University of Sussex

WHAT MATTERS TO CHILDREN LIVING IN KINSHIP CARE

"Another way of being a normal family"

Paul Daniel Shuttleworth

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree

Signature…………

This thesis is dedicated to my father

Malcolm Shuttleworth, writer, poet and inspiration.

Abstract/Summary

Background: Kinship care is the long-term caring arrangement within the family constellation for children who cannot remain with their birth parents. Despite being the most prevalent alternative care arrangement for children worldwide, there is a lack of research into kinship care. Few studies focus on the child's perspectives, and very few explicitly focus on the meaning of permanence for the children. These children often have similar needs as others that have experienced abuse and neglect. Additionally, they must manage complex dislocated family relationships, and most experience financial hardship with very little support.

The little kinship care research that has been done reflects a preoccupation with comparing kinship care as an alternative to state care rather than a family set up within its own right. Also, research, legislation and practice for kinship care has been founded on the concerns and debates for adoption and fostering processes. This typically produces a range of atheoretical, descriptive outcome studies that often provide conflicting answers by focussing on the what rather than the how. This can cause ambivalence for practitioners, academics, and policymakers.

Objective: This is the first study that has solely sought the views of children in kinship care in England. It explores the lived experiences of 19 children in such arrangements. More specifically, it focuses on kinship care as a permanence option.

The study does not presuppose certain theories of permanence, childhood, or family. Instead, theoretical explanations emerge from the children's own valuations of their family lives. This can enable social workers to find more attuned ways to support, protect, and permanency plan for children out with the traditional concepts of permanence, family, childhood, and care that are often taken for granted.

Methodology/methods: The study's innovative approach utilises critical realism as an underlabourer, and Sayer's (2011) work on reasoning in particular. By using a dialogical participative approach, different methods such as child-led tours, photo-elicitation, and visual methods were used to capture the children's valuations of their lives. Utilising a range of theories provided empirical certainty with an interpretivist awareness of subjectivities.

Results: In their family lives, children in kinship care navigate the in-between of the purported binary positions often ascribed to care, kinship, permanence, autonomy, and recognition. Through thematic analysis and retroduction, it was found that the children manage the

mechanisms of 'Connection/Separation', 'Recognition/(Mis)recognition', 'Care & Protection/Independence & Risk'.

Conclusions/Implications: By using a range of methods, children are competent in giving nuanced and sophisticated understandings of their own experiences, needs, and intentions. Also, privileging children's accounts of family, care and childhood, reinvigorates the current policy and practice debates in UK social work. Children's views challenge the dominant adult-centric framing of the social work debates that emphasise the professionalisation of kinship care as a placement and a process-driven service.

The study also reinvigorates the debates regarding permanence. The children show that kinship care arrangements disrupt both notions of substitute care and also birth family care. They provide insight into the fluidity inherent in their family's composition and the roles and responsibilities for their ongoing care across it. The children navigate and manage these relationships, their sense of autonomous interdependence, and their sense of permanence across the family network and, at times, away from it. Traditional notions of placement, contact, and life-story work are (mis)recognitions of their family lives. Therefore, more attuned recognition can provide more meaningful support for children in kinship care where multiple family relationships endure but are also often in flux.

Acknowledgments/recognition

This piece of work is not only about family but has also been borne out of the love and support of family. Like the children in this study, I recognise that my family is constantly evolving and does not just restrict itself to genetic ties. So, thank you to my mother, Marcia Randell, my sister, Jo Shuttleworth, Jack, James, my nieces Lila and Isis, and all my other relatives. You have all managed to keep me focused whilst still providing me with the joys of family life.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Chapter 1 - Introduction -
A New Child-Centric Approach to Kinship Care and Permanence

Jordan – "Kids should always stay safe in their family."

This is the first study that has solely focused on children's views to access the meaning of safe family life and permanence for children living in kinship care in England. It explores the lived experiences of 19 children in such arrangements.

Kinship care is when children are placed in the full-time care of family members when they cannot remain with their birth parents. According to English law, kinship carers can be related to the child biologically, by legal family ties, or by a significant prior relationship (Children Act 1989). Globally, kinship care is the fastest growing care option for children that cannot live with their birth parents (Leinaweaver, 2014). In the UK, extrapolations from the 2011 Census data suggest that over 203,000 children live in kinship care arrangements.

For children and family social workers, kinship care is typically viewed as a placement that is an alternative to state care (Skoglund and Thørnblad, 2019). Since the Children Act 1989, social workers must first consider the child's own family network for care away from birth parents. This is because it is considered to be more likely to reinforce a child's sense of identity and belonging than fostering, adoption, or residential care (Farmer et al., 2013; Connolly et al., 2016; Winokur et al., 2018; Simmonds et al., 2019). Kinship care may, therefore, lead to a greater sense of permanence. However, prior to this study, no research has explicitly explored what a sense of permanence means to children, specifically in kinship care arrangements.

A sense of permanence in UK legislation means that all children should be granted *"a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging"* with family not only during childhood but also into adulthood (Department for Education (DfE), 2010:22–23). Although for many years permanence has become a highly contested concept in social work, the overall aim is to ensure safe, positive, and enduring family functioning .

By its very nature, kinship care challenges traditional permanence and placement discourses (Geen, 2004). Permanence was initially established on fostering and adoption's notions of a

substitute family that replaces the previous family life (Kirton, 2020). These notions do not match the kinship care experience, which places these children in the middle ground. The children are not merely removed from one family to another separate family. Instead, there is an attempt to secure permanence within the current, potentially risky, family affiliations. This raises concerns about what it means for children to, as Jordan states, "*always stay safe in their family*". It also raises questions about whether the arrangement is like adoption or fostering arrangements, or another form of birth family preservation. Such quandaries lead to ambivalence for the social work role in how to support this particular form of family life (Ponnert, 2017).

More troubling still is the absence of the child's voice in the policy and social work practice for kinship care and permanence (Kallinen, 2020). When social workers, policymakers, and other researchers do seek a child's perspective, they all draw on very different ways of thinking about how to access and interpret child voice and experience. Without consensus on ways to obtain and use children's views, one type of adult-centric knowledge is typically relied upon about family life in kinship care arrangements. This allows policy and practice to take for granted traditional concepts of permanence, family, and care.

The following study rectifies this shortfall. It does not presuppose certain theories of permanence or family. Instead, by using the methodologies of critical realism and dialogical participation, children's views are central to the production of knowledge. Theoretical explanations emerge from the children's own valuations of their family lives. This research approach can enable social workers to find more attuned ways to support, protect and permanency plan for children. Therefore, the main research question is:

- What matters to children living in kinship care arrangements?

The subsidiary questions are:

a) What do children think about their family life in kinship care?

b) What are the implications of the children's views on the social work practice of permanence planning?

The following chapter introduces this innovative approach to kinship care and the meaning of permanence for the children in kinship care. Firstly, I discuss my practice experiences of kinship care and how the countless unresolved service-driven debates, alongside the ambivalence of

professionals, led me to imagine a different research method to try and better understand family life in kinship care. I also discuss the benefits of collaborating with two leading organisations, Grandparents Plus and Coram BAAF.

The chapter then provides a brief description of what kinship care means worldwide and in UK legislation. Subsequently, there is an explanation as to why a looser definition is used for this particular study. This is to move away from kinship care simply and uncritically being recruited into generic permanence discourses that were initially intended for fostering and adoption.

The next section of the chapter examines the prevalence and characteristics of kinship care arrangements and those that live in them. It also briefly looks at the current interest and research in kinship care. The chapter then reiterates how listening to the voices of the child can significantly add to the current social work literature on kinship care. With this in mind, children's views must be captured in both a robust way and ethical way. The methodological frameworks in which this can be achieved are then introduced. The final part of the chapter outlines the shape of the thesis.

1.1 My social work practice background and a vision for more child-centric research

Before becoming a PhD social work researcher, I was a children and families social work practitioner for over ten years. Throughout my social work career, I have always aligned with the guiding principle that social work should keep families together wherever possible (Featherstone et al., 2014). After eight years in various child protection roles, I moved my practice to a family and friends team. This was a team of social work practitioners who specifically assessed and supported kinship care arrangements. It was part of the Fostering, Placements, and Permanence Service. The ramifications of placing kinship care in services such as this will be returned to throughout this thesis.

My work with the team further combined the aspiration to keep families together with the overriding mandate that social workers must ensure children's wellbeing and protection from harm. It allowed me to balance process-driven, procedural work, including court work and legal permanency planning, with more time to support families in a less authoritative way. However, I quickly became aware of the many tensions for social work practice with families in kinship care arrangements. My social work practice with kinship care needed to address both an

optimistic view of families and manage the threat that family members pose and have posed on a child's safety and wellbeing (Kettle and Jackson, 2017).

These tensions were further demonstrated by me witnessing very diverse and ambivalent views about kinship care alongside the never-ending debates about whether it can be a considered a valid permanence option. Such ambivalence was also evident in the disparity between social work practitioners, legislation, court decisions, and local authority panels. It seems that the more people considered kinship care, the more they questioned what it meant and its validity. This often caused a febrile environment of professional disagreements but also personal inner conflicts. It was apparent that kinship care challenges both our professional and personal values (O'Brien, 2012).

Through the tangle of questions and challenges it also became apparent that the children's views were either treated as an addendum to assessments and decision-making, or else they were neglected entirely. This neglect and undermining of children's views seemed even more incongruous, considering that a child's investment in a placement is one of the central indicators of how long it will last (Boddy, 2017).

One day, I was sitting at the lunch table with an array of my social work colleagues who all had different roles and responsibilities within the children and families service. We were discussing the benefits and challenges of kinship care. Afterwards, I wondered what the conversation may be like if, instead of adult professionals, the children that were living in kinship care arrangements were at that table. Suppose the children sat down to discuss their lives with each other. Would they talk about educational achievement, legal orders, safety, permanence, resources, and physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing in the way usually discussed by social work professionals? My previous experience suggested that the children were unlikely to talk in such a service-driven way. I was curious about whether they would be able to cut through all the debates and adult-centric quandaries. Would the children add anything useful to our knowledge of kinship care? Ultimately, would the children be able to guide social workers towards better ways of supporting them?

1.2   Collaborating organisations

While contemplating my proposed study, I felt that it would be beneficial to recruit two leading organisations as they could provide different views and resources to broaden the scope of the research. I asked Grandparents Plus and Coram BAAF to collaborate with the study. They both

take slightly different approaches to kinship care but centrally hold onto the social work values that I also revere. Brief descriptions of both can be found in Appendix A.

Grandparents Plus take a grassroots approach where kinship carers' voices are central to their work. Coram BAAF take a more systemic, social work practitioner, legislative, academic research, and professionalised view on ensuring children and families in kinship care are appropriately supported. This study traverses the middle ground between the two organisations. It directly questions the debate regarding whether kinship care should be seen as a permanency placement alongside fostering or adoption. However, it also stresses the need for the voices of those in specific kinship care arrangements to guide any policy and social work practice changes. This helped ensure the integrity of the study. The collaborating organisations helped ground the research in the realities of practice and remind me of the impact that inadequate social work intervention can have on a child's wellbeing.

1.3   What is kinship care?

1.3.1   Worldwide historical and social definitions of kinship care

To find out the best way to support children in kinship care arrangements, it is necessary first to define what it is. The concept of kinship care is not new. It can be traced historically to anthropological studies from around the world. It is one of the oldest traditions in child-rearing. There are many casual incidents of children being brought up by their family network if they could not be cared for by their parents. In the Bible, there are many references to children being raised by relatives. In Ancient Greece and Rome, adoption and fostering amongst family members was seen as an effective way to produce heirs (Enke, 2019).

The phrase kinship care itself is said to have originated from the documentation of slaves in the US (Geen, 2004). Around one-fifth of the children of slaves were cared for by other slaves when separated from their birth parents. It was understood that such an arrangement would be reciprocated if the carers' own birth children were separated from them.

Probably one of the best-known phrases that applied to kinship care comes from the African maxim 'it takes a whole village to raise a child' (Owusu-Bempah, 2010). Currently, only a minority of households in rural South, East, and West African contexts are autonomous economically or socially (Abebe, 2019). As such, child-rearing practices in these parts of the world are a collective venture. Especially in famine and epidemics, children may be sent to their relatives to reduce parents' chances of losing all of their children.

In other contemporary societies such as India and Poland, children being cared for by relatives is not necessarily seen as a response to a crisis. Instead, it is a common-place method for effective and efficient child-rearing. In these societies, the more able and employable parents will work away, often abroad, while family members, typically grandparents, will care for the children. This co-residence and intra-familial interdependence characterise a social, or rather, a collective life. Children are the duty and responsibility of family collectives. In these countries, established kinship systems rather than the state dictate children's social, cultural, religious, and material rights (Owusu-Bempah, 2010).

1.3.2 English legislative definitions kinship care

Moving away from anthropological explanations, in the UK, kinship care and social work's response to it are underpinned by legislation and government duty. The European Convention of Human Rights (Article 8), which is part of UK law under the Human Rights Act 1998, requires public authorities to respect family life. This supports a key principle of the Children Act 1989 to always firstly promote and support a child remaining within the family setting. Research suggests that placing a child as close as possible to their family and social culture will reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown. It will also reduce the anxiety of a child having to live with strangers in an unfamiliar environment (Winokur et al., 2018). Thus, the overall intention of utilising kinship care is to safeguard the family unit while promoting permanence (DfE, 2015).

Legislation, policy and their interpretations for social work practice with kinship care are also shaped by the ongoing socio-political debates around the privacy of family life versus the need for state intervention. For example, in most UK policy and legislation, the demarcating of two different kinship care types emphasises this private life versus public interest debate. A distinction is usually made between formal kinship care and informal kinship care in UK legislation.

1.3.2.1 Formal kinship care

In the UK, formal kinship care is also known as kinship foster care. Formal kinship care refers to an arrangement where a child is being cared for by a family member or friend and where there is social work involvement. In such circumstances, a child in England is placed under a legal order such as a Care Order or an Interim Care Order, and they become 'Looked After' (Children Act 1989, s.31). Consequently, for formal kinship care, the local authority obtains joint parental rights and responsibilities with the birth parents (Wijedasa et al., 2015).

Such an arrangement, therefore, falls under the jurisdiction and responsibilities of the local authority. Specific measures must be in place to ensure the wellbeing of the child. Children in formal kinship care must be placed under the care of the relative or family friend who is either approved as a foster carer by a local authority fostering panel or is being assessed for their approval (Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, Reg 27).

1.3.2.2 Informal kinship care

Informal kinship care describes a situation where there is no public legal order that secures the arrangement. Therefore, the family or family friend assumes responsibility for a child without state intervention. Studies suggest that around 95% of all UK kinship care arrangements are informal (Selwyn et al., 2013).

There has been much speculation about why so many kinship care arrangements are informal. Macdonald et al. (2018) undertook an international review of the literature regarding informal kinship care. They found that the media's portrayal of some social workers as unduly interventionist and inept encouraged guarded behaviour and distrust by family networks. Therefore, many informal carers expressed wariness over intrusive bureaucratic processes, were reticent to have any social work involvement, and did not ask for support.

Informal kinship care incorporates four distinct types of placements as defined by the Children Act 1989.

- Informal arrangements with a relative or friend for up to 28 days

- Informal arrangements with a close relative for longer than 28 days

- Private fostering – where a child has not been accommodated by the local authority but is cared for by someone who is not a relative for 28 days or more.

- A private court order – where a formal court order has been made without local authority involvement.

In summary, all arrangements under 28 days are treated similarly and do not have to be disclosed to the local authority. However, if the arrangement lasts over 28 days, then disclosure depends on the relationship between the carers and the child. If the carer is a close relative, there is no obligation to disclose the arrangement. A close relative is defined under the Children Act 1989 as *"step-parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles or aunts, by either blood or marriage"* (CA 1989, s.105(1)). Therefore, disclosure often relies on the absence of a genetic link.

Initially, the Children Act 1989 stated that a formal kinship carer is only someone related to the child by blood or marriage. However, this was later amended in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Young Person's Act 2008 to include those known to the children but not directly related to them.

> *"Any local authority looking after a child shall make arrangements to enable him to live with; a relative, friend or other person connected to him/her unless that would not be reasonably practicable or consistent with his welfare." (Adoption and Children Act 2002, s.23(b))*

In the UK, kinship care is also often referred to as family and friends care. While this may open the status of kinship carers to further ambiguity, such definitions shift the understanding of kinship care from a purely genetic phenomenon to a socially organised one. This broader understanding is further endorsed in the Children and Families Act 2014.

The terminological quagmire of what constitutes a kinship carer has led to some grave misunderstandings and, indeed, poor practice over the years. In 2015, the government reviewed Special Guardianship Orders, which is now typically used to secure kinship care placements. It found that in a minority of cases, *"potentially risky placements"* were being made because children were not living with the prospective guardians, and there were *"no or little pre-existing"* relationships (DfE, 2015:5). Therefore, the Special Guardianship (Amendment) Regulations (2016) revised the Schedule to Special Guardianship Regulations (2005). This requested more detailed assessments of the nature of a child's relationship with the prospective carer. The relationships both at the time of assessment and in the past must now be fully considered, irrelevant genetic or legal ties.

1.4   The definition of kinship care for the purpose of this study

As can be seen, there is no single definition of what constitutes kinship care and often little agreement about who is involved and how it should be supported. For research, questions arise as to whether kinship care should be seen as a family arrangement in line with anthropological, historical and worldwide accounts or whether it should be co-opted into traditional social work accounts of statutory duty and permanence. For this study, I used a definition that keeps both perspectives in mind. The definition also allows enough openness so that the children, from a variety of different circumstances, can aid the debate about what kinship care and permanence

mean. Like many international researchers looking into kinship care, including Winokur et al. (2018), who conducted a systematic review of kinship care, I have utilised the Child Welfare League of America's (1994) definition.

> *"Kinship care is the full-time care, nurturing and protection of children who must be separated from their parents by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, step-parents or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child." (Child Welfare League of America, 1994:2)*

This definition not only reflects a broader global philosophy of kin but also represents the social work values of inclusivity, cultural relevance and ties of affection (Crewe and Wilson, 2007).

1.5   Prevalence and characteristics of kinship care arrangements

The number of children living in kinship care is rising throughout the world (Hong et al., 2011; Skoglund and Thørnblad, 2019). In 2014, Leinaweaver estimated that around 163 million children worldwide were being cared for by their grandparents or other kin. The last 15 years have seen an increase in several regions, including the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018), Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020), Scandinavia (Holtan, 2008), and Canada (Drapeau et al., 2016).

In the UK, organisations and the most up-to-date research extrapolate that over 180,000 children live in kinship care arrangements (e.g., Hingley-Jones et al., 2020). This figure is based on Census data obtained in 2011 (Wijedasa, 2015). There are undoubtedly issues with getting estimates from data collated over eight years ago. Also, the literature envisages that 180,000 is an underestimate because the data only includes those living with family members. It excludes children living with non-genetically related family friends.

It is tentatively possible to obtain a slightly more accurate picture of how many children are in kinship care arrangements in the UK. Theoretically, data could be obtained from national statistics concerning Looked After Children (DfE, 2019), which can then be cross-referenced with Census data. Calculations would bring the amount up to over 203,000 children living in kinship care arrangements. However, again, the extent of the kinship arrangements can only be crudely extrapolated from past Census data. A more precise picture cannot be obtained until more accurate data is acquired. What is more certain is that kinship care is the most common placement arrangement in the UK when birth parents cannot care for their children (Hill et al.,

2019). Furthermore, the numbers are increasing each year disproportionally to the population, and this trend is likely to continue (Dorval et al., 2020).

Various factors appear to contribute to the increase of kinship care arrangements in the UK (Argent, 2009; Munro and Gilligan, 2013; McCartan et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2019). These include:

- The preference for family-based care is due to the belief that the child will be in a familiar setting with a pre-existing bond.

- The changing nature of family structure.

- Growing problems in society with parental substance misuse.

- A rise in the reported cases of abuse and neglect.

- An increasing prison population.

- The decline of residential care.

- Higher numbers of children entering care and declining foster carer population unable to meet this demand.

Whilst this presents a descriptive factor analysis for why kinship care is a growing phenomenon in the UK, it does not provide a coherent explanatory analysis. Such research does not show how a child may be experiencing kinship care. The proposed variables for children entering care do not provide much insight into how they live their family lives or how social work should support specific children in these arrangements.

1.6   The renewed UK government interest in kinship care

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in UK kinship care arrangements by the government, the courts, and policymakers. This is because research has found that kinship caregivers are also more likely to be grandparents, single, female, older, less educated, unemployed, live in overcrowded conditions, and live in financial hardship (Farmer and Moyers, 2008; Aziz et al., 2012; Selwyn and Nandy, 2014; Wijedasa, 2015; Mervyn-Smith, 2018; Grandparents Plus, 2020). These kinship caregivers also often have significant physical, behavioural and mental health needs (Rubin et al., 2017). A disproportionate number of children in kinship arrangements belong to an ethnic minority group and have more health issues than children who live with at least one birth parent (Wijedasa, 2015; Brown et al., 2019). There has also been a concern that services and support to these families are inconsistent not only

between local authorities but often between practitioners (Farmer and Moyers, 2008; Selwyn et al., 2013).

In 2019, a rapid evidence review was undertaken by the Nuffield Family Justice following the Re P-S Court of Appeal judgment (Brown et al., 2019; Harwin, Simmonds, et al., 2019; Simmonds et al., 2019). In the case of *Re P-S (Children) [2018] EWCA civ 1407,* the use of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and care orders were questioned. SGOs are now the most commonly used court orders to secure a child's kinship care living arrangement (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019). Therefore, there was a call by the Court of Appeal for authoritative, evidence-based guidance for the use of SGOs. Amongst other things, the review called for:

- Assurance that support services to kinship carers are available locally and align with entitlements for adopters and foster carers, such as parental leave, housing priority, and financial support.

- The addressing of the gap in research on children and young people's views and experiences of special guardianship. Further research also needs to address the challenge of how best to ensure safe and positive contact with birth parents and the wider family.

A Parliamentary Taskforce on kinship was also set up in December 2019 to raise awareness about, and support for, children in kinship care arrangements. Its report was launched on 30 September 2020. The Task Force was undertaken in conjunction with the Family Rights Group. The cross-party parliamentary approach recognised that kinship care is widely:

> *"unrecognised, underappreciated and often poorly supported – it is,*
> *in effect, the unacknowledged third pillar of the children's social care*
> *system." (Kinship Care Parliamentary Taskforce, 2020:7)*

The Taskforce report highlighted the impact of time pressures on social workers, courts, and families. It underlines the need for ongoing advice on kinship care, and the rights of the children, birth parents, and carers. It also re-emphasised the ongoing difficulties for contact between the children, their birth parents and their siblings. The report reiterated that support, including financial aid, was variable in consistency and quality across local authorities.

While the government's new interest in kinship care is welcome, both reviews highlight that the child's voice remains negligible in the research. The focus on government, local authority, and

court responses on kinship care still place such discussions in adult-centric and service-oriented ways. Children's kinship care family life experiences are presumed to fit into traditional notions of fostering and adoption and substitute parenting, whether or not they do.

1.7   A brief overview of current research on kinship care

Current research offers limited perspectives on kinship care. Firstly, there are relatively few studies on kinship care compared to research on other living arrangements for children that cannot be cared for by their birth parents (Kallinen, 2020). Secondly, many of the 'current' UK descriptive data has been extrapolated from the 2011 Census. There is no current monitoring to provide more accurate numbers of kinship care arrangements that are happening. Thirdly, the data tends to homogenise kinship care either by pulling together international research or by treating it solely as a service and social work intervention. It is often forgotten that kinship care is also a family way of life specific to its cultural context (Skoglund and Thørnblad, 2019). Fourthly, much research is placed in broader studies for children in foster care or adoption. Fifthly, children's views and experiences have been subjugated for the seemingly more reliable adult views, adult constructs of permanence, and the seemingly more important adult concerns. When children's views have been included in UK research (e.g. Broad, 2004; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Farmer and Moyers, 2008; Hunt et al., 2008), very few studies have focussed solely on the children's perspective without the influence of adult views.

Put simply, not enough is known, and research tends to explain these children's experiences and their sense of permanence using adult-centric constructs and methodologies. As further explored in the literature review, this study proposes that there are two ways that a new research approach can be devised to add to knowledge about the lived experiences of children in kinship care.

- Use the children's views as central to the analysis of family life and permanence for children living in kinship care.
- Explore different theories away from the traditional ones used in social work kinship care studies. This can further help explain and understand the children's views on matters such a permanence.

1.8   Design of the study & neologisms

A new methodological approach was required to give credence to children's views and the possibilities of new theoretical approaches. Participatory methods were employed for the study. However, there are also debates in social work and Childhood Studies literature on children's participation about how to conduct it ethically and meaningfully. To navigate this, critical realism was used in conjunction with a process known as dialogical participation. As discussed further in the Methodology Chapter, this granted the study empirical assurance alongside an interpretive awareness of different contexts.

This social work thesis draws on the views of children using different theories and a myriad of participatory task-based interviews. It uses a wide range of literature that is often not linked to kinship care, participation, permanence, or childhood studies. However, utilising different theories and approaches to both obtain and explain the data has a significant drawback. It requires the use of and the mixing of specific disciplinary jargon. This is even more problematic in the field of social work, which is already jargon-heavy. Critical realism, which is used throughout this study, is also often accused of coining new words, neologisms, or even making everyday words have different meanings. Examples of this are the words emergence, mechanisms, and absence.

Language has been a central consideration for this study because the use of words is intertwined with power. For example, it is known in social work that the words we use create interactions and power relations (Morley et al., 2019). Research, especially with children, must always keep this in mind. Therefore, I have been mindful of language when speaking to children and during the thesis' write up. I have persistently tried to ensure that the words and ideas are accessible. However, at times, there is a need for jargon and neologisms, especially if they are words used by the children. This can allow the evolution of language and thought that better connects with the realities of the lived experiences of the children.

1.9   Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. This first chapter has introduced the complex world of kinship care and articulated the problem. It has discussed how my practice experience led me to propose the benefits of including children's views. The chapter has also started to map out the different debates that lead to ambivalence for social work practice and policy regarding kinship care and, more specifically, kinship care as a valid permanence option. It has

contextualised the study population with regards to the cultural, socio-political, and legal permutations. This evidences the rationale for the study.

Chapter Two provides further context into the ambivalence for social work practitioners when it comes to the benefits and risks of kinship care as a permanence option. It discusses how social work and legislative notions of working with families first and foremost, and those of permanence and support for such arrangements, are seemingly incongruent with the realities of practice for kinship care. Whilst such notions are embedded primarily in the Children Act 1989, they are also founded on the concerns and debates around fostering and adoption. Alongside the socio-political environment inherent in current social work practice, this means that kinship care does not neatly fit into these established ideologies and systems. Therefore, the chapter reiterates the proposal that the lived experiences should be the starting point for further social work policy and practice development for kinship care.

Chapter Three discusses why children's views are not typically included in social work research on kinship care. It reviews the few past studies that utilise the child's voice in kinship care and posits why their views remain mostly absent. As a literature review, it also looks at kinship care's current knowledge and highlights any gaps. The chapter stresses the importance of a new methodology that is not only more participative and theoretical but also one which utilises the extensive research into family and childhood from other disciplines such as sociology.

Chapter Four discusses the methodological approach used for this inquiry which ensures the inclusion of the voice of children in research meaningfully through participation. It also highlights that social work must be cautious when using participation with children so that it does not, paradoxically, further marginalise them. It looks at children's participation in social work research and the barriers to it. The chapter then suggests how social work should adopt a particular reflective and ethically charged participatory stance known as dialogical participation. The methodology chapter also discusses the relevance of philosophy and knowledge production whenever participation is undertaken both in research and practice. Particular methodological stances are necessary so that generalisations can be robustly made and ensure that research findings can produce change. Therefore, critical realism is proposed as a way to accentuate certain participatory methods.

My positionality is further presented in Chapter Five. Acknowledgement of this allowed me to be reflective and collaborative in the study design. I also discuss the particular methods used for

the study. This includes photo-elicitation, child-led walking tours, and an interviewing process with the children that discussed the emerging theories.

The study's findings and their implications are presented in the three chapters that follow. Chapter Six presents the children's views. By using thematic analysis alongside abduction and retroduction, the children's views suggest three main mechanisms inherent in kinship care and children's sense of permanence. These are connection/separation, recognition/(mis)recognition, and care & protection/independence & risk. Most strikingly in this chapter, the children demonstrate that they are knowledgeable and insightful about their lives and needs.

Chapter Seven demonstrates how children's views can help reinvigorate social work thinking for both kinship care and a sense of permanence. Insights and interpretations from the children's views suggest that they trouble commonly held notions of permanence and kinship care that are ever-present in social work policy and practice. It proposes different ways of theorising the children's lives that are more attuned to their experiences. Finally, the chapter draws together the knowledge from past research with the findings of this study. Therefore, new ways of thinking are proposed for kinship care, alongside practice recommendations that align with the children's needs and wishes for a safe and flourishing family life.

Chapter Eight summarises, reflects on, and celebrates the thesis and the findings. It reiterates the benefits of finding innovative ways to gain children's views and commit to their worth. The chapter also describes the study's challenges and promising further research directions that have emerged. It shows that the starting point to understanding a child's family life is to include children in the debates. Children can help provide a better understanding of what permanence, kinship care, and good, safe family life mean.

Chapter 2 -

Legislative and Social Work Practice Context for Kinship Care - How Kinship Care Troubles the Traditional Notions of Placement and Permanence

Eliza – "It still annoys me really today because nobody really understands or seems to want to understand my situation."

In 2000, O'Brien claimed that kinship care occupies an "*ambivalent space*" for social work practitioners (O'Brien, 2000:205). Later, O'Brien (2012) found that social workers remained unsure about how kinship care fits with the intersection of fostering, adoption, and guardianship. More current research suggests this ambivalence still holds true (Irizarry et al., 2016; Ponnert, 2017). Social workers question whether kinship care arrangements should be viewed as part of family support and preservation or whether the vulnerable children should be removed from their municipality and family conflict in accordance with a child rescue ideology. This causes uncertainty for practitioners in how to best work with kinship care and how the care should be practically and financially supported.

The ambivalence is despite clear legislation in the Children Act 1989, which merged and enshrined three main strands that impacted kinship care as both a concept and a practice.

- The emphasis on partnership with the birth families first and foremost.

- The notion of permanence.

- The regulation and support of kinship carers.

These notions are now embedded in legislation, social work rhetoric, and policies. However, they are traditionally based upon the concerns, debates, and systems, for fostering and adoption. These do not transpose well to kinship care which has its unique position in between the responsibility of care from birth parents and the state. Kinship care lies somewhere in between the arrangement. In the UK, especially, it is both a private birth family affair and a public concern (McCartan et al., 2018).

The following chapter firstly reiterates the unique position that kinship care occupies and how this adds an extra obstacle for social work practice with children that cannot remain in the care

of their birth parents. Then the chapter, using the Children Act 1989 as an anchor, looks at the notion of collaborating with families, first and foremost prior to legal proceedings, and how this has been a challenge for practitioners. Next, the chapter addresses the notions of permanence and how these fit and do not fit for children in kinship care arrangements. Current support, monitoring, and regulation for kinship carers are then further explored. Lastly, there is a brief overview of the other pressures that impact a social worker's ability to provide adequate support for children in kinship care and their families. Many UK social workers are struggling with increased workloads, low levels of control, and poor managerial support (Ravalier, 2019). This reiterates the need for a new research approach founded upon what permanence and effective social work intervention mean specifically for children in kinship care.

2.1 Private versus public concern

Many of the debates surrounding kinship care pivot on the extent to which the state should interfere in, or be held responsible for, the private family unit (Xu et al., 2020). In 2001, Hunt stated that:

> *"Kinship care is genuinely unique in that it straddles the gap between care by birth parents and care by the state." (Hunt, 2001:47)*

This gap is often taken for granted. It only becomes evident when kinship care, as a concept and a practice, starts troubling traditional notions of care away from birth parents. It raises questions about whether kinship care is akin to fostering or adoption or whether it should be seen as a child remaining within the birth family. It provides uncertainty about whether kinship carers should be seen as altruistic family members independent from social work regulation and support or as foster carers that need to be regulated, paid, and supported by the state. Even with the demarcation between formal and informal kinship care, straddling the gap between birth parent care and state care causes confusion about how social workers should interfere and support the arrangements and under what mandate (Ponnert, 2017).

2.2 Working in partnership with families prior to court proceedings

Pivotal moments in child welfare typically arise from child protection scandals of under-intervention or over-intervention (Kirton, 2020). The Children Act 1989 is no exception (Pierson, 2011). It was hoped that the Children Act 1989, amongst other things, would better regulate the power imbalances between local authorities and parents and make responsibilities towards

children more transparent. The Act was devised to provide a more straightforward and ethical approach for social work practice with children in need of protection (ibid).

Importantly for kinship care, the Children Act 1989 mandated that social workers work in partnership with families. It did this in a multitude of ways. Firstly, the Act reinforced the intention that children should, first and foremost, remain in the care of their families (CA 1989, s.17(1)(b)). It stated that children should only be removed from their families if they are likely to suffer significant harm and remaining in their family's care is not be consistent with their welfare (CA 1989, s.31). In these circumstances, the 'Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities (DfE, 2010) states that applications to court for care orders can only happen after work has happened with the families for the opportunity to place children in kinship care arrangements. This is because, as the guidance notes,

> *"…many children and young people benefit by being placed with relatives or friends or others connected to them, near their own homes, continuing to attend the same school, living with their siblings and in accommodation that suits any special needs." (DfE, 2010:16)*

Secondly, the Children Act 1989 also favoured voluntary arrangements rather than compulsory intervention. Such recognition that families have prime responsibility towards children fitted into the family-first ideologies that were dominant at the time (Pierson, 2011).

Lastly, the Children Act 1989 also provided an ideological shift from children being 'at home', or the state looking after them 'in care', to children under state care being 'Looked After Children' (LAC). It was hoped that this would not only reduce stigma but also create an expansive scheme that offered a myriad of ways of how social work could be involved in the care of children, even when not in state care (Garrett, 2017). Under the Children Act 1989, children in kinship care arrangements can now be supported regardless of their legal or placement status.

Partnership with all families was further supported by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008. Also, the Public Law Outline (2014), which guides the case management of public law proceedings, reaffirmed that the viability of family placements must be examined pre-proceedings.

2.2.1.1 The Family Court Crisis

In 2016, a family court crisis was declared despite the Children Act 1989 mandate for work with the families being a priority before children's removal from their care (Munby, 2016). The crisis

declaration was due to the number of children in the care system being at a 30-year high (Holt and Kelly, 2020). It highlighted that the family first ideologies proposed in the Children Act 1989 were not necessarily reflected in the realities of practice. Too many children and families were being subject to the care proceedings and subsequent removal.

For kinship care, a crucial issue with high numbers of families going through courts is the process' adversarial nature (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019). In court, families of potential kinship care arrangements are often pitted against each other for the care of the children. After the children are placed in the care of the more capable family members, the whole family then has to rebuild relationships for contact. This is usually managed between family members in kinship care arrangements and is often difficult enough without conflict through courts. Furthermore, the adversarial nature of the court process also affects the relationship between families and social work. Therefore, kinship carers are less likely to approach social work for support once courts orders are made (ibid).

The crisis of too many children being subject to care proceedings initiated the 'Care Crisis Review: options for change' (2018). The review found that many overlapping factors were contributing to the rise. The review did not explicitly point to kinship care. However, it acknowledged family as an underused and underfunded resource for social work interventions. The 2018 Care Crisis Review also highlighted how statutory guidance, such as Working Together to Safeguard Children (DfE, 2018), must be amended to promote relationship-based practice further. It suggested that policy and practice are needed to recognise the harmful impact of *"a culture of blame, shame and fear*" that has developed over recent years (*Care Crisis Review: options for change*, 2018:18). This culture has affected the decision-making processes for social workers (Hardy, 2020).

2.2.2   Feelings and attitudes towards kinship care
2.2.2.1   *Intergenerational abuse*

This reticence for social work to utilise family as a resource prior to proceedings and to see and support kinship care as a safe, valid option for children in need of protection is influenced by personal and professional attitudes. A social worker's value position significantly impacts their work for families in kinship care arrangements (O'Brien, 2012).

One of the most frequent arguments against kinship care is that of intergenerational abuse (Peters, 2005; Farmer and Moyers, 2008; Owusu-Bempah, 2010). This is the adage that the

'apple doesn't fall far from the tree'. It focuses on dysfunction embedded in the family and passing through the generations (Jonsson, 1975).

Specifically, regarding kinship care, the concern for intergenerational abuse was first highlighted by Crumbley & Little (1997). They explicitly questioned whether legacies and patterns of behaviour are passed down through the generations. They argued that workers and policymakers could struggle to understand how much relatives, particularly grandparents, may have contributed to the abuse and neglect by birth parents. Moreover, they claimed, even if the carer interrupts the behaviour, practitioners still have concerns that other family members or household members may still perpetuate abuse.

The prospect of intergenerational abuse combined with risk society ideologies can be compelling enough to dissuade kinship care arrangements. As both Beck (1998) and Giddens (1991) observed, ideas and practices to mitigate risk have become organising principles in contemporary societies. Accentuated by managerialism and the need for efficiency, social work has offered an almost natural site for the risk narrative (Hardy, 2020). This fear of risk permeates throughout decisions regarding approval of non-kinship care foster care rather than kinship care. However, it is worth noting that some studies have found that children in kinship care are less likely to be maltreated than children in traditional foster homes. Other studies have suggested similar rates of confirmed maltreatment reports (Biehal, 2014b). Therefore, such wariness of risk may often be exaggerated.

2.2.2.2 Concepts of family, care, and gender roles

Another value base for social workers to contend with when working with kinship care is the conceptualisation of family. In the last fifty years, with the increase in chain migration, same-sex couples having children, acceptance of divorce, and the move away from gender-traditional work-family roles, there has been more diversity and fluidity in family life (McKie and Callan, 2011). Policies for children and families, especially for care away from birth parents, have tended to favour the white middle-class heteronormative ideal (Boddy, 2019). They give precedence to the ideal family or 'family-like' environments. They habitually demarcate and dichotomise between 'ordinary' families and the 'troubled', or rather 'troubling' or 'troublesome', ones (Smith, 2015). This means that families that use kinship care arrangements are often seen as troublesome families that utilise an abnormal family set up (Owusu-Bempah, 2010; Corbin, 2015; Pratchett and Rees, 2017; McCartan et al., 2018).

This normative ideal of what a family should be is further underpinned by beliefs about care responsibilities being gendered and mainly undertaken by women. Patriarchal capitalist principles, therefore, assign women the labour of social reproduction and also of paid and unpaid care. This means that kinship care can reinforce women's oppression (McGhee et al., 2018). Because most kinship carers are women, the unpaid labour of care could essentially be seen as just being shifted from one female family member to another, hopefully less risky one (Lara, 2013).

Such concerns have led some social work academics to argue for multiple meanings of family and more awareness around the gendered nature of family and care. They argue for more sociological understandings (Biehal, 2014; Boddy, 2018), feminist understandings (Wendt and Moulding, 2016), and a focus on relationality rather than just genetic relations (Smart, 2011). It is proposed that these broader understandings of family can better equip social workers to undertake more collaborative roles with the diverse nature of families in kinship care arrangements. Social workers will then be more able to uphold the principle highlighted in the Children Act 1989 that there should be a primary focus on working in partnerships with families, no matter their setup.

2.3   Permanence

The Children Act 1989 was also crucial for England embedding notions of permanence into legislation. Kinship care is typically framed as out-of-home care and placed into the discourse of permanence (Winokur et al., 2018). This need for permanence applies to all children who come under the authority of the Children Act 1989. It is required for all the children, regardless of their looked after status. The Department for Education guidance on the Children Act 1989 gives a broad definition stating that permanence should offer every child

> *"a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity…a secure stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond." (DCSF, 2010:11)*

Also,

> *"Permanence provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and families from family support through to adoption."*
> *(DCSF, 2010:11–12)*

Permanence focuses on the philosophy of a child's place within the family. It is usually set within the discourse of family preservation, belonging, affiliation, history, heritage, custom, and emotional continuity for children (Boddy, 2017). Alongside these notions of what counts as family identity, it is rooted in child development studies and attachment theories (Bowlby, 1980).

It is no surprise that permanence has become a key consideration for kinship care. Since the seminal work of Goldstein et al. (1979), permanence has dominated childcare policy and practice (Schofield et al., 2012). However, the concept has evolved differently across jurisdictions, and it is applied in different ways to kinship care. These differences can be seen in various legislative, procedural and practice domains (O'Brien, 2012).

2.3.1 Drift

Part of the permanence narrative has come about in order to address concerns around drift. The concept of drift for children in care originated from practitioners from both the UK and the US (Simmonds, 2014). Drift is when children's placements are delayed from being made secure. Historically, processes often meant that children had extended stays in short-term foster care without attaining family reunification or solutions for the longer-term. Foster care should never be used as a long-term solution but instead used as a temporary intermediate one. There should be explicit goal-directed activities to move children out of temporary care as soon as possible (Brown and Ward, 2012). This emphasises the planning part of permanency planning (Maluccio et al., 1986).

This need for speedy permanency planning led to a more explicit policy and practice framework. Its influence was at its most significant in the late 1980s, especially with the introduction of the Children Act 1989, although it retains its impact and its importance today. For example, the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 require there should be an agreed permanence plan for all children who are accommodated or in care. Also, the Children and Social Work Act 2017 highlights the importance of considering the long-term impact and outcomes when considering permanence.

2.3.2 Permanence decisions not being made in a timely manner

A key turning point for social work practitioners in children's services in the UK was introducing the 26-week limit for family court cases (Children and Families Act 2014, s.14) This was in reaction to cases on average lasting for over a year. The 26-week limit meant that children often

waited for permanence decisions. The 26-week limit also raised the bar for adoption, again re-establishing that remaining within the family must be prioritised.

The 26-week limit had worrying implications on kinship care arrangements (Hingley-Jones et al., 2020). It meant that there was very often little time to assess or even identify potential carers within the family network. Furthermore, Bowyer et al. (2015) note that because kinship carers' assessment period is much briefer than for foster carers for adopters, the threshold for approval is lower.

In 2019, The Family Justice Council published interim guidance on special guardianship to address this. It clarified that extensions are available for kinship carer assessments and gave definitive criteria for such extensions. The move was also in response to some of the issues identified by Lord Justice Munby, then President of the Family Division, in *Re P-S (Children)* [2018] EWCA Civ 1407 and Re S (A Child) [2014] EWCC B44 (Fam)). In the Re P-S case, special guardianship was denied to grandparents because they came forward characteristically late in the process. There was not enough time for a comprehensive assessment. The Judge also deemed that the child had not lived for an "*appreciable period with the prospective guardians*". Therefore, systems initially designed to address fostering and adoption concerns seemed to place children in kinship care at a disadvantage, especially for permanency planning and timely intervention.

2.3.3 Different categorisations of permanence and their meaning for kinship care

Permanence, and its aim to give a child a sense of continuity throughout their childhood, is often divided into three categories (DCSF, 2010). These are:

- Physical permanence - the stability of a placement.

- Legal permanence - carers have parental responsibility by way of Court Orders.

- Emotional permanence - grounded in theories of attachment.

2.3.3.1 Physical permanence

Out of these distinctions, promoting placement stability has been one of the ultimate goals in child welfare (Connolly and Morris, 2011). This is because frequent placement moves often have deleterious effects on children's wellbeing. This includes a negative effect on physical development and brain development and an increased risk for children's behavioural, social, and academic problems (Konijn et al., 2019).

The focus on physical permanence is not without its controversies. Schofield *et al.* (2012), for example, highlight that permanence can occur without continuity of a placement. Furthermore, a child remaining in placement does not necessarily imply that they feel a secure part of the family. This is especially relevant for kinship care, where a child will usually have many conflicting feelings about being in different caring placements within the same family throughout their childhood (Kallinen, 2020).

Different government guidance has tried to mitigate multiple placements for children (e.g. DfE, 2018). However, the number of placements that children undergo has also been reliant on resources. For example, as early as 1999, Sellick referred to the increasing difficulties local authorities had in recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of foster carers in the 1990s. Currently, it is estimated that there is a foster carer shortfall in England of around 7,220 (The Fostering Network, 2020). However, this does not mean that there is an absolute shortage all over England. Instead, the foster carer shortage is geographically based, and there is a shortage of carers that can look after the more challenging children.

