manage an emotionally difficult encounter with two siblings as part of an investigation of physical abuse (an incident previously referred to in Chapter 5). When asking one of the children about where their parent was when their injury occurred, one of the children physically froze and couldn't speak. After getting the child a drink of water and after the young person subsequently revived, *Helen* and her colleague decided to walk the two children back home instead of driving them home in their car.

> *We ran home which is twenty minutes ran through the park and then they were chatting away on the way but it would have been very easy to just kind of we haven't got time...they'd said 'we like going in the park' so…we were doing races in the park and you think 'I don't know is it a good way to spend your time (pause) is it not, but it felt like a very good way to spend my time but not necessarily very professional. I don't know what theory that fits with but it certainly sort of diffused any sort of difficulties of the afternoon so that hopefully they can then go back home that evening and sort of feel a bit calmer*

Helen choose to do what felt '*good*', by doing something that helped these two children to feel a bit calmer but did not perceive her actions as necessarily being accepted or valued as representing a *professional* response in terms of how she had used the time she had with the children.

One area of conflict between notions of what is a 'professional' and a 'good' use of time in *Helen's* account, can be seen in the way preconceived ideas of professional behaviour conflicted with being in the moment with the child. A second tension between professional expectations of what constituted a valid or a valued use of time spent with children and the worker's temporally situated personal judgement as to the sufficiency of time needed to develop a meaningful connection with a specific child, is also evident here.

Understanding *lived time* as having a tri-partite past-present-future nature (Husserl, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 2012) can be helpful to use as a theoretical lens here, for interpreting and understanding why Helen experienced a tension between what she what she perceived as a '*good'* in the moment response to children's distress and her culturally understood expectation regarding what constituted a valid and sufficient '*professional'* response regarding her use of time. Phenomenologically understanding the lived present as also containing echoes of the past, *Helen's* reflections on her experience of being in the moment with the child can be seen as an example of *Helen* not being able to completely prevent her prior understandings of cultural expectations regarding her professional role and of what constituted a *'professional'* response, from intruding into her reflective present. The tensions created by pre-existing organisational-cultural constraints could therefore sometimes foreground themselves in practitioner accounts of relationship building.

Having sufficient time for building relationships with children was an issue raised in all interviewee accounts. The significance of time for practitioners in building meaningful relationships with children was to do with the amount of time they had available to build relationships during individual encounters. It was also to do with the length of time practitioners were likely to be involved in the child's life in terms of the nature of their professional role. As discussed in Chapter 4, interviewees talked about the organisationally generated time constraints attached to their role and how this impacted on their relationships with children. This was especially commented on by practitioners working in teams undertaking a short-term duty and assessment role. There was an awareness that they would only be in the child's life for a very short period of time and that the nature of the relationship they built with the child had to be proportionate in relation to this. This especially impacted on the amount of detail social workers asked children for, about their lives as illustrated in *Ruth's* comments.

> *Yeah I think on a duty and assessment team cos of the nature of the fast pace of the work and it can be quite difficult in ending cos you know that you're then going to be kind of closing that case or transferring on to another worker and you've invested in that really and you're forming an assessment and trying to...build up strengths and put safety measures in place that might be necessary for safeguarding issues so I think it's a lot of reassurance to the child but I think in yourself you want to make sure those things are in place and it's you know especially when you've had such an engaging young child you would liked to have continued that and to work with them more long term but you've got to be realistic what you can achieve within that short space of time as well and I suppose we are reminded of that in our team a*

lot you know...you have to be mindful what you can realistically achieve with a child in one or two sessions.

Ruth only met with 5-year-old *Troy* on two occasions during the assessment, which was initiated in relation to an issue of domestic abuse. *Ruth's* second meeting with *Troy* was therefore also about ending her involvement with him. The case was to be transferred to the long-term team because the nature of the child wellbeing concerns meant there was a need for ongoing social care involvement.

I told him how lovely it had been to meet him and how impressed I was with his picture and that it had been really fun chatting to him and getting to know him and that I'm sure that the new worker when they met him would feel the same and enjoy getting to know a bit more about him and they'd probably be involved for longer than I had been you know because I didn't want him thinking there were just going to be random adults coming in and out of his life and it's the way it works the system...so I tried to explain as much as I could without overwhelming him really

The brief duration of social worker-child relationships in duty and assessment teams and the fast-paced nature of assessment work meant that practitioners had to get to know children quickly and equally quickly find out as much as possible about children's lives. At the same time, interviewees were aware that they were only dropping briefly into the child's life and would be disappearing out of the child's life again just as quickly once the assessment had been completed. Whilst social workers are required to make what one interviewee (mentioned in Chapter 4) called '*instant*' relationships with children as part of their duty and assessment role, there was a practitioner recognition that the nature of the worker-child relationship needed to be tempered with respect,

through acknowledging the impact of only being involved in a child's life for a very short period of time, as indicated by *Kate.*

> *I feel I've built up a very short term relationship...purely there for a very very very short period of time...I don't like I don't want to push too hard because I just think it's not fair for you to then have to repeat everything that you've said to me to the next social worker...I'm not saying I don't ask them any questions because clearly I do but I'm really really mindful that they might have to say everything again and actually if they've suffered significant abuse they're not going to want to keep recounting over and over again, why would they*

Kate talked about aiming to get an overall *'flavour'* of the child welfare concerns when asking children to share details about their lives, rather than pushing children towards the disclosure of too many personal details. This was because these children would then be asked about their lives in greater detail by the next, longer term social worker allocated to the family. For practitioner *Kate,* forming a meaningful ethical relationship with children in a short-term duty and assessment context meant ensuring that there was a degree of respectful proportionality enacted in terms of how much detailed information each child was asked to disclose, given the brief duration of the worker-child relationship.

Sustaining ethical worker-child relations: respectful proportionality

Kate suggested there was a moral or ethical imperative towards maintaining a sense of respectful proportionality in relation to building short term relationships with children. *Kate* indicated this was especially the case when she might only meet with children on a couple of occasions before her involvement ceased. In respect of one family she worked with, *Kate* was aware of issues of significant

abuse and neglect in relation to the children. Shortly after bringing all the children into local authority care, she was organisationally required to pass on responsibility for working with the family to the long-term social work team in accordance with the way teams were organised in her authority.

> *Sometimes it's hard if they're telling you that you just think especially with them kids the [name] kids that I've talked about it was horrible I went home...oh my god really...and that's why I say I don't try to get too much [detailed information about the children' experiences of abuse] because I think I can't give. I can't give enough back in a very short space of time to warrant you saying absolutely everything to me does that make sense*
>
> Researcher: *Yeah it does yeah*

Interviewee *Kate* was not in control of the length of time she was organisationally allowed to be involved with the family but could decide how she used the limited time she had. Ethical worker-child relations for *Kate* involved trying to ask only for the minimum amount of information her social work assessment role required.

Social workers are required to intrude into the most intimate aspects of family life in order to help safeguard the wellbeing of children but are expected to do so respectfully and sensitively. Maintaining a sense of *respectful proportionality* in these types of assessment circumstances is really as much about what practitioners try *not* to do, as what practitioners do in their interactions with children. It was about practitioners trying *not* to treat children as disposable relational goods or human resources simply to be mined for nuggets of assessment information before passing casework responsibility for the child over to the next social worker. This was done by workers sustaining a sense of proportionality in the way they intervened in children's lives.

A practitioner sense of the need to sustain a degree of *respectful proportionality* appeared to be applied by interviewees throughout the whole period of worker-child involvement, including during the beginning and ending of worker-child relationships. Practitioners were aware that often, they would only be briefly involved in a child's life. To ensure the young person they were working with was aware of this, interviewees described how they would let the child know this at the start of their involvement, with one practitioner explaining: 'r*ight at the beginning we talked about...I make it quite clear that I'm not here forever I'm only here for a little bit'.* Practitioners appeared to feel a sense of responsibility to ensure children were aware of the level of relational commitment the worker could offer, before the worker began to ask the child about themselves and their experiences during social worker-child initial encounters. This seemed to be about practitioners ensuring a degree of relational proportionality was sustained.

Throughout their descriptions of their encounters with children, social workers in this study described experiences of treading a delicate relational balance between sustaining a degree of worker approachability and worker distance, between asking children to trust them and share personal information about their lives, whilst simultaneously letting children know the worker's professional involvement was time limited. Interviewees also talked about acknowledging to children that they were a stranger to them, but at the same time explaining to children why the social worker was also a safe professional-person for the child to talk to. *Helen* for example commented:

> *I always try and give a little snapshot of me and sort – a little bit of what I do you know normally 'don't talk to strangers but' (intake of breath) [both researcher and interviewee laugh together loudly] that*

> *'I've got a qualification' that's a really hard one isn't it asking them to trust you and it conflicts against every message that they've had ...yeah that's difficult and I still don't know a way round that really*

Social workers in this study experienced relationship building with children as a kind of *push me-pull you* role (Lofting, 2001) of getting to know children whilst simultaneously also preparing to leave them. The tension created by these two opposing relational positions required an ongoing balancing of relational concern throughout the period of social worker-child involvement. This ongoing relational balancing by interviewees, was reflected in a practitioner concern with maintaining a degree of worker-child relational proportionality in respect of the kind of working relationship developed with children. This was reflected through practitioners ensuring that children were sufficiently involved in the assessment process such that their views and feelings were not ignored or overlooked, whilst also ensuring that children's trust and willingness to share their feelings and information about their lived experiences was not exploited, given that the worker was only working with the child for a short period of time.

This required practitioners to pay constant ethical attention to how to *be* (Heidegger, 2010) with children where ethical *being-with* appeared to be centred around social workers ensuring that all of their interventions with children were valued. In Levinasian ethical terms (1981) ethical *being-with* is interpreted and understood here, as practitioners ethically choosing to respond to the already-present moral plea of children to be accepted and acknowledged as an equal human being, by paying ongoing attention to ensuring there is at least some degree of balance or sense of fairness achieved during the time practitioners and children spend together, whilst recognising that the worker-

child relationship is always ultimately an unequal relationship, due to the statutorily defined nature of the social worker's professional role.

Being with children during endings

In some instances, the social workers interviewed in this study were still working with the child they talked about building a relationship with, at the time the research study interview took place. In most cases however, practitioners spoke about their experiences of relationship building with young children where the practitioner's involvement with the child had already ceased. Acknowledging the ending of the practitioner's involvement with the family by saying goodbye directly to the child(ren) was recognised by interviewees as important, both in terms of thanking the child for allowing the worker to get to know them and in trying to set a positive precedent for the child's relationship with any future professionals who may become involved with them. *Karen* for example, said:

> W*hen you've finished that assessment then to finish it by going out doing a very brief visit thank you (pause) thank you for talking to me and actually so that those children in the future if anything comes up they're not going to think anything - can't talk to anyone they just left me and didn't come back*

In some circumstances, it was not always possible for interviewees to necessarily know in advance that it was their final visit, or alternatively workers were not able to directly acknowledge to the child that this was their last meeting, for other reasons.

> Researcher: *So when you saw him for that final time in the family home then did you know at the time it was going to be your final visit or*

Azeem: *I think yeah I think in reflection I probably did know but I wasn't able to kind of*

Researcher: *Weren't able to say it was*

Azeem: *That's right yeah...because part of me was just conscious of the police investigation that was ongoing [the investigation was about an incident of domestic abuse]...I was still a little bit conscious of is mum going to stay away and have no kind of not have any idea intention of reconciling what will be the kind of police investigation outcome of that and will that kind of impact on her ability to protect and keep the kids safe should dad return so I think that - I was just conscious of that's why I didn't finalise or confirm that...keeping it loose if you like...I was saying 'I'm just going to kind of speak to your mum you know waiting on some other kind of information about what we need to look at or what we need to do to support you guys' and he was happy with that...'if there's anything else I'll speak to your mum but take care' and that kind of thing and he was he seemed to be okay with that*

A number of reasons were given for why practitioners were not always sure when social care involvement with the family would cease. The unpredictable and changeable nature of children and families' circumstances was sometimes the cause. Some interviewees explained that they had to go back and consult with their line manager before a decision could be formally made to end their involvement with the family, with one practitioner for example commenting: *'I do need to speak to my manager about it'*.

In circumstances where there was going to be ongoing social work involvement with the family but the referral and assessment team social workers needed to end their involvement with children, interviewees had to say good bye but simultaneously inform children that another social worker would soon be

introducing themselves to the family and taking over the role of working with them. Practitioner *Ruth* for instance, talked about how she tried to end her involvement on one occasion by preparing the child for the fact they were going to have to get to know a new social worker.

> *I told him how lovely it had been to meet him and how impressed I was with his picture and that it had been really fun chatting to him and getting to know him and that I'm sure that the new worker when they met him would feel the same and enjoy getting to know a bit more about him and they'd probably be involved for longer than I had been*

Whilst practitioners often ended their involvement by thanking children for their participation, it was not always just social workers who thanked children. For interviewee *John*, one family expressed their thanks to him on his last visit to the family home.

> *When I arrived they did have a bottle of booze for me a bottle of wine (researcher laughs) I don't know how appropriate that is but I did declare it...a box of chocolates and a card that they'd all put in 'thank you for being my social worker'...that kind of goodbye that was a kind of 'we will miss you' rather than 'thank god that bloody social worker's not coming round anymore'*

A shared sense of togetherness was temporally generated in this above encounter through family members exhibiting what can be interpreted as a humane or ethical form of presence*. Humane presence* is phenomenologically understood here, as representing the holistic acknowledgement of John as a person as well as a social worker, with the family's thanks signalling their acceptance of *John* on equal relational terms (Levinas, 1981) where accepting the other person as an equal human being is seen as the ethical relational response that generates the meaningfulness of the relational encounter.

For *John* and for other social workers in this study, the ending of the professional working relationship with children had an emotional impact on the practitioner as well as on the family: '*I felt I was going to miss them a bit as well' (John)*. The experience of working with families and getting to know intimate details about a child or family's lived experiences, left a relational imprint on social workers that remained long after their involvement with the family ceased. This was the case even when the social worker may only have been involved in a child's life for a very short period.

Practitioners continued thinking about the children they had worked with after their professional involvement had ended: *'I do think about things when I go home and I wonder what happened to them' (Sheila).* The temporally experienced resonance of the worker-child relationship therefore remains an embodied part of practitioners' ongoing lived experience, through each practitioner's individual thoughts and memories.

