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**Critical Times: a critical realist approach to
understanding services for looked after children
and young people.**

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Summary

The PhD submission centres primarily on the book *Testing the Limits of Foster Care*¹, which reports on a piece of applied social work research, and the paper *Critical Times: a critical realist approach to understanding services for looked after children* which examines key theoretical issues relevant to the study. Two other book chapters 'Changing Perceptions of Children and Childhood'² and 'Risk and Opportunity in Leaving Care'³ are included as supplementary examples of the applicant's work. In common with *Testing the Limits of Foster Care*, these seek to understand aspects of child welfare practice in light of wider changes in society and social policy and so are consistent with a critical realist perspective.

The study reported in the book *Testing the Limits of Foster Care* was an evaluation of a foster care project set up to provide an alternative to secure accommodation (Community Alternative Placement Scheme)⁴. The research was concerned with how the scheme developed, the nature of the service and its capacity to help young people have good experiences and outcomes. Its purpose was to assess the potential and limitations of this form of care provision.

The book outlines the development of the service, and the needs, experiences and outcomes for the first twenty young people placed within the scheme. These are compared with similar young people placed in secure accommodation during the same period. In most respects outcomes were similar for both samples. However outcomes were not viewed as directly resulting from one particular placement, but rather influenced by a host of considerations relating to the young person's own

¹ Walker, M., Hill, M., Triseliotis, J. (2002). Testing the Limits of Foster Care :Fostering as an Alternative to Secure Accommodation. London, BAAF.

² Borland, M. (1999). 'Changing Perceptions of Children and Childhood' in The Companion to Foster Care. A. Wheal. Lyme Regis, Russell House Publishing: 8-16.

³ Walker, M. (2002). 'Risk, Opportunity and Leaving Care' in The Companion to Leaving Care. A. Wheal. Lyme Regis, Russell House Publishing.

⁴ Referred to throughout the paper as CAPS.

circumstances and nature of services offered. Foster care and secure accommodation offered young people a very different kind of experience, whilst access to other services such as education and support to independent living were equally important in determining how they fared.

Correspondingly, the nature and effectiveness of CAPS could be best understood as shaped and given meaning by certain aspects of the current social and policy climate. Of particular relevance was the predominance of risk considerations in wider society, on social policy generally and, specifically, on the operation of social work service provision. Risk has multiple meanings and has become a prominent concept in both academic and policy contexts. Foster care had not previously been examined from this perspective, though the implications for field social work have been widely discussed, for example by Parton⁵ and Jordan⁶.

A number of tensions emerged for families providing foster care for 'high risk' young people within a risk based social work system. First, tension arose from the different meanings of risk within family and social work service contexts. Whereas families were concerned with preventing immediate and practical dangers, social work services understood risk as a more abstract phenomenon which was managed through formalised guidance and procedures. Secondly, accommodating high levels of risk is valued within social work provision and was inherent in the project's remit, yet this poses a potential threat to the trust, safety and informality which characterise family life. A third issue was that access to and exit from the scheme was based on judgments about 'risky' behaviour, with an under-pinning assumption that young people would move on, once their behaviour no longer warranted secure accommodation. However most young

⁵ Parton, N. (1996). Social work, risk and the blaming system. Social Theory, Social Change and Social Work. N. Parton. London, Routledge.

⁶ Jordan, B. (2001). "Tough Love: Social Exclusion, Social Work and the Third Way." British Journal of Social Work 31(4): 527-546.

Jordan, B. (2004). "Emancipatory Social Work? Opportunity or Oxymoron." British Journal of Social Work 34(1): 5-19.

people were identified as needing a period of stability, an opportunity to establish meaningful relationships and a positive experience of family life. This implied potential conflict between risk and needs based approaches.

A theoretical framework was needed which would accommodate interactions across the social spectrum, from structural influences to the day to day experiences of carers and young people in placement. In addition, 'objective' data on outcomes had to be viewed from a perspective which also took account of meaning and process. As outlined in the paper *Critical Times: a critical realist approach to understanding services for looked after children*, Bhaskar's⁷ critical realist philosophy and Layder's⁸ methodological writing provided this.

Critical realism views social reality as multi-layered and densely packed, created through a myriad of interactions across social domains. Though deeply interconnected, structures and the actions of people constitute separate and distinctive social domains, which need to be understood both in their own terms and in light of the connections between them. Layder advocates a methodological approach which involves identifying key concepts, understanding their significance within and across domains and exploring the power relationships which underpin their operation. This method was used to demonstrate that, within CAPS, the concept of professionalism was key to reconciling the tensions between operating as a family and as a form of social work service provision, though not completely effective in harmonising these.

From a critical realist perspective, the key to coherently combining objectivist and subjectivist approaches was to understand the status of 'objective' findings and the nature of causality. In the evaluation of CAPS, outcome measures provided

⁷ Bhaskar, R. (1989). The Possibility of Naturalism. Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf.

⁸ Layder, D. (1998b). Sociological Practice Linking Theory and Social Research. London, Sage.

useful indications of how young people's lives had been affected by the experience of being placed with foster carers or in secure accommodation. Exploring what lay behind these findings involved examining the research process itself and the significance of each form of care in terms its location within the care system, access it allowed to key services such as education, young people's personal experience and wider social expectations. Causality was viewed in terms of interconnections across these dimensions, rather than in linear terms.

By drawing on critical realist insights, the evaluation of CAPS developed new understandings of foster care, whilst examination of relevant theoretical issues has shed light on the nature and potential of evaluative social work research in relation to services for looked after children and young people.

Theoretical Paper:

Critical Times: a critical realist approach to understanding services for looked after children

Introduction

This paper examines the theoretical underpinning of the published work which constitutes this Ph.D. submission. Three publications are presented and are drawn on to support the central thesis of the submission:

- 1) book : *Testing the Limits of Foster Care*¹
- 2) book chapter: 'Changing Perceptions of Children and Childhood'²
(Pages 8-16 in *The Companion to Foster Care*)
- 3) book chapter: 'Risk and Opportunity in Leaving Care'³
(Pages 7-17 in *The Companion to Leaving Care*)

The book *Testing the Limits of Foster Care* reports on the evaluation of a foster care project set up to provide an alternative to secure accommodation (Community Alternative Placement Scheme)⁴. This publication is central to the submission because it examined foster care from an original perspective. Whereas foster care research has previously focused on placements and agency practice, this study reported that a more comprehensive understanding could be reached, if the impact of the wider social and policy context was also brought into the frame. Particular consideration was given to the predominance of 'risk' considerations within current social work services and how this influenced both the nature of the foster care task and young people's access to services.