This shortage and displacement of appropriate carers mean that many children are not matched to their appropriate care needs. This has a considerable impact on local authorities and their decision making around permanence and practice (*Care Crisis Review: options for change*, 2018). It has led to an increase in kinship care placements which are seen as cheaper, more abundant, and likely to provide fewer moves for children that cannot remain in their birth parents care (McCartan et al., 2018).

2.3.3.2 *Legal permanence for children in kinship care*

There are different ways of securing legal permanence for children in kinship care arrangements. Notably, all legal orders were initially intended for children requiring either adoption, foster care, or residential care.

2.3.3.2.1 Adoption Orders

Adoption Orders are not commonly used for kinship care arrangements (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019). The Adoption Act 1926 regulated the previously informal arrangement. An Adoption Order is a lifelong order and, in most cases, as well as Special Guardianship Orders, is successful in providing a permanent home for children (Selwyn et al., 2014). An Adoption Order legally revokes the birth family's rights and responsibilities and grants parental rights and responsibilities to the adoptive parents.

Alongside this legal severance, the Adoption Act 1926 originally prevented any contact between birth parents and the adopted child. The legacy of this is the main reason adoption is not used for kinship care arrangements (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019). At the very least, in practical terms, children in kinship care would struggle to have complete separation from their family members whilst also remaining in the family constellation. There are also queries regarding the confusion of roles and identities if a child were, for example, to call their grandmother mum (Freeman and Stoldt, 2019).

2.3.3.2.2 Special Guardianship Orders

Of all the UK permanency options, Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) are the most recently introduced. SGOs are the most prevalent orders used to secure children's legal permanence in formal kinship care arrangements (Wade et al., 2014).

SGOs were intended as an 'adoption-lite' solution to the debates over complete legal severance. It was originally intended to complement adoption as a response to the failed custodianship regime featured in the 1975 Children Act. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 amended section 14(a) of the Children Act 1989 to bring special guardianship into law. The legislation was reinforced by the Special Guardianship Regulations 2005. Initially, it was anticipated that SGOs would mainly be used where a child had developed a strong relationship with a foster carer or for children that had maintained strong links with their birth family. So, it was felt that these should not be completely severed (Wade et al., 2014).

SGOs allow birth parents to share legal parental rights and responsibilities (PR) with the kinship carer(s). However, an SGO grants the carer the majority share of PR. This means that birth parents must be consulted regarding significant issues in the child's life, such as health and education. Nevertheless, the kinship carers can overrule them on any final decisions. This power weighting is reinforced by birth parents having to apply to a court to challenge an SGO once it is established.

2.3.3.2.3 Residence Orders and Care Arrangement Orders

Before SGOs, Residence Orders were often utilised to secure a children's legal permanence with kinship carers. Similar to SGOs, they allowed parents and carers to share PR for the duration of the order. However, this sharing was genuinely equal. Therefore, kinship carers' power to act autonomously was severely limited. Residence Orders were replaced by Child Arrangements Orders, introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014.

2.3.3.2.4 Supervision Orders

A Supervision Order places a duty on the local authority to *"advise, assist and befriend the supervised child"* (CA 1989, s.25(a)). For kinship care, it is usually used in conjunction with other orders, most notably SGOs (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019).

The use of Supervision Orders for kinship care arrangements is subject to ongoing contention. There are concerns that Supervision Orders have been used as a contingency when there has been insufficient time to test the suitability and stability of kinship placements. This especially applicable due to many potential kinship carers being identified late in proceedings (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019). Therefore, it is a risky and potentially unethical strategy to add a Supervision Order onto the SGO because a child's wellbeing and relationship with carers is yet to be tested. This concern was also highlighted in the Special Guardianship (Amendment) Regulations 2016.

2.3.3.3 Emotional permanence
2.3.3.3.1 Emotional permanence and the substitute family

Most authors maintain that a sense of permanence is crucial. This is a sense of belonging and mutual connectedness to feel part of the family (Schofield et al., 2012). Legal standing and legal orders can provide a degree of security from which a sense of permanence can be established. Time and physical stability of a placement can also play a part. However, current research clearly shows that it is vital to think beyond legal permanence and physical stability in order to find the right match for children's needs. Permanence depends on *"securing the right placement, for the right child at the right time"* (Boddy, 2017:2) rather than there being a hierarchy of preferred orders or placement types. It should be noted that many contemporary discourses around emotional permanence are still bound into notions of placement and the need for rapid decisiveness from Courts and social workers. The debates remain service-driven, even for kinship care arrangements.

The way that sense of permanence can be achieved has also been subject to contestation within social work and permanency literature. There are two main counterpoints; substitute psychological parenting, and family preservation and support post-separation.

Psychological parenting was a term first used by Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit (1979; 1986; 1986) in their book trilogy. It refers to a person who has a parental relationship with a child, whether or not they are biologically linked. Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit assumed that parental relationships

were usually derived from biological parenting. As such, there should be a primary focus to maintain biological and 'natural' parenting. Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit suggest that one of the most effective ways to do this is for families to be left alone with minimum intervention. Nevertheless, if parenting is too neglectful or abusive, then the state must get involved. In such a scenario, the best that courts can do is resolve matters quickly. Furthermore, and most importantly, when the child's psychological needs are not being met under such circumstances, then birth parenting should give way entirely. The children instead require substitute parenting and a substitute family that is cut off from previous carers. A child should be separated from these inadequate parents from an early age, from infancy if possible. The debates regarding severance once again come to the fore.

Psychological parenting proposes that the only true permanency option for children who cannot remain in their parents' care is adoption. This accentuates the notion that fostering, residential and kinship care placements cannot be considered long-term solutions. It emphasises that such placements will not allow children to benefit from their need for substitute psychological parenting.

The Children and Families Act 2014 helped emphasise this viewpoint. It removed the general duty to promote contact for looked after children, including those placed for adoption. The move was initiated by Narey, who was the Government's Advisor on Adoption. He aimed to boost adoption numbers and speed up the adoption process. Whilst he did not directly condemn open adoption, in his report for The Times, he stated that post-adoption only adopters should be regarded as the child's "*real and only parents*" (Narey, 2011).

Since Maluccion (1986) and Thoburn (1994), this notion of substitute families and severance has been questioned by academics such as Beihal (2010; 2014a), Boddy (2017), Cossar & Neil (2013), and Featherstone et al. (2018). They agree that it is crucial to recognise the value of permanency in a child's identity formation. They also agree that children's kin networks are essential to them coming to terms with their past, present, and future relationships. However, the debates start from the construction of children's best interests and to what degree these are tied to birth family relationships after separation (Kirton, 2020).

The BASW enquiry emphasised this questioning of birth family severance after separation in relation to ethical and human rights in UK adoption (Featherstone et al., 2018). Key themes that arose included the impact of austerity on low-income families, the lack of resources and tight timescales. This highlights ongoing concerns about whether the adoption process and the

support offered accentuate class inequality (Gillies et al., 2017). The BASW enquiry also portrayed the severance of relationship post-adoption between the children and family members as unjust and damaging to both.

The main arguments against complete severance post-separation are that:

- A child can cope psychologically with multiple caregiving relationships beyond Bowlby's allowance of secondary attachment figures (Cassidy et al., 2013).

- Birth parents will be psychologically present, whether or not they are physically present (Samuels, 2009).

- The complete severance stance utilises particular notions of heteronormative requirements (Hicks, 2005), the norms of the nuclear family, and conservative gender roles which do not reflect current family setups (Goldberg, 2019).

- There are questions regarding the practical viability of post-separation severance in a changing landscape of social media (Greenhow et al., 2017)

Overall, the suggestion is that it may often be more appropriate to maintain birth family involvement in a child's life in some way (Featherstone et al., 2018). This approach was also endorsed by The Care Inquiry (2013). The inquiry recognised that the care system was failing many children, and too often, it focussed on breaking relationships rather than making them.

However, the legacy of adoption and substitute families as the only valid permanency option remains. It often still continues to be touted as the preferred way to secure permanence (Kirton, 2020). For example, in January 2020, the Children's Minister sent a letter to all Directors of Children's Services stating that adoption was to be prioritised by the new government as the route to permanence.

Kinship care adds a different dimension to such debates. Because kinship care arrangements include separation from birth parents whilst remaining in the family constellation, the continuity and discontinuity disputes related to fostering and adoption may not apply. For this reason, there needs to be a better understanding of what permanence and severance mean for children living in the specifics of their kinship care arrangements.

2.4 Regulation and support for children in kinship care arrangements

As can be seen, the Children Act 1989 promoted permanence to be a central consideration for all children under social work's attention. It also attempted to embed the notions of partnership with families and family preservation wherever it is in the child's best interests. Another key stipulation that impacts children in kinship care is the Children Act 1989 legislation for support and monitoring. However, commenters have described this particular bridging of kinship care into the child welfare system as piecemeal, reactive, and based on limited research evidence (O'Brien, 2012).

The two different kinship care types, formal and informal, stipulate what social work support, both practical and financial, are provided. Formal kinship care arrangements, where there has been authorisation by the local authority, are bound by LAC fostering processes (CA 1989, s.22). Informal kinship care arrangements, where the arrangements have been made without official local authority intervention, are usually addressed with support from the child in need processes (CA 1989, s.17).

2.4.1 The assessment, regulation and support for formal kinship care
2.4.1.1 Assessment and regulation of formal kinship care

For formal kinship care, the Children Act 1989 stipulates that if a child is to be cared for by family members, the local authorities must take practical steps to approve them as foster carers under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. Such steps involve a minimum six-week viability assessment. This is intended to evidence the kinship carers' ability to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. A child is allowed to remain in the care of a prospective kinship foster carer for up to 16 weeks during further assessment (Care Planning Placement and Case Review (England) 2010 Regulations, Reg 24). The arrangement can be extended by a further eight weeks when required (Care Planning Placement and Case Review (England) 2010 Regulations, Reg 25). Only in emergencies can children be placed with relatives without an assessment, a court order, or approval of a fostering panel.

Because children in formal kinship care arrangements fall under the local authority's responsibilities and duties, potential kinship foster carers are assessed to fit around the fostering standards and regulation. The majority of regulation was instigated in the Children Act 1989. It now also resides in the Guidance and Regulations Volume 4 Fostering Services (DfE, 2011), the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the Children Act 2004 and the

Children and Young Persons Act 2008. Specific requirements relating to placement planning for looked after children are in the Children Act 1989 regulations and guidance Vol 2, care planning, placement and case review (DfE, 2015). Finally, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and National Minimum Standards (DfE, 2011), as amended, provide a clear framework concerning how foster carers, including kinship foster carers, should be assessed.

There are only two pieces of specific guidance for foster carer assessments that are explicitly aimed at potential kinship carers. The first is Chapter 5 of the 'Family and Friends Care statutory guidance' (DfE, 2011). It provides detailed considerations for practitioners regarding the differences between non-kinship care foster carers and kinship care foster carers. The second is the 'Initial Family and Friends Care Assessment: A good practice guide' (Family Rights Group, 2017). This underlies the need for a collaborative, sensitive, respectful approach to initial assessments that also prepare the potential carers for what lies ahead.

There are many difficulties with fitting kinship cares assessment into this established fostering assessment process. Fundamentally, kinship care is placed within a foster care system designed for relatively short-term placements with strangers. On the other hand, kinship care in England is a permanent solution with known adults, usually with very little chance of reunification (McCartan et al., 2018).

Research has also shown that many kinship carers find the fostering assessment processes intrusive and demeaning, especially when they feel they have brought up children relatively well (Farmer and Moyers, 2008). UK-based non-kinship care foster carers also usually actively choose foster care as a vocation, and so, in a sense, they chose the intrusion and scrutiny after much thought. Non-kinship care foster carers also have long periods of training before approval and are financially compensated for their caring responsibilities. Kinship carers, however, are more likely to become carers due to emergency crises. They have less preparation to ensure that their houses, lifestyles, other caring obligations, and work are aligned with their new caring responsibilities (Taylor et al., 2020). They also have to contend with legal issues around guardianship (Nandy and Selwyn, 2013).

The starkest difference between kinship care foster carers and non-kinship care foster carers is the need for managing ongoing relationships within the family. Non-kinship care foster carers are not central to managing the ongoing family tensions that led to children being unable to remain in their birth parents' care. However, kinship carers often have to assure the children's safety whilst also responding to the birth parents' distress and needs. Kinship carers also often

feel the guilt of their family, and possibly even themselves, contributing to the abuse and neglect (Hingley-Jones et al., 2020).

Finally, kinship carers' personal circumstances are more likely to be different from those of non-kinship carers. To reiterate, kinship carers are more likely to be older, experiencing financial hardship, lack space, isolated, and more likely to be experiencing physical and mental health issues (Nandy and Selwyn, 2013; Taylor et al., 2020). This means that their housing and their lives may not fit fostering standards and regulations. The Family and Friends Care statutory guidance (DfE, 2011) does provide some advice on these matters. It states that although housing may not meet the standards, and although the carers' mental and physical health may be of concern, these are to be noted in the totality of the assessment for suitability. It must be balanced against other factors and noted down for future support once carers have been approved. The guidance also includes some leeway for potential kinship carers that have criminal convictions.

2.4.1.2 Support for formal kinship care arrangements

The flexibility afforded to consider kinship carers as foster carers means that often lower standards of approval are applied to kinship carers in comparison to non-kinship care foster carers (Bowyer et al., 2015). The lowering of thresholds has implications in terms of a child's right to be protected from harm. These concerns are heightened because once kinship carers are approved, they typically get less support (Kinship Care Parliamentary Taskforce, 2020). The illogicality is that placements that typically require more monitoring and support, in reality, receive less.

The support that kinship foster carers and the children in the placements receive should now be aligned with those for non-kinship care foster placements. The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (DfE, 2011) cover the local authorities' responsibilities for all their foster carers, including kinship carers. Kinship foster carers are to receive foster allowances for the children aligned with a child's age. However, the allowances must also consider the carer's experience and skills as a foster carer. This leads to discrepancies in payments, with local authorities still using unlawful strategies to pay kinship carers lower amounts (Davey, 2016).

A child must also have a care plan per their LAC status (CA 1989, s.22(3); Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010). This includes reviewing the care plan

at Looked After Child Reviews, and regular visits to the child and the carers at a maximum interval of six weeks with at least two unannounced visits a year.

Overall, there is a consensus that appropriate support and oversight must be provided for children and their families that are in kinship foster care. Children should only go to placements where there has been appropriate scrutiny and consideration for a child's welfare and protection. The question remains not if they require such things, but how can they fairly and flexibly be delivered. Therefore, there have been repeated calls for the development of different, more relevant appropriate models of kinship care whilst maintaining the standards of scrutiny, monitoring and individual need-based support that foster care systems can provide (Doolan et al., 2004; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Nixon, 2007; O'Brien, 2012, 2014). Using the current foster care system has been described as fitting a square peg into a round hole (Dill, 2010).

2.4.2   The assessment, regulation and support for informal kinship care

Compared to formal kinship care placements, informal arrangements do not have as much access to comprehensive assessments, support services, financial support, or care and permanency planning (MacDonald et al., 2018).

2.4.2.1   Assessments and regulation of informal kinship care

Assessments for informal kinship care only applies to private fostering arrangements. Under section 66 of the Children Act 1989, this is an arrangement where a child has been provided with accommodation for over 28 days by someone who is not a close relative (CA 1989, s.105). This is regulated through the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering (DfE, 2005). Once the local authority is notified of the prospective arrangement, they must visit within seven days to establish whether the arrangement is suitable. Social workers must write an assessment and, if the placement is viable, must visit the children at least every six weeks for the first year and then at least every 12 weeks after that. It has been acknowledged that many people in the UK are unaware of private fostering. Therefore, often the arrangements are not notified to local authorities (Nandy and Selwyn, 2013)

2.4.2.2   Support for informal kinship care arrangements

For private fostering arrangements and all other informal arrangements, because the child is not LAC, most services or support is provided under section 17(1) of the Children Act 1989.

Under this legislation, local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area who are *"in need"*. However, again, this support is discretionary, and there is no automatic entitlement. They are deemed one-off payments and small packages of support, which can be made multiple times. Such families are often not seen as a priority to social work departments who manage limited resources and need to attend to seemingly more urgent crises where there are immediate dangers towards children (Roth et al., 2012).

Informal kinship care may also receive means-tested and other discretionary financial payments, as well as other forms of support from local authorities. However, the overall evidence suggests that informal kinship carers receive very little financial or practical support (Zuchowski et al., 2019). Again, this is worrying considering that kinship carers are likely to be in areas of socioeconomic deprivation and experiencing financial hardship (Nandy and Selwyn, 2013).

2.4.3   Court orders

There are some disagreements in the literature about whether children placed under Court Orders such as SGOs are defined as formal kinship care arrangements irrespective of whether they were previously looked after under foster regulations (MacDonald et al., 2018). This discrepancy is also represented in how these children are assessed and supported by local authorities. If it is a private application, even those taken on under local authorities' insistence, no assessment or support is required. However, if the child has previously been in care, they must have an assessment and an SGO plan provided by the local authority. This may include financial support, although financial support, again, remains at the discretion of local authorities. The lack of local authority obligation is made very clear in the recent Commons Library Briefing (Cromarty et al., 2019) and the Kinship Care Parliamentary Taskforce report (2020).

If children are subject to SGOs, the Adoption Support Fund can also provide therapeutic work for children. This is not available for children that live under other family arrangements such as Child Arrangement Orders or those subject to Section 20 arrangements (DfE, 2020).

2.4.4   The reluctance for formal kinship care arrangements and local authority support
2.4.4.1   The reluctance of the carers

The legislation for kinship care, as first stipulated in the Children Act 1989, perpetuates a paradox. Whilst the emphasis is to keep children with their families as a priority with minimum intervention, if a placement is to be made, then the state should be involved in family life. Private

family life becomes a public concern regarding the permanence for a child. However, private family life requires scrutiny, regulation, assessment, and monitoring by social workers and local authority panel members. This has meant that kinship carers have a reticence to have formal social work involvement even with the need for support (MacDonald et al., 2018).

Even when carers have managed to avoid formal kinship care arrangements, they often do not ask for financial assistance or support when it is required (ibid). This is because of the fear that if they are seen not to be managing, then the children will be removed from their care. This fear is not outside the realities of practice. Selwyn et al. (2013) found that many of the informal kinship carers in their study were told that if they were unable to cope, then the children would have to be fostered or adopted.

2.4.4.2   The reluctance of social workers and local authorities

On the one hand, legislation and policy mandate the support of formal arrangements for children in kinship care. On the other hand, it also provides many potential diversionary routes from the system and social work providing discretionary practical and financial support. There are lots of different ways that local authorities can shirk responsibilities. Many local authorities try to dissuade kinship carers from taking up the formal foster care route whilst not making it clear that carers are likely to receive less support if they make private arrangements (Farmer and Moyers, 2008; Hunt and Waterhouse, 2013; Selwyn et al., 2013; McCartan et al., 2018). This is despite many of the children in kinship care arrangements having similar backgrounds and similar additional needs to others inside the care system (Munro and Gilligan, 2013). Even when kinship carers are approved as foster carers, then social workers will go to great lengths to persuade kinship carers to apply for SGOs and Residence Orders, which was not often seen as fair by carers (Farmer and Moyers, 2008).

It is important here to step back and ensure that blame is not solely placed on local authorities or individual social workers. Social work and local authority policy and practice must be placed in its socio-political context. Budgetary pressures, increased managerialism in social work, and the increase in the individualistic neoliberal ideologies all impact decisions to regulate and support kinship care placements. These all contribute to the evidence that local authorities have a vested interest in not approving kinship carers as kinship foster carers (Hunt and Waterhouse, 2013; Selwyn et al., 2013)

2.4.4.2.1 The impact of budgetary pressures for kinship care

Internationally, and specifically for current UK social work, the financial restrictions are often traced back to the 2008 financial crash, which significantly impacted social services. The subsequent economic recession and retrenchment meant that the government issued policies to rein in public expenditure and raise revenue. The Conservative policy of austerity cut budgets in 2010 by around 25 per cent over the following four years (HM Treasury, 2010). The 2015 Spending Review confirmed even further reductions to departmental budgets. In 2019, there was hope when it was announced that there would be increased spending and an end to austerity. Caution was added, though, and The Spending Review also stated that due to the *"pressures of the time"* (Wheatley et al., 2019:48), such as Brexit and a sense of public distrust, spending and possible cuts would need constant review. It is very likely that the Coronavirus 19 epidemic will again produce more stark years ahead to reduce the much-elevated government debt (Emmerson and Stockton, 2020).

Previously, the significant budget cuts for children's social care services coincided with an increase in the number of families living in poverty. This led to an increase in demand for children's services (Crenna-Jennings, 2018). The demands have been increasing each year for over a decade, with around half of all local authorities' expenditure on children's services for children who are looked after (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019). This led to 91% of local authorities overspending on children's social care in 2017-2018. As such, it has been realised that spending can be cut by reducing looked after children numbers and by placing them in informal kinship care where support, both practical and financial, are discretionary. Furthermore, even when the local authorities finance kinship arrangements, placement start-up costs are lower, there are no recruitment costs, and less training is given (McCartan et al., 2018). Kinship care then is *'financially attractive for cash-strapped local authorities'* (McGhee et al., 2018:1192).

2.4.4.2.2 The impact of the modernisation of social work on kinship care

In the UK, there has been a rise of neoliberalism and its resulting individualistic rhetoric. This rhetoric has become pervasive and suggests that families are no longer judged to be struggling in the face of adversity, a presumption that arguably informed the UK 1989 Children Act. Instead, they are presented as wilfully failing to exercise sound judgement to take up opportunities to become hard-working families. It places individuals as self-interested rational actors with either the ability to manage their issues or else having difficulties in doing so (Houston, 2016)

Again, this brings the public versus private concern debate to the fore. Neoliberalism and the subsequent individualism have impacted how family's responsibilities are viewed in policy and by social work practitioners. This, along with the *"politics of withdraw"* (Edwards et al., 2012:739), has helped form a new punitiveness (Pratt et al., 2013). They have an impact on how kinship care arrangements are supported (Hingley-Jones et al., 2020). It has pushed blame and responsibility onto either the families themselves or individual social workers (Winter and Cree, 2016).

Reactions of the public highlight such discourses. Many have blamed professionals for the deaths of children at the hands of caregivers. Most notably, public discourse persecuted social workers after the scandal of Baby P and the murder of Ellie Butler. Ellie's case relates explicitly to kinship care. Ellie stayed with kinship carer grandparents until ordered to return to her birth father, who killed her. Newspaper headlines declared that the Local Authority had *"blood on their hands"* (Taylor, 2018). This shows that processes such as neoliberalism and individualism help cement the beliefs that social workers should know about and be intervening much more with risky families. On the other hand, individualism also helps support the view, almost in contradiction, that it is the responsibility of family to care appropriately for their own without kudos, payment, or state intervention.

This blaming of either the service users or the social workers has led to the development of defensively orientated bureaucratic child protection systems. It reordered social work into what Harris (2003) termed the 'social work business', which has also been increasingly plagued by the introduction of market disciplines. This is also known as the modernisation and managerialism of social work, focusing on 'best value', 'consumerism', and 'performance' (Diaz and Hill, 2019). Social work time and service user progress have become measurable to hopefully increase efficiency and move service users through the service as quickly as possible.

2.5   A new approach to kinship care

The managerialism and modernisation surrounding social work practice have meant that work with kinship care has had to be primarily process-driven, centred around cutting costs and evaluating and prioritising one family's needs over another. As can be seen, kinship care has been slotted into existing practices, legislation and policy that have already been established. Social work policy and practice have co-opted the ideals of collaboration with families, permanence, and practical and financial support but on the philosophies that originated for concerns with children in adoptive, fostering, and residential placements. Whilst this has

provided a useful stopgap, such ideals have not been able to be reasonably upheld. This has led to various crisis reviews, research, and literature claims that the current systems are not fit for purpose when applied to children living in kinship care arrangements (Munro and Gilligan, 2013). It has meant that assessment and support have been short-handed to be based on legal orders intended for other situations and family lives. This is despite the guidance asserting that social work decisions about support to kinship carers and their families should be taken based on need, not legal status (Department for Education, 2010).

The focus on the basis of need is not unfamiliar territory for social work. Again, it is one of the tenets of the Children Act 1989. However, it is crucial to determine what the specific needs of children in kinship care arrangements are. One way to find out is to take a bottom-up approach rather than top-down prescriptions that clash with the realities of practice and where the duties outlined in the Children Act 1989 are unlikely to be deliverable (Preston-shoot, 2001). Theories, policy and practices can then emerge from the starting point of children's perspectives (Winter, 2010)

> *"By using children's voices, and by listening to their unique*
> *experiences, we can begin to understand kinship care, in each*
> *of its forms, from the perspective of those most affected."*
> *(Messing, 2006:1433)*

2.6   Conclusion

Despite the clear guidance in the Children Act 1989, social workers have difficulty fitting kinship care into traditional notions of permanence, fostering, adoption, and support for children in placements. This is compounded by personal values and the socio-political arena in which contemporary social work is placed. The intersections of kinship care, private family life, public responsibility, social work practice, risk, and the need for permanence are complex. Often, they stand in contention with each other. This leads to social workers' ambivalence around the strengths and challenges of kinship care. Social workers can be unsure of what to do and be easily led by the cheapest intervention, if any, rather specific needs-centred approaches. The recent Parliamentary Taskforce report on kinship care (2020) highlights this deficit in practice and support.

One possible solution, not approached in most kinship care studies, is that services should be shaped around the children's own notions of permanence and safe care by family. Rather than a top-down approach that forces children in kinship care into systems that are not designed for

them; instead, services should be built up from the children's lived experiences. It is proposed that this will give way to new understandings that are more fitting to what truly matters in these children's lives. It can provide policy, practice, and legislation that fits better with the realities of their experiences of permanence and family life.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review -

The Absent Voices and the Limited Insights of a Child's Family Life in Kinship Care

Kimberley – "They should listen to children as well because they might have things that they would like to say and maybe they have things that they'd like adults to hear. And it's not all of the time that adults are properly listening to them"

The previous chapter showed how, after the Children Act 1989, kinship care became a state-endorsed intervention and a concern for social work in the UK. It became a permanence option and the preferred placement choice for children who could not remain in their birth parents' care (Selwyn and Nandy, 2014). It was also shown that the majority of policy currently considers a child's sense of permanence and identity as important indicators of their wellbeing and happiness (Boddy, 2017). This demonstrates a need to think beyond legal permanence and placement stability. However, there remain queries around what a sense of permanence means to children living in kinship care, how to plan for it effectively, and how appropriately to support it. One solution is to, as Kimberley requests, *"listen to children as well".* Children living in kinship care arrangements should be listened to about their family life and experiences. When placed alongside the more empirically based quantitative research, this can assist policymakers and practitioners to target the child's specific needs (Casas, 2011).

This literature review explores the current positioning of children's views in kinship care social work literature and research. Firstly, it describes the review's methodology and why it was vital to include literature that moved away from the typical theoretical constructions used in social work and kinship care research. The chapter then looks at the legal, conceptual and practical benefits of listening to children for social work practice, policy, and research. This stresses the absolute importance of children's views but also the need for different ways of thinking about childhood, children, and their voice.

The chapter then focusses explicitly on children's views, or rather the absence of them in kinship care research. This absence of children's views alongside the traditionally methodological stances used in most kinship care studies leads to generalised and often mixed findings. Many lack a theoretical base, and, similar to literature for looked after children, many are comparative and quantitative, which result in descriptive studies (Holland, 2009). These tell us about the

what but do not tell us much about the how. The concluding part of this chapter involves a discussion of new ways forward, which involve the sole perspectives of children and the use of more sociological understandings to examine better the experiences and sense of permanence for these children.

3.1 Methodology of the literature review into the views of children living in kinship care

A narrative literature review was conducted. These are interpretative-qualitative in nature and give insight into general debates, appraisal of previous studies and the current lack of knowledge (Collins and Fauser, 2005).

Initially, an attempt was made to confine the review to literature that directly relates to permanence and kinship care in a UK context. However, due to the relative paucity of the literature relating to kinship care, international findings have been included if they were in, or translated into, English. These relate to the broader issues of kinship care and permanence, but they are deemed relevant and transferable to a UK context.

The literature was analysed using thematic analysis, and ontological and epistemological assumptions were given due attention. The literature was critiqued whilst being mindful of the policy agora (Brown, 2014). This phenomenon suggests that literature is often skewed towards popular discourse, such as the rise of evidence-based practice in social work (Drisko and Grady, 2019). This affects which research is promoted, legitimised, and given validity in policy. Furthermore, Brown (2014) claims that research is often only funded if it fits with established mainstream ideologies, particularly if they complement the elected government's rhetoric. It was, therefore, essential to discover not only what literature is present but also what ways of thinking the available research supports and what types of research are missing.

A comprehensive search was conducted using a range of key phrases and Boolean operators. Initially, UK search terms such as "kinship care" and "family and friends care" were used as well as international terms such as "kincare", "grandfamilies" and "relative care". For the purposes of this thesis, I have also focused on the key areas and constructs in the field of social work. These are specifically "permanence", "children's views", and "children's participation".

Electronic databases were searched via the University Library search engine. The databases searched included Scopus, ASSIA, IBSS, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Cochrane, Campbell, Social

Care Online, and Sociological Abstracts. Google scholar was used, as well as a subscription to its alerts. Alerts were also set up on Scopus, Web of Science. The alerts were set up from December 2016 to September 2021.

A snowball technique was then undertaken using references from articles to source further literature. Grey literature was also explored. These are articles or research published through universities, governments, charities, and organisations such as CoramBAAF and Grandparents Plus, who undertake their own research and are collaborators in this research. While many of these were informative and signposted other literature of relevance, many were not peer-reviewed and did not meet the inclusion criteria.

Another critical consideration was what constitutes social work research and literature? This is an even more pertinent question considering the paucity of kinship care literature and the limited conceptualisations of research and childhood used in a lot of social work literature (Graham, 2011). Although social work research does not have a distinctive theoretical or methodological base, at its core, the purposes and contexts of social work give its research methodology a distinctive shape (Shaw and Holland, 2014). I have, therefore, also included key literature in children's rights, childhood studies, and children's voice in research and policy, where it has had clear relevance to social work.

3.2 Why should social workers and social work researchers listen to children?

There are three reasons why social work practitioners and researchers should listen to children's views: legal, conceptual, and practical (McCafferty, 2017).

3.2.1 Legal reasons for social work to listen to the views of children

It is a child's right to have their views heard. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989 gives children the right not only to express their views but also have those views taken seriously for *"all matters affecting them"* (UNCRC, 1989). All matters include not only day-to-day practice and service delivery. The UNCRC also clearly states that children's right to protection, provision, and participation must be integrated and applied to social, economic, and political policymaking (Muscroft, 1999). Finally, the UNCRC includes children's right to be properly researched (Beazley et al., 2009).

For social work, including children's voices in practice has seen a dramatic shift in the last few decades (Lansdown, 2010). This need to listen to children is also in line with the values and

practices entrenched within social work regarding child's rights (Denzin, 2002). It is especially true for children that have been subject to abuse and neglect in their families (Moran-Ellis, 2010). The Children Act 1989 explicitly mandates that practitioners must take into account children's wishes and feelings. It is said that this is not only their right and enhances democracy, but importantly it is essential for their protection (Sinclair, 2004).

Children's involvement as a means of protecting children is also found in the influential document 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (DfE, 2018). Furthermore, in her review of the children protection system, Eileen Munro stressed the importance of listening to children, although she acknowledged this is not always straightforward (Munro, 2011). A common theme that emerged from her review suggested that social workers were not consistently listening to the voice of the child.

Such legislation, research and guidance have led social work practitioners and local authorities to attempt to focus on giving voice to children and young people who are receiving services (Lansdown, 2010). This is particularly the case for those in foster care (Nybell, 2013). These include The Children's Commissioner for England's annual survey of care leavers and those in care. However, this is a long survey with low response rates. The most recent in 2019 focussed on the instability of placements and how this affected the quality of children's lives. Instability was a theme chosen not by children but from the Placement Stability Index. This raises questions about how child-centred the survey is. If the design was not particularly accessible, and adults imposed the theme under investigation, this queries how effectively the views were obtained about what mattered to the children.

Local authorities also run children in care councils to hear the views of children who receive services. However, these are small groups of people that usually have minimal impact on decision making (Wright et al., 2006). Some local authorities have also devised their own surveys for children receiving services. These are not publicly available, but generally, they are:

> *"poorly devised, very long and with potentially upsetting questions that are conceptually confused." (Selwyn et al., 2017:366)*

Overall, in social work practice and research, few effective practices actively seek the views of children and young people who are not in their birth parents' care (Mannay et al., 2019). There is often a lack of space or time for such practices of talking with children (Kennan et al., 2018). This paucity of listening to children's voices is further evident for social work studies relating

specifically to kinship care. Recently, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2019) reviewed both international kinship care and its corresponding Special Guardianship Orders in the UK. It made it clear that there were only a few small studies with children's views of kinship care and *"a dearth of studies"* on children's experiences of special guardianship. It summarised that *"…this significant gap in knowledge and understanding must be addressed."* (Harwin, Simmonds, et al., 2019:15). This dearth is reiterated in other kinship care literature, which also claims that it is imperative to research children's experiences of these arrangements (e.g., Messing, 2006; Owusu-Bempah, 2010; Pitcher, 2013; Kallinen, 2020).

3.2.2   Conceptual reasons for social work to listen to the views of children
3.2.2.1   Concepts typically used in social work research with children

Whether implied or explicit, a particular theoretical perspective of childhood underlies any piece of research about or involving children (Harden et al., 2000). Hodes (1992) remarks that there are often many different contrasting views.

> *"[T]he diversity of ideas people have about children is as striking as*
> *the convictions with which they are held." (Hodes, 1992:258)*

This presents a challenge for researchers but especially for social worker researchers because theory matters in social work. However, there is not one sole distinctive theoretical or methodological base (Shaw and Lorenz, 2016). This is due to social work having two main tasks. Firstly, it is a complex professional activity to individuals which borders on the activities of other professionals, such as medicine and psychology. The other aim is to further social integration, social justice, and solidarity (Lorenz, 2016). Therefore, there must be a focus on both individual and societal change. Different theories, some conflicting, are required to encompass this.

Despite understanding this tension, social work primarily utilises conventional models of childhood that focus on the individual. In particular, much social work research is based on child development and socialisation (Graham, 2011). This is because whilst social work often tries to address its "*kind of inferiority complex*" (Lorenz, 2016:456) with other disciplines and professions, it is also coerced into the political interests emanating from neoliberal social policies. These favour a positivist meaning of evidence with implications of value neutrality (Reisch and Jani, 2012). For example, direct work with children often overuses insights from psychodynamic and attachment theories (Smith et al., 2017). This is especially true when examining loss and a sense of permanence for children that cannot remain with their birth parents. Such focus is seen as beneficial because it explores the meaning of events and

relationships for children and their inner lives. It helps children understand what has happened within their family during separation and can help them build identity formation (Fahlberg, 1994).

Another example of conventional models used is resiliency-based approaches. These are also prolific in social work. Especially during the 1990s, enhancing resilience in children became a sought-after goal of interventions (Hook, 2019). The concept of resilience also emerges from child development and socialisation. Resilience highlights the capacity of children to recover from trauma or to demonstrate competence and cope despite continuous or cumulative adversity (Bottrell, 2009). Literature focussing on resilience is often grounded in an ecological paradigm informed by systems theory. It recognises differences in developmental pathways as processes of transactions, such as individuals in relationships and environments that foster resilience (ibid).

Although both child development and socialisation approaches are undoubtedly useful, such conceptual suppositions typically create research that positions children as passive objects. It also allows them to be perceived as consumers of a service that need to achieve predetermined outcomes (Morrison et al., 2019). They also usually centre around the deficits in children (Graham, 2011). This, in turn, influences social and health policies, which can be constrained by a view that prioritises children only as future citizens in terms of human capital (Morrow, 2008). The aim is for children to become valued, healthy, law-abiding adults. Throughout many neo-liberal social policies, the emphasis is on children as 'becomings', not 'beings' (Qvortrup, 1994).

3.2.2.2   The new sociology of childhood – the child as an agent in need of belonging

The new sociology of childhood (Jenks, 2005) challenges these dominant paradigms of child development and socialisation that inform most social work research and policies, especially around permanence and children in out-of-home care. Since the 1990s, the new sociology of childhood began repositioning children as subjects, rather than objects, of research (Mason and Hood, 2011). Rather than individualised studies of childhood, this alternative paradigm centred on the context of children's lives. It did so by moving away from the traditional views in child psychology but also of traditional sociology, which also tended to perceive children in passive roles, lacking adult capacities. It took a more interactive approach, where children did not merely internalise the social world but also interacted with structures and strived to make sense of their culture. They were accorded agency as social persons. This challenged notions that

children are adults in the making (James et al., 1998). It emphasised children as 'beings', rather than 'becomings'.

The new sociology of childhood stressed children's own voices as most reflective of themselves, their lived experiences, and their realities (Graham, 2011). Children's views became worthy of, if not an essential addition to, research. This approach is rarely seen for kinship care because the private world of family, experiences, and relationships are often devalued in favour of public knowledge based on observation of it as a service (Reisch and Jani, 2012). Children's views in kinship care research remain a secondary, less reliable and less valid endeavour.

3.2.2.3 Critiques of the new sociology of childhood

For the last few years, there have been emerging critiques of the new sociology of childhood. This is because it often valorises the child's voice and agency to the point of fetishism (Spyrou et al., 2018). Human agency is core to social work (Hugman, 2009). Typically, social work practice theories and frameworks position agency as socially mediated, but they also position service users with self-determination (Parsell et al., 2016). Both are important.

Nevertheless, the new sociology of childhood has been accused of replacing a child's image as vulnerable, dependant, and developmentally deficient with another image of the autonomous, competent, capable, knowing, yet constructed child. This allows agency to remain parochialised as property, something that a child either has or does not. However, authors such as those in the book 'Reimagining Childhood Studies' (Spyrou et al., 2018) propose that agency should be seen as a relational dynamic, a process between different interdependent entities. It is an assemblage of sorts and is the relationship in-between (Oswell, 2012). Such approaches to conceptualising agency avoid the pitfall of considering it an *"essential identity, position or characteristic"* (Tisdall, 2016:365).

To put it another way, whilst the new sociology of childhood gives voice more status in research, it often constructs it as something singular, unwavering, inherently positive and something that is awaiting discovery. Its notion of voice also has limited focus by utilising constructions of Global North, white, middle-class norms that dominate the UNCRC framework (Horgan et al., 2017). This overemphasis on a Minority World view neglects the importance of different childhood experience, such as children's interdependence within the family in the Majority World. For this reason, there have been new calls to decolonise childhood studies (Cheney, 2018).

The other disputes against the new sociology of childhood are that human and non-human materialities are often disregarded in favour of discourse so that the 'new' paradigm can separate itself from the preceding biological, psychological and developmental discourses (Kraftl and Horton, 2018). Simply there has been a replacing of nature with culture, the material with the discursive, and structure with agency (Spyrou, 2019). This type of hard social constructionism is further explored in the next chapter, which discusses ontology and epistemology.

The last criticism pertinent to social work research is that in the new sociology of childhood, children are often seen as just beings. Many authors now view children and adults instead as both 'beings' and 'becomings' (Spyrou et al., 2018). This not only breaks down adult/child dualisms but also, for social workers, gives credence to them working on both the present and future lives of children (Uprichard, 2008).

3.2.3   Practical reasons for social work to listen to the voice of children

When researching and listening to children, it is essential to be mindful of the above debates around childhood, rights, and agency. This is especially true for social work research and practice, where it is crucial to understand a child's sense of permanence and identity. It is not enough for studies to end on an *"upbeat note",* stating children need to be given voice in the future (Lesko and Talburt, 2012:280). Children also need to be seen as active in constructing their lives in the present. They are making do and getting by (Crosby et al., 2012). As such, practitioners should be concentrating on what the children are currently doing to meet their own needs and how they are currently navigating permanency within their family lives. Practitioners should be listening to how the children are utilising their agency and how they are helping to construct their own lives. Social workers should view how children are currently doing kinship care and encompass this in any intervention.

Listening to children in this way can also promote their wellbeing (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2020). Involving children in decision-making contributes to their personal development by empowering and enhancing self-esteem and social skills (Vis et al., 2011). Involvement can prepare children for civil society and teaches tolerance and respect for others (Ochs and Izquierdo, 2009). It also helps move away from children feeling services view them as just a problem child or individuals with just deficits (Sandbæk, 1999). It has even been found to help children and young people protect themselves from further abuse (Vis et al., 2011).

Involving children also can improve decision-making processes and outcomes by ensuring that decisions are more inclusive and responsive to explicit and stated need. Services can then be designed and evaluated based on more tailored, informed, inclusive, and democratic constituency (Barnes, 2012). Service delivery becomes more child-centric, based on what children state they need instead of mostly adult-centric, based on what adults think children need. As a further consequence of this type of involvement, accountability and transparency can improve, with children given the right to hold decision-makers to account.

3.3 The views of children in kinship care research

The benefits of including children's views in both research and social work practice are numerous. However, at the time of writing, children's voices have been included in just under 25 published pieces of international social work research that focus specifically on kinship care. This is not a large amount considering the prevalence of kinship care arrangements. Furthermore, most of these studies differ in their scope, methodologies, and where they took place. For example, one was undertaken in Ghana (Kuyini et al., 2009), and six were from Spain, but only two of these, by Montserrat (2007) and Montserrat and Casas (2006), were translated to English. The majority of studies that sought views from children originate from the US (e.g. Brown et al., 2002; Messing, 2006; Dolbin-MacNab and Keiley, 2009; Sands et al., 2009), some are from Norway (e.g. Holtan, 2008; Holtan et al., 2005), two are from Sweden (Hedin, 2012, 2014), one is from Finland (Kallinen, 2020), three are from Australia (e.g. Hislop *et al.*, 2004; Downie *et al.*, 2010; Kiraly and Humphreys, 2013), and the remaining three are from the UK (e.g. Hunt et al., 2008; Farmer et al., 2013; Selwyn et al., 2013).

3.3.1 Kinship care research solely examining the views of children

Research solely examining the views of just the child in kinship care are even scarcer (DfE, 2014). Most are part of larger studies that include the views of adults, such as carers, professionals, or birth parents (e.g., Broad et al., 2001; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Hunt et al., 2008; Farmer et al., 2013; Selwyn et al., 2013; Wellard et al., 2017). The concern here is that children's voices on their own are deemed inadequate. Often adults' views are thought more reliable and knowledgeable than those of children. Therefore, when research does combine the two, adults' views are likely to take precedence, and policies and practices may develop that do not entirely address children's realities (Tay-Lim and Lim, 2013). This is why there needs to be more kinship care research that is not diluted or persuaded by adult voices (Pitcher, 2013; Kallinen, 2020).

The few studies that have researched solely with children's views are mainly from countries other than the UK. These have small samples and mainly focus on formal kinship care (e.g., Altshuler, 1999; Hislop et al., 2004; Fox et al., 2008; Burgess et al., 2010; Kallinen, 2020). Whilst these may be efficient for recruitment purposes, not all of the children's views are likely to reflect the 95% of informal care in the UK (Selwyn and Nandy, 2014). One exception is Messing's (2006) US study which used focus groups to explore the views of children in informal kinship care.

The two UK studies that ascertain the views of children without the views of adults are from Scotland, by Aldgate (2009) and Burgess (2010). Although both informative and thorough, the difficulties with the Scottish studies are that Scotland has a different legal system to the family court system in England & Wales. As such, there may plausibly be differences in how the children view the influence of legal permanence on their sense of permanence.

3.3.2   Overall findings from kinship care studies that examine the views of children

Although kinship care research that includes the views of children is subject to different attentions, methodologies, and contexts, some themes appear throughout:

- Overwhelmingly, most children were happy with their care arrangements, their lives in general, and their kinship carers. They felt love, care, kindness, and belonging (Altshuler, 1999; Broad et al., 2001; Hislop et al., 2004; Messing, 2006; Montserrat and Casas, 2006; Boada, 2007; Burgess et al., 2010; Downie et al., 2010; Kallinen, 2020).