Several of the practitioners who worked in a short-term duty and assessment team setting additionally wished it was possible to either continue working with children whose circumstances they had initially assessed, or to at least be able to have some subsequent information about how the child was doing. This was especially the case when the child was likely to remain looked after or was being prepared for a move into a permanent placement arrangement away from their birth family, as in the instance described by *Kate.*

> *It was a horrible horrible case what those children will have suffered and you need closure you're only human and you can't witness and hear all of that to nothing you know you need to know what's going to happen to them kids are they safe do you know what I mean so you have to need to find out...I think I'd want to know as well*

because these children need a level of justice about everything that's happened... for them to be able to look back and be like right ok this is what social services did this is what the police did

There was a difficult aspect to building meaningful connections with children when working in short-term organisational settings. Some interviewees found it difficult to accept and feel comfortable about the amount of relational changes for social workers and children that resulted from different social workers temporally dipping into and out of children's lives, as *Susan* indicated.

Even though it's only been a very short period of time we [name of child] and I have come a long way in our relationship but then that's got a bad side as well because when we finish court...he's going to be placed for adoption. The adoption team will step in at that point of placement order so he will get another social worker... and then it's just carrying on for him isn't it <u>more</u> and <u>more</u> people who are coming and going and that really saddens me because...[number] years ago when we were doing adoptions social worker saw it through so you saw it through from the day you removed the child to the day they were placed in their adoptive placement so you were very much part of family finding you went through with the adoption team to view potential adopters you were involved in all of that and you saw it right through to the celebration hearing when it was all finished...and I <u>loved</u> that seeing that all the way through and now to have come this far with [name of child] to not even be a part of that I mean if I'm lucky I'll be part of the appreciation day that they get for him but that's reliant on the workers inviting me to that you know I'd much...would have liked to have been part of the family finding bit for [name of child] as well...he's had a really rough experience of professionals and people

Sustaining a greater sense of relational continuity was therefore seen as something that was beneficial for the wellbeing of the practitioner as well as beneficial for the wellbeing of the child.

It has been argued earlier in this chapter that ethical or humane *being-with* is linked to individuals being treated as a persons of equal worth or value (Levinas, 1981). The past-present-future nature of *lived time* (Husserl, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 2012) additionally suggests that prior relational experiences can be carried forward into future lived experiences and can therefore potentially impact on them. Practitioners who were only involved in working with children on a short term basis, worked hard to ensure they acknowledged and valued their relationships with children in the temporal present of *being-with* them (see earlier chapter subsection comments of *Ruth* and *Karen*) with interviewees appearing to understand that the quality of relationship they developed with the child in the present, could potentially impact on the child's relationships with the next social worker who worked with them in the future. However, interviewees also (see *Susan's* above comments and the earlier subsection comments of *Kate*) appeared to express concern about the negative relational impact on sustaining humane relationships with children, of a practice environment characterised by frequent changes of social worker, where constant relational changes appeared to place only a limited value on social worker-child relationships and arguably by implication, ascribe limited value to children and practitioners themselves. This highlights the importance of continuity rather than disruption where successfully *being-with* relationships have been co-created.

Time constraints: organisations, personal circumstances and personal-professional values

For those interviewees working within a locality based team structure where social workers undertook short-term interventions with families but also worked

with families on a long-term basis if needed, some practitioners as a consequence, built longer term relationships with children that lasted for several months up to several years (over ten years, in the case of one interviewee). In these practice instances, there was an opportunity for these social workers to become a little more involved in the child's life in a slightly broader sense: not so tightly focussing solely on the immediate child safeguarding or child wellbeing concerns, but also allowing more time to acknowledge the child as a person with a life outside social care involvement. Interviewee *John* for example, wanted to be a worker who '*went the extra mile'* for a particular young person he worked with.

> *They had a school harvest festival or it was a little charitable event. It might have been the children in need stuff actually... there was no need for me to go there wasn't like a reason there wasn't a meeting around it there wasn't any further assessment we were doing but the kid had said - six and a half year old - because I'd had a good session with him the week before 'we've got this open thing on it's 20p to come and we are selling stalls and selling cakes' and I went...and he really appreciated it you could tell. I hung out for probably and hour or so in the school hall he ran over to me and said (animated tone of voice) 'aah you're here'*

John decided to go to this school event because the young person wanted him to be there. *John* also indicated that it was important to take this extra time to be with the young person in a non-instrumental way by giving time to the child that was not connected to the completion of an assessment task: it was *unconditional time*. Offering this type of time was also related to the values *John* wanted to uphold as a social worker. He felt offering to spend time just *being-with* children, was a professionally justifiable use of his work time and a valid way of building worker-child relationships.

John talked about how he had since progressed in his career as a social worker and had now begun to find it increasingly hard to spend these extra periods of unconditional time with children because of the pressure of '*workload, process, at court, court report and all that sort of stuff'.* Other interviewees similarly talked about the time pressures of their job in terms of how their role frequently involved doing visits to family homes out of office hours at 6 pm or later such as up to 10 pm at night for example such as when bringing children into care. These kinds of working hours impacted on the times practitioners had available for their own personal lives, but the reverse was also the case. When one practitioner for example decided he needed to preserve more personal time for his own family, this impacted on his professional life and on the time he had available for building meaningful working relationships with children on his caseload. After having a second child, *John* indicated how he now found it more difficult to always give extra time to the children and families he worked with.

> *The amount of time I was with him* [6-year-old young person] *and pretty much always being willing to be on the floor and stopping and taking my coat off and stuff like that I was conscious of doing that even though (pause) I do probably a bit more now I sometimes keep my coat on thinking oh I can't really hang out here I've got other things to do - or at that time I was more stop, time is important for them. Yes, I only had one child at home at that time not two. I've got to make sure I'm home these days*

In order to make social worker-child relationships more meaningful, practitioner *Margaret suggested* that spending time with a child that was not task focussed, was one way of facilitating this.

> *It would be better to be able to spend more time even if it was just to go out with the [foster] carer certain activities and get*

to know [the child] in that sort of way I feel that would make it more meaningful

Having shared everyday experiences with a child through simply spending time *being-together-with* them, was understood by *Margaret as* being something that was a relationally valuable lived experience in and of itself. While Chapter 5 discussed the benefits of doing shared activities with children as a way of generating common relational ground between workers and children through a shared relational experience, generating a sense of *being-together-with* children is about more than undertaking an activity together. It is about generating an ethical sense of *being-together-with* another person, where the moral plea to accept the other person as an equal human being is positively responded to (Levinas, 1981). It is therefore not necessarily the type of shared activity that social workers undertake with children that is of primary significance. It is generating a temporal sense of *being-together-with* another person that makes the experience of undertaking a shared activity a meaningful and humane relational experience.

For participants in this study, the amount of time practitioners had available to spend with children, impacted on the development of meaningful worker-child relationships. The minimum amount of time a practitioner felt was needed for generating a meaningful working relationship or connection with a child varied according to the specific practice context but was also influenced by the personal inclinations of the child and the social worker.

Researcher: *How do you know as a practitioner when you have formed some kind of meaningful working relationship with a child what is it about the way that they respond to you that tells you you've formed some kind of connection*

> Azeem: *Yeah I think for me its observations so if we're speaking having like a shared interest or if we've got something that we can both comment on or they're able to kind of respond well to me they're more you know they appear more relaxed. They're able to speak I think that's when I know I've got them...I think there's always going to be them young people those young people you know that don't or who aren't as kind of open and don't will take a bit more time to kind of build up that relationship but I think you know when you're in that situation that you need to go slowly maybe or you might need to do more work or more sessions to build that up and I think in some cases it's* <u>*instant*</u> *that first meeting. You know you've got a good rapport with them*

The uniqueness of every individual social worker and child makes the process of relationship building an uncertain and jointly negotiated temporal process of discovery. Social workers interviewed in this study therefore talked about needing to sustain an openness of approach and of expectation in social worker-child encounters that can be phenomenologically understood as a *can be* (Diekelmann and Diekelmann, 2009), what *Azeem* termed '*going with the flow'* of worker-child encounters, generating relationships through the ongoing temporal, moment-by-moment lived experiences of each encounter (Heidegger, 2010).

Relationship building moment by moment: '***we're always relationship-based building I think aren't we'*** **(*John*)**

Most interviewee accounts of making meaningful working relationships with young children in this study were not about working with a child over a period of several years. Most practitioners were in practice circumstances where the practitioner was working with a child and their family for only a few weeks.

Practitioner *Azeem* felt it was not possible to have a fixed or pre-prepared response in these circumstances. Instead an attitude of openness was needed, both in terms of how to relationally respond to each child he was meeting with, and in relation to establishing how much time was needed to complete an assessment.

> *We always get a referral so we always have something to go off but again it can be quite different when you actually go to the home when you meet the family meet the children so it's very much and I think you make that judgement and I think when you have that first face to face contact with the family with the children or in some cases you may pick that up and it may change so you might - right I don't need to see this young person for long you know maybe two sessions but then something might come up from school or from mum or from dad about some other concerns so you have to go back so I think very much you never know. There isn't anything set in my mind in kind of cases like that it's always kind of going with the flow if that makes sense...I think you have to keep it open*

'*Going with the flow'* of each worker-child encounter reflects how relationship building was temporally experienced by interviewees. Relationship building with children was experienced by practitioners as a moment by moment gestalt of *being-together-with* children, where each practitioner had to decide how best to *be* with a child: how to temporally personally-professionally presence themselves in relation to the other person involved in the encounter.

The fundamentally relational nature of human *being* can become unnoticed and difficult to grasp not '*because it is situated far away'* but precisely because it is '*habitual to us'* (Diekelmann and Diekelmann, 2009: 139) with a consequent potential for the lived experiences of practitioners to become overlooked as

'*mundane activity*' (Jeyasingham, 2014: 1891). Using phenomenological perspectives to explore practitioner-child relationships through the lens of the temporally generated nature human *being,* helps to foreground some of the potentially taken-for-granted ways in which social workers temporally *presence* themselves through their actions (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) to intercorporeally and ethically *be* with children (Levinas, 1981) when undertaking initial assessments of need and risk.

Conclusion

This chapter has used the phenomenological lens of *lived time* (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2012) to explore the meaning and significance of time in relation to practitioner-child relationships. Understanding the nature of human *being* or presence (Heidegger, 2010) as temporally generated, helps to illuminate the different ways in which interviewees *presence* themselves (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) when attempting to build meaningful relationships with children. *Lived time* is additionally understood as a past-present-future moment by moment narrative of lived experience (Husserl, 2012). Through these above phenomenological lenses, practitioner-child relationships are understood as a series of temporally experienced happenings, where each temporal moment of practitioners and children *being-with* one another (Heidegger, 2010) has a particular relational quality.

Practitioner responses to children were sometimes described by interviewees as spontaneous and embodied felt experiences (Gendlin, 2003) generated in the moment of the as-it-is-happening relational environment of each worker-child encounter. Interviewees also described their relational presence or way of

being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 2010) as constituting an inseparable personal-professional form of presence, where practitioners sought to maintain an ethical approach to building relationships with children within the pre-existing constraints of the investigative nature of their social work role. The meaning and significance of the ethical nature of human presence or *being* was explored using Levinas's (1981) phenomenological interpretation of *being-in-the-world* as fundamentally ethically as well as socially constituted, to explore how practitioners ethically presenced themselves when striving to build meaningful relationships with children through trying to sustain a humane practitioner approach. It was suggested that practitioners' sought to sustain a human or ethical form of presence through temporally trying to enact ways of '*being-together-with'* children where children were recognised and valued as human beings of value or worth (Levinas, 1981), for example through trying to sustain a degree of relational proportionality in their dealings with children and through acts of recognition. The ways in which interviewees chose to personally-professionally and ethically *presence* themselves during temporally unfolding moments of *being-together-with* children, were argued to therefore be of central importance to the generation of meaningful practitioner-child relationships.

The next chapter therefore considers several contrasting moments of relationship building shared by interviewees that are phenomenologically interpreted as moments of existentially '*being-together-with'* children in order to explore in further detail, how the everyday temporal, emotional, physical and ethical *being* or presence (Heidegger, 2010) of social workers becomes manifest during the process of social worker-child relationship building and can contribute towards the development of meaningful worker-child relationships.

CHAPTER 7: WAYS OF '*BEING-TOGETHER-WITH'* CHILDREN

A Heideggerian understanding of human existence or *being* starts from regarding the nature of human existence as inescapably social: a *'with-world'* (Heidegger, 2010: 125) where human beings always exist in the world with others. As part of his exploration of the nature of human *being*, Heidegger explores the relationship of *being* to time, in terms of what it means to '*come to presence, to appear in time'* (Moran, 2000: 199) within a social or *with-world*. Heidegger saw temporality or *lived time* (see also Chapter 6) as central to understanding the meaning of human existence, regarding existence not as an object, but as an active kind of *becoming* that is always in the process of being created. Through this phenomenological lens, the temporal nature of human presence or *being* (Heidegger, 2010) is therefore an ongoing form of temporal *becoming* where human relationships are an ongoing temporal, moment by moment accomplishment.

The previous chapter identified that practitioners temporally sought to enact meaningful ways of *being-together-with* children where children were recognised and valued as human beings of equal value or worth (Levinas, 1981). However, the already-situated initial assessment context identified by interviewees within which social worker-child relationships were being built (see Chapter 4) was described as a challenging crisis point, time pressured and uncertain environment where there was often little or only fragmented knowledge available, about the family's circumstances or the nature of any child wellbeing concerns. Practitioners and children were therefore attempting to build meaningful relationships with one another within an emotionally

challenging and time limited practice context. This chapter therefore uses four contrasting, temporally unfolding moments from interviewee accounts where practitioners and children encountered one another, to reflect the diversity of emotional contexts that social workers in this study encountered during assessments. These temporally unfolding moments have been interpreted as moments of anger, chaos, joyfulness, and recognition.

The chapter discusses how these interviewees strived towards sustaining a humane and ethical form of practitioner presence or *being* (Heidegger, 2010) in their encounters with children by utilising some of the intercorporeal (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) practices discussed in previous chapters (5 and 6), leading to more meaningful practitioner-child relationships. The consequence of these moments of practitioner-child meeting are also explored in relation to the resultant promotion of child wellbeing, the way a meeting ultimately goes positively and through how a social worker feels sustained by the worker-child interaction. These phenomenological theoretical lenses are used to discuss why sustaining a humane (ethical) form of practitioner presence, generated through practitioners and children co-creating a shared sense of '*being-together-with'* one another as human *beings* (Heidegger, 2010) of equal worth (Levinas, 1981), is central to meaningful social worker-child relationships across these diverse contexts.

'Being-together-with' a child during a relational moment of anger

Practitioner *Susan* recounted an instance of arriving at a foster home to see 5-year-old *Harry* and finding him in an angry mood. *Harry* was throwing himself around the lounge of the foster home. A few minutes later, *Harry* came towards *Susan* and started to hit her.