¹ Walker, M., Hill, M., Triseliotis, J. (2002) Testing the Limits of Foster Care :Fostering as an Alternative to Secure Accommodation. London, BAAF.

² Borland, M. (1999) 'Changing Perceptions of Children and Childhood' in The Companion to Foster Care. A. Wheal. Lyme Regis, Russell House Publishing: 8-16

³ Walker, M. (2002) 'Risk, Opportunity and Leaving Care' in The Companion to Leaving Care. A. Wheal. Lyme Regis, Russell House Publishing.

⁴ Referred to throughout the paper as CAPS.

The chapter *Risk and Opportunity in Leaving Care* examines the experiences of young people leaving care, acknowledging that in making the transition to adulthood, they have much in common with their peers, but also some distinctive requirements. This chapter does not have an exclusive focus on foster care, but, in common with *Testing the Limits of Foster Care*, draws on an analysis of the 'risk society' and associated critiques of neo-liberal social policies.

*Changing Perceptions of Children and Childhood*⁵ was written for a book on foster care. As with the other two publications, it draws attention to the impact of wider social and policy changes on child welfare practice. The main focus is on the 'new' sociology of childhood and children's rights. Though the original chapter did not refer to the predominance of 'risk' considerations, this was included in an updated version for a second edition currently in press. A typed copy of the addition to the chapter has been included in this portfolio.

These three texts have been selected from the applicant's publications because their common theme, to understand aspects of child welfare practice in light of wider changes in society and social policy, corresponds to the new perspective on foster care which emerged from the evaluation of CAPS.

⁵ Co-authors' confirmation of the applicant's contribution to the book is included in the submission.

These new insights into foster care derived from a critical realist analysis, in particular drawing on the work of Derek Layder (Layder 1997). His conceptualisation of the social world in terms of distinct but interconnected domains constitutes a useful framework within which to explore the complex dynamics through which child welfare services are shaped and impact on children and young people's lives. It also has implications for how social work research is carried out and the kind of knowledge which can be expected to be derived from it.

This theoretical outlook is relevant to all three of the texts included in the portfolio, but the thinking was developed in relation to the study reported in *Testing the Limits of Foster Care*. For that reason, the two main sections of this paper refer only to the evaluation of CAPS. The first considers the methodological challenges it presented and proposes a critical realist approach as a means of understanding and managing them. More detailed consideration of critical realist principles and their application to the analysis of the CAPS research is offered in section two. The primary focus is on three key study findings:

- certain features of family life make it difficult for families to accommodate high levels of risk;
- tensions between a risk based and welfare based ethos permeated the work of the scheme;
- key aspects of the current social and policy climate, notably the predominance of risk considerations, influenced the nature, operation and effectiveness of the scheme.

Drawing on all three published texts, the portfolio's central claim is that the nature, operation and impact of social work services for accommodated children can best be understood as resulting from complex interactions across key aspects of the social and policy context, current provision for looked after children and the personal experiences and actions of carers, young people and social work staff. Though our understanding of these interconnections will always be incomplete, shedding light on them becomes a legitimate, even key, role for social work research. Further consideration is given to the implications of this position in the conclusion to this paper.

Section One : The Quest for Theoretical Coherence

The Challenges

It is relatively unusual for a government funded piece of social work research to give explicit consideration to the social theory which underpins it. Yet from the start the CAPS evaluation raised a number of thought provoking questions about the nature of the project itself, the scope of the research task, appropriate types of methods and the kinds of knowledge which the research would be able to yield. Corresponding questions were being debated in the social work literature, so the quest for theoretical coherence was prompted simultaneously by the demands of this study and more general theoretical discussion. Though separate in some respects, questions about a) the nature of CAPS as a social phenomenon and b) the kinds of knowledge that might be generated from its evaluation, were also interlinked. Each issue is therefore considered separately before considering the relationship between them.

The Nature of CAPS

From the start it was clear that CAPS was an interesting social phenomenon. Its creation involved combining two social institutions in new ways: the family and social work service provision. Yet the purpose of the scheme was intensely personal and practical, namely to offer family care to young people who might otherwise be placed in secure accommodation ⁶(*TLFC pages 1-2; 10-11*). CAPS would therefore operate across a

⁶ Throughout the paper, relevant pages in the book *Testing the Limits of Foster Care* are identified in the format (*TLFC, followed by page numbers*).

number of dimensions which broadly corresponded to the sites to be examined in the evaluation. These are summarised in Table 1:

Table 1: Key Dimensions of CAPS

Social Dimension	Relevant Sites	Related matters of interest to the research	Research Methods
Personal	<p>lives of the carer families;</p> <p>placements;</p> <p>young people’s lives (before, during and after CAPS placement)</p>	<p>experiences, views and actions of young people and carer family;</p> <p>impact of placements on young people’s lives</p>	<p>semi-structured interviews at three points in time with 20 young people , carers, CAPS senior practitioners and local authority social workers.</p> <p>administration of standard measures: Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; Rosenberg Self-Esteem Measure</p> <p>(A broadly similar set of data was obtained in relation to 20 young people placed in secure accommodation.)</p>
Organisation of CAPS	<p>development and management of the scheme</p>	<p>recruiting and supporting carers;</p> <p>referring and placing young people;</p> <p>defining the foster care task and roles of key staff.</p>	<p>interviews with the project manager and other NCH senior staff;</p> <p>interviews with carers, senior practitioners;</p> <p>two surveys of referrals to and placements within the scheme</p>
Wider Structures and Systems	<p>child welfare system;</p> <p>legislation;</p> <p>policy;</p> <p>current ethos and arrangements for service provision.</p>	<p>operating within relevant legislation and policies;</p> <p>negotiations with other agencies;</p> <p>project’s role in relation to other service provision.</p>	<p>interviews with key stakeholders, including local authority service managers;</p> <p>surveys of referrals and placements;</p> <p>analysis of relevant legislation, policy and literature.</p>

From an early stage, the research team acknowledged that each of these dimensions would be influential in shaping the nature and effectiveness of the scheme. Structural and organisational matters would influence what happened in placements, whilst the attitudes and actions of carers, staff and young people would play an important role in determining the nature of the project's work. Underpinning many of the anticipated issues was the need to negotiate safe and sustainable arrangements for a high risk client group to be cared for within a family home. Thus, in order to understand how CAPS operated and its capacity to meet its stated aims, the research would need to shed light not only on separate dimensions of the scheme, but on interactions across them (*TLFC 12-14*). Questions of the relative importance of structure and agency were evidently key. Differing perspectives on the nature and operation of 'risk' also had to be incorporated. These are considered in detail later in this paper and in *TLFC* at pages 12-25.