- The children felt that their caring arrangement was currently stable, but not necessarily permanent (Altshuler, 1999; Broad et al., 2001; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Messing, 2006; Boada, 2007; Hunt et al., 2008; Selwyn et al., 2013; Kallinen, 2020). This may be due to the children worrying about the health concerns of their, usually older, carers (Hislop et al., 2004; Farmer et al., 2013; Selwyn et al., 2013).

- Many felt a sense of unresolved loss (Hislop et al., 2004; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Downie et al., 2010; Farmer et al., 2013; Selwyn et al., 2013). The family relationships as a whole were often marked by absence and difficulties, which made them ambiguous as well as significant (Kiraly and Humphreys, 2013b; Kallinen, 2020)

- Many felt that the kinship carers had old fashioned parenting styles, were stricter than other parents, and stifled their independence (Broad et al., 2001; Hislop et al., 2004; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Broad, 2006; Kuyini et al., 2009; Downie et al., 2010)

- Many of the children highlight family relationship and contact issues with birth parents, siblings and extended family. They often felt not listened to about these matters (Hislop et al., 2004; Holtan, 2008; Burgess et al., 2010; Downie et al., 2010; Kiraly and Humphreys, 2013b; Wellard et al., 2017)

- Many of the studies highlighted that the children felt a stigma about their family life and so would tell nobody, or almost nobody about it (Hislop et al., 2004; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Messing, 2006; Boada, 2007; Burgess et al., 2010; Downie et al., 2010; Farmer et al., 2013)

- Many of the children talked about financial and environmental stress on their families, such as overcrowding (Broad et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2002; Hislop et al., 2004; Broad, 2006; Downie et al., 2010).

Notably, in Aldgate and McIntosh's (2006) study, children were in contact with a wide range of relatives, and most of them were in contact with their siblings not living with them. The children tended to make no distinction between siblings, *"half-siblings"*, and *"stepsiblings"*, who were often equally important to them.

There have also been a few retrospective studies in recent years capturing kinship care alumni's views (Dolbin-MacNab and Keiley, 2009; del Valle et al., 2011; Wellard et al., 2017; Cudjoe et al., 2019). The findings from these studies suggest that there is a lack of resources after the caring arrangement officially concludes. Poverty, unemployment, and cultural and religious beliefs can also cause challenges for both carers and children. These studies also showed that kinship care could provide benefits to, but also issues with, contact with the children's siblings and birth parents. The children also appreciated that kinship care could provide continuity for them in terms of stability and closeness of family relationships. Whilst the studies reiterate findings from other child perspective studies, they focus on the impact of kinship care on where they are now as adults. They are retrospective and reliant on adults' memories and current context. Therefore, their views are more likely to be adult-centric and less likely to capture how the children are currently making do and getting by (Bell and Bell, 2018).

All of the above findings provide a good scope of kinship care's benefits and challenges, although they provide limited attention to the how. For example, many of the children felt that their caring arrangement was stable yet not permanent. This does not help fully explain the child's feeling of how permanence and stability may, or may not, be related. They were also happy, but again this does not, outside hypotheses and inferences, give insight into the link between

happiness and a sense of permanence or stability. Different studies will cite different reasons, depending on their research paradigms and a priori views. This means that the researchers can often only combine correlations with causes, turning possibilities into probabilities and then into facts and certainties (Alderson, 2013).

3.3.3   The views of children in kinship care from broader LAC studies

Another way that the children's views have been sought is through larger general studies with children in local authority care. There have been several literature reviews that explore these children's views of their care experiences, including children in kinship care (e.g., Dickson et al., 2010; Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017; Wood and Selwyn, 2017). Again, only broad findings can be made for these children, especially those in kinship care. These are that the children stated they were generally happy in the care arrangements, noting the importance of relationships with their family and the wider community. However, they would have preferred to have remained in the care of their birth parents if possible. They also wished to be more involved in decision making.

In terms of researching permanence in these broader studies, the children spoke about a need for stability of the placement and having a sense of belonging. They also wished for an understanding of their life story. The detailed UK survey for 'Our Lives, Our Care' also highlighted the importance of pets (Selwyn et al., 2018). Unfortunately, none of the separate studies or those included in the literature reviews could definitively correlate between different needs in relation to whether they were fostered or were in kinship care arrangements.

One of the most significant studies for this research that includes children in kinship care in LAC research is Biehal (2014a). She compared the views of children in kinship care with those in foster care. The study directly examines a child's sense of permanence. It utilises a range of theoretical perspectives, including attachment, developmental, socialisation, and sociological understandings of family. The children in the study showed the myriad of ways that they are able to perceive belonging. Such perceptions were shaped by the interplay of past and present experiences, mental representations and relationships.

3.3.3.1   The challenges of including kinship care into broader children in care studies

There are three issues with including kinship care in LAC studies. Firstly, this engages in the debate around whether kinship care is better or worse than other 'placement' options. It operates from the evidence-based 'what works for kinship care as a service?' framework hoping

that social work can tailor more effective practice. This often attempts to smooth over and aggregate the vast complex, interweaving differences between placement types. It takes a more surface outcome-led approach, looking at what adults feel matters to children in local authority care. It again can only focus on the what rather than the how.

Secondly, as previously mentioned, formal kinship care represents only 5% of kinship care arrangements in the UK. Therefore, 95% of the children in UK kinship care placements are just not represented.

Thirdly, as stated in the previous chapter, comparing foster care with kinship care and providing services on that basis is like 'Fitting a Square Peg into a Round Hole' (Dill, 2010).

There is also a selection bias inherent in such studies. Placement types will be selected based on availability and accessibility both for the research and in practice. The advantages and disadvantages accrued and unequal selection and representation into the type of care are confounding factors for existing research (Xu and Bright, 2018). Such comparisons may obscure the specific characteristics and needs of families concerned with kinship care. It may also obscure the existence of different subgroups of families sharing similar characteristics (Dorval et al., 2020)

3.4   Theories of kinship care

A central argument proposed throughout this thesis is that it is essential, especially when examining kinship care and permanence, to include different ways of conceptualising childhood and children, but also family. Usually, social work utilises only psychosocial risk discourses to interpret childhood experiences (Pupavac, 2001). Such frames of reference or "*schemata of interpretation*" enable but also restrict ways of understanding (Goffman, 1974:21). Kinship care is not just a social work intervention; it is also a complex continuation of family relationships and practices. It is inadequate to research a sense of permanence in kinship care solely utilising approaches from developmental and socialisation theories or through the evaluation of foster-care practices and procedures. Furthermore, childhoods and children in kinship care are heterogenous affairs both materially but also conceptually. Methods and methodologies must, therefore, account for different experiences but also be able to conceive those experiences in different ways. They must move forward beyond only using theories produced from psychological, developmental, and socialisation theories and more readily include others, such as sociological conceptualisations.

Skoglund and Thørnblad (2017) progress this point further about kinship care. They state that upbringing by relatives, childhood, parenthood and kin involvement in child-rearing has been of interest to sociologists, anthropologists, and historians for decades before the 1990s when kinship care became a significant part of child protective services. Nevertheless, these traditions have been paid little attention to in social work research in kinship care. Instead, there is a propensity to understand it solely as a service within child protective services. This directs studies towards outcomes such as placement stability, risk, effects, and comparisons to other out-of-home placements, rather than as a context in which family life is practised. It is studied "*more as a technology and less as a family*" (Skoglund and Thørnblad, 2019:4). Fallesen and Andersen (2015) reiterate that researching outcomes and effects is useful as descriptive evidence but has limited use for policy recommendations or whether or not to use kinship care for a particular family.

Such use of only particular theoretical and conceptual framings can be seen throughout kinship care research history and development. Overall, there is relatively little explicit integration of well-conceived theory in the relatively small amount of kinship care research or policies compared to other subjects of study (Kang, 2007). However, the studies that have integrated theory are described below.

Some of the earliest thinking about kinship care as a social work practice focused on theories of intergenerational cycles of abuse (Geen and Berrick, 2002; Connolly, 2003). Later, as previously described, kinship care was conceptualised, along with other studies on childhood, using other types of behavioural biology, although to limited degrees. These include Testa's (2002) use of inclusive fitness, Testa and Shook Slack's (2002) utilisation of gift relations, Herring's (2008) implications of behavioural biology, Herring et al.'s (2009) use of evolutionary theory, and Pratchett and Rees' (2017) exploration of altruism, inclusive fitness and social identity theory. Music and Crehan (2014) utilised a psychoanalytic child psychotherapy approach, and Ziminski (2007, 2014) utilised systemic family therapy. Connolly at al. (2016) suggested the use of a life-course approach.

For kinship care, attachment theory has been the grounding of much literature as well as for the related policies on different types of placements and permanence (Simmonds, 2014). However, behavioural biology, child development, attachment theory, and permanency cannot offer complete explanations or solely be the basis for planning. This is because they tend to place the majority of the responsibility on individuals. For example, Belsky (2010) warns that attachment theory's overuse often causes sociocultural factors to be ignored.

In terms of more sociologically informed research and literature, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory was used to place kinship care within socio-macro context (Hong et al., 2011; Pratchett and Rees, 2017); as have social capital theory (Kang, 2007), complexity theory (Warren-Adamson and Stroud, 2015), game and exchange theory (Testa and Shook Slack, 2002) and structural-functional theories (Pratchett and Rees, 2017). Pubustan-Char (2007) compared stability and permanence outcomes for kinship and non-kinship placements using biological (kinship theory), economics (game theory), and sociological perspectives (social interaction theory and gift theory) to provide a continuum for kinship altruism. Holtan and Thørnblad (2009) and Lara (2013) placed kinship care in the arena of gender, class, labour force and neoliberalism, and Owusu-Bempah (2010) presented the concept of socio-genealogical connectedness. O'Brien (2014) developed a new conceptual model for kinship care assessment using systemic, social constructivist and narrative ideas. Kallinen (2020) recently built on the concept of personal life and kinship care, as discussed by Smart (2007). Hingley Jones et al. (2020) used Mason's (2008) conceptualisations of family affinity and the ways this interacts with the *"politics of withdrawal"* (Edwards et al., 2012:739).

3.5   Findings from studies that have not involved the voice of the child

Despite these innovative approaches, most kinship care research and its corresponding policies still use a service-driven 'what works?' framework. This is often a more rational, descriptive, pragmatic approach and a less theory-based research type (Gray et al., 2009). Most focus on the following outcomes:

- Placement stability & legal permanence

- Relationship quality and emotional stability

- Child wellbeing

- Placement quality   (Hunt et al., 2008)

These inform the structure of the rest of the chapter. However, the studies do not incorporate the voice of the child and have examined the role of kinship care rather than children's perspectives of it. The research is done about the children rather than with them.

3.5.1   Legal Permanence and placement stability

As previously discussed, permanency is the achievement of the emotional (attachment), physical (stability) and legal (carer has parental responsibility) permanence, which aims to give

a child a sense of continuity throughout their childhood (DCSF, 2010). Most studies that focus on permanence in kinship care fall into the two broad categories of legal permanency and placement stability. A sense of permanence or emotional permanence is often secondary. Furthermore, many are comparative. For example, the majority of studies examine how kinship care placement influences legal permanency (i.e., reunification, adoption, and legal guardianship) in comparison to non-kinship placements (e.g., Koh and Testa, 2008; Koh, 2010; Ryan *et al.*, 2010). Overall, the findings are mixed, with some studies suggesting that kinship care often causes delays in time and can reduce the overall likelihood of legal permanence. Others suggest that it increases the likelihood.

It has also been found that in England and Wales, reunification with birth parents is less common (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019). This is likely due to how kinship care is viewed in the UK as an alternative arrangement to last for the rest of childhood rather than a temporary holding position as it is more commonly viewed by other countries (McCartan et al., 2018).

Ryan et al. (2010) explicitly examined the kinship adoptive experience compared to other non-kinship adoption types. The researchers concluded that regarding the legal order of adoption:

"Kinship adoptions appear more readily to produce positive outcomes and permanent placements" (Ryan et al., 2010:1631).

When considering stability, studies typically examine how kinship care placement influences placement stability compared to non-kinship placements (e.g., Koh, 2010; Perry *et al.*, 2012; Font, 2015). These studies found that kinship care placement predicts more stability. Kinship placements are less likely to break down, and children are less likely to have multiple placements (Koh, 2010). However, it has also been found that if placements are unsatisfactory, children are less likely to move (Farmer and Moyers, 2008; Farmer, 2010). Therefore, the absence of breakdowns does not always equate to the absence of unhappiness or a child's sense of permanence (Sinclair, 2005).

In contradiction, other studies have found that in terms of stability, most children do not benefit additionally from being placed with kin (Andersen and Fallesen, 2015). What is generally now agreed is that they appear as stable or sometimes more stable than their non-kinship equivalents (Nixon, 2007).

To add to the confusion, a systematic review by Winokur et al. (2018) suggests mixed findings and that there may be very little difference in overall permanency outcomes between different placement types. Firstly, this is because it was a review of international research. Therefore, different permanency definitions and outcomes depend on the public and legal policy of different countries. Secondly, by considering factors such as the reasons for coming into care, whether there were prior relationships and the risk of financial insecurity, favourable starting points often lead to the perceived favourable permanency outcomes (Koh and Testa, 2008; Font, 2015). This has been reiterated by a longitudinal study comparing long-term placement types (McSherry et al., 2016) and is highlighted by the rapid literature review on kinship care from Nuffield (2019).

3.5.2 Relationship Quality Between the Children and Family Members and emotional stability

The absence of studies that explicitly focus on a sense of permanence is almost ironic, considering that one of the main advantages cited about kinship care is that of emotional permanence. Studies show that children in these arrangements are more likely to maintain family ties, have a stronger sense of identity and an increased possibility of remaining in the same community and school (Broad et al., 2001; Broad, 2006; Burgess et al., 2010; Dill, 2010; O'Brien, 2012; Selwyn et al., 2013). Nevertheless, these studies do not directly focus on emotional permanence or discuss it much further than in terms of the psychosocial or outcomes for when they become adults.

What is known is that one of the key benefits for kinship placements is that children maintain a family history, family identity, ethnic identity, and cultural consistency that is not available in non-kinship foster care (Hunt et al., 2010; Kiraly and Humphreys, 2016). Kinship care arrangements are also more liable to promote secure attachments and relationships between the child and the carer than other types of placements (Hunt et al., 2010). Ponnett (2017) suggests that this is because kinship caregivers and the children are more likely to develop emotional attachments. After all, they have a shared history and are likely to know one another. However, some US studies have contradicted these findings, suggesting either no significant differences (Strijker et al., 2003) or even that the relationships that the children have are likely to be worse within kinship foster homes (Chipman et al., 2002; Harden et al., 2004).

These contradictory findings are likely due to not only the very different contexts of the placements being investigated but also the complexity and individual differences inherent

within any family relationships. Because many of the relationships are already established, they are likely more complex and stress-prone than for stranger foster care arrangements (Sykes et al., 2002). Caregivers have to manage not only the relationship in the new immediate family at home but also renegotiate existing family relationship outside the home (Rubin et al., 2017). They also have to manage the birth parents, with whom they will have an existing relationship and who are usually their own children (Goodman, 2007).

3.5.2.1   Contact

Section 34 of the Children Act 1989 states that when a child is taken into local authority care, they must have reasonable contact with any person that has or had parental responsibility before being in care. In kinship care arrangements, children are more likely to retain relationships with their extended family and have contact with their siblings and birth parents (Rubin et al., 2017). As previously mentioned, the children view their birth parents as important (Burgess et al., 2010; Kiraly and Humphreys, 2013b). However, parental contact is often problematic, disturbing and re-traumatising for the children (Kiraly and Humphreys, 2013a). This is compounded by the assumption that kinship carers can manage contact without training or support from the state (Argent, 2009). Relatively recent research suggests that there should be a shift in thinking from parental contact to a more holistic family contact whilst expanding the meaning of family (Kiraly and Humphreys, 2015, 2016). It should be about the whole family in whatever form that takes, and contact should be thought about in relation to the child's specific situation, rather than families be given arbitrary rules and ruling by the courts or the local authority.

3.5.3   Child Well-being
3.5.3.1   Protection and Safeguarding

Practitioners often worry that due to existing complex family relationships, unauthorised contact and collusion with birth parents are more likely to take place in kinship placements (Kiraly and Humphreys, 2013a). Concerns are also often raised about whether kinship carers can protect the children from risky family members and, in some cases, violence from the birth parents (Hunt et al., 2010; Ponnert, 2017). There is, however, very little research into the safeguarding and protection of children in kinship care arrangements. Although there is very little evidence to support concerns, there is unfortunately very little evidence to contradict them either (Nixon, 2007). Findings do, however, highlight that kinship carers are less likely to be monitored or report situations. As such, any issues the children may have are more likely to be hidden from professional services (Connolly, 2003).

3.5.3.2   *The physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children in kinship care*

For children that have been removed from their birth parents, kinship care can reduce stigma and the trauma of separation (Ehrle and Geen, 2002; Messing, 2006). Despite this, Farmer et al. (2013) show that children still experience stigma from peers because of the family arrangement.

Most UK research reports that children in kinship care do as well or better in developmental outcomes than their non-kin counterparts (Farmer and Moyers, 2008), although they are twice as likely to have long-term health problems or disabilities that limited their day-to-day experiences (Wijedasa et al., 2015). There is also much research that has found that the children have fewer mental health issues (Holtan et al., 2005; Winokur et al., 2018), emotional and behaviour issues (Conway and Hutson, 2007; Brown and Sen, 2014) and education needs (Farmer and Moyers, 2008). However, those in kinship care have less access to services (Winokur et al., 2018), and so less use of medical, mental, and education support services may not necessarily indicate better wellbeing. Kinship carers may also underplay behavioural difficulties, and this could have negative outcomes for access to, and the undertaking of, assessments (McCartan et al., 2018)

3.5.4   Quality of Placement

As can be seen, many different variables, contexts and individual circumstances can make up a kinship placement. Most studies are also either based on empirical outcomes or are inadequate in terms of their methodology to explore the children's experiences. This can provide only one type of perspective rather than giving a holistic view away from individualised biological and behavioural explanations (Belsky, 2010). Therefore, it is unsurprising that research finds it difficult to unanimously conclude whether placement quality is better in kinship care arrangements than non-kinship ones (Winokur et al., 2018). Again, all that can be said is that kinship care arrangements are as good as or better for children in kinship care rather than non-kinship care away from birth parents. However, as for any caring arrangements, the quality relies on a sufficient fit between the emotional capacity, sensitivity and skills of the carers, and the needs of the child and the child's developmental challenges (Nuffield, 2019)

3.5.5   Policy, Practice & Support

The relative paucity of kinship care literature and their mixed findings have meant that UK policies and practices have had to be implemented faster than research is carried out (O'Brien, 2012). Also, because it is often found that stability and wellbeing are better or at least as good

for children in kinship care than for those in stranger foster care (Winokur et al., 2018), this has often been misconstrued to mean that the children do not have the same level of need (Rubin et al., 2017). Yet, additional factors such as the higher likelihood of poverty, isolation, carer stress and ill health, as well as complex family relationships mean that these kinship children and their families are likely to need more support than for foster placements (Selwyn et al., 2013). Without appropriate support, it is harder for the carers to meet the needs of the children. This will affect the child's sense of permanence and wellbeing. It is, therefore, ironic

"that financial assistance and other support and services provided by child welfare agencies are skewed against kinship carers." (Owusu-Bempah, 2010:92).

This is especially pertinent considering poverty remains the single most important driver of a child's health and wellbeing, yet social work policy and practice has not addressed this effectively (Davidson et al., 2017)

3.6   Conclusion

Children have a right to be heard, and this is widely acknowledged in legislation and its corresponding social work policy. Yet, it is clear from the literature review that children are often not heard, especially those who have been or are subject to social work intervention. This is despite developments in childhood studies that promote the benefits of children having agency, voice, and being seen as active citizens and participants in their own lives. Such matters are often seen as a distraction by social work researchers and policymakers. Children's views and different ways to conceptualise their childhoods become an additional extra to be added onto adult-centric outcome-focused work, especially for children in local authority care. If children's views are included, they are rarely seen as valid or reliable on their own, and they are usually there to corroborate adults' views.

Overall, there is a relatively small amount of kinship care literature that tends only to make general comments that kinship care placements are often viewed as a good as or better option for children (Brown and Sen, 2014; Wijedasa et al., 2015). It is also apparent that the majority of social work research into kinship care favours large amounts of quantitative data and representative samples that can show them the progress, efficiency, and effectiveness of policy decisions. Many studies research kinship care alongside non-kinship placements. The majority are also either atheoretical or reinforce the hegemonic human development and socialisation

discourses. Sociological perspectives are often disregarded. This produces research that remains both partial and biased towards an adult-centred individualised frame of reference (Graham, 2011).

Such monological ways of perceiving children and childhoods are further limiting when examining permanence. Emotional permanence and a child's sense of permanence, despite an understanding of their importance, are often relegated secondary to the more easily measurable outcomes such as placement stability and legal permanence. Again, this only provides general and often conflicting research.

There are also issues with homogenising kinship care. Kinship care is a huge phenomenon with many intricacies. Therefore, trying to merge experiences, or making comparisons between fostering and adoption, may also account for many of the findings being either broad or mixed. Kinship care has its own complex permanency experience for children and should be treated as such (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019). There are also many different types of arrangements within it (Connolly et al., 2016). Even the demarcation of formal kinship care and informal kinship care is not enough. There are now many hybrid kinship arrangements where, for example, social work may have intervened or may intervene later in so-called informal placements (Berrick and Hernandez, 2016). It is, therefore, imperative not to essentialise kinship care. The placements, the carers and the children, "*are neither uniform nor homogenous in their characteristics, roles or statuses*" (MacDonald et al., 2018:71).

The proposal here is that a modified version of the social model of childhood should be incorporated into research and practice alongside a more critical understanding and appreciation of a child's family life from different perspectives. Adding this approach envisions children in a wide diversity of social contexts. It counterbalances the usual abstract individualised developmental and socialisation perspectives. It allows an examination of how children experience their lives through specific social, historical and cultural arrangements (Winter, 2006). Rather than just examining kinship care as a process or a quasi-service delivery option alternative to state care, a methodology is required that also investigates the nature of familial relationships and a sense of permanence for children within kinship care. There needs to be research that examines *how* these children are cared for. This can be achieved by findings ways to better include the voice of children in social work research, policy.

Chapter 4 - Methodology -
Finding Out What Matters to Children through Dialogical Participation and Critical Realism

Erica – "Well I used to think that when we were with our mum and dad, like out with a Contact Supervisor, that they weren't listening to us because we were just children…like they think we're liars"

The previous chapter focussed on children's voice in kinship care studies. Having more research that encompasses their views can ensure a more attuned understanding of the family lives. In turn, this will provide better support that is more responsive to their needs (Kennan et al., 2018). This chapter will focus on the methodology of using participatory research (PR) in order to obtain children's views.

PR is based on the concept that top-down research, planning, and policies are both ineffective and inappropriate. It suggests that local perspectives, interests, and priorities should inform any initiatives by involving the collaboration of those affected by them (Humphries, 2008). PR is also generally viewed as both ethically and ideologically sound (Mosse, 2001; Shaw and Holland, 2014).

However, participation and the concept of the participatory child is subject to increasing scrutiny in academia (Spyrou et al., 2018). Prout contends that children's participation is high in rhetoric but low in application (Prout, 2003). It is multifaceted and is described as *"messy, fraught and ambiguous"* (Gallagher, 2008b:404). This is partly because participation is aligned with democracy and power relations, and so there is trepidation that it must be done right. If not, there is a risk of further marginalising and exploiting oppressed groups such as children. Such apprehension, combined with the need for what is seen as more sound evidence-based practice, can immobilise social work researchers and practitioners from engaging in participatory practice (Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen, et al., 2020).

The first part of this chapter identifies the challenges surrounding PR. These are:

- PR is steeped in power relations. It is, therefore, inherently a political endeavour.

- PR is often submerged and restricted by monological thinking. Such thinking suggests that childhood, identity, and participation can only be explained and done in one way

or another. For example, using monological thinking, PR is either applied or not; it is either transformative or exploitative. Children can also be viewed as the equal to adults or different and either harmed by exclusion or harmed by inclusion (Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen, et al., 2020). The reality is that PR lies on a continuum between such purported binaries.

- PR often focusses on voice, listening and consultation, rather than broader considerations such as place, space, and time.

- A sociological constructionist perspective is embedded at the very core of PR. Such a perspective becomes problematic for researchers when generalising particular children's views to a larger population (generalisability) or highlighting what is right and wrong (moral relativism).

This methodology chapter will show the reasoning behind the methodology, methods, and analysis for this study. It will discuss the sticking points that can impede participatory research. The in-depth discussion responds to social work's calls to better explore child participation's complexities and contradictions (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2020). It is not good enough to doggedly call for participation and then apply it without proper consideration of its intricacies and power relations. The chapter will then suggest a way forward using dialogical participation and critical realism. This will move away from monological thinking. Instead, it will introduce a dialogical approach which works from the premise that children can be different and the same, sometimes at different times, and sometimes even at the same time. It stresses the importance of including children as part of the process itself as a space to explore such issues. It is proposed that critical realism is a welcome augmentation to dialogical participation, childhood studies, social work, and kinship care research. It is a philosophical and political endeavour that can allow us to ask the right questions, judge explanations on their merits, and guide us towards the most appropriate solutions.

4.1   Participatory Research

4.1.1   What is participatory research?

In a sense, all research is participatory. Whether respondents are there to either provide data or are more actively involved in the implementation and design, they are still participating in the study. However, the difference between conventional research strategies and PR is that PR tries to identify and balance out the power differentials involved from its conception through to its application (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2009).

A summary of the basic principles for social work PR is that (Humphries, 2008):

- PR strives to equalise power between researchers and participants. It is a bottom-up approach focusing on the local historical, cultural, political, and socio-economic factors as defined by those being studied. Therefore, those impacted by the phenomena of study become active agents in defining the problems, methods, analysis, and action of the research.

- The knowledge base for research and policies, such as those for social work, results from a constant genuine dialogue between theory and practice, and the researchers and the researched.

- The methods used are flexible, creative, and tailored to the needs and wishes of the participants.

- The emphasis is on the process as well as outcomes.

- The researcher's role is of facilitator rather than director.

With further examination, these basic principles very quickly become problematic. They are about how PR should be done, almost like the elements of a recipe, and they unravel with more in-depth investigations of power and knowledge production. For example, adults still hold power about what constitutes constant genuine dialogue and when it would be appropriate to initiate it. These adult's opinions are very much subject to their own beliefs and pressures from organisation's policies and the broader societal view of children. If children are only seen as vulnerable, there may never be a right time to initiate a genuine dialogue with them. There is no doubt that children's involvement in research is nestled within broader discourses about children and childhood and empowerment, philosophy, politics, ethics, and social science research methods (Abebe, 2019).

4.1.2   What are the fears of getting PR wrong?

There is broad academic agreement that participation can be beneficial for all (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2020). However, a significant anxiety highlighted throughout social work literature is that PR is only done on a superficial level, and it may be exploitative (Shaw and Holland, 2014). Spyrou (2011) argues that it should not be assumed that PR overcomes the power imbalances between children and adults or that it results in more authentic research. There are warnings throughout the literature that PR may only be used in a tokenistic way (Holland et al., 2010). There is also very little evaluation or monitoring that measures PR's effectiveness with children

(Kennan et al., 2018). As such, it is highly possible for participation to unwittingly perpetuate the exclusions and the injustices it attempts to overcome.

One way such exploitation can happen is when PR is seen simplistically as ideologically good. This can mean patronage and reputation building for researchers, institutions, and providers (Mosse, 2001). Projects are more likely to be funded if they include participation. PR can also be perceived as an economically efficient method for implementation and compatible with bureaucratic planning (Humphries, 2008). Citizens, especially children, are usually cheaper commodities than researchers. Therefore, participation may just be seen as a low-cost, technical-rational solution to the complex issue of social exclusion.

Another central fear is that participants can simply be conceptualised as redemptive agents, capable of tackling their own social exclusion. Rose (1996) argues that participation often does not view agency as relational and so pushes responsibility for governance and decision-making on individual capabilities, rather than on society. It relieves society of its responsibilities to address the structural inequalities participants, such as children, face. This is detrimental to social work, which must fight for social justice despite being a producer and transmitter of power struggles (Webb, 2010). It is ethically dubious to suggest that individuals are entirely responsible for shaping their future through voice and choice. This reinforces social inequalities and victimisation. It suggests that those who fail to become agents of change only have themselves to blame. This rhetoric of individualisation, which has parallels to *"neoliberalisation"* (Brenner and Theodore, 2002:6), leads to a culture of 'Responsibilisation' (Zinn, 2020). It is for this reason that Fielding (2008:59) speaks about PRs "*deep dishonesty*".

Such serious qualms highlight that participatory practice must be reflexive. Combined with the need to forge and maintain emotional relationships with participants, PR should take time, energy, and emotional labour to ensure it has a sound ethical foundation (Foster, 2015). However, such labour is hardly ever described in PR accounts. Instead, it is deemed more apt to describe step-by-step processes to the detriment of exploring the risky and emotionally challenging aspects of PR itself (Lenette et al., 2019).

4.1.3   Monological thinking

This chapter's critical point is that PR often fails to be genuinely participative and collectively empowering due to monological thinking. From such monological perspectives, things are either/or. For child participation, monological thinking tends to recycle old arguments with little

resolve (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010). There are four main ways in which monological thinking dominates PR with children. These are children being treated the same or different to adults, children being treated only as vulnerable, and simplistic notions of voice, consultation, and listening.

4.1.3.1 Being treated the same

A primary difficulty with monological thinking emerges when children are treated the same as adults. Children are often over-valorised by such approaches, which typically originate from the new sociology of childhood. They are fetishised as competent, knowing, active, agentic, discursive, and aware (Abebe, 2019).

Treating children the same as adults also tends to homogenise groups. It also does not consider how the system may be inadvertently biased (Fitzgerald et al., 2009). For example, if a child needs to contest or challenge their rights, they must first possess a certain status. A more vocal, able-bodied, white, male, middle-class, educated child is more likely to access the opportunities to participate and be more able to speak up. Therefore, treating children as a homogenous group fails to consider how asserting a claim for change requires non-discriminatory social structures and a large amount of self-determination and agency (Tully, 2004). It suggests a level playing field, which is something that social work, sociology, and history strongly dispute.

4.1.3.2 Being treated as different

On the other hand, children may just as problematically be treated as different. This is the most common approach for social work (Bijleveld, Vetten, et al., 2020) and the social sciences (Horgan et al., 2017). The approach attempts to consider different competencies, skills, and abilities. However, being treated as different also usually treats children as immature. This cultivates the belief that children may engage with PR with unrealistic expectations and that they are too young to know, oversee, or understand their situations (Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen, et al., 2020). As Qvortrup (1994) suggests, they are 'becomings' and not yet adults, rather than 'beings'. Furthermore, their (in)competence is typically judged on their age and how close they are to adulthood. Participation and citizenship are not widely established for children under the age of 13 years (Horgan, 2017). Consequently, younger children, who have even less opportunity to influence decisions in their everyday lives, are often ignored (Lansdown, 2010).

4.1.3.3   Being treated as vulnerable

Another example of monological thinking is how children are usually treated as especially vulnerable compared to adults (Meehan, 2016). This echoes the emphasis in social work on protectionism rather than on empowering children (Kennan et al., 2018). There is a fear that participatory involvement will re-traumatise children who have been subject to challenging, even abusive experiences. There is also a perception that because of their vulnerable status, working with such children and having them as research participants is a laborious ethical nightmare (Maconochie, 2013).

4.1.3.4   A simplistic focus on voice, consultation, and listening

Another major issue with monological thinking is that it tends to define very complex ideologies and practices narrowly. Since the Children Act 1989, legislation, white papers and local and national policies emphasise the duty to ensure children's participation. However, in these documents and policies, children's participation tends to be defined rather narrowly as voice, consultation or listening to children (Canosa and Graham, 2020).

Voice is often presented as a verbal or textual form. However, other communication forms must be recognised, especially with children with disabilities (Tisdall, 2012). Also, note that the term voice is singular. In practice, rarely people do not provide standardised, consistent information. When speaking, people are unavoidably given to vacillation and indecision. This is especially true when individuals, such as these children in the study, disclose such deeply felt concerns as physical self-image, death, pets, and attachments to missed parents. They try to navigate through conflicting thoughts by thinking aloud with some of the characteristics of internal conversation. Relaying views involves truncation, omissions, the use of symbols, and so on. People have many voices and inner conversations before deciding which ones to act on or are allowed to act on. This is akin to everyday reflexivity. As such, the voice(s) of the child does not happen in isolation. Therefore, listening to voices and silences should be seen primarily as a relational act in the space of the research encounter (Meloni et al., 2015).

This study does not speak to the lone voice of single research participants. Far less does it speak to their collective voice. Instead, what is presented are patterns of responses over time throughout the research encounter. The interest is in their often-conflicting voices and how they navigate competing demands, views, and needs from both themselves and others. They, like everybody, are continually navigating how they are seen as, or feel, either different or indeed the same as others.

The terms consultation and listening are also problematic. Most legislation and policy state that procedures are required to promote such actions. However, very rarely is there the specification of how, when, or even with whom. Also, neither term indicates that any action needs to be taken after consultation or listening have occurred. Despite good intentions, participation in social work does not always necessarily involve children in making decisions or influencing change. Children who have had social work intervention still report that they do not feel heard, do not influence decision-making and are often uninformed about what is happening in their lives (Bijleveld, Vetten, et al., 2020). Consultation and listening can be, and often is, treated as a one-off tick-box event rather than an ongoing process (Boone et al., 2019).

4.1.4   Dialogical participation

Some authors are now suggesting that it is time to move beyond western societies' constructs of listening, voice, collaboration, and children's participation (e.g. Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2009; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010; Facca *et al.*, 2020). Such authors propose that participation should not be placed primarily within rules, procedures, and institutional design, which typically focus on either difference or equality. Instead, there should be a focus on participation as an ongoing process of dialogue in spaces. It should not be a monological process, like following a recipe, but rather a thoughtful, relational, and dialogical one that involves children at the very beginning of the debates. Therefore, a dialogical approach does not focus on an endless discussion about whether a child can or should participate. Instead, it suggests engagement through a process of mutual recognition, interdependence, and respect for children and their views and experiences (Percy-Smith and Weil, 2003). This is akin to sociology's dialectic approach (Craib, 2000). The issues no longer revolve around the perception of difference or similarity to adults, as they are both. Instead, ethical matters are related to how PR can be an inclusive process that navigates between such seeming dichotomies.

This idea of participation being an inclusive space that is more than just about voice is not new (Prout, 2011). Lundy's (2007) 'Voice is not enough…' conceptualised the following considerations necessary for participation:

Lundy's (2007) model of participation	
Voice	So that all can express their views safely, verbally and non-verbally.
Space	For social processes to promote inter-generational reflexivity.
Audience	Views must be acknowledged and listened to.
Influence	Views must be acted on, and it must be an ongoing process with opportunities for feedback.

TABLE 1 - LUNDY'S (2007) MODEL OF PARTICIPATION

4.1.4.1 Voice – What is it, and who can have it?

Dialogical participation does not conform to the simplistic principles of competence typically echoed in the legislation and policy. Instead, it suggests that all humans have the capacity to engage from birth when they are able to reason, analyse and express complex experiences and decisions. Incompetence, dependence, and vulnerability are, therefore, not criteria for inclusion or exclusion. Instead, they inform the conditions of the spaces for which their participation occurs. It asks for a person-friendly process rather than a child-friendly one (Punch, 2002). As such, all participants, whatever their age or role, are supported in the most appropriate ways. A dialogical approach does not ignore the voices of children or prevent them from being heard due to overzealous notions of protection. Instead, it takes the view that:

> *"rather than protecting children and young people from research, we need to protect them through research" (Lundy, 2007: 935)*

4.1.4.2 Space

The use of appropriate space for views to be formed is the key to dialogical participation. It should be set up to promote adult-child relations to allow for joint problem-solving between people of all ages and abilities. It becomes an inter-generational encounter (Canosa and Graham, 2020). Communicative action spaces (Percy-Smith, 2015) encourage children to become part of the discussion with different pieces of knowledge, but also a common goal. This draws on Habermas' (1987) theory of system, the public sphere, and the lifeworld. Children's participation becomes reframed as a study of the spaces and reflection at a certain point in time for child-adult relations.

4.1.4.3   Audience and influence

Often unintentionally, many participation projects with children may promise respect, listening, and future changes, which cannot be achieved. A dialogical approach tries to guard against this. It suggests that adults and children must be candid about the aims, motives, and sponsorship of research and participation. Listening, reflexivity, and honesty must be a starting point (Kennan et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it would be naïve, idealistic, and possibly even hypocritical to suggest that such an approach to dialogue is devoid of power. Participants remain subject to cultural, social, legal, political, and cultural discourses that enable and constrain what they can and cannot say. There must be an acknowledgement of children's social location as subordinate to adults. There must be persistent questioning of how those involved should be involved. As applied in this study, there have to be ongoing check-ins and clarification.

This continuous knowledge exchange should happen not only by those directly taking part but also by other structures that seem removed from the act. This is done through ongoing dissemination. Such an approach utilises traditions from participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) and is akin to Pawson and Tilley's (1997) teacher-learner cycle. Learning and action happen on the level of the individual, in terms of recognition, and on the interpersonal, in terms of dialogue with others. It also occurs on the systemic, in terms of including the views and the responses from services, organisations, and practice.

With such open debate and negotiation, there will undoubtedly be conflict and disagreement. Participation is not an easy process. However, disagreement should not be shied away from but instead accompanied by empathy towards each other with people we have built trusting, caring relationships with (Kennan et al., 2018). Without conflict, compromise cannot be found. Furthermore, without real compromise, good lasting change cannot happen for the better. The question then becomes about what is better or good. This is where participation, even dialogical participation, can run into substantial issues.

4.1.5   Difficulties with the social constructionism inherent in PR

PR relies heavily on knowledge, and therefore truth, being socially constructed (Canosa and Graham, 2020). As such, by typically aligning itself with the new sociology of childhood, PR usually takes the view that there is no 'Grand Narrative' but rather little narratives (Lyotard, 1984). Everything becomes subjective. It is as if there is no truth, and that is the truth. Therefore, social constructionism has its own grand theory that rejects all grand theories.

4.1.5.1   What is good?

Putting such a paradox to one side, there becomes an issue that is even more problematic. If there can be no one truth, therefore, there can be no moral judgement (Benton and Craib, 2010). This harks back to Winch's political relativism. It allows a refusal to judge between different cultures and experiences. This suggests that behaviour and opinion are just different, and we just need to enjoy them all for what they are. No one culture, no one way of living is better than the other. This abyss of relativism is obviously not correct as it provides no normative base for a social worker from which to act (Taylor and White, 2016). For example, we know it is wrong that the majority of kinship carers live in financial hardship. Therefore, comparisons and moral judgements are made. We cannot just celebrate poverty, inequality, suffering, and harm as difference and leave it like that. Postmodernism and social constructionism fail to explicitly address what is right and what is wrong. It can easily let people, society, everything, and everybody, off the hook.

4.1.5.2   Representative sample?

There are also issues with social constructionism when it comes to representation. How is it possible to generalise from a sample of individuals who are said to represent kinship care if there are no real truths? The hope would be that the children's experiences and situations would all be similar enough to make meaningful inferences. However, the literature review has shown that children in kinship care are not a homogenous group, and neither is kinship care.

Even if one could homogenise the needs of those in kinship care arrangements, then there would still be further technical difficulties regarding authenticity, reliability, and validity of the research (Humphries, 2008). For example, it is argued that PR privileges the older, louder, and emotionally literate over those who do not conform (Holland et al., 2010), with numerous PR methods reflecting the white middle-class norms of communication (Vandenbroeck, 2006). Furthermore, participating children may be disciplining themselves to behave to expected norms. The children may only be trying to appease the researcher, their carers or society. This especially true when tasks are often highly managed by researchers who rely on schooled docility (Holland et al., 2010). Social constructionism, therefore, does not fully tackle these problems of generalisability and social inequalities. Instead, it could be said that it permits them through its premise of multiple childhoods and narratives, and its focus on the social.

4.1.6 A different foundation for dialogical participation is needed

Overall, the concept of dialogical participation helps us to realise the validity of children's views with a critical awareness of power differentials that can promote active citizenship. It is an ethic and a process that embraces and moves past simplistic never-ending debates over whether children are different or the same. It provides a more in-depth understanding through generational perspectives, mutual responsibility, and dialogue (Abebe, 2019). However, it does not assist with problems of social constructionism, no matter how ethically practical it claims to be. It does not fully recognise the interactions between structure and agency, between discourse and the material, the discursive and the non-discursive, and between epistemology and ontology. This is of little consolation to a child living in poverty, having moved from their parents who neglected or abused them. Their hurt and bruises are real and not just something that can be negated by talking. Dialogical participation still maintains that everything is reducible to a language game. These matters of conflating epistemology to ontology can be rectified by taking a critical realist approach.

4.2 Critical realism

Critical realism is a philosophical endeavour. While many may feel that philosophy has no place in many research studies, what exists in the world (ontology) and how we know about it (epistemology) are essential factors that need to be considered. As can be seen in the discussion regarding social constructionism, without thinking about what data means and represents, a researcher cannot proficiently or ethically give sound implications or recommendations from their findings. For example, it has previously been found that having pets is a positive feature for many looked after children and children in kinship care (Wood and Selwyn, 2017). Also, most of the children in this study had pets in their homes, which they would talk profusely about as positive forces in their lives. This obviously does not suggest that the majority of kinship care arrangements around the world have household pets. The sample is too small to make such a generalisation even when added to previous research. It also does not necessarily mean that children should only be placed with families with pets or that local authorities should buy pets for families in kinship arrangements. Firstly, common sense suggests that it is not the pets that are the key here. Secondly, a moral judgement has been made, which social constructionism arguably does not allow. Thirdly, not all families are able to accommodate a pet.

What is really of interest to a researcher is that pets and the value of having pets feature in these children's lives. They evoke emotional and physiological responses. These are, hopefully, responses such as happiness and the release of oxytocin, rather than upset and histamines. There is also something fundamental in the relationships with these pets that add to these children's well-being. They really do matter.

Nevertheless, this is not just about how the children think, talk, and construct pets. Pets are real and exist whether our minds know about them or not. Also, the UK culture of having pets as part of the family has a bearing on how we include them in our lives. Philosophical thinking allows us to contemplate how people and their social structures can be construed, described, fitted together, and most importantly, researched and interpreted. It allows us to consider the general principles that lie behind various aspects of life. It allows us to discern what reality is and how to examine it.

4.2.1 Where the critical realism research paradigm positions itself

Critical realism rejects the preoccupation of positivists with prediction, measurement, and quantification. It suggests that this phenomenon is not *"meaningless, [even] if we cannot falsify or verify it empirically"* (Bhaskar, 1998:28). Although they may guide explanation, measurements are thought to be inadequate in explaining the nature of phenomena. As useful as empirical research can be to help map out issues, it conforms to hyper-realism (Alderson, 2016). This is an over-belief in reality. When this happens, complex situations are treated as objective yes-or-no facts that fit into a binary analysis. This imitates monological thinking. Critical realists argue that to stop a level of analysis at such a point of observing and describing confuses correlation with cause. Research only through positivist, quantitative, and similar types of empirical methods loses the person through the method, the problem through the technique, and the most important questions through regressions (ibid).

Critical realism not only moves beyond pure empiricism and positivism but also rejects outright strong social constructionism. It rejects the tendencies of poststructuralism and postmodernism, which explain social realities as merely discursive or linguistic actions (Bhaskar, 2008). It posits that reality cannot only be reduced to *"ideas people have"* (Jessop, 2005:42). This proposition that there is no reality without language is known by critical realists as the epistemic fallacy. This conflates ontology with epistemology (Bhaskar, 1998). Reality is conflated with our knowledge of reality. This is hypo-realism, which is an under-belief in reality (Alderson, 2016). Furthermore, as argued above, this leads to moral relativism. Therefore, social constructivist thinking makes connections between the data, implications and recommendations appear tenuous at best.

Critical realism brings together the positivist's search for an external reality and the interpretivist's understanding that all meaning associated with that reality is socially constructed (Oliver, 2012). It suggests that there is a social reality, whether or not it is directly experienced or observed. Social reality exists independently of human knowledge, the mind or thinking. However, ontology always transcends epistemology. Furthermore, the object of knowledge is intransitive (fixed), yet our knowledge of it is transitive (subject to change) (Archer et al., 2013).