> *He started play fighting with me then which is something that I don't take part in...he was trying to I don't know what he was trying to do but he was kicking and he was power ranging chop*
>
> *Researcher: Hand chopping*
>
> *Susan: Hand chopping yeah but the hand chopping didn't stop before - it was hitting me...deliberately hard and I said 'why are you trying to hurt me why are you trying to hurt me [name of child] 'I'm not I'm not I'm just I'm just playing' and I said 'no you are hurting me and you need to stop this now' and then he threw himself...he sort of threw himself - so I was sitting on the edge of the settee talking to him he was doing all this directly in front of me... jumping up and down and punching out and then he held both hands together and he punched forward and he landed on me his whole body landed on me so I put my arms round him and then held him for a bit and he was wiggling but not wiggling get off me, it was almost like he was wiggling to be held...so then I said 'ooh this is nicer isn't it now you're not hurting me anymore' and then he said 'oh I want to go and play'...*
>
> Researcher: *So how long were you holding him for*
>
> Susan: *Just seconds...the physical contact it was like the physical contact to me - putting my arms round him stopped the progression of any more hurting me*
>
> Researcher: *So could you feel it [the anger] fall in him*

> Susan: *Yeah it was almost - it was very sort of unusual it was tangible and then as quickly as it had happened it stopped and because [name of foster carer] at that point shouted...he jumped up and then he ran off*

In this relational moment of interaction between *Susan* and *Harry*, *Susan* had to choose how to respond towards *Harry*. She chose to hold *Harry* by putting her arms around him.

From a phenomenological relational perspective, *Susan's* response was also a temporally expressed way of '*being-together-with' Harry*, that can be seen as an ethical relational response of caring, through *Susan's* recognition and acceptance of *Harry* and his anger. Caring for another person is not a rational, reasoned response. It is a form of empathy or '*feeling-with'* (Noddings, 1986: 30) where the person who is the one-caring receives the other who is being cared-for and views their world '*through both sets of eyes'* (Noddings, 1986: 63). It is a form of '*being-together-with'* the other person that accepts and values the individual in all their uniqueness but also confirms the other as a person who is cared-for. The importance of such moments of being cared-for are they offer a moment where the child is able to more fully *be* him or herself in the relational moment. Such moments additionally may have the potential to free the child to move forwards, opening up the opportunity for growth.

Caring-for another person is about encountering the other person respectfully and with regard. This means encountering the other person as another person '*in relation'* (Buber, 1970: 55) as a *Thou*, not encountering the other person as an object (as an *It).* Ethical relations are expressed here as meaning more than a virtue ethics of holding fast to an ethical ideal of justifying what is right or good behaviour. Noddings (1986) suggests that caring for others is first and foremost

rooted in a natural instinct or *obligation* to care, as can be seen in the impulse of a parent to protect their child. The responsibility to be either the one-caring or the one cared-for is therefore a fundamental part of what it means to be human.

This accords with Levinas's (1981) view that ethics are a fundamental condition of human existence and what gives life meaning. In Noddings' understanding of caring as an ethical relational act, the ethical self of a person is not regarded a separate part of their being or as an individual possession but is instead seen as an ethical form of *presencing* or way of *being-with* other persons: a relational accomplishment that is strived for, both by the one-caring and by the one who is cared-for. This temporal generation of a sense of existentially ethically '*being-together-with' Harry* through a relational act of caring, can be interpreted as being generated through the holistic and embodied, physical-emotional *intercorporeal* interactions (see also Chapter 5) between social worker and child (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). *Susan's* bodily-emotional responses showed that she cared for *Harry* even when he was angry, with this acceptance allowing Harry to let go of his anger and move forwards. *Susan* was then able to go and speak with the foster carer afterwards to try and explore why *Harry* had returned home from school so angry that day.

A relational moment of chaos

Practitioner John recounted doing a piece of group work with a parent and her children in the family home as part of his ongoing work with the family.

> S*o I'd done some scaling questions and sort of motivational interviewing solution focused sort of stuff so it said things like each question had a scale of nought to ten and in a black pen*

> *they had to mark on it and all agree as a family where they were before we started work back in September October and where we were now in February March with a green pen to see if it actually had a difference. So, we had family swearing less in and around the house, attending school during school, being safe and supervised in the local area coming in on time respecting the boundaries routine erm yeah not fighting. So there were about five or six questions and they loved it. All the kids. The six-year-old was more active they got into a fight which wasn't physical but it was there mum said 'stop effin fighting' and just kind of trying to do this to see who was going to use the pen of course - so they had to negotiate each of them having the black pen for one question the green pen for one question. The two-year-old had some gastro problem and threw up in the middle of the session splattering the flip chart paper with his norovirus or whatever and we had a crisis and we had to stop and mop it up. The girl [an older sibling] got covered in it. Splashed in it a bit did a <u>huge</u> kick off. Started hitting the door 'I can't believe you threw up on me' the other two lads laughing their heads off at this but mum went after her and said 'can you just mind him [the two-year-old] a bit' and said 'calm down just mind' and she [the older sibling] came back and re-engaged so at the end of it me and [name of colleague] could say 'you did really well there mum'*

Social worker-child relationships are not smooth linear relational progressions. They consist of emotional ups and downs and social workers cannot control every aspect of the environment of each encounter. As with the experience of *John* above where he carefully pre-planned his approach, using pens and flip chart paper with all members of the family, some of the events such as two-year-old *Laclan* being sick, were able to quickly derail the pre-choreographed intervention plan.

Stern (2004) suggests that human lived experience is temporally comprised of a linked series of present moments (episodes of consciousness) each of which has its own temporal shape. Stern sees each temporal present moment as lasting from approximately one to ten seconds, where each moment is comprised of a whole embodied happening or gestalt: a felt (affective) as well as a thought (cognitive) experience. These episodes of consciousness are separate but also linked, in that each episode represents our as-it-is-happening lived experience but also simultaneously contain the moments that we recollect as our past experience and our imagined or anticipated future.

Stern uses this Husserlian tri-partite understanding of time to explore the importance of therapeutic relationships in his field of psychotherapy. He suggests that to achieve positive therapeutic change, the past experiences of an individual as recollected in present moment of experiencing, '*must be rewritten or replaced by a new temporal experience'* (Stern, 2004: 221). Through a collectively shared moment of meeting between psychotherapist and client, there unfolds an opportunity for the client through their present experiences, to change how they view or make sense of their past, thereby opening up a potential new future for themselves. This potential new future is the opportunity for positive change and personal growth to occur. In interpreting Stern's phenomenologically inspired ideas and applying them to help understand the nature of social worker-child relationships, whilst social work practitioners are not therapists, this does not mean that their relational interventions cannot be therapeutic in terms of their impact on children's wellbeing (Stevenson, 2013). Collectively shared moments of worker-child interaction can contribute to the narrative temporal script of a child's life in

positive, as well as in negative ways. Even brief social worker-child moments of meeting are therefore important.

Stern argues that each present moment has its subjectively temporal shape or *thickness* (such as when time seems to slow down for example) so that the impact of a seemingly insignificant period of clock time may in terms of its meaning to the individual, subjectively feel of much greater significance. Such moments matter. Stern makes it clear however, that this ongoing co-creation of a series of relational interactional moves is not a neat, linear experience. It is rather an *'inescapably unpredictable, creative and spontaneous process that can involve many mismatches, derailments, misunderstandings'* (Stern, 2004: 158). These misunderstandings and mismatches then require some kind of relational repair. Rather than being seen as mistakes however, this messy and ongoing process of rupture and repair in relationships forms fundamental part of the process of human interaction and of learning from experience (Stern, 2004) as human existence is always an active kind of *becoming*. (Heidegger, 2010).

Applying this understanding to the family session described by *John* then, and the moment of chaos everyone involved in the session experienced, the process of social worker relationship building with children and their families *is* a messy and unpredictable endeavour. Humans relations cannot be bracketed and put to one side when completing an assessment task, however well planned the intended intervention may be. '*Being-together-with'* children and their families requires practitioner flexibility, creativity and openness, including a sustaining of practitioner openness to experiencing moments of relational chaos or derailment and embracing these as normal and unavoidable aspects of the temporally generated nature of service user-social worker relationships: what

Azeem earlier termed '*going with the flow*' of worker-child initial assessment encounters.

Social worker-child relationships are therefore not about how effectively or consistently the practitioner can be seen to exert relational control over events (although this may sometime be necessary). Developing meaningful worker-child relationships involves sometimes making communicative mistakes and then seeking to repair them through a shared intercorporeal process of meaning making (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) that opens up the potential for changes in the nature of the relationship between social workers and children to occur through the opening out of opportunities for new understanding. In the instance described by *John*, for example, he worked together with other family members to help manage the unexpected disruption, with the collaborative actions of the parent, children and social worker contributing to the eventual re-engagement of the elder sibling with the family- social worker meeting. After the chaos of the family session had subsided, the unplanned derailment gave *John* the opportunity to let the mother of the children know that she had handled a difficult family situation well. This feeling of positive progress also coincided with how the family scaled themselves in respect of family relations and how they had improved over the past five months '*from being 2's and 3's not great to 7's and 8's'.* It meant that the family session ended on a positive note, with the children actively involved in the assessment of the family's progress and with the meeting additionally ultimately generating a positive shared relational experience. Generating a sense of togetherness (of '*being-together-with'* one another) in the above instance, was achieved by the practitioners valuing and recognising the contribution of each family member as being of importance and by these practitioners working collaboratively with family members to facilitate

the involvement of all the children in the session. The temporal generation of a sense of togetherness can be seen as being achieved through the practitioners adopting a co-operative and dialogical (Ruch et al., 2020) intercorporeal approach (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) to communicating with family members, where every family member's contribution is valued (Levinas, 1981).

A relational moment of joyfulness

Earlier in this thesis in Chapters 5 and 6, there are interviewee descriptions of social worker-child encounters where practitioners have attempted to ease children’s distress at the same time as being aware that the investigative and safeguarding nature of their relational role is the precipitating cause of it. Despite the potentially oppressive and coercive nature of the child protection task, social workers in this study still sought to find or co-create small moments to *be-together-with* children through shared moments of affective as well as physical meeting. I have chosen to describe one such moment (recounted by practitioner *Karen* as a meeting with two young children aged 4 and 5 years on a visit to the family home) as a moment of joyfulness. Whilst *Karen* was undertaking an assessment of any potential risks towards the children following an incident of domestic abuse as well as establishing whether there were any family support needs, *Karen* was also visiting the children with the intention of getting to know them a bit better before planning to see the children again, on their own at their school.

> Researcher: *Did you arrange to meet them all together*
>
> Karen: *Arranged to meet them all together. I did obviously want to speak to them on their own but felt it was a bit better if I go in*

first when mum's there and they can see that I am talking to their mum and then make them feel a bit more trusting I guess and a bit more comfortable with me when I am going in to school to speak to them on their own...that first visit when I went in and they were both watching tv on one of the sofas and I was speaking to mum on one of the others keeping our conversation down a little bit so that things that we were talking about don't want them to overhear so we were having our - we were talking as we're talking kind of they started looking over then you know they were paying attention at the okay right there's somebody else in the house that's talking to our mum who is it, and the little girl came over and she said 'have you seen my play house'. She'd made a cardboard play house (Karen laughs) I said 'ooh that's fantastic' you know as you do and then she wanted to show me her ballerina outfit and then he wanted to show me dinosaurs (researcher laughs) so from that point on the conversation then went to the children and it went back we were kind of in and out of that conversation...the little girl she'd made this playhouse recently with mum and explained how she'd made it and there were a couple of toys and things around but they kept on going upstairs and running up and down (Karen laughs) and bringing in more things (Karen and researcher laugh) and chairs and all sorts of things (Karen laughing while talking) they were bringing down.

Researcher: *So were they very proud to show you them*

Karen: *Well yeah…they were saying 'oh can you come and see us again' (Karen starts giggling) and I said 'yeah I'll come and see you' and made arrangements with mum in my diary and said 'I'll come and see you on* <u>*this*</u> *day and you'll have to think of something new that you can show me (researcher laughs) when I come next time and they were very 'yaaaay' let your hair down (Karen and researcher both laughing together) and they did well they had different things (researcher laughs) but you know really good because giving them that opportunity to do what they wanted to do and just building that relationship in that way gave me the*

foundations to go into school and say 'hiyah you all right' [for] that direct piece of work

Such fun or joyful relational moments are important as they contribute to the narrative temporal script of children's lives. Positive affective life experiences can accumulate to produce a sense of wellbeing (Boddy and Statham, 2009). How social workers *are* with children when they are undertaking assessments or intervening in family life is therefore important, as all relational experiences leave relational trails (Ingold, 2000). Moments of shared joy or fun can therefore have a therapeutic impact in terms of social workers contributing towards the maintenance of children's wellbeing. This is may be because (as identified in Chapter 5) temporally generated instances of joy or fun may, like humour and laughter, be argued to represent a collaborative lived experience that can be experienced as a temporal instance of shared humanity (Morriss, 2015; Jordan, 2017), achieved through the generation of an existential sense of '*being-together-with'* one another (Heidegger, 2010).

A relational moment of mutual recognition

Some of the interviewed social workers in this study who worked in short-term duty and assessment teams found it hard not being able to continue to work with and be involved in children's lives after the initial assessment was completed. For one interviewee, however, the long-term social work team were based in the same office as the duty and assessment team. After this practitioner's work with the child ended, the practitioner was able to keep in touch with the social worker from the long-term team to find out how things were progressing for the young children she had worked with. On one particular day,

Sheila bumped into the social worker from the long-term team, who was walking with *David* to take him for a contact visit with his parents.

> *The other thing that happened not long ago was that the youngest little boy had been with the other social worker here at [name of social work office] and he ran over and gave me a hug (pause)*
>
> Researcher: W*ow*
>
> Sheila: *He said to me he said to me 'I know you' he said he said and I said 'I know you too' and he gave me a hug and that was just (pause) I just thought do you know that has just made my day that (pause) he gave me a hug (pause) he'd looked at me and he kept looking at me and he was walking past with the social worker and he stopped and I looked at her obviously and she said 'hiya' and it's like 'hi' and then he looked at me and cos he wasn't a shy little boy 'I know you' 'and I know you too' [said in a whisper] and then he gave me a hug…*
>
> Researcher: *And what do you think that meant*
>
> Sheila: *I know I'd done the right thing I definitely knew I'd done the right thing and he'll remember that and so will I*

Sheila had only been involved with *David* for a few weeks but was the practitioner who took him and his siblings into foster care, which had been a distressing experience for all of the children. The hug and recognition from *David* offered *Sheila* the reassurance that despite the upsetting nature of her previous involvement, things had turned out okay for him, but this encounter also gave *Sheila* reassurance that *Sheila* herself was okay. The hug and greeting between *Sheila* and *David* can be interpreted as an expression of mutual care and affection and as generating an emotional-physical, embodied and intercorporeal (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) ethical sense (Levinas, 1981) of *being-together-with-one-another* that supports the wellbeing of the child, but

such shared moments can also equally support the confidence and wellbeing of the social worker. Sustaining the emotional energy to constantly be the *one-caring* for others as a social worker is hard, if the practitioner never feels they are also sometimes the one who is *cared-for* (Noddings, 1986).