Nature of knowledge to be developed

The foregoing perspective on CAPS implies that understanding of process, particularly in relation to the meaning and operation of risk, would be key to shedding light on the extent to which foster care could and should be further developed as an alternative to secure accommodation. Yet the primary aim of the research was to assess outcomes for young people placed within the scheme and compare these with similar young people placed in secure accommodation at around the same time (*TFLC 26-28*). The focus on outcomes was consistent with the study's central government funders' expectation that the research would, as far as possible, develop objective means of quantifying the success and cost effectiveness of CAPS placements.

In practice, and in common with much social work research (e.g. Stein and Carey 1986; Bullock 1993; Harker et al. 2004), the study sought to combine measurement of outcomes *and* understanding of the processes which underpinned them. However, in relation to CAPS, this combination was not straightforward because measuring success through comparing outcomes implied a linear relationship between service input and outcomes and that these could both be understood through quantifiable, objective measures. In contrast, a *focus on understanding processes* implied that the relationship between service delivery and outcomes would be more complex and that each could only be understood in terms of their *meaning* to key participants. This meant that a theoretical framework was needed which would coherently accommodate the objectivist and subjectivist assumptions which the two approaches implied.

Perspectives on Social Work Research

The distinction between positivist/objectivist and interactive/subjectivist paradigms is well established in social science and evaluative research (e.g. May 1996). Trinder (Trinder 1996) reviewed current social work research in terms of these distinctions and argued that, since, elements of both were often unthinkingly combined, many studies lacked theoretical coherence. As a result, she argued, social work research findings were seldom sufficiently robust either to allow new insights and perspectives to emerge or to challenge accepted policy and practice.

The main thrust of Trinder's article was that government funded social work research is a highly political activity, in the sense that it pervasively defines the role of social work by producing the kind of knowledge those in power expect social workers to have. She argued that the present preference for what she termed 'pragmatic' research corresponded to an expectation that social workers be competent technicians, able to administer surface solutions, rather than professionals with a sufficient understanding and skill to appreciate and address underlying causes of personal and social problems.

According to Trinder, the weakness of social work research derived in part from a too narrow focus on describing services and assessing outcomes, rather than taking into account the impact of wider context and structural factors. The focus was primarily on assessing service efficiency, rather than exploring more fundamental questions about how services came to be as they were or whether they should be changed. It was this narrow focus, she argued, which allowed the theoretical incoherence at the heart of much social work research to go unheeded. Questions of structure and agency or how the social world could be known were generally ignored.

Similar criticisms were made by Parton in relation to the Department of Health's child protection research programme published in 1995 (Parton 1996). His central point was that the series of studies did not address more searching questions about how certain situations came to be viewed in terms of child protection or how social workers made sense of their work. In particular, he argued that the pervasive influence of risk considerations within the child welfare system were ignored. As a result, subsequent

policies which encouraged social workers to view children as ‘in need’ rather than ‘at risk’, failed to recognise that this would only be feasible following more fundamental change in the values and priorities of the system. He further argued that there was a degree of inconsistency in how child abuse was conceptualised, in that, though this was for the most part understood as a socially constructed phenomenon, some extreme forms were viewed as inherently abusive.

Critical realism was adopted as a useful perspective within which to address these issues and their relevance to the CAPS evaluation. Bhaskar’s writing provided insights into the nature of social phenomena and how they might be understood, whilst Layder’s work also offered a means of translating this into a practical methodology for applied research (Layder 1981; Bhaskar 1989; Layder 1998a; Layder 1998b).

It should be pointed out that the CAPS evaluation was not set up with a critical realist approach in mind, nor was Layder’s method applied in full. Instead relevant theoretical insights, together with key elements of Layder’s practical method, proved useful in understanding connections between clusters of findings which emerged as the study progressed. Layder specifically advocates that his ‘adaptive theory’ should be used in this incremental way within applied research (Layder 1998b). For Layder, theoretical development involves an ongoing process of testing data in light of theory and reviewing theory in light of data. This process does not end with the publication of a text, so Layder would welcome that the process of writing this paper prompted further review of some of the findings presented in *Testing the Limits of Foster Care*.

Layder's approach is somewhat different from the focus on realist evaluation, as developed, notably by Kazi (Kazi 2003). This focuses on increasing understanding of what contributes to service effectiveness, whereas the analysis presented here is primarily concerned with understanding the nature of the service itself. Initially the CAPS study sought to apply Kazi's 'single case evaluation' approach to assessment of outcomes (Kazi 1996), but, because placements were essentially concerned with demonstrating acceptance and normalising young people's experience, the repeated use of systematic measures by carers proved inappropriate.

The questions to be considered in this paper emerged from both the CAPS research and the wider literature. These are:

- How might the relationship between structure and agency be conceptualised and explored ?
- What kind of knowledge can be gained from government funded social work research?
- Can subjectivist and realist/objectivist perspectives be coherently combined?

In section two, each of the three above questions is considered in light of critical realist thinking. The second and third questions are dealt with briefly, with more attention being devoted to the first.

Section two: Understanding CAPS through Critical Realist Insights

How might the relationship between structure and agency be conceptualised and explored?

Conceptualising structure and agency

Discussion of the role of structure and agency has been core to much academic thinking about the nature of the social world, with several theorists setting out to bridge the dichotomy between the main schools of thought (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977 ; Giddens, 1984).