While critical realism challenges constructivist and empiricist research as ways of knowing in their own right, it does not reject them. By not adhering to the dogmatic idealism of either in their age-long debate, a critical realist perspective is said to combine both. It takes a middle path that helps analyse, explain, and validate critical social research. It draws on the strengths of

empiricism and interpretivism but also overcomes their limitations. Critical realism deals with the generalisation gap head-on allowing researchers to make more meaning out of data. It does this through the stratification of reality.

4.2.2 The basic tenets of critical realism

4.2.2.1 The stratification of reality

Critical realism postulates three levels of reality. This perspective can assist us in explaining the world around us (Bhaskar, 2008). Social reality is understood as stratified systems with objects connected through causal relationships (Morton, 2006). This is highlighted below in Figure 1.
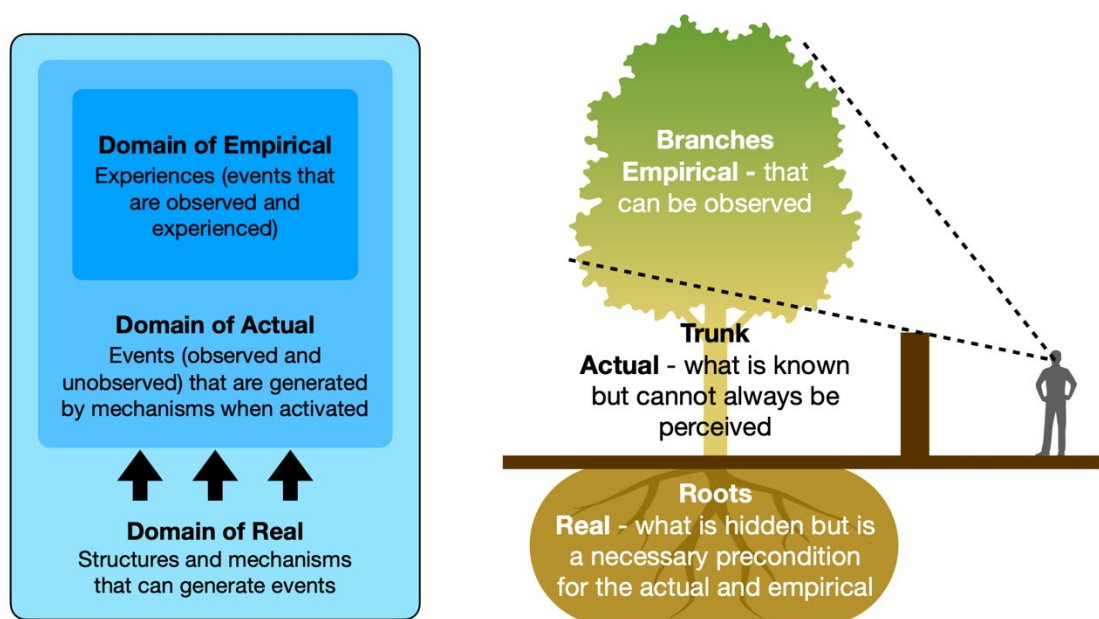
FIGURE 1 - TREE DIAGRAM OF THREE ONTOLOGICAL LEVEL: EMPIRICAL, ACTUAL, REAL (ADAPTED FROM WALSH AND EVANS, 2014:E2)

As shown, the actual level comprises of all events, whether or not they are ever experienced (like the tree trunk blocked by the wall). The empirical is when the actual becomes experienced (like the branches in view). This empirical level is traditionally where science tries to investigate phenomena. Finally, the real (the unseen roots) is where underlying mechanisms generate events and can instigate change for the whole tree. This level is what critical realists are most concerned with; finding these hidden mechanisms that generate certain phenomena.

4.2.2.2 Mechanisms & retroduction

Mechanisms are "*nothing other than the ways of acting of things*"(Bhaskar, 1978:14). Bhaskar proposed that mechanisms can be identified by a process called retroductive reasoning. This is a:

> "*mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them*"
> *(Sayer, 1992:107).*

Retroduction takes a step back from the surface level of events to identify what has to be in order for events to occur. For example, a child must have experienced disruption if they are placed with new carers. Seeing and examining the world in this way moves beyond the flat actualism of empirical and actual levels where most positivists, constructionists, and interpretivists remain. Without focusing on the mechanisms, the root causes tend to be missed.

Such mechanisms can belong to the psychological (i.e., mental structures, schemas, unconscious processes and memory, object relations, and attachment styles), the social (i.e., ideologies, social classes, and modes of production), and the physical (i.e., atomic, chemical, and biological structures). For kinship care, the literature review leads to a hypothesis that one of the psychological mechanisms could be a drive for a sense of permanence. Some societal mechanisms could be patriarchy, structural racism, neo-liberalisation, and the managerialism mounting in social work. A biological mechanism could be the release of oxytocin when near their carer. Like the roots of the tree, these mechanisms cannot be directly observed, although their impact can be.

4.2.2.3 Contexts and outcomes and causation

The contexts in which the mechanisms are placed are also relevant. Again, for kinship care, contexts, such as the amount of time a carer spent with a child before placement, will also impact whether the sense of belonging mechanism is activated. The context will also impact how it is activated. However, mechanisms are contingent not only on the context but also on other mechanisms. All these different mechanisms may contradict, act in opposition, or ameliorate.

> "*Outcomes = Mechanisms + Contexts.*" *(Pawson and Tilley, 1997)*

This ideology opposes the successionist view of causality that A leads to B, and so on. It instead suggests what is known as generative causation (Bhaskar, 2008). As such,

> *"causal laws must be analysed as the tendencies of things, which may be possessed unexercised and exercised unrealised, just as they may, of course, be realised unperceived." (Bhaskar, 1989:9–10)*

There is the reciprocal interplay of heterogeneous, multidimensional systems. As such, the enterprise of identifying causal mechanisms is complex and multi-layered.

This leads to a fundamental point of critical realism; everything is fallible. There are many ways of knowing. Despite the intransitive nature of reality, it will always be interpreted by different people in different ways. This is true even for researchers, and even if a researcher attempts to be objective. Therefore, findings must be placed under a web of expectations and cannot be taken as absolute. There can only be emergent properties or tendencies which are speculative (Bhaskar, 1989). They are not inevitable closed reactions.

4.2.2.4   The Realist Evaluation Cycle

Despite the caveats of tendencies and that everything is fallible, it is still possible to come up with explanations. This is done by utilising theories that fit best with data. We cannot create knowledge and theories from nothing, and so science as a social process depends on adapting prior, transitive, transferable knowledge. In other words, preceding hypothesis and theories are used to explain what is happening in the actual and empirical and are also used to identify and explain the mechanisms (Fletcher, 2017).

The notion of using theories was furthered by Pawson and Tilly (1997). They devised a realist evaluation cycle. This applies models of analogy and metaphor and so subjects theories to empirical scrutiny. Through experimentation, the possible mechanisms and contexts hypothesised either affirm the theories to be adequate or to require adaptation. Theories may even need to be abandoned altogether. Theories are, therefore, judged on their explanatory power. Whether they take us away from the nature of things or more deeply into them depends on the adequacy of the premises and concepts adopted and how they are used (Sayer, 2011). Retroduction, along with this type of retroductive reasoning, provides a more in-depth, meaningful explanation. It does not merely describe recurring patterns and effects (Bhaskar, 1998). It also allows for an accumulation of data over time and promotes methodological pluralism and pragmatism.
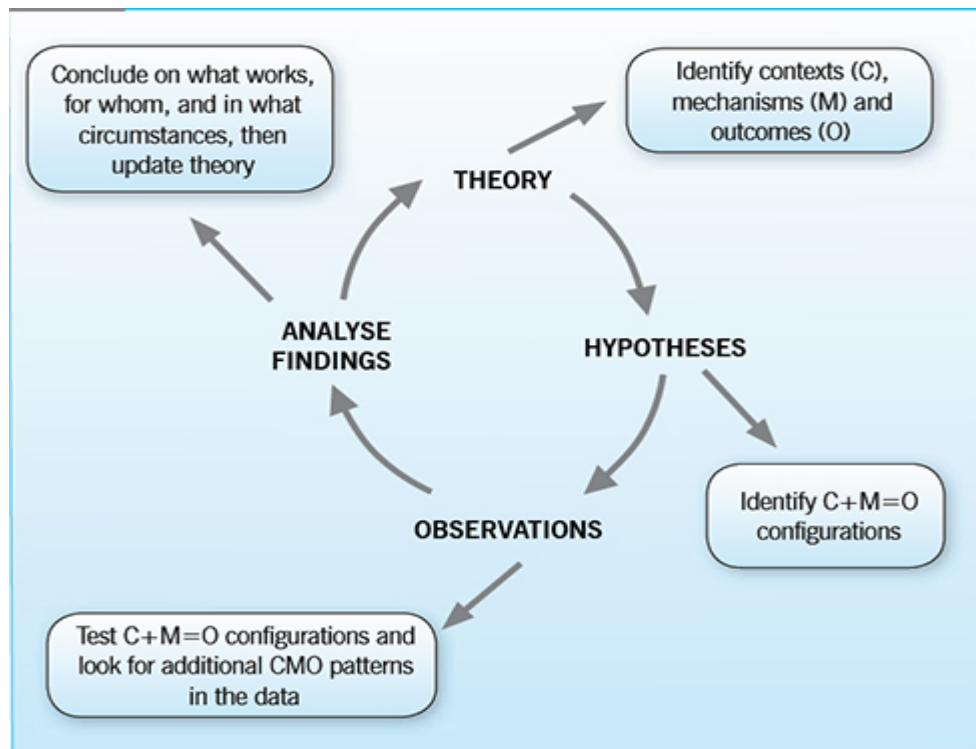
FIGURE 2 - THE REALIST EVALUATION CYCLE (PAWSON AND TILLEY, 1997:85)

4.2.2.5   What are the practicalities of realist research?

Due to this idea of ongoing knowledge production from various perspectives, critical realists tend to use mixed-method approaches. They typically use statistical analysis to ascertain patterns or regularities in empirical phenomena and then use qualitative inquiry to probe for depth explanation (Alderson, 2013). As this study has done, they take a both/and approach by utilising empirical research on kinship care to map out the issues. However, they recognise that concern for the participant's account must remain at the heart of any matter. Bhaskar states that *"actors' accounts form the indispensable starting point of social enquiry"* (Bhaskar, 1998:xvi). Bhaskar insists that this will help stop explaining behaviour in a determinist way.

Critical Realist studies should be undertaken in the 'open' world as it is deemed impossible to completely control all the conditions in the empirical. It is deemed impossible, especially in the social world, to control all the variables and undertake comparative studies in a 'closed' system (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

4.2.3 Valuations of what matters
4.2.3.1 *Judgmental rationality*

The concept of explanatory power suggests that just because all knowledge is fallible does not mean that all knowledge is equally fallible (Sayer, 1992). Bhaskar makes it clear that in no way are *"all beliefs equally valid in the sense that there are no rational grounds for preferring one to another"* (Bhaskar, 1986:72) or that we must descend to the abyss of relativism in the same way social constructionism does (Taylor and White, 2016). While reality cannot be known for sure, it can be described with better or worse, more accurate, or less accurate accounts (Hartwig, 2007). This is known as judgmental rationality.

4.2.3.2 *'Is/ought' dichotomies, facts versus values, normative claims, and doing the right thing*

Along with the concept of judgemental rationality, critical realism suggests that individuals and collectives can change society and the world around them. This belief is essential for both social work practice and participatory research. This power to transform is why critical realism has the label critical and is both a critical theory and a political endeavour. Taking from Marx and other Frankfurt School thinkers, critical realism states that human subjects are real beings who navigate the world through social interaction. It is out of this social nexus that emancipation, or indeed oppression, can occur. However, regarding the first part of the chapter, how can we ensure that research, even PR, leads to emancipation rather than unwittingly perpetuating oppression? How can we ensure that we are working on facts rather than just inadvertently confirming our biased beliefs and values?

This is known as the 'is/ought problem'. Following David Hume, a dominant philosophy is the separation of facts from values; the 'is' from the 'ought'. For a long time, it was assumed that researchers should not let their beliefs influence their work. For example, ethnographer Hammersley (2009) argued that researchers and academics should strive to be value-neutral and objective in their work.

While this is/ought (i.e. positive versus normative, fact versus value) dichotomy has long been defended in the social sciences and philosophy, it is impossible to maintain or support in the practice of social work or research on practice. Firstly, there is a simple and logical reason for rejecting the dichotomy. To make the argument that 'ought' cannot be derived from 'is' is itself a normative claim and assertion of a value. This is very similar to the grand theory that rejects all grand theories.

Secondly, all research questions begin with an assertion of value. Such questions are chosen due to deeply rooted concerns about what matters most and to whom it matters. This assertion happens even when researchers are not aware of such assumptions or fail to make them explicit (Sayer, 2011). In Bhaskar's view, the social sciences are not, and cannot be, value-free (Bhaskar, 2008). Structural dimensions of reality associated with oppression should be identified and challenged. That is the role of research.

Thirdly, separating facts from values implies that value judgements are not made through facts or that value judgements can threaten the objectivity of facts. This is incorrect. To explain further, here are a few examples:

- Although the statement 'kinship carers are more likely to live in financial hardship than non-related foster carers' is a fact, it also cannot be read or be researched without a value judgement. We automatically think about whether this is acceptable and whether this fact is worth challenging.

- Within the statement that 'most children are in kinship care arrangements because they have been abused', there is a value judgment and normative claim about what is abuse. Abuse may be slightly different in different cultures. In a sense, it is a subjective word. Nevertheless, the term abuse is also not arbitrary. Smacking children may be accepted in some cultures, yet it causes various degrees of harm, whether or not it is deemed to be normal. Thus, although this includes a value statement, it does not mean it is not a fact.

- Less value-laden statements such as 'most children are in kinship care arrangements because they cannot be looked after by their birth parents' are likely to be less accurate than those that mention abuse. They could even be seen as dismissive of the suffering of the children.

Therefore, the more one accepts or imposes an artificial distinction between fact and value, and the 'is' and 'ought', the more one is removed not only from the actual world of people and practice but also from the things that matter most to people (Sayer, 2011). It confuses the things of logic with the logic of things. The 'no-is-from-ought' argument is about logic, which concerns the relations between statements, but values are often about states of being and the practice of living.

4.2.3.3 Why what matters?

In his book 'Why Things Matter to People', Andrew Sayer (2011) reiterates that we all operate from this middle ground between the 'is' and the 'ought'. It is what drives us. It is what life or "*life-force*" is all about (Sayer, 2019:261). We are suspended between things as they are and might become, for better or worse, and as things we need or want them to become (Sayer, 2011). Using a normative orientation, we continuously judge what is good or bad, continuously making evaluations. Then we decide what to do. This is because while we have capabilities, we also have vulnerabilities, and we are dependent and have needs. We are dependent on our health, our environment, and our relations with others. Furthermore, if actions, the environment, and relationships can enrich our lives, they can also damage them. We can flourish or suffer, which is also shaped by contingency. This, again, is a move away from monological thinking.

Such considerations between the 'is' and the 'ought' make our relationship to the world one of care, or concern and valuation. Our valuations can be little questions about what we would like for dinner or larger ones, such as whether we would like to have contact with someone who has subjected us to abuse. We use reasoning and morality to move between the states of lacking and the states of fulfilment and flourishing. This is why we care about things, and this is why things matter. Sayer argues that moral judgements, values, and evaluations are in the scope of reason. He states that these things help identify what motivates people and, as such, are linked to the generative mechanisms innate in universal human nature. To be clear, the definition of innate here is not necessarily blind instinct or biological determinism because it involves dispositions, potential and emerging capacities.

Valuations, then, can be seen as potential causal mechanisms. This understanding can be put another way using Archer's (2012) notion of reflexivity and inner conversations. She utilises Bhaskar's (1986) transformational model of social activity and proposes that our actions are influenced, but not determined, by social structures at all levels. Such structures may pre-exist specific human action, but also, humans reflexively monitor the social world. Through this process of reflexivity, humans can decide whether or not to individually or collectively exert, influence, and change the relatively enduring yet emergent structures. This occurs through the inner conversations we all hold about our personal concerns (what matters to us most) and how to realise them in a social order that is not of our making or choosing. For Archer, then, one crucial role of the engagement with participants is to draw out and analyse human reflexivity, individual reasoning, and their grounding through their inner conversations. Furthermore, an

informant's explanations of thoughts and actions are significant because such inner conversations *"have powers that can be causally efficacious in relation to himself and to society"* (Archer, 2003:14). Again, such reasoning is a guide to the sought-after generative mechanisms, which can also, very importantly, lead to transformation.

4.2.4   Embodiment

A final and relatively new addition to Sayer and other critical realists' theses is the importance of embodiment (Nellhaus, 2017; Sayer, 2019). Again, this highlights the rejection of radically opposed dichotomies such as the mind and body, or culture and nature. This is because several mechanisms and processes are operating at different levels with different interactions between them. Bodies are neither cultural products nor immutable. Changes to the body occur depending on what causes them as well as where the changes are happening. For example, neuroplasticity implies that our capacities develop and sometimes regress, per our experience and prior development. A child cannot be taught to express complicated feelings clearly unless they have learnt a language to an appropriate level. We cannot just dismiss the capacity to think in the abstract as having nothing to do with the body. Everything interacts. There are significant interactions between the conscious and the subconscious, the psychological and the physiological, the body, brain, mind, and the environment. Such connections can operate unnoticed in the flow of the everyday. However, they could also be mobilised deliberately as a form of therapy, or even with in-depth focussed research about what matters.

To sum up, this study employs a critical realist needs-based conception of social being. This views individuals not only as causal agents and as self-interpreting meaning-makers but as needy and dependent beings that have an orientation of care and concern about things. It presumes children are humans capable of flourishing and suffering. Needs here is used as a shorthand that also covers lack, want and desire, and includes culturally acquired or emergent needs. When someone says what something means to them, it shows an evaluative relation to the world. When a child describes what something means to them, this cannot be merely glossed over as just a subjective expression of their feelings; it is about something. It is about their embodied well-being or ill-being, their relationships, attachments, and commitments to others. It is about concern. It is about themselves and the transitive and intransitive structures of the world. Therefore, finding out what matters is about providing space for children's reflexive thinking and outing their inner conversations. It is about discovering the mechanisms and contexts that can lead to the desired outcome, which is for children to flourish in their family lives.

4.2.5　How critical realism helps this study
4.2.5.1　How critical realism assists good social work practice and research

As discussed in previous chapters, social work is a complicated endeavour, especially when it centres on practice with kinship care arrangements and permanence planning. Social work as a discipline needs more than one analytic perspective to catch the complexity witnessed in practice. It is often described as something that utilises multi-disciplinary perspectives. Social work continuously navigates the tension between the individual's capacity for personal agency and the social, economic, political, and other contextual factors. Critical realism welcomes this both/and approach. It allows social workers to recognise not only social factors such as poverty, race, gender, and social exclusion but also psychological and biological individual problems such as anxiety, depression, and substance misuse.

Social work also must be not only explanatory but also emancipatory. Like critical realism, it must be critical. Social work's principal task is to instigate change while adhering to a particular set of values and ethical practice. This can be done by promoting certain individual behaviours. Change can also occur by attempts to expose the underlying ideologies of powerful interest groups and false consciousness. Therefore, critical realism's attention to morality and values provides direction for social work's value-led practice. It confronts the abyss of relativism by advocating for judgmental rationality, stating that not all beliefs are equally valid (such as the right to beat a child). Some things are not just culturally bad, but they are morally bad.

Critical realism attempts to explain and ethically value phenomena rather just than describe phenomena. Critical realism does this in a way that leads into "*consideration of right conduct and the good life*" (Houston, 2010:74). It allows for a normative view and judgments of when things are not acceptable. It is also careful not to prescribe to separate dichotomies. Such precepts align with social work's central tension of care and control, protection versus rights, visions of emancipation, and focus on marginalised groups (Oliver, 2012). For this reason, critical realism is receiving increased attention from social work (e.g. Houston, 2001, 2005, 2010; Longhofer and Floersch, 2012; Oliver, 2012; Craig and Bigby, 2015; Kjørstad, 2017)

Critical realism's stratification of reality can further help identify the level where appropriate changes and interventions need to be made. For example, it may seem like a suitable approach to stop any contact between a child and their birth parents if it seems to upset the child. However, this approaches the issue on the actual and empirical level of reality. The hypothesis generation relies on the surface level explanation. It does not look at why the child is upset. It

does not look at why the physical presence of the birth parent causes upset. It does not address the real, the underlying mechanisms and the underlying issues. These are that the children wish to have positive relationships with their family members, including their birth parents. Therefore, stopping contact may actually work against the children's need for positive relationships because family tensions may become more fraught. It keeps things on the actual and empirical level. Instead, an intervention needs to identify whatever mechanisms occur, whether they be a positive attachment, positive affiliations, a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, and so on. When these have been identified by retroduction, then the process of identifying the particular contexts can start. For this example, it may be that contact should be thought of differently, and connections should be maintained differently.

Finally, the idea of fallibility and constant re-evaluation is of use for social work. Not only does this align with social work's often utilised ASPIRE model (Sutton, 2006), but also by rejecting linear causality, critical realism describes a social world where there are multiple opportunities for change. Generative mechanisms are neither determinative nor all-explaining. It is, therefore, helpful with systemic thinking and uncertainty, which are central tenets of all social work (Munro, 2019).

4.2.5.2   How critical realism helps childhood studies

Critical realism ensures that real living embodied children are present in the research. It does not promote one monological viewpoint over another. It recognises that autonomy is relational. It sees things in the dialogical. This is despite the long history of children being perceived a certain way and despite ongoing discussions about whether children should be subjects or objects of research, seen as different or the same as adults, or as 'beings' or 'becomings'. It notices sociological approaches, and different beliefs and discourses of childhood. However, critical realism does not collapse being into knowing. It acknowledges that bodies and suffering do really matter and are not just ignored as cultural or political relativism.

It must also be remembered that children, their well-being, and the parenting of them are all emotive subjects. Alderson (2013, 2016) argues that research with children is not only value-informed but also value-saturated. Its entire goal is to show how children can flourish. Critical realist research does not ignore this. It advocates that values, emotions, and reasoning play a significant part in any study and all life that involves children.

4.2.5.3   How critical realism helps studies on kinship care

As previously discussed, one of the main challenges of kinship care research is its tendency to homogenise kinship care as one thing with solutions that will apply to all situations. This can also be encouraged by arguments for parity between kinship care and non-related foster care (e.g. Sir James Munby's (2019) speech at the Coram Permanence Event). Critical realism can help navigate such tensions. Firstly, critical realism treats kinship care as a context that affects and is affected by mechanisms. It does not pretend that all contexts are the same but can advocate for what kinds of contexts can allow for the emergence of preferred outcomes by way of generative mechanisms. Taking a critical realist approach to kinship care research means that the starting point would be an evaluation not about whether it works compared to other situations or placements, but rather how it works, for whom it works, and under what circumstances. Secondly, by breaking down kinship care as both a practice and a concept into mechanisms, but also understanding the role of morals and ethics, means that lobbyists no longer have to utilise comparative arguments. Particular children's rights and needs, and the meeting of these are judged on their own merits. Lastly, critical realist research adds to the current research on kinship care, which usually conforms to traditional research notions of evidence-based practice and is quantitative and atheoretical. With its emphasis on the plurality of methods, critical realism allows quantitative and qualitative research to be seen together. They are both required and useful, although some more than others. Therefore, the limited body of kinship care research can be examined in terms of an ongoing realist evaluation where there are continuous cycles of research and reflection.

4.2.5.4   How critical realism helps participative research

The critical realist notion of fallibility is crucial to making participatory research more ethical and more democratic. While fallibility does not necessarily allow us to get to the ultimate truth, it at least acknowledges there is one. This sceptical honesty allows us to at least strive towards truth, rather than either seeing the findings as conclusive facts or outright dismissing them.

For example, because of their transitive views, participants' accounts are never accepted as straightforward evidence. They must always be subject to theories regarding the mechanisms at play and the real underlying structures that shape such constructions. Such questioning happens regardless of whether the participants are children or adults. Whether or not there is a belief children are different or the same as adults in terms of their competence, reliability, and so on, ultimately, such debates serve as distractions. No human has absolute control, power, or

knowledge of reality. However, we can all speculate on why things are as they are. This leads to participation being an *"I'll show you my theory if you show me yours"*, akin to Pawson & Tilley's (1997:169) proposal for realist evaluations. It lays the ground for participation being more than a one-off event and for it being about dialogue. Under critical realism, participation becomes even more about the dialogical, the meeting in the middle, outing the inner conversations and collectively navigating the space between the 'ought' and the 'is'. It is about not being persuaded by the monological or by certain actors claiming authoritative knowledge.

Critical realism, therefore, allows participants to explain their worlds in terms of the real and focus less on the descriptive and the actual and empirical. It also accepts that emotions and values are essential parts of how we live our lives and survive in this world. How we feel means something.

Finally, it must be remembered that Bhaskar and Archer highlight the transformative potential of human agency. Focussing on structures rather than events enables us to address not only the root causes of oppression but also such consciousness-raising is a crucial strategy for tackling it. Dialogical participation and the sharing and critique of knowledge are the first step to social justice and positive impact. Empowerment under a critical realist lens becomes less about an individual endeavour and more about a collective one.

4.3   Conclusion

Participation usually has to battle with how children are seen. Are they different from adults or the same? This debate usually distracts from including children in the dialogue about their lives. They are living with such tensions, and so can comment on them if appropriate space is provided. However, such dialogical participation does not help with the social constructivist aspect of PR. This suggests that there is no one objective reality, no fundamental truth, but rather multiple realities that are locally and culturally specific and altered by the knower. Naturally, if one version of events is no more adequate than another, then how can there be any advances in knowledge beyond the local? This is a particular problem when trying to apply findings to normative evidence-based social work policy and practice. It is even more problematic when trying to implement children's rights and social justice. A solution is to apply a critical realist stance. This helps us understand the world of social work. Through retroduction, judgemental relativism, and its ontological stance, critical realism allows researchers to get closer to the real and, with that, the truth. It allows an ethically charged social scientific truth-claim, but one that is fallible and, like the participants' viewpoints, open to scrutiny, criticism,

and corroboration. It allows for the recognition of the material, the interpretative, and the need for dialogue to help gain greater understanding and change. It helps stress the central role of participants' knowledge, their inner conversations, and their valuations. Therefore, concerns about using PR are discussed with the participants rather than such anxieties hindering the process. This is particularly useful for those labelled as not-as-good-as and whose voices are not readily heard. The next chapter will show how to apply such an intricate methodology and how ongoing reflexivity is vital to the process.

Chapter 5 - Methods -

Fallibility and Rigour - Creating Meaningful Research through Collaboration and Reflexivity

Rainbow – "Kids aren't always right, but adults aren't always right either."

Critical realism advocates that participants' and researchers' values and reasoning play a significant part in any study. How a researcher sees the world impacts how they collect data, how they analyse it, and what they see as the purpose of research. It influences what they think is right or true. Therefore, ontological and epistemological assumptions of the social work researcher, how they believe the world to be and how they believe we can learn about the world, should be stated upfront (Longhofer and Floersch, 2014). Such awareness is essential for qualitative research (Subramani, 2019) that is value-informed (Longhofer and Floersch, 2014) and theory-driven (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). It is particularly necessary for social work research, and even more so when researching children and families (Featherstone et al., 2014) and the febrile territory of family life for children in kinship care.

The ontological assumptions that guide this study have been laid out in the previous chapters. They have discussed the current tensions and debates surrounding kinship care, permanence, and corresponding social work practice. This can cause ambivalence for social workers. It has also been shown that kinship care research is partial, both in terms of the monological approaches taken and neglecting children's views. As such, the majority of the research is adult-centric, both methodologically and substantively.

The epistemological assumptions that guide the study argue that children's views are a valuable resource for kinship care studies. It is not only a child's right to have their experiences of their family lives heard, but this can also add a new perspective for social work practice where permanence is the goal. By accessing children's experiences, there can be a better understanding of the reality of their family lives.

The main research question is:

- What matters to children living in kinship care arrangements?

The subsidiary questions are:

a. What do children think about their family life in kinship care?

b. What are the implications of the children's views on the social work practice of permanence planning?

The following chapter demonstrates how a researcher's epistemological and ontological assumptions influence the design of a study. Therefore, at the very start, my positionality is further discussed. The rest of the chapter then describes the design and methods used in line with my particular standpoint. It shows how critical realist and dialogically participative methods can help to navigate, and in some cases, mitigate such assumptions. In particular, Manzano's interview approach (2016) helped the study be both collaborative and reflexive. This gave the children's insights both relevance and rigour (Syed et al., 2010). Alongside triangulation, it ensured that their experiential knowledge was transformed into a legitimate academic discourse which can ultimately provide better social work practice.

5.1   Positionality & reflexivity

I am a white, Reform Jewish, non-heterosexual, cis male who is 45 years old and has lived in the UK for most of his life. I identify as middle-class. I view my identities as complex, intertwined, and mutually reinforcing. Therefore, I take the intersectional approach frequently used in social work (Mattsson, 2014). I understand that my identities alter in significance according to my experiences and my surroundings. I have experienced privileges associated with having particular attributes. I have also experienced marginalisation, victimisation, and violence. I have a generally liberal egalitarian standpoint regarding social justice, social work, critical reflection, and anti-oppressive research.

I have an MA in social work and was in practice for ten years. Two of these years were with a kinship care team before returning to study for my social work PhD. Overall, I try to think the best of families, believing that removing children from their birth parents should only be a last resort for their safety and wellbeing. I acknowledge that families, individuals, and society can change, and it is a fundamental task of social work to help instigate positive changes (IASSW, 2014).

Regarding kinship care, my experience and knowledge suggest that the local authority must appropriately support the whole family's needs. However, this is often not the case.

Furthermore, I believe that families have valuable knowledge of their own experiences and situations. Their views should be included in all assessments. Finally, I do not have children, although I am close to my nieces. This has an impact on my understanding of children and childhood.

Being aware of not only my positionality but also its impact requires reflexivity. Reflective practice and reflexivity are now widely accepted as necessary in contemporary social work. However, they remain contested terms (Watts, 2019). Therefore, I have used Archer's (2003) definition, whose morphogenetic approach is often used in critical realist social work literature (e.g. Houston, 2010). This has a more interactive outlook.

Archer defines reflexivity as something that

> *"emphasises the autonomy of human agents, with interior thoughts that belong to them alone, but also that such agents reflect upon themselves in a relational fashion, in relationship to others and society." (Archer, 2003:123)*

Reflexivity was often a complex, confusing, challenging, and emotive process. Overall, I achieved reflexivity through supervision, a research diary, and input from the children, families, peers, practitioners, and relevant organisations, such as the collaborating organisations. Many of them were critical friends, as defined in feminist social work research by Appleton (2011). Through ongoing discussion, they challenged the study, helped shape its design, and helped ensure integrity.

5.2   Overall study design

5.2.1   Qualitative methods

It was decided that the children's valuations of their family life would be best obtained through qualitative methods. This study mainly uses words and images instead of numbers in its analysis. It places careful attention to the relationships central to the data collection rather than just mapping out the problem using statistical analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). While quantitative methods, such as surveys with large samples, have useful findings, the data produced is more likely to be descriptive and generalised. Qualitative methods are more likely to provide rich, detailed understandings of a child's family life (Gallagher, 2008a). The qualitative tradition also supports my epistemological stance. It reiterates the need for researcher and participant reflexivity, and respects multiple standpoints (Shaw and Holland, 2014). Qualitative approaches

can also effectively give voice to those, such as children, who are customarily silenced and marginalised (Abrams, 2010).

5.2.2   The use of valuations

In line with a critical realist methodology, it was essential to go beyond the surface of observed facts and experiences (the actual and the empirical domain) to investigate what happens underneath (the real domain). To access the mechanisms in the real, the children were asked to be reflexive and make valuations of their lives rather than just provide descriptive answers (Easton, 2010). Whenever the children offered answers, their reasonings about specific propositions were examined. For example, rather than accepting descriptive answers such as "pets", follow up questions were used, such as "What do you think makes a good pet?".

> *"Switching perspectives from the "extrinsic", descriptive and explanatory viewpoint to the intrinsic, first-person standpoint [when] we can see this moral sentiment is a first order capacity relating to what it means to be human...at the core of human agency" (Norrie, 2009:220–1).*

This need for a flexible yet focused approach with the children meant that the interviews were semi-structured.

5.2.3   The interview schedule

This research explicitly used a myriad of theories from different disciplines to help explain the children's experiences of permanence and their family life. To help judge such theories' adequacy, it used the knowledge and wisdom from both my peers and, even more importantly, the children themselves. Therefore, tentative theories were embedded in the interviews.

Manzano (2016) provides a helpful interviewing sequence to allow for this. This interview structure became the foundation of the study's scheduling. Manzano's sequencing also employs the principles of critical realism's teacher-learner cycle (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) and dialogical participation (Facca et al., 2020).

Manzano (2016) suggests there are three phases to a critical realist qualitative research design.

- **Phase 1** - Theory gleaning interviews – Exploratory questions about the participants' experiences and valuations

- **Phase 2** - Theory refinement interviews – Less standardised and more tailor-made questions derived from previous answers.

- **Phase 3** – Theory consolidation interviews – Both the interviewer and the participant revisit the theories and consolidate them with further insights. These either *"inspire/validate/falsify/modify"* hypotheses (Pawson, 1996:295).

Despite this collaborative approach, it was essential for me, as the researcher, to maintain overall control in the interviews. Researchers' knowledge and experience mean they are experts about how, and in what context, issues should be investigated (Pawson, 1996). Researchers must be *"carefully contextualising the domain in which subjects reflect on their own thinking"* (Pawson and Tilley, 1997:168). Researcher expertise, however, must also be balanced with the children as experts in identifying the issues that matter to them most. My general attitude was one of an *"amiable incompetent"* (Abbott and Sapsford, 1998:112). This is someone friendly, purposeful, and intelligent. It is also someone that lacks specific knowledge about lived experiences and has to be told certain things.

5.2.4 The use of different participatory methods

Data collection had to be flexible, adaptive and ready to accommodate the unexpected (Greig et al., 2007). It was essential to be mindful of the different ways that people communicate. The data collection had to be person-friendly to attend to the children's different abilities and needs (Punch, 2002). This allowed for appropriate sensitivity and care as the children were often explaining personal and delicate issues. I was also mindful that these children have experienced loss and are no longer living with their birth parents. Many have also experienced abuse and neglect.

Flexible and creative participatory methods were employed to engage with the children effectively (Gallagher, 2009). The mosaic approach (Clark, 2010) was used as a template for the multiple participatory tasks. Such methods assisted a vital objective of the study, which was to solely use the children's views as the primary data.

By combining Manzano's (2016) interview sequence and participatory methods, the first phase interviews' primary tasks were walking tours. For the second phase, we used photos taken by the children to elicit conversation, as well as maps and role-play. We used symbols and pictures for the third phase to see if we had represented all that mattered to them.

5.2.5   Triangulation

The combination of different methods created an image of the children's worlds pieced together from smaller images. It created a "*mosaic of children's lives*" (Clark, 2010:117). Such triangulation can limit subjectivity and improve validity and reliability (Healy and Perry, 2000).

Triangulation in research has many different meanings (Leckner and Severson, 2019). Triangulation is referred to here as a concept where a researcher attempts to gain perspectives from multiple sources. It is an essential concept for mixed-method critical realist research (Modell, 2009). It can help control the influence of various biases and presumptions. Triangulation can also capitalise on each method's strengths or perspective while also compensating for their various weaknesses (Wynn and Williams, 2012). Nevertheless, an initial concern was how to amalgamate and analyse different data types such as photos, maps, and drawings. Therefore, materials and tasks were used to elicit conversations rather than be examined as standalone pieces of data for analysis.

Triangulation was also obtained by having multiple visits with the same child. The study was a prospective longitudinal research process. It took place with three different contacts with the children over one year, and there were at least four months between each visit to the same child. This timeframe allowed the children's perspectives to change, or remain, following their experiences and reflections. It also allowed for researcher reflection, analysis, theory forming, and discussions with peers.

It was also essential to gain different perspectives of family lives by recruiting different children that were living in their own unique circumstances. A multi-case study design was undertaken to provide chances for comparison (Miles et al., 2013). However, it is not a typical comparative study nor a randomised control trial. Instead, in response to the heterogeneity inherent in kinship care, the participants, and their circumstances, the study opted for theoretical replication. This contrasts with literal replication, which predicts similar results (Yin, 2018). Instead, theories are used to explain specific circumstances for specific children. Theories can then be used to predict contrasting results but for predictable reasons.

Finally, further triangulation was also achieved by gaining multiple perspectives from others outside the researcher-participant dyad. Again, collaboration was crucial. Not only were critical friends vital but so was previous research and literature from a variety of disciplines, both quantitative and qualitative.

"Important as these qualitative methods are, though, critical realist research must draw on an array of mixed methods, interdisciplinarity, triangulation, theoretical erudition and the systematic review in order to capture the complexity of the objective and subjective dimensions of social life." (Houston, 2010:84)

5.2.6 Analysis

A critical realist approach aims to provide empirical certainty with interpretative awareness of subjectivities (Alderson, 2013). It does this through the identification of demi-regularities and by using abduction to identify themes. Retroduction is also used to identify mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2019).

Abduction is also known as theoretical redescription. It uses inference to explain the phenomenon through the interpretation and recontextualisation of events through a conceptual framework or suite of ideas (ibid). Hypotheses gained from previous research and literature were necessary before data collection. A list of codes was kept in mind from the literature review, tentatively applicable theoretical frameworks, and fundamental critical realist concepts. This differs from grounded theory or inductive reasoning, which does not test the pre-existing hypothesis (Fletcher, 2017). It also differs from a deductive or even a flexible deductive approach. Unlike deductive reasoning, the study did not aim to disprove original theories explicitly, but rather the theories speak to the data and vice versa. Throughout the collaborative process, codes and theories were changed, eliminated, and supplemented with new ones, even after every piece of text was coded (Gilgun, 2015).

Retroduction was also used. To reiterate, this is the *"thinking backwards"* from outcomes and effects to causes (Houston, 2010:82) so that findings do not just stay on the empirical or actual. Retroduction attempts to highlight the main mechanisms and contexts that may produce specific outcomes. It was undertaken after initial abduction. Abduction was then later utilised again to confirm explanations.

As can be seen throughout this thesis, a realist analysis is never a defined separate stage of the research process. It is not a case of trudging out and labelling a few themes and mechanisms identified with the help of a computer software package. Instead, it is the ongoing iterative process of placing nuggets of information within their broader context (Pawson, 2006). As part of a realist research evaluation cycle, the analysis starts before, during, and after data collection.

The only mandate is that any insights pursued should be both complementary with, and retrospective to, fieldwork (Manzano, 2016); in this case, social work practice.

5.2.7 Sampling and sample size

Cases were selected to develop a deeper understanding of what matters to children living in kinship care, rather than being chosen to be statistically representative of larger populations. Although critical realism's identification of mechanisms can produce generalisability, there still needed to be inclusion and exclusion criteria for both analytical and logistical reasons. There had to be some purposive sampling, otherwise, there may be too much or too little data. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that this would depend on how many children could be reached and wished to take part. As such, the sample was also, to some extent, one of convenience (Shaw and Holland, 2014).

As stated in the introduction chapter, for this study, the children were all living in kinship care arrangements in England as defined by the Child Welfare League of America (1994).

> *"Kinship care is the full-time care, nurturing and protection of children who must be separated from their parents by relatives, members of their tribes, or clans, godparents, step-parents or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child" (Child Welfare League of America, 1994:2).*

The children also had to be attending school. School attendance meant that children were more likely to be practised in focussing on particular tasks for allotted periods (Hamre and Pianta, 2001). Such children were also more likely have had the experience of an adult, other than their family and close family friends talking to them about their family lives (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

Characteristics and variables of the children were not defined by their actual attributes such as gender and ethnicity. The aim was to avoid, as far as possible with reflexivity, the naming, defining, classifying, stereotyping, or comparing of characteristics by imposing my ideas and values. Instead, critical realism identifies attributes by the real deeper structural mechanisms of the power relationships between classes, such as carer–child or participant-researcher (Sayer, 1992). For example, it was essential to interview some children who were in an ethnic minority in their local environment rather than have one child that was black, one that was white, one that was Jewish, and so on. This allowed power relationships to be discussed in more depth. For

example, we discussed what it felt to be marginalised for being seemingly different, rather than just discussing what it felt like to be of Traveller heritage.

Theories were confirmed through the mixed-method strategy until the saturation point (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This means new data was sought from new perspectives until no new events emerged in the ongoing analysis. The sample size needed to be big enough to allow for both retroduction and saturation. In other words, the more instances and signifiers investigated in the empirical allowed for easier recognition of what was happening in the real (Easton, 2010).

Nineteen children were initially recruited to take part. They were all from a variety of different backgrounds and family circumstances. However, two children decided not to take part before the first interviews, two others were not available for the second, and one child was not available for the third. With the families' consent and the children's assent, the data from all interviews are included in the analysis.

5.2.8   Timetabling and flexibility

Setting up sessions and engaging with child participants involves a lot of physical and emotional labour (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). I ensured that I would only visit a maximum of two families a day. This enabled me to maintain focus throughout my meetings with the children. The four-month gap between interviews also allowed me to spend time spent reflecting, analysing, collaborating, and building theories before then putting them back to the children.

Despite my enthusiasm and commitment, this was not always returned by the carers. I became aware that I often became yet another external demand (Cree et al., 2002). I spent much time reminding some families and renegotiating plans. Furthermore, while gatekeepers have a positive function by protecting children from potentially anxiety-producing research, it is known that they can also use their position to censor them or stop them from engaging (Goredema-Braid, 2010). This is especially true for children living away from their birth parents, many of whom are likely to have experienced abuse and neglect (Kirk, 2007). Moreover, the gatekeepers may have experienced inadequate services or resources due to cutbacks. They can become research weary and sceptical about the benefits of social work research (Cree et al., 2002). Conversely, the gatekeepers may, on the other hand, coerce the children into participating (Harden et al., 2000). Overall, the process required a patient, empathetic, and flexible approach. The study needed to align with the children's family lives and the carers motivations.

5.2.9   Dialogical process and ethical concerns

Ethics must be the foundation of any research design (Yip et al., 2016). Furthermore, ethical research practice must also be seen as an ongoing complex collaborative process (Hugman, 2010). This is because research is a site of power that can influence the creation and the sustaining of discourses, practices, and institutions such as those of social work (ibid). Comprehensive knowledge of different ethical approaches to social work research was sought and reflected upon for this study. This included using Butler's (2002) code of ethics for social work research and the principles of the ethics of care such as respect, integrity, and justice (Tronto, 1994). Moreover, I was guided by social work values (BASW, 2012), which require professionals to respect subjects' moral autonomy through honesty, competence, and informed consent.

The study adhered to fundamental principles of the ESRC framework (2017). Before meeting the children, the study design was submitted to and approved by the University's Ethical Review process (Appendix B). This was with the understanding that any ethical statement is only a starting point, should be seen as the minimum statement of values, and is always provisional. Such frameworks likewise state that consent, confidentiality, and an acknowledgement of power differentials must underpin all research design. The is especially true for research with children to mitigate the anxieties around their vulnerabilities, whether real or imagined (Alderson, 2013). A new DBS certificate was explicitly obtained for the project to help alleviate these anxieties.

Ethical concerns were addressed using a dialogical approach. The children were included in the conversations around the power dynamics between them and adults. Many of the questions asked, directly related to how much autonomy and say children should have regarding their lives and who had a responsibility to keep them safe. The children were instrumental in the planning of consent, assent, anonymity, and confidentiality. This dialogical approach happened not only at the very start but throughout the research.

Financial payments or gifts for the children were considered, but these can be counter-productive in equalising power relations (Zutlevics, 2016). Instead, the children kept the photos they took for the study.

Finally, the research had to have a meaningful impact. One of the fundamental ethical principles of any research is that the participants do not just disclose personal information for no reason

(Alderson and Morrow, 2020). This principle is particularly relevant for social work research, where participants are likely to have undergone tough challenges in life. As such, effective and meaningful dissemination was a crucial part of the study.