Conclusion

This chapter has considered four temporally unfolding relational moments of social worker-child interaction in order to explore some of the ways in which interviewees sought to meaningfully *be* (Heidegger, 2010) with children in their encounters with them: interpreting these moments as moments of anger, chaos, joyfulness and mutual recognition. It has been argued that interpreted through a phenomenlogical lens, these moments foreground the intercorporeal spatial, emotional-physical (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) but also ethical (Levinas, 1981) ways in which practitioners and children can generate meaningful relational encounters with one another during initial assessments.

Practitioners and children were identified as temporally generating an existential sense of '*being-together-with'* one another when adopting a collaborative intercorporeal approach to communicating with one another, where generating a sense of *togetherness* was also temporally-ethically founded on practitioners' acceptance, recognition and valuing of the contribution of children in the co-generation of a meaningful practitioner-child relationships.

Phenomenologically considering the ethical nature of human *being* and what makes any human relationship meaningful in relation to these diverse moments of *being-in-the-world* with other people (Heidegger, 2010), has helped illuminate

how interviewees developed what they perceived to be meaningful connections with children across these diverse contexts. It has been argued in this thesis, that it is through social workers (and children) responding to the already present ethical plea to acknowledge and accept the other person as an equal human being in the world that makes their relationships meaningful, as this is what makes human existence meaningful (Levinas, 1981). Ethics are relationally enacted (Hay, 2019) through temporally generated intercorporeal, actions (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2014). Practitioners were foregrounded as generating an existential sense of acceptance, recognition and worth in their encounters with children through interviewees' embodied and intercorporeal actions that were oriented toward generating a sense of '*being-together-with'* children through practitioners' holistic and temporally generated actions, feelings and vocalisations.

In the next (Discussion and Conclusions) chapter, the findings from Chapters 4 to 7 of this thesis will be discussed more extensively, with links made to some of the literature explored at the start of the study as well as to literature published during the course of undertaking the study.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter situates the research study in existing literature, discussing the ways in which the findings accord with, contrast with, or challenge, existing knowledge regarding the nature of social worker-child relationships. First, the chapter reiterates the importance of social worker-child relationships. In the next two chapter sections, two themes within the study findings are discussed in relation to existing literature. These are the spatial, embodied and intercorporeal nature of worker-child relationships and then the temporal and ethical *being-with* nature of social worker-child relationships. The chapter then underlines how the thesis makes an original contribution to existing understandings of social worker-child relationships and acknowledges the limitations of the study. The concluding two sections of this chapter provide a summary of the key recommendations for social work education, training and practice developed from the findings of the study and situates these in a discussion of social worker-child relationship building within the broader socio-political climate of social work practice, reaffirming the possibility of and need for meaningful social worker-child relationships in assessment work.

The importance of social worker-child relationships

As outlined in the literature review, the quality of the relationships developed between social workers and children are regarded as important as children themselves have indicated they want improved relationships with their social workers (Care inquiry, 2013b; Winter, 2015; Ingram and Smith, 2018), and

because strong links have been identified between high quality worker-child relationships and good outcomes (APPGC, 2017).

There is a strong body of existing literature that supports the use of relationship-based practice approaches in social work (see for example, Ruch et al., 2010; Megele, 2015; McColgan and McMullin, 2017) and governmental statutory guidance also outlines the expectation that during child and family safeguarding assessments and interventions, children should be able to develop relationships of trust with practitioners who are helping them (HM Government, 2018). However, social worker-child relationships are also politically-culturally defined as *purposeful* relationships (DfE, 2014; HM Government, 2018) which implies an expectation that practitioners should form relationships with children that are focused towards achieving a specific assessment or intervention. This 'thin' understanding of worker-child relationships opens up the possibility for social worker-child relationships to be understood *solely* as purposeful relationships. Enacting this narrow understanding of the term *relationship* has the potential to lead practitioner-child encounters towards becoming nothing more than de-humanised task-driven relational experiences that are denuded of a more holistic sense of person to person relations: relationships that are perceived in purely instrumental terms. In addition, the pressures of fast paced, crisis oriented and the uncertain nature of initial assessment work alongside high social worker caseloads (Corby et al., 2012; Forrester et al, 2013; Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018), are known to impede practitioners' ability to form meaningful relationships with children.

This study therefore sought to explore social workers' *positive* practice experiences of developing relationships with young children during initial assessments, to better understand how meaningful (rather than instrumental)

practitioner-child relationships can be achieved. This study's findings support the position that those interviewees who perceived (from their own perspective) that they had formed a meaningful relationship with a particular child, had a much richer (as opposed to 'thin') understanding of the nature and meaning of social worker-child relationships where practitioners were keen to ensure that their relationships with children were *not* solely assessment-task focused.

Whilst the importance of using an embodied practice approach in social work is well established (see for example, Cameron and McDermott, 2007; Ferguson, 2018b; Charfe, 2019), using the phenomenological lens of *intercorporeity* to explore the nature of practitioner-child relationships, extends existing embodied understandings from solely considering the 'flesh' (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) or bodies of individual workers and children, to illuminate the interactive and co-created spatial and social nature or 'flesh', of worker-child relationships. This leads to a foregrounding of children's embodied agency in directing the relationship building process and allows attention to be drawn to the collaborative nature of social worker-child relationships. Using a lens of *intercorporeity* also extends understanding of existing practices given less attention in previous studies, that can help to generate more meaningful worker-child encounters, as identified below. The next chapter section therefore discusses how the phenomenologically grounded theme of *intercorporeity* can deepen existing understandings of how meaningful social worker-child relationships can be achieved.

The spatial, embodied and *intercorporeal* nature of social worker-child relationships

Using the phenomenological theoretical lenses of *incorporeity* and *lived space* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 2014) to examine and interpret interviewee accounts of relationship building foregrounds the *relational environment* of social worker-child relationships, where the whole spatial and material environment of material objects and people collectively generate the lived experience of each worker-child encounter. Practitioners were perceived as working together with young children and others to co-create a *comfortable relational environment* for each encounter through a range of practices, as discussed below.

In this study, the already-situated referral and assessment context within which social worker-child encounters took place was found to be one where practitioners were often expected to undertake *same day* meetings with children, where children may have had little or no prior notification that they were going to meet with a social worker (see Chapter 4). Similarly, practitioners were often meeting children for the first time having had little time available to prepare for the first worker-child meeting, with social workers additionally having only limited or fragmented knowledge about the child and the family they were going to be working with. Despite these pre-existing circumstances that also included the pressure of working to organisational timescales, practitioners were still expected to build relationships with children quickly, assess children's wellbeing and identify or clarify any potential safeguarding concerns. Pre-existing constraints relating to the organisational context of social work practice have been identified elsewhere, as contributing to the generation of an *uncomfortable* context within which worker-child relationships are expected to

be initiated and sustained (Ruch, 2014). In contrast, interviewees and children in this study sought to find ways to generate a *comfortable* relational environment for worker-child encounters, starting with the way social workers and children introduced themselves to one another; recognising children as vulnerable but still competent persons; and through increasing opportunities for agency through intercorporeal spatially situated encounters.

Co-creating comfortableness in initial social worker-child encounters

Despite the recognised importance of social workers introducing themselves clearly to children by explaining who the practitioner is and why they are there (Howes, 2012: Nicolas, 2012), it is suggested elsewhere that social workers still do not always do this. Ferguson (2016a) for example, found that some social workers observed doing initial home visits to see children, omitted to include any kind of rapport building phase with children and sometimes even failed to introduce themselves to children and say who they were. In contrast to this, the findings of this research study draw on examples of social work practice to indicate ways in which clearer introductions can be achieved by demonstrating (see Chapter 5) how introductions can open the possibility of building relationships with young children over a short time period.

Interviewees described their initial encounters with children in embodied and *intercorporeal* terms (Merleau-Ponty, 2012), where children as well as practitioners, shaped the nature of the introduction and the spatial, emotional-physical and vocal as well as the verbal aspects of worker-child communication. Practitioners described the process of relationship building as a co-created practitioner-child endeavour, where children and practitioners contributed to the

generation and quality of the relational environment. The benefits of understanding the communicative process as co-operative endeavour have also been identified elsewhere (see Ruch et al., 2020).

Success was achieved where interviewed social workers introduced themselves by their first name and provided an explanation of their role by checking out children's current understandings. Successful introductions were also achieved through practitioners adding additional information where this was needed and through social workers using simple and straightforward language. This is in line with the findings of van Bijleveld et al. (2019) and others, who identified it was beneficial for children when workers provided plain verbal communications and clear explanations. It has been suggested however (see Ruch et al., 2020), that social workers do not always appear to give sufficient weight or value to non-verbal aspects of communication with children, with practitioners identified as sometimes not paying attention to children's nonverbal signs and '*ways of expressing emotions, wishes or concerns'* (van Bijleveld et al., 2019: 4). The findings from this thesis contrastingly suggest that interviewed social workers *can and sometimes do* pay attention to the holistic physical, vocal and emotional communication of children, and that practitioners understand the process of relationship building as an embodied and intercorporeal process (Merleau-Ponty, 2014).

Interviewees recognised the importance of the vocal, tonal and gestural nature of their own embodied presence such as when recognising, for example (see Chapter 5), the significance of social workers' tone of voice in conveying emotional meaning when seeking to offer comfort or reassurance to children and through practitioners' use of expressive noises as well as words to help create a more comfortable relational environment during initial and subsequent

worker-child encounters. The importance of vocalisations as well as words, as ways of communicating with children, is also recognised elsewhere (see for example, Petrie, 2011a; Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018). Utilising a lens of *intercorporeity* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) for interpreting the nature of worker-child encounters, helps to illuminate the way in which spatial, physical and emotional as well as vocal communications can be used by children *and* practitioners, to co-create a comfortable relational environment for worker-child encounters. This study found, for example, that both practitioners and children used practices of physical-spatial sharing, such as narrowing the physical distance between workers and children; getting down onto the same height level; and getting alongside one another. This was achieved through a negotiated process of too-ing and fro-ing that can be interpreted as workers and children making efforts to achieve a great degree of spatial equality in the way their bodies shared the lived space. The importance of negotiation (McMullin, 2017) and reciprocity (Petrie, 2011b; Hadfield et al., 2020; Ruch et al., 2020) in initiating and sustaining practitioner-child relationships, is already recognised and valued and is rooted in a more democratic understanding of how worker-child relationships should be generated. Understanding the physical-spatial interactions of workers and children through the phenomenological lens of *intercorporeity*, however, offers an additional, theoretically grounded way of understanding why negotiated and reciprocal physical-spatial worker-child bodily practices are of importance in the generation of meaningful worker-child relationships, foregrounding the way in which the communicative practices of social workers and children are always interlinked.

Communicating meaningfully with children is recognised as a holistic and embodied experience (Ruch et al., 2017) where all interactions are understood

as communication (Petrie, 2011a). This study found that whilst practitioners and children used physical-spatial communications to co-create the relational environment of initial and subsequent worker-child encounters, social workers and children also communicated with one another in emotional-spatial ways, as is discussed next.

Co-creating comfortableness through recognising vulnerability, competence and agency

Practitioners in this study frequently described the generation and quality of the relational environment of their encounters with children as co-created accomplishments, where children had influence (Larkins, 2014). Interviewee accounts contained implicit understandings that children should be active participants in the assessment process. Possibilities for meaningful worker-child relationship building can therefore be argued as beginning, to some extent, *before* workers and children initially encounter one another because the way practitioners *are* with children, is to some degree already influenced by how practitioners perceive or conceptualise childhood as a state of (in) competence (Lansdown, 2005), (non) participation (Thomas, 2007) and (in) vulnerability (Overlien, 2017). This study found that practitioners appeared to start from a position of regarding children as competent persons (see Chapter 5). At the same time, interviewees also indicated that they saw children as vulnerable individuals. Seeing children as vulnerable persons, however, did not mean that social workers disregarded the importance of facilitating children's ongoing participation in the assessment process.

Whilst other studies have identified workers' perceptions of children's capacities as hindering practitioners' abilities to form meaningful relationships with children (Winter, 2009), affecting the opportunities given to children to participate in decision making processes (Vis and Fossum, 2013) and identified practitioner understandings of child competence and perceptions of child vulnerability as influencing the degree to which workers were willing to use a participatory approach, based on workers' desire to protect or rescue children (Collings and Davies, 2008; Fern, 2012; van Bijleveld et al., 2019; Kosher and Ben-Ariah, 2019), the findings of this thesis contrastingly suggest that some practitioners can and do hold a more nuanced and holistic perception of children as vulnerable but still-competent persons, who are able to participate in the assessment process.

Interviewed social workers in this study did not seem to regard child vulnerability as the main factor limiting children's participation. It was the temporally generated degree of discomfort or distress being caused to the child by the practitioner's presence and interventions, that was of most concern to practitioners. The level of child *comfortableness* (see Chapter 5 findings) was something that practitioners therefore noticed and responded to on an ongoing basis during social worker-child encounters. Practitioners interviewed in this study talked about children's *comfortableness* in spatial-physical and spatial-emotional terms, where these aspects collectively contributed towards the facilitation of a comfortable relational environment. Whilst interviewees identified *child comfortableness* as an important factor facilitating child participation, practitioner understandings of *comfortableness* in this thesis also included practitioners' reflections on their *own* levels of comfortableness that included practitioners' own spatial-physical and emotional-physical comfortableness at

getting close to children or willingness to engage in play with children or to use touch. *Comfortableness* was thereby understood as a co-created and intercorporeal relational experience that could support or hinder the building of meaningful worker-child relationship.

These above findings complement but also extend work undertaken by Ruch (2014), who has explored the *challenges* of communicating with children as identified by social work practitioners. Ruch's findings concentrate on discussing the constraining aspects of worker-child communications, identifying practitioner physical, emotional and relational-organisational *uncomfortableness* as an important issue in social worker-child relationships. This study contrastingly focusses on practitioners' *positive* experiences of relationship building and how *comfortableness* is achieved, finding that interviewees understood *comfortableness* as a co-created relational good that was achieved through holistic and embodied, intercorporeal communications such as by for example: doing shared activities; co-creating laughter and generating problem free talk; or through workers and children sharing bits of personal information with one another.