A distinctive perspective on questions of agency and structure is central to the critical realist approach. In the *Possibility of Naturalism* (Bhaskar 1989) Bhaskar makes the case that societies and people, though inextricably linked, exist and need to be understood separately. Whilst he accepts that '*the material presence of society = persons and the (material) results of their actions*' (Bhaskar 1989) page 37, he rejects the notion that society is no more than the sum of people's actions. Social structures exist prior to and independent of the actions of people, even though they can have no power or effect, except through social actors. The social world is multi-layered, consisting of structures, the actions of people and the myriad of interactions through which these two separate domains are pervasively interlinked.

Bhaskar argues that, from this perspective, debates over the relative importance of agency and structure are no longer relevant. Both structuralist and humanist approaches make the mistake of reductionism, asserting that the social consists *either* in structures or the agency of social actors. Layder (Layder 1981) contends that this reductionism also

applies to some extent to theorists such as Bourdieu and Giddens who claim to have resolved the agency/structure dichotomy, since Bourdieu's concept of habitus emphasises the inherent influence of social structures on behaviour (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1987), whilst Giddens' structuration theory focuses primarily on the ways in which structures are produced and reproduced in the process of social interaction, failing to take account of structures' prior existence (Giddens 1976; Giddens 1984). By acknowledging the separate existence of agency and structures, that each needs to be understood as inherently different from the other and that the ways in which they connect are important, critical realism claims to offer a way of more faithfully representing the nature and complexity of the social world.

The notion of 'emergentism' (Layder 1998) is crucial to critical realist understanding of the nature of structures and ways in which structures and agency interconnect. Structures are viewed as having 'emergent' features which exist independently, but only come into operation in interaction with other social forces. Thus social structures and systems have inherent 'tendencies' to impact in certain ways, but their actual influence will depend on how other aspects of the social world respond to and shape their potential power. This means that power relationships and meaning are central to understanding the nature and operation of social phenomena. However because social structures have certain inherent features, social phenomena cannot be understood only in terms of how they are known and experienced by individuals. Critical realism rejects the relativism this subjectivist stance implies. Bhaskar's view is that social reality exists on three levels:

- 1) empirical, i.e. experienced events; 2) actual i.e. all events whether experienced or not;
- 3) causal i.e. underpinning mechanisms which generate events (Bhaskar, 1989).

The critical realist perspective corresponded broadly with the view of CAPS as being formed within certain pre-existing social legislative and policy structures, yet created through the interactions among and between project staff and carers, both through the scheme's formal policies and in how these were implemented in practice. Drawing on critical realist principles, Layder's *Theory of Social Domains* (Layder, 1994; Layder 1998a) offered a useful framework within which to conceptualise the operation of CAPS. His *Adaptive Theory and New Rules of Sociological Method* (Layder 1998b) also offer a practical means of applying critical realist insights to applied research.

Exploring structure and agency in relation to CAPS

Though building on longstanding developments in foster care, CAPS was breaking new ground, notably by increasing the level of risk to be accommodated and enhancing the professional status of the carers. If families were to act as an alternative to secure accommodation, they had to be able to accommodate fairly high levels of risk, whilst still retaining the essential features of family life. The main risks to the carer family ranged from the obvious and concrete to the pervasive and abstract. They were: 1) physical harm caused by the young person to him/herself or other people; 2) false allegations made against a member or friend of the carer family, potentially resulting in loss of reputation and trust; 3) informality and trust associated with family life are undermined as a result of steps taken to manage risk, e.g. locks on doors (TLFC 70-75).

The challenge for carers was not simply to accommodate these risks, but to do it in ways consistent with being a strong family *and* a form of social work service. This is potentially difficult, because ‘risk’ is constituted differently and has different significance within each of these settings. (This point is expanded on pages 16 and 20).

For CAPS the challenge was to create a new kind of ‘professional carer family’ which could reconcile these different dimensions. Later in this section a specific example of this process is given. First the nature of ‘the family’ is considered.

The Nature of ‘the family’

Though they may disagree about the nature of the processes that sustain ‘the family’, most social theorists relevant to this study agree that families have certain enduring characteristics. There is a strong expectation that relationships within families should be enduring, informal and based on trust and care for fellow family members. Families are expected to be a ‘safe haven’ and to support the wider community by upholding its values and producing good citizens, despite evidence that many families do not conform to this ideal. These ideals were evident in social workers’ expectations of CAPS placements (TLFC 100-105, 120), what young people valued in carers (TLFC 138-142) and the ways in which carers viewed their work (TLFC 124-126).

In terms of critical realist thinking, the ‘*historically formed standing conditions*’ (Layder 1998 page 88) which sustain ‘the family’ exist independent of the actions of individual family members. Though they are accorded their power through the practice of family

life, these practices themselves are shaped by deeply embedded notions about the meaning and purpose of family life. Any change would therefore result from major structural changes to the 'historically formed standing conditions' in which family life takes place, not individual behaviour alone (Bhaskar 1989 ; Layder 1998b). According to Beck, globalisation and the move from a wealth to a risk based society have been key influences on people's behaviour, resulting in more diverse forms of family life (Beck 1992). Giddens acknowledges that despite changes in form, enduring expectations of the family remain powerful (Giddens 1984; Giddens 1991). Foucauldian analyses which emphasise the power of discourse emphasise the family's critical role in governmentality, that is the myriad of structures, organisations and activities which define what is 'good' and 'normal' in society (Rose 1989; Dean 1999; Parton, Wattam et al. 1997) (*TLFC*, 20). Thus families are part of the social fabric and their key features are not easily changed.

Creating a CAPS carer family

According to Layder's framework (Layder 1998b) the creation of a CAPS carer family would involve processes whereby certain inherent features of 'the family' and 'social work service provision' would be combined, through the linking activities of CAPS as an organisation and the behaviour of CAPS carers and staff in planning and managing placements. Layder suggests that these processes can best be understood by identifying key concepts which apply across all three domains, in particular linking concepts, and exploring the power relations inherent in their operation.