5.3 Procedures and data collection

Having shown the reasoning and structure for the study's overall design, the specific strategies and methods undertaken will now be described. Similarly, all decisions were underpinned with an awareness of critical realist methodologies, the need for a collaborative approach, and the provision of appropriate time and space for reflexivity.

5.3.1 Recruitment

Nineteen children were recruited through the social media and the mailing list of the collaborating organisation Grandparents Plus. A post was also put on the Facebook group 'Raising Awareness of Kinship Care'. Before posting, it was ensured that both organisations were aware of the aims of the study. In particular, it was made clear that neither the names of the participants involved nor their families would be disclosed.

The posts and emails contained a link to the website devised for the study. The website highlighted the study's aims in an accessible and engaging way. It also stipulated who could participate, how they could participate, as well as information regarding anonymity, consent, and the right to withdraw. The website can be found at:

https://familyandfriendscarewhatmatterstochildren.wordpress.com/
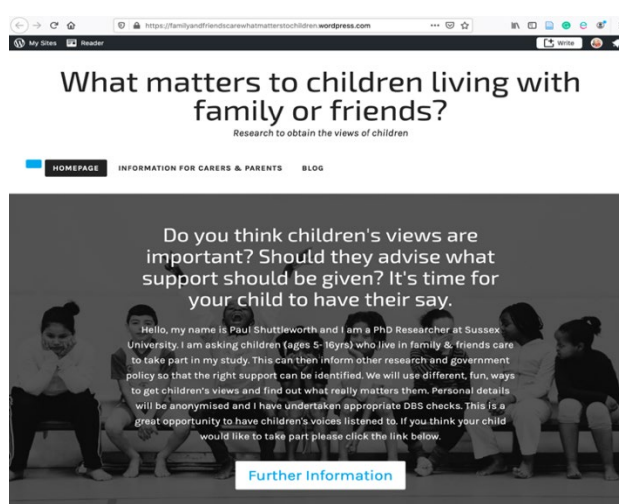
FIGURE 3 - WHAT MATTERS TO CHILDREN LIVING WITH FAMILY OR FRIENDS WEBSITE

5.3.2   Providing information

The central, vital points of the information provided to participants and their families were:

- The aims and methods of the study.

- That the study was voluntary.

- The right for the children to withdraw from specific questions or indeed the whole study.

- The meaning of confidentiality and anonymity.

The information was conveyed in various ways and through various mediums such as the website, information sheets (Appendix C), emails, telephone conversations, and visual methods. It was recognised that there had to be appropriately tailored information, in different forms, for different individuals with a range of needs and developmental stages (Beresford, 1997).

The information presented in these ways did not replace having discussions with participants before starting each interview or activity (O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016). When initially meeting the children, at least one carer was present to help reiterate and reinforce information. At the subsequent sessions, information was again relayed to the children. This happened alongside their carer if the children confirmed this was their wish. Starting sessions in this manner also helped remind and refocus them on the aims of the study.

A central challenge for the research, and me personally, was how to position and label myself. I am proud of the social work title of my profession and my practice. However, it is known that many families that are in kinship care arrangements have not had positive experiences with social workers. Many no longer wish to have social workers in their lives (Grandparents Plus, 2020). Nevertheless, I had to be transparent about the study being social work research that addresses social work practice. Also, if the researcher has been introduced as a trusted professional, carers are more likely to give consent (Cree et al., 2002).

After much consideration, I decided that calling myself a social work researcher would be the most honest reflection of my role. This still was not without its difficulties. Often, I was prescribed a role by the families regardless of how I had introduced myself. For example, many of the carers would talk to me after I had seen the children asking for legal or practical advice. The advice sought by the carers diminished as the study progressed. My unwavering reply was to signpost them to available resources. This included legal services, their local social services departments, and the Grandparents Plus advice line.

5.3.3   Consent and assent

Gatekeepers were a significant consideration for the recruitment of the participants. Gatekeepers are the people in the children's lives who are not researched in themselves but rather provide access. They were important as they are the intermediaries between the researchers and the participants. In social work research, these are usually the people in the participants' lives with legal responsibility for their safety and wellbeing (Clark, 2011). Gatekeepers are not neutral and have their own priorities, aims and interests.

For this study, the gatekeepers were parents, carers, and, if relevant, social workers. Alongside permission from the children, permission was gained from at least one person who held parental responsibilities and rights. There could also not be any dissent from other parties such as birth parents if they had not given written consent. As is typical for qualitative social work studies, the children's informed assent was sought, and the gatekeepers' consent was provided (Shaw and Holland, 2014).

The children also signed their own consent forms. Although this was not legally necessary, it framed the study's collaborative approach and helped ease the power differentials between the adults and the children. It also demonstrated to the children that their views were influential and central to the study. The children devised their own signatures. The majority of them had not been asked to sign consent forms before. They all said they appreciated being included in this way. The consent forms can be viewed in Appendix D.

Overall, gaining informed consent and assent was as much a process as an event. It was an ongoing dialogically participative process and more than just a set of procedures (Shaw and Holland, 2014). For example, it was never assumed that the children were ultimately obliged to complete the research because they signed a form. Periodically throughout the sessions, children were again asked for their verbal assent. Also, as previously mentioned, some of the questions directly related to their sense of agency. They were asked how their independence interacted with the responsibility of adults to keep them safe. Finally, there was an ongoing awareness of any cues that the children were no longer comfortable or were reluctant to relay further information. We devised a stock phrase of "I don't want to talk about it". It was imperative that the children did not feel pressurised, and that they understood that the interview could stop at any point they wished. They were also shown how to stop the recording device.

5.3.4 Anonymity & confidentiality

It was essential to be mindful of the confidentiality of the information obtained and the anonymity of participants. However, most researchers agree that complete confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed. This especially true if a child discloses information that they, or others, are at risk of significant harm (Wiles et al., 2008). The realities of confidentiality and anonymity were clearly explained to the participants and their carers. Moreover, the family were assured that if confidentiality and anonymity had to be broken, they would be informed about the process as it happened.

All the children chose their own pseudonyms. Again, this enabled the children to feel a level of agency and ownership over the research. Names, addresses, and other potentially identifying information specific to their lives were also changed during transcription. Data protection procedures were followed according to the Data Protection Act 2018, and the university's research and General Data Protection Regulations (2020). For example, the audio recordings were anonymised and placed on the secure server Box.com.

Many of the carers wished to be informed about the private concerns of the children under their care. This issue has been identified by other researchers (see Kirk, 2007). There was, therefore, an ongoing open discussion that was initiated at the first meeting. It was made clear that the information provided would not be readily disclosed to the carers unless deemed absolutely necessary.

Another consideration was ensuring anonymity from *"persons with whom respondents have relationships such as spouses, coworkers or neighbours"* (Bickford and Nisker, 2015:278). There is always a small chance that others in the children's lives would recognise them based on information provided in the research. Again, this was discussed in full with both the children and their carers. Some of the children were disappointed that this would mean that they would not be made famous through the study. However, with further discussion, they understood the need to anonymise data and keep them and their families safe.

5.3.5 Safety

Critical realist studies are undertaken in an open system. The study's primary site was the participants' homes and, for the first interviews, the surrounding neighbourhood. While interviewing the children, there was at least one carer who held parental responsibility in the home. Doors to rooms were left open to safeguard against allegations. When out on child-led

walking tours, permission was sought from the carers, and we were always in public view. It was discussed at the beginning of each session that the children's carers would try not to overhear, but they may inadvertently do so.

5.3.6   Initial interviews

For the first phase of interviews, the theory gleaning interviews (Manzano, 2016), the main priority was to determine the outcomes that the children wished for their family life. This is akin to Pawson and Tilley's (1997) 'outcomes = mechanisms + contexts' model, as discussed in the previous chapter. Central to the questions were: what makes a good kinship care arrangement for you, what does permanence mean for you, and what are your valuations of family life?

Within this, it was also vital to determine the moral orientations and values that the children found important. This allowed an examination of the 'ought/is' for the children (Sayer, 2019). Specific questions evoked valuations and moral judgments. For example, one of the questions asked the children what they thought their family motto was.

A template was used as a prompt for the questions, themes, and discussions that needed to take place (Appendix F).

5.3.6.1   *Child-led tours*

The children were asked to take me on a guided tour of their homes and, if they wished, their neighbourhood. It is argued that child-led tours generate richer data than non-task-based interviews (Loebach and Gilliland, 2010). The method used was an amalgamation of the docent method by Chang (2017) and the more conventional participatory walking interview heralded by Emmel & Clark (2009). The children were simply asked to show me what mattered to them. This had the following advantages:

- The children had control over what was shown, the walk's length, and the route followed (Emmel and Clark, 2009).

- The children did not have to maintain eye contact, which can be intimidating for many (Trell and Hoven, 2010).

- The tours allowed for natural pauses through occurrences such as opening doors and picking up objects. This diminished some of the awkwardness of silences and allowed the children time to think before they spoke. They were also less likely to focus on the perceived right answer (Edensor, 2007).

- The tours provided a sense of connection between the environment and the body. It afforded a greater embodied action than just voice and gesticulation (Evans and Jones, 2011). The children literally showed me how their spatial practices were embodied and experienced.

- We did not lose sight of the real or the reverent (Bhaskar, 2008). The children often showed me precisely what they were talking about.

5.3.7 Field-notes

Fieldnotes were made after each interview (Appendix E). Fieldnotes were essential because the interviews and the narratives were situated in specific circumstances at specific times. They had *"situated meanings"* (Gee, 2005:57). These fieldnotes described the possible motivations and feelings of all concerned and described the settings in which the interviews took place. They provided reminders for supervision and subsequent cross-referencing (Elliott et al., 2012). Also, just the action of writing down notes actively encouraged researcher reflexivity (Eriksson et al., 2012).

5.3.8 Transcription

In order to conduct a thematic analysis, the data had to be transcribed into written form. There are debates within the literature and ongoing ones within the academic community regarding the importance of transcribing your own data or hiring others to do it (Bird, 2005).

In consultation with my peers and on reflection, I transcribed my own data. After the interviews, the interviews' audio recordings were played back and spoken directly into the computer microphone using Google software. This free software allows for password protection to ensure adequate confidentiality. Shaw and Holland's (2014) guide for transcribing was used. Overall, the transcribing process was an imposing phenomenon. It was laborious and time-consuming. Nevertheless, it became a crucial step in my analysis.

5.3.9 Initial analysis - codes and themes

The coding started during the transcription and the initial familiarisation of the data. The purpose of such coding was to detect demi-regularities (Fletcher, 2017). Critical realism states that these occur on the 'empirical' level of reality. Topics, observations, and phrases that emerged during the research were coded. They were tendencies, which are a rough trend or broken patterns in the data (ibid).

To help identify such demi-regularities, the transcription was annotated with thoughts, feelings, and values. When these became recurring or seemed to be illuminative instances (Stake, 1995), they were put on post-it notes and placed on a wall in my home.

During coding, themes were also identified. Thematic analysis through abduction is a flexible approach to data analysis. It is compatible with multiple research methods and critical realism (Fletcher, 2017). It involved careful reading and re-reading of the data. This allowed me to go from the description of demi-regularities to in-depth analysis and interpretation.

The themes were also placed on the wall. The post-it notes were then colour coded and moved around. The wall allowed me to see the data as a whole. The post-it notes were placed in different areas near to corresponding theories that linked back to the research questions. As such, the codes were condensed into initial lower-order demi-regularities and themes, into master themes, and then into organising themes (King, 2012).

FIGURE 4 - WALL DISPLAY OF DEMI-REGULARITIES, THEMES & THEORIES

The codes and themes were then transposed to electronic mind maps. This provided more mobile representations to show my supervisors and peers. Subsequently, in line with Manzano's (2016) interview sequencing, the themes and codes were then were used to create a loosely structured topic schedule for the second interviews.

Identifying themes and codes was a messy and multi-layered endeavour. It involved moving backwards and forwards, linking between the data and the corresponding literature. It also

involved sounding out ideas with my supervisor and my peers. The process allowed me to start to cautiously link theory to the children's family lives, permanence, and social work practice.

Throughout the process, I was aware that the codes and themes could only provide tentative explanations (Oliver, 2012). Many of them seemed, on reflection, to be aligned with the particular lens that I was wearing. Initially, such biases were worrying. However, I kept faith that through retroduction and the research cycle, such theories would either persist throughout the research or else they would fade away as less relevant (Vincent and O'Mahoney, 2018). Through supervision, collaboration with peers, and further interviews with the children, I was confident that theories would either be supported, elaborated on, or rejected.

5.3.10 The second interviews

The second phase interviews' main aim was to refine theories and themes (Manzano, 2016). Previous answers were used to provide further direct lines of enquiry. A template was used as a prompt for the questions, themes, and discussions that needed to take place (Appendix G).

It was important that the children still maintained some control over the direction of the conversation. The interviews needed to remain dialogically participatory. They also needed to accommodate the specifics needs and methods of communication of the children. For the second interviews, a variety of task-based methods were again used to elicit conversation.

5.3.10.1 Photo-elicitation

Firstly, photographs were used. The children were given disposable cameras after the first meeting. They were simply asked to take pictures of things that mattered to them. Due to issues of consent, confidentiality, and politeness, the children were also told that they had to ask permission of people before they took their photo.

Photo-elicitation was used for this part of the study. Photo-elicitation merely inserts photographs into research interviews as a talking point to stimulate conversation (Dockett et al., 2017). This is often confused with photo-voice, typically used as part of action-based research (Clark and Morriss, 2017). Action-based research was not viable for the research. There was not enough time for the children themselves to engage with change-makers, such as policy-advisors or social workers.

Photo-elicitation is part of the group of visual methods that are now more commonly used for research with children (Shaw, 2020). The image acts as an extension of memory and as a

memory anchor. It also allows researchers to see parts of participants' lives that otherwise may not be visible (Barbour, 2014). Images are often said to represent an intersection between personal biography, politics, culture, positionality, and aesthetics (Edwards, 1994).

Photo-elicitation can be a valuable and flexible tool that assists in the communication of the child's world. It also disrupts typical power flows in an interview (Goldman-Segall and Goldman, 2014). For example, it is said that children are more able to lead the conversation when producing their own pictures. In this study, the children could alter the pace and shape the conversation by either remaining on specific pictures or by swiftly moving on (White et al., 2010). The use of such an object can help verbally restricted, reticent, or socially distant participants (Bahn and Barratt-Pugh, 2013). It can reduce the strangeness of interviewing because it is similar to showing a family album (Tinkler, 2013).

The issue of representation when using photos in research remains a contested issue (Rogers, 2017). This is especially true because most visual methods utilise a social constructivist viewpoint (Prosser and Loxley, 2008; Poku et al., 2019; Shaw, 2020). The use of photos in research became an ontological and epistemological question.

Once again, my assumptions had to be considered. There also had to be an assurance that the method was aligned with both dialogical participative thinking and a critical realist approach. Photo-elicitation has not been written about from a critical realist perspective, although associations can be made. Photo-elicitation provides not only a bridge between the research and the participants but also photos can bridge different experiences of reality. The photos, and the objects within them, are real and visibly about something - just as what matters is about something. The effects of the process are not only interpretative but also experiential and embodied (Goldman-Segall and Goldman, 2014). It includes the sensory, the emotional and the affective. It allows children to think about and

> *"reveal what is hidden in the inner mechanisms of the ordinary and the taken for granted" (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004:7).*

As such, photo-elicitation can be effectively used if ontological and epistemological assumptions are acknowledged, and the approach is reflexive and explicitly critical (Dockett et al., 2017)

After the children took their pictures, the film rolls were sent to me at the university. The photos were then developed. The children then opened the pack of photographs at the next meeting

and could show me some, all, or none of the photos. This allowed the children to maintain some control over any disclosures or any pictures that they later deemed sensitive.

5.3.10.2 Drawing and maps

Drawing, maps, and role-play were also the task-based tools used to help the children communicate complex, abstract, and often sensitive issues. This depended on the child and the situation. They provided innovative and bespoke ways to collect data (Thomson, 2009). Such methods also offered a change of pace, were fun, and kept the children engaged (Clark and Morriss, 2017).

Some children drew genograms, eco-maps, and diagrams to represent their lives. The genogram, in this case, a simple display of a family tree (Carter and McGoldrick, 1989), was a valuable tool for children that preferred more structured representations. Conversely, eco-maps were a more flexible approach that helped some children describe the relationships around them (Hartman, 1995). It allowed them to use drawings and objects which were moved around a piece of paper alongside conversations about their meaning.

Genograms and eco-maps are often used in social work (Rogers, 2017). If the children stated they had done the task before with social workers, the tools were not used. It was essential not to further complicate the children's positioning of me as a social work researcher.

5.3.10.3 Role-play

Finally, role-play was used. This was not included in the original design of the study. It is an excellent example of the reflexive and participatory research approach. In the first interviews, one of the themes that emerged was how the children viewed themselves and how others viewed them. As such, I asked the children in the second interviews, "How would you describe yourself?". They would often say, "I'm me" or other valid yet abstract responses. However, one child suggested, "Do you mean how would you introduce yourself?". This seemed a useful way to ask the children the same question. In a subsequent interview, a child who was incredibly energetic and hard to focus throughout the interview, told me that she loved drama. We, therefore, played a game where we met each other at a party and had to describe ourselves. This kind of role-play re-engaged the child with the interview.

Drama is not often used in social work research, even such basic kinds of imaginary play and role play (Shaw and Holland, 2014). However, ethnodrama researcher Fabian (1990) states that

some types of knowledge can be represented *"only through action, enactment, or performance"* (Fabian, 1990:6). It draws out responses in ways that are tacit, spontaneous, embodied, or affective rather than merely cognitive.

5.3.11 Further analysis

Following the second interviews, there was further identification of demi-regularities and themes, and further analysis using abduction and retroduction.

At this stage, NVivo was considered to help code, theme, and analyse the data. Unlike statistical software, this type of qualitative data analysis software does not do the analysis but can only facilitate it. Drisko (2013) warns that such software "*may offer some modest overtones of thoroughness but these can be appearances only if the software is not used thoughtfully*" (Drisko, 2013:287). Because I had been using a system of annotations and post-it notes on the wall, it seemed unnecessary for me to use another system to analyse my data. NVivo was, therefore, used only as a place of storage and filing. The analytical programmes within it were not utilised.

At this stage of analysis, the data revealed some seemingly contradictory themes and concepts. These in-between spaces were not ignored. Instead, they were considered vital parts of the findings. They demonstrated that such contradictions were part of the children's ambivalent and reflexive thinking about their family lives. Archer's (2012) work on reflexivity and internal conversations helped theorise these reflexive spaces and the positions of tension experienced by the children.

5.3.12 Review meetings

The final phase of interviews, according to Manzano (2016), are the theory consolidation interviews. The initial findings and analyses were reflected back to the children. They still needed to earn their way into the final analysis and show *"practical adequacy"* to provide an explanation (Sayer, 2000:43). The interviews allowed the collection of data until saturation and epistemological closure (Easton, 2010). The children's responses to previous accounts were documented and considered but were not used to change the original data.

For these final phase interviews, visual methods were used alongside an interview template bespoke to each child (Appendix H). This allowed the analysis to be framed in a way that the children understood. It was an adaptation of another tool known as the 'Words and Pictures' explanation (Hiles et al., 2008).

FIGURE 5 - WORDS AND PICTURES EXPLANATIONS FOR FINAL PHASE

At the end of the interviews, the children were asked a set of questions that explicitly allowed them to have reflexive space to explore the inner conversations and mechanisms they had previously highlighted. For example, they were asked, "what's the difference between children and adults?"

5.3.13 Dissemination

Dissemination is arguably one of the most crucial processes of research. This is highlighted in the participatory research literature, particularly Lundy's (2007) model, which stresses the importance of audience and influence. The importance of impact and knowledge exchange is also highlighted as essential by universities and funding bodies, such as the Research Council UK, which funded this project.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) and Rycroft-Malone et al. (2012) recommend that participants be included in dissemination activities, especially when informing policy. However, under the stakeholders' advice and SeNSS and the university's research ethics guidelines, adequate assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity could not be provided. Therefore, it was decided that the children's views could more be ethically represented through their quotes rather than their physical presence at dissemination events.

There are also concerns about dissemination being seen as a one-off end of project activity or event rather than a process of ongoing active research utilisation (Shaw and Holland, 2014).

Cronbach et al. (1980) highlight this by recommending that much useful dissemination is informal, not deliberate, and some of its most significant effects are indirect. They suggest that researchers just be around, talk briefly and often, tell stories, and use multiples models of presentation.

Dissemination was achieved through various conferences and presentations throughout the research process. The audiences consisted of practitioners, policymakers, and academics from a variety of disciplines, as well as kinship carers. Provisional findings were also given to recent studies such as the 'Blueprint For A Special Guardianship Support Service' Hall (2020) and the Nuffield (2019) study on kinship care and Special Guardianship.

5.4   Conclusion

Ongoing collaboration, dialogical participation, and dissemination helped develop the methodology and task-based methods. They also ensured a continuous critique of the theories that emerged from the study. It promoted reflection and reflexivity through the continuous rechecking of my positionality. Most importantly, working in partnership helped maintain the overall focus of the study. It ensured that I never lost sight of how the research could improve social work practice for children living in kinship care. It allowed me to ensure that theories struck a chord with families and practitioners and that the research would mean something and matter. The ongoing collaboration ensured that the children's views became a valuable resource. As can be seen in the next chapters, it allowed their perspectives to produce a valid academic discourse that addresses the everyday realities of social work practice and permanency planning for children living in kinship care arrangements.

Chapter 6 - Findings -

How Children Navigate the Contradictions in Kinship Family Life and in Permanence

Danielle – "Family are part of your life and you sometimes get to see them, or you don't. You just like you know that they are there with you, looking out for you, but like not in your house or near."

The previous two chapters have shown the methods of enquiry used to elicit children's views in meaningful and ethical ways. This chapter shows how by using such methods, the children described and made valuations about their family life in a kinship care arrangement.

Through retroduction and thematic analysis of the children's accounts, three central mechanisms emerged. They were core to how the children were doing family life and permanence in their kinship care arrangements. These mechanisms, or strategies, are the ways of being, thinking, and doing, which are subject to potential activation through the contexts and conditions around them. They are:

- Connection/Separation

- Recognition/(Mis)recognition

- Care & Protection/Independence & Risk

It should also be noted that the mechanisms include their antonyms, their opposite states. Just as Danielle talks about being there and not being there, this is in line with Bhaskar's conceptualisations of absence and presence. He states that there is no way that a purely present being, object, or event, can exist without its opposite. For example, a room is made up not only of furniture but also empty space. Also, absence or negativity is always before presence and positivity (Bhaskar, 1993). There must be space to put furniture into.

The following chapter begins with a further acknowledgement of how these mechanisms interact. It then uses the views of the children to explain how they use these mechanisms to manage their relationships, how they are viewed, and their concepts of effective care. Like Danielle's quote above, the children speak about seeming contradictions and ambivalence in their family relationships as well as their strive for a sense of permanence. They also talk about their use of time, space, and other resources and how these are intertwined with the

expectations of childhood, and the need for interdependence in multiple family relationships that endure but are also in flux.

6.1   The interactions of mechanisms

The mechanisms of Connection/Separation, Recognition/(Mis)recognition, and Care & Protection/Independence & Risk, emerged from the children's views using thematic analysis. The iterative and reiterative approach necessitated abductive and retroductive analysis. This identified these mechanisms as prominent strategies for the children. These mechanisms were crucial in making family life work for these children in kinship care arrangements. Although the mechanisms are distinct entities in their own right, they interact with each other.
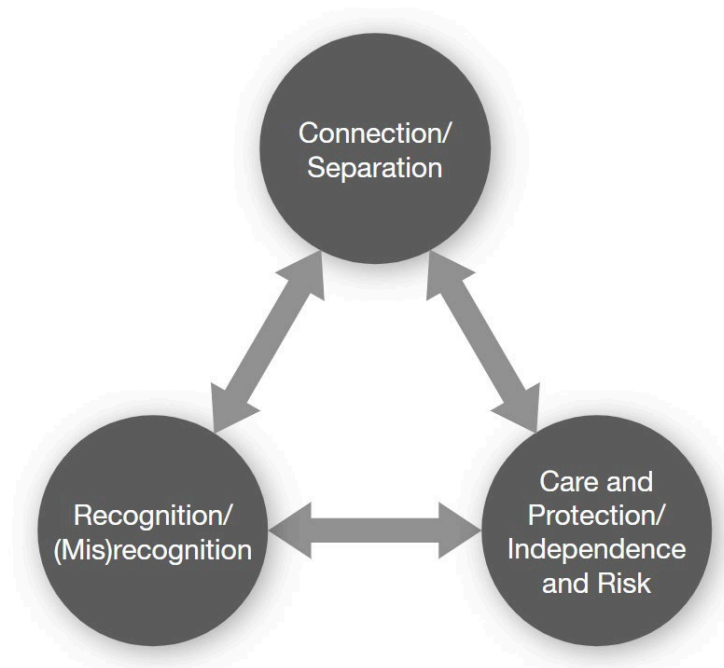
FIGURE 6 - THREE CENTRAL MECHANISMS THAT EMERGED FROM HOW THE CHILDREN MANAGE FAMILY LIFE AND PERMANENCE.

An example of this is with food. Food was a major topic of conversation with the children. It is an everyday issue that is central to everybody's lives. Talking about food is an easy way to relate to each other and can show concern. Cooking a child's favourite food demonstrates care, connection, and a recognition of their individual likes and dislikes. The children also spoke about how food is used to mark celebratory events when family and friends spend time with each other, share family and cultural recipes, and talk about the past, present, and future. Shared meals then are social encounters in which values, emotions, and each of the mechanisms play a part (Ashley et al., 2004).

6.2 The mechanism of connection/separation

*"**Rainbow** - Although my sister is not here, I can see her by phone, by computer, and by things that she's given to me, like love. And I talk about people that aren't here every day. And I have pictures of them. And this (shows a postcard). It says sisters will be forever friends. And my sister's fiancé taught me how to ride a bike."*

Throughout the majority of conversations, the children talked about relationships and different ways to keep connections with people. People in children's lives were often psychologically present even when not physically present (Samuels, 2009). Relationships then are of central importance. This section highlights this by examining the mechanism of connection/separation in terms of personal values, families, sharing, contact, memories, and objects. Because family relationships are such a significant part of permanence, this section takes up the largest part of the findings chapter. It is the building block for the rest of the chapter, which then shows how the other mechanisms intertwine.

6.2.1 Relationships, values, and moral orientations

The importance of relationships affirms the hypothesis that we are all relational interdependent beings. We need other people to flourish. Conversely, being alone can cause suffering (Sayer, 2011). This was highlighted by Erica, who spoke about living with her birth parents.

*"**Erica** – We used to not like it there because we were just really alone."*

However, relationships with others are complicated. The children's need for, yet ambivalence towards, personal relationships were apparent throughout. This reiterates a lot of literature about children who are not in their birth parents' care (e.g. Biehal, 2014). Strong feelings of attachment, guilt, and loss were accompanied by feelings of love, forgiveness, and acceptance (Cameron and Maginn, 2008).

These contradictions are further highlighted by the values the children said were important:

Feeling Special	Fairness	Feeling Wanted	Humour	Becoming An Adult
Being A Child	Having Fun	Not Being Ignored	Hope	Knowing What's Happening
Sharing	Privacy	Time Alone	Being Safe	Taking Risks
Kindness	Being Caring	**Values That Matter**	Loyalty	Trust
Generosity	Forgiveness	Respect	Honesty	Being Comfortable
Pride	Enthusiasm	Team Work	Trying Hard	Cuteness & Prettiness
Thoughtfulness	Being Loving	Not Nagging	Not Being Angry	Not Swearing Or Shouting
Being Polite	Getting Along	Having Company	Just Being There No Matter What	

FIGURE 7 - VALUES THAT MATTER TO THE PARTICIPATING CHILDREN

These values are interesting not because they suggest that children need these things to have a good life. The purpose is not for carers and social workers to aim for these things or show these things without reflection. It is not about merely separating the 'ought' from the 'is'. Nor should the responsibility just rest on individuals. The reason why these values are interesting is that many of them seemingly contradict each other. How is it possible to feel special if you believe in fairness? How is it possible to obtain privacy if a goal is to also share with others? These values highlight not only what matters but also the contradictions that are navigated in the children's family lives and their relationships.

6.2.2   Family

6.2.2.1   An ever-growing family and planning permanence

The participants often spoke not only about their family being in flux but also continually growing.

> **"Sydney –** *Well, I've got nan and grandad, aunts and uncles, mum and dad, and Anna [not genetically related] who now lives with us.*

So, I call her family, because she is my family really. Oh god I've got
so much family they keep popping in my head. Yeah, I don't think...I
don't know how you really lose family. It just keeps getting bigger.
And it's just that if they're not there anymore, well they're still here,
but they're like in heaven."

Danielle also spoke about the deceased still being present.

"Danielle -...because your life doesn't end. Because if someone dies,
you still have their life in your heart."

All of the children spoke about death at least once in every interview. They would talk about the death of family members, pets, or members of their community. They showed how they often think about how people will be more or less present in their lives. They also thought about how different family members often change their roles and responsibilities. This may be at the forefront of their minds because their carers are usually older than non-kinship carers (Selwyn and Nandy, 2014). It is also understandable considering their past experiences of being removed from one part of a family unit and being placed in another (Farmer et al., 2013). As such, a wider family also takes on a meaning about who could be next to care for them.

"Lucy - And yeah Grandma said if she drops down dead the next day
then we have to go and live with Uncle M and Auntie J, and her sister.
We have to move all the way to where they are, and so then I'll have
to, like, go to a different school when I'm, like, literally in my second
term at secondary school."

It is interesting to note that Lucy is explicitly permanency planning. Moreover, permanence for these children is about remaining within the family. It is not just a reliance on one or two caregivers. It is not about permanent substitute care with particular carers throughout their childhood. Permanence, therefore, is not only about the assured presence of somebody but is also marked by understanding the changeable presence and absence of them. Permanence is a fluid construct for these children, ever-evolving, but also contained by their own particular constructs of family and their desire to remain within it.

6.2.2.2   *How the children construct family.*

The children described an abundance of genetically related family members, family friends, and personal friends involved in their lives and care. They were adamant that all these different people could be family. This is seemingly not unusual for kinship care arrangements (Farmer,

2010). However, each child would have their own way to distinguish between different types of family. They would use terms such as proper family versus relatives and close family versus extended family. Some children also used religious explanations, such as Danielle, who stated that there was a difference between *"blood family"* and the idea that *"God thinks everybody is part of the same family".*

For most children, though, family was dependent on how much effort and time people spent wanting to relate:

> *"Eliza - ... I think if they can make an effort to, like, want to spend time with you and stuff... I don't think for family you actually have to be about related to you; I just feel like they have to want to relate with you."*

Such definitions suggest that family is nothing more than a transitive social construct based on feelings, values, and beliefs. However, most children also expressed that a family has a fixed intransitive genealogical aspect to it.

> *"Zack - Everyone who I'm related to is important to me, even if you hate them. They're still important. Like have you heard the saying that you can't choose your family but you can choose your friends. Like that."*

Despite all the various explanations of what constitutes family, all the children showed a desire to feel part of a wider family. This is usual for children in kinship care arrangements (Biehal et al., 2010). This is summed up by Eliza, who saw gaining a sense of wider family as a benefit of kinship care.

> *"Eliza - Well for me, most people that I need, even if they're not like directly related to me, they're like, for me, they're still like family...So it's like, it's kind of not compensation, but it's like I've got so many other family members, so it kind of makes up for the fact that I don't have the like original house unit."*

6.2.2.3 Siblings

The participants talked about their full-siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, and siblings living in the same house but were genetically aunts and uncles. They spoke about siblings who had been adopted, siblings they had heard of but never seen, siblings who they were only allowed to see

supervised, and siblings of half-siblings. There is a widespread commitment within UK policies to the principle of maintaining sibling relationships with research evidence to support this. However, there is still minimal mention of siblings in kinship care literature (Wellard et al., 2017).

The children often viewed sibling relationships as beneficial because they were felt to have had a shared experience. This often pre-dated their current family care arrangement. This reduced the intensity of separation. The children were not only more likely to have others that could empathise with them, but siblings also gave the children a sense of identity and groupness (Davies, 2015).

> *"**Erica** – Kimberley, she really loves me, and she cares for me, and she, like, wherever we go or whatever we do. And we understand each other and sometimes talk in bed about, like, what's happened to us. And if grandma's not there, she protects me."*

Lucy also reiterates the point that siblings are more likely to be with you throughout your life, but also that they will share any inheritance if their kinship carers were to die.

> *"**Lucy** - …because when grandma and grandad die, they said that we can have half of the house each and we'd still live in it and look after each other."*

Such thinking again demonstrates how the children in kinship care frequently permanency plan and envision continuity in their lives.

Siblings, however, do not always get on, and the relationships varied according to personal and social factors. The children displayed a spectrum of feelings towards their siblings. Siblings had affection, concern, and responsibility towards one another. There was also often hostility, rivalry, and even violence towards each other (White and Hughes, 2017).

> *"**Jake -** Yeah, I only like talking to [my sister], because when I actually see her, she actually just says "go away you stupid you bum head". And so sometimes, I kicked her by accident like a Power Ranger."*

Overall, the children showed that having relationships with siblings can be an effective way to learn the complexities of socialisation and how to navigate complex relationships. Additionally, siblings can help with a sense of belonging, continuity, and prime a child for collective responsibility (White and Hughes, 2017).

According to the children, pets can also be family members (Cain, 1985). Except for one household, all of the children in the study had pets. One of the main reasons the children said that pets were beneficial was that they provide company whilst not talking back.

> **"Harmony -** *because people can then go tell other people what you said, and they can also use it against you later. Like you don't expect people will do things like that, but they do. And pets are just there for you. Like animals and dogs, like they're just there for you."*

The children also indicated that pets are a shared possession and responsibility that can be used as a focal point to signify how the family unites (Sussman, 2016). Many would insist that pets allowed them to take on responsibility. However, when explicitly asked whether they actually fed their pets, cleaned out their dwellings, or walked them, most admitted that often they did not.

> **"Lucy** *– Well I do try to look after them quite a lot, but grandpa looks after them more because it's a bit too early for me to take them out. But I like the dogs because they're really nice and friendly. I love training them and stuff, and going on walks with them when I can, and growing up with them, and watching them get told off by grandma."*

Pets were often described as being like a sibling or another child. They were also often introduced by name and how long they had been with the family. Additionally, the children would often describe how frightened the animals were when they initially came to live with them.

> **"Lucy -** *They were quite scared, and they were really small, because it's a new habitat for them and because... I can't remember where grandma and grandad got them from, but I don't know. But grandma bought them toys and everything and we played with them. And they're much better now. Well not [cat's name], but he lets you stroke him. But he's more of an outdoor cat."*

In this sense, the children often found similarities between pets and their own experiences of being part of a new family arrangement (Irvine and Cilia, 2017). The animals were cared for, mainly by the parent figures in the household, and even though they may have needed a period of readjustment, they were accepted as part of the family. Pets were a way to conceptualise and

compare their own sense of permanence. It allowed them to predict their care experience and envisage how their connections may endure.

6.2.3   Sharing

The children frequently talked about sharing and how this is intrinsic to a sense of family. They mentioned the sharing of pets, plants, time, and resources. They also spoke about having a shared sense of narratives and identities. Such sharing of events, responsibilities, and experiences are fundamental to positive family functioning (Freistadt and Strohschein, 2013). It helps build bonds and attachments, leading to a better sense of permanence in the family (Mayall, 2002). For example, this need to share experiences, narratives, time, and space was highlighted by each child mentioning the importance of family holidays (Lehto et al., 2009).

> *Kimberley – "Well it's important to go to different places because you can see the environments, erm, sometimes you can learn new things you can see new things. And erm, it's fun because sometimes, like when we went to Singapore, you can meet new people or, erm, people that you have heard about but not seen before. And it was fun to see our relatives with Grandma and Erica."*

6.2.3.1   Sharing space

The children often spoke about the use of space. An example of this was sharing a room with siblings. There remain social work and policy debates about whether or not sharing rooms is appropriate. Legislation states that children over the age of 10 of the opposite sex should have their own bedrooms; otherwise, this is considered overcrowding (Housing Act 1988). However, the children were seemingly ambivalent about this.

> *"Researcher – What's it like sharing a room?*

> *Purple – Erm, it's sometimes nice. It gets a bit crowded because Danielle always takes up most of the space. Although sometimes if you share a room you get to, like, to speak to your sibling at night-time, and also, we get to like play games together."*

It was more important for the children that a variety of spaces were available to be used depending on the tasks required. They appreciated areas, such as livings rooms where the whole family could be together. They also valued spaces that were distinctly their own, such as a

preferred chair in the living room or at the table for meals. The children also appreciated space to be alone.

> *"**Eliza**- Yeah because I share a room and I don't ever feel like I don't have anywhere to go and just, like, build my own. So, I don't think it's necessarily about needing to have your own room. It's just like needing to know that there is somewhere that you can go if you need to be alone or whatever."*

Having multiples residences for some children, such as Jordan and Thomas, was also manageable, desired even, as long as they helped them navigate the connection/separation in their family lives.

> *"**Jordan** – Well I don't mind because as long as I have a bed. We do different things in different places coz there are different people around here. And I don't have [the main carer's birth children] here which can be good but can also bad."*

Beds are also another good example of how shared space and private space was often on a continuum for the children. The majority of the children would look at their beds and refer to them when describing what makes a home. They were significant parts of their family lives. Beds helped them maintain a separation from the world and the worries around them. At the same time, beds also helped the children not feel alone, neglected, nor wholly detached from others.

> *"**Jake** - And sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night, I always go into that bed (Jake takes me into his grandparents' room to show me some blankets on the floor next to their bed).*
>
> *__Researcher__ - Why do you come and sleep in here?*
>
> *__Jake__ - Cos sometimes, I always wake up in the middle of the night... So, and I can't get back to sleep, so, cos my bed's uncomfortable...because my bed's not the comfy one."*

It is improbable that the floor was comfier than his cabin bed. It is more probable that he felt more comfortable being near his grandparents. Many of the children reiterated this specific need for comfort when sleeping. They spoke about the importance of being able to sleep in your kinship carers bedrooms when scared or worried. They wished to feel connected even when they were engaging in a seemingly solitary activity.

Gardens were also important places where the children felt both connected and disconnected at the same time.

> *"Eliza - I feel like if I go to the garden, I'm out of the house but I'm not like away from everyone. So, it's nice for me to just cool off, or think, or just going to sit and chill. But I'm not like detaching myself. But I also feel like it's a place where everything…Like if you want to have people around and stuff, and just have a good time, you can go out in the garden and stuff."*

Overall then, spaces, places and the material environment are symbolic of the dynamic push and pull of the relationships in the children's family lives. The everyday use of children's spaces can be seen as ways that confirm and challenge their sense of affiliation, connection and family functioning (Thornock et al., 2019).

6.2.3.2   Sharing time

> *"Zac- You don't have to do things with people you can just, like, be with them…like watching a film could be one of the most specialest things in the life."*

The concept, or rather the context, of time permeated throughout the interviews. Pets, plants, people, and objects were often introduced with the child putting a time stamp on how long they had been in the family. Time was very much relative or relational to others.

> *"Lucy - I don't know why, but I took a picture of the clock. I don't know why time is really important to me. Like sometimes I get worried if I don't know what the time is…I just really like having a clock. So, I don't know why. It just makes me feel kind of safe."*

People often require knowledge of the time to feel safe (Forman, 2015). It is vital to have some control and knowledge over what is to come. There are power differentials inherent in the use and the understanding of time. Critical time studies show that control over time is a medium of hierarchical power and governance. Time plays an essential role in social methods of inclusion and exclusion (Halberstam and Halberstam, 2005). For example, time is often allotted for children. This can include free time or time for parental contact. If time is not used compassionately and efficiently, it can be seen to be symbolic of precarious and chaotic lives (Yuill and Mueller-Hirth, 2019). Children may feel that they are returning to chaotic or inadequate care.

The children spoke about the need for families to have routines, matching rhythms, and time-dependent events. For example, Lucy talked about the importance of having a movie night with her carers every Friday. However, carers and the children do not necessarily have to be doing the same activities. For example, the children often inferred the need for 'mush time' (Baraitser, 2013). This is when a family are together, not necessarily even in the same room, but rather in the same place, such as in the house. Another example is when family members are on holiday at the beach. During these moments, each person's rhythms seemingly match, whether one person is doing homework, or another is playing on their phone, or another is reading a book.

Children and adults, therefore, use time as a commodity. However, as Megan states, time is just as valuable if it is spent alone or with only one other person engaging in activities they enjoy.

> *"**Megan** - That it can be quite difficult being a child, and that they just need like time with people, but time alone as well… And it's just nice to be with just nan and like just grandad sometimes. Like there are some days when we go out fishing…It's like, he's got passion for it, and it's just nice to see him happy.*
>
> ***Researcher** - OK, do you like fishing as well?*
>
> ***Megan** - It's alright (laughs)."*

The children made it very clear that there must be a consensus about how time is spent together. They did not like to feel forced into spending time in certain ways, and they did not like it when rhythms did not match when it had been negotiated beforehand that they should. For example, Kimberley and Erika expressed frustration that their birth father spent time on his phone and seemed bored when he was meant to be engaging with them during contact. Additionally, when they meet with their mother:

> *"**Erica** - We don't like it when we see her. She makes us upset. She says things about what we don't want her to say about the past and things we don't want to talk about."*

For these children, spending time and connecting is more important than the activities undertaken. It is an essential part of attuning to each other's feelings (Baraitser, 2013). However, there must be a consensus from all parties about whether the time is spent focussing on the present, the past, or the future. This is extremely pertinent when considering social work interventions such as life-story work or relationship-based practice.

Many of the children used 'we' when telling stories and decisions that affected them. This inclusive 'we' can be seen as a discrete and economical way of expressing feelings of belonging and affinity (Simmons et al., 2008). When placed in the context of the perceptions of family, which they said was often large and in flux, it can be seen to signify an attachment that shields against further feelings of possible further rejection or loss.

The children also shared stories and family resemblances about their relatives, including their birth parents and deceased family members that they had never met. They felt a shared narrative with the whole family and its intergenerational life-course.

> *"**Erica** - And this over there, that's our great grandma, our grandma's mum, and we never got to see her. She died when grandma was 7 years old. But erm we've seen pictures of her, and Grandma looks like her, and she's very beautiful. And Grandma says we get, she gets her good looks from her, and we get erm... good looks from her as well."*

Finally, the children relished stories and photos about their journey with their current family unit.

> *"**Danielle** - (Points to photo on the fridge). That's the first morning we were here. My Grandad couldn't fit in (laughs)..."*

6.2.4   Relationships with parents & contact

Echoing previous research, all the children showed some ambivalence towards their parents (Kallinen, 2020). For example, Thomas spoke with admiration about his father and his work. Later in the same interview, he said that he was "*rubbish*" and "*didn't do anything*".

The children had a variety of contact with their birth parents. For Zack, he preferred his birth mum to turn up on an ad-hoc basis. For Megan, she preferred to only know about her mum through the storytelling of other family members.

> *"**Megan** - And it's nice because they all, like remember, like, my mum and stuff, and they can talk about her...It's like when our mum was young, or when our nan was young, and she was bringing up my mum. Obviously, it was like very different. And memories would have been brought out in photos and everything like that. So, it's like she still there but not there."*

Louise also said she was OK with never seeing her birth mother again because she had a photograph of her. However, she recognised that her birth mother was the gatekeeper to her seeing her younger sister. Louise said that this caused anxiety because relationships were fraught between family members. This highlights the need for some semblance of positive functional family relationships for contact to be beneficial (Kiraly and Humphreys, 2016).

The actual word contact was only used in reference to a service the families received from social services. Furthermore, it was negatively referred to when it was mentioned, such as when Erika and Kimberley described being *"forced"* to go to contact. They felt their contact was being used as a commodity and a bargaining tool. They were ways to appease the professionals involved in their care. Also, being given contact was a way to commiserate the parents for the loss of their children.