Co-creating opportunities for agency through intercorporeal spatially situated encounters

The findings of this study show that the generation of an environment of *comfortableness* encompasses more than just the individual physical actions of practitioners and children: it also incorporates *intercorporeal* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) auditory and emotional-spatial dimensions. The fluid, emotional and sensory nature of *lived spaces* in relation to social work child protection practice

has already been recognised as important, and its significance for working with children and families, considered (see for example, Ferguson, 2009a, 2010b, 2018b; Jeyasingham, 2014). Understanding space as interpersonally generated through human relationships (Stanley et al., 2015) as well as through physical or material things, is also recognised. The importance of children experiencing a welcoming and relaxed (Lefevre, 2010); private and confidential (Richman, 200); or emotionally safe space (Archard and Skiveness, 2009) are all identified as important for worker-child encounters, and offering children a choice of venue for meeting with practitioners, is also regarded as beneficial (Marchant, 2008).

In a referral and assessment context however, children are not usually given a choice as to whether, or where, to meet with practitioners as the context of the case will often determine the location of initial and subsequent worker-child encounters (Winter et al., 2017). The statutory nature of the social worker's role additionally requires social workers to see children on their own when there are immediate child protection concerns (HM Government, 2018). This study found that within these pre-existing *spatial* constraints, it is possible for practitioners to work collaboratively with children, generating opportunities for children to exercise choice, with practitioners' recognising and respecting children's right to exercise emotional-spatial and physical-spatial agency.

Interviewees, for example, drew attention to the importance of the auditory nature of lived spaces and the potential importance of utilising *semi-private* (as opposed to wholly private) auditory spaces for some worker-child encounters, where the auditory reassurance of nearby voices could make children feel more comfortable. *Semi-private* spaces were also identified as being spaces where the physical exit route from the space was not completely blocked off, allowing

children a degree of spatial choice regarding being able to physically remove themselves from the same room as the social worker, if they wished to do so. In instances where children did not situationally appear to be able to exercise physical-spatial agency (see Chapter 5) interviewees recognised that children could still communicate emotionally *across* spaces with them, even where children's physical-spatial agency was constrained. This suggests that practitioners' recognised children's ability to exercise emotional-spatial agency.

Phenomenologically interpreting space in terms of how it is *lived* or experienced, can positively contribute towards existing understandings of the importance of understanding how space is *lived* or experienced (Ferguson, 2010b, Jeyasingham, 2014). For example, the above study finding adds to existing understandings of the mobile nature of worker-child relations (Ferguson 2018b) by highlighting how children's agency can still be emotionally-spatially generated even when mobility is constrained, extending understanding of the ways practitioners and children can generate space (Jeyasingham, 2014) during their encounters with one another. Using phenomenological perspectives (by understanding spaces as *lived* spaces) to analyse practitioner accounts of relationship building in this thesis, can therefore help to deepen existing understandings of the spatial ways in which worker-child relationships are generated, including how practitioner and child agency is spatially enacted.

The importance of social workers developing effective participatory relationships with children (aside from the statutorily required expectation that workers do so) is that developing meaningful relationships with children can help social workers gain a better understanding of children's wellbeing and help practitioners gauge the impact on the child of any of any welfare concerns (Burton, 2009). Better assessment outcomes and better decisions may also be produced as a result of

children feeling more able to disclose abuse (Vis et al., 2011) and through the potential of an adult-child encounter becoming a therapeutic experience in and of itself (Ferguson, 2016). Children's active participation in the assessment and intervention process has also been argued as important from the perspective of practitioners (van Bijveld et al., 2013), as practitioners have been found to connect effective child participation to the establishment of a meaningful worker-child relationship, a finding also mirrored in the findings of this thesis (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

Interviewees in this research study understood social worker-child relationships as co-constructed phenomena and regarded their relationships with children as being successful where children were perceived as actively participating in the social worker-child encounter. Participation was however, not just described as verbal, but also as vocal, emotional-physical and spatial-physical: as *intercorporeality* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). In instances where interviewees felt they had *not* successfully established a relationship with a child, this was related to practitioners feeling they had not been able to establish any sense of relational reciprocity with children, where this reciprocity was communicated in a range of spatial-corporeal ways. Children for example, hid under tables from practitioners or kept at a physical distance from them (see Chapter 5). This contrasted with more participatory intercorporeal encounters such as a child grabbing a practitioner's' hand or in another practice instance, a child running towards a practitioner and then jumping up and wrapping their arms and legs around them.

The findings of this research study therefore suggest that there cannot be meaningful worker-child relationships without child participation. Participation here, is understood not simply as discursive, but also as material (Wyness,

2011) as it is achieved through action, including what might be described as misbehaviour (Larkins, 2014) or resistance (Morrison et al., 2018). The findings in this thesis suggest that practitioners placed value and importance on building relationships with children: something that has not always been found in other studies (see for example, Ruch, 2014).

The Munro report (2011) argues that the undervaluing of worker-service user relationships stems from the current dominance of written records, flow charts and the description of social work as constituting a series of tasks that can be sequentially completed, rather than the intricacies and importance of the emotional nature of practice being acknowledged. The findings of this study contrastingly suggest that where despite the already-situated constraints of the organisational referral and assessment context, interviewees identified their relational encounters with children as meaningful, practitioners remained able to perceive children as competent and agential persons: exhibiting what Ruch et al. (2017) termed a *capacity oriented* approach to building relationships with children.

The way in which interviewees appeared to perceive children as simultaneously agentic *and* vulnerable persons, has also been identified elsewhere (see Morrison et al., 2018), lending support to the usefulness of adopting a relational understanding of agency (Esser, 2016) as a way of understanding the nature of social worker-child encounters. Whilst the way in which practitioners can respond in 'containing' ways to children's agency in order to help children bear their feelings has already been highlighted (Morrison et al., 2018), the findings of this thesis extend these existing explorations of the relationally generated nature of children's and practitioners' agency (see also Hadfield et al., 2020), by considering agency in spatial-physical and spatial-emotional terms.

While practitioners in this study did not appear to question the right of children to participate in worker-child encounters, interviewees did perceive the degree of successful child participation as related to the temporal ability of children and practitioners to form meaningful connections with one another, so the research study findings regarding temporal nature of practitioner-child relationships will be discussed next.

Temporal, ethical *being-with* in social worker-child relationships

In this thesis, the utilisation of insights from Heideggerian phenomenological explorations of the nature of human existence or *being* to analyse practitioner accounts of relationship building, has foregrounded temporally *lived* nature of social worker-child relationships and the inescapably social nature of human *being,* where *being-in-the-world* always means being-in-the-world-with-others (Heidegger, 2010). Understanding time as *lived time* (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2012) additionally highlights the tri-partite past-present-future nature human existence or *being*, where every current moment of an individual's lived experience also contains the background traces of past and potential future horizons of meaning (Smith, 2003; Stern, 2004; Husserl, 2012). Using these phenomenological understandings as interpretive lenses in this study has illuminated the temporally generated nature of practitioner and child *being* or presence and has led to an exploration of the different ways practitioners and children can *be* together during the process of worker-child relationship building that encompasses: being together as 'whole persons'; the

ethical nature of human presence and the possibility of ethical participatory endings to being-with children.

Being together as 'whole persons'

This study found that interviewees perceived the need to care about children as whole persons, but that practitioners' similarly needed to temporally presence themselves to children as whole persons, where holistic or whole person presence was phenomenologically interpreted as a temporally expressed historical-present-future form of presence (Husserl, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 2012), described in this study as an intertwined personal-professional form of practitioner presence (see Chapter 6). This *presencing* of the practitioner as a whole person was achieved by interviewees sharing temporal aspects of their prior lived experiences with children, which included workers sometimes sharing little bits of personal information about themselves with children (*sharing 'selves'*) and seeking areas of common interest with children that interviewees described as trying to find *common ground* (see Chapter 5). The seeking out of *common ground* sometimes involved, for example, practitioners talking about the interests or hobbies that they had outside of their work role as well as asking children about their own interests.

Practitioners indicated that sharing a bit of personal information about themselves was related to trying to generate a sense of fairness or equality (Hatton, 2013) in their interactions with children within the already-situated practice context of a professional-service user relationship that was recognised by interviewees as unequal, because the nature of the social work referral and assessment role *required* social workers to ask children to share personal

information about their lives. Interviewees additionally reported doing everyday activities with children such as going for a walk or watching a television programme together. These can be seen as valuable ways of being with children that were not solely directed towards the professional task of eliciting children's views, but were also opportunities for generating an experience of a shared person-to-person activity where both workers and children were participants (Jensen, 2011): through a holistic form of *personal* as well as *professional* way of *being-together-with* one another. Practitioners in this study appeared to relate to children in a holistic manner (as whole persons) through a range of co-created practices that also included for example, the use of humour and problem free talk or doing other shared activities together such as running or playing with children (see Chapter 5).

This study's findings regarding the importance of practitioners *being* themselves in their personal-professional wholeness in the company of children (and of social workers also perceiving children holistically) in order to establish a meaningful worker-child relationship, accords with children's own views expressed in other studies about what children want from their social workers. For example, children have placed a strong emphasis on the personal qualities of the social workers they work with, valuing such things as practitioners being respectful, caring, honest, open and understanding (OCC, 2010). Research interviews undertaken with children as young as six years old about the child protection system have also found that children similarly do not want to be pressurised for information or bombarded with questions but '*to be seen as a whole person*' (OCC, 2011: 13) by their social worker.

Whilst doing taken for granted everyday types of activities with children as part of the process of relationship building appeared to be something that

interviewees *personally* valued, interviewees also questioned whether this was an acceptable or valued *professional* way of being with children (see Chapter 7), with a tension seemingly existing between personal and professional ways of temporally *being* with children that was related to workers' prior conceptions of personal and professional behavioural norms. This tension between more institutional and 'natural' practitioner frames for understanding the nature of worker-child communications, has been similarly identified elsewhere (see Hadfield et al., 2020). In the findings of this thesis, personal-professional tensions were apparent in practitioners' different expressed levels of personal and professional comfortableness in the use of touch and in other non-verbal ways of being with children such as for example, through play (see Chapters 5 and 6). The degree of practitioner comfortableness with the use of play is regarded as important because play is recognised as an important way of communicating with children (Ferguson, 2011), regarded as a key medium for children's expression and as enabling children to express thoughts and feelings they may not be able to verbalise (O'Reilly and Dolan, 2017). Vocalisations and gestures may similarly be ways that children communicate their views and feelings (Larkins et al., 2015; Adams and Leshone, 2016). Practitioners' degrees of comfortableness with communicating in non-verbal ways with children therefore have the potential to impact on the quality and depth of worker-child communications and the degree to which meaningful worker-child connections are established.

Whilst using a phenomenological understanding of *lived time* to interpret interviewee accounts can illuminate how practitioners' prior personal and professional experiences can impact on present moments of relationships building, social pedagogical theories also support the understanding that using

a personal-professional, whole person approach for building social worker-child relationships is important. For example, workers and children undertaking everyday activities together are suggested as valuable ways of contributing to personal growth, self-confidence and wellbeing (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011). It is also seen as important when using a social pedagogical approach, that practitioners use (in a considered manner) the personal as well as private aspects of themselves in their work (Smith, 2012).

Although no interviewees described their relational practices as rooted in social pedagogical theories or traditions, it is argued in this thesis that social pedagogical theoretical lenses complement and support phenomenological understandings of social worker-child relationship building practices. Social pedagogical approaches for example, aim to address '*the whole child*' (Petrie et al., 2006: 20) through the adoption of a personal-professional approach and through the use of everyday activities. These social pedagogical understandings add weight to the phenomenologically interpreted findings in this thesis, where even small personal-professional and everyday collaborative moments of worker-child interaction were perceived by interviewees as important and of value in building relationships with children. Where social workers *personally* felt that doing everyday things with children was important, but struggled to value or justify this in *professional* terms, both a phenomenological understanding of holistically '*being-together-with* with children and social pedagogical approaches offer conceptual ways of supporting and theoretically justifying the use and value of these types of social worker practices through explicating why such practices are important, if not fundamental, to building meaningful relationships with children.

Practitioners are human beings who bring their own unique personal and professional history with them, into their professional practice (Kwan and Reupert, 2019), a view that was reflected in this study's finding (see Chapters 5 and 6) in the way that, for example, some practitioners were more physically interactive and comfortable with young children than others. From a phenomenological perspective, each practitioner temporally *presences* as a personal as well as professional *being* who has their own personal-professional strengths and vulnerabilities. The impact of personal factors in relation to working with children is something that others such as Ferguson (2016a, 2016b) and Winter et al. (2017) have similarly noted in their ethnographic studies of social worker practices. The findings of this thesis support but also enhance these existing understandings, by providing a phenomenologically theoretically grounded explanation as to why social workers' personal qualities need to be acknowledged but also accepted as an inescapable aspect of social work practice, as *being* a social worker (Heidegger, 2010) is inescapably a temporally generated personal-professional form of *being* (see findings Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

Other findings of this research study (see Chapter 4) show that the legislatively defined and statutorily prescribed nature of social work's investigative and assessment role and the expectation of a timely referral and assessment response, generate an already-situated cultural context for social workers' initial encounters with children. The fast-paced and timescale-driven nature of assessment work required interviewees to develop ways of quickly and succinctly explaining to children who they were and why the practitioner needed to meet with them, to build relationships with children quickly, rapidly find out as much as possible about children's lives, but also to bring the social worker-child

relationship to an end after what was often a relatively brief period of involvement (see Chapter 6). Social workers in this study tried to ensure that the whole period of their relationship with children was a participatory experience, despite practitioners experiencing this underlying timescale and workload pressure. Interviewees tried to sustain a participatory practice approach within a pressurised practice environment by attempting to generate, if only fleetingly, some temporally experienced sense of '*being-together-with'* children where at least some parts of the worker-child encounter constituted a shared experience. How social workers and children generated a sense of 'sharedness' or togetherness during the process of relationship building, will therefore be discussed next.

Togetherness, power and 'being-together-with' children

Heidegger understands human *being* or existence as a *with-world* (2010) that is socially and temporally generated through an ongoing process of meaning making. Through using this social-temporal phenomenological lens to interpret practitioner accounts of relationship building, the moment by moment, temporally generated in nature of human *being* within interviewee accounts was foregrounded, leading me to consider the different ways that practitioners and children sought to *be-with* one another during the process of building worker-child relationships, as explored in findings chapters 6 and 7.