Families and social work service provision are very different in terms of their form, purpose and task. Within CAPS a key issue was the differing meanings of risk. While voluntarily accommodating increased risk potentially undermines 'the family', the capacity to manage risk is highly valued within current social work services (Parton 1996; Culpitt, 1999); *TLFC 18-25*.

The notion of professionalism was an important linking concept, in that this implied that, with skilled assessment, matching and risk management strategies, 'professionalised' families could remain safe and autonomous, whilst also accommodating quite high levels of risk (*TLFC 66-75*). The centrality of this concept was evident from the ways in which the notion of professionalism was used and redefined in debates about the level of risk which families could or should accommodate.

Different uses of 'professionalism' were evident in the 'matching' process. In principle and in practice carers were accorded considerable say over which young people were placed with them. This respected their authority and autonomy in their own home, whilst also emphasising that knowing their own family's preferences and capacities was part of their professional skill. However carers' ability to manage increased risk was also viewed as part of their professional development, thus according project management a say in the level of risk a family could manage. In these circumstances, carer autonomy might be viewed as moderated. In some instances, when carers resisted taking a young person they thought would present too high a level of risk, some had been advised that they were expected to do so, because they were paid a 'professional fee' (*TLFC 45-46*,

51-2, 66-70). In this context, professionalism was being defined in terms of willingness to manage risk in exchange for higher rewards. This implied that carers gave up some of their rights to autonomy when agreeing to work for the scheme.

That the concept of professionalism could be accorded these different meanings of competence and employment status highlighted its usefulness as a linking concept. However, operating at both a practical and conceptual level, carers came to challenge the ideas that a) professional practice offered adequate protection and b) their own value should be defined by their capacity to manage risk.

Over time, carers became aware that they or colleagues were exposed to different kinds of harmful experiences, so often their faith in professional assessment and safe caring practices diminished, making carers more aware of the need to protect themselves (*TLFC* 70-74).

More fundamentally, some carers came to question the idea that the capacity to manage risk *should* be so highly valued within a foster family. There was a growing feeling that young people who could benefit most from placements should be given priority, not those at risk of secure accommodation. Correspondingly some argued that if over intrusive safe caring regimes had to be introduced, (e.g. no other children visiting the family home, own children leaving the family home at times of crisis), then the placements would no longer offer a good experience of family life. Since foster care was valued by social workers for its unique capacity to offer this, its effectiveness as a social work service would also be

reduced. Some carers also argued that looking after very hurt young people in a family home required as much skill as managing risk and should be equally valued. These views implied that foster care should be needs rather than risk focused (*TLFC 80, 207-9*).

Carers had considerable say in which young people were placed with them, so these ideas influenced which young people found a placement with CAPS. Thus, though relatively lacking in organisational power, carers were able to draw on strong social expectations of family autonomy and safety to shape this new service. However CAPS had come into being because local authorities were willing to pay higher fees for placements of 'high risk' cases, reflecting the prevailing ethos within social work services. The requirements and economic power of local authorities were also very influential in shaping CAPS. The role of CAPS management and staff was to reconcile these competing forces and associated values and concepts. It proved an on-going tension.

How has this analysis strengthened the findings?

According to Layder, demonstrating links between structural tensions and experiences at an organisational and practical level allows findings to move from being descriptive to explanatory. In relation to the CAPS evaluation, this meant that the constant debate about the appropriate level of risk to be managed could be understood as resulting from inherent differences between families and current social work services. Furthermore, because certain structural features apply across society, the findings may be more generalisable than would otherwise have been the case (Layder 1998). This analysis thus provides grounds for arguing that the tensions described here are likely to be present in

any scheme within the UK which sets out to provide the distinctive benefits of family based care to a high risk group of young people, though, in other circumstances, they may be expressed in different ways. However these issues may not arise in other contexts or countries. For example it is to be expected that risk would operate differently within foster care in countries such as Belgium or France, which have retained a stronger welfare ethos in children's services and where, at least in the initial stages, child protection concerns can be explored through problem-solving and the exercise of professional judgment, rather than the adversarial and proceduralised approach which characterises the UK child-protection system (Cooper and Hetherington, 1999; Hill et al. 2003). Inter-country differences in how fostering is organised and its role in relation to other forms of care would also be influential (Colton and Williams, 1997).

In understanding social reality as multi-layered and densely packed, critical realism also emphasises the different nature of social domains. It is this acknowledgement of difference which also allows for the complexity and variety of the social world to be more fully understood and for realist and subjectivist perspectives to be coherently accommodated.

Can realist/objective and interpretivist/subjective perspectives be coherently combined?

In this final section, the objectivist/subjectivist dilemma is illustrated by considering different perspectives on risk, first in general terms, then as applied within CAPS and its evaluation. Thereafter, brief consideration is given to the combination of objective and subjective perspectives in assessing outcomes.

Different Nature of Risk and Distinctive Characteristics of Different Domains

According to Lupton (Lupton 1999) the nature of risk can be understood in three ways:

- as a real hazard which can be objectively known and measured (realist perspective) ;
- as a real hazard, which can only be known and understood in terms of the meaning accorded in a particular social context (weak constructionist perspective);
- as not real, but the product of historically, socially and politically contingent ways of thinking (strong constructionist perspective).

Each of these three perspectives operated within CAPS. Carers' requests for an objectively agreed level of acceptable risk implied that objective measurement was possible, whilst in practice most acknowledged that the risk any young person presented and what carers were willing to tolerate, depended on a range of environmental and attitudinal considerations (*TLFC 70-2*). However, within the social work system, the term 'risk' was also used in a more abstract sense, consistent with a strong constructionist approach. The response to a particular situation would depend on how the risk was defined, for example as constituting a 'child protection' concern, not simply the nature of the dangers faced (*TLFC 75, 205-7*). In addition 'risk' was a means of allocating priority to resources and as such permeated several aspects of the scheme (*TLFC 12-25,42-43, 199-201, 203-209*)

The critical realist position is that the nature and operation of risk will necessarily differ across different social domains and contexts. CAPS carers were living in the intensely practical and personal setting of a family home, where the priority was to prevent immediate and real harm, yet they were required to adhere to formal procedures which corresponded to the wider concerns of social services. In certain situations, for example when unable to physically prevent a child from running away and when confronted with false allegations, some carers felt these procedures prevented them from acting as responsible parents would have done and could also leave them feeling exposed (*TLFC* 205-7).