> *"Kimberley - Yes, we both have to see our parents because, erm, we've been told by a couple of people that it's, erm, important, important to see our mum and dad, and by law we have to see them…Because they say that, erm, they are our mum and dad and they care about us, and they like love us ,and it will be hard for them, if, erm, we didn't see them. If they don't see us. Well, we already know that they are our mum and dad. We know that. Like they've told us that they love us, and they miss us. And we know that. And we don't have to go and see them for them to tell us that."*

Rainbow and Lucy knew that they might see their parents when they were older. The hope was that later on, the situation would be more manageable. The children thought that this would be because either their birth parents will have changed, or else they would be both physically and emotionally stronger.

Whilst all of the ways of keeping connections with their parents varied, it was apparent that any type of contact is complex and emotive, even when generally positive. Contact is never a benign experience (Neil and Howe, 2004). Furthermore, the children said that keeping any connection has to be done safely with everyone's agreement. There must be a mutual consensus.

> *"Eliza - If you're going to have contact with that person it needs to be regular, and you need to know what's going on all the time and it just makes things easier to keep healthy relationships. There needs to be a mutual…Everyone needs to know what's going on and what's going to happen. Like every time."*

6.2.5 Photos

The children possessed many photos in their rooms, on their phones, and in their houses. This allowed the presence of those people in their life with whom they had a connection. Photos allowed psychological connections to continue even in people's absence. They also gave the children some control over remembering important events and people.

> *"**Eliza** - Because it's like in that moment, if you get a picture that's like, you've got that moment now forever. Like I'm a really sentimental person so I just feel like if you get a photo of that moment, nobody can really take away from you really."*

How the photos were displayed indicated the children's feelings towards them. For example, Harmony managed her feelings towards her mother by taking control of her physical photographic presence.

> *"**Harmony** - Erm. And then I do have pictures up there, but I decided to like...oh...hide (points to picture of mum). OK (laughs). So, I have pictures up there. Let me get them down…A picture of my mum, but I always get an argument with her, so I don't really like bring them out. I just. Yeah, that's why it's behind that and I turned it round."*

6.2.6 Memory shelves, memory boxes and transitional objects

Like photos, many of the children had memory shelves, memory boxes, and ornaments associated with loved ones. Again, these were not only a way of having control over such connections/separations but also as a way to link the past, present and future.

> *"**Kimberley** - Like the whole shelf, it's like memories because we went to Singapore and that's grandma, grandma's mum, my great grandma. And [my sister] Erika got me that, and I got her that (points to ornaments). And I used to do gymnastics, and I won this shield because I was working hard and achieve lots of things in gymnastics. And grandma got these lights, and it lights up. And erm, so some of these ornaments, like, erm, I sometimes like to sit on my bed and just look at them, because when I look at them it makes me like happy. And erm, it's sort of like memories to me. Like good memories. It makes me feel like more calm, and it takes a bit of worries off my mind and stuff. And it makes me think about Erica. Like happy memories of Erica and myself. And of grandma and her mum. And sometimes I just sit on the bed and I just like, erm, look at it. And sometimes I talk to my [deceased] great grandma, because talking to her is, like, nice."*

However, like Harmony and the photo of her birth mum, children also found other ways to manage objects that sparked more difficult memories. They found ways of managing the emotive space between feeling connection and disconnection.

> *"Eliza - And this is why it's like…It used to be like a coping box, and it's got like memories from my old primary school. Like the last like cardigan that my mum gave me. And stuff like that. And it all goes in a box rather than on the shelf because I kind of like, I put it away a bit…It's just cos I know it's there. So, it's like nothing has been ignored kind of thing. But I feel like obviously there's no point in dwelling on things, but you can remember them, because it might; like it was still a part of your life, it's still happened, but I just don't think dwelling on it is very helpful."*

A vital aspect of using objects to remember is that they should help the child feel optimistic about the present or help them progress. This idea of not dwelling, of moving forward in their lives, was a key concern for the children.

Some objects were also a way that the children could feel secure and feel that they still had a connection to those important to them. They were transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953). Unicorn, for example, used badges on her school bag that were given to her by her carers. Sydney, who would spend a lot of her school holidays seeing different family members in other parts of the country, had her favourite soft toy that went to different houses with her.

The importance of such transitional objects has long been recognised in social work and for children in care (Watson et al., 2020). Therefore, it may be useful to conceptualise memory shelves, memory boxes, and even life-story work as object attachment or transitional objects. These all provide children who have changed carers a sense of security and continuity through an assortment of familiar sights, smells, touch, and stories (Fahlberg, 1994). They bridge the gap between internal and external experiences and create a link between us and the outside world (Winnicott, 2002).

6.2.7   Play

For many of the children, play was a way of negotiating between imagination and reality. The children seemed to experience both these realms simultaneously, trying, testing, and confronting the two. Although play had to be fun, it was never frivolous. The children spoke about play having meaning (Linn, 2009).

Play was also a strategy to spend time with others. The children preferred games that they could play with other people. Again, such a connection was vital for them. It also allowed the children to construct and understand their own standing and test out their power and vision (Chudacoff, 2007). The children would use play not only to show how they would care for others or navigate the world of adult jobs, but they would also use it to demonstrate that they belonged to certain gendered and commercial cultures.

> *"**Researche**r – Why do you have these Lol Dolls?*
>
> ***Rainbow**- Well, so I can play with them, and they're so cute. Look.*
> *And we do things together…and I can collect them. And some of my*
> *friends have them as well, but I probably have more."*

Play is natural yet constructed. It is also freely chosen yet often requires permission and assistance. It is also powerful and empowering, yet external forces quickly diminish it. It has a meaning beyond just its outcome but also has meaning in its outcome (Linn, 2009). It is both autotelic and teleological. Through play then, the children navigated through the contradictions in their lives, expressing and working through their inner conversations. They used play to help understand their connections with the world around them (Cook, 2018).

6.2.8   Books, music, social media, TV

Finally, the children also used social media, books, music, books and TV to disengage but also to engage. They found it a useful way socialise, connect, and to attune to others and their interests. Also, social media was especially important to the older children to connect with their friends, many of whom did not live in their local neighbourhood. However, books, social media and TV were also used to escape and gain a sense of autonomy (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017).

> *"**Louise** - Erm I don't know it's just when I hear music I just it kind of*
> *takes the control of me as such and it just means a lot to me. It*
> *makes me forget about the outside world."*

Overall, books, music and social media were also ways that the children could be both connected and separated from the world.

> *"**Kimberley -** Books are about relating to real life as well and*
> *sometimes it's nice to get stuck in the book and you kind of shut out*
> *everything else and you're like on your own in a different world. And I*

kind of feel like if there's a main character, then I kind of feel like I'm that person and I can relate to them…So, I kind of learn, and it helps you a lot in life."

6.3   The mechanism of recognition & (mis)recognition

*"**Researcher** - What does home mean to you?*

***Louise** - A place to be yourself."*

Having heard how the importance of managing relationships with others are, the next section shows that how the children are viewed by others interconnects with this. It looks at recognition/(mis)recognition in terms of how the children wish to be perceived and included. Note the word (mis)recognition rather than misrecognition. This acknowledges, again, that binaries are not useful or appropriate. Even (mis)recognition involves recognition.

The following section shows how the children wish to be acknowledged as both children but also not-yet-adults. It is about the importance of being listened to and feeling valued. Furthermore, it also acknowledges that children are influenced by, and can influence, society and culture. Recognition/(mis)recognition, therefore, is concerned with children's status'.

6.3.1   'Being' versus 'becoming' (Qvortrup, 1994)

The participants spoke about indicators that allowed them to feel and demonstrate that they were flourishing. It gave them a sense of pride and status. They talked about their achievements at school, at clubs, with music, and the need to grow and develop. The children were keen to show me this and display their achievements to other visitors through framed certificates and pictures. There was a sense of comparison, almost boasting.

*"**Kimberley** - Erm I love playing my flute because I love music and it makes me happy. And last year, erm, we went to this church by our school, and I played in front of like the whole school, and I like really enjoyed myself and everyone said I was quite good."*

Sayer (2011) explains this by stating that we have to be comparative to form valuations about ourselves. To know whether we are doing well or not, we need to relate our activities to those of others.

This need to achieve and flourish highlights that the children value a sense of 'becoming.' It does not show whether 'becoming' and 'being' are separate or whether such goals are only applicable to children's lives. For example, at times, the children would directly state that they needed to go to school so that they could get a good job as an adult. Also, the children would insist that part of being a carer was thinking about their children's future prospects.

> *"Zack - Because grandma cares for me and she wants me to grow up and have a good life. So, a good education is quite important…So, she kind of thinks in the future. Not just in the present, not the past, but in the future."*

The children also had a sense that they were an investment into future generations and for the care of the older family members.

> *"Danielle - [It's important to try new things] because when you're older you might be fussy, and you might just keep buying the same things when you're older. And then your kids might get bored of them because when I'm older I might not see my nan and grandad's because they might be dying. And if they went to hospital, I'll always be there and do something nice for them."*

Nevertheless, the children often demonstrated that being in the moment is also essential and that not everything was about learning and socialisation for the future.

> *Zack - "It's important to have at least a little bit of fun when you're a child".*

Overall, the children spoke about this need to both 'be' and 'become'. That these things are never separate and that both are important (Uprichard, 2008). Feeling part of the whole family life course and the intergenerational family life cycle was also important. It allowed them to feel a sense of continuity and belonging.

6.3.2 Being listened to

The children realised that as children, they were less likely to be listened to. This often bemused and frustrated them.

> *"Researcher – but people may say that adults have more experience and are more clever, and so that's why you should listen to adults more.*

Zac – Yeah, well, maybe they are, but children should still have a chance as well as we're not just dumb brats. And if adults have more experience, then why are most adults stabbing each other and causing all this war? And kids aren't doing anything."

All of the children highlighted the need to be heard by adults but also understood that perspective limits everybody.

"Kimberley - I would say that we do know things, but sometimes we don't really understand, like, things that are happening in life. Like with our mum and dad, we don't know everything. But things that we do know and that we have experienced, like we had gone and seen them, they should listen to us. But they should listen to them as well. I think they should listen to both of the sides of what they have to say because I don't think that all of the time that adults are listening to children, and I think they don't listen about their feelings, how they're acting, and not all of the time adults are listening to them. Like you listen to me, grandma listens to me. But like the social workers, they don't really listen to us."

Being listened to was, therefore, seen as a crucial factor in positive, helpful relationships. Empathetic listening and not necessarily acting on concerns was also seen as beneficial in itself.

"Rainbow - The Hub is just like where you can just like calm yourself down, and this is basically private, where you can just go and (blows out through mouth) just calm down…Because sometimes when I'm panicking, I can always go there. Mrs. J, yeah. She helps me do a lot of things and we always have like a little session. We talk about our feelings and that's it."

Rainbow also points out that there is merit in those outside the family constellation who can listen. This is because others are less likely to act unless absolutely necessary. Their feelings could still be acknowledged and recognised. In these spaces, the children were not as anxious about hurting other people's feelings. There were less likely to be repercussions and conflict (Geldard et al., 2017). The children understood the need for consultation, generational perspectives, mutual responsibility, and dialogue (Abebe, 2019). They wished for a dialogical approach. Furthermore, for some issues, like contact, the children were clear that they may offer valuable solutions.

"Erica - Once a social worker came. He said have you ever thought about like other ways of seeing your mum and dad or anything or

having visits or contacts. And we said, "what about writing a letter or like writing an email or something". And then he was like "oh my gosh, I'd never thought of that before. Like that's a really good idea".

6.3.3   Childhood and rights

Throughout the interviews, we often talked about these differences between children and adults. This was a crucial part of a dialogical participation methodology. The children demonstrated how they were frequently thinking about, navigating, and working out how they were positioned and how they positioned themselves.

> *"**Louise** - There isn't much difference between children and adults. In a way we're all children but just some are more independent and smarter. Sometimes adults are more smarter than kids about somethings, but kids can outsmart them. Like it's just an age, it doesn't mean anything. You can have more experience, but some chose not to learn, and then some do. And then some chose to keep those experiences to themselves. And then some will choose to use it to teach others how to carry on with life and be themselves."*

The children spoke at length about such similarities and differences. They talked about how adults were there to teach, provide, care for, and keep children safe. However, they also spoke about how children and adults should have similar or even the same rights.

Slime is an excellent example of how the children wanted to protect their status as children but still hold onto their rights. They often spoke about slime parties, slime poking videos, slime stations, and the process of making slime. It was undoubtedly a social and cultural craze. However, towards the end of the fieldwork, its importance had diminished for the children.

It took me a long time to try and understand the obsession with slime. There is minimal research on it. Most research frames it around autonomous sensory meridian responses (ASMR) acquired from touching it or watching others touch it (Harper, 2020). After reflection, I realised that slime was not necessarily just a developmental tool or a way to receive pleasant physiological responses. As an adult, I was not meant to understand it. Slime helped them hold onto their child status whilst having fun. This marking out of children's popular culture matters (Horton, 2010).

> *"**Sydney** - Well some people might ask "why do you have slime", and it's none of your business. You have alcohol why can't we...We don't*

understand you. We don't understand about alcohol. Grown-ups do,
but they don't understand about slime. So, we don't need to bother
about them, they don't need to bother about us. We just have it."

6.3.4   Gender

The children also wanted to reiterate the importance of clothes and shopping. However, in this study, there were gender differences placed on their importance. For example, some of the girls used makeup to try and resolve their insecurities.

*"**Researcher** - Why do you like makeup?*

*"**Harmony** - It's just something because I, erm, don't have very self-confidence in myself, and I suppose it's like something that all girls use. Well, not all girls."*

This level of performativity gives some credence to Butler's (2006) gender ideology that gender is created through behaviour. It also means that the gendered environment in which the children are positioned affects how they are viewed and helps form their identity.

Such gender differences have been highlighted in foster carer studies (e.g. Heslop, 2019). Gender differences are associated with different ways the children relate with carers and others. In only one of the families was the main carer male. This is a fact easily overlooked by the use of the gender-neutral term kinship carer. This again highlights that children are reflections not only of their immediate environment but also of their cultural and sociological ones, such as a patriarchal society. Therefore, any understandings of their family lives and a sense of permanence must have a critical understanding of the impact of gender.

6.3.5   Shopping

The children not only showed how they reflected the patriarchy inherent in society but also reflected consumerist capitalism. Many of the children would tell me how much certain items cost. The provision of clothes, toys, and other items indicated the children's concepts of care. Also, at its simplest, shopping as an activity helped the children sustain social bonds with their family members, friends and the community.

*"**Kimberley** - And this is erm a picture of TK Maxx and this is one of the managers there and, erm, he's nice and he just chats to us sometimes about, erm, things that are fun...And you can just wander*

*around the shop and I feel safe there because sometimes grandma
let's Erika and I just go there. Not together, but, but to wander
around the shop together without grandma a bit. So, I think Grandma
knows that will be safe inside the shop."*

Shopping allowed the children to feel a level of independence whilst being monitored to some extent by their carers and trusted adults in the community. It also allowed the children to buy gifts for others, to reciprocate the care they had received. Consumerism leads the children to value gifts and presents as an indicator of care, love, and connection. It also allows them to take part in the consumerist world (Compeau et al., 2016). The buying of valuable material objects helps the children feel a sense of affiliation, investment, and, therefore, permanence.

6.3.6 Being different and being normal

The children regularly navigated how others may see their family arrangement and how they felt like normal children. They were aware that normative expectations determine how people are perceived. However, for them, normality included an ideal. This ideal of being cared for in a normal family setup included supposed resolutions to many of their concerns. The children felt that others that were not in similar situations would not have the same difficulties in their lives. They imagined that such children would not have challenges concerning their primary attachments, protection against loss, freedom from stigmatisation, or permanence. Therefore, a sense of normality was synonymous with not being different and life going well (Madigan et al., 2013).

> *"Danielle - …Some people pick their children up and I just look at
> them, and I just have to walk with my sister and my grandad. And
> when I see other people with their mum and dad, they have a big
> laugh and it makes me feel upset."*

This is further highlighted by all the children using the word "like" when describing their family relationships (Biehal, 2014a).

> *"Zack - Because she's looked after me for 5 years now and she's
> technically like my mum and I, erm, and yes, so…Like she's like a
> mother. Like she treats me like her son, she, she cares for me like a
> son."*

Research suggests that the prospect of this sense of normality is one of the benefits of kinship care and remaining within the family (Burgess et al., 2010). However, the children's idealised

framing of normal family life is problematic. Protection from loss is unachievable in anyone's life, and concern about the nature of relationships is unavoidable. Furthermore, stigmatisation is likely to occur for one reason or another.

These problems with recognition and (mis)recognition caused cognitive dissonance for these children. One of the seemingly most emotive, possibly intrusive, questions asked was whether they viewed themselves as different.

> *"**Harmony** - I don't think…I don't like being called different. I don't like, I don't like being called different because I know I'm different and stuff, but I like different to be a nice…. Yeah, I know I'm like different because this doesn't happen every… this like doesn't happen. Well it might. It might happen to other people. But I don't know. It doesn't happen to many people. Yeah like, I'm not trying to be dramatically different. Like I'm not dramatically different."*

And Zack's very forthright response was:

> *"**Zack** - I don't mind living with my grandma because the only thing that's really different is that I live with my grandma. I do what ordinary 10-year-olds do like play sports. I go to school. So, I'm technically a normal 10-year-old. But some people might not think that but that's my opinion. So."*

A pertinent example of this tension of being perceived as normal or different was highlighted when the children talked about the value of kinship carer groups. Most posited that it was more about the groups being of benefit to their carers. A few children acknowledged that such groups were also of use to themselves. This was because they were not treated differently, and others would listen to them without prejudice.

> *"**Eliza** - Yeah like it's nice that we're all there in the same, like position. Like nobody's better than, well not better than anyone else, but nobody's like different from anyone else…I don't need to announce it there or speak about it there because everyone just kind of knows anyway. And it's nice just because it's like well other kids are doing it so…And you if you want to talk to them about. You feel better when you're speaking to them about, erm, all of it, all of the things and, erm, the advice helps a lot."*

6.3.7   Partitioning and keeping secrets

To guard themselves against the intrusion of others' views, the children tended to restrict sharing details of their past and their living situation to a few close friends and those who needed to know. This partitioning was a way of protecting their feelings from others stigmatising them (Smart, 2011). It was also a way of compartmentalising their lives and protecting their identity (Farmer et al., 2013). The study supports previous findings that not giving children a choice, such as by social workers doing in-school visits, disrupted their sense of agency.

Winnicott's (1965) psychoanalytical theorising on the true and false self is useful here. The children's experience of feeling alive and spontaneous (true self) was eroded by others who made them feel dead inside, like a shadow of who they should be (false self).

> *"Researcher – Do others know about you not living with your birth Mum and Dad?*
>
> *Rainbow - They do. They just make fun of me for it.*
>
> *Researcher - Oh, do they? What your friends?*
>
> *Rainbow - No, my enemies. She's called [redacted]. She is very unpleasant. She treats me like muck off a shoe, trying to wipe me out."*

6.3.8   Kinship care as an alternative to fostering and adoption

Rainbow told me that for her, being adopted was important to her. This was because she felt claimed.

> *"Rainbow - I don't know why it's special…You know the didgeridoo? We didn't own it from the very start. We got it and kept it. Because I feel like the didgeridoo. So, mum and dad adopted me and now it means they're going to keep me forever and keep me safe. I belong here."*

Most of the children also acknowledged that kinship care is a specific scenario that requires specific recognition, knowledge, and support.

> *"Eliza - It still annoys me really today because nobody really understands or seems to want to understand. Like we never see on*

*the news about like anything to do with kinship care or anything. And
then so much goes wrong with it. Like the money in the benefits is
just like one of the biggest things. I just think like it's so unfair to see
someone like adopted or fostering, they get so much more support
with like money. Also, with like social services in my opinion. And you
can't expect then these kids to have the same opportunities. It is left
down to the child themselves, which is why I think some people are
like "wow, how do you deal with it?" Like, because we don't like have
anybody else to like help us deal with it, or like any funds to help us
get away to deal with it."*

Moreover, support should not just be shaped to a particular homogenised view of kinship care, but rather it should be centred on specific circumstances.

*"**Harmony** - Yeah like it doesn't need to be like labels. It's just another
way of being a normal family. Like, there is no authority. It just needs
to be, I think, it needs to be a facility that is available to people if and
when they need it rather than something that's been put in place by
someone else which is just like…It doesn't even need to be formal or
anything like that. It just needs to be there, I think, for however you
need it."*

6.3.9   The political child

The children also wanted their opinions heard regarding broader political discourse (Nolas et al., 2017). Children would express their concerns regarding homelessness and about the climate emergency. Rainbow, who was six at the time, asked me and told me her thoughts on Brexit. Megan also wanted to clarify that adults seemingly have more choice in life, yet children should also be given choices about major political decisions that affect their lives.

*"**Megan** - Like with the whole Brexit thing. All adults were given a
choice whereas I think maybe the children should have been able to
choose, because it's our lives more than it's going to affect them and
some other people."*

6.3.10 Cultural affiliations and religion

Lucy was keen to inform me about her Traveller heritage. Kimberley and Erika highlighted the importance of going to Singapore to learn about their cultural heritage. They also wished to learn how to cook certain foods. They were very aware that cultural differences and differences in ethnicity and skin colour can impact their lives and feelings.

> *"Kimberley - Erm, the last contact with our mum was, was saying,
> like "oh, you're really dark" and "I like black people". And it was a bit
> strange because we didn't feel like right."*

Finally, religion, spirituality and places of worships were essential aspects of the children's identities. Again, this is missing within kinship care literature. However, it was a great strength to children, helping them and their families not only to socialise and find support but also to guide their inner conversations and thoughts about the world.

> *"Danielle - Church matters because we get...because me and Purple
> go out with these adults, and then we learn about more stuff. And we
> also do fun activities. Because God, because God's real, and also God
> could be in your heart. And if you feel sad, you can just pray. But if
> you're at school some people might laugh at you if you go to church."*

Both Kimberley and Danielle show that engaging with family culture, ethnicity, and family religion helps with everyday concerns and are essential parts of identity and belonging (Owusu-Bempah, 2010). Additionally, they demonstrate that (mis)recognition can lead to unhappiness. Therefore, any social work task, including permanence planning, must fully consider the individual identities that matter to the child, as well as societies and others' views on them.

6.4   The mechanisms of care & protection/independence & risk

> *"Megan - Adults should be there for you and provide for you. But
> they're not here to, like, stop you from doing anything you want to
> do. And they just want you to be safe."*

The final mechanism that emerged was that of care & protection/independence & risk. This is akin to the standard social work debates on care/control and paternalism/self-efficacy (Grimwood, 2015). In some ways, it is an amalgamation of the two other mechanisms of connection/separation and recognition/(mis)recognition. Nevertheless, it needs its own mechanism because the children were emphatic that both safety and the need for independence often caused them tension in their family lives. For example, the children demonstrated that they understood their dependency on others. They all valued being cared for and provided for in a safe environment. However, they also wished to have a sense of freedom and the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. The following section explores the meaning of care, safety, rules, and how the children manage the world outside their family unit to explore their sense of autonomy.

6.4.1 Care

> *"Jordan - Adults make money. And you got to get money to get food and to stay in your house and go to the shop when needed."*

The children valued parental relationships because adults would provide for them and keep them in a safe environment. However, parenting was not about just providing for their physiological needs and physical safety; but it is also about empathy, tolerance for frustration, and patience (Sunderland, 2016).

> *"Researcher – What advice would you give to carers for children in a similar situation to you?*
>
> *Danielle - To be, to let that child have a good life with you and make them feel strong, and make sure they don't really cry about their parents."*

Furthermore, care was seen as reciprocal.

> *"Erica - like we respect each other and love each other, and just feel safe together, and help each other in life."*

Nevertheless, the children also realised that care included being challenged.

> *"Zack - Like say I didn't want to do something, he wouldn't make me do it, but he'd push me and push me and push me, and I'll end up enjoying it in the end."*

It became apparent that the children valued parenting that took time to listen, understand, discuss, narrate, and interpret life together (Wellard et al., 2017). They felt that communication is vital for positive parenting and, as Kimberley said, *"chats"* from the earliest age. This had to be done sensitively with recognition of each child's particular circumstances and needs. This is especially true when relaying difficult to hear information.

> *"Eliza - I feel like it's too much to put on a child for them to know every single thing. I feel like there isn't a necessity for them, maybe when they're older and they themselves know. I think if they can't remember it, and it's not affecting them, and they haven't really asked to know, then there's no point in telling them like all the details. I think like trust your instincts and judging what's the kid asks*

*for. Like if they ask questions don't stray around them but, and don't
like lie. But I just think in hindsight there are times when it's like you
don't need to know that. But just be there to listen to them when
they're upset and stuff."*

Finally, all the children felt let down by their birth parents. They thought that the reason they were no longer in their care is that they prioritised other things. The other priorities differed for each child. They mentioned work, violent partners, housing, drug misuse, or their own emotional or mental health needs. Whilst there was an acknowledgement that adults need to look after both themselves and children, the children felt that their needs should not, overall, be sacrificed over the birth parents' needs.

*"**Eliza** - I feel like, if they do everything that they can to make things
the best that they can. I'm not saying that they have to have like, give
all the kids everything that they need, everything that they want, but
I just feel like if do their best all the time, or even if, even if they don't.
Like, everybody has bad days. But I just feel like the good needs to
outweigh the bad in every situation if you're trying to look after
someone. When I feel like you should have the best intentions of the
person that you trying to look after, rather than other things that you
make. So basically, if you're a mother, your kids should prioritise over
most things."*

6.4.2   Feeling safe

All of the children often mentioned the importance of feeling safe in their home and with other people. However, they would often alternate regarding the value of being protected and being able to protect themselves. Harmony, for example, spoke about needing to take risks.

*"**Harmony** - To me, if people say to me like don't do that, I do it
because you've have just told me not to do it…*

Researcher - But what if they're saying something to keep you safe?

*Harmony - No, because then I would tell myself not to do that, and
then I listened to myself (laughs). Yeah, I trust myself more than
anybody else and also, it's also important to learn yourself and make
mistakes. It's just like everybody that I have trust in…I can't even trust
my nan with anything because even if it's like your things that
happened, she'll go and tell other people she doesn't even know."*

Trust was a key value for any relationship, especially with people that give you advice and guidance. Moreover, trust and safety were not just things that needed to be felt but also concrete things that could be measured. They needed to be evidenced and, to some extent, predictable.

> *"Erica- Erm, they are like another bit of my family where there I don't like feel safe with them. I don't trust them, and they've done lots of things wrong, and blamed it on us, like called us liars and things like that. Grandma has never done that, and she would never do that."*

In their everyday lives, the children often tested and enacted these tensions between safety, trust, independence, and risk (Zinn, 2020). A good simple example is the use of trampolines. Each family, except for one, had trampolines in their garden. They were not just places where the children felt they could release tensions by doing physical activity. The children also spoke about trampolines being boundaried places of play. They all had nets around them. Therefore, on the trampolines, the children could socialise or be on their own. They could do as they choose whilst having literal boundaries to keep them safe.

> *"Ellie - Because when we're [on the trampoline] we can do what we like. Watch."*

6.4.3   Rules & taking a firm hand

Another way that the children managed to have some predictability of feeling safe was through rules. After describing an event in her birth parents care where she was scared because she heard monsters in her bedroom, Unicorn said:

> *"Unicorn - And that's what happened, and I've been writing signs all around my house everywhere. Because I need to put rules, rules in the house."*

All of the children said that rules were needed:

> *"Louise – To keep things in order…Because you don't want to be a danger to others, or you want to be able to keep everyone safe. And rules are a way of doing that…Rules should be something that is discussed with everyone that's in the place with rules so then they can help come up with them in a way that it makes sense and they can obey them."*

Nevertheless, the children recognised that adults needed to take overall responsibility for their child's welfare.

> *"Louise - [Carers] should take a firm hand, because sometimes if you've been in that situation, you can come out of it being a bit feisty and unsettled and so need a firm hand to calm me down a bit."*

6.4.4 Feeling safe and supported in the neighbourhood

To feel safe in their family lives, the children said it was essential to feel safe in the surrounding neighbourhood.

> *"Harmony - I want to feel comfortable to come outside and feel safe to come outside because that's one thing I don't feel out here. I think when I'm out and about, I'm surrounded by strangers. Strangers tend to scare me, even though some strangers are friends you haven't met yet."*

The children did not just want to feel safe in their surrounding community; they also wanted to feel supported and cared for by it. A sense of belonging and affiliation did not just depend on their genetic or extended family members. Again, they needed also to feel a sense of connection with others outside their family constellation. This was not dependant on whether you were the sole child in the household or if there was a sole kinship carer. For example, it was important for Megan, who lived with her nan, grandad and four siblings.

> *"Megan - That there's a lot of people that like look out for you. Like next door. And they like support everyone. And across the road. They will support everyone then like as a family on just our street, and that we're like all just together."*

6.4.5 School and hobbies

Similar benefits of places outside the family home arose when the children discussed the importance of hobbies. Activities such as schools and clubs not only allowed for the sense of achievement, as previously discussed, but also allowed time away from the family home (Frønes, 2009). However, these spaces still had the confines of rules, structure and routine. The children still had to feel safe.

Sports and hobbies also allowed socialisation away from the family home with like-minded individuals and were part of the children's identities.

> *"Zac – the good things about hobbies is that it's a fun thing in that you can interact with others and make new friends and do whatever. Well not whatever, but you make friends have fun, learn something new… I think because it like calms you and you don't really focus on like problems. You just focus on like what you're doing in the moment."*

Some of the children also regarded activity leaders as part of a family. These adults not only made them strive to achieve but also seemed to be able to comfort, support, and guide the children.

> *"Louise - So, [my karate teacher] protects you, she teaches you right and wrong and is always there so. And very friendly…So she treats us as we're her own children."*

6.5   Conclusion

The children show how they manage their family relationships and their relationships with the world outside their family constellation. They reflect on how they are viewed, how they are cared for, and how find a sense of permanence. In their own particular contexts, they are managing the mechanisms of connection/separation, recognition/(mis)recognition, care & protection/independence & risk.

It is not only apparent that the mechanisms intertwine and affect each other. It is also clear that each mechanism has its own tensions within it. Examples are the children's need for, yet ambivalence towards, personal relationships. Also, the children desired to feel connected to their carers and birth parents, even though they do not always want to have their presence felt. They welcome their sibling relationships, even though, at times, they can be difficult. They wish to conform to societal constructs of family, yet they embrace them as non-static and ever-growing. They want to be listened to about their lives but feel they need to be protected from responsibility and harm. They want to be normal children of their generation yet recognise their specific needs and circumstances. They are able yet vulnerable. They are independent yet dependent. The children want a sense of permanence, even though they know from past experiences that nothing can be guaranteed. Moreover, the children want social work to help them and their family, yet they do not want to be seen as a kinship care child and do not want further interference.

Such tensions could be seen as a difficulty when trying to provide a way forward for practice that can often be centred on definitive procedural approaches. Nevertheless, the most striking conclusion from listening to the children's views is that they are capable of providing competent, nuanced explanations about their lives and their needs. They also use space, time and resources in creative ways to explore and challenge, but also take respite from the tensions inherent in a world of contradictions, especially when living in kinship care arrangements. This gives credence to the principle of the sociology of childhood that children are experts in their own lives (Smart, 2011).

It regrettable then that research, policy and practice often exclude the insights of children. By listening in a genuinely participative way, more meaningful and individually tailored solutions can be found. As will be discussed in the following chapter, they can provide a basis for building theories and practices that can more accurately match the children's family lives as they, themselves, experience them.

Chapter 7 - Implications -

Using Children's Views to Help Refocus Social Work Practice for Children Living in Kinship Care Arrangements

Megan - "It doesn't matter if you don't live with your mum or your dad, but that you live with people that actually care about you and know who you really are. I don't know. I think it just kind of gives you like a freedom to be like you want to be. So, nothing really matters. I guess it doesn't really matter as long as you're just happy within yourself and there's people around for you."

This chapter explains the implications for social work from the research findings on children's experiences and understandings of family life in kinship care. It demonstrates how research that utilises the insights of children living in kinship care can add to, and in some cases disrupt, ongoing social work practice debates. It also shows how we should work with the ambivalence, the *"I don't know"* and the in between spaces inherent in these children's lives.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part frames a summary of the findings in terms of themes that pose challenges to social work policy and practice discourse about kinship care. The second part shows the theoretical and conceptual implications of such insights. It reveals that utilising theories, often disregarded within social work literature, could allow for a better understanding of the dualisms inherent in children's family lives and their sense of permanence, and how the children navigate them. It shows that theories of 'doing' family, the ethics of care, recognition, and autonomous interdependence, can help to place these children's lived experiences of kinship care into academic debates. The final part of the chapter recommends social work practice that can assist children in kinship care maintain a sense of permanence. It looks at how the findings and theories can be utilised to deliver more attuned social work practice.

This chapter moves away from the children's actual accounts and looks more specifically at their accounts' meanings. However, it has been necessary to ensure that their voices are still present, especially for this thesis which advocates the necessity of children's voice alongside adult-centric narratives and constructs. Therefore, at times, the children's views and narratives have been included to emphasise particular points.

7.1 Part 1 - How the children's accounts contest the simplifying of their family lives

The children's insights unsettle the notions of kinship care, family, and permanence, which are often viewed simplistically in contemporary UK social work policy and practice frameworks. This is especially the case because many of the policy and practice frameworks applied to kinship care are based on notions of fostering and adoption. The children's valuations suggest that they hold much more nuanced ideas about being safely connected/separated to their carers, their families, and the wider world. This can be seen in the following ways:

7.1.1 Another way of being a normal family

The children rarely view kinship care as an alternative to fostering or adoption. As highlighted in the context chapter and the literature review, kinship care is simply perceived as an out-of-home placement in most social work literature and policy. However, the children prefer not to perceive their situation as a placement out with their family. Instead, it is a way to remain in their family. They wish for kinship care to be seen, as Harmony states, as *"another way of being a normal family".* It is one of the many diverse family practices that provide for them, keeps them safe, and allows them to flourish.

7.1.2 What it means to have a family and a home

As analysed thematically in the previous chapter, the children's accounts challenge traditional static views of both family and home that are often assumed within social work policy and practice. Typically, family forms are seen as hierarchical, gendered, institutionalised, and dependent on individual carers. They are also often based on the premise of genetic relations (Morris et al., 2017). The children, however, view blood ties as an indicator of a family but not necessarily a requirement of it. Family can be in a variety of forms and includes members that are not genealogically related, or in the case of pets, species related.

The children also see family as practices that are performed, evolve and grow. Family is not static, but instead, most probably due to their experiences, it changes as do the roles of the individuals within it. Furthermore, they view care as the responsibility of the whole family rather than just their birth parents or current carers.

Similarly, home does not have to be a single place of residence, but rather places of safety, comfort, and care. The children showed how they disrupt common, simplistic notions of both

family and a single home in social work policy and practice, which are often used for assessments (Wissö et al., 2019), and often primarily based on theories of attachment (McCafferty, 2020).

7.1.3 Participation and social justice

The children wish to have the option to be consulted on every aspect of their lives. However, they want this to be done with sensitivity at the right time, in the right way, with the people with whom they have trusting, caring, compassionate relationships. They do not wish to make the final decisions as they believe this is the role of adults whose experience and resources they rely on to keep them safe and provide for them.

7.1.4 What it means to have permanence

The children show that a sense of permanence, affinity, belonging, and interdependence in the family network is more important than legal permanence or having stability by remaining with one or two primary carers throughout their lives. It is, therefore, not about substitute care. Instead, it is about having a growing sense of family to care for them.

Legal permanence may help to achieve the trusting and caring relationships they desire. Nevertheless, having an emotional sense of permanence in terms of *"a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging"* (DfE, 2010:22–23) is the primary goal. It is more important than having legal certainty of care or, for them, seemingly arbitrary timescales that often seem enforced on them by social work and the Court. Children's timescales should not just be based on the developmental life trajectories that govern social work practice but also on how individual children mobilise time itself.

The children use time to make sense of permanence. They use tools, objects, items, and spaces for reflexivity so as not to dwell.

> ***Eliza*** *– "…obviously there's no point in dwelling on things, but you can remember them, because it might; like it was still a part of your life…"*

The children wish to move forward using their past. Having a sense of permanence, then, is an ongoing process and practice, which the children are continuously thinking about, testing, and revising.

7.1.5 What it means to have safe connections with others

The children showed that relationships, links and connections with others in their lives are ongoing. Psychological connections remain whether or not essential people in their lives, such as birth parents, are physically present. Therefore, again, primary relationships of care cannot simply be ended, forgotten, or substituted.

The children use different tools and strategies to manage these connections in a variety of nuanced ways. They wish for their feelings and current preferred strategies to be central to decisions around keeping these connections. They also acknowledge that circumstances and their wishes will change.

7.1.6 The responsibilities of those outside the immediate family constellation

The children feel the whole family requires help from others to manage these connections and relationships with each other to ensure they are trusting, caring, and reciprocal. Responsibility does not just rest on the children, their family, or individual social workers. Support for their wellbeing and sense of permanence is, therefore, not just reliant on the individualised, neoliberal ideologies on which European social work is often based (Webb, 2016).

Having a sense of affinity, solidarity, continuity, and belonging is not just confined to their family relationships but also depends on links with other communities outside the family constellation and the cultural and political markers that surround them. Religion, hobbies, school, friends, gender roles, heritage, politics, consumer capitalism, and children's popular culture also impacted their sense of worth, wellbeing and sense of belonging. This is often forgotten or minimised in policy, literature, and research about children (Spyrou et al., 2018).

7.2 Part 2 - Theoretical and conceptual implications - How the children's views can help social work think about kinship care and permanence

Theory must inform social work practice. It is only with a meaningful understanding of the issues at hand that appropriate social work interventions can be provided (Morley et al., 2019). A resounding implication from the children's accounts is that using just one school of thought regarding family, kinship, childhood and permanence, cannot adequately explain their lives or be the sole basis of policy and practice (Deacon and Macdonald, 2017). As hypothesised in the literature review, it is not enough to rely on just psychological, sociological, or even psychosocial theorising to sufficiently understand the complexity of a child's world, their relationships, or

their sense of permanence. Instead, there should be a critical multi-disciplinary approach. This may provide a more complex and messier picture, but it is also one that mirrors the realities by acknowledging the tensions inherent in children's lives. It also reflects social work's requirement to attend to change on both the individual and societal level (IASSW, 2014)

7.2.1 Doing and displaying family

David Morgan's (2011) notion of family practices emerged as a fruitful concept to help understand how the children talked about their lives. Much like the children in this study, Morgan attempted to challenge everyday understandings of family as a static category that consist solely of legal bonds, blood ties, or residence. Family is, therefore, is not merely about legal, genealogical, or cultural definitions.

In this study, the children regard those with blood ties as part of their family. Some, like Louise, also distinguish between genetic relations they have little personal connection with by calling them "*relatives*" rather than "*family*". However, the children also recognise those without any genetic or species relatedness, such as family friends and pets, as part of their family. Their family is in flux and continually growing. Central to this is how family members relate to each other.

> ***Zack*** *– "…but they're family because they've made the effort be with us"*

This ability for a family to shift and undergo change shows that the children understand family as something people do, rather than just as something people are (Morgan, 2011). It is a move away from idealised understandings of family often held in social work policy and practice. Instead, family has multiple meanings established by the sharing of memories, time, space, and by having a sense of permanence, belonging, continuity, and connection (McCarthy, 2012; Biehal, 2014a). Children are active subjects in the making and meaning of family. They are active and instrumental in making family life work.

Finch's (2007) concept of family display is also helpful. Throughout the study, the children were always trying to convey that the way their family members do family should be perceived as normal compared to those in the UK not living in kinship care arrangements. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that their circumstances were different. They were also aware that this difference might cause others might vilify them.

In this study, by talking to a researcher about how they do family, such as going to church, shopping, holidays or fishing together, the children tried to achieve recognition of their essential relationships as family ones. They were displaying family to give it credence in the eyes of others. This is not particular to families that are in kinship care arrangements. All families have this need to display.

7.2.2 Autonomous interdependence – having agency along with independence and dependence

The children often spoke about wanting to be independent, yet they acknowledged dependence on those around them. Also, they often desired responsibility yet would not always welcome it when it was placed upon them. They often pined for family members to recognise and affirm their accomplishments but would then insist that it was important not to let others' views affect them.

Psychologists would argue that this need for reliance, yet non-reliance, is typical of any child, especially when they embark into adolescence (Van Petegem et al., 2012). However, psychological explanations of the tensions between dependence, independence and autonomy, even humanist ones, often fall short for these particular children living in kinship care arrangements. This is because there are additional tensions inherent in their family lives. The children have been let down by their birth parents and have experienced the precarious nature of care. Furthermore, their kinship carers are often older and may not be able to provide continuous care throughout their childhoods (Wijedasa, 2015). The children also have to deal with the psychological presence of birth parents in their lives who may have caused them trauma, even if they are not physically present. Finally, these particular children want their family to be left alone by social services but also wish for more state assistance. In many ways, children in kinship care experience a heightened sense of the vacillations between wanting themselves and their family to be independent yet also dependant.

Another way to help understand such ambivalences is to use philosophy to deconstruct the binary constructions of independence and dependence, and connection and separation. Hegel famously asserted that we gain self-consciousness only through the process of recognition from others (Houlgate, 2013). Sayer (2011) also alluded to this when he talked about humans being comparative and relational in order to provide us with a sense of ourselves. Our vulnerability and dependence on others are not merely instrumental, but they are also necessary for our very personhood.

Such insights reiterate Bhaskar's (1993) concept of autonomous interdependence (Arce, 2018). Carers, family, community, and society not only assist these children in gaining intentional agency and a sense of self, but these, in turn, are necessary for the "*reproduction or transformation*" of others around them (Bhaskar, 1993:154). As such, the children can shape family, community, and society's identity and actions through being given their agency and identity through others. This is akin to Archer's (2012) conceptualisations of internal conversations.

In the study, it was not that children did not talk about their individual needs and interests. Instead, these were secondary to their desire to sustain family solidarity and interdependent life. Repeatedly the children spoke about the need to sustain trusting caring relationships, above all else, because if relationships produce their sense of self and autonomy, then, as many have unfortunately experienced, it can also be eroded by them. They, therefore, wished to invest and gain a sense of continuity to the relationships around them. Their desire for a sense of permanence in their relationships with the whole family became a central concern. Furthermore, these children worked exceptionally hard to make family work.

> ***Louise*** *– "Sometimes when I'm in bed I think of all my family and try and cut them out. But I can't because it's way too big."*

Such a way of perceiving our relations to each other also assists in the difficulties with the simplistic notions of agency, participation, and empowerment that often surround social work discourse (see methodology chapter). With the insight of autonomous interdependence, agency no longer merely becomes synonymous with the expression of autonomy. A child speaking up at a meeting full of adults may not necessarily have any effect, or there may even be a negative one on future relationships. Therefore, empowerment theorised through autonomous interdependence can be better framed as a collective struggle over time, where responsibility is shared. It is dependent on resources, and it becomes something to be achieved over a life-course rather than only in the present.

Finally, autonomous interdependence has particular relevance in the arena of kinship care, where wishes for complete family autonomy are at odds with the need for state intervention and support. Reframing state intervention as an ongoing relationship alters any questions about whether kinship carers should be a burden of the taxpayers. It is no longer whether the state should support these families, as all families are supported and support others to some extent, but rather to what degree should support continue, and how.

7.2.3 Ethics of care
7.2.3.1.1 Values

Not only do the children feel that for kinship care, definitions of family and being interdependent matter to them, just as important is the way they are cared for and how that care can be predicted. They want a sense of, and confidence in, the actual activity of care. They want to know they will be provided for by named carers. However, how care is done is just as important. Such care that consists of both being and doing fits with Tronto's (1994) and Sevenhuijsen's (2000) ethics of care arguments. They propose care entails a moral orientation. The way we care is as important as doing it.

As shown in the 'Values That Matter' diagram in the previous findings chapter, the children spoke about the values required for relationships to be positive; for others to care well. The children weighed up not only what matters but what matters most. As also shown, these preferred moral orientations and values often seemed at odds with one another. Further conversations with the children also suggest that the need for such values to be displayed depended on who they were talking about and their circumstances. For example, the ways they expected social workers to care was very different to their expectations from family members. The children expected social workers to listen to them and help their concerns but not share their lives in the same reciprocal and intimate ways as close family members.