This study found that children and practitioners temporally generated a sense of '*being-together-with'* one another through co-creating experiences of sharing or togetherness. This was not achieved solely through a reciprocity of vocal interactions between workers and children, but was also done in spatial and

embodied (intercorporeal) ways by practitioners and children getting down and alongside one another, doing shared activities, through the use of touch or by emotionally generating a sense of worker-child togetherness through for example, the use of humour and shared laughter and by sharing 'selves' (see earlier chapter section discussions).

The importance of temporally generating a sense of worker-child *togetherness* is similarly reflected in social pedagogical understandings of practitioner-child relationships. Social pedagogical understandings foreground the importance of the 'how' rather than the 'what' of worker-child relationships (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011) and social pedagogical approaches are underpinned by an egalitarian or democratic understanding of professional-service user relations, where relations are enacted through an inclusive and shared approach (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012). However, as discussed in Chapter 1, contrastingly, social work practitioner-child relationship building is situated in a context where the power of the social work role is considerable and is generated through its legislatively defined function to intervene on behalf of the state in family life (Parton, 2014). The type of relational role that social workers are expected to enact is therefore at least partially politically and governmentally prescribed. For example, the knowledge and skills required of child and family social workers includes the expectation that social workers will be simultaneously *‘authoritative and compassionate’* (DfE, 2014: 2) in their approach.

This study provides insight into how practitioners can work hard to counterbalance the unavoidable and ongoing tensions that stem from the directive nature of their social work role by generating temporal opportunities for less directive experiences during worker-child encounters. Practitioners still

remained aware of the inherent tensions embedded in relationally managing these conflicting care and control aspects of their role during their encounters with children (Corby et al., 2012; Lonne et al., 2016) but interviewees sought ways to temporally manage these tensions through generating moments of sharing. Practitioners in this study (see Chapter 5) were acutely aware of the already-present intergenerational as well as professional-service user power imbalances and their potentially oppressive impact and the findings of this thesis indicate that practitioners can try to ameliorate the already-situated asymmetric adult-child and practitioner-service user relations of power by using a range of practices that have a common focus: that of seeking out different ways of '*being-together-with'* children where each social worker-child encounter is a shared relational experience in at least some respects, despite the pre-existing social-cultural circumstances where practitioners ultimately retain more authority and responsibility (Storo, 2013).

This study found (see Chapter 6) that practitioners undertook a lot of shared, intercorporeal activities with children such as running through the park together, playing football, or using toys such as figurines, trains or trucks. These activities were phenomenologically interpreted as generating shared experiences of practitioners and children '*being-together-with'* one another (Heidegger, 2010), where the practitioner was not teaching the child, but instead the social worker and child were playing together. Such activities also provided opportunities for children rather than practitioners, to take the lead (see *Harry* putting *Susan* to bed, for example, in Chapter 6). This above study finding is congruent with Storo's (2013) suggestion that for worker-child alliances to develop, co-operative experiences need to happen at a relational and task level.

Doing activities with children offers the potential for generating a more shared relational experience: an experience of existentially '*being-together-with'* one another in a way that recognises and values the contributions of the child as well as the practitioner. This can be achieved through engaging with children on their terms, rather than on the terms of the practitioner (see for example, Bannister and Huntingdon, 2002: Oliver and Pitt, 2011). This facilitates the process of worker-child relationship building through generating an experience of sharing where both worker and child are participants. This study's finding regarding the importance of practitioners '*being-together-with'* children as a way of building meaningful relationships is supported by other psycho-socially rooted understandings of social worker-child relationships, where the usefulness of social workers' conceptualising and thereby also ascribing value to, co-operative and reciprocal experiences, has similarly been highlighted (see Ruch et al., 2020). Phenomenologically conceptualising practices that facilitate the process of relationship building as being any kind of practice that temporally generates a sense of togetherness or of '*being-together-with'* children, can help to encourage practitioners to sustain a more democratic relational approach to building relationships with children wherever possible, despite the always already-present unequal power relations inherent in the dual 'care and control' (DfE, 2014: 3) environment of initial assessment work.

The ethical nature of practitioner presence

Whilst practitioner accounts in this study contained descriptions of temporal instances of worker-child togetherness (see above), interviewees also identified ethical relational tensions and dilemmas about how or whether to, for example,

use touch when working with children, respond to the touches of children and whether to alter the degree of personal space between workers and children. Interviewees also considered to what degree it might be acceptable to ask children to share intimate details about their lives, when practitioners might only be working with children for very brief periods of time.

Heidegger has been criticised for not addressing the ethical dimension of human existence or *being* (Brook, 2009). In order to deepen understanding of how practitioners temporally managed some of these ethical tensions, a Levinasian (1981) phenomenological understanding of the fundamentally ethical as well as social nature of *being* was additionally used as a theoretical frame to aid exploration of the *ethical* ways of *being-with* children identified in interviewee accounts (see Chapters 6 and 7).

As also outlined in Chapter 6, Levinas argues that human existence or *being* is made meaningful because the very nature of *being-in-the-world* creates an always already present obligation on each individual to respond to the moral plea or summons of other persons to share the world with them (Levinas, 1981). It is this demand to acknowledge and accept the other person as an equal human being in the world as an ethical condition of human existence, that Levinas suggests gives life (or human existence) meaning.

Through this phenomenological lens, interviewee accounts of relationship building were understood as founded on an ethical core of *humane presence* or *being*, that was simultaneously therefore both a personal and professional form of ethical presence, where the manner in which each person chooses to respond to the ethical call of the other (the person that faces them), determines whether a humane or more objectifying response is proffered (Levinas, 1981).

From this perspective (see also Chapter 6), issues of justice are not detached from issues of morality, as to respond infinitely to one person potentially produces injustice for all those other persons who are not present (Levinas, 1981).

Child and family social work does not take place in a social, moral or political vacuum (Winter, 2019). The rights, interests and responsibilities of individuals, families, organisations and other social groupings exist in tension with one another. The child protection system has cast an increasingly wide net such that one in five children born in 2009-10 were referred to children's services in England before the age of five (Bilson and Martin, 2017) whilst the number of child protection investigations has increased, with the size of social work caseloads often exceeding organisationally agreed limits (Unison/Community Care, 2014). This *investigative turn* in the provision child welfare services (Bilson et al., 2017) has occurred at a time when there are increasing levels of poverty existing alongside inequalities in child welfare service provisions and child welfare outcomes (Bywaters et al., 2016). Social workers are therefore attempting to build meaningful relationships with children in a socio-economic and political climate where reduced financial resources have led the Directors of Children's Services to report that it is becoming increasingly difficult to fulfil all of their statutory duties (APPGC, 2017). Social work practitioners consequently face real challenges in building and sustaining meaningful relationships with children in practice circumstances where caseloads are high and supporting resources are constantly being reduced: an ongoing political-professional as well as personal challenge that has be argued is not new, but has existed since the inception of the profession (Winter, 2019). The phenomenological understandings contained in this thesis that suggest how meaningful worker-

child relationships can be built, offer social workers and social welfare organisations potential ways that workers can seek to still ethically *be* with children, within these constraints. Phenomenological understandings of worker-child relationships offer suggestions for how workers can help to sustain the humanity of the *process* of delivering child and family welfare services within the current perfect storm of austerity, increasing inequalities in welfare interventions and continuing cuts in overall local authority budgets (Bywaters, et al., 2017).

Because the creation of humane presence requires social workers to be with children as whole personal-professional human beings, the role of supervision and reflection becomes critical to helping social workers manage and sustain good and ethical worker practices. This study therefore reinforces Winter et al.'s (2019) insight that if social worker presence or *being* is understood as an intertwined embodied, emotional-cognitive form of personal-professional presence, supervision is essential for enabling workers to safely express and reflect on their feelings and fears, when emotional tensions and conflicts in their practice arise. Also echoing Ingram (2013a), this is because the ability of workers to recognise and understand the feelings of service users, is linked to social workers' ability to recognise, understand and manage their own feelings.

Extending the relevance of phenomenologically understanding practitioner *being* in terms of a temporally generated past-present-future form of human presence (Husserl, 2012; Heidegger, 2010) in this thesis, also reinforces understandings of social worker-child relationships identified in other studies by revealing further dimensions of the relational complexities of social work practice. Stabler et al. (2019) for example, found that the same social worker characteristics and skills were experienced differently (sometimes positively, sometimes negatively) by different children at different points in time, and for

different, contextually situated reasons. There is therefore an increased recognition of the nuanced, intricate and contingent (Winter et al., 2017) nature of worker-child relationships. These thesis findings support this more complex understanding of social work practice, also suggesting that social work education, training and practice may benefit from focusing much more on (and attributing much greater importance to) what means to *be* a social worker (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016).

No two human beings are alike. The tendency towards trying to standardise social worker practices (see for example, Forrester et al., 2018) is therefore wide of the mark and ignores the relational complexities of social work practice. Understanding social worker practices as a form of humane presence is to re-orient the conversation about social work towards a relational understanding of how one person treats another and how social workers and children interact and understand each other *in-relation-to-one-another*.

This has implications for the social work profession, social work educators and employing organisations, in terms of ensuring that opportunities for ongoing personal-professional reflection are provided as an essential component of sustaining good social work practice. Supervision cannot be regarded as a desirable add-on to be provided to social workers if time and resources allow it, but needs to be recognised as an integral part of sustaining good practice (as it is already acknowledged as being in other professional settings such as psychotherapy and family therapy). The importance of supervision in social work has long been highlighted as important (Brown and Bourne, 1996; Hawkins and Shohet, 2006; Wonnacott, 2012). This study's findings regarding the personal-professional and temporal nature of human presence adds further weight towards existing arguments that there is a need to also re-orient the

focus of social work supervision away from the dominance of managerial functions, towards the more reflective, educative and support aspects of supervision (Field et al., 2016).This however, requires organisational priorities to change.

Current drives towards ensuring that local authority social worker practices are grounded in a shared, organisationally adopted conceptual model or in specific theoretical approaches (Sebba et al., 2017) means that social worker practices need to be justified with reference to theoretical understandings of practice. Whilst restorative and signs of safety-based models have already been adopted in many authorities (McNeish et al., 2017) there is room for other, alternative conceptual models and practice approaches to emerge. Applying phenomenological understandings of social work practice offer a theoretically grounded way of understanding the process of relationship building, that can be used to explain the importance of generating everyday practices of sharing and co-creating a sense worker-child togetherness, that is rooted in a democratic and humane understanding of social work practice and of social worker-child relationships. The findings of this thesis indicate that sustaining an authentic and humane personal-professional form of practitioner presence is important not only during worker child introductions and the assessment, but also when ending social work involvement with children. This aspect of social worker-child relationships will therefore be considered next.

Ending relationships with children

This study found that social workers tried to ensure that their final meetings with children ended on a positive note. This was done by social workers thanking

children for their contribution and by acknowledging the worker had appreciated spending time with the child (see Chapter 7). This study finding accords with Reimer's (2017) suggestion that it is preferable for endings to be planned, although the thesis findings indicated that social workers could not always confirm directly with the child that it was their last visit. This was due to workers either needing to confirm with their manager that closing the case was acceptable or because of other outstanding issues such as ongoing criminal investigations, for example. Where workers were not able to specifically state this was to be their last visit, practitioners in this research study sought ways of saying goodbye to children in a more general sense. Interviewees, for example, sought to thank children for their contribution and tried to generate a positive tone during their final meetings with children. These findings regarding ending relationships are echoed elsewhere, as creating a feeling that something has been accomplished, has been identified as helpful, as has attempting to end the meeting on a positive note (Fine and Glasser, 1996).

Taking additional time to say goodbye to children (see also Chapter 1) is also identified as important so that the ending of worker involvement is experienced as a negotiated accomplishment that children are prepared for (Reimer, 2017). Adopting this approach has time implications if accepted as a recommended practice within statutory social work settings. This is because doing an additional social work visit to say goodbye to children requires additional worker time. High caseloads and workloads in this study, were a concern for interviewed social workers. High caseloads (see Ridley et al., 2013) have been identified as impacting on workers' capacity for relationship building, with lower caseloads being seen as more facilitative of good quality relationships between practitioners and children. This has been identified as resulting from lower

caseloads freeing up worker time to work directly with young people, as well as enabling practitioners to undertake work with children on a more planned, rather than crisis intervention basis (Ridley et al., 2013*)*. Sustaining good quality relationships and good practice outcomes for service users has also been identified elsewhere, as having time and resource implications (Larkins et al., 2015b). Meaningful and participatory endings for social worker-child relationships are therefore facilitated when workers have additional time for a planned ending. This study found that despite the time pressures practitioners are under, social workers can make sure there is some kind of acknowledged ending to their involvement with children, where children's contribution is valued.

This study found that sustaining an *authentic* and *humane* approach to ending relationships with children meant practitioners taking more than a task focussed approach to ending the worker-child relationship. For example, some interviewees proffered a holistic form of emotional as well as physical goodbye that contained a person to person acknowledgement and thanking of children rather than just a factual statement that the worker’s involvement was ending. Some of the relational endings described in this study were interpreted as exhibiting a degree of mutuality (of recognition, respect and esteem) between social workers and children. Generating some sense of togetherness or of '*being-together-with'* children throughout the period of social work involvement including during endings, can help children to feel valued, ensure children are perceived holistically as people, and help to ensure a participatory approach is sustained, even at the end of the social worker-child relationship.

Original contributions to knowledge

This thesis offers a new phenomenological theoretical perspective for understanding practitioner-child relationships through utilising aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of embodiment (2012, 2014); Heidegger's (2010) phenomenological ontological exploration of the nature of human existence or *being;* and Levinas' phenomenological exploration of the ethical nature of *being* (1981); to enhance understanding of the nature and significance of social worker-child relationships through utilising all these above phenomenological lenses.

The thesis provides a new theoretical contribution by phenomenologically examining the notion of *being* in relation to social work, that extends existing psycho-social and social pedagogical understandings (see Chapter 1) of practitioner *being,* which the literature review identified as currently undertheorised. Current psycho-social understandings refer to the notion of *being* as variously representing the emotional capacities, value base and person aspects of self (Lefevre et al., 2008) or practitioners' personal disposition (Megele, 2015). In social pedagogical understandings, the term *being* is linked to notions of worker authenticity, genuineness and the use of the practitioner's own personality (Bird and Eichsteller, 2011), with a separate term *Haltung*, used to additionally refer to workers' ethos or mindset (Hatton, 2013) moral stance (Charfe, 2019); ethical orientation and use of self (Gardner, 2019); and value base (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). The philosophical phenomenological exploration of the notion of *being* provided in this thesis, argues that *being*, from a phenomenological theoretical perspective, is not regarded as a separate category that represents only ethical, emotional, personal attributes, personality

or attitudes. *Being* is instead phenomenologically understood as a holistic form of spatio-temporal practitioner *presencing* that collectively encompasses the cognitive (thinking), emotional (feeling), bodily (doing) and ethical aspects of self or *being*. This phenomenological understanding of human *being* (Levinas, 1981; Heidegger, 2010) can help to conceptually clarify the epistemological relationship between the social pedagogical notion of *Haltung,* and that of *being* and similarly provide a theoretically grounded definition of *being* that can enhance existing psycho-social understandings of *being*.