Assessing Outcomes

Earlier in the paper questions were raised about the potential incoherence of assessing outcomes by objective measures, whilst also acknowledging the inherent importance of meaning. From a critical realist perspective, the key to justifying this was to understand the status of so called 'objective' findings and the nature of causality.

Outcome measures used in CAPS ranged from those which reflected an element of objective reality in the young people's lives at a certain point in time, for example where they were living and whether they were in education or employment, to much more subjective assessments of progress. Because of small sample size and limitations on matching, these had little predictive value in themselves. They did, however, provide useful indications of how young people's lives had been affected by the experience of being placed with CAPS or in secure accommodation and were valuable in challenging

initial expectations that foster care would necessarily produce better outcomes (*TLFC 122-3, 129-30, 143-86*).

Exploring explanations for these findings involved examining the research process itself, the meanings attached to each form of care in terms of social expectations, young people's personal experience, its location within the care system and access it provided to key services such as education. Causality was viewed in terms of interconnections across these dimensions, rather than as a direct result of placement in foster care or secure accommodation. (*TLFC 122-3, 129-30, 143-86*).

Two further characteristics of the critical realist approach were particularly applicable to this study. First, Bhaskar argues that critical realist research is potentially emancipatory, since it involves looking beneath the surface to understand the social mechanisms which result in needs not being met (Collier, 1994). In the CAPS study, a certain discrepancy was noted between the identified needs of many young people for stability and a preference within the current UK care system for short term placements (*TLFC 24 ,40, 200-1*). The second strength relates to its theoretical pluralism. Critical realism seeks to build on rather than replace existing knowledge, whilst also allowing different aspects of social reality to be understood in its own terms. Within the CAPS study, theories of attachment and human development (e.g. Howe et al. 1999) were taken into account alongside Beck's and others' sociological analysis of current society (e.g. Beck, 1992; Jenks, 1996). It has been argued that this breadth of scope added considerably to understanding the potential of this kind of scheme.

Conclusion

Central to this submission is the claim that services for looked after children are best understood as complex social phenomena, concerned with the very practical business of caring for children, but whose operation and effectiveness are also deeply influenced by trends in both wider society and how social work services are delivered. The two chapters, *Changing Perceptions of Children and Childhood* and *Risk, Opportunity and Leaving Care* drew on a range of literature to highlight some of the ways in which developments in wider society and service provision had a bearing on foster care practice and how a young person leaving care might be expected to fare. Both implied that a more comprehensive understanding of what looking after children entails would be gained by looking beyond and below the practicalities of service provision and measurable outcomes.

This kind of deeper understanding was sought within the evaluation of CAPS and reported in *Testing the Limits of Foster Care*. A critical realist perspective proved useful in moving towards this because it offered a suitably complex conceptualisation of foster care as a social phenomenon and could accommodate the different kinds of knowledge which contribute to understanding this form of care, from analysis of social policy to theories of what children and young people need in order to thrive. Methodologically, Layder's work offered a means of using this theoretical framework within applied research.

This analysis has a number of implications for how evaluative research in child welfare is conducted, and the kind of knowledge it is able to develop. Those outlined here draw on Layder's approach, together with the author's experience of using critical realist insights in the analysis of the CAPS evaluation and in subsequent evaluative studies. Rather than proposing an 'ideal' critical realist model, ways of working are suggested which could be feasible within the kind of evaluative studies which are commonly commissioned within the UK.

First it is proposed that the research should not simply describe the service being evaluated in terms used by policy makers and service providers, but should look more critically at how this service is constituted, its meanings for stakeholders and the functions it serves for service users, the agency and society. This kind of understanding can be developed in a number of ways. First, the literature read to inform the study should encompass research and theoretical analysis relevant to personal, organisational and social domains and so be broader in scope than would usually be the case. In addition, the literature would be read with a view to forming preliminary hypotheses about the underlying functions this service might be expected to serve and implications for key stakeholders. These would be based on writing about practice, theoretical analyses and previous research, and would be tested within the evaluation itself.

An example from the author's recent practice was to understand advocacy services for young people as challenging existing adult/ child power relationships, so likely to be viewed by professionals with some ambivalence. This perspective suggested certain

explanations when the evaluation identified a discrepancy between strong expressions of support for the advocacy service, yet few referrals. These were then checked out in the course of the study, drawing on data relating to the experience of the advocacy service and the specific organisational context.

This approach has the potential to produce depth rather than surface understanding. Its distinguishing characteristic is to take into account the ways in which wider systems and structures influence the nature and effectiveness of services. Furthermore, it has the potential to highlight that the explanations or descriptions respondents give, while not untruthful, represent only one perspective. Looked at through another lens, quite different conclusions might be reached about the nature, potential or limitations of a particular service and to what these might be attributed.

A range of perspectives can be accommodated within Layder's approach because social reality is viewed as consisting of different social domains which can be investigated and known in different ways. Different kinds of data are considered both separately and together in order to reach more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the matters being investigated. This pluralist approach has some benefits in evaluations of child welfare services which, in line with the current emphasis on 'what works?', are usually expected to produce evidence of quantifiable change as a result of a particular service being offered, yet, to be practice valid, have to also reflect the complex processes entailed in delivering and receiving services. Both can be accommodated by valuing quantitative measures as important indicators of a service's effectiveness, but only accepting them as

valid if they can also be explained through understandings of *how* surface outcomes were reached. Possible explanations would be sought on the basis of theoretical understanding and empirical data and would encompass matters relating to the child or young person, care or service offered, relevant aspects of the social and policy context and connections across all three. Testing out possible explanations would form part of the research process, with subsequent researchers free to do the same, thus further strengthening the findings.

The main advantage of this approach is that it seeks to do justice to the complexities of children's lives, the services being evaluated and the evaluation process itself. Its aim is to develop understanding of the elements of services and wider systems which enhance or detract from children's life chances. It also forges stronger links between theoretical understanding, empirical data and practice. It might be suggested that embracing complexity obscures clear messages about how services can be made most effective within the present system. This paper has argued, however, that this kind of multi-faceted social work research and practice *should* identify how the system itself might be changed, so that it 'works' for children and young people looked after away from home.