7.2.3.1.2 Ethics of care versus ethics of justice

Ethics of care literature is a useful way of conceptualising how different values and moral orientations intertwine for practice (Collins, 2018). When discussing the context of professions such as social work, the literature often debates the differences between the ethics of care and ethics of justice (Collins, 2018). In summary, the ethics of care entails mutual trust (Held, 2006), relational responsibility, responsiveness, attentiveness, and competence (Tronto, 1994). It necessitates empathy, compassion, and a commitment to nurturing without causing suffering. It is grounded in ideas of interdependence, although they use phrases such as relational ontology (Sevenhuijsen, 2000) or relational autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000).

Often seen in contrast to this, the ethics of justice is frequently pitched as a more rationalist alternative (Held, 2006). It focusses on questions of fairness, equality, consistency, rules, and individual rights. It is more predictable and less risky. It is based on concepts of autonomy and that everyone is individually different yet equal, also known as universality. It is of central consideration in the field of jurisprudence.

As previously described in the introductory chapters, the onus on professionalism, modernisation, managerialism, regulation, legal processes, risk-aversion, efficiency, and standards currently dominate social work practice and policy (Collins, 2018). They also dominate the domains of children's services. The children's insights do not denigrate such a need for regulation and safeguarding. Instead, they emphasise that children and families social work practice must treat the safeguarding and appropriate development of children with great importance. This includes meeting their emotional, physical, and educational needs. Furthermore, the children wanted to be treated equally to their carers birth children and were concerned about the right for family members to see each other. They also wanted to ensure that social workers fulfilled their duties. However, they also wanted social work practitioners to be more compassionate and understanding of their situations.

> *"**Kimberley** – Our social workers didn't always do what they said they were going to do. I think that's bad…They also weren't very nice, except for one. [She] was good because she listened to us and made us feel safe."*

As the children viewed both the ethics of rights and the ethics of care as necessary, this gives credence to Sevenghuijsen's (2000) and Tronto's (1994) conclusions that caring and rights are both vital and intertwined. Parenting, care, and social work practice should not be confined to considerations of rights and rules. They must also take account of human relationships and context. However, in terms of upholding the ethics of rights, the ethics of care must be the primary consideration (Barnes, 2012).

Another benefit of meeting care needs as a primary concern is because the children asked for more effective responses to their needs themselves rather than responses to a supposedly homogenous group. The children wish for their families to be cared for in alignment with their specific situations.

7.2.3.1.3   Mature care

Also from the ethics of care literature, the concept of mature care is useful when considering kinship care. Mature care helps to address the issues of rules, protection, and reciprocity. Petterson (2012) furthered Gilligan's (1982) conceptions of mature care pitted against commonly held views of an ideal type of altruistic care. She argues that altruistic care is *"seen as a selfless, compassionate, and spontaneous act, the focus of which is to concentrate the other's immediate needs"* (Pettersen, 2012:376). This is a common perception of how and why

kinship carers should look after the children (Owusu-Bempah, 2010). However, neither the children nor, according to literature, the carers view their responsibilities in this way. The children inferred the need for interdependence and reciprocity in their relationships. Often this was key to ensuring that they did not feel like a burden. As such, they would buy presents for carers or engage in other family member's activities such as fishing or going to church, despite the children finding the actual activities only, as Megan claimed, *"alright".* They felt a responsibility to do well and repay the carers by caring for them when they were older. This demonstrates the wish for their growth to have dividends in terms of everyone's wellbeing. They endeavoured to gain a useful place within the whole family's intergenerational life-course, which would help them gain a more permanent family position.

This type of relational, reciprocal activity is the basis of mature care. It is not limitless or altruistic. The children also understood this as meaning adherence to negotiated rules. They saw rules as signifiers that they were being cared for appropriately and were being kept safe. It also allowed them a shared narrative and a sense of continuity, affinity and permanence (Mason, 2008). It also suggests sensitivity to the long-term physical and mental wellbeing of children.

> *Louise – "Rules should be something that is discussed with everyone that's in the place with rules so then they can help come up with them in a way that it makes sense, and they can obey them later."*

The final reason why mature care is a useful concept to apply to kinship care is that merely theorising care as altruistic, unconditional, selfless, and unlimited avoids the ethical and political aspects of care (Pettersen, 2012). Again, the children's discussions reflected the politics that surround kinship care. They felt it was unfair that their carers were often expected to unconditionally care for them without any practical, emotional, or financial assistance from social workers.

7.2.4   Recognition and participation

Theories of recognition, most notably the work of Axel Honneth (1996), Charles Taylor (1994), and Nancy Fraser (2000), are also useful to interpret the wishes and the needs of the children. Such theories pull a lot of the above themes together. They help to conceptualise the ongoing process of identity and family formation while also emphasising interdependence and the importance of supportive relationships.

7.2.4.1 Spheres of recognition

Honneth (1996) described three spheres of interaction that require constant negotiations; or struggles for recognition. These are struggles due to the power relationships inherent in any interactions. This is especially true for children who are often viewed as merely immature, incompetent, and vulnerable. It is even truer for children placed in family relationships where some adults are told that they are not good enough parents.

Notably, the spheres can help social workers to target different areas in the children's lives, which are required in order for them to gain a sense of permanence.

7.2.4.1.1 The first sphere of interaction for recognition

The first sphere of interaction necessary is that of love or primary relationships of positive regard. These are interactions mainly based within the family and may, especially for these children, involve conflict and disclosure of potentially upsetting information. However, the children stated that most difficulties could be weathered with time, depending on the relationships' quality and perceived durability.

> **Megan** – "I know I'm never going to have an argument [in this house] and then it's going to carry on for ages and it's just going to escalate. So, there is sometimes tension in the house, but I feel like that happens in every house. But for us, we just kind of move away from it quite quickly so it's not really an issue. Also, I guess I know that they're always going to be there for me in some way, even if it were bad."

The children required trust that conflict and any information provided to them is done according to their best interests at the right time, in the right place, with people with whom they have caring relationships. There is an emphasis, again, not only on what the relationships are but how they are done.

7.2.4.1.2 The second sphere of interaction for recognition

The second sphere is that of rights upheld through legal rights and moral respect between actors. Recognition of rights also means that the child, in return, respects the rules and laws of society. This means that the law, institutions, and society should recognise their rights not only as children but also as dutiful, interdependently autonomous legal subjects. Furthermore, the

law should recognise that kinship care is a particular situation that requires a particular sense of permanence.

As previously touched upon, participation is also essential to this value of respect and interdependence, especially when it comes to rights. In particular dialogical participation transcends participation based on sameness or difference and addresses both. Dialogical participation also allows for Fraser's (2000) addition to the theory of recognition, which moves away from Honneth's (1996) identity-model. This promotes a focus on redistribution and the sociological and political conditions that must be in place. It takes a broader approach and takes individual responsibility away from just the families. It is not enough for families and children to be given a tokenistic opportunity to participate; they must feel that they are well-placed and able to do it.

7.2.4.1.3 The third sphere of interaction for recognition

The third sphere of recognition proposes the need for solidarity to provide self-esteem, resilience and a sense of permanence through acknowledgement by the community. This echoes the findings that having a sense of affiliation, solidarity and belonging is not just confined to their family relationships but also with their communities. Children gain recognition through their experiences at school, work, neighbours, clubs, and extra-curricular activities. Unfortunately, the importance of practices outside the family home is often forgotten in social work permanence literature. However, this solidarity centres on connecting through friendships and casual alliances. It builds social capital, which can also reduce and prevent child abuse (Jack and Jordan, 1999).

7.2.5 Dialectical thinking

Following on from one of Marx's sociological concepts, critical realist Roy Bhaskar (1993) terms the moving away from dualisms as dialectical thinking. It is distinct from analytical thinking, which considers distinctions and connections as separate.

Dialectical thinking underpins this whole thesis. The children demonstrate how they often challenge simplistic either/or views of their family lives and how they navigate ambivalence. They are often navigating the in-between space of simplistic binaries. Sociologists call these dualisms (Craib, 2000). Such dualisms are often present because, as illustrated in the introductory chapters, kinship care, permanence, legislation, social work, and research often try to suggest their validity through discrete either/or binaries. Kinship care is usually framed as

either a private family arrangement or a placement. Permanence is typically viewed as either remaining with birth parents or the substitution of them. Permanence is also usually seen as discrete, which measured in terms of stability and legal permanence, or else it can only be produced through how a child feels. Research is either empirical or interpretivist.

Bhaskar (2008) considers such dualisms arise because individuals often concentrate only on the differences between things. As such, there is an onus on classifying and grouping things, such as species, age-groups, placement types, and other concepts. Taxonomy assigns objects and people into fixed groups and separates them according to their function. Child versus adult, reason versus emotion, mind versus body, kinship versus non-kinship, private versus public, and permanence versus impermanence are among the countless resulting dichotomies that dominate social work thinking (Kjørstad, 2017). Therefore, notions such as doing family and autonomous interdependency enmesh such dichotomies and address such paradoxes head-on. Dialectic thinking traverses the continuum between rights and care, absence and presence, recognition and (mis)recognition, independence and dependence, adulthood and childhood, vulnerability and ability, the psychological and the sociological, the philosophical and the empirical, theory and practice. It is *"the art of thinking the coincidence of distinctions and connections"* (Bhaskar, 1993:190).

Importantly, transformation, on whatever level, can only occur when people work in the dialectic process (Simpson and Price, 2007). For example, it is not enough to consider the child before their kinship care arrangement as a different child to the one in their new family arrangement. There are undoubtedly continuities as well as differences. The children are their past, present, and becoming selves in continuously changing patterns.

Overall, the children showed that they often navigate and think dialectically. They think across and in-between. Therefore, the challenge is how practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and academics can do the same without needing to resolve or fix such tensions.

"…the beginning of wisdom is the discovery that there exist contradictions of permanent tension with which it is necessary to live and this is above all not necessary to resolve" (Gorz, 1982, cited in Cree 2000:205)

7.3 Part 3 – Attuning social work policy and practice for kinship care

The final part of the chapter presents the implications drawn from the above summary of findings and theories. Thinking about how the children in kinship care can trouble social work discourse, it utilises the theories of doing and displaying family, autonomous interdependence, ethics of care, recognition, and dialectical thinking. Doing so provides a body of recommendations that can assist social workers in their day-to-day encounters with children and families living in kinship care arrangements. It challenges the dominant framing of the social work debates that primarily emphasise the professionalisation of kinship care as a placement and a predominantly process-driven service. Furthermore, it gives credence to suggesting that policy and practice around permanence must recognise how the children keep multiple families in mind (Rustin, 1994).

7.3.1 Recognition of how the children view their family arrangement

As previously discussed, recognition constitutes a "*vital human need*" (Taylor, 1994:26). Recognition is especially true for these children living in set-ups that others often perceive as unusual or somehow worse than being brought up by birth parents. The children want their specific family lives to be acknowledged and their needs appropriately supported. They want their family lives to be recognised as normal but not typical. They celebrate diversity rather than difference. Kinship care, then, should be viewed as one of the many family practices that need particular family support. As a socially constructed category, kinship care should be seen as an upbringing by family (Skoglund and Thørnblad, 2019). It should not be viewed as a placement option or a service dependent on state resources.

However, taking a critical realist viewpoint, kinship care is not just socially constructed. It occurs independently of how we know, categorise, or think about it. It is essential to acknowledge its interdependence with social services, the welfare system, and often courts. Therefore, the dialectical should be acknowledged. Kinship care remains in the in-between space between the private and the public. It is a family practice that is also used, at times, as a service.

Nevertheless, unless prompted, none of the children used the phrase kinship care or talked about social workers. Therefore, policy and practice should first focus on the specifics of kinship care as a family arrangement, rather than just borrowing or adapting from adoption and fostering discourse, policy, and practice. Overall, it would be better for social work to perceive

kinship care in the realms of delivering a type of family support rather than as a child placement service.

This may seem like a difficult cultural shift to some. For many years academics, policymakers, and practitioners have been trying to fit kinship care into existing notions and procedures. Shifting how we think about kinship care not only means not comparing potential foster carer assessments to potential kinship carers assessments (O'Brien, 2014) but also not comparing fostering rates to allowances given to kinship carers. It questions how the experiences and knowledge in Fostering or Adoption Panels can relate to the specifics of kinship care arrangements. Thinking about kinship care as a heterogenous family set-up in its own right argues for its specific support instead of support from the Adoption Support Fund dependent on a child's legal status.

Not using terms such as placement, contact, or out-of-home care, can also have a considerable impact. These small utterances can quite quickly change the discourse surrounding kinship care. Changing how social workers speak about kinship care can change how social work thinks about family and childhood. This not only helps practitioners continue to think about such family arrangements in a more compassionate way but also displays recognition when talking to those being supported. If the children do not use the words when describing their lives, then neither should social workers in their everyday practice.

7.3.2 Recognition of the children's family and home

Another difficulty is that families in kinship care arrangements are usually pitted against traditional ideals of family. However, the recognition of how families 'do' rather than just a focus on what families are (Morgan, 2011) means practitioners can be wide-ranging when deciding who should have caring commitments within kinship care arrangements. Carers do not necessarily have to have any genetic relation. The most important thing for these children is being cared for by someone that is well known to them and feels part of their family. They wish for safe, inclusive care that allows them to feel a sense of belonging and continuity. They also want people to be able to recognise and accept them for who they are. They desire carers that, as Eliza states, *"want to relate"* to them, spend time with them, and have an affinity towards them (Mason, 2008).

Recognition of the many ways that families 'do' allows social workers to be more creative around caring responsibilities. For the children, care and a sense of permanence is the

responsibility of the family as a whole and does not rely on one or two substitute carers. Therefore, care can be shared if children feel that responsibility is a collective endeavour and that they are being prioritised rather than ignored or neglected.

Doing family and doing care also expands the meaning of home. Some children, such as Jordan and Thomas, were happy to have multiple residencies, some less so. However, home involved different uses of space, whether that be shared spaces, private spaces, and spaces to be alone or to be with others. The most important prerequisites of home, or homes, are that they are safe places where the children felt they belonged and could be themselves. It mattered that they had spaces such as their beds and memory shelves in their rooms, but also enough shared spaces where they could feel comfortable whilst managing the connection/separation inherent in their lives.

This type of shared compassionate care is dependent on working with the family as a whole in a timely, systemic way. Therefore, potential carers must be identified as a priority so that work on family relationships can start as soon as possible. Furthermore, everybody needs to be consulted, including the children. Rules and responsibilities need to be agreed upon by all, and if necessary, regulated. It also involves a reciprocal mature, caring arrangement that is supported not only by other family members but also by social work, other agencies, and the state. Therefore, any arrangement requires a dialogical participatory process. Family Group Conferences, although currently under debate, are examples of such approaches. They can obtain solutions from the whole family whilst ensuring that family roles and responsibilities are made clear alongside an agreed commitment from social work (Deanna and Kate, 2018).

Just as crucial for the children is that family membership is displayed as well as done (Finch, 2007:66). For example, the use of names such as mum and dad for their kinship carers may be of particular symbolic value for certain children. The children want to show that their family and their childhood is normal. Such displaying of practical kinship (Bourdieu, 1977) also includes family holidays, day trips, school trips, help with homework, taking on responsibilities such as household chores, the use of social media and cultural crazes, and family mealtimes and events. As such, families must have the time, resources, and capabilities to include kinship and typical childhood activities.

7.3.3 Recognition of the merits of child participation

Being mindful that there are multiple meanings of family forms and home requires professionals to spend time with the children so that they can understand their perspectives. Social workers need to find out what their meanings of family and home are, how their family is negotiated and lived, and find out what matters to them in particular.

There are many ways to gain an understanding of these children and their situation. There are many tools for social workers that are effective in communicating with children (Lefevre, 2010). As shown with this study, photo-elicitation, walking tours, role-play, drawing, and simply having time to listen are successful methods. The work, then, primarily becomes relationship-based, with a stress on the importance of how those relationships are conducted (Ruch et al., 2010). For example, the ethics of care literature would suggest that they are principally undertaken with sensitivity, empathy, compassion, competence, responsiveness, and trust.

Nevertheless, the children also want to be safe and can often become frustrated.

> *"**Erika** – …Things can take too long… [Social workers] don't listen to us…they don't always do what they say."*

As such, regulation, administration, and paperwork are also necessary, but they must not be at the expense of positive relationships. Preferably, they should be used to support them, but again, relationships must come first (Munro, 2011)

Participation and the inclusion of children is not just the responsibility of individual social workers. Sociological understandings of recognition (see Fraser, 2000) suggest there must be resources to support participation in social work. For example, this means that policy should ensure that social worker *"compassionate time"* must include, but take priority over, *"paperwork time"* (Yuill and Mueller-Hirth, 2019:1534). Resources need to also be available for the families and the children. Discussing wishes and feelings can harm relationships, especially for children such as Erika and Kimberley, who did not want face-to-face meetings with their birth parents. Therefore, discussions with and about the family must be done compassionately. This means that children will often require assistance from others, such as friends or professional advocates. Having someone who is partisan to listen to them and only act under their instructions (unless they or others are in grave danger) is crucial for them to participate. It also helps them to sound out and process their ongoing dialectical thinking.

A key concern for children's participation is the felt responsibility for social workers and carers to protect children from upsetting information. Such protection from harm again brings us back to a fundamental issue in kinship care, and arguably social work. It also echoes the protectionism of children seen only as vulnerable, vehemently opposed by the new sociology of childhood ideology (Jenks, 2005). However, the children in this study show that they are persistently thinking about matters affecting their lives. They are contemplating who they are in relation to those around them, how much influence they have, and why they are in their current position. These dialectical internal conversations do not diminish if they are not talked about (Archer and Archer, 2012). The children continue to think about the information they have been given. Moreover, if insufficient information has been offered, the children will often fill in the pieces of their life story themselves based on piecemeal memories, half-truths, or untruths (Staines and Selwyn, 2020).

Professionals and family members must, therefore, be mindful of the individual child's circumstances. As suggested by Eliza, information must be shared, and family living must be discussed, but not all details have to be told at once. Again, the ethics of rights, including the right to participate and be informed, must not be separated from the ethics of care. Discussions must be done in a timely way with sensitivity by a person that is knowledgeable and competent. It should be with a person, either personal or professional, whom the children trust and who understands and recognises the child's particular situation. Furthermore, this relational, dialogical way of doing participation, of being given agency rather than autonomy, must not be considered a one-off process but must be considered from a life-course perspective.

Finally, children wished not only to be consulted but help collaborate on all assessments that involve their lives. This is not only their right according to legislation, but also children should be seen as valuable resources for social workers. They can provide feasible solutions not only because they have been thinking about their needs throughout their lives but also because they have many everyday experiences of how their families function. Therefore, their views should be prominent in risk assessments, child permanence reports, and viability assessments. Such active participation is endorsed by relatively new guidelines for kinship care, such as the 'Initial Family and Friends Care Assessment Guide: Good Practice Guide' (Family Rights Group, 2017).

7.3.4 Support for a child's sense of permanence and their ability to manage connection/separation

7.3.4.1 Emotional permanence, legal permanence, and stability

The children in this study support the current dominant way of thinking in fostering and adoption literature, policy, and practice. This, as discussed in Chapter 2, is that a sense of permanence for the children reiterates the UK legislative definition of *"a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging"* (DfE, 2010:22–23)*.* Furthermore, legal standing and legal orders can provide a degree of security from which a sense of permanence can be established. Time and physical stability of a placement can also play a part. However, it is vital to think beyond legal permanence and physical stability in order to find the right match for children's needs (Boddy, 2017). The children stated that legal orders should match their needs for a sense of permanence and help them negotiate and sustain the many kin and non-kin relationships in their lives. That should be their purpose. A sense of permanence is the primary and ultimate goal. Court orders should also not just be applied so that families are more able to receive the necessary support. Overall, the ethics of care must be the ultimate goal, integrated into and supported by the ethics of justice.

At times, some of the children felt this was forgotten. For example, sisters Kimberley and Erika were subject to a Child Arrangement Order which caused them high anxiety and uncertainty. This was due to their desire for less face-to-face contact with their birth parents. They stated that this caused them such distress that they would often cry and vomit before seeing them. They also wished for their grandmother to have more control over their lives. They viewed their grandmother as more likely to put their needs first and keep them safe.

Nevertheless, their grandmother insisted that they go to contact in order to obey legal stipulations. This made them doubt the safety that she could offer them. They also felt for this matter that there was no recognition, no family solidarity, and no shared narrative. In this case, legal permanence worked against the children's sense of permanence. It is just one example of the ethics of justice placed before and not integrated into the ethics of care. Therefore, family arrangements must not be led primarily by legal processes unless they are synchronised with the children's emotional needs.

Placement stability also does not necessarily equate to the children's sense of permanence. Being forced to remain in specific adults' care is counterintuitive if you are not happy there. Stability of care includes, for these children, something broader. The children's views of stability

are not just limited to remaining with their current carers. It includes, as implied earlier, stability and a sense of permanence into the broader family network as a whole.

Finally, again in keeping with current debates around permanence, support should take a life-course approach (Connolly et al., 2016; Boddy, 2017). The children recognised that connections/separations with their family would vary as they got older, even after their childhood. They showed that they are likely to have some level of need, or newly emerging needs, that require support and help, sometimes on a long-term basis. The children will benefit from access to a range of services throughout childhood and beyond, irrespective of their legal status or current caring arrangements. Support may include counselling, advocacy, mental health services and specialist provisions. However, some of the children stated that they would not use support prescribed by social workers. Nevertheless, they still wished for recognition of their needs and specific family circumstances. Therefore, appropriate support still needs to be available and periodically offered.

7.3.4.2 *Spending time and sharing space*

The sharing and non-sharing of space and time were not only crucial for a child's sense of family but also for a child's sense of permanence. The children used time and space to test out and challenge their continuity of care, affinity, and belonging. Spending time and using space efficiently and effectively, with or without others, mattered. Time and space were used as commodities and markers. For example, by employing the concepts of autonomous interdependence and dialectical thinking, it is argued that the children used space to manage the push and pull of connection/separation. The children desired space to explore their autonomous interdependence by using trampolines, books, food, media, social media, gardens, and their own personal areas in the house. Whilst the children engaged with these seemingly solitary activities, they still maintained some safe connection to the world around them. Furthermore, the time spent in apparently separate spaces was often 'mush time' (Baraitser, 2013). It was also on the proviso that they knew more focussed time could be spent later with those they felt could keep them safe and care for them.

Children's struggles through autonomous interdependence often caused both internal and external conflicts (Arce, 2018). They would often challenge boundaries and often needed, as Louise stated, a *"firm hand"*. However, for the children, how the conflict was approached signified whether they received mature care and regard for their safety. Depending on the carers' response, challenges and negotiation showed recognition and respect for their agency

and personal circumstances. Appropriate responses to such challenges demonstrated that the children were recognised as valued contributors to their own and their family's lives. Therefore, carers and practitioners must allow flexibility and negotiation so that boundaries are adapted when it is deemed fair and practicable. As with all negotiations, especially where there are such power differentials, this needs to be done primarily through dialogue with those with whom they have trusting, caring relationships.

The children also spoke of the provision of time and space to assist with separation/connection not being just an individual responsibility. The necessity of both must be recognised by their community, professionals, and the state. Such opportunities depend on having the right amount of time with others, having enough financial means, and having safe enough real and virtual spaces. For example, as a teenager wishing to have more *"freedom"* outside the family home, Harmony did not feel safe in her neighbourhood. She also often felt that her nan was preoccupied with work and trying to obtain access for her younger brother. Her home also had poor internet access to the virtual spaces she desired. These circumstances impacted her choices and sense of wellbeing.

The use of time, space, and temporality are often only implicitly alluded to in social work literature on children's permanence (Boddy, 2017). It is usually simply framed that some children will require more time to form attachments than those in their birth parents' care (Howe, 2011). For kinship care, time has been explored regarding how court orders and assessments may not allow for appropriate time for thorough assessments, or how certain orders do not necessitate stability (Harwin, Alrouh, et al., 2019). Limited attention to spatiality and temporality has also been for other areas of social work (Jeyasingham, 2014). The most notable is from Ferguson (e.g. 2010), and Yuill and Mueller-Hirth (2019), who examine the use of space and time by social work practitioners. Furthermore, a recent edition of the journal 'Qualitative Social Work' dedicated a whole issue to place and space in social work (Bryant and Williams, 2020). However, there was not a specific article about social work with children that are not in their birth parents' care. The children's insights have, therefore, provided a new direction of enquiry into how they use space and time to navigate their sense of permanence.

7.3.4.3   Sharing narratives, rituals, routines, and family practices

The children also used stories, routines and rituals, such as shared mealtimes and family celebrations, as a way to do and display family (see also Schofield *et al.*, 2012; Biehal, 2014). This provided them with a shared sense of narrative, belonging, and affinity. It also helped them feel

a sense of belonging in the whole family's intergenerational life cycle. A focus on family practices suggests that kinship can be maintained through such everyday interactions (Cossar and Neil, 2013).

The sharing of family stories, narratives and conversations should also include those about the possibility of different caring arrangements in the future, and death. Again, the children in kinship care arrangements show that they are thinking about these things, whether or not they are explicitly talked about (see also Burgess et al., 2010; Farmer et al., 2013). They have previously experienced a shift in care responsibilities within the family, and they, therefore, consider family as an active process that shifts and is in flux (Morgan, 2011).

Pets (Carr and Rockett, 2017) and siblings (Jones et al., 2019) were also other ways that the children could share narratives, explore permanence, and do kinship. Both often provided play, comfort, somebody to care for, and somebody to care for them. Pets also could not answer back and would listen without judgement. Sibling relationships, however, would often be more precarious, and so they would often have to work harder to negotiate their autonomous interdependence. Again, they were working in the dialectical and negotiating relationships. However, by seeing how their family treated siblings and pets, they could better predict continuity of care and how others in similar situations may belong. These types of long-term, day-to-day relationships and markers are essential for the children to compare their sense of permanence within the family.

7.3.4.4 Objects and Life-story Work

There is a plethora of social work literature on the use of objects, photos and toys that aid a child's sense of permanence (Watson et al., 2020). These findings reiterate their importance. The children often used teddy bears, badges, letters, and clothes as transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953). They not only allowed a bridge between connection and separation, but also between the past, present, and the future (Watson et al., 2020).

> *Lucy* – *"Because my other nanny, she gave it to me a long, long time ago. And like sometimes when, erm, the Care Bear gets dirty, erm, and grandma has to wash him, I get really sad, and I can't sleep. Because Care Bear's not there."*

Most social work literature uses the term life story work (LSW) when discussing how objects can help the telling and retelling of stories. There is no single definition of LSW nor how to do it

(Hooley et al., 2016). There is a consensus that it is based on attachment and loss theories and that it can aid a children's narrative identity and continuity of sense of self (Watson et al., 2020). Indeed, the children also spoke about using narratives, photos, memory boxes, memory shelves, presents, and storying other personal objects typically associated with LSW. They helped them navigate the dialectical and the in-between of connection/separation they experience in their lives.

However, the term LSW and psychosocial explanations can only go so far. They do not allow for how these children in kinship care manage such activities specific to their family circumstances. Firstly, not once did the children use the term LSW. This may be because the term is usually conflated with a social work intervention for children that are in state care or are adopted. Therefore, because the children do not wish for their family practice to be viewed as a placement, they are unlikely to use phrases or processes that suggest it is one.

Secondly, LSW does not seem to the children to recognise that their specific family is perceived by them to be continually growing and in flux. As previously stated, the children do not experience their care as substitute care or discrete separation and loss. Their family life also contains reconnections, whether through contact, stories, or even seemingly small things such as family resemblances.

Thirdly, the work part of LSW sounds like an intervention that social workers perform on children. These children were already using various tools and methods to manage the connections/separations inherent in their lives without social work intervention. Therefore, doing work to children underplays and does not fully recognise their agency. It can ignore the children's current methods of managing, which also can be the most useful resource on which to base further methods.

Fourthly, LSW can often be seen as a time-limited task. However, the need to gain a sense of continuity of care, belonging and affinity mattered because the children understood from past experiences that family relationships shift over time. Again, for these children, family identity and families are an active process (Morgan, 2011). It is work that happens and encapsulates an individual's life-course. Therefore, LSW is not just a one-off process or a book that is completed, primarily by a social worker, and then put on a shelf.

Contact was a dominant issue for the children. It is also a dominant and complex issue for social workers working with children in kinship and out-of-home care (Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). Therefore, although it should be seen as LSW or another way of managing connections/separations, it deserves its own attention.

Contact is another social work term. Again, in this study, the term was not used by any of the children unless used to describe a specific provision set up by social services. Alternatively, the participants talked about seeing their birth parents, remembering them, having mementoes, and being told about them. Some children were clear they did not want to see their birth parents at present and would remain connected either by letter, social media or through stories and photographs. It, therefore, does not have to be marked by physical presence and can be *"everyday interactions [through which] kinship relations are maintained"* (Cossar and Neil, 2013:74). The phrase contact, therefore, does not encapsulate the totality of how the children conceive it. A better phrase and way to think about contact would be the maintaining of connections.

The children described maintaining connections throughout their lives and over the life-course rather than at specific events. Such descriptions once again encapsulate that connections across the family/families can be complicated, challenging, and is an ongoing and ever-changing phenomenon. It is something that is done and displayed in the same way that family can be. Such framing recognises multiple family belongings in the children's family lives which are, by their very nature, in flux (Rustin, 1994).

The children spoke about how their families' relationships are so enmeshed that they are unlikely to be untangled by prescriptive contact arrangements, Contact Orders, contact plans, or contact centre regulations. The quality of contact was the issue for the children, not the quantity. Furthermore, the relationships needed to be reciprocal and based on trust and respect. They did not see why they should turn up at a contact centre, if a family member were misusing substances, prioritising their own issues, or if the birth parents had not turned up previously. Again, the ethics of rights cannot supersede, or be seen as separate to, the ethics of care and mature care.

If quality functioning relationships are central to maintaining positive, safe connections, then work with the whole family is of central importance. All of the spheres of recognition must be

addressed. Work with birth parents and other associated family connections is as vital as the work with the carers and the children. Furthermore, because the children view permanence, identity and knowing that others are alright as a responsibility of the family as a whole, they do not have to be addressed by direct connections with the birth parents. For example, a child's needs regarding connection/separation can be addressed through face-to-face meetings with an aunt who is more able to focus on the needs of the children. Therefore, family connections should be treated holistically, rather than adhering to Bowlby's views regarding substitute care and definitive exclusion of priory primary attachments. It is about the whole family (Kiraly and Humphreys, 2016).

Finally, the children were resolute that there must be more recognition of the children's wishes and feelings, especially for keeping connections. The children strongly disagree that a child's wishes and feelings around keeping connections should be given more or less validity dependant on their understanding and age (Family Rights Group, 2017). They showed that they could understand the complex nature of their experiences regardless of their age. However, the children made it clear that all final decisions should be made by adults whose role is to take ultimate responsibility for their safety and wellbeing. Similarly to LSW, professionals should also consider the tools and strategies that the children are currently using, have used, or would prefer to use to maintain such connections. The children acknowledged such wishes and needs would likely change over time.

7.3.4.6   Negotiating permanence with and through their community

Much attention so far has mainly focussed on the roles of individual carers, birth parents, and social workers to aid a child's sense of permanence. It is also important to acknowledge how the child's community can offer them a sense of belonging, continuity, and affinity. This evokes Honneth's (1996) call for recognition by the community. It also recognises that family, for these children, often included personal friends, teachers, and activity leaders.

The children spoke about achieving a sense of achievement, self-confidence and self-esteem from activities outside the archetypal family constellation. This includes schools, hobbies, clubs, extra-curricular activities, and time spent with friends. Such activities also provide the children with the required time away from familial paradoxes, tensions, and the separation and losses that arise from their fragmented family circumstances. They often did this by ensuring that they did not mention their circumstances to others, except for maybe a trusted select few. This time

away also allowed them further connections, providing them with shared narratives, routines, and rituals. They demonstrated that it often provided them with a sense of permanence.

Events for children exclusively in kinship care also often allowed them not to have to talk or think about how their lives were often not perceived as normal. Such events allowed the children to be recognised primarily as children living in a diverse range of different family set-ups, rather than as, paradoxically, children in kinship care arrangements. This paradox often caused a struggle for recognition with the children contending with the dialectical process of being both different and similar. This could be too much hard work for some children when all they wished for was relief. Therefore, they would not attend. For other children, being with others in similar situations meant they could also discuss any concerns. It allowed them to acknowledge that many of their feelings, such as those of ambivalence, could be attributed as reactions to circumstance rather than personal flaws. Ultimately the willingness to attend specific kinship care events and groups came down to personal choice. This requires further research, but indeed, the children state such kinship care specific events should be offered, yet never forced upon them.

Finally, the children also spoke about the need to talk to others outside the immediate family network or professionals involved in family care. In line with the ethics of rights, the children wanted those with responsibilities for their care, such as social workers, to take some action on their views. However, they also required others who listen but do not necessarily act on their concerns. People like some of their close friends. These are people they felt do not judge and who the children felt will always, as Louise stated, *"be there no matter what"*. This presents a strong argument for access to talking therapies, independent visitors, and ensuring the children having trusted empathetic friends.

7.3.5   Recognition of starting points

The analysis of the children's views emphasises the importance of Honneth's (1996) second sphere of recognition. This alludes to the upholding of children's rights through legal rights and moral respect. This is especially pertinent to kinship care. Previous chapters highlight that despite kinship care being the most commonly used type of care when children cannot remain with their birth parents, it is also the most underfunded. It is the 'Cinderella' service where carers receive little training, few start-up costs are required, and typically little financial and practical support is offered. Kinship care can easily be disregarded and exploited as no more than a private family practice to suit budgets (Hantrais, 2004).

Whilst the children wished for recognition of their specific relationships with their family and community, the way they do permanence, and their legal and symbolic rights, none of these can be obtained without appropriate resources. Therefore, money for such things cannot be an afterthought or, worse, a luxurious extra. The children talked about how money mattered, and this must be heard. Furthermore, the lack of money often caused the children concern for their carers.

> *"Harmony - …Like, my nan worries about money and doesn't have enough money to do anything."*

Overall then, there needs to be recognition for both the particular situation and the effect of social policy, marginalisation and inequalities on particular groups, such as kinship care families. Macro data must be used in conjunction with examining individual cases and localised data. The risks that poverty, for example, has on kinship care arrangements must be considered in policy and practice to provide appropriate support to these families (McCartan et al., 2018). It has been found that most local authorities have not used local demographic needs and data to underpin their family and friends policies and practice (Ashley, 2015). Only by the policymakers, practitioners and researchers recognising disadvantage, by listening to the lived experiences and correlating them with macro data, can there be a meaningful distribution of resources (Fraser, 2000).

7.4 Conclusion

Analysis of the children's views demonstrates that maintaining their lives and a sense of permanence involves them having ongoing complex, challenging, changing, ambivalent, and dialectical thoughts and processes. The children wish for better recognition of this by their families, carers, communities, and social work practitioners. The recognition of the dialectical spaces inherent in their family lives should also extend to legislation and policy because context matters to the activation and deactivation of the strategies and mechanisms they use.

The children have also been keen to display that recognition should not just extend to their challenges, deficits, and troubles. Recognition must also extend to the ways they are making do and getting by. It is not just about ensuring that there is less (mis)recognition of what kinship care family practices are, for example, by not using placement phrases and processes. The children also wish for better recognition of the many ways that they are navigating and working with the tensions in their lives, for example, by using objects, photos, spaces, and time.

Relationships are the building blocks for these children's lives - relationships with their families, professionals, local communities, and wider society. The children desire relationships built on trust, reciprocity, compassion, and respect. They want these to be safe, positive and enduring. The children identified which ones were important to them and which ones needed managing in different ways. Therefore, presumptive adult-centric notions of family and support can only go so far in reflecting the realities of the children's lives. The children see their care as an interdependent collective endeavour, and this can only be achieved by including them in the debates around their family lives and kinship care arrangements.

Chapter 8 - Conclusion -

The Value of Children's Views to Recognise Kinship Care for What It Is, rather than What It Is Not

Eliza – "We're not like stupid. We know what's going on. Like we're probably in the best situation to deal with it. Yet, there is like a lot of shock and surprise when children come out with certain things and ways to deal with things. And people are like "well I don't know how you know that". And I think it's just very underestimating."

This study sought the views of 19 children living in kinship care arrangements in England. It is the first study that has solely focused on children's views to access the meaning of family life and permanence for children living in kinship care in England. The findings demonstrate that privileging children's accounts of family, care, and childhood disrupts the current policy and practice debates in UK social work. Children's views challenge the dominant adult-centric framing of the social work debates that emphasise the professionalisation of kinship care as a placement and a process-driven service.

The children also reinvigorate the debates regarding permanence. Their narratives demonstrate that kinship care arrangements disrupt both notions of substitute care and also birth family care. They provide insight into the fluidity inherent in their family's composition and the roles and responsibilities for their ongoing care across it. They also show that they navigate and manage these relationships, their sense of autonomous interdependence, and their sense of permanence across the family network, but also, at times, away from it.

The children's accounts suggest that social work policy and support should centre less on the authoritative procedural approaches initially designed for fostering and adoption. Whilst procedural approaches and scrutiny are essential in terms of a child's right to safety, there must also be more focus on the more cooperative practices that include the child's voice and recognise the specifics of the children's family arrangements. Such recognition can help to manage the challenges of kinship care. It can provide meaningful support for children in kinship care where multiple family relationships endure but are also often in flux. It can help ensure that a lifelong perspective is taken.

The need to establish valid methods to engage and elicit such insights from the children has also challenged dominant childhood studies and social work research methodologies. Reductionist

accounts of agency that are typically derived from celebratory social-cultural accounts of childhood and participation cannot provide adequate means for obtaining and understanding children's lived experiences. Neither can social work's propensity to just use conventional models of childhood and research. Instead, by testing out pluralistic methods, understandings, and hypotheses using abduction and retroduction, more reflexive and collaborative dialogue can be established. Such innovative methods that use critical realism and dialogical participation can benefit both social work research and practice by allowing more ethical access to children's views. The methodologies and methods also help ensure that children's views have validity and meaning in academic and social work debates.

In this final chapter, I summarise and reflect on the main findings and the implications of this study. I recognise the value of the views of the child participants. I also reflect on the study's approach, the limitations, and opportunities in terms of new directions for research. This is done under the following sections: 'Thesis Summary'; 'Original Contributions to Knowledge'; 'Challenges and Limitations'; 'Suggestions for Further Research'; and 'Concluding Reflections'.

8.1   Thesis summary

The purpose of this study was to contribute to social work kinship care literature by providing new understandings of such family arrangements. More specifically, by involving the voice of the child through participatory methods, it was anticipated that there would be new insights into kinship care as a permanence option. This can enable social workers to find more attuned ways to support, protect, and permanency plan for children. The main research question was:

- What matters to children living in kinship care arrangements?

The subsidiary questions were:

a. What do children think about their family life in kinship care?

b. What are the implications of the children's views on the social work practice of permanence planning?

Earlier chapters of this thesis explained the current ambivalence surrounding kinship care as both a concept and a practice. A primary reason for this is that legislation and practice for kinship care have been founded on the concerns and debates for adoption and fostering processes. Therefore, the Children Act's 1989 underpinnings of collaborative practice with families prior to

legal proceedings, notions of permanence, and the legislation that provides local authorities with a mandate to support kinship care are frequently challenged in the realities of practice. This can lead to ambivalence and inadequate support for children in kinship care arrangements. As the recent Parliamentary Taskforce notes, in the UK:

> *"…kinship care is widely unrecognised, underappreciated and often poorly supported" (Kinship Care Parliamentary Taskforce, 2020:7)*

Not only is kinship care widely unrecognised in practice, but there is also a lack of social work research into kinship care. Since the Children Act 1989, the little research that has been done again reflects the preoccupation with conceptualising kinship care as an alternative to state care rather than a family set-up in its own right. Simplistic derivation from such assumptions usually produces a range of atheoretical, descriptive, outcome studies that provide conflicting answers by mainly focussing on the what rather than the how. Even more concerning is the absence of the child's own voice in the policy and social work research and practice for kinship care and permanence. When social workers, policymakers, and other researchers seek a child's perspective, they are mostly seeking to corroborate the views of adults, usually of carers and social workers. It is usually done in ways that perpetuate the misguided distinction between incompetent children and competent adults, and through monological conceptualisations that draw on traditional notions of a child's voice, family life, and experience. This leads to only certain types of knowledge being seen as valuable, reliable, and useful. It allows the majority of policy and practice to take for granted traditional concepts of permanence, family, care, and children's voice that do not fully reflect the children's lived experiences.

This study aimed to remedy this shortfall by making the child's voice(s) a central starting point to understanding the meaning of kinship care and permanence. Utilising critical realism as an underlabourer, and more specifically, Sayer's (2011) work on reasoning and valuations, the study used a multitude of methods that could provide a dialogically participative process. It also allowed for extensive collaboration not only with the children themselves but also sought the advice of peers, practitioners, and previous literature. It allowed for a reflexive yet rigorous process where the children's views can be taken as both valid and meaningful.

Through thematic analysis and a retroductive process, theoretical explanations emerged from the children's own valuations of their family lives. These demonstrate how children in kinship care navigate the in-between of the seemingly binary positions often ascribed to care, kinship,

permanence, autonomy, and recognition. Therefore, for kinship care, and especially for the meaning of permanence in kinship care, the children manage the mechanisms of

- Connection/Separation
- Recognition/(Mis)recognition
- Care & Protection/Independence & Risk

An analysis of the children's views shows how they trouble commonly held notions ingrained in social work thinking, legislation, policy, and practice. This suggests that new approaches and thinking are required. Other theories, not usually ascribed to kinship care studies, can help to understand further these mechanisms and how they interact with their contexts. Specifically, theories of doing family and displaying family (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011), recognition (Taylor, 1994; Honneth, 1996; Fraser, 2000), autonomous interdependence (Bhaskar, 1993; Arce, 2018), and the ethics of care (Held, 2006; Pettersen, 2012; Collins, 2018) are welcome additions to the developmental and socialisation theories that dominate many of the social work outcome studies on kinship care. Policy and practice can then start to move away from monological language and thinking that does not wholly reflect the children's lived experiences. By finding out what matters to children living in kinship care, social work can provide more attuned support to help ensure the children's safety, wellbeing, and sense of permanence.

8.2   Original contributions to knowledge

8.2.1   This is the first kinship care study in England to solely focus on the views of the children

There have been multiple appeals for the views of children living in kinship care (e.g. Messing, 2006; Owusu-Bempah, 2010; Pitcher, 2013; Brown et al., 2019). This study ensured that children's views took centre stage to knowledge production. The children disproved the commonly held beliefs and approaches that focus on their vulnerabilities, inabilities and trauma. The study shows that, especially when examining a sense of permanence, children's views are not only worthy but vital to the understanding of family life in kinship care.

8.2.2   This study adds significantly to the limited body of social work research on kinship care

There is a limited body of social work research on kinship care. Such subjugation exists despite kinship care being the most used care setting for UK children that cannot remain with their birth parents (Kinship Care Parliamentary Taskforce, 2020).

This study adds to previous broad findings by providing a more in-depth understanding gained from the 19 child participants. It has been mindful of homogenisation and utilised critical realism to approach generalisability. Through dialogical participation, it has produced a deeper understanding of how children make do and get by, their interdependence, and how they manage a sense of permanence in their everyday lives. The study actively encourages critique, debate, and further research by way of the realist evaluation cycle (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) so that these children's lives can begin to be better represented in policy and practice.

8.2.3 This is the first study to focus on a sense of permanence specifically for children living in kinship care

While there have been studies citing that one of the main advantages of kinship care is to reinforce a child's sense of identity and belonging, none have directly focussed on a sense of permanence for children in kinship care. Instead, the preference has been to measure placement stability and the impact on outcomes of legal permanence. When emotional permanence is discussed, comparative studies are typically done which examine it alongside fostering and adoption. This study, however, moves away from such comparative approaches. It investigates a sense of permanence specifically for a child living in kinship care without presupposing certain theories co-opted from adoption and fostering discourses.

8.2.4 The is one of the few kinship care studies to utilise sociological perspectives to understand the children's experiences

As discussed in the literature review, most social work studies on kinship care have been under-theorised concerning its primary task; to re-establish safe and secure family lives for children through childhood and beyond. This has led social work usually conceptualising kinship care as a technology rather than as a family set-up (Skoglund and Thørnblad, 2019). It is seen as a service to be evaluated rather than another way that a family can function. When studies have utilised specific theories to ground their research, these are mostly derived from human development and socialisation. However, the children in this study also described their lives in ways that evoke more sociologically embracing theories regarding doing family, care, autonomous interdependence, and recognition. Furthermore, by incorporating a modified version of the social model of childhood, this study included but was careful not to fetishise discourse, sociological debate, and the relational nature of children's agency.