This thesis also makes a new phenomenological theoretical contribution in relation to the interpretation of social worker-child relationship building practices by extending beyond a Heideggerian (2010) analysis of the nature of human *being* or existence, to additionally use insights from Levinas's work (1981) to address the ethical nature of human existence or *being* and use this to better understand how meaningful practitioner-child relationship are generated through exploration of the significance of *humane presence*. Whilst the relevance of the philosophical work of Levinas has already been considered in relation to social work education (Tsang, 2017), issues of cultural competence (Ben-Ari and Strier, 2010), social work's knowledge base and the profession's concern with issues of social justice (Rossiter, 2011), as well as being conceptually critiqued (Garrett, 2017), this thesis extends current understanding and applications of Levinasian ethics to social work practice. This is achieved by drawing attention to how Levinas's' (1981) exploration of the fundamentally ethical nature of human existence can enhance Heideggerian understandings of the inherently social nature of *being-in-the-world* as a way of understanding social worker-child relationships, by acknowledging the fundamentally social as well as ethical nature of *being-in-the-world.*

The use of this additional Levinasian phenomenological theoretical lens to explore the inescapably *ethical* nature of human existence when analysing and interpreting practitioner accounts of relationship building, has provided a richer analysis and way of explicating how practitioner-child encounters can become meaningful encounters. This thesis therefore offers a theoretically grounded conceptual framework that can support current discourses about the importance of sustaining a humane social work practice approach (Ferguson, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2014; Tompsett, 2014) by contributing suggestions as to how a humane form of practitioner presence can be sustained.

The literature review and subsequent concluding chapter discussions in this thesis additionally illuminate the strong underpinning theoretical links between phenomenological and social pedagogical understandings of human relations, lending theoretical grounding to the case for the usefulness and relevance of extending the existing applications of social pedagogical ways of working with children, to child and family social work practice.

Limitations of the study

This research study set out to explore practitioner experiences and understandings of making meaningful relationships with children. Making the decision to focus on exploring only practitioner understandings of worker-child relationships enabled a detailed exploration and analysis of social workers accounts of relationship building to be achieved. One consequence of making this choice, however, is the research study could be criticized for presenting a very one-sided view of social worker-child encounters, as children were not interviewed. To try and ameliorate this, I have situated my discussions of

practitioner experiences of relationship building within the context of research studies already undertaken into children's experiences, utilising findings from existing research, to contextualise my findings.

I also chose to restrict the focus of my research study to practitioner experiences of working with children under the age of eight years. It could therefore be questioned whether this study's findings have any broader relevance for social work practitioners working with older children. It may have been beneficial to extend the breadth of the study by interviewing social workers about their experiences of building meaningful relationships with children over, as well as under, the age of eight years to see what kind of similarities and differences of understanding emerged. This would have required a much larger scale of research project which as a sole researcher, I would not have been able to successfully complete within the timescale allowed for submission of the thesis. Undertaking a phenomenological exploration of the nature and meaning of social worker relationships with older children does however offer a potential avenue for future research.

In terms of the methodological limitations of this study, some phenomenologically oriented researchers may criticise the use of one-off interviews instead of undertaking a series of repeat interviews with practitioners. Phenomenological research encourages the use of repeat interviews as a way of gaining an increased phenomenological depth of understanding of practitioners' lived experience. Doing repeat interviews was first and foremost, not feasible for practical reasons. The recruitment of *any* participants was expected to be quite difficult due to my insider knowledge about practitioner workloads. Social workers had limited availability during their working day to attend a one-off interview, let alone more than one interview. The use of repeat

interviews was therefore unrealistic. As the research study progressed, I also subsequently realised that doing single interviews was also sufficient for generating rich and detailed practitioner accounts of relationship building. This was because practitioners shared a broad and eclectic range of understandings of their lived experiences: talking in detail about themselves, the children they worked with and about a range of personal as well as professional experiences.

Undertaking repeat interviews would have produced a greater quantity and range of data for analysis, such as allowing practitioners the opportunity to share their experiences of building relationships with a number of children from a range of different families, rather than focusing primarily on working with one family. Practitioners may also have expanded on their experiences of relationship building to include more detailed discussions about the work practitioners did with older siblings in each family, rather than focussing only on the younger children (under the age of eight years) in each family.

Alternatively, interviewing a larger number of participants instead of doing repeat interviews may equally have provided an enriched or more diverse range of practitioner accounts of relationship building with young children. In both of these instances however, it may have been feasible to collect the data, but unlikely that I would have had sufficient time to transcribe and analyse it, within the timescale of this research study.

Completing ten practitioner interviews was, however, sufficient to generate a diverse range of detailed practitioner accounts of relationship building and to achieve the central aim of this study: to explore practitioner understandings of what constitutes a meaningful social worker-child relationship in an initial assessment context. This number of interviews was regarded as sufficient

because the practitioner interviews encompassed practice accounts from social workers working within a range of different organisational and team settings as well as social workers with differing lengths of post qualification experience. Each practice circumstance described, was also unique. Analysing ten interviews also enabled me to undertake a greater depth of analysis and generate a broader range of interpretations of the data than would have been feasible, had I completed a larger number of interviews.

Recommendations for social work education, training and practice

The thesis findings indicate that meaningful social worker-child introductions require practitioners to take sufficient time to introduce themselves to children clearly and directly. It is also important for practitioners to check out with children what their understanding of a social worker is and why the practitioner has come to see them. Taking a negotiated approach to initial meetings with children is important, and this can be achieved through practitioners spending a bit of time just *being-with* children in a more reciprocal kind of way, generating a temporal sense of togetherness. This can involve practitioners for example: sharing a bit of personal information about themselves; talking with children about an issue or topic unrelated to the immediate issue of concern; using humour; or doing a shared activity with a child as a way of finding some common ground with them.

Given some of the pre-existing constraints on social worker-child relationships (such as issues of intergenerational and professional power), it is of even

greater importance that practitioners seek ways of ‘evening out’ the relational starting ground of initial (as well as subsequent) social worker-child encounters in order to make the encounters between social workers and children, a more shared experience. It is also important that social work students, educators and practitioners understand that there is no alibi in existence (Bakhtin, 1993), meaning that each of us cannot avoid taking responsibility for our own actions in terms of the way we presence ourselves or behave towards others. We are fundamentally ethical and social beings (Levinas, 1981) that make moral choices. Any human act is therefore a deed for which we must take responsibility. It is not ‘*a mere happening’* (Holquist, 1993: Foreword, xii). We can choose to have a humane approach towards others, or to ignore and objectify other persons.

It is important to acknowledge and accept that social work practitioners are always inescapably *presencing* themselves in more than just a professional sense. Practitioners are whole, embodied persons who bring themselves into their practice as inextricably intertwined personal-professional beings. Social work practice, education and training would therefore benefit from assigning greater importance to foregrounding the personal-professional nature of social work practice. Focussing more specifically on helping social work students and practitioners understand and manage the tensions inherent in workers being with others in inextricably personal-professional ways, may help practitioners to work more sensitively, reflectively (Boddy, 2005) and humanely with children.

Children should not be conceptualised or perceived by practitioners solely as service users. Children should be recognised as whole persons: fellow human beings who should be acknowledged and treated as such. Children's opportunities for agency in co-creating comfortableness and influence within

assessments should be facilitated by: doing shared activities and sharing 'selves'; the use of humour and problem free talk; using semi-private as well as private spaces for worker-child encounters; generating different movements through space; and through emotional-spatial and physical-spatial acts of sharing that are intercorporeally negotiated.

Some of the practices congruent with intecorporeal and ethical *being-together-with* children that were identified in this thesis are similar to those that underpin social pedagogical approaches to working with children. This includes practices such as doing shared everyday activities with children and using a personal-professional embodied and intercorporeal whole person approach to building relationships. Social work educators, employers and practitioners understandings of, and theoretical justifications for, such worker-child relational experiences can therefore be enhanced by using phenomenological understandings of *being* in tandem with social pedagogical theoretical understandings of worker-child relationship building: valuing the *process* of worker-child relationship building rather than just the assessment outcome.

Conclusion

This thesis promotes a contextualised and holistic understanding of social worker-child relationships that is situated within a humanistic understanding of social worker-service user relations. Promoting a contextualised understanding of social worker-child relationships is important because the way people talk and think about a topic generates a form of representation or *discourse* (Foucault, 2002) that becomes part of societal and individual ways of understanding and representing the world.

The social work discourses that become dominant have implications for the way social work educators, students, social work managers and practitioners see and treat people. This is because discourses have different ideological stances and representations of power relations embedded within them (Burr, 2003). The way social work is predominantly talked about, understood or represented in written texts such as PhDs, journal articles, books or through other media such as television is important. This is because the most dominant and persistent discourses about social work and social worker practices create a climate of understanding (Winter and Cree, 2016) that becomes accepted as the 'right' way for social workers to *be* in their relationships with children, unless this viewpoint is challenged by other discourses.

Dominant discourses about social work and social workers influence public, political and practitioner perspectives of what are perceived to be acceptable or legitimate forms of practice for children and family social workers. The messages about social work practice that become dominant, impact on how practitioners feel they *can or should* be with children.

Social workers in this study had a sense of expectation that a clearly delineated boundary ought to be sustained between personal and professional ways of being, with a purely *professional* enactment of being, perceived as the ideal state for practitioners to sustain. Practitioners shared experiences of practice instances where the practitioner felt anxious that they may have transgressed a professional boundary by becoming too *personal.* Interviewees suggested it was their university training that had most strongly given them this message about sustaining clear personal-professional boundaries but at the same time indicated that sustaining a purely professional persona did not tally with their lived practice experiences of building meaningful relationships with children.

Instead practitioners suggested a more personal-professional form of worker presence was needed in order to form meaningful relationships with children.

Tensions between personal and professional ways of being a social worker have existed since the inception of the profession (Corby et al., 2012) and these tensions are also represented in current professional and governmental discourses about social work. Notions of what constitutes ‘professional’ behaviour for a social worker in England are encoded in professional association and governmental documents including: the knowledge and skills statement for child and family social work (DfE, 2014); statutory safeguarding guidance (HM Government, 2018); Health and Care Professions Council Standards of Proficiency (HCPC, 2017); and in the British Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics (BASW, 2012).

These documents all contain advice about how social workers should *be* in their relationships with service users. The BASW code of ethics for example, focusses on the broader principles underpinning social work practice, where practitioners’ ‘*ability to act ethically’* (BASW, 2012: 5) is based on a respect for human rights and social justice. The current knowledge and skills statement (KSS) for child and family social workers sees professional ethics differently. It locates social work’s professional ethics within the prescribed parameters of a state-regulated professional role, where practitioners must: ‘*demonstrate the principles of social work though professional judgement, decision-making and actions within a framework of professional accountability’* (DfE, 2014: 2). The ability of social workers to act ethically within the KSS understanding of the professional social work role, is primarily framed in terms of the degree to which practitioners conform to socio-politically and organisationally defined norms of

professional behaviour, rather than in relation to a broader sense of human rights.

In contrast, the BASW code of ethics is rooted in a '*humanitarian and democratic'* (BASW, 2012: 5) value base that is focussed on meeting people's needs and on the development of human potential. Its ethical base is rooted in universal, humane values, not organisationally defined norms of what constitutes acceptable professional behaviour. The knowledge and skills statement for child and family social work, whilst emphasising some ethical principles such as the promotion of service user autonomy and self-determination, views professional ethics primarily through a lens of professional accountability.

Discourses such as these have power. They can influence how social work is seen by those outside the profession, but also impact on the education and training of social workers and on social work practitioners themselves, depending on which discourses begin to dominate and are seen as important or perceived as having value. Dominant discourses can influence how social work students and practitioners understand what type of professional person they are, should, or can be.

Generating a different discourse or a new way of seeing worker-child relationships through for example the dissemination of the findings of this study, offers a potentially new practice discourse to practitioners, local authority employers and to social work educators. It offers a way of conceptualising and understanding social worker practices that is founded on a contextualised, holistic and human rights-based understanding of social worker-child relations,

that also accords with the ethics of the profession (BASW, 2012) rather than being rooted solely in notions of employer or procedural accountability.

One of the most dominant discourses about social work and social workers gaining an increasingly strong foothold over the last 20 years, has been the symbolic belief or '*cultural trope'* (Shoesmith, 2016: 195) of social worker-blaming. Shoesmith argues that this cultural trope of blaming has taken hold because it enables society to manage the emotionally distressing truth that children are abused, by blaming social workers for failing to prevent child abuse from occurring. This dominant discourse of social worker-blaming also deflects attention away from any political, structural and organisational impacts on the wellbeing of families and children (Featherstone 2012; Bywaters et al., 2014, 2016, 2017; Bilson and Martin, 2016). This discourse of social worker blaming leads to the focus being increasingly placed on what is 'wrong' with social work and social workers, through persistent and repeated exhortations about the poor state of social work training (Laming 2003; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014), the deficiency of social worker skills and academic capabilities and identifying regulatory weaknesses as the source of social work's difficulty (DCFS, 2009).

Social work is *dirty work* (Howe, 1986) with the child and family social work role in particular, becoming increasingly tightly regulated and state mediated (DfE, 2014; HCPC, 2017; HM Government, 2018). Is there any place in this current professional climate then, for trying to generate a different discourse about social work and social workers: one that looks at social work practice through a more positive lens by considering what makes social worker practices meaningful?

Generating more practice-centred understandings of what meaningful social worker-child relationships should or do look like, is central to ensuring social work does not become a dehumanized, mechanistic form of lived experience for practitioners as well as for children and their families. Language constructs knowledge (Foucault, 2002) so promoting a discourse about meaningful social worker-child relationships can help to promote a more holistic and embodied form of knowing about *how* social workers practise.