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¹Updating preface to the chapter:

**‘Changing Perceptions of Children
and Childhood’**

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Changing Perceptions of Children and Childhood :

Moirira Walker

The Update – introduction

Updating this chapter after five years provided an opportunity to think about whether the intervening period had seen significant changes in perceptions of children or practice. Overall the essential issues are unchanged, so on the whole the chapter remains in its original form. However, since it was written, the author and colleagues have completed an evaluation of a specialist foster care scheme (Walker et al.2002). This study highlighted a range of ways in which risk considerations shaped perceptions of children and young people, operated in foster care and were relevant to some of the dilemmas highlighted in the original chapter. In light of this, the updated chapter is prefaced by a brief summary of some of the theoretical ideas and findings from this research. The intention is to offer a slightly different lens through which to view the points made in the original chapter, primarily by taking account of the ways in which notions of risk pervade contemporary life, social policy and the nature of social work service provision.

The original chapter argued that children's lives and attitudes to children had changed markedly in the last decades of the 20th century. Concepts of children's rights, participation and empowerment were viewed as central to these changes. In addition sociological and historical analyses had revealed that expectations of children and childhood were not predetermined, but rather 'constructed' in ways which corresponded

to specific social and cultural environments. Furthermore, children themselves actively shaped and gave meaning to their lives. It was therefore important that adults seeking to understand children or act in their best interests should take time to find out what mattered to them and why. Whilst a children's rights ethos underpins current legislation and policy, some tensions were acknowledged about how this should be implemented. For example, it is widely held that outcomes for looked after children will be improved by standardising assessment and monitoring systems, as with the Assessment and Action Records. However some commentators have argued that this reduces the scope for focussing on what matters to individual children, while also underplaying the pervasively undermining effects of poverty and disadvantage in the lives of looked after children. A somewhat different dilemma was that an appropriate balance between protecting children and respecting their right to self-determination had to be constantly negotiated by foster carers and other responsible adults.

The Update- childhood and risk

The update begins by considering how children's lives and 'childhood' come to be constructed in certain ways in present day society. One influential writer on childhood, Jenks (1996) argues that this is best understood in light of sociological analyses of the ways in which preoccupation with risk pervades all aspects of personal and social life. Beck (1992) coined the term 'risk society', by which he means that risk considerations now shape social structures, institutions and the lives of individual people. Increasingly, he argues, social life and the business of government is concerned with risk rather than

wealth distribution. This change is attributed not only to increasing levels of risk, but to the nature of risks themselves. In contrast with previous times, many of today's risks are invisible, beyond the control of individuals and potentially catastrophic in their effects (e.g. pollution, contaminated food and nuclear accidents). Mostly they are the unintended consequences of globalisation and scientific progress, so that faith in science has been eroded, while scientists are increasingly preoccupied with trying to limit the risks they have created. Correspondingly, social sciences have failed to cure social ills, while social services and other experts have been found wanting in the care and protection they offer children and other vulnerable groups. With a loss of faith in professionals, systems of audit and quality assurance have replaced reliance on professional judgement.

Beck demonstrates ways in which this 'risk society' is associated with a break down of the social structures which protected people from risk in the past. Arrangements for family life are increasingly diverse, patterns of working life vary and people are increasingly expected to protect themselves and their families from risk, rather than relying on the institutions of the welfare state. Individuals, he argues, now have to create their own pathways through life. Following tradition or relying on family and community support is no longer an option. On the positive side this offers the possibility of more freedom and choice. However life is also more lonely and precarious, especially for individuals who have to contend with a higher than average level of risk. Subsequent research (e.g. Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) has demonstrated that opportunities for social mobility remain limited for young people in disadvantaged circumstances. Yet there is apparently a wide range of education and work options on offer, so individuals tend to be

blamed, and to blame themselves, when they do not succeed. Personal and social insecurity thus characterises present day living.

In light of Beck's analysis, Jenks (1996) takes the view that children come to represent both the guardians of the future and a nostalgic longing for a more reassuring and stable past. He considers that notions of children's rights and more investment in children are consistent with an unacknowledged recognition that adults have become reliant on children for a sense of purpose and security. The flip side is that many children are overprotected and under pressure to succeed, while those who threaten the future, for example by behaving badly, are feared and stigmatised.

Consistent with Jenks' analysis, Goldson (Goldson, 2002) draws attention to an increasing distinction in current social policy between 'children in need' and 'children who offend'. The present government's focus on ending child poverty and associated strategies to improve the education, health and well-being of those living in low-income areas attest to a high level of investment in children. However at the same time, services for children and young people who offend have been reorganised in such a way as to focus more narrowly on offending, rather than promoting welfare. Thus, whilst most children are considered worthy of investment to improve their life chances, some children come to be defined primarily as a risk, in which case resources are directed primarily at controlling them.

The Update- children, risk and foster care

These theoretical perspectives emerged as relevant to foster care in the work of specialist scheme evaluated by the author and colleagues (Walker et al. 2002). The Community Alternative Placement Scheme (CAPS) was set up by NCH Action for Children (Scotland) in the late nineties. Its remit was to provide family placements as an alternative to secure accommodation for young people aged 12 to 16. Within the scheme, most young people were defined as both a 'risk' and 'in need', so the two concepts operated, somewhat uneasily, in tandem.

In Scotland, between 200 and 250 young people are admitted to secure accommodation each year, with about 90 in placement at any one time. A majority are boys, but about a quarter are girls. Girls are much more likely to be admitted for welfare reasons, rather than for offending. Approximately two thirds of young people in secure accommodation are placed there on the authority of a Children's Panel, because they are repeatedly running away and/or present a risk to themselves or other people. The remaining third are subject to a court order, either on remand or serving a sentence for a serious crime. The CAPS scheme catered only for young people placed by the Children's Panel. Building on best practice in specialist foster care, core elements of the new service were to be :

- carer payments equivalent to a reasonable salary
- intensive support to carers, available 24-hours
- specialist training
- automatic entitlement to respite care (8 weeks per year)

- individualised programmes
- educational support
- time-limited placements .