8.2.5 This is the first social work research that combines critical realism with participatory methods. There are also very few studies that combine critical realism with research about childhood or social work

Despite its explanatory strength, critical realism is often criticised as a philosophy in search of a method. There is a lack of accessible material on critical realist methods (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014). There are even fewer materials on critical realist participatory methods and even fewer social work studies or childhood studies that utilise a critical realist methodology. This study provides a useful template for successful methods for critical realist research.

This is the first study to combine critical realism with dialogical participatory research. This study is also the first that explicitly applies either critical realism or explicit dialogical participation for children who cannot remain in their birth parents' care.

8.2.6 The children have shown alternative approaches to navigate permanence, social work, and kinship care

As described below in the key findings, the analysis of the children's views has contributed to knowledge by demonstrating how they navigate and reinvigorate the debates within the permanence, social work, and kinship care literature.

8.3 Key findings

8.3.1 Listening and talking to children – we must provide more spaces to participate

The most important finding is that children in kinship care arrangements are competent in giving considered, nuanced, and sophisticated understandings of their fractured family life experiences. They live and deal with the tensions and ambivalences of their everyday lives and manage their nuances. Findings from this study are consistent with the growing body of evidence that attests to young people's competence to participate in research as leaders and agents of change (Heinsch et al., 2020).

> ***Purple*** *– "Listen to the child and what they need. Because adults can sometimes ignore the child. Well, we know stuff too about what's going on. And we've listened to them so it's rude that they don't listen to us."*

The children want to be involved and informed about all aspects of their lives at all stages. Their age should not be the defining factor to what information they are told and whether they are involved, yet it should guide how they are included. The children want ways of working that

demonstrate trust, empathy, compassion, reciprocity, and commitment. They, however, do not want complete responsibility for decisions and understand that adults must protect them and be accountable for their current and future wellbeing. They also recognise that their views may change over time.

The children wish to be given opportunities to participate from the outset. The participation process must be dialogically driven from the start. It is about providing the right space and relationships for a dialogical process. It is about ensuring that children's views are considered and, through negotiation, are acted upon. It is an ongoing process, and empowerment becomes a collective responsibility.

8.3.2   Children in kinship care live and navigate the in-between and the fluid nature of relationships

The children showed how they navigate the in-between, the dialectic, in their lives. They are part of a new substitute family but remain within their birth family network. They are ambivalent with their feelings towards their birth parents, wishing for them to remain part of their lives whilst also experiencing the difficulties and challenges in the relationships. The children's arrangements and relationships also need support, and they need to be protected by the state, yet they also wish for minimum interference from social work. They, and their families, are vulnerable and dependant, yet they can also be agentic. Working with such seeming contradictions means that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should move away from monological thinking that usually dominates kinship care debates.

The children use space, time with others and alone, and objects to navigate these in-betweens and the resulting inner conversations that occur in their lives. This knowledge alone is a useful resource to help aid professionals to navigate kinship care arrangements and make more attuned decisions.

8.3.3   Permanence

The analysis of the children's views supports recent research into permanence. This reiterates that a sense of permanence should be the goal of legal permanence and placement stability. The findings corroborate the UK legislative definition of a sense of permanence that *"a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging"* (DfE, 2010:22–23) with family not only during childhood but also into adulthood. However, for the children, emotional permanence also includes the idea of multiple families and multiple residences (Rustin, 1994). Furthermore,

inclusion into a family is not only biologically fixed but also includes more sociological understandings of doing and displaying family (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011). Family, then, can include non-related individuals, pets, family friends, and even professionals. For these children, it is also something that is in flux and is continuously growing and evolving. The children did not frame kinship care as something that just provides substitute psychological parenting. It is also about being part of an intergenerational life cycle and life story.

Again, there must be a move away from monological approaches to more dialectical thinking that is in line with the children's lived experience. Analysis of the children's views shows that monological approaches that privilege one definitive goal over another without noting their intersection, such as legal permanence over emotional permanence, or even emotional permanence over legal permanence, do not fully reflect the children's wishes, experiences, or needs. This allows a move away from static, traditional notions of family care and home, to support that is more creative and more in line with the realities of specific family lives. Time and processes based solely on the child's developmental trajectories are also insufficient. We must also understand how the children mobilise time itself.

The children demonstrate that a secure sense of family belonging is achieved at points of intersection between past, present, and concurrent relationships. It also includes exploring their sense of autonomous interdependence. To do this, children use objects, memories, people, time and space in various ways to make sense of their lives. Beds, trampolines, shopping, slime, siblings, teddies, holidays, and pets are highlighted in this study as these children's particular tools and transitional objects. They help bridge the spaces in between separation and connection from their relationship and the world around them.

Erica – "It's ok to think about bad memories but we have to feel safe to do that."

Appropriate resources can be identified by listening to the children's wishes and by coming up together with safe, viable and realistic approaches that can assist them in managing their lives in the dialectic. It is not about finding ways to resolve the seeming contradictions in their lives, but instead, it is about recognising them and helping the children navigate them.

The children use such things because they want to move forward in their lives and do not want to recount painful memories in unsafe places or with those they do not trust. They do not wish to dwell, but instead, they want to flourish and progress. As such, life-story work is essential,

although the children do not call it this. They do not see it as a one-off social work task that is led by practitioners. Instead, it should be a collaborative approach that is ongoing throughout their lives. Children need to be given the right information about their lives and the people in them so that they can begin to understand it. This is because the children manage these connections and separations with or without help or even the right information. It is, therefore, essential not only to talk to children about their lives and future plans but also to ground specific work in the tools and strategies they are currently using.

Finally, maintaining and navigating a sense of permanence is a challenging and demanding task. The children also demonstrate that this sense of permanence also happens and interacts within their self-identified communities outside the family constellation. Time out allows them to obtain either some respite from their feelings or an opportunity to work through them with others. Such multiple ways to achieve a sense of permanence are why they feel they can have many different homes, affiliations, and places to receive care throughout their lives. Therefore, the word placement does not truly represent their experiences. Apart from the inference that this is a single place, it also represents, for the children, that their family set-up is a social work technology, rather than another way of being a normal family.

8.3.4   Connections instead of contact

Although linked to permanence and LSW, contact requires its own attention. The children demonstrated that along with the multiple, fluid and evolving nature of families, relationships and connections endure. Relationships with people still exist even if people, such as birth parents, are not physically present. Families do not just manage such relationships through face-to-face contact but also through their everyday practice. Also, many of the children found face-to-face contact anxiety-provoking and, in some cases, unmanageable. They did not feel safe. As such, the term contact is to be used with caution. It is more useful to think in terms of connections.

Connections can happen in different ways and do not have to happen only through direct contact. They can also be maintained indirectly, including through being connected by proxy. If relationships are too fractious and unsafe, then connections can happen through the telling of stories. Also, the children can write letters they never send, draw pictures, or write stories about those not physically present in their lives. The most important thing is that the children feel they have some control and say over the relationships that matter and that those connections are managed safely.

The children wish for their feelings and current preferred strategies to be central to decisions around keeping these connections. They also acknowledge that circumstances and their wishes will change. The children feel the whole family requires help to manage these connections and relationships to ensure they are trusting, caring, compassionate, and, if possible, reciprocal. This is an ongoing process that does not necessarily provide fixed solutions. It is a process of negotiation and renegotiation that recognises the ambivalence and the in-between spaces in which the children occupy.

8.3.5 Critical realism and dialogical participation are useful tools to gain insight into what matters to people

Critical realism has proved itself to be a useful philosophy and methodology for participatory methods. Firstly, it allowed for the generalisability of its findings through its unique epistemological and ontological perspectives, though retroduction and the use of theories to explain the notion of fallibility, judgmental rationality, and the use of valuations. To sum up, it has found out what matters.

Secondly, the study's critical realist approach, combined with dialogical participatory methods, has provided a useful, fun, engaging, and almost unassuming toolbox of tasks to gain children's views. It has also embedded reflexivity and meaningful collaboration through processes such as Manzano's (2016) theory building interview sequence. Using tasks such as walking tours, cameras, drawings, and role-play to elicit one-to-one interviewing helped the children and the research focus on the critical realist domain of real.

Thirdly, the dialogical participative approach was enhanced by critical realism to ensure that the children were meaningfully included in conversations around differences, equality, and their need for protection from harm. For example, it gave them space to be included in conversations around confidentiality and autonomy. Therefore, ethical considerations were not decided by the researcher or the gatekeepers alone on the basis of difference between adults and children. Instead, such considerations were approached in collaboration with ongoing dialogue around power differentials and the roles and responsibilities of others for our care.

Fourthly, and importantly, the design and methods used allowed the researcher, and often the carers, to witness the children's lives and demonstrate that they are interested in their views. The very research process in itself allowed for the recognition of the children, their families, and the impact that they can have on policy, practice, and the wider world.

8.3.6 Sociological theories can help us understand the lives of children living in kinship care

Because sociology also routinely addresses dualisms and the dialectic, it can help us understand not only the lives of children in kinship care arrangements but also the tension and contradictions inherent in social work (Simpson and Price, 2007). For example, it helps explain why the children feel that both the ethics of care and the ethics of justice are essential and intertwined, yet overall, the ethics of care must take precedence. What we do is important, but the way we do - with sensitivity, empathy, compassion, competence, responsiveness, and trust - is vital for engagement. Working in the dialectic helps explain how an understanding of autonomous interdependence is vital when considering children's lives. So, too, are the public versus private, and the service versus family upbringing debates. A modernised sociology of childhood, the ethics of care, and theories of recognition have been crucial to help understand the children's views and their experiences of family life and permanence in kinship care. Therefore, when combined with theories grounded in human development, sociological explanations can provide researchers, policymakers, practitioners and students with a clearer picture to truly explore such tensions. Such reflexive thinking can instigate change.

> *"Transformation, on whatever level, therefore, only comes about*
> *when people intentionally put themselves in the dialectic process"*
> *(Simpson and Price, 2007:6)*

Sociological theories can ensure that social work research, policy and practice does not privilege simplistic notions of empowerment, participation, and individual capacity. It ensures that contexts such as culture, gender, politics, and consumer capitalism are held within debates, and their impact is given appropriate consideration.

8.3.7 Recognition

The final key finding ties all of the above together. Recognition is essential for all of us, and (mis)recognition was something that these children said was the primary source of their unhappiness. The children want recognition for their achievements and their struggles. They want to feel a sense of belonging, attachment and affiliation within their family, their whole family, but also within their communities and society. Moreover, they want their lives recognised for their realities in which they live. The children struggled for recognition in the following ways:

- The children wanted their family to be seen as another way of being a normal family. They did not wish to be seen, as Harmony said, as *"dramatically"* different from other families.

- The children did not see themselves in a placement in line with adoption and fostering narratives. Instead, they wished for their family lives to be situated as a different type of living with family, which includes a broader sense of family, home, and care.

- Social work phrases often used, such as contact, placements, permanence, and life-story work, do not adequately represent their lives or how they want themselves or their families to be perceived.

- The children wished for services, especially schools, to have better knowledge about kinship care as a family arrangement. They wished for more attuned support in line with their specific needs at their specific stage, place and position in life.

- The children were aware of the impact of not having enough recognition and help from services. This includes practical, financial and housing support. The lack of support limited their options, such as going to clubs and family holidays, and some neighbourhoods made them feel unsafe. It stopped their family lives from being done and displayed as normal. This often caused them suffering.

- The children often felt that they were often not included in discussions in their lives and were often seen as vulnerable, inadequate, and unable. For example, they felt that they were often not listened to by social work practitioners.

This leads to the fundamental principle that has come up again and again throughout this thesis. Social work must recognise kinship care and these children's family lives for what they are, instead of for what they are not. We know that they are not living with their birth parents. The children are also not in stranger foster care or stranger adoptive placements. The professionalisation of kinship care as a placement service only partly describes their care. The children felt this approach on its own diminishes their family experiences and needs. Inappropriate processes and even particular phrases can reduce their real-life experiences to arbitrary impersonal things and procedures to be measured. Policy, practice and explanations will fall short if based on such premeditations. Kinship care is a complex family arrangement that lies between private and public care. It is a complicated permanency option that lies between substitute psychological parenting, parenting by birth families, and theories of multiple family affiliations. Social work policy and practice must be based on real accounts of the children's lives.

8.4 Challenges and limitations

8.4.1 A large amount of data

This study was intent on making the research methods accessible and committed to encouraging children to safely share their views that it used many different methods to ensure this. As such, a large amount of data was produced from different mediums and managing such a large amount of data was time-consuming. Moreover, it required some researcher bias into what data was useful, how to link it together, how to interpret it, and what theories would help explain the children's lives. Such bias was mitigated not only because the extensive amount of data allowed for enhanced triangulation (Healy and Perry, 2000) but also because the researcher used a critical realist framework comprising of valuations, judgemental rationality, and retroduction (Sayer, 2011). However, the main concern was that the children wanted the researcher to use as many of their observations as possible. Even though on the third visit, where there was a check-in to ask was anything missed out, there were so many astounding insights presented by the children that even a thesis may not be able to do them complete justice. For this reason, the University of Sussex Research Data Repository has been considered. This allows the sharing and licensing of research data for reuse.

8.4.2 Recruitment

For recruitment, the mailing list of Grandparents Plus was used. This is where the study acquired the majority of its 19 participants. However, this meant that there was a selection bias. The majority of the participants' carers were grandparents, although one carer was a great grandparent, and another was a great aunt. Research suggests that while grandparents are the largest group of carers in the UK, there are smaller but significant numbers of aunts, uncles, siblings and friends of the child and family that take on the role (Farmer and Moyers, 2005). Exact numbers are not known, especially as the majority of arrangements are informal. As such, the sample was not statistically representative of kinship carers in the UK. Again, this bias and generalisability issue was mitigated by a critical realist approach that allows for theoretical replication.

The other challenge addresses the potential that recruitment was biased favouring the more settled family lives and children. Such bias is a standard limitation of participatory research, especially in social work research (Shaw and Holland, 2014). Although this bias encouraged a more strength-based approach, the children still managed to discuss why relationships can be

contentious. Therefore, the bias's effect was likely minimal, so the findings are still considered reliable and valid.

8.4.3 Children as participants – the perception of riskiness and re-traumatising the children

As discussed throughout the thesis, children, especially those who have had social work intervention, are often only seen as vulnerable. Because of this dominant view, carers, professionals, and academics were often cautious that the research would re-traumatise the children. Such anxieties around the children's vulnerabilities, whether real or perceived, meant much time was spent with the gatekeepers, usually carers and the university ethics board, alleviating concerns around consent, confidentiality and power.

This study has always been mindful of the impact of talking about difficult things and has encouraged the carers and the children to be mindful of this also. In-depth interviews inevitably invite participants to problematise pressing and possibly distressing issues in their lives (Longhurst, 2009). Therefore, interviews would always end with the caution that afterwards the children may feel things that were not particularly nice, having talked about their often-challenging lives. If concerns arose that may severely impact the child's wellbeing, then the families were signposted towards appropriate professionals and support. Most importantly, the other alternative was not to talk about such issues with the children and not include them in research about their lives. The alternative was to further silence this marginalised group. This study demonstrates the irrationality of that option. The children showed they think about their lives, its challenges, and its contradictions whether we speak to them or not. Ensuring that children can express their views about their family life ultimately benefits us all.

8.4.4 Reflexivity

Social work is a political endeavour. Kinship care is also political, as is research with children, participatory practice, and critical realism. They are all about the primary mission among social scientists of 'empowering' the 'weak' and ensuring wellbeing (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). For these very reasons, identifying power and working with reflexivity was crucial to the research process. This proved a difficult challenge, as the more that I investigated, the more I was persuaded by certain ideologies. Also, I was dissuaded, angered even, by others. In some critical realist literature, especially the literature on social work, this is not a limitation. Instead, it enriches and drives a study. Longhofer and Floersch (2014), for example, argue that social work

research must be value-informed and social work practice and values must be research-informed.

I am also aware that my skills, knowledge, and values as a social worker impacted my ability to engage meaningfully with the children, hopefully positively. Additionally, my experience with the realities of day-to-day social work practice will have influenced my perspective. Overall, my social work experience will have swayed my positionality.

I have come to some understanding of the research, my positionality, and where it must sit with the viewpoints of others. This study does not, and must not, suggest that those that do not have the values and approaches identified in this study should not be practising social work or inform policy regarding kinship care or permanence. This study adds to a body of knowledge and is not a substitute for it. It adds a valuable alternative viewpoint where children's views have been central to the analysis. Furthermore, the study's social scientific truth-claim, like the children's views, must be open to scrutiny, criticism, and corroboration. This is the very purpose of critical realist paradigms, dialogical participation, and working in the dialectic.

8.5   Implications for further research

This thesis has revealed several directions for further research. Due to this study's success in utilising children's views, critical realism and dialogical participation, it is proposed that further research will benefit from using such methodological groundings.

8.5.1   How do children use time and space to achieve permanence?

The use of time and space emerged as ways that the children made sense of their family relationships and sense of permanence. It raised the need for further investigations around how children mobilise time in various spaces to navigate the separation/connection in their lives.

8.5.2   What type of support groups can benefit children in kinship care arrangements?

Support groups and events specifically for children living in kinship care arrangements directly address the children's ambivalences about being different yet being the same. Some children spoke about how exclusive kinship care specific support groups will mean that they will not be seen as unusual or different. Others said that it perpetuates their difference and labels. Therefore, it would be useful to research what the children would view as a positive support group, event, or activity.

8.5.3   Children's inclusion in local authority panels for kinship care

In this thesis, it has been argued that a new approach to the specifics of kinship care is needed. However, it is also recognised that any potential care arrangements for children need to be assessed to ensure their wellbeing and safety. One way to do this is to set up a local authority panel that has specific knowledge and experience of kinship care. This can be a relatively low-cost yet hugely significant way to ensure that kinship care is recognised for what it is, rather than what it is not. There would be questions around children's involvement in the panel, including whether they could be part of it. However, children's views and valuations of what makes a good kinship care arrangement and meaningful child participation should happen at the beginning of such debates. It could be the start of a truly dialogically participative approach to kinship care that sets a precedent for future social work processes.

8.5.4   State of the Nation: Children's Views

Grandparents Plus produces an annual 'State of the nation' survey which collates kinship carers views. A similar survey that collates the views of children in kinship care arrangements will benefit research and can have an overwhelming impact on policy and practice. The design and methods used for this potential study should include children's views from its inception.

8.5.5   Participatory action research

All of the above projects would benefit from a participatory action research (PAR) methodology. Initial hopes were that this study could develop into participatory action research. Unfortunately, time constraints did not allow this. There is concord between PAR and critical realism. Both utilise the premise of cyclical inquiry and social change that are useful tools for social work research (Houston, 2010). PAR would allow solutions that the children themselves conceived to be tested and evaluated alongside them.

A good example is how local authorities can better listen to children. As made clear, few effective social work practices actively seek the views of children and young people who are not in their birth parents' care (Mannay et al., 2019). There is often a lack of space or time for such practices of talking with children (Kennan et al., 2018). By including children in the research at the beginning, they could devise strategies, help disseminate them, and test them out. PAR would seek to create even better opportunities for change and further holistic understandings (Selener, 1997).

8.5.6 Progressing the realist evaluation cycle using the hypothesised mechanisms from this study

A central philosophy of this study proposes that there are mechanisms in human nature that guide us towards flourishing rather than suffering. As such, the mechanisms of connection/separation, recognition/(mis)recognition, and safety/risk and the need for a sense of permanence apply not only to children in kinship care, not only to looked after children, but also for all children and, in fact, all of us. Therefore, there is merit in utilising the theorising of such mechanisms to see how they interact with other mechanisms and contexts inherent in other people's and our own lives. This opens up so many different possibilities for future social science and social work research design.

8.6 Concluding reflections

This research was based on questions regarding whether children would add anything useful to our knowledge of kinship care. Would they be able to cut through all the debates and the adult-centric quandaries? Would the children be able to guide social workers towards better ways of supporting them and their need for a sense of permanence?

Personally, I have been astounded by the in-depth insights and understandings of the children. Also, through initial dissemination at various practice seminars, international conferences and symposiums, this study has already instigated academic debates and potential new directions for kinship care and permanence planning for children in kinship care arrangements. This is not without its challenges. To know that we have not got it right yet, despite our best efforts, and that children still do not feel listened to is a difficult space to occupy. However, the children have demonstrated that their views are worthy of further inclusion in social work policy, practice, and research, especially for kinship care. They and their views matter, and we should be looking at how they are currently managing the tensions in their lives in order to inform future work. At the risk of ending on an *"upbeat note"* (Lesko and Talburt, 2012:280), this study has proved that children can help guide us towards better recognising the realities of their lives so that we can better support them. Children want to be heard. We just have to provide space to listen, understand, reflect, and respond.

> *Louise* – *"When people just don't listen to you and they like go on to try and change the subject, I'm like "oh no you don't, I'm still talking about this.""*

Chapter 9 - References

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Chapter 10 - Appendices

10.1 Appendix A - Collaborating Organisations

10.1.1 Kinship

Kinship, previously known as Grandparents Plus, are a national charity for England and Wales that supports and campaigns on behalf of kinship carers. They have an ethical commitment to the carers, which extend to the synthesis, analysis, and dissemination of research. They take a grassroots approach. Kinship carers' voices are central to their work.

Kinship are influential in kinship care research, policy and practice. Their work leads to national awareness of kinship care through media outlets and advises local and national governments. Kinship also undertakes an annual state of the Nation survey (Grandparents Plus, 2020). This is one of the largest yearly national surveys of Kinship Carers.

The organisation also runs two regular Kinship Care Professionals Groups and is a Kinship Care Alliance of charities. They frequently organise national conferences and seminars. Such events provided a platform to disseminate the initial findings of this study.

Finally, Kinship, their work, and their events helped ensure that this study's focus remained on the voices and lives of families in kinship care arrangements.

10.1.2 CoramBAAF

CoramBAAF is dedicated to promoting permanence and improving the lives of children of children that are not in their birth parents' care. They have a background in and extensive knowledge of fostering and adoption. Coram's large UK membership base provides them with a context for research that is unique. Coram is a leading organisation that is on the Government Advisory Committee. It has been advising and collaborating on many planned reforms (e.g. SGO Amendment Regulations (2016)), and it is a member of the National Research Advisory Group. I was able to shadow this group and, again, present my initial findings to practitioners and other academics. CoramBAAF feels that kinship care offers a particular challenge when it comes to permanence. As such, they take a more systemic view and social work practitioner, legislative, academic research, and professionalised view on how to ensure children and families in kinship care are appropriately supported.

Coram Voice is a subsidiary of CoramBAAF. This is a child and advocacy service currently investigating wellbeing. They were able to provide helpful information on appropriate methods for obtaining children's views. CoramBAAF also provided further dissemination opportunities, both by way of presentations and by ensuring the initial findings were kept in mind for the Nuffield (2019) rapid review.

10.2 Appendix B - Ethical Clearance

Project Title	What Matters to Children in Kinship Care?
Status	Approved
Email	P.D.Shuttleworth@ sussex.ac.uk
Phone No.	07980868083
Applicant Status	PG (Research)
Department	Social Work and Social Care
Supervisor	Luckock, Barry A
Project Start Date	25-Sep-2017
Project End Date	28-Sep-2020
External Funding in place	Yes
External Collaborators	Yes
Funder/Project Title	
Name of Funder	SeNSS

10.3 Appendix C - Information Sheets

10.3.1 Information sheet for the children

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Project title: What Matters for Children Living in Kinship Care?

Hello, my name is Paul Shuttleworth and your carer said you might like to take part in some research. However, it is also up to you whether you want to take part. I want to tell you about my research. I will also speak to you about it when we meet.

Who am I and what am I doing?

My name is Paul, and I am a PhD student at the University of Sussex. I want to find out what really matters for children that live away from their birth parents and live with other family instead. I want to know what you think about things. After you have told me I will then write it in a report. This will then be shown to people such as other researchers, students, social workers and to people that help advise the government.

What will you get to do if you take part?

- You can show me around your house or neighbourhood and tell me what's important to you.
- I'll give you a camera, show you how to use it and then you can take some pictures of important things in your life.
- We'll meet up and talk about what you have shown me and what pictures you have taken. I'll ask you some questions about your family. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions and you don't have to answer all of them. You can also draw, make diagrams or we can do other activities to help me understand.
- After we've spoken a few times, I'll come back and talk to you about what you have said and what I think it means.

These activities should be fun.

I will record what we talk about because it's important that what you say will be remembered. I will show you how to turn off the recorder if you don't want some things recorded.

What will I do if you take part?

- I will make sure that I have written down the things that matter to you
- I will write a report for my university about what you have told me. Your name won't be used. You can pick a name for me to use instead.
- I will share the report with other people so that they can make things better for you or other people like you.

Do you have to take part?

• If you want to take part, just let me know or you can sign a piece of paper. I will check with you every time we meet just in case you change your mind. I will also keep asking the person that takes care of you to make sure it's OK.

• You can say no up until I have gone away and written down everything you have told me. The final time you can say no will be on 29th October 2018, just after you start your new year at school after the summer holidays.

Who will I tell about what you said?

I will not tell anyone what you tell me but will write it in the report without using your real name. However, when we are in your house the person that takes care of you will be in another room. We'll ask them not to listen, but they still might hear some of what has been said.

If you tell me you are going to seriously hurt yourself or anyone else then I'll need to tell someone. If this happens, I'll talk to you about what I'm going to do.

Who is helping me to do this?

The University of Sussex has said it's OK for me to do this research. I have two supervisors, Barry and Russell. I talk to them a lot and they advise me and help me. Two organisations, CoramBAAF and Grandparents Plus, have said they will help me. They will not know your name but will help me tell other people about what you have said.

Contact

You can phone or text me on 07980 868083. If I don't answer, leave a message. I promise I'll get back to you.

What now?

If you agree to take part, then I will call you and we will arrange a time to meet.

Thank you for your time and attention!
Do you have any questions for me?

The views of children that live in kinship care. What matters to them?

My name is Paul Shuttleworth. I am currently a PhD student at the University of Sussex. This information sheet will share with you the outline of my research study and invite you to contact me should you wish to do so. Please take time to read the following information carefully. I also have sent information sheets for your child, so they too can make an informed decision.

What is the purpose of the study?

To find the views of children that live in kinship care. I want to find out what really matters to them.

Although kinship care as a placement option affects many children and their families lives, relatively little research has actually been done on it. Even less has been done where children's voices are given priority. My research will be a fun, innovative way to get the views of children. I will write them up in my thesis, which acts as a report to inform other researchers. Furthermore, I will be working with Grandparents Plus and CoramBAAF so that the findings can also affect government policy and professional practice.

My PhD research last for 3 years but I envisage meeting with a child around 4 times. As well as interviews, I will use different fun activities such as photography, drawing, and the child taking me on a walking tours. This is because I understand that there are many ways for a child to communicate with me and because I want them to have some choice.

Throughout the process the children will be told that there are no right or wrong answers and that they do not have to answer all or even any questions. Their consent will also be sought, and this will be revisited many times. It is hoped the interviews will take place in the family home (with an adult with Parental Responsibility present) but if they feel more comfortable, we can find a space in the neighbourhood (within public view at all times).

Who has been invited to participate?

I will invite 10 children living in kinship care arrangements in England to take part. It doesn't matter how long they have been living with their kinship carers. I will be speaking to children/young people between the ages of 5-16 years. We will use different activities appropriate to their ages.

Do they have to take part?

The research is entirely voluntary. I will need a signed consent form from an adult with parental rights and I will need verbal and/or written consent from the child. There should

also be no objections from others that hold parental rights. Consent is an ongoing process which is also discussed in the child's information sheet and will be discussed every time we meet. The child is free to withdraw at any time before I have gathered all the children's views and recorded them.

What will happen if my child takes part?

- I'll meet your child and then ask them to take me on a tour of their house and/or their neighbourhood to show me what's important to them.
- Your child will be given a camera, shown how to use it and then ask to take pictures of things that are important to them. They should do this without me and then a few weeks later we will have a look at what they have taken. They will be advised that they should not take pictures of people without their permission.
- We'll meet up and use the information obtained from the walking tour as well as the photos to talk about their lives, including their family life. We may also use drawing, make diagrams or use other fun activities to help your child to express their views.
- After I have looked and thought about what has been said, I will return a couple of months later. We will check that I have managed to capture what they said and talk about what it could mean.

I will use an audio recorder so that I can keep an accurate record of the meetings. The children will be shown how to turn off the recorder if they wish.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

This study will cost the child their free time and as much authenticity and honesty as they care to share with me about their lives. I understand that maybe some of the issues they may bring up are of times when they weren't so happy. I will therefore approach these issues sensitively and if the child becomes upset then we will acknowledge this and decide whether to take a break, seek support or the child can withdraw from the study completely. After discussing certain sensitive issues the child may experience mixed emotions for at least few days afterwards.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I hope that our children will enjoy taking part in some fun activities but most importantly your children will have a chance to speak about what matters to them. Children's voices will then be given a greater place within research and can affect policy and practice. This means that your child can directly influence services for future children that are living in kinship care.

Will my information in this study be kept confidential?

Confidentiality and protection of the children's identities are top priorities. Apart from disclosures of harm to self or others, or serious crimes, everything that children may reveal to me during the research will remain confidential. I will anonymise information from the children and use pseudonyms in writing up the final results and findings of the research study.

Because interviews will take place in the house where there will also be an adult with PR present, it is possible that they may overhear the conversations. Your child will be made aware of this and you will be asked to try and not listen in. Furthermore, I will not release the personal views of the child to the person holding PR unless there is a safety issue.

Consent forms, personal addresses and names will be kept in locked storage. My supervisor, Barry Luckock will have the names and address of families I am visiting but all other identifying information will only be seen by me.

In order that the data can be used for another study, researchers share anonymised data in a shared repository. I will use the UK Data Archive.

Despite these efforts, it may still be possible, although this is rare, for some people to identify the families (i.e. by someone who has worked with the family). However, I will try to ensure this does not happen.

What should I do if I want my child to take part?

You should speak to other adults that have PR for the child. I have sent you an information sheet for your child. If everyone agrees, ask your child to read this or read it with them. I will contact you in a few weeks. If the child still wants to take part, then I'll ask you to send me back a signed consent form from you.

I will then try and speak to the child by phone to set up a meeting. Every time we meet, we will go over issues of confidentiality, consent and the child's right to withdraw. They will be given the opportunity to sign a consent form also.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

I acknowledge that for me, this study will result in a PhD, a thesis and potential publications. I will keep your family informed about how they can obtain copies of these. However, I do not aim for the results and findings of this study to end there. Grandparents Plus and CoramBAAF will help me share the findings at conferences and seminars but also on boards such as the Government Advisory Group so that it can affect policy and practice.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am conducting this research as a student at the University of Sussex. I am currently in the School of Education and Social Work. The University of Sussex has insurance in place to cover its legal liabilities in respect of this study. My research is currently funded by the South East Network of Social Sciences.

Who has approved this study?

The research has been approved by the Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee.

Contact for Further Information

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Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have further questions. If at any point you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact my supervisor in the first instance

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Date
18 February 2018

10.4 Appendix D - Consent Forms

10.4.1 Consent form for the child participants

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Project Title: What matters to children in kinship care.

Project Approval Reference: EDR/PDS24/1

Have you been given the information sheet by the researcher, Paul Shuttleworth?

yes / no

You have been asked to take part by:

- Showing Paul around your home or local area to see what matters to you.

- Take some pictures which you can then show some or all of to Paul.

- Talk to Paul about what matters to you

- Meet with Paul a few months later to look over what you talked about

Do you understand what you will be asked to do?   yes / no

Do you want to do the activities Paul has described?   yes / no

Do you understand that Paul will use different names for you family in his report?

yes / no

Do you understand that you don't have to take part?   yes / no

Name:

Signed:

Date:

X

US
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

PROJECT TITLE: **The views of children that live in kinship care.**

Project Approval Reference: ER/PDS24/1

I'm happy for _____*(name of child)* to take part in the above University of Sussex research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet. I understand that agreeing to take part means that with the child's consent they will:

- Meet with the researcher for a child-led walking tour
- Take pictures
- Be interviewed by the researcher
- Allow the activities to be audio taped
- Meet with the researcher a few months after the first interview(s) to review what was said and what it means.

I understand that all data will be anonymised to try and prevent my family's identity from being made public. I also understand that the researcher will keep any identifying data in locked storage which will only be seen by them except for names which will be known to the supervisor.

I understand that _____(*name of child*)'s participation is voluntary, that they can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that they can withdraw any time before the child's views have been collected and recorded without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

I understand that anonymised data may be reused by other researchers at a later time and will be stored in the UK Data Archive.

I consent to the processing of my and my child's personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Name: _____

Signature _____

Date: _____

10.5 Appendix E - Context and Reflection Sheet (completed after each session).

NAME OF CHILD FOR THE PROJECT:

What was the child doing before the visit?

What were the rest of the family doing before?

What was the child going to do after the visit?

What was the rest of the family going to do?

Specific acts, behaviours, activities and events

Strategies practices or tactics – activities aimed towards a central goal (e.g. participating to get a rewards from carers).

Levels of participation.

Relationship and interactions

Meanings – what concepts, norms, and values etc did the child use to understand their world? What meaning of events have for the child? How does it make them feel?

States – general contexts experienced (e.g. lack of support, dislike of social work)

Settings

Reflexivity – researcher's role in the process. How was I feeling? How did it go? What was I doing before? What am I going to do now?

10.6 Appendix F - First Meeting Template

<u>Intros</u>

Speak to carer – show ID, DBS, letter from supervisor.

Take off coat, be on child's eye level as much as possible. Start the recorder.

Give the carer the info sheet.

Go through the child's info sheet. Explain there are different types of family set-ups.

Reiterate:

- I am finding out what matters/ what's important for children living with family members who aren't living with their birth mum or dad.
- I will write this in a report but will make sure that I use a different name – What name would you like?
- I will ask some questions that may seem silly or obvious. This is so I can really understand what you mean.
- You don't have to answer all the questions if you don't want to – just say "I don't want to answer that".
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. It is not a test.

Sign consent forms (child does not have to sign)
Final verbal consent check.

<u>Walking tour</u>

I'd like you to show me around the house or even outside if you'd like. I want you to show me things that you think are important, you think are interesting or special. It's about what you think is interesting not what you think I will find interesting.

(Ask the child to repeat back what is said)

Some questions while we're walking around.
What normally happens here?

What do you like to do here?

Why have you shown me this?

At the end:
So where is your favourite place?
What is your least favourite place?
What is your favourite thing?
What is your least favourite thing?

Cameras

I want you to take some pictures of things that matter to you.

Show how to do it. When you have finished give your camera to your gran and she'll send it to me. I'll then get the pictures printed. I won't open the pictures, you open them when I visit in a few months' time, and you can then show me what you want. You can show me all of them or some of them.

Do you have any questions for me?

I'll visit again in a few months' time and we'll can open the pictures. Then you can show me some of them or all of them and you can tell me about them. We can also do some drawings of your family or a family tree.

If you have any questions when I'm gone then you can ask your gran to contact me. She has my phone number, and she can either ask me questions or else you can speak to me on the phone. I might not be able to talk to you straight away, but I promise I will get back to your as soon as I can.

10.7 Appendix G - Second Meeting Template (with example of child-specific annotations)

Lucy – likes space, people, pets and going to different places. Known by the family as a "talker". Grandma, and grandad. Also lives with sister.

INTRO & REMINDERS

- Remind the children about my *role*: assume the children might have been asked before about this kind of thing by a SW. Maybe check for this as a way of emphasising at the outset that I am not trying to get them to confirm a standard script. The researcher role is different (helping people at the university understand what it is like living with a relative when you still have parents/siblings elsewhere)

- Who has been interested to hear what they have to say?

- Remind the children (and myself) about my *RQ*: it is about what matters to the children in their family life/lives for children that are living with family members but not their birth mum or dad, however they construct and describe the meaning they attach to this. Keep the focus here.

- That they can withdraw at any time

- What we are going to do today. Go over what they and other children have talked about. Check that I have understood what they are thinking about – their inner conversations/thoughts about what matters to them.

- That I will keep confidentiality and use a different name.

- I will ask some questions that may seem silly or obvious. This is so I can really understand what they mean.

- They don't have to answer all the questions if they don't want to – just say "I don't want to talk about it". "However, I think what you have to say is important and I really want to hear."

- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. It is not a test.

PHOTOS

- Ask open questions and valuation questions…tell me about? What makes a good…? What matters most?

- Link to their first interviews – Family rules, pets, photos, slime, seeds for the garden, complicated genetic relationships with all family members, great grandad's book of poems, lots of toys, likes the broken rocking horse that she got for Christmas, Care bear, angry at mum hiding pregnancy, feels she can challenge boundaries.

- Tell me what you think when you see all these photos together?

- Is there anything you wished you could have taken a picture of that you didn't?

FAMILY & VALUES

- What's 'family' to you? Who does it include? (Can use drawing)

- What would you say is your family motto? – Showed me the list of house rules last time. Which is your favourite?

SPACE/PLACE/BELONGING

- What does home mean to you?

- What are the good things about living with your grandparents/mum/dad?

- What do you want out of family life?

- What kind of family life does you grandma/mum/dad want for you?

IDENTITY/RECOGNITION

- How would you describe yourself?

- How would your grandparents/mum/dad describe you? Talker – strong-willed.

- If different why is it different?

ABSENCE/CONNECTION

- Do you feel there is anything missing in your life?

CARE/CONTROL/INDEPENDENCE/VOICE

- What kind of things can frustrate you? What do you do when you get frustrated? Last time, you spoke about mum hiding pregnancy.

VALUATIONS OF OVERALL SITUATION

- What advice would you give to a child that has just come to live with family members in a similar situation?

- What advice would you give to the grandparent/person caring for the child?

10.8 Appendix H - Third (Review) Meeting Template (with example of child-specific annotations)

LUCY – Family vs relatives, clocks, pets, showed me how she permanence plans.

INTRO & REMINDERS

- Remind the children about my *role*: assume the children might have been asked before about this kind of thing by a SW. Maybe check for this as a way of emphasising at the outset that I am not trying to get them to confirm a standard script. The researcher role is different (helping people at the university understand what it is like living with a relative when you still have parents/siblings elsewhere)

- Who has been interested to hear what they have to say?

- Remind the children (and myself) about my *RQ*: it is about what matters to the children in their family life/lives for children that are living with family members but not their birth mum or dad, however they construct and describe the meaning they attach to this. Keep the focus here.

- That they can withdraw at any time

- What we are going to do today. Go over what they and other children have talked about. Check that I have understood what they are thinking about – their inner conversations/thoughts about what matters to them.

- That I will keep confidentiality and use a different name.

- I will ask some questions that may seem silly or obvious. This is so I can really understand what they mean.

- They don't have to answer all the questions if they don't want to – just say "I don't want to talk about it". "However, I think what you have to say is important and I really want to hear."

- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. It is not a test.

OPENING QUESTION

I want to use our time today to check with you whether my thinking about what matters to you in your family life is right. For example, you talked and your grandma talked about you wishing you had more control. You said that you only wanted to talk about your past and things that worried you when you want, and you didn't like being told to go to J's dad's when you didn't want to go. However, you also talked about how it is up to your grandma and grandpa to ensure that you've enough money, food, a house and things and they have responsibility. So, I was wondering if it isn't about you having control but more about you being listened to and consulted? Do you understand the difference between people doing what you say and being consulted?
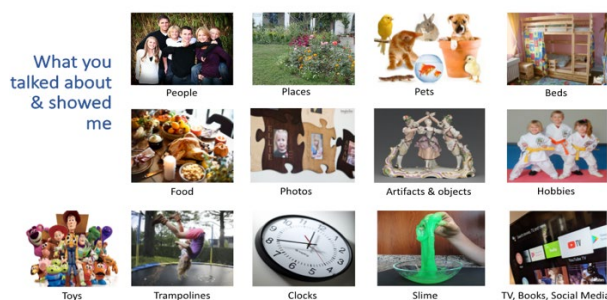
PICTURES/SUMMARIES OF THINGS CHILDREN TALKED TO ME ABOUT (Show separate sheet).

- **People** – family/people they live with, family they don't live with, relatives, birth parents, siblings, friends, teachers, relationships are vital. **Keeping people in mind, being kept in mind. Being cared for.** Difference between family and relatives. Stick together and are there when you need them. Dependable. Is that what makes the difference that they stick together no matter what?

- **Places** – having a home, **how they feel themselves and safe in their homes, gardens and outside spaces near the house** – having somewhere they feel safe to roam around in, flowers, schools, neighbourhood, parks. You said home is a space you can be yourself. You don't have to work with tricky relationships with people you don't know or are unsure of. Physically and mentally safe space. Going ice-skating, shopping. Holidays. Places which you have a bit of independence but also have people around if you need them. Garden good for you and the environment. Watch vegetables grow. Is it important to see things flourish and grow with time?

- **Pets –** Like a brother/sister, something that always shows you love, a caring responsibility, having something that you can talk to without worrying about what it's thinking or it answering back. **Not being judged**. Having something cute and something to cuddle. Bring family together. They are like extended family. Helped the cats settle. Almost like having others join your family home the same way you did. Death and cherishing the moment. You also said that pets are really important because they are unique and special, but also you learn to enjoy them because they will die. Do you think that pets are good to help you learn about losing things in your life but them still being there?

- **Beds –** when I asked what makes a home, this is what most of you told me. Having somewhere safe and comfortable where you sleep. Having somewhere where you hopefully don't have to think too much about things. Settled. Times when try to forget but also still feel connected.

- **Food –** Eating together with people for social occasions. Having your likes and dislikes met. People cooking for other to show they care. Have special food you like or don't like (e.g. spaghetti hoops). J making food. Grandma making sure that you have things you like.

- **Photos –** Capturing memories. Remembering people in your life that aren't always there. Seeing your family together. Keeping connections. Have a picture of siblings when you're not going to see them in your life. Pictures to remember e.g. siblings. Photos a good way to have control over when and how you see people.

- **Artefacts –** A word meaning objects, mementos and presents. Things that remind you of good times. Things handed down from the family to remind you that you belong and are loved. Care bear. Things given to you from family and relatives.

- **Hobbies** – Space away from the house. Places to achieve things, try out things, enjoy being with other people apart from your family. Be independent. Flourish. Football and going to school.

- **Toys** – playing with other people. Having things that are yours. Thinking about different things. Pretending and imagination. Having fun. Having something with you to keep you feeling calm and safe. Care bear makes you feel safe. Comforting but also it helps you remember people.

- **Trampolines** – Having a space that is safe for you to jump around in and do different things. Having fun. Jump around with friends and others. Show off. Going to get one. Swimming pool.

- **Clocks** – Having routines is important. Knowing when bedtime, dinner time is. Knowing where you are going to be for the rest of your childhood. Spending time with others sometimes more important than the things you do with them. Control? Impatient? Like being able to see clocks. You said time is important for everyone.

- **Slime** – It's for children and young people only. Adults aren't meant to understand it. Nice to touch. Calming. Predictable. Slime parties. Slime poking YouTube videos. I still don't understand slime. Why do you think that is?

- **Books, TV, social media** – Being entertained. Watching different lives. Fantasy worlds. Learning lessons about life. Connecting with others and not feeling lonely, being able to relate to different characters. YouTube. Having control over what you watch and when. Being able to do homework and be connected with others. It's also a way to disconnect.

FINAL QUESTIONS:
HAVING VOICE/AUTONOMY & BEING DEPENDANT - RECOGNITION

- Is it good to have rules?

- Is it important for people to listen to you? Why?

CONNECTION/SEPERATION

- Although your (birth) mum and dad don't live with you, is it important they are still part of your life?

- How do you make sure that they are still part of your life?

RECOGNITION - PARTIONING

- Do you only tell some people about your family life? You said you'd tell people that didn't know you.

- Who do you tell?

CHILDHOOD - RECOGNITION

- What's the difference between adults and children?

Thank you for helping with the research and for letting people know what your life is like. I have found it really interesting and other people are also interested. Hopefully what you have said can help others in similar situations to you have the right care and support they need.

Ensure they have my contact details if they wish to tell me something else or want to withdraw.