The findings of this thesis contribute further practice-centred and contextualised research knowledge about social worker practices, adding to the growing body of '*practice near'* (Froggett and Briggs, 2012: 1) understandings of social work practice (see for example research already done by Ferguson, 2016a; Jeyasingham, 2018; Forrester et al., 2018; Winter et al., 2019; Hadfield et al., 2020). This thesis offers a positive contribution towards the collective knowledge base of what counts as a valued or as a valid form of social work practice knowledge that moves away from mechanistic and proceduralised understandings of social work practice, and towards a more humane understanding of social worker-child relations.

The findings of this study suggest that for social workers to form meaningful connections with children, they need to *presence* themselves in a holistic manner. *Presencing* in the context of this research study, means a personal-professional form of worker presence that is also a *humane* form of ethical presence. *Humane presence* is a mode of being where practitioners strive to sustain a stance of caring and of respectful proportionality in the relational responses they proffer to children. A humane form of practitioner presence also encompasses an understanding that practitioners need to use their whole embodied selves in their encounters with children, what social pedagogy

similarly terms using a head, heart and hands approach (Petrie et al., 2006; Hatton, 2013; Nsonwu et al., 2013; Cameron, 2016)

Re-focusing attention on the fact that social worker-child relationships are primarily human relationships, rather than solely service user-professional or adult-child relationships, can contribute to academic attempts to re-centre debates about social work towards more humane understandings of practice rather than seeing social work as an administrative, technical or mechanistic role or form of practice. The interpretations and discussion of the findings of this study also aim to add to existing discourses that are currently trying to reclaim and defend a more humane form of professional child welfare practice (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014; Featherstone et al., 2014) where the nature and quality of human relationships matters. It is important that social workers, social work students and social work educators recognise and value the importance of continuing to generate and defend small democratic and humane spaces of care, if social work is to remain a humane profession.

The lack of time available to build relationships with children was an issue that was persistently raised in practitioner interviews in this study. When time is such a precious commodity, it is even more important that practitioners continue to find ways of defending the values at the heart of social work practice: to respect and value other persons as *like-persons*. *How* practitioners spend time with children is therefore important and how practitioners *relate* to children constitutes the heart of an ethical and democratic social work practice approach. Moments of meaningful connection between social workers and children are about practitioners seeing each child they work with as another agentic human being rather than as an object of concern (Laming, 2003).

Generating meaningful worker-child connections even within relatively small temporal spaces, can generate a feeling of worker-child togetherness that can positively contribute to the child's ongoing experiences of recognition and may also be a life affirming encounter or positive experience in and of itself (Bannister and Huntington, 2002).

Whilst social work employers, universities and politicians continue to seek out innovative new models and methods of practice and of education and training (Smith et al., 2013; Forrester et al., 2013; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2016; Sebba et al., 2017), whatever the specific model of practice or method used, the day to day relational practices of social workers need to be based more fundamentally on practitioners striving to sustain *meaningful relationships* with children throughout the whole of any assessment and intervention process. This involves practitioners striving to sustain a humane form of practitioner presence by seeking ways of generating experiences of togetherness (of *'being-together-with'*) children.

Striving to sustain a humane form of practitioner presence is necessary despite, but even more so precisely because of, the existence of asymmetrical power relations between social workers and children and because of the dual coercive as well as supportive nature of the social work role. It is through practitioners sustaining a humane form of personal-professional presence, utilising everyday objects and everyday spaces, and participating in shared, everyday activities with children that social workers and children can create meaningful relationships with one another despite the myriad pressures that surround them both. Small actions and small moments can and do matter.

The findings of this study show that meaningful worker-child connections can be generated in even the smallest of temporal spaces. When children are experiencing difficult and traumatic circumstances, it is the way practitioners *are* with children that makes a significant difference to how children experience social work interventions. The degree to which practitioners manage to existentially '*be-together-with'* children impacts on the degree of child participation but most of all indicates to children whether they matter as persons.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Introductory participant email

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A PhD RESEARCH STUDY

Research title

Making meaningful relationships with young children during initial assessments: practitioners' experiences and understandings

Dear colleague,

You are invited to take part in the above named PhD research study, supported and partially funded by the University of Central Lancashire. Your employer has also been consulted and has agreed to support this research study.

My name is Liz Munro and I am an HCPC registered social worker who previously worked for 10 years within several different local authorities initially as a generic, and subsequently as a specialist children and families social worker. I currently work as a university lecturer and practice educator and am undertaking my PhD on a part time basis at the University of Central Lancashire.

My research study aims to explore social work practitioners' *positive* practice experiences and understandings of the nature, meaning and use of relationships within the context of working with young children (aged approximately between 3 and 7 years) during the process of undertaking an initial assessment.

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to attend an individual interview lasting no longer than 60-90 minutes. The attached participant information sheet and interview guide give you further details about the research project, what it involves and how it is being undertaken. I hope you find it of interest and will agree to participate.

If you would like to take part in this research study, please email or phone me back to confirm your interest and I will then contact you further about the research.

Many thanks for taking the time to consider this request. I hope you will agree to take part.

Kind Regards

Elizabeth Munro
PhD student, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) [contact details have been anonymised]

Appendix 2: Participant information sheet

<u>Research title</u> Making meaningful relationships with young children during initial assessments: practitioners' experiences and understandings

My name is Liz Munro and I am an HCPC registered social worker who previously worked for 10 years within several different local authorities initially as a generic, and subsequently as a specialist children and families social worker. I currently work as a university lecturer and practice educator and am undertaking my PhD on a part time basis at the University of Central Lancashire.

<u>Invitation</u> You are invited to take part in the above named PhD research study. This research is partially funded by and has the support and approval of, the University of Central Lancashire. Below is an outline of the study. I hope you will find it of interest and will agree to participate. The outline describes what the research is and explains how and why it is being undertaken. Before agreeing to take part, please take time to read the information provided carefully. You are encouraged to contact me and ask if there is anything that is not clear to you or if you would like further information.

<u>Aims of the research</u> This small scale research study aims to contribute new understanding of how social workers successfully achieve a positive, meaningful and effective working relationship with young children (aged about three to seven years) starting from their first contact with a child. This research aims to explore how practitioners manage to sustain a meaningful working relationship with a child throughout the process of undertaking an initial assessment.

<u>Why have I been invited to take part in the research?</u> I have approached HCPC registered social workers currently working as a social work practitioner in a children and families team and who have current involvement in undertaking initial assessments of need and risk. I am especially interested in hearing about social workers' practice experiences in relation to working with young children aged approximately 3 to 7 years, as my research focuses on this age range.

<u>Do I have to take part?</u> Your employer has also been consulted and has agreed to support this research but your agreement to take part in the research is entirely voluntary as although your employer is supportive of the research taking place, your decision to participate or not to participate, will have no implications for your employment. You can also choose to withdraw from the research study both before and after any interview has taken place, without giving a reason. You will have at least 7 days before the interview date to change your mind and you can also withdraw from the study up to and including 7 days after the interview has taken place. If you decide to withdraw from the study the individual information and data collected in respect of yourself will be destroyed and your name removed from the study files. However,

once the data has been collected and has begun to be transcribed and analysed (approximately one week after the interview takes place) it will no longer be possible to withdraw your data from the study as the interview data will then have been anonymised and incorporated into the study.

What will happen if I agree to take part? If you agree to participate, you will be asked to attend an individual interview. The interview should last no longer than 60-90 minutes. The interview will be arranged to take place in a private room according to your preference. This may for example be a room that is available for you to book yourself as an employee, or at another other venue of your choice. It is planned that the content of the discussion will be digitally recorded and then transcribed (and anonymised) to promote accuracy and rigour of data collection and analysis but if you prefer, I will take written notes instead.

What are the possible benefits of taking part? You may enjoy the process of reflecting on your work, but I cannot promise the PhD study will help you directly. However, the information generated from the study will be used to contribute to an increased understanding of social worker practice experiences of effective and meaningful relationship building when working with young children.

What are the possible risks of taking part? There are no specific risks identified. However, there is some additional time provided at the end of the interview where you can discuss any difficulties or sensitive issues that arise during the meeting that you wish to discuss further and I can offer advice about individual follow up support, if needed.

What if there is a problem? If you have a concern about any aspect of this study or require any further clarification about any aspect of the research, in the first instance please ring or email me and I will do my best to answer any questions you may have. My contact details are: Liz Munro, PhD student, University of Central Lancashire [further contact details have been anonymised]

You can alternatively contact a member of my PhD supervisory team who are: [contact details have been anonymised].

If you have any concerns about the conduct of the study or about the individuals involved that would be inappropriate to raise directly with the researcher, you should use the university Concerns Procedure. This means contacting the University Officer for Ethics at [contact details have been anonymised] to outline your concerns and should include some information about the study, the name of the researcher and the nature of the complaint.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential? All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be securely stored and kept strictly confidential in accordance with data protection requirements. All information will be anonymised and no identifiable data regarding any individual participant will be used in the doctoral thesis. If any practice information shared in the process of the interview leads to a strong belief that a specific child may be at risk of significant harm (and this has not already been reported within the relevant safeguarding routes) then there will be a discussion about how this information might be reported to the relevant person or line manager within your organisation.

What will happen to the results of the research study? It is intended that the results of this research will be published and disseminated in a variety of forms, including in the form of a PhD thesis, a summary report, in journal articles, at conferences and other events. The results of the research may also be used to inform future related research. If you would like a copy of the summary report of the research or further information about any of the published materials available, you will be asked to provide an email contact address at the end of the interview, so this information can be sent directly to you, once it becomes available.

My contact details are: Elizabeth Munro PhD student, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) [contact details have been anonymised]

Appendix 3: Consent form

PhD Research Participant Consent form

Research Title: Making meaningful relationships with young children during initial assessments: practitioners' experiences and understandings

Name of Researcher: Liz Munro **Researcher's email address:** [contact details have been anonymised]

(Tick answers as appropriate)

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study.	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐
2. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions (via face to face, telephone or email contact).	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐
3. I agree to take part in the interview and to the collection of additional demographic and contextual information.	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐
4. I agree to the interview being digitally audio recorded.	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐
5. If answering no to question 4, I alternatively agree to the interview being recorded via written notes.	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐
6. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research any time (up to and including 7 days after the interview has taken place) without giving any reason.	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐
7. I consent to quotes from my interview being used in academic and educational publications.	**YES** ☐	NO ☐
8. I agree to take part in the above study.	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐

Participant:

Signature:

Date:

PhD Researcher taking consent: Liz Munro

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 4: Interview guide

PhD Interview guide

<u>Research title: Making meaningful relationships with young children during initial assessments: practitioners' experiences and understandings</u>

Please can you tell me about one of your own personal practice experiences of doing either a s47 investigation and any follow up assessment (also previously known as a core assessment under the 1989 Children Act as amended by s53 of the Children Act 2004) or undertaking a s17 assessment where you feel you managed to develop some kind of meaningful working relationship with a particular child or children within one particular family?

Ideally, I would like you to try and talk about your work with one particular family by which I mean if you can talk about your experiences of working with a particular child in as much detail as possible, including things like how each encounter with the child felt to you; what you saw, smelt, sensed, touched, heard around you etc. as well as what was said and what you did during each meeting (as well as what the child did or said).

I am particularly trying to get a sense of how you met with the child (and maybe also with their family) *for the first time* and then also for you to talk a bit further about any additional ongoing contact you had with the child after that first meeting with them.

My research is especially trying to explore *positive practice situations* where social workers feel they have been successful in achieving some kind of meaningful working relationship with a young child (between the ages of around three to seven years).

I am hoping through this research, to get some sense of what practitioners understand or perceive a meaningful working relationship with a young child to look like, or to be like, in relation to working with a child during the process of undertaking an initial assessment.

I would also be interested in hearing about your experiences more broadly, in terms of what you would describe as, or feel to be, the main features of developing a professional, meaningful working relationship with children.

<u>Additional prompt questions</u>

How did you personally experience…?

What was it like?

What did it feel like?

In what way?

Can you give me an example of what you mean?

Could you say more about that?

How did the experience affect you?

What changes do you associate with this experience?

What feelings were generated by the experience?

What emotions were you feeling?

What was the mood or atmosphere?

What thoughts stood out for you?

What bodily changes or states were you aware of at the time?

How did you use your voice?

What did you hear?

What did you see?

How did you experience the use of 'touch'?

What aspects of the experience really stand out in your mind? For example what were your immediate surroundings like?

How did you interact with the space around you (for example, were you still?...did you move?.. how did you use your body?)

How did your body feel?

How did things smell?

How did things sound?

What did you do?

What did you do next?

How did you experience the passing of time during this experience?

How did you experience a particular moment of the experience or the transition from one moment of significance, to another?

Closing questions

Do you feel you have shared all that you feel is relevant, in relation to the experience?

Is there anything else you would do like to add?

Do you have any questions you would like to ask me about the interview or about the research study?

Appendix 5: Contextual information sheet

PhD Research Participant demographic and contextual information

Research title: Making meaningful relationships with young children during initial assessments: practitioners' experiences and understandings

1. How old are you? (please circle or tick the relevant answer) 21-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60-69

2. What is your identified gender? Female

Male

Other

3. How many years have you been social work qualified? 0-2

3-4

5-7

8-9

10-12

13-15

16-20

21+

4. In total, how many years experience do you have of working in a children and families social work team environment?

0-2

3-4

5-7

8-9

10-12

13-15

16-20

21+

5. What kind of team structure do you currently work in (e.g. a duty, screening or initial assessment team, generic team, long term team etc?)

6. Approximately what percentage of your time in your current job is spent undertaking initial assessments (i.e. s17, s47 or 45 day assessments under the Children Act 1989 as amended by the Children Act 2004)?

Appendix 6: Notation system used to transcribe the data

Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2013) and Silverman (2011).

(.) = short pause

(pause) = longer pause

----- = word particularly emphasised

[= overlapping speech

.... = omitted text

( ) = explanatory text inserted by researcher to reference non-verbal interactions

[ ] = explanatory text inserted by researcher to clarify meaning or context

Example of initial style of transcription used

Participant: ...the introduction was probably only (pauses) five minutes really.

Researcher: Yes [so

Participant: [they were kin'a keen a[nd

Researcher: [yeah

Participant: they saw pens and paper and I had it obvious in a bag erm...It felt a little bit like(.) the social worker they had before hadn't been too creative but I didn't know that for sure [(.)

Researcher: [hmm

Example of later style of transcription used

Researcher: When you came into the house erm sorry did you say flat?

Participant: Yes it was a flat

Researcher: So was it a flat on the ground floor or

Participant: It was – it was erm just a one story flat but it was kind of it's not on the ground floor if you see what I mean...

Appendix 7: Pseudonyms of interviewees

Kate

Azeem

Sophie

Karen

Margaret

Ruth

Susan

John

Sheila

Helen