The evaluation included several dimensions:

- a *quasi-experimental* comparison of experiences and outcomes for young people placed within the scheme with a similar group of young people admitted to secure accommodation;
- qualitative exploration of the development of the scheme and the nature of the fostering task
- evaluation of some aspects of cost effectiveness.

Criteria for admission to the scheme were that the young person was likely to be placed in secure accommodation, usually because he or she presented a risk to self or others. The original idea was that placements would be time-limited and would focus primarily on addressing behaviours which might warrant admission to secure provision. Of course, young people's needs would be addressed, but the primary aim was to enable young people to move home or into a less specialised placement within a relatively short period. In practice this approach did not always correspond with young people's needs. Young people themselves said foster care worked best for them if they felt accepted, rather than 'worked with', while carers wanted the chance to make a difference to young people's lives, not simply offer a time-limited alternative to secure accommodation. Social workers said most young people needed stability and experience of reliable

relationships, viewing family placement as having the potential to offer this. To some extent the scheme came to accommodate these needs and expectations, so that a holistic approach was adopted and several of the most successful placements lasted over two years.

This shift towards this more needs-led approach was not unproblematic. In debates with local authorities about how long placements should last and what resources should be made available, two competing views of young people and local authority responsibilities were evident: the 'child in need' whose welfare the local authority has a duty to promote, and the troublesome child to be controlled and brought back into line. Foster carers fought to make sure the former perspective prevailed, but the battle was hard at times, because, in their quest for cost effectiveness, local authorities were keen that relatively expensive CAPS placements should be retained for young people who were particularly troublesome and defined as 'high risk'. Foster carers were thus not only championing individual young people, but challenging a system which settled for bringing young people under control, rather than maximising their potential. Rationing services on the basis of risk made sense in terms of cost effective service planning, but not to foster carers whose concern was for the long-term welfare of individual young people.

Differences between foster carers' focus on the individual young person and agencies' more strategic concerns emerged in other ways which were relevant to some of the issues raised in the original chapter. For example, in situations where young people are

considered likely to put themselves at risk, achieving a balance between their right to protection and self-determination is usually viewed either in terms of competing rights, or rights versus needs. Practice within CAPS suggested that different approaches to managing risk were equally relevant. Parton (Parton 1998) has argued that, since social workers are placed under impossible demands to accurately calculate and manage risk, procedures are set up to ensure that decisions are *defensible* rather than necessarily *right*. In some ways social work services become adept at managing risk factors in ways which dissociate the risk management process from real life situations. In contrast foster carers focus on the very practical implications and dangers for specific young people, assess risk on the basis of detailed knowledge of them and their lives and care primarily about protecting them from harm. These different approaches were evident in foster carers' outrage when they were advised by social workers that they should not try to physically prevent young people from running away, and given reassurances that they [the carers] would not be held responsible if the young person came to harm. Whereas carers were preoccupied with keeping the young person safe, agencies also had to guard against the risk of allegations against carers or staff. In these and similar situations, some carers felt strongly that the language of rights was being used to excuse adults from their responsibilities to children and young people. Again, debates about rights took on a somewhat different perspective in light of risk management.

Questions of risk were quite different when it came to considering the value of standard forms of assessment and care planning, such as the Assessment and Action Records. Here the focus was not on immediate threats, but on enhancing life chances, so building

resilience to future risks. The original chapter noted different views on whether a formalised prescriptive system could be 'child-centred', whether its capacity to hold professionals to account would result in better service provision and the extent to which focussing on individual children was likely to improve their life chances, since disadvantage disproportionately affects the sections of society to which most looked after children belong and will return.

Evidence from the CAPS study offered some practical answers to these questions, while the Beck analysis can be used to shed further light on some wider implications. In terms of practical experience, it might be argued that care planning systems such as the Assessment and Action records imply a more rational and optimistic model of service provision than is justified, in that they assume that resource provision will correspond with assessed need, that children and young people will readily accept what is offered and that outcomes will correspondingly improve. Practice in providing education for young people within the CAPS scheme indicated that the reality was somewhat different. First, it proved very difficult, sometimes impossible, to access suitable education. Whilst attempts were made to meet assessed need, the more usual situation was that young people had to adapt to whatever education or work situation could be made available.

A second difference was that helping a young person access education or work placements was not simply a matter of finding a resource. More usually a mutually agreeable arrangement had to be continuously negotiated on matters such as behaviour, time keeping and choice of subjects. Carers were often central to these discussions,

making sure young people's views and requirements were taken into account, while also holding them to account, should they fail to meet reasonable expectations. When school and work placements broke down, carers would spend time helping young people learn from the experience, then begin again the process of finding another option. In short, accessing education was a complex and skilled on-going process, the detail of which is not easily reflected in the quality assurance approach of the Assessment and Action records. Whether young people's rights and perspectives were respected within the care planning process could not easily be answered. Whilst negotiations with young people were necessarily child-centred, these often took place in relation to resources which were not a preferred option.

Because access to education and work experience was so restricted, the A&A records' third assumption, that appropriate service provision will result in better outcomes, could not really be tested. However, despite a high level of educational support from carers within CAPS, only a few young people remained in school or employment by the time the research ended.

The ways in which carers helped young people access education and work might be viewed as helping them learn to reflect on options and plan their lives which, according to Beck's analysis, are central skills in today's society. Some undoubtedly had benefited from this kind of support. However it would be wrong to suggest that untrammelled opportunities were available to the young people placed in this project. For most of them, already considered 'high risk', it proved difficult even to find appropriate school and

work placements. Established occupational and social structures may be changing, but the odds were still strongly stacked against these young people. Typically placements were viewed as offering young people 'choices', but in reality these were limited, so it was unfortunate, if somewhat predictable, that most young people blamed themselves when education, jobs or placements did not work out. With appreciation of the social dynamics which shape young people's lives, it may be that the language of choice should be more sparingly used and the challenge of offering young people better opportunities more realistically resourced.

This update has briefly summarised the case for viewing some of the issues considered in the first chapter in light of an analysis of how risk operates and is managed within society, social work services and foster care. Its essential message is that dilemmas faced by foster carers and young people are best understood within an understanding of the wider social and policy context.